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Unravelling the geographical palimpsest through fieldwork: discovering a sense of place

Unravelling the geographical palimpsest through fieldwork: discovering a sense of place

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ABSTRACT: *Fieldwork enables students to gain a greater understanding of the people and places that they encounter. Urban areas are popular destinations for fieldwork because they present a landscape that is in a continual state of change. Yet, as this article indicates, the past is ever present in the urban landscape as each place can be regarded as a palimpsest, where layers of history, geography, culture and politics co-exist. Through active participation in fieldwork, students have the potential to unravel this palimpsest and discover a deeper sense of that place. The example used here reflects upon urban fieldwork in Barcelona as experienced by a group of undergraduate students who, as they carried out and reflected upon their field work, benefited from gaining a sense of place informed by a range of geographical processes and meanings. The article concludes with a series of suggestions for those embarking on fieldwork and wishing to unravel the geographical palimpsest.*

Introduction

Urban landscapes are a palimpsest consisting of superimposed layers of geography, history, culture and politics. These layers can be deciphered to gain a better understanding of a sense of place (Tuan, 1977; Cresswell, 2014). This gives each district, or even an individual street or locale, its own set of physical, socio-economic and cultural characteristics. It is important to study not just the formation of place, but also the responses and reactions to place (Davidson *et al.*, 2005). However, the relationship between a visitor and a destination is a complex one, influenced by preconceptions and background of the visitor, as well as the direct experiences when encountering that place for the first time and also for those returning to the destination. Each place may 'appear' different or have different meaning according to an individual's relationship with that place, whether they are a local or visitor, male or female, and other demographics such as age, sexuality, religion, their lived experiences, values, culture, individual personality, and many other factors (Massey, 1994; Anderson, 2010). An individual may be influenced by what they have read or seen and, as such, the intertextuality of one set of readings may influence the appearance or analysis of another. In so doing the shaping of meaning can be partly or wholly influenced by another source (Allen, 2011; Hones, 2014). These meanings are not necessarily fixed, as they are culturally constructed and continually evolve (Holloway and Hubbard, 2001).

This article discusses how it is possible for students and teachers, as visitors to a new and unfamiliar destination, to unravel the stories within an urban landscape from its geography, history, architecture and culture¹. The term 'unravel' refers to an untwisting and straightening out of a geographical story in an attempt to identify, solve or explain a range of processes and meanings. A sense of place is often not clear cut, but messy, fuzzy, fragmented and potentially incomplete (Massey, 2005; de Roo and Porter, 2007). By visiting and looking at a place, an individual can reveal its stories and thus better understand why its form is the way it is, and how that place

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The Barri Gòtic Quarter of Barcelona. Photo © Bryan Ledgard.

functions. Based around a field trip to Barcelona in Spain, this article examines how second- and final-year undergraduate students experienced a different style of fieldwork teaching and learning to traditional approaches. Here students are responsible for the academic content and teaching during the field visit: they organise a group presentation in the field and lead an activity with their peers. This means that students take possession of part of the field trip, which encourages them to engage with a particular place through a deeper level of understanding (Hill and Woodland, 2002). This article examines the experiences of those students in deciphering the geography, history and culture of a place on an international field trip, and reveals how their sense of 'place' developed while encountering the geographical palimpsest. The article is also helpful to those teaching about places in the new UK A level Geography specifications being taught from September 2016 (Department for Education, 2014) because it discusses an approach to gaining a deeper understanding of a sense of place.

Place as palimpsest

The word 'palimpsest' refers to an ancient manuscript that has been over-written with more recent text, but the older text can be seen showing through: 'a piece of... manuscript on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for other writing' (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 1990). The concept of palimpsest is frequently used in various socio-scientific fields. In urban studies it can be applied to explain the construction stages of historical buildings and monuments and the development of urban morphology (Crang, 1996; Scazzosi, 2004; Vâlceanu *et al.*, 2014). A landscape often shows traces of older forms and symbols, not just recent features. Therefore, what exists in any given place are layers of meaning that are waiting to be revealed, interpreted and understood by those who encounter them.

