Sensing and Storying the Urban Landscape

People-Place Relations in Central Reykjavík

Ólafur Rastrick

Abstract

The study explores the intertwined roles of sensory engagement and narrative practices in shaping place attachment in inner-city and central Reykjavík. Through a qualitative mixed-methods approach – including walk-alongs, audio-visually recorded in-situ group sessions and solitary self-led walks with audio-visual recording glasses – this study examines how individuals connect to the urban landscape and form place attachment through embodied experiences and the telling of personal and shared stories. Building on an understanding of the city space as relational, multiple and becoming, this study illustrates how sensorial experiences, reminiscences and stories shape and reshape the relationship between people and places. Special consideration is given to the notion of breccia to illuminate the dynamic relationship between past experiences, sensorial engagement and the materiality of place, thus underscoring how the participants' understanding of and attachment to the built heritage of the city is in flux, always open to new stories and contexts.

Keywords: Storytelling, emplacement, place attachment, urban landscape, relationality, brecciation, sensory ethnography

The urban landscape is not merely a backdrop to everyday life that is independent of city-dwellers' engagements with it. Following Massey (2005), places are not fixed but are always emerging and continually shaped by interactions, movements and narratives. In this process, people and the physical environment engage in an interactive relationship, perhaps most clearly manifested in the recontextualization and fate of

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Ólafur Rastrick, Professor of European Ethnology, University of Iceland. Orcid ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3679-8638. rastrick@hi.is

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the effigies of certain notables over recent decades. Public monuments, meticulously designed and carefully placed to induce a clear message to those who pass them by, can instantaneously fail to do so – the message being transposed or rendered either inappropriate or insignificant. By engaging with the (slowly or swiftly changing) material features of the city through experience, recollection and narration, people actively contribute to its production. A place is a dynamic relationship between people and materiality; a place can thus hold multiple and diverse meanings and ambiences depending on who experiences it, how they move through it and what memories or emotions it induces. As narratives and experiences accumulate, are remembered, forgotten and recontextualized, the significance of the urban landscape is, to some extent, maintained and in other senses transformed.

Not only monuments or designated heritage sites, Sumartojo (2020) reminds us, but "all places can carry echoes of the past" (249). Indeed, as Österlund-Pötzsch (2011) observes, the city – where people live their everyday lives – serves as a "stage for subjective memories and storytelling", in which seemingly insignificant features of the environment become "inscribed with multiple stories" (117). In engaging with a place, individuals draw on their sensory faculties, experience and knowledge to make sense of the location. For those revisiting a stumping ground from their youth, the encounter with the materiality of place may trigger memories of people, events and bittersweet sensations, among other things, that fashion the understanding and engagement with the locale. Complete strangers will, on the other hand, rely more solely on their knowledge and experience of other places in perceiving and evaluating an unknown territory. The material qualities of place that signal its pastness will certainly contribute to the feel of the place and interact with sensory and cognitive processes that constitute its significance for the individual.

Drawing on examples from a mixed-method ethnographic study of people–place relations in inner-city and central Reykjavík, conducted from 2022 to 2024 (Jóhannesdóttir & Rastrick 2024; Rastrick 2025), this article explores the intertwined roles of sensory engagement and narrative practices in shaping place attachment in central Reykjavík. This study examines how individuals connect to urban spaces through embodied experiences and the telling of personal and shared stories. The findings reveal how sensorial encounters with Reykjavík's urban fabric evoke memories and emotions, while arguing that subjective sensorial experience and the stories people recount and develop about features of the urban landscape are central to understanding how the past and its endless reconfigurations can figure in the present to dynamically dictate people's understanding of place, place attachment and a sense of belonging.

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From a folklorist perspective, this study resonates with work on the relationship between storytelling and landscape (Cashman 2020; Gunnell 2009). This article argues that, in their sensorial and narrative encounters with place, the participants in our study engaged in vernacular place-making, activating the landscape through memory, significance and personal biography as well as through wider communal narratives, thus storying place as a way of knowing and belonging. Cashman's (2008, 2016) exploration of how people weave together memory, emotion and the physical environment though storytelling as a central way of making sense of the environment thus offers an important avenue for understanding people–place relations. From a different perspective, working with Icelandic legends, Gunnell's (2009, 2018) attentive appreciation of the situational and performative contexts of storytelling underpins this study's ethnographical emphasis on the significance of exploring our participants' interactions with the environment in situ.

