

Forming **Identity** through Memory, History, and **Place**

Abstract

In Seattle, WA, rapid growth and urbanization have sparked concerns about displacement, gentrification, and a lack of social cohesion. In response, this research concentrates on creating a narrative and an experience that demonstrates a connection between memory, history, and place. It is seeking to answer the questions: How is identity shaped by our built environment? Can storytelling along with physical movement alleviate feelings of place attachment? As a case study this research is located in Seattle's Central District neighborhood. To answer these questions, I conducted research on theories of place and identity and published an online survey targeting residents of the central district. I also interviewed eight central district residents and created a composite walking tour that illustrates the historic landscape of the neighborhood from their collective memories and stories. My final product, a narrated walking tour, serves as a mechanism to bring people together, to educate the public about the central district, and to highlight the interplay between spatial geography and social identity. The tour conjures lost places and memories into the physical world and serves as an urban planning tool to heal displaced communities. As Seattle continues to grow and change, experiences such as this walking tour provide a living, breathing example of our shared history to anchor old residents while inspiring new citizens to honor our natural and built environment.

Introduction

Identity, defined by the Oxford Dictionary is “The fact of being who or what a person or thing is.” This research explores the questions: How identity is shaped by our built environment? Can storytelling along with physical enactment alleviate feelings of place attachment? This research seeks to preserve the historical identity of the Central District neighborhood through the memories of its residents. As a student of urban design and planning, I feel it is my responsibility to do no harm. It is my hope that by understanding the relationship between the built environment and the human experience, I will learn how to design spaces that nourish the human soul while honoring its physical history.

As such, I conducted interviews of several central district residents and then create a walking tour from the physical places in their stories. This compilation of places highlights their shared experiences, values, and histories that shape their identities. Through storytelling, archival research, observation, field research and the physical act of being in these spaces, this research and the tour demonstrates a connection between memory, history, and place. My final product, a narrated walking tour is a compilation of their personal memories and stories. The tour will serve as a mechanism to bring people together, to educate the public about the central district, and to highlight the interplay between spatial geography and social identity. I begin this project by absorbing information about theories of place and identity, and exploring works by prominent thinkers in the fields of urban planning, historic Seattle, and phenomenology.

Literature Review

The idea for this project was formed while reading *Seattle Walks* by David B. Williams. I first encountered David at a reading for his book, *Too High and Too Steep*, and fell in love with his passionate explanation of Seattle's topographical history. Each chapter immersed me in the physical and social history of Seattle. It was more than a guide book, it was new way of seeing the city through its remnants of the past. He exposed the stories of our landscape, and this, coupled with doing my own walking tour in summer 2017, sparked the idea to create a walking tour based on the memories and experiences of central district residents. This literature review serves to inform my process, critical thinking and critical learning, and guides my analysis of how the built environment shapes our identity.

Starting with the end product, I began to read books on touring in the city of Seattle. This research provided case study examples of both good and bad tour guide books and sparked ideas on how to create my own. In *Seeing Seattle* by Roger Sale, one is presented with a basic, no frills guide book of popular destinations in the city of such places as Pioneer Square, Downtown Seattle, and the University of Washington. His commentary begins, however, with stating that "Seattle is now at a crossroads" and touches on some of the economic and growth pressures the city faced in the early 1990's (Sale, 7). Most refreshingly, Sale states that his book is about seeing "and discovering what one makes of what one sees" (Sale, 15). This statement illustrates the importance of seeing as experience and the importance of seeing beyond the visual experience of an object to its two dimensional, physical representation. On the contrary, *Seattle City Walks* by Laura Karlinsey did not exalt the importance of seeing as experience and, with the exception of a chapter called "Parks of the Lake," only offered the standard tourist

locations despite declaring the book a guide through Seattle's "diverse" neighborhoods (Karlinsky, 37). Her format was straightforward with a brief description of each location, its history and modern use. Overall, I did not find either of these books very engaging, but they affirmed the absence of findings. In other words, the absence of a walking tour in the central district neighborhood, confirmed the need to create a walking tour in the central district. The importance and evolution of this neighborhood in Seattle's history has been overlooked and lacks historical documentation. And although I grew up in the Leschi neighborhood within the central district, it was important for me to learn more about its history.

