

Why Do Historic Places Matter?

EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENTS TO URBAN HERITAGE



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Why Do Historic Urban Places Matter?

Historic urban places matter economically, environmentally and socially. Much of the evidence for this view has focused on positive outcomes in terms of facilitating urban and economic development and, increasingly, drawing connections to wellbeing. This report presents a different narrative, asking instead, *why* these outcomes can occur, for example

- ✓ Why do people choose to live, work or play within historic urban places?
- ✓ Why do historic urban places retain an importance within urban development?

To answer these questions the report considers the importance of emotion and, specifically, the role of emotional attachments, in understanding why historic urban places matter.

WHY NOW?

Traditional theories of heritage conservation ascribe value based on the primacy of an expert view of physical fabric. Increasingly these theories are being considered alongside a people-centred approach which seeks a rebalance between *what is valued* and *who ascribes value*. In practice this means that whilst architectural and historic interest remains central there is an increasing focus on pluralising heritage values in ways that can include different voices and places. The rise of people-centred approaches is exemplified both by ICOMOS' resolution in December 2020 to

"Promote people-centered approaches, the connections of people with heritage and places; intercultural dialogue and understanding, sustainability and well-being when addressing local, national, and international heritage policies and practice"

and by Historic Environment Scotland stating that

*"We think that people are increasingly interested in different aspects of our history that our listing and designation policies have not traditionally recognised."*²

The adoption of a more people-centred approach can also be seen within the wider planning and built environment sector; examples such as the Community Empowerment Act and the introduction of Local Place Plans in Scotland parallel similar initiatives in England.

This report does not privilege physical fabric or people but rather focuses on developing a better understanding of the relationship between the two. It does this by considering a range of different voices, from local residents to campaigners, developers, investors, architects, and planners, and by seeing tangible and intangible heritage as indivisible.

HOW?

The report conveys the findings of a four-year Arts and Humanities Research Council project led by Professor Rebecca Madgin, University of Glasgow, and supported by project partners: Historic Environment Scotland, Montagu Evans LLP (a London-based property consultancy) and SAVE Britain's Heritage. The report considers two main questions:

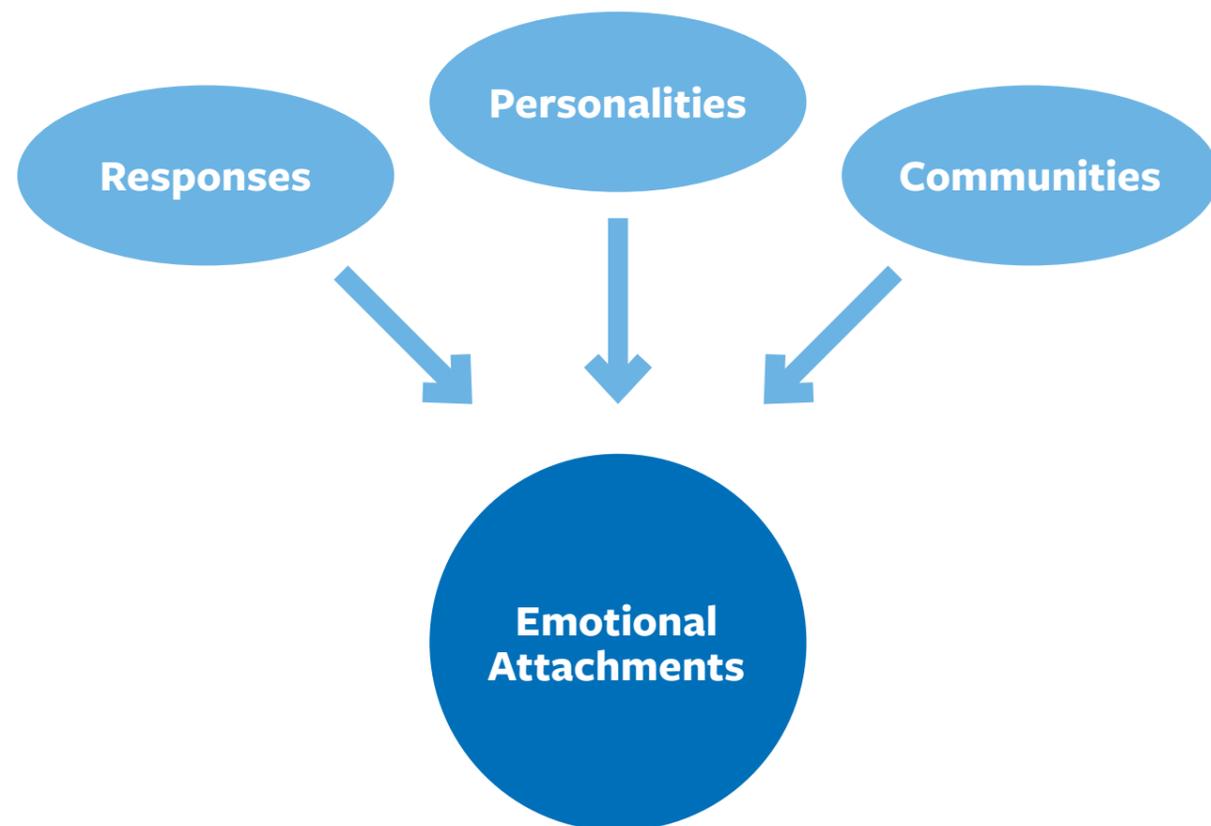
1. How and why do people develop emotional attachments to historic urban places?
2. How do these attachments influence decision making within the urban environment?