Building on this premise – namely, that places are not merely static backdrops, but are dynamically constructed through social interactions and shared memories – the current article borrows on the one hand from writings associated with the relational turn in urban studies to facilitate an understanding of space as relational, multiple and always under construction (Massey 2005; Löw 2016; Amin & Thrift 2017). On the other hand, this study also draws on phenomenological propositions to emphasize how experience is both embodied and emplaced (Casey 2000; Seamon 2018), as well as studies on people–place relations and place attachment (Madgin & Lesh 2021; Manzo & Devine-Wright 2021). In linking these distinct theorizations, use is made of the metaphor of *breccia*, which has been experimented with in both critical heritage studies and architectural studies to illustrate how material and experiential fragments from the past are brought together in the present in a rearranged context (Bartolini 2014; Öztürk Aksoy & Dursun Çebi 2024). Building on the case study, this article examines how place-based everyday anecdotal storytelling and both past and present sensorial experiences of place are expressed and shared, embedding affective perceptions, personal memories and cultural meanings into the physical landscape in a provisional and volatile way. By foregrounding the affective and experiential dimensions of urban life, this article demonstrates how sensing and storying the city create emplaced attachments that resonate at both the individual and communal levels. From this perspective, it is argued that the urban built heritage in Reykjavík is not just about listed physical sites – it encompasses how people's everyday emotional engagements, memories, anecdotes and sensory experiences continually shape and reshape the meaning of urban spaces, ultimately fostering attachment (or conversely, effecting detachment) to places.

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Methods

Seeking to access the different kinds of perceptions, different modes and contexts of storytelling that emerge as people engage with places calls for a certain variety in terms of methodological approaches. Indeed, advancing sensory ethnography, Pink (2015:160), advocates methodological plurality when seeking to access the diversity of people's experiences and understandings of multisensory environments. In striving for methodological variety, the methods used in this study have certain aspects in common. They are founded on the premises that people's engagement with places is best studied in situ and while people are experiencing, perceiving and responding to a particular physical environment – rather than reflecting from afar on the significance of place (Pink 2015; Waterton & Watson 2015). Furthermore, the study has been guided by the understanding that people engage with the urban environment as they move through it and that walking is both commonplace and the most sensorially absorbing form of people–place interaction in a city centre environment (Middleton 2010; Österlund-Pötzsch 2011).

This project employed three complementary qualitative methods designed to provide a multi-faceted perspective on people's affective, sensory and emotional place-relations in an urban landscape. The aim here was to gain richer insights into how individuals experience, remember and ascribe meaning to places that transpose the past into the present, as well as to highlight dynamics that would remain hidden if only a single method were applied. Each method both compensates for the limitations of the others and generates openings that they might otherwise foreclose, thereby producing a layered methodological approach.

The first method involved walk-alongs, where a researcher accompanies a participant through an area of the city while engaging them in conversation. This approach allows for an immediate exploration of how participants perceive and make sense of the material and sensory environment as they encounter it. As has been demonstrated in earlier studies of urban experience (e.g. Kusenbach 2003), the walk-along method elicits reflections on embodied engagements with place, while foregrounding how memories and associations emerge in situ. At the same time, the results are necessarily shaped by the presence and interventions of the researcher, who guides the dialogue and frames the encounter.

The second method consisted of focus group sessions with two to four participants – family, friends, neighbours or colleagues – who met up at a prearranged site. Conducted in a minimally intrusive manner and supported by the use of historical photographs, these sessions were designed to encourage participants to share and compare their experiences of the

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changing urban landscape. The focus groups underlined the collaborative dimension of people–place interactions, showing how memory, meaning and attachment are socially negotiated. They also bring into play questions of group dynamics and power, because the trajectory of discussion and the co-production of knowledge may be influenced by differences in status, personality or narrative authority (Krueger & Casey 2015).

The third method adapted sensory research methodology as developed by Cooke, Buckley and associates (2020, 2021), involving the use of audio-visual recording glasses. Participants undertook solitary walks through familiar areas, recording what they saw, said and heard with minimal researcher influence. These recordings captured micro-interactions with the urban environment that may be overlooked in more conventional interviews. Within a week, participants revisited selected sections of the recordings with a researcher in a narrative-style interview that encouraged reflection and elaboration. This two-stage process afforded both immediate, emplaced documentation and subsequent interpretive commentary, thus creating opportunities for participants to articulate affective and sensory dimensions of their encounters.

The study was conducted in Reykjavík's city centre and adjacent inner-city neighbourhoods between 2022 and 2024. In total, 80 individuals participated, having been recruited through a combination of snowball sampling and social media advertisements. Eligibility was determined solely by participants' self-reported connection to the city centre, established through long-term or repeated engagement with the area. The group was balanced in terms of gender, ranging in age from their late twenties to their mid-eighties.

The Relationality of the Built Urban Heritage

Urban scholars have increasingly worked from the perspective of understanding space as relational, which refers to a *spatial turn* in the social sciences in general and a *relational turn* in urban studies (Löw 2016; Amin & Thrift 2017). Amongst the most influential protagonists of this area of study, Massey (1991, 1995, 2005) challenged the idea of space as a static container or a fixed backdrop to everyday life, while arguing for an understanding of space as relational, multiple and always under construction. The construction of space is thus not only a question of physical structures and layout, but is shaped by social relations, histories and movements. In this sense, space can simultaneously hold a multitude of meanings as an amalgamation of diverse and sometimes conflicting experiences and interpretations. The volatility of space derives from this, and

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its meaning evolves through encounters, narratives and changing power dynamics. In this view, places are never finished but are ongoing processes of becoming shaped by both past trajectories and future possibilities. In this vein, Massey (2005) introduced a temporal component of spatial constructions (what she refers to as *space-time*), thus emphasizing that space and time are co-constitutive – that is, made through interactions that unfold over time.