These layers of meaning help to establish a sense of place and can include attributes such as geography, history, culture, socio-economics, arts, architecture and language. Some of these attributes may be present simultaneously whereas others may appear to be hidden from sight, waiting to be discovered. City districts have their own internal geographies and characteristics that are a product of the 'successive waves and cycles of development and of demographic, social, cultural, political and administrative change' (Knox, 2012, p. 8). What exists is a multi-faceted landscape, which exhibits multiple identities that may vary

temporally, spatially and individually (Sampson and Goodrich, 2009). The landscape is an accumulation of 'geo-graphy' – what Schein describes as human 'earth writing' (2010, p. 222) – a material record of human activity. Palimpsest refers to the geographical and historical fabric and layering; the concept of 'place' and in particular a 'sense of place' is a social construct based on perception and interpretive possibilities. The characteristics of a place are not purely physical (bricks and stone, architectural design, and so on), but consist of many other factors, including representations (through symbols) and functionality (how the space is used and by whom). The idea that a place can be 'read' as a text is not a recent development (see, for example, Ricoeur, 1971; Cosgrove and Daniels, 1988; Duncan and Duncan, 1988; and Benediktsson and Lund, 2010), yet the idea is still relevant because the history of a place can be deciphered, and the contemporary issues gleaned by looking for symbols and meanings in the landscape as part of the geographical palimpsest. As such, both past and present processes of place formation can be implicit in its contemporary interpretations.

A place can, therefore, have more than one meaning and identity and can be contested as it is viewed and experienced from a variety of different perspectives and circumstances. Visitors/tourists may have a different perception of place compared with local residents. It is not just about the physical fabric of the city, its buildings and its architecture, but also observations and experiences of visitors to that place. According to Hall (2007) how humans perceive and engage with places is important, as the meaning of individual places is also associated with a sense of identity and belonging.

Being in a public space in a city is a sensuous experience (Degen, 2003). Walking around any place in a city tends to involve all the senses giving an indication of the character of that place, e.g. the traffic noise and fumes, crowds of people, voices, smells emanating from shops, the textures and designs of buildings. Thus our perception of a place as a visitor involves both mental representations and sensuous perceptions – the material construction of place combined with the social construction; the people encountered and their behaviour and activities (Degen, 2003). It is through the use of our senses that we begin to mediate our relationship with the environment and to form a sense of place (Degen, 2003). A sense of place is achieved when personal identities form in relation to specific environments. Knowledge and feelings about a place are formed as a result

of lived experiences and as such become part of a person's self-identity (Hall, 1997; Lawler, 2008).

In an attempt to unravel the palimpsest, the geographical histories of the past may appear as traces or fragments, like artefacts or piecemeal layers in an archaeological excavation. An interpretation by students and teachers as visitors of these fragments is not an easy task because they are being deciphered through contemporary values, expectations and cultures. By unravelling the palimpsest we are making sense of the past in the present. What is experienced by those encountering these places in the present is regarded as tomorrow's history (Carvalho, 2011); personal memories, shared imaginaries, historical narratives, emotional and spiritual attachment to places and events are important and can be lost through time. The city landscape is not an impermeable surface layer but one that has porous qualities as glimpses of the past can be seen in the present. By uncovering and interpreting some of the layers a deeper sense of place can be achieved, because present form and function is revealed to be connected to past events. The city consists of a series of spaces and flows as layers of city life are deposited through time (Massey, 2005), and geographical fieldwork helps to uncover such processes and, as such, leads to a greater understanding of the palimpsest of city life.

Encountering place

Visiting a new and unfamiliar place can be seen as a journey involving first, the discovery of the geography, history, society, culture and arts, etc. and second, (self-)awareness of our own changing relationship with that place. In this article we discuss how it is possible to gain a greater sense of place (even during a short stay) and perhaps even discover more about yourself at the same time. Typically, students of geography at university have the opportunity to experience international fieldwork at some point during their degree courses. Even if a person has visited that place before, participating in an academic field trip will be considerably different from other types of visits. Students may visit destinations that they would probably not visit as a tourist, and see the place from a variety of different theoretical perspectives. However, even students and their teachers can be regarded as tourists or outsiders visiting a particular place at a given time for a particular purpose.

