



Viewpoint

Botanic Gardens and Place Identity: Informing a more relevant educational practice

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Abstract

Botanic gardens through their history and time-honoured practices have become significant holders of place meanings and are often at the centre of cultural landscape issues across the globe. Botanic gardens, especially in the colonial world, now face the challenge of implementing a more relevant course of action that focuses attention on livelihood and environmental justice. The Durban Botanic Gardens is a case in point where these processes are being actively explored through the Garden Window Project. However, this project requires a new approach for actively and meaningfully engaging with people-plant relationships; one that relies on place associations, narratives and the manner in which plants and place identity provide meaningful learning opportunities for people.

Introduction

Most interpretation is aimed at visitors from outside the immediate area. But involving local people in thinking about what makes their place special, and how they might tell others about it, can help them find a new sense of pride in their own area. For some projects, this may be the most important thing of all, and any actual end product only secondary. (Carter, 2001:8)

The Durban Botanic Gardens is located within the city of Durban, in walking distance from a major transport node, Warwick Triangle, the site of one of South Africa's largest traditional medicinal plant markets. The 'Gardens' is currently the oldest surviving botanic gardens on the African continent. Established in 1849, the Gardens was developed with the express purpose of experimenting with potential agricultural crops (economics), and served as a botanic station supporting the movement of economics throughout the colonial world (McCracken, 1996).

Background

This paper is based on some research conducted at the Gardens, in the context of the Garden Window Project. The Garden Window Project aims to develop the Durban Botanic Gardens as a multi-purpose service hub in which visitors to the Gardens will be able to personally connect, in various ways, to plant-related programmes (urban greening, medicinal plants and food gardens) represented in the city, in order to appreciate more fully the vital role that plants play in our lives.

A total of 28 interviews were conducted over a three-month period. Respondents included people who were employed, volunteered or visited the Gardens on a regular basis. The study aimed to investigate and understand how issues of place identity and cultural landscape function at the Durban Botanic Gardens. This paper aims to explore the features of place identity and the cultural landscape evident at the Durban Botanic Gardens as way of directing its interpretation/environmental education programme. This is particularly important given the local environmental context in which the Durban Botanic Gardens is located, i.e., in one of the world's fastest growing cities with a range of social development issues: poverty, unemployment and HIV/AIDS. These issues are juxtaposed amid the city's rich natural and cultural heritage.

Places are more than just physical spaces occupied by people. Rather, they are better understood in a phenomenological sense, as dynamic and layered holders of meaning(s) for the various groups of people associated with them. Place need not be just a bounded physical space (in fact one is more likely to discover that the boundaries of places are porous, 'bleeding' with meaning(s) and influence); imaginary places like physical places shape our identity and we, in turn, through our own subjectivity, socially construct the places of significance in our lives. This experience, or sense of place, is constructed on the basis of a number of 'elements' or modes of interpretation as suggested by Galliano and Loeffler (1999): 'Sense of place is a combination of elements that according to cultural geographer Ryden (1993), includes four essential qualities: personal memory, community history, physical landscape appearance and emotional attachment' (p.2). Cultural landscape is that which is 'value laden', possessing an 'identity value', hence meaningful and considered worthwhile preserving (Arntzen, 2002).

The Durban Botanic Gardens, by its history alone, is a 'time thickened' place within the Durban cultural landscape (Crang, 1998). The Gardens as a significant place is imbued with meanings layered in the tradition of horticultural and social practice that both serve and link various cultural groups (some previously excluded) both locally and globally. The Gardens can be viewed as a 'hybrid' space, reflective of societal attitudes, values, perceptions, and knowledge of plants and their relationships to people. Botanical collections are more than just assemblages of select groups of plants in a bounded physical landscape. Rather they represent much larger ambitions and politically motivated narratives linked to people-plant-environmental relationships.

Botanic gardens can also be regarded as 'palimpsests' or places in which select societal values have come to be readily expressed, discarded or upheld over time. Places are the 'fundamental means' in which we interpret the world around us and pursue action. Our identity is located in places, informing us of who we are and how we should behave. The result is an ongoing social construction and reconstruction of places (Cheng, Kruger & Daniels, 2003). Places are given meaning through action. Place is always made through the action of doing 'through everyday processes of participation' (Mackenzie, 2004). The result of human doing and action in place is the build-up of layered cultural meanings over time. It is only in place that culture can exist and be manifested.