A relational understanding of space implies an acknowledgement that places have different meanings for people and that those meanings may change over time. Thus, we can say that a variety of stories can co-exist within the same place, each carrying its own temporal depth encompassing memories, past uses and future potentials. By integrating time into spatial analysis, Massey highlights that places are constantly being reworked through historical processes, lived experiences and future possibilities. This perspective allows us to see historic urban landscapes as dynamic, immersed with past experiences, present encounters and imagined futures rather than as frozen historical sites. Personal and collective narratives can thus be conceived as continuously shaping and reshaping the meanings of urban spaces. When individuals recall memories or share anecdotes about their surroundings, they are engaging in a process that actively constructs space through interrelations.

In bringing a relational perspective to the study of the tangible heritage, different metaphors and conceptualizations have been used to apprehend how the temporal and spatial intersect (Mawson 2024). The notion of *heritage assemblages* has, for instance, been introduced in heritage studies to theorize the dynamic and relational nature of heritage, emphasizing how it is constituted not by fixed objects or narratives, but through the coming together of diverse elements – material, spatial, social, sensorial, affective, mnemonic and temporal (Hamilakis 2017; Edensor 2023). Heritage assemblages can be seen as formed through the "dynamic folding, intersections, and entanglements of time" (Edensor 2023:2), where pasts are not merely preserved but are actively negotiated in the present. Rather than seeing heritage as a stable or singular entity, heritage assemblages foreground the heterogeneity and instability of heritage. Elements within an assemblage may include buildings, regulations, emotions, stories, performances and technologies, all of which are entangled in complex and often shifting relationships. These assemblages are context-dependent and open-ended, thus allowing for tensions, contradictions and multiple meanings to coexist.

Over a decade ago, Bartolini (2013, 2014) introduced the term *brecciation* to heritage studies based on Freud's metaphorical use of geological breccia to describe the temporal qualities of dreams and how they are

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not formed of ordered or linear narratives but can draw together fragments of dissimilar origins. In contrast to the metaphor of the palimpsest, which is commonly used to describe the multiplicity of meaning that is or might be attributed to aspects of the historic urban landscape, Bartolini's (2013) adoption of brecciation highlights how "fragments from different moments are brought together and reordered" (1045). Drawing on Bartolini's concept, Houssay-Holzschuch (2021) notes how the term encompasses the clutter and complexity of space-time configuration and highlights the temporal dynamics: "Past elements from a specific bygone period can therefore be brought back to the surface, here or there, or sink and disappear for a while" (465). While Bartolini's interest in the term focuses primarily on how different physical elements from different times and contexts coexist and interact in the materiality of the city environment, she suggests that the concept has possibilities for understanding the more intangible aspects of urbanity. "Indeed", she suggests, by "enabling juxtapositions to coexist … there may be subtler ways for affect and emotions, forms of tensions, as well as issues of power to be exposed." While the notion of palimpsest may have drawn attention to hidden traumas or hauntings evoked by place, "brecciation may reveal other forms of accommodation and seduction present at a site" (Bartolini 2014:531).

Recently, the architectural scholars Öztürk Aksoy and Dursun Çebi (2022, 2024) have adopted breccia in linking a space syntax approach to a phenomenological perspective, thus placing memory and lived experience at the core of their analysis. Rather than focusing solely on the spatial arrangement of the built environment, their concept of *urban breccia* draws attention to how individuals perceive, remember and emotionally engage with urban space. They use the term to describe how cities are not experienced as coherent or continuous, but rather as fragmented and layered formations composed of multiple temporal and experiential strata. These fragments – material, affective and mnemonic – are not passively received but actively composed through bodily movement, memory and imagination. In this sense, their approach foregrounds how individuals produce subjective images of place that are sedimented over time and shaped by both sensory and emotional engagements.

Building on this, the metaphor of brecciation can thus be extended to describe how people make sense of places they have encountered across different times, contexts and emotional states. It allows us to conceptualize place not as a fixed or stable identity, but as a dynamic, composite formation shaped by overlapping memories, affects and associations. First, the metaphor reflects the fractured yet cohesive nature of personal experience. People's sense of place is often built through fragments – sensory impressions, emotional residues or stories – accrued over time and held

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together not by rational continuity, but through subjective meaning-making. Second, it foregrounds the idea that the urban landscape is not perceived uniformly, but as a patchwork of moments. The same location might carry multiple, even contradictory, associations depending on one's position in time or social context. Third, the metaphor evokes how individuals layer and compress these experiences into a meaningful narrative, however provisional or unstable. The act of narrating place becomes a form of sedimentation. Fourth, it acknowledges dissonance: competing or unresolved experiences are not erased but remain embedded in the composition, ultimately contributing to its textured complexity. Finally, the metaphor opens up space for those more elusive or buried fragments of experience – the smells, atmospheres, absences – that still inform one's affective response to place, even if they remain outside conscious recall.