Encountering a place can evoke a range of emotional responses; what is challenging is being able to capture the unfiltered emotions of students

while simultaneously encouraging them to be aware of the emotions of others about that place. Understanding that places can generate emotional reactions is powerful in developing a sense of and (in turn) an emotional attachment to place (Smith *et al.*, 2009). It is important that students are encouraged to reflect upon their emotions, which may change over time, as they begin to unravel the palimpsest and to gain a greater understanding of the area under investigation.

Sense of place

Fieldwork helps us to understand the palimpsest by experiencing different locations and situations to begin to see 'attachments and connections between people and place. We see worlds of meaning and experience' (Cresswell, 2014, p. 18). Based on the work of Tuan, gaining a sense of place is made possible by experience as 'what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value' (1977, p. 6). To express a sense of place is to describe its human and physical features along with the processes that shape these features as well as the human actions that provide further meaning and interpretation (Standish, 2014). We see and make sense of symbols, and human experiences provide insights into how and what people know about the world that they inhabit. 'Seeing' refers both to what the eye sees and the ways in which meanings are constructed from seeing and being in a particular place; in other words, everyone responds differently to external and environmental stimuli (Rose, 2016). Nevertheless, different people will make sense of the world around them in different ways and as a result navigate and understand a place differently (Tuan, 1977). Therefore, place can be regarded as a construct that can be described in several ways and at different levels, which can be simultaneously abstract and real (Wee *et al.*, 2013).

Residents of a city often view places and local events in relation to social and cultural references, whereas visitors endeavour to base their experiences on enjoyment and an awareness of differences (Richards, 2007). Even when places of cultural significance have not specifically targeted visitors, the rapid growth in tourist numbers has ensured that visitors will experience them. Visitors to a place often have a natural curiosity, especially in areas of high cultural significance (see Richards and Wilson, 2006; Urry and Larsen, 2011), yet, it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between what is considered to be 'authentic' and what has been constructed to replicate the past in the

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present (Boorstin, 1961; MacCannell, 1976). Therefore, to gain a deeper sense of place it is important that visitors look beyond the superficial: searching for clues in the landscape in order to unlock the palimpsest. They can uncover a range of historical, economic, environmental, political, social and cultural references and begin to reveal hidden narratives, all of which may help in gaining an informed sense of place (Hall, 2007; Hall and Barrett, 2012).

The importance of fieldwork

International fieldwork is offered on most geography university degree programmes. It provides an exciting opportunity for a student to experience somewhere and something different, through the 'looking glass' of being a geographer. Reasons for doing fieldwork at school and university are well documented (see, for example, Kent *et al.*, 1997; Balderstone, 2006; Fuller *et al.*, 2006; and Boyle *et al.*, 2007). During any type of field trip, you would expect that students gain a sense of 'place'. Nevertheless, encouraging students to fully engage with their surroundings can be challenging, especially in a new and unfamiliar places.

By providing students with an active learning experience they can be encouraged to observe, think for themselves and inform others. Students are not *tabula rasa* because they bring prior knowledge and experiences to their learning (Wee *et al.*, 2013). This provides a framework onto which subsequent experiences and learning are built. Understanding about a place is constructed from current experiences, knowledge and understanding superimposed onto past experiences, knowledge and understanding. Students are able to interpret landscapes through the use of meanings contained in other texts including written ones (such as books and essays) and non-written ones (such as maps, paintings and performances). This degree of intertextuality enables students to gain a deeper sense of place because it enables them to draw upon a greater range of knowledge and experiences (Allen, 2011; Hones, 2014).

Students are able to learn better when they are able to relate new information to existing foundational ideas, all of which are drawn from human experiences (Bransford *et al.*, cited in Wee *et al.*, 2013). Such experiences are not just academic (i.e. learning about the geography of place), they also have the potential to transform an individual's sense of place, both consciously and

subconsciously. In some cases, there may be a significant change of viewpoint in the individual, leading to transformative learning (Simm and Marvell, 2015a). This article challenges how prospective and current students view and approach field trips and how they can discover a 'sense of place' by unravelling the geographical palimpsest through fieldwork. This is in line with the recent changes to the A level geography curriculum in the UK as teachers and their students are required to identify processes and meanings that relate to the study of place.

Students are asked to identify:

'how humans perceive, engage with, and form attachments to places and how they present and represent the world to others, including the way in which everyday place meanings are bound up with a sense of identity and belonging [as well as understanding] that both past and present processes of development can be seen to influence the social and economic characteristics of places and so be implicit in present meanings' (Department for Education, 2014, p. 11).