Tuan (1974) provided an explanation of place as a concept linked not just to 'position in society' and 'spatial location', but rather one associated with spirit and personality: '...places, like human beings, acquire unique signatures in the course of time' (Tuan, 1974:233). It is this 'personality' that may command awe or evoke affection. Tuan's places are 'non-directed

homogeneous spaces', having a 'stable existence', and are recognised as public spaces and/or 'fields of care'. These qualities are expressed in landscape icons such as monuments, which add significance to a locality, transforming it into a place, and making the locality a 'centre of meaning':

All places are small worlds ... Places may be public symbols or fields of care, but the power of the symbols to create place depends ultimately on the human emotions that vibrate in a field of care. (Tuan, 1974:243)

Extracts from the Research Results: Place-based narratives

A number of themes emerged in the narratives from the various people interviewed, and the data selected for use in this section highlight and share some of the insights gained into two of these themes.

Botanical nationalism

One fascinating issue that emerged in the above research was the notion of 'botanical nationalism', a concept which suggests that plant collections are not neutral assemblages of plants but represent certain single-minded foci that are reflective of a nationalistic agenda. In the same manner that statues and monuments may kindle nationalistic fervor, specialised botanic gardens such as Kirstenbosch develop feelings of national pride. For Osborne (2001), place and identity may be intentionally manipulated or socially constructed to create national identity in the iconography of monuments and elements of national heritage, as reflected in the following narrative:

RES 5.: [T]he South African trend at the moment which is essentially what I think one could call botanical nationalism, which has all the faults and the advantages of nationalism... Botanical nationalism goes further because what worries me about it, is that like all ideologies, it tends to become cliquish and it tends to become exclusive and because of that it creates a them and us and I think that is unhealthy.

The sense of identity associated with the Durban Botanic Gardens, and especially in light of the above concern about what has been referred to as 'botanical nationalism', is indicative of the manner in which place meanings serve to create a notion of *othering*. According to Cheng *et al.* (2003), 'Identity is a powerful behavioural influence, for the process of distinguishing oneself from others lends meaning and order to an otherwise chaotic world ...' (p.93).

Sense of ownership

The Gardens, because of its history, botanical and social traditions, is a prime example of a place where sense of ownership is made strong through long-term association, and in some cases extended from generation to generation within the same family of visitors. The Gardens

has been linked to significant events in the life of the following visitor who, through the effects of apartheid, was forced to move along with his family away from close proximity to the Gardens. However by that stage the Gardens had already served some major milestones in the respondent's life allowing him, despite all the hardship of forced removal, to 'claim ownership of the Gardens'. According to the respondent he has been visiting the Gardens for the past 60 years!

RES 18.: I sort of uh claim ownership of the gardens you know...not legal ownership but I, I feel that I've have been here for so, I've been through the gardens for so many years that uh I may be part of it... almost my entire life has been spent here uh all be it for a few periods, you know: playing as a child, coming again as, as a high school student, coming with uh, with uh girlfriends, coming again when, when I got married. Even though I've come at very isolated times...I still feel that I uh, I own part of the Gardens...And of course because I was, I was born in the, around the corner and I lived my entire, twenty one years...over here and then after twenty one years old I, we were moved to Sydenham because of the Group Areas Act but I spent the uh greater part, of most of my childhood just around the corner.

Place Identity and the Planning of Interpretation/Environmental Education Programmes

According to Carter (2001) interpretation is an integral part in promoting special places such as monuments, old buildings, a historical event, etc. Without interpretation it may be difficult for a visitor to feel the significance of a site such as a battlefield. Interpretation therefore uncovers the significance of special places, the sense of care for a particular place, and aids in unlocking the identity of particular places.

Interpretation is a means of accessing our heritage and uncovering hidden narratives that reside in special places. Freeman Tilden (1977), the first to publish on the subject of interpretation, aimed to move people beyond simply being told and knowing the facts about a place to developing a sense of value for significant places and internalising a sense of care that could motivate the need to help conserve important sites. This has significance for environmental education practice by allowing various groups of people to contribute fresh ideas about a place, provide new insights, as well as new ways of looking that serve to invigorate special places such as botanic gardens and in turn provide visitors access to an authentic place experience.

Conclusion

The Durban Botanic Gardens possesses a unique place identity, given the traditions and cultural landscape practices that have come to be represented in the artifacts and practices of the place. As a place considered stable and 'time thickened' through years of practice and sentiment, the findings show that despite past exclusions, Indian and African people in Durban still

developed a sense of place identity at the Gardens. The proposed Garden Window Project has the potential to embrace the integrated social changes envisaged by the city of Durban. It is therefore appropriate that a place-based approach is applied in order to foster a new culture of relating through plants to the needs of local communities. This will ultimately aid in developing a more meaningful public horticulture and environmental education programme.

Notes on the Contributor

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