Conceptualizations of heritage assemblages and brecciation thus offer a way to accommodate an understanding of the city space as relational, multiple and emerging. In contrast, traditional views on urban built heritage, fostered by an *Authorized Heritage Discourse* (Smith 2006), tend to work from the premise that segments of the urban space, demarcated as heritage sites through expert value judgements, offer a stable repository of heritage value. Although this position has been heavily critiqued (e.g. Smith 2006; Harrison 2013; Whitehead, Schofield & Bozoğlu 2021; Edensor 2023), prevailing heritage management structures generally position urban built heritage as something to be conserved on grounds of a fixed valorization and a coherent historical narrative. As an institutionalized and dominating way of *past presencing* (Macdonald 2013), this linear and top-down understanding of historical significance cannot accommodate the different ways people give meaning to the urban environment. Adopting a relational approach to space in this context thus reframes the urban built heritage as something inherently dynamic, contested and socially produced. Thus, it can be claimed that the urban built heritage cannot be understood solely in terms of its architectural form or historical origin. Instead, it is constituted through the relationships people build with it over time – through daily use, emotional attachment, memory, protest or even neglect. A singular, authoritative narrative about a building's "significance" is insufficient; its meaning emerges through plural, lived interactions. A relational perspective also challenges the dominant tendency to privilege one interpretation of a place. The focus is thus moved towards perceiving urban heritage as a site of coexisting and sometimes conflicting narratives – from official commemorations to personal memories and marginalized voices. Finally, the focus is moved from assuming that the value of heritage is rooted in its preservation of the past, which implies a desire for stasis or authenticity-as-unchangeability, towards

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recognizing heritage as an unfinished cultural process that is constantly being remade through everyday interactions, contemporary events and shifts in social context. This opens up space for more inclusive, participatory and future-oriented approaches to heritage – where new stories, uses and experiences are seen as part of the evolving significance of the built environment.

Revisiting an Old Stomping Ground and the Tale of the Cobbler's Ghost

In one of her suggestive movements in theorizing space as relational, multiple and always under construction, Massey (2005) proposes conceiving space "as a simultaneity of stories-so-far" (9), and that "places are collections of those stories, articulations within the wider power-geometries of space" (130). For the individual, a place at any given moment can thus be seen as a collection of personal anecdotes and learned stories linked to that same place, available for recollection. Evidently, these stories are not all the same, as Howard (2019) reminds us: "the same landscape can mean different things to different people" (51), and one should add, those meanings are prone to alter with new encounters and experiences – as new stories emerge. De Certeau (1984) also compared places to stories, including stories that do not necessarily make it to the surface of consciousness or discourse: "Places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state, symbolizations encysted in the pain or pleasure of the body" (108).

In our study on the perceptions of Reykjavík's inner-city neighbourhoods and city centre, we were particularly interested in people's engagement that they themselves found to be significant (Jóhannesdóttir & Rastrick 2024). For our participants, walking through the city, being present at a place they either stumbled upon or had consciously chosen to visit, would prompt memories, calling forth fragments of past experiences associated with the place in question: events and persons of the past, as well as observations about the physicality of place and how it has changed (Rastrick 2025). These mnemonic episodes manifested in various form of sensorial or emotional expressions, sometimes, but not always, expressed in anecdotes or cohesive narratives. While these stories might at times convey general (historic) knowledge about the place or reflect the cultural memory of the area, more often than not the anecdotes were fraught with personal observations that provided glimpses, however fragmentary, into the significance the place held for the participant.

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Anna was one of our participants who had been recruited though snowball sampling. She is a professional folklorist in her early thirties and had moved from the countryside to the city when she started university. After completing her studies, she and her boyfriend rented a basement apartment in an inner-city neighbourhood but have since moved to the suburbs, apparently with some remorse. We provided Anna with audio-visual recording glasses for her city walk. With minimal instructions, mainly designed to encourage her to express herself during the walk about what she was perceiving and how she felt, we sent her off on the solo tour, starting from a well-known public square in the city centre, with the audio-visual recording from the glasses creating what Sumartojo and Pink (2017) call a *video trace*.

About ten minutes into her walk, she found her way to her old home address as she "sometimes do[es] when in the vicinity … just to check," she explains, "if the house is still yellow" (H-119). Years ago, while Anna lived in the house, she had learned that the owners planned to repaint the house a different colour, a choice to which she did not subscribe. Once she heard that the owner's girlfriend had suggested painting the house black, and Anna "simply couldn't imagine anything worse". On another occasion, just before they moved, she overheard a couple of workers doing renovations at the house discussing plans to paint the house brown, "which I also think is appalling" (H-119). In Anna's eyes, the yellow colour had gained specific importance. Not only was the exterior of the house painted yellow but so too was the apartment, "at least the kitchen and living room" (H-119). Repeated "threats" to paint the house black or brown intensified how she referred to the brightness of the yellow colour as symbolizing the couple's time in the apartment, as if a darker colour would impede the pleasant memories that she associated with the place. Standing in front of the house, Anna associated the yellow colour with "summer", contending that "this house is very much summer in my mind, it is very dear to me" (H-119). She then extended her confession of emotional attraction to other timber houses clad in corrugated iron in the inner-city dating from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: "I love all these tiny, brightly coloured, old houses – I think they are kind of great – I think they are really great" (H-119).