The findings have emerged from the textual and visual analysis of a range of existing documents and from place-based oral histories and emoji-based workshops which captured the thoughts and feelings of people involved with and/or impacted by urban change, including built environment professionals and local residents. The evidence comes from Scottish and English towns and cities and predominantly covers the period from 1975 to 2019.

THE ROLE OF EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENTS

The term emotional attachment aligns with work on place attachment contained within the discipline of environmental psychology. The place attachment field is concerned with understanding people-place relations and particularly the way that people form emotional bonds with place³. This relationship has been examined in a range of different places, including residential, recreational, and environmental, but there remains a lack of research and understanding concerning how and why people form emotional attachments to historic urban places.

People's emotional attachments to historic urban places are often elusive yet typically emerge during times of urban change. The most visible aspect of this attachment comes through the expression of a range of different emotional **responses** such as anger, joy and pride as places undergo change. However, this doesn't explain why a place matters so much to people that it provokes these kinds of emotional responses. Here we need to focus on how and why people form emotional attachments. This report outlines a view that historic urban places have **personalities** – which are an amalgam of interlocking parts – and people form attachments to these personalities. Together, these two dimensions start to reveal how and why attachments to historic urban places can be formed. However, a further and final dimension is needed that reveals *who* forms this attachment and why. This is covered in the report by focusing on the emotional **communities** who both form emotional attachments and express emotional responses to historic urban places.



THE LANGUAGE OF HERITAGE

A discussion about historic urban places, whether buildings or areas, often leads to the expression of repeated and familiar terms and phrases. Some of the most common ways in which participants, local residents and built environment professionals, described the historic environment can be seen in the below graphic. Many of these descriptive terms, such as 'beautiful', 'lovely', 'grand' or 'elegant' are positive and reference the way buildings look, showing how aesthetics and beauty continue to dominate the discourse. The terms are not universally positive though; some participants also described the historic built environment as 'bleak', 'irrelevant' and an 'encumbrance'. A closer look at the language also suggests that people are also able to describe how historic places made them feel.

Terms such as 'comforting', 'uplifting' and 'reassuring' co-existed with terms such as 'depressing', 'dispiriting' and 'sad'. Each of these terms reveals the importance of understanding the relationship between people and place and how those relationships are not solely developed by the look of buildings but are also shaped by the feel of place and how people feel *in* and *about* place.

This heritage lexicon hints at the fact that emotional attachments could exist between people and 'charming' and 'attractive' historic places but that this is complex. The intention in this report is to move beyond how people describe the look and feel of historic urban places to instead focus on how people emotionally respond to historic urban places.



RESPONDING EMOTIONALLY TO HISTORIC URBAN PLACES

Historic urban places can stimulate a range of emotional responses as shown by the below word cloud.



As can be seen, historic urban places have the capacity to provoke a wide range of emotional responses. Although these emotional responses may seem to be split between positive and negative the reality is that they often coexisted:

- ✓ Emotional responses were often **blended**: 'happy' and 'sad' could co-exist in the same way as 'happy' could become 'very happy'.
- ✓ Emotional responses varied in their **intensity**: hotter emotions such as anger could be found alongside cooler emotions such as disinterest.
- ✓ Emotional responses were **fluid** and responsive to circumstance and context rather than fixed in time and place.