As such, understanding the idea of a palimpsest is one way to help make the connections between past and present and the many processes that have helped to shape and define a particular place over time.

Pedagogy

The traditional form of geographical field trip offers staff-led tours with opportunities for data collection. Many British universities have organised trips to Barcelona, in northern Spain, in order to immerse students more fully into the place to get them to better appreciate and understand the geographical issues, to discover meanings associated with that place and thereby unravel the palimpsest or story of that place for themselves (Marvell *et al.*, 2013).

The example used here is based on the experiences of international field trips to Barcelona organised by two universities in the United Kingdom. Students work in groups, select and research a topical issue, then present a talk and a learning activity about their chosen issue during the fieldtrip in that location, i.e. their talk is performed by students *in situ* with the geography around them (Marvell, 2008; Marvell, *et al.*, 2013). The student audience can thus become immersed in the place and learn about the geographical issues in the very place being discussed. This approach offers a rich experience for the students in being able to establish a sense of place by

Barcelona: an introduction

The city

famous *Modernista* buildings by architects such as Antonio Gaudí. These buildings reflect the influence of *Modernisme* (also known as Catalan modernism), which has its roots in the Art Nouveau movement in Europe and as expressed through the Catalan Renaissance during the mid-nineteenth century.

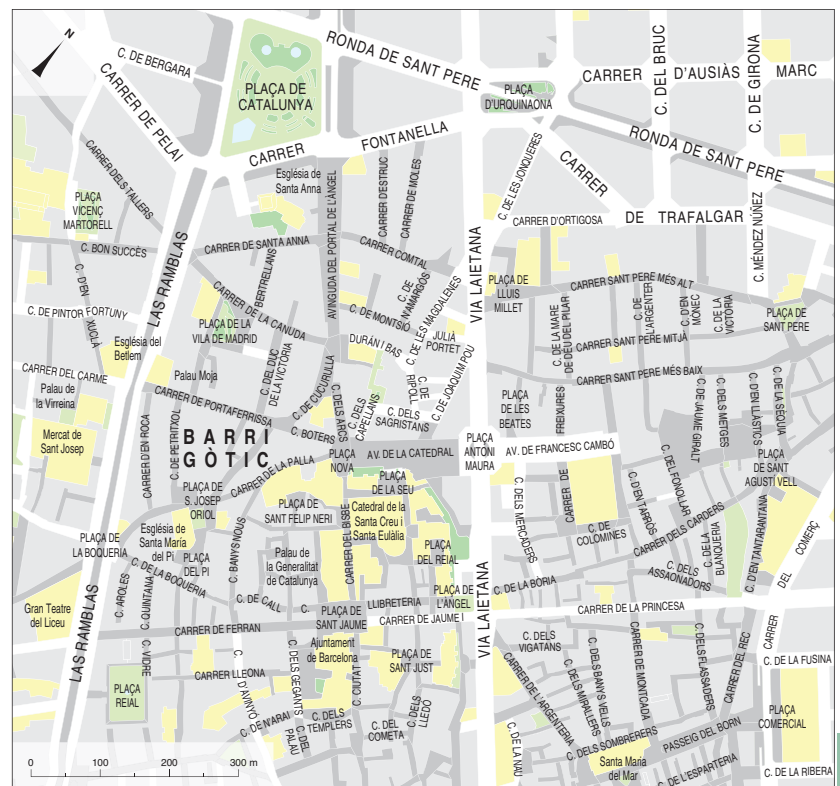
The redevelopment of Barcelona as a major European city was partly due to the hosting of the Olympic Games in 1992 (which was largely based around the hillside district of Montjuïc). This work coincided with the construction of new roads, new transport networks and new buildings, which themselves have acted as a catalyst for further economic regeneration (Monclús, 2007). Today, the city thrives on tourism, trade fairs, conferences and technological innovation. Recent improvements include the 22@ district established in Poblenou – this area now specialises in high-tech industries, innovative architecture and services. Waterfront regeneration has included the construction of marinas and artificial beaches, which has made Barcelona a popular destination for leisure as well as business visitors (Smith, 2012; Marvell, 2013).