Anna's visit to the house prompted a few other anecdotes that she recounted for the benefit of the recording, while lingering by the house explaining various features of the building and making observations about its quality and ambiance. As the video trace captures her movements – with her looking at the house, back yard and neighbouring houses from different angles – she is quite casually reminded of a personal ghost story involving her boyfriend:

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> He was absolutely certain that the house was haunted because every time I went away, which happened regularly, to [her hometown] or somewhere else, then when [soft snicker, barely detectable] Palli woke up in the morning, *his shoes had been moved* [italics designate slightly dramatized emphasis]. He was often telling me such things, and he is just quite sensitive to the supernatural, which I'm not. And he was saying that his shoes had been displaced and something. And I just go, ahh okay, should I Google the house like we are in some old horror movie, and I just Googled the house. As it turns out, a shoemaker had lived in the house for a long time, and this completely convinced us that it was the shoemaker's ghost that was moving the shoes around (H-119).

The anecdote ends here, in a matter-of-fact kind of way, excusing the "folkloric digression", as her perception shifted to other aspects of the landscape and she heads away from the house. There is an air of casualness with an understated humorous twist to the anecdote, giving the impression that the absent presence of the cobbler was a welcomed added value to the place. The story was called forth by being in situ, Anna having been instructed to articulate her feelings and thoughts as she walked through the urban landscape. The anecdote is thus illustrative of the brecciated nature of her encounter with her former home. As she moves through the familiar landscape, her memory is activated not through deliberate reflection, but through spatial engagement: looking into the backyard, scanning neighbouring houses and narrating sensory and architectural details. This unstructured, fragmentary form of recollection aligns with the metaphor of breccia, where the experience of place is not linear or cohesive, but composed of layered, disjointed elements that are sedimented through repeated encounters over time.

In this instance, the ghost story surfaced as one such fragment – partially humorous and perhaps uncanny (for the boyfriend) – that was firmly situated in Anna's personal narrative. The anecdote was shaped by multiple temporalities and contexts: her own repeated departures from the house; her boyfriend's sensitivity to the supernatural; a folkloric motif familiar from broader cultural narratives; and the retrospective confirmation offered by Google, tying the story to a former resident. These elements – personal, cultural, affective and digital – coalesced into a moment that was only loosely held together by narrative cohesion but was rich in meaning.

Such a moment exemplifies how brecciation allows fragments from different moments and sources to co-exist without necessarily resolving into a single interpretation. The presence of the cobbler-ghost is not offered as proof or belief, but as a narrative layer enriching Anna's sense of the place. The absent presence is both literal (a ghost story) and metaphorical: it suggests how past lives and associations can hover at the edg-

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es of perception, subtly influencing how a place is perceived and valued.

Furthermore, the anecdote was possibly shaped by an awareness of the research context. Herself a folklorist, Anna was conscious of the fact that she was taking part in a research project (that incidentally bears the acronym *haunted*) and speaking to folklorists and ethnologists, and this may have influenced the selection and tone of the story. This adds yet another aspect to the breccia: the performative and situational context of narration. Her casual delivery, mixed with understated humour, reflects not only her personal memory but also an intuitive engagement with genre and audience expectation. The anecdote thus becomes a composite of lived experience, cultural form and research context – all compressed into a brief, textured moment in the urban landscape.

Sharing and Co-creating Emplaced Anecdotes

Anna's video trace offers insight into her solitary encounter with place through a method that focuses on the subjective interior and thus misses somewhat sight of the co-creative aspect of storytelling. In the sessions that included a participant and researcher (walk-alongs) or multiple participants and a researcher (group sessions), the communal aspect of place-based anecdotes can be appreciated. In the group sessions, where the participants knew each other beforehand, interactive reminiscing often fostered co-created narratives of everyday past events and circumstances associated with particular locations. An example can be drawn from a video-recorded session with three childhood friends (a woman and two men) in their mid-eighties at the time of the recording (H-203). The session took place by Lake Tjörnin in the city centre, with clear view of the lake and its surroundings, including the old primary school two of them had attended in the late 1940s. Throughout the session, the participants could complement each other's stories with small comments and information that the other had not realized, had forgotten about or remembered differently.