Searching for historical context, I began to research the central district by reading *The Forging of a Black Community: Seattle's Central District from 1870 through the Civil Rights Era* by Dr. Quintard Taylor. This book provides a historical overview and a detailed background of the black community in Seattle, and lays the foundation for my exploration of cultural memory and communal connections through shared space. Dr. Taylor gives a vivid account of how the central district emerged as a black community, and of how the black population in the city of Seattle went from less than 1% in 1940 to more than 10% in 1990 (Taylor, 244). He details effects of the great migration and industrial age on Seattle's black population and describes the formation of black collective identity and values. I found this book an invaluable resource to ground my thoughts about the benefits, challenges and opportunities of spatial limits. It also provides a grand view of racially defined residential districts in Seattle, known as redlining, and the effects of economic and social segregation. My only fault with this book is that it is from the viewpoint of an outsider looking in, and therefore has element of sterility throughout. In an intimate account, however, bell hooks recalls a childhood assignment to design the

house of her dreams (hooks, 45) in the book *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*, a collection of dialogues about art and aesthetics. In the chapter “Black Vernacular: Architecture as Cultural Practice”, she details the request to “dream” and remove all barriers from her daily reality of growing up poor in the segregated South. Upon reflection, she questions the intention of the assignment because it dismisses the politics of space, and ponders “if we had been encouraged to think critically about the actual spaces we inhabited...we would have learned to think about space politically, about who controls and shapes environments” (hooks, 146). Instead, the removal of all barriers allowed her to express her fantasies and desires and how she interacts with space. For example, her dream house contained many places for reading because she loved to read. This dream house, however, was contrary to her lived experience and she considers “how the physical environment reflects the uniqueness of a culture” (hooks, 149). Hooks provides several examples of how “black folks equated freedom” with the right to exercise control over space on their own behalf (hooks, 147), and of how architecture plays a meaningful role in our daily lives.

For hooks, architecture and spatial construction is political. And architecture can be both liberating and suppressive. She asserts that “state-built dwellings erase all chances for unique perspectives to shape living space and replace these with a blueprint for sameness” (hooks, 150). In this way, she highlights the importance of the human experience in relationship to space and aesthetics and hints at the subversive effects of imposed structures. hooks writes lovingly about her early childhood memories of familial spaces and of how they shaped her relationship to interior space. Reflecting on her experiences in the physical environment and her views on architecture as culture, architecture as power, and architecture as freedom, I am

more aware of the political, social, and cultural implications of design and space.

These thoughts were further developed when viewing *Naked Spaces: Living is Round* by Trinh T. Minh-ha. In this documentary film, Minh-ha simply records the daily life, rituals, and architecture of several African villages. The entire film is unscripted, but upon viewing a series of vignettes the story becomes clear. Through observation, the observer witnesses the behavior and construction of a culture. In a random chant, she states that “houses and humans are both made of small balls of earth,” and in village after village, the houses are made of earth. Minh-ha demonstrates the connective tissue between a village in Togo and a village in Mauritania. Most of the houses are round and grouped together around a public space. And in each village, space is designed to accommodate the daily rituals of men and women. There is a hierarchy of space and each building is carefully placed according to its function and relation to air, earth, water and light. For Minh-ha, “the circle is the perfect form,” and the spatial layout of these villages and the communal rituals illustrates the human cycle of life and death. They are living in harmony with the environment and in harmony with their community. They are one unit, not many and resemble the whole of a circle.

Although quite different, the readings by Dr. Quintard Taylor and bell hooks complement and inform the film by Trinh T. Minh-ha. These resources all demonstrate the social construction of a community and the importance of spatial construction and design in our lives. Through research, self-reflection and observation, they all come to a similar conclusion that architecture shapes our identity and is part of our cultural or racial memory. Armed with a better understanding of the cultural connections to space, I turned my attention to theories about the human experience of place to better understand the impacts of

human scale urban environments (Gehl), and of how design matters to our psychological state and well-being (Goldhagen). In the *Power of Place* by Dolores Hayden, she explores how cultural identity, social history, and urban design are intertwined and reflections of our urban landscape. Hayden states that “humans come to know places through engaging all five senses, sight as well as sound, smell, taste and touch (Hayden, 16).” She provides examples of our social relationships with space and of human attachment to places. She believes that just as humans actively shape our environment, our environment is passively shaping us. Our individual sense of place is a “biological response to the surrounding physical environment and a cultural creation (Hayden, 16).” In this way, Hayden is acknowledging our cosmic connection to the natural environment and cultural geography. She goes on to explore the essential character of a place.

For Hayden, “aesthetic qualities of the built environment are both positive and negative and should “be understood as inseparable from those of the natural environment (Hayden, 18).” She gives accounts of spatial barriers that are imposed to limit the economic and political rights of marginalized groups by race, class, gender, etc. And states that “the interplay between social and the spatial is constant (Hayden, 22). She goes on to demonstrate how structured territory shapes our social life and states that...

