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Beyond the Basketball Court: Place, Connection, Memory and Letting Go

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Looking out from the window of my HDB block, I see the court sitting precisely where it always had. Enclosing the court is a four-sided, green wire fence that rises like a cage. Outside, the court gives a sense of containment, whereas inside, it feels exclusive. Stepping onto the court, memories rush in, overwhelming my mind like a long-forgotten treasure chest that has been pried open, spilling out memories of the distant past. There was this smell in the air, that of a faint rubber scent of a worn-out basketball, accompanied by the echoes of bouncing basketball against the court—a rhythm that remained unchanged through the years. I could feel the life of the court purring softly beneath my feet as though the ground itself held the weight of every game, every step, and every memory made here. The court, once worn with deep cracks and patches of paint rubbed away, now gleams with a fresh coat of sky blue and matte red paint.

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However, no matter how many layers are painted over, the rust clinging onto the edges of the rim, slightly bent from the countless shots taken, whispers the memories of the games long played.

I have noticed that the friendships I had once formed here have faded in time, replaced by young adolescents and unfamiliar faces. The way they sprinted across the court with effortless movements, was so familiar it felt like looking through a window into the past, reminding me of my primary school days. The unspoken coordination, the way friendships were effortlessly forged, their faces displaying expressions of sheer joy as if all their worries had dissipated, mimics how my childhood best friend and I once played here almost every day. For a split second, I thought I saw him there, giggling and yelling my name to pass the ball eager to win over our opponents. But he had migrated long time ago. Suddenly, the court feels different, smaller than before, even emptier. I once believed that childhood friendships formed were permanent. However, with new players now claiming the space we once ruled, the absence of those I knew had left a hollow shell even in the most popular of sports. And it seems to be a painful void I had to bear.

As I leave the court, it seems the memories remain trapped inside, locked behind the metal cage. Behind me, I can still hear the sounds of the game, but they feel distant; it feels like I'm losing the beat. So, I hesitate, glancing back for one last look, hoping to peek into the past, to see if there are still remnants of my childhood memories there. However, the moment has passed, and the game shall continue while my role in it has changed. I leave carrying nothing but the ache of nostalgia. I couldn't help but wonder: Are the places we cherish merely backdrops to the fleeting nature of human connection, or do places hold people together despite the passage of time?

Drozdowski et al. (2016) explored the complex relationships between memory, place and identity, especially in the aftermath of war and conflict. They investigated how individual memories are embedded into physical landscapes. They argue that memory is active and powerful. Rather than being static, memory is perpetually questioned and challenged, actively reshaping how individuals recall both joyful and traumatic experiences. It is not merely written in official narratives or preserved in stone monuments but rather experienced through sensory encounters with the locations, triggering memories through sight, sound and even taste and smell. Drozdowski et al. (2016) assert that memory is not merely a passive recollection of the past, but an active and ever-changing force that summons individuals, communities and countries to perceive themselves and their role in this world.

According to Jones (2011, p. 2), “memory makes us what we are”, emphasising that remembrance is not just a reflection of history but a crucial process that shapes, challenges and reaffirms identity. Drozdowski et al.’s (2016) argument holds true in many situations in our life. Our experiences at significant places are more than just the details. It is through the sensory encounters that a past reality is triggered, and such are the places that hold our memories, at times bittersweet, painful, melancholic. However, are the memories embedded deeply in such places enough to hold people together?

Such concerns have been explored from a psychological perspective. Scannell and Gifford (2017) provide a different perspective by exploring the psychological benefits of place attachment. They argue that places are not passive backdrops but active contributors to emotional stability. Going in-depth on the psychological benefits of place attachment, they argue that with significant places, individuals can galvanise cognitive and emotional connection. Scannell and Gifford (2017) identified some psychological benefits of place attachment theory, such as stimulating positive emotions, stress relief and memory support. Place attachment is positively correlated with the quality of life. A meaningful location works as an active contributor to emotional stability and connection rather than a mere passive backdrop, reinforcing the idea that “to be human is to live in a world that is filled with significant places” (Scannell & Gifford, 2017, p.1). Nevertheless, relocation or forced displacement can have detrimental psychological impacts on place connection, those being stress, isolation, suffering, and a feeling of loss. I agree that places help sustain relationships by anchoring emotional stability through psychological attachment to places. I also agree that relocation can have a detrimental impact on one’s emotions. I felt it when I lost a very good friend due to migration.

However, would emotional stability extend beyond the place itself, preserving the relationships formed within the place, even when the individuals are no longer physically there? Scannell and Gifford’s (2017) argument seems to mirror my experience but in a different way. I do feel an emotional connection when I am at the court, but the emptiness I experience is not from being physically distant from the place, instead it stems more from the absence of those who used to be there, such as my primary school friend who left Singapore long time ago. This makes the argument more complex as place attachment may help maintain stability, but it does not necessarily guarantee continuity of relationships. Scannell and Gifford (2017) emphasise how places can hold people together over time, yet in my case, the court has remained unchanged while my relationship with my friend has faded, at times, empty and void.

If places were merely passive backdrops, their role in relationships would be insignificant. However, if places actively hold people together, my return to the court would have brought back my old friendship along with my memories. It appears that reality seems more nuanced, and yes, painful. Places do preserve memories, but they do not necessarily preserve relationships in the way we hope them to. Drozdowski et al. (2016) claim that places act as repositories of memory because they shape identity through our sensory encounters becoming less a site of connection and more a quiet witness to what had been forged and to what has changed. In contrast, Scannell and Gifford (2017) suggest that places provide emotional stability by focusing on individual psychological attachment, anchoring us to moments we once cherished. However, their argument overlooks how places can simultaneously highlight the weight of absence, in a way that reminds us of what has been lost rather than a force that holds people together. While the basketball court does not sustain my relationships, it stands as a witness of my past—acting as a site for nostalgia, a physical manifestation of the passage of time and a remnant of a distant memory for which remembering can seem painful deep within, and forgetting seems palpable in time.

Therefore, despite my deep attachment to the basketball court, and despite the nostalgic ache, why did my relationship with my primary school friend fade in time? Why did it become alienating and void? If this were a sign, what does it signify? In my rumination, I realised that places do not merely exist as passive settings, nor do they single-handedly preserve relationships. It goes beyond just that; places refine our relationships or allow us to see and feel more vividly what we have not seen or felt before. They serve as a mirror, reflecting both impermanence and transformation, reminding us not only of what has been lost but also of what endures in our memory, and the decision we make to either hold on to this memory or let go.

Memories hold the echoes of our past, yet they do not stop time and ourselves from moving forward. The memories of my friend and I embedded in every bounce of the ball did not just preserve connection, they amplify my consciousness of how I reconcile nostalgia with reality, longing with acceptance, letting go, and moving on. Perhaps, then, it is not simply whether places are passive or active instruments in sustaining relationships, but rather how they reveal the fragile, enduring, yet fleeting nature of human connection—how they remind us of who we were, who we have become, what we have lost along the way, and our resolve to carry on.

Bionote

Foo Jing Lui, Jonah is an undergraduate student at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Singapore pursuing a major in Accountancy. His academic work centres on financial reporting and business decision-making. His writing explores how memory, identity, and place intersect, drawing from lived experiences. Beyond academics, he is actively involved in the NTU Sports Club and plays competitive basketball.

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