Shortly into the session, for instance, they started reminiscing about ice-skating as children on the lake during winter. Pitching in with personal anecdotes, sentiments and pieces of information about "how things were back then", the group session quickly took the form of a normal conversation between peers, with the researcher gradually retreating with his queries and comments, instead giving the childhood friends a chance to interact freely about the immediate surroundings: "At one stage," Andrés asserted, "the municipality started to pipe warm water into the lake for the benefit of the ducks, and that…" – Sigfinnur broke in: "then the kids started falling in the thaw holes [turning his gaze to the lake and point-

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ing]". Andrés muttered in agreement but was blocked from making a further point by Sigfinnur, who continued: "I was once in woodwork class in school [indicating the school building] and then I saw someone falling in and I just jumped out of the window and rescued…" – Andrés interrupted cheerfully: "Yeah, you rescued him, I remember this very well" – and Sigfinnur said: "Ahh, you remember, I was maybe around eleven," paused for a moment, looking intently at his friends: "That wasn't too bad." The others started to giggle amiably as they visualized the heroic deed of the "modest" child saviour. With a mischievous expression on his face, Sigfinnur carried on: "He probably wouldn't have drowned, people have drowned there, no I don't think so, …" – Andrés indicated that he disagreed, but Sigfinnur continued, "there was sludge in the bottom – he was scared, the poor bugger." After a moment's hesitation, Andrés chipped in: "You threw him a jumper…," which put Sigfinnur back on track: "Yeah, I had read it in *Æskan* [local children's periodical] that you should crawl on the ice and take off your jacket or jumper and then toss [imitates the movement] one end of it to the chap that was in the thaw hole, you know, so you wouldn't break the ice…" (H-203).

This exchange illustrates how the reminiscences could unfold in a dialogic manner, with overlapping turns, interruptions, embodied gestures and expressions of sentiment, thus making the encounter a collectively animated act of remembering. As the woman joined in, the conversation went on to other ice-skating incidents, of themselves and others falling in the lake, of the guys with scrapers who cleared the snow off the ice, of crowds skating on the lit-up rink on winter evenings to the sound of music from a gramophone, among other memories – thus creating a narrative tapestry echoing both embodied sensory memories and descriptions of the physicality of the skating rink on the lake. They reconstructed chains of events among themselves, individual and shared impressions of the environment forming a negotiated narrative of the past and present of the place. Often they remembered things differently or not at all – "his shop was on the other corner" or "no, I don't remember that"– but through the conversation, they seemed, sometimes hesitantly, to be negotiating an agreement about how things had been and what they signified. The group session thus became a platform for mutually developing their stories and anecdotes. In this case, the brecciated configuration was not confined to a single subjectivity but emerged through a dynamic interplay of recollections, corrections and elaborations. Each participant brought their own fragments – partial memories, embodied sensory impressions, emotional tones – and in the act of sharing and responding, these fragments began to gather as sediment in a collectively composed narrative. Being in situ contributed to the mutual remembering. The visual and spatial cues

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provided by the surroundings functioned as prompts, not only triggering individual memories but anchoring them in shared spatial references. Sitting beside the lake, the site became a kind of mnemonic field that supported the coalescence of disparate recollections into a collectively intelligible narrative, thus showing that the process of narrating the environment is not only internal or psychological but is also performed and reshaped through embodied interaction.

This form of co-creative storytelling highlights the temporally unstable and fluid nature of memory, where stories are not merely retrieved but reconstituted through interaction. The anecdotal fragments may shift in emphasis or meaning depending on the other's input, which demonstrates how even seemingly stable memories of place are contingent and relational. The breccia metaphor accommodates this porous and dynamic process: rather than a static layering of personal recollections, a composite assemblage is formed in which memory is shaped through social negotiation and spatial context.

A group session with the siblings Markús and Málfríður (H-209) is another case in point, giving further insight into the embodied and performative aspect of in situ storytelling. Málfríður had just turned seventy-two at the time of the recording, and her brother was five years her senior. The session took place in what used to be the back yard of their childhood home, where their family had lived for ten years in the 1950s and early 1960s. A recent concrete house had replaced the timber house that had been their home, the old house having been relocated elsewhere within the city centre. Although their house, along with some of the neighbouring ones, was no longer there, they could orient themselves quite easily with reference to the street and remaining older buildings on adjacent lots. Málfríður observed: "This feels a bit like home, even though the house isn't here – because the environment is" (H-209), thus underscoring that, for her, the place persists even though quite a bit, but not all, of its physical features have changed. She continued: "All the buildings across the street – this is so important – they are still there, and they played such a role, because everything was there – everything, shops and everything" (H-209). None of the shops that were there in the 1950s are there any longer, but she identified the buildings as being the same.

Having sat down in their old back yard, side by side on the folding chairs provided by the researchers and facing the video-recorder, the siblings immediately launched into a discussion about the physical transformation of the site. They quickly went on to reminisce about the people and events they associated with the back yard and the surrounding neighbourhood. With four other siblings, all close in age, the back yard had been a playground for them and for a herd of children from the neigh-

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bouring houses. Although the site had transformed, being in situ, Markús and Málfríður cheerfully talked, often with nuanced references to various remaining material features of the place, about the buildings and layout of the place as it was during their youth, the games they played and the mischief that they and their friends had got up to.