“Ghettos and barrios, internment camps and Indian reservations, plantations under slavery, and migrant worker camps should also be looked at as political territories, and the customs and laws governing them seen as enforcement of territory (Hayden, 23).”

Hayden’s discussion on the territorial history of residential segregation echoes

discussions about gentrification, displacement, and unofficial redlining in modern day Seattle. It also speaks to the early history of the central district neighborhood and poses questions for its changing landscape. For Hayden, our urban landscape carries layers of history and our social history is embedded in the urban landscape (Hayden, 42). With imposed policies of upzoning and the rising cost of living, many central district residents are at risks of displacement. How will the loss of this social memory transform its physical space? And how can urban landscape history retain the cultural geography, place-specific memory, and urban public history to preserve our social identity?

My approach to this project is experimental, historical, and theoretical. And my aim is to create a narrative and experience that demonstrates the connection between memory, history and place.

Conclusion

These readings have provided me with ways of knowing and understanding the discovery areas of my research project, and ways to recognize and understand the deeper meaning of what residents of the central district share with me. I need to recognize signs of significant theories, explore cognitive connections and identify when collectively remembered values are transmitted through their memories. Through the personal stories of central district residents, I hope to capture the evolving transformation of its landscape, urban social history, and identity. Through personal accounts, archival research, mapping and physical reenactment, I aim to reclaim, recover and reveal the social memory and physical history that binds the past to the present and the future.

METHODS

Research for this project entailed the quantitative method of an online survey, and various qualitative methods including: literature review, in person interviews, archival research, case studies, usability test, and observation. With these methods, I gained a deeper understanding of my topic and the central district neighborhood by investigating the subject, then testing and evaluating the effectiveness of the outcomes in connection to physical space before forming walking tours.

After an extensive literature review, an online survey was launched on Survey Monkey in February 2018 for the purpose of revealing the historic landscape and the cultural geography of the central district neighborhood. The survey consisted of 10 question with seven quantitative and three qualitative. Questions include:

- What is your gender?
- What of the following age ranges includes your age?
- How do you primarily identify? (race)
- Do you rent or own your residence?
- How many years have you lived in the central district?
- If you had to describe the central district in three words, what would they be?
- Name four of your favorite places in the central district?
- What are the biggest challenges facing the central district today?
- What is the highest level of school you have completed?
- What is your zip code?

The survey was posted on several Facebook pages targeted to the central district, and in

one week's time I received 52 responses. The results serve as a basis for informing who lives there, what do they like or dislike, and what are their concerns. For the qualitative questions, most responses were several sentences long. Although a small sample size, I now had a clear picture of the perceptions and lived experiences in the neighborhood.

To probe a bit deeper, I conducted ten in-person interviews of central district residents. These conversations allowed me to better understand the meaning of places located in the central district. Some residents have lived in the neighborhood for more than forty years and others, less than 5 years. The interviewed residents range in age, race, and years in residence to capture and demonstrate an intersectional view of the neighborhood. I conversed with each resident for at least one hour, and then asked them to mark their favorite places on a map of the central district. These maps will be compiled to create a composite walking tour map. These maps are also presented individually on each resident profile page in the final write-up. Upon completing the in-person interviews, I synthesized the individual stories and began to conduct archival research on their favorite places. The archival research accompanies the composite walking tour map, whereas the resident stories accompany their individual maps. To complete the walking tours, I field tested various combinations by walking the proposed route. This exercise was at once informative and invaluable in deciding on which combination of locations worked best together for the tour.

The effect of these various methods weaves together the historic landscape and cultural geography of the central district neighborhood. Additionally, the technique of storytelling is a powerful urban planning tool that brings people together, heals displaced communities, and diminishes place attachment.

RESULTS

Planning is fundamentally centered around people and how people navigate space. With the goal of understanding how people shape place and places shape people, and I now have a deeper understanding of both. My research exposed the deep rooted connection between our physical environment and identity. It explored how people attach symbolic meanings to place. And it investigated how storytelling can address feeling of erasure, the effects of displacement, and gentrification. Essentially, this project builds upon the works of many and combines theory and practice to create an experience that can spark conversations about place meaning and identity. The tangible outputs of ten walking tours is the ultimate expression of community. The tours will bring together disparate groups around the subjects of place and identity.