Encountering the palimpsest: the Barri Gòtic

Popular with visitors, the Barri Gòtic area of Barcelona has a network of small streets based on the medieval street pattern, which open out onto a series of squares or *plazas*. The remains of a

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Figure 1: Central Barcelona with Las Ramblas and the Barri Gòtic Quarter.



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Roman wall can be seen close to the Catedral de la Santa Creu i Santa Eulàlia in the western part of the Barri Gòtic. The Catedral's imposing façade faces the wide Pla de la Seu with many shops and restaurants around the perimeter. The Barri Gòtic is also an area of creative importance – it was home to famous artistic residents including Picasso, who is celebrated in the form of the Picasso Museum.

During the field trip students are asked by their tutors to describe their initial perceptions of the Barri Gòtic and to estimate the area's age. They often describe the area as 'mediaeval' or 'gothic' and mistake the buildings for ones that are much older. The preconceptions of visitors may fuel a desire for perceived 'authenticity' as they look for something old, even though it may not be (Richards, 2007).

Many of the narrow streets of the Barri Gòtic contain a mix of local shops, tourist shops and museums, which can present different characteristics of place depending on the time of day. At the time of visiting Carrer de la Llibreteria during the morning (Figure 2a) some businesses

were closed and their frontages were protected by metal shutters adorned with graffiti (Figure 2b). This can profoundly affect a sense of place as sometimes the visitor's experiences can be overwhelmingly positive, or somewhat negative. Guide books often portray this area as an open-air 'mediaeval' or 'gothic' quarter. While the Barri Gòtic (Figure 3) may appear to be mediaeval or gothic, nowadays it cannot be described of as thirteenth-century. Instead, the buildings were constructed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the neo-gothic style. During the nineteenth century, some of the original gothic buildings were removed and more contemporary buildings were added in their place. These more modern buildings are more functional than aesthetic, but their juxtaposition with the older buildings provides a sense of an 'organic' or 'natural' evolution of the area. Unravelling the palimpsest reveals that original buildings have been altered, sometimes demolished, or moved, and existing buildings may look older than they really are. The area contains some medieval buildings – notably the Santa Maria del Mar, Plaça de Sant Just, Palau de la Generalitat de Catalunya (Carrer del Bisbe side, 1418) (Figure 4) and Carrer del Montcada (rich merchants' houses) located outside of the core area of the Barri Gòtic – yet other features (such as the enclosed gothic bridge



Figure 2a: The Carrer de la Llibreteria in the Barri Gòtic Quarter is typical of the narrow streets filled with shops and museums. Photo: © Alan Marvell.

Figure 2b: Shopfront shutters adorned with graffiti in the Barri Gòtic. Photo: © Bryan Ledgard.



Figure 3: Students beneath the 'gothic' bridge over the Carrer del Bisbe within the Barri Gòtic Quarter. Photo: © David Simm.

constructed across Carrer del Bisbe in 1928 – see Figure 3) were constructed later.

The original Catedral de la Santa Creu i Santa Eulàlia was built between 1298 and 1448, but the façade that adorns the building was added during the 1880s and completed (to an earlier gothic design) in 1913 (Figure 5). Students may consider religious buildings as being 'old', but the interior of the Església de Santa Maria del Pi on the Plaça de Sant Josep Oriol was destroyed by fire in 1936 during the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) and restored during the 1960s. Similarly, the Plaça de Sant Pere appears to be a medieval church, but is actually a twentieth-century renovation.

The urban fabric is continually under renewal and, as such, is not meant to be regarded as a museum, but this raises questions to the observer about what can be considered to be original, historic or even 'authentic'? The Barri Gòtic is an eclectic mix of old and new. There is an imprint of medieval on the modern urban fabric: the buildings follow the original medieval street pattern, but are now much taller. The original medieval two-storey buildings confined by the city walls have been extended upwards to become five- or seven-storey buildings. The result is a network of narrow, dimly-lit passageways with multiple-tenanted apartments often with washing hanging across them.

The Barri Gòtic Quarter thus displays a patchwork of different architectural periods simultaneously. The influence of medieval architecture incorporated into the nineteenth-century design of some buildings provides a challenge for students to make sense of the palimpsest, for example, in identifying what is old but made to look older.