> Málfríður: But it was so much fun, here, where this building is [pointing], there was this really high A-roof [steeply pitched roof – uses both arms to indicate location, size and shape] and another house in front with a long drop to the ground [uses hands to emphasize the long drop]. We'd spend every evening there, for hours, sliding down the A-roof. And if anyone was still inside [the hardware store that was in the building], of course they would shout [in a different pitch of voice]: "Hey, get down from there." But we made sure to be there after the shop had closed [looks at her brother, pinching his arm].
> Markús: Yeah, they more-or-less left us alone, those chaps.
> Málfríður: Yeah, usually. There were 10–12 kids sliding down here [makes a sliding movement with hand].
> Markús: We climbed up on, up on –
> Málfríður: the bins –
> Markús: the bins, yes, there and onto the roof [makes expression with hand] –
> Málfríður: onto the roof [lifts her arm above her head to express height] –
> Markús: and from there on to the other roof and then we were there [indicates towards where the rooftop had been].
> Málfríður: This was of course quite dangerous – and then onto the A-roof that was terribly high. Just imagine if we had fallen down on the other side or [chuckles, lifts both arms above head to indicate height].
> Markús: Then we sat straddling the ridge.
> Málfríður: Yes, straddling and chatting. That was the main entertainment – you know – the whole evenings (H-209).

The siblings' conversational exchange illustrates how they collaboratively and affectively reconstructed their childhood memory through both language and embodied gesture. Completing and affirming each other's sentences while animating their recollections with pointing, mimed movements and playful interaction, they re-enacted the embodied experiences of climbing, sliding and sitting on the rooftop. Their account frames the site as simultaneously thrilling and dangerous, while underscoring how children appropriate and reconfigure the built environment as spaces of play and transgression, often in defiance of adult authority. Crucially, the memories are explicitly anchored in the present setting ("here, where this building is"), producing a brecciation of past and present elements that reinscribes the contemporary landscape with affective and mnemonic significance, and thus exemplifying how place-making is performed through narrative, gesture and shared reminiscence.

Through their reflections and embodied reaction to the place, the back yard becomes more than a physical site – it is a node in a web of lived ex-

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periences, shared histories and emotional attachments. Through their storytelling – with fleeting impressions of past games, remembered neighbours, missing structures and surviving details – the siblings reassemble the site as a landscape of meaning, rich with playful mischief, social bonds and childhood imagination. This indicates that their perception of the value of the place is not solely derived from architectural preservation but from the interplay of people, stories, material traces and affective memory. The fact that the siblings could orient themselves and begin storytelling so readily suggests how these elements are entangled in their sense of place and contribute to their attachment to the place.

Place Attachment through Sensing and Storying

Addressing the emotional bonds between people and place, scholarship on place attachment (cf. Manzo & Devine-Wright 2021) often refers to the phenomenological tradition that draws on the works of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty (and their insistence on the central role of bodily presence and action in human existence), sometimes referred to as the phenomenology of place (Trigg 2012; Seamon 2018). The phenomenology of place theorizes the existential significance of place, ultimately connecting the very possibility of our being-in-the-world to being at a place (cf. Casey 1996:44). This suggests that subjectivity and place are directly associated with both experience and agency and can only "take place" by being emplaced (Malpas 2018). David Seamon (2018) talks about this existential condition, that at any given moment we find ourselves located in a place as "perpetual, unavoidable emplacement", defining place as "any environmental locus that gathers human experiences and meanings spatially and temporally" (1). Summing up phenomenology's treatment of place and distinguishing it from a realist approach to place, Dylan Trigg (2012) maintains "that lived spatiality is not a container that can be measured in objective terms, but an expression of our being-in-the-world" (4). He further explains that at every moment "we find ourselves located in a particular place, specific to the bodily subject experiencing that place. We are forever in the here, and it is from that here that our experiences take place" (4). This understanding is at odds with the commonplace approach that sees the subject as inserted into a spatiality that is independent of the perceiving human being. In terms of the built environment, this approach has been developed in architecture, for instance, by theorists such as Norberg-Schulz (1979), who coined the term *existential space* in rejecting a functional approach to the built environment and highlighting how all architecture is intrinsically connected to human existence and perception.

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This phenomenological orientation towards place is helpful for understanding how individuals articulate a sense of belonging through memory, embodiment and everyday encounters with the urban landscape. It highlights how meaning emerges not simply from spatial form, but through lived and emplaced experiences – through walking, seeing, remembering and narrating. In this view, personal and collective histories are not external to place but are folded into its textures, atmospheres and material forms. The built environment thus becomes meaningful not only as a backdrop for life but as an active participant in shaping subjectivity. This perspective is especially illuminating when considering the reflections of participants in our study who, while moving through familiar neighbourhoods, described the city not in terms of publicly defined urban environment but as something animated by lived experience and memory.