CHALLENGES & LIMITATIONS

Like any project, I encountered a few challenges along the way. The biggest obstacle was finding time to meet with central district residents. There were several identified people that I did not have the opportunity to meet with who would have been fascinating subjects. And although I interviewed a well-rounded group of individuals, I am still missing desired qualities that only certain people can provide. Additionally, the interviews themselves were sometimes challenging. Each subject had a different response to the same questions. More than that, some subjects were completely engaged and welcomed the chance to dispel their personal stories while others appeared curt and somewhat suspicious of sharing too much. Adjusting to the personalities of my subjects was an acquired talent.

Accessing the online survey analysis was another obstacle I faced. By using SurveyMonkey to conduct the online survey, I was restricted to basic analysis unless I subscribed to an annual membership with a minimum \$324 fee. Given that I could not invest this sum for the project, I did not gain access to the qualitative analysis of three survey questions. In hindsight, I should have researched this platform more closely and selected a mechanism that provided affordable access to the information I needed. Finally, this project, while meaningful is limited by the non-scientific data that I collected via online survey and oral interviews. It is not all encompassing or representative of the Central District. Nor is this research a voice for all of its citizens.

NEXT STEPS

On Saturday, 23 June 2018, one of the composite tours will launch in partnership with The Urbanist, an online think tank publication. It is my hope to have at least twenty to thirty participants, who I will guide on this tour. The tour will have special guests including members from The Urbanist and my interview subjects themselves. I will conduct another survey at the conclusion of the walking tour, and will include its results in my final analysis. Furthermore, the entire project will be compiled into a booklet that features both composite walking tours and all eight individual tours. The booklet will then be dispersed to select organizations, all participants, and the CEP major. And the tour itself will be available to local schools, and organizations like Feet First, Black Heritage Society, and the Northwest African American Museum. In short, the project will live on and touch the lives of Seattle residents and become part of the conversation about the psychological and phenomenological experience of place.

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APPENDIX 1: Walking Tour Maps



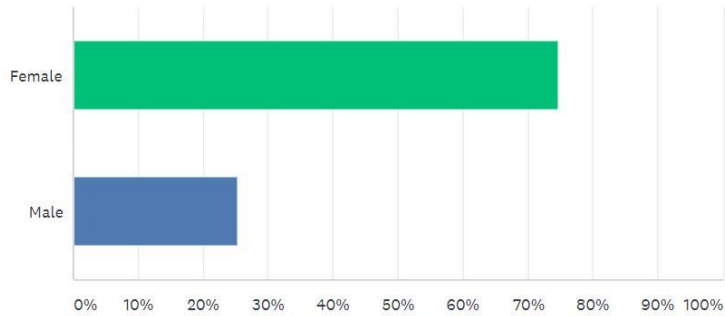
APPENDIX 2: Survey Monkey Results

Q1

Customize Export

What is your gender?

Answered: 63 Skipped: 0



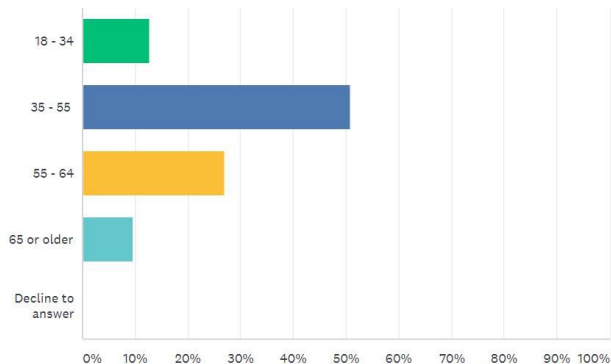
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Female	74.60%	47
Male	25.40%	16
TOTAL		63

Q2

Customize Export

What of the following age ranges include your age?

Answered: 63 Skipped: 0



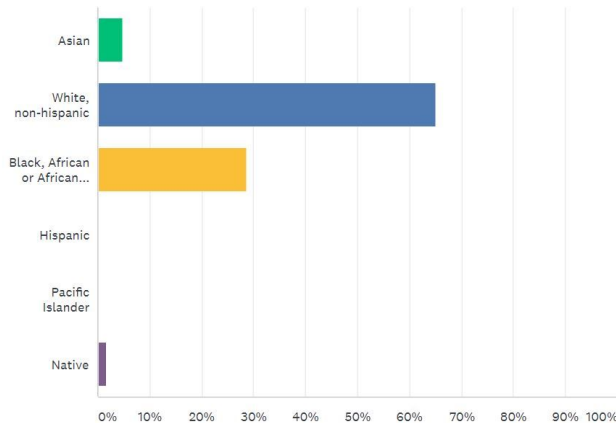
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
18 - 34	12.70% 8
35 - 55	50.79% 32
55 - 64	26.98% 17
65 or older	9.52% 6
Decline to answer	0.00% 0
TOTAL	63

Q3

Customize Export

How do you primarily identify?