The Barri Gòtic Quarter became firmly established as the centre of Barcelona when the Catedral de la Santa Creu i Santa Eulàlia was completed at the start of twentieth century. There appears to have been a conscious decision on the part of city authorities to continue to situate the Catedral within a 'gothic' environment as buildings and façades were created from fragments left over following the demolition of the historic city. In 1927, restoration work began in the Quarter, which created a new atmosphere and environment, thus the area can be regarded as a mid-twentieth century creation with its origins in the Middle Ages. The Quarter can be interrogated in architectural terms because it contains a unity of style that is unusual within a city that has witnessed successive attempts at urban regeneration. This process of urban transformation has encouraged Gant (2011) to describe the Barri Gòtic as being

transformed from a 'national symbol' to a 'medieval theme park' where the past has been commoditised to present a new image to attract investment and tourism, and to reflect the political and cultural importance of the area.

From the 1950s, the Barri Gòtic became increasingly part of the tourist circuit as it was progressively recognised as a historical visitor attraction, with the streets surrounding the Catedral de la Santa Creu i Santa Eulàlia attracting the majority of visitors.

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Figure 4: *Palau de la Generalitat de Catalunya: one of the few original medieval buildings in the Barri Gòtic.*
Photo: © Alan Marvell.



Figure 5: *The nineteenth-twentieth century façade of the Catedral de la Santa Creu i Santa Eulàlia.*
Photo: © Alan Marvell.

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Who is the Barri Gòtic for?

When unravelling the palimpsest, it is not just about revealing layers of history and meaning, but also about beginning to question the motive for, and the purpose and effects of processes and performances. Locals often avoid Las Ramblas and Plaça Reial due to crowds of tourists and the prevalence of souvenir shops, the activities of stag parties and other, less salubrious, activities (Sinkeviciute, 2014). In order to ease the flow of visitors and disperse them across a wider geographical area, signposts provide a series of well-marked tourist routes through the Barri Gòtic; thus preventing tourists getting lost in the maze of streets and directing them to key attractions. These routes were deliberately created in order to produce a tourism circuit whereby visitors can be more easily managed (Maitland and Newman, 2009). These areas are actively managed by the local authorities, who regularly wash down the main thoroughfares and systematically remove graffiti. Far from being just a tourist attraction, the Barri Gòtic is the political centre of Barcelona and the surrounding region. As the Palau de la Generalitat de Catalunya (Figure 4) and the Ajuntament de Barcelona are places where people work and live, the area is an integral part of the Barcelona landscape and the life of its citizens.

By unravelling the palimpsest do students gain a sense of place?

Personal perception of place is influenced before an individual even experiences that place directly. Before arriving at a destination, personal perceptions will have been influenced by what is expected to be there (Taylor, 2015). For example, promotional marketing materials, tourist brochures, websites, reviews, and guidebooks may direct the reader towards tourist sites often with a 'top ten' of must-do sights to see and facilities such as bars and restaurants to visit. A synopsis of the history may be present within this preliminary material, but it is often a short and sanitised version. Literature, film, television documentaries and news items may offer perceptions of a place as do opinions and stories from family and friends sharing their own experiences. Academic staff may also inadvertently reinforce preconceptions. Warnings about pickpockets in tourist areas or advice not to venture into less salubrious districts particularly late at night may reinforce and/or instigate fears and concerns, thereby affecting a person's openness to and interpretations of that place.

As part of the pre-field trip preparation students are often asked to provide a list of words they associate with the destination. They may have a

mixture of positive and negative images or thoughts before they have physically encountered the place. Do they arrive with preconceptions or high expectations? On arrival, preconceptions may be reinforced or dispelled. Initially, negative feelings may be reinforced after travelling – here the onset of fatigue or the experience of disorientation in arriving at the destination in the dark or a crowded environment may influence perceptions. Such preconceptions may 'cloud' or 'inform' an initial sense of place that may be then difficult to dispel (see Figure 6). Cities often appear to display homogenous characteristics while visitors actively search for 'difference' (Hawthorne, et al., 2015). When arriving in a new place there is the potential to be overwhelmed with new sights, sounds and smells. Finally, the time of day and weather can also influence an initial mix of emotions consisting of expectations, excitement, anticipation, and in some cases travel fatigue. Students record what they observe and encounter in their reflective diaries. On reading the diaries it becomes evident that students are aware of the social and historical aspects and the immediacy of the place in terms of activities rather than aspects such as architecture. It is clear that some students begin to gain a more mature and subtle appreciation of place and to appreciate a sense of identity – in this case of the Barri Gòtic – and a sense of Catalan identity through the appropriation of the *Modernista* style – in particular the influence of Gaudí – and through Catalan emblems, symbols and flags.