Five emotional responses re-occurred across the research: anger, enjoyment, fear, pride and sadness⁴. However, a sixth category comprised of a range of different emotional responses and experiences was also identified. The term 'wow' was used to describe both a historic place and the feeling of being in a historic place. In this sense it can be seen as a composite of several different emotional responses including admiration, adoration, aesthetic appreciation and awe.⁵

WHY?

There were three main causes of emotional responses to historic urban places:

1. The look, feel and everyday experience of the historic urban place.
2. A comparison between what the place currently is and what it could become.
3. As a result of the process of urban change and how the present and future of the historic places was being managed.

Emotional responses were informed by a fusion of the recalled places and events of the past, the felt experiences of the present and the imagined places of the future. Time and place could not be neatly broken down into delineated categories; past, present and future and the tangible and intangible dimensions of historic urban places were fused together and manifested in the expression of a range of emotional responses.

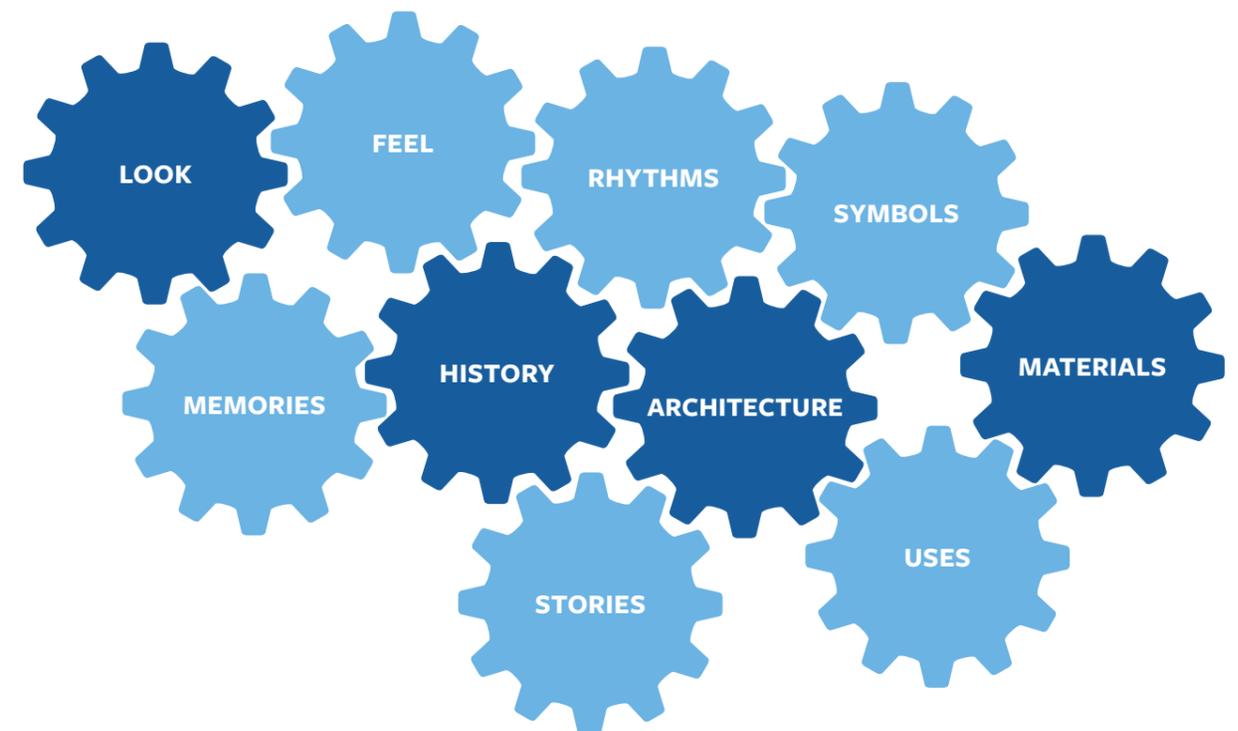
FORMING EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENTS TO THE PERSONALITIES OF HISTORIC URBAN PLACES

The research found that people form emotional attachments to what can be described as the 'personalities of historic urban places'.⁶ These personalities were comprised of a number of interlocking parts that both included and went beyond architectural and historic value and built fabric to also recognise the importance of intangible aspects of historic urban places. Some of these parts would be recognised within the traditional approach to heritage conservation. Others are more akin to the people-centred approach and focus on the feel of place, the stories about place and the embodied experiences of place.