Answered: 63 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Asian	4.76% 3
White, non-hispanic	65.08% 41
Black, African or African American	28.57% 18
Hispanic	0.00% 0
Pacific Islander	0.00% 0
Native	1.59% 1
TOTAL	63

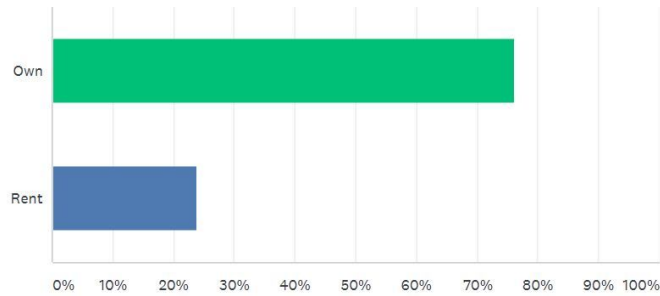
Q4

Customize

Export

Do you own or rent your residence?

Answered: 63 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Own	76.19%	48
Rent	23.81%	15
TOTAL		63

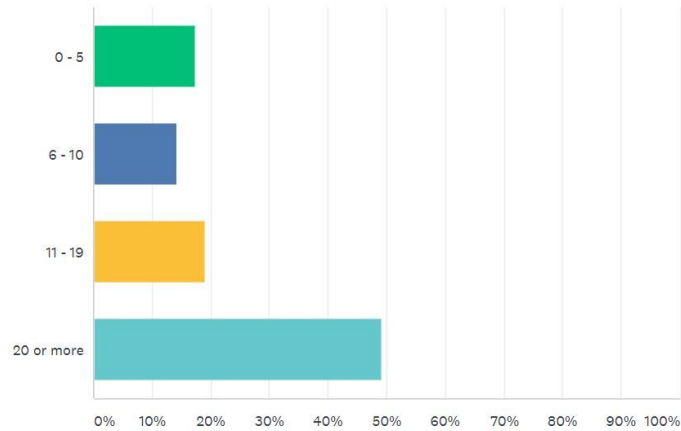
Q5

Customize

Export

How many years have you lived in the central district?

Answered: 63 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
0 - 5	17.46%	11
6 - 10	14.29%	9
11 - 19	19.05%	12
20 or more	49.21%	31
TOTAL		63

Q9

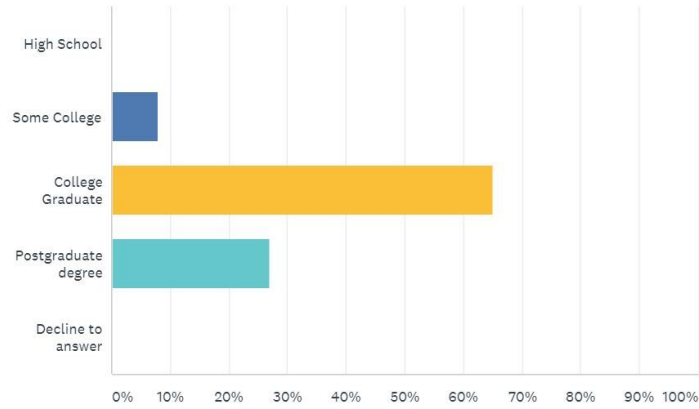
Rectangular Snip

Customize

Export

What is the highest level of school you have completed?

Answered: 63 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
High School	0.00% 0
Some College	7.94% 5
College Graduate	65.08% 41
Postgraduate degree	26.98% 17
Decline to answer	0.00% 0
TOTAL	63

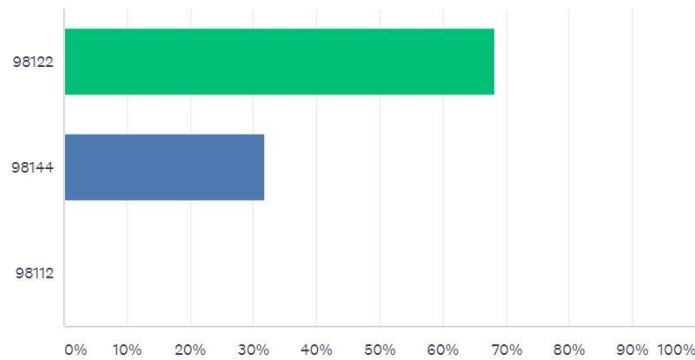
Q10

Customize

Export

What is your zip code?

Answered: 63 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
98122	68.25% 43
98144	31.75% 20
98112	0.00% 0
TOTAL	63