'Wrongly, I now appreciate, I started to form my first impressions... early on during the bus ride from the airport. How disappointing [I thought, it is] just like any other European city.' (Student A)

'The little alleys [and] buildings were typical of what I had expected, but [I] was slightly annoyed by the fact they were now home to some tacky tourist shops and bars.' (Student B)

'My guide book... appeared to "rank" sites around the city in order of importance, forcing a particular impression on a generic tourist, but I'm glad we saw a mix [of places] and not just [what] we "had" to see.' (Student C)

Figure 6: Students identify their own preconceptions about Barcelona.

As students spend more time in a place, experience it and learn more about that place, they also begin to evolve a sense of their relationship with the place in terms of attachment and 'seeing the real Barcelona' as an outsider (see Figure 7).

'A sense of place is created by a number of things such as amenities, historical influences, cultural aspects, community, atmosphere, and others... I would define place as the atmosphere and feeling a location provides through the influences it celebrates and draws upon.' (Student D)

'It is more than just a geographical space, it evokes emotions and feelings, "place" provides an understanding of the people who use an area and for what purpose.' (Student E)

'I cannot stress the importance of people in defining a sense of place... their lives, legacies, cultures, languages and beliefs... are all stories that they leave behind.' (Student F)

Figure 7: Students reveal a sense of place by unravelling the palimpsest.

Emotional interaction with the environment

A more nuanced sense of place begins to evolve through a process of being *in situ* (Marvell, 2008), and students' preconceptions are reinforced or challenged, e.g. through personal security, gender issues and experiencing the unfamiliar. When interacting with the environment students experience a range of emotions that go beyond cognitive reflection. Opinions begin to form and students begin to develop a greater degree of empathy with the issues of a particular place. This enhances their sense of place, which signifies the importance of fieldwork. As one student wrote:

'In situ, students experienced a unique, multi-sensory experience of a place... From this experience, I can say active participation in situ is something that cannot be simulated easily in the classroom.' (Student G)

Getting the most from fieldwork

As students actively participate in fieldwork, they begin to refine their understanding of that place (be it Barcelona or elsewhere). Understanding also increases through experience, which involves one or more of the following:

Immersion and being *in situ*

The value of physically being there cannot be understated. The example in this article facilitates academic understanding through research and actively engaging in student presentations by taking possession of part of the fieldtrip and

sharing the responsibility for delivering and facilitating the learning of other students (Marvell *et al.*, 2013).

Exploration and (self-)discovery

Exploring the city independently as a group of students is a very important part of the learning process. Not only do students feel comfortable navigating new surroundings, it allows them to take a more active and keener view of their surroundings as they are in an unfamiliar place. Some students were surprised by the display of Catalan and pro-Independence flags because they were not expecting to see such political and socio-cultural expression while encountering the Barri Gòtic Quarter.

Chance encounters

By exploring the city independently students are increasingly likely to experience a range of chance encounters, which will enhance their sense of place. Chance encounters may lead to a deeper understanding of place and the lives of its citizens because often these experiences can be regarded as moments in time and not something that can be experienced every day (Valentine, 2008). As one student experienced, while standing in the Pla de la Seu:

'Incredibly I managed to glimpse a street parade on the last day of a Catalan tradition where people wearing giant masks of kings and queens were surrounded by people playing music.' (Student H)

Personal reflection and self-awareness

Students are able to gain a heightened sense of self-awareness and begin to question their own relationship with the place they are visiting (Moon, 2000). While participating in fieldwork students begin to move from a 'tourist' perspective to one of empathy for local issues and situations; in the case of Barcelona pro-independence of Catalunya and tourist intrusion into residential neighbourhoods.