Indeed, all participants expressed, to varying degrees, a particular attachment to places that elicited anecdotes or narratives of personal significance. Such attachments were especially pronounced in relation to sites imbued with personal memories or associated with familiar individuals, both living and deceased, as well as with events of personal relevance. Tóta's walk-along offers a poignant illustration. A long-time resident of an inner-city neighbourhood in Reykjavík, her narrative offers an illustration of how the city becomes meaningful through its entanglement with personal history and emplaced storytelling. During her walk-along, she chose a path that took her to different places associated with family and friends: residential housing, workplaces and the cemetery, visiting the gravesites of her relatives. Her walk and talk revealed extensive knowledge of the area's historical development, cemented in personal recollections and stories about people and places, some passed on to her from others. Towards the end of the walk, after many places had prompted little anecdotes from earlier times, the researcher asked her what, for her, generated a sense of belonging to the city. Without hesitation she proclaimed: "Roots, people, stories!" After a pause she acknowledged: "I was of course much more with granny and grandpa … they were good at telling stories about where they had lived and what they had been doing here in town". After another pause, Tóta professed: "For me, it's like the city comes alive – it becomes something more than just streets and houses. It becomes like stories you look at, and then you get these memories through the stories" (H-007).

Tóta's reflection on her sense of belonging reveals the relational character of the urban space. She does not communicate a view of the city as a static container of buildings and streets, but as an affective and narrative fabric where relationships – between people, memories and material forms – intersect and take shape. Her account shows that the urban landscape is

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constituted through ongoing interactions: between her own biography, her grandparents' stories, the historical lives of buildings and the embodied act of walking through the city. Characterizing the city as becoming "like stories you look at" suggests that urban space is a polyvocal terrain in which different narratives and temporalities overlap. Through her grandparents' memories, Tóta accesses not only her own past but a broader cultural memory, which suggests that the meaning of place is never singular or uniform. Instead, it is shaped through a tangle of voices, affects and material cues, some intimate, others inherited. This also seems to speak to the becoming of the neighbourhood – how its meanings are not pre-given, but emerge through experience, memory and narration. The city "comes alive" for Tóta not through monumental heritage or formal history, but through the activation of place by stories and emotional resonance. This suggests that place is in a constant state of transformation, made meaningful through the situated practices of remembering and storytelling. The city becomes, in this sense, an evolving entity – alive with affective and mnemonic charge.

With reference to the conceptual framework of brecciation, it can be seen that her perception of the historic urban landscape is not structured by coherence or chronology that form neat layers, but by disparate fragments – memories passed down, fleeting impressions, partial narratives – that accrue and interact over time. Like breccia, her relationship to place is made up of pieces of different origins: personal memories, her grandparents' accounts, cultural references and sensory associations. These fragments are bound together not through historical continuity but through affective resonance and personal meaning-making. Thus, Tóta's understanding seems to suggest that the built heritage of the city is not only something preserved or displayed, but something continually assembled through everyday practices. The historic urban landscape holds value for her because it is not simply there – it is storied, felt and re-lived, ultimately forming a brecciated assemblage of past and present, material and emotional, individual and collective.

Conclusion: Attachment to Urban Landscape through Narrative and Affect

As people move through the urban landscape, their engagement with place becomes palpable. Writing about her home city of Melbourne, Australia, the author Sophie Cunningham captures how public events and personal, emplaced experiences interweave to produce the city as it is known and felt by individuals: "The cityscape has become embroidered over the years with impressions of these larger public dramas, moments that nestle along-

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side more private and fleeting experiences" (2011:4). As this article has illustrated, seemingly insignificant material features, even absent ones, may evoke a feeling or memory that contributes to the subject's relationship with place. Such affective encounters are shaped by the materiality of the environment as well as other atmospheric dimensions of the moment – lighting, smell, weather. They are also informed by the subject's mood, mindset and, importantly, by past experiences and personal or cultural knowledge of the place in question, as well as of other places that may be similar or serve as a point of contrast.

This article has demonstrated how the historic urban landscape of Reykjavík is not only experienced through architectural forms or official narratives but is continually produced through the sensorial, affective and narrative engagements of those who move through it. Drawing on the relational turn in urban studies and the metaphor of *brecciation*, the study has shown how individual and collective encounters with the city's built fabric contribute to a dynamic sense of place. As stories are told, memories are evoked and sensory experiences are felt on the move and in situ, the city is reanimated – not as a coherent whole, but as a constellation of emotionally charged fragments. These fragments, like geological breccia, are drawn from different times, sources and affective registers, sedimented into the present through the interplay of materiality, memory, emotion, narration and performance.

By approaching the urban landscape as relational and always under construction, this study aligns with Massey's (2005) call to view place as a "simultaneity of stories-so-far". The stories shared by participants – whether solitary and introspective, like Anna's account of colour and spectral presence, or dialogic and co-created, like the reminiscences of the siblings and the old friends – show that heritage is not merely inherited but actively made through lived, sensory and emplaced practices. The metaphor of brecciation offers a means to account for this textured, fragmentary and affect-laden composition of place. It underscores the relational, multiple and temporally dispersed nature of place-making, especially in everyday urban environments where heritage is not always monumental or visible, but felt, remembered and continuously reassembled through the embodied presence of the individual. Taken together, this study illustrates that the emotional significance of urban built heritage lies not solely in the conservation of physical structures, but in the experiential processes by which people sense, interpret and narrate the city. In this light, urban heritage emerges not as a fixed legacy, but as an unfinished and plural process – dynamic, relational and always becoming.

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