Perceptions – real or imagined

Through their reflective personal diaries and discussion within their groups and with tutors it becomes apparent that students often see things differently. This notion of difference is not necessarily one of right or wrong, rather it is one of depth of understanding and the ability to identify and articulate knowledge and understanding based on what is being seen and understood. The perceptions of visitors to a place may be enhanced

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by its features, which may distort or suggest a version of events that may be real or imagined (Soja, 1996), as can be seen in the example of the Barri Gòtic.

Insider/outsider, self/other

It is important to recognise that others will have different values and opinions. For example, the perception of a visitor may be different to that of a resident. Students are encouraged to empathise and 'see' things from a variety of 'other' perspectives, which they are not part of (Sampson and Goodrich, 2009).

Life through a geographical lens

Being a geographer on a field trip provides a unique opportunity to view life through a geographical lens. This is not just about an ability to observe, record and interpret the world from a personal perspective, but also about the ability to form a critical perspective, using geographical skills of enquiry, which, in turn, enables students to discover a range of meanings, events and geographical connections (Jackson, 2006).

Conclusion

Every place has its own unique set of characteristics, as 'cities reveal themselves in the moods and personalities of their districts' (Knox, 2012, p. 8). Being actively engaged in international

fieldwork is not just about going there and being a tourist, but also about making sense of what is encountered. As geographers we are interested in understanding how a place functions, co-exists with other places and represents a range of meaning. This is not an easy task, because it is difficult for an outsider, who is only visiting for a few days or weeks, to fully understand a place. It can also be argued that the residents themselves may not be aware of important local histories and connections.

As visitors, our senses are bombarded by being immersed *in situ* and, in turn, our senses mediate our own relationship with the environment. We are affected not only by what we see, for example the materiality of the landscape, the physical layout, buildings and natural features, but also by the other senses too. Experience and practice of being in a place is both subjective and an active dialogue between users of space and the physical aspects of that place. This is then interpreted through the senses, which form memories (Degen, 2003).

To experience a place more, to better immerse ourselves in a place, there are some simple things that we can all do as teachers and students – whether on an international or local field trip or simply taking a holiday. These include learning about a place by unravelling the palimpsest of the urban landscape, which involves learning to see a place with an enquiring mind. By adopting a 'geographical eye' to recognise the different 'layers' in the fabric of a particular place (Figure 8) – including its physical characteristics, history, socio-economic indicators, representations of culture and so on – is to engage with the geographical palimpsest. However, it is important to recognise that a sense of place means different things to different people: 'other' voices and interpretations are important in this process of discovery. It is important to acknowledge that as a visitor you are an outsider; offering a detached perspective may offer an alternative interpretation. As Gieryn states, the meanings associated with a sense of place are 'pliable in the hands of different people, malleable over time, and inevitably contested' (2000, p. 465).

In order to unravel the palimpsest students and their teachers can begin to apply a series of focused observations that may include:

- geography – location, activities and connections
- history – key events and people and their representation through street names, memorials, museums, etc.
- nature – flora and fauna

Figure 8: Carrer de la Boqueria in the Barri Gòtic Quarter of Barcelona. Photo © Bryan Ledgard.



- language – descriptions of the area
- aesthetics – visual representations of the area
- materiality – architecture and construction
- culture – art, music, festivities, celebrations, commemorations
- perceptions – social constructions, aesthetics, design, feelings of (in-)security/safety, sounds, smells, time of day, and so on.

When preparing to visit a place it is important to get the most out of being there and begin to unravel the geographical palimpsest. As geographers we should study maps to help become familiar with the geography of the city. We should be able to identify its different component parts and how they fit together, for example where the key areas are located and how these are accessed by transport networks and hubs. Teachers and students can use 'Streetview' in Google Maps to see the city at street level and obtain a different perspective before encountering the geography at first hand. Additionally, it is important to read about the place, both in tourist guidebooks and popular literature as well as academic and news sources, in order to identify the geographical issues and contextualise the emerging debates. It is also necessary to be open-minded. Visitors may not know what is there until they get there and explore and experience a place for themselves, because they may have some preliminary perspective drawn from other sources. Having a basic understanding of the local language often helps to bridge intercultural differences, and will often be appreciated by local people. The spoken word can also reveal further meaning and understanding as local documents and artefacts disclose themselves to the reader and begin to make sense. By unravelling the palimpsest students can gain a deeper sense of place, which has the potential to lead to transformative learning and in turn offer a deeper understanding of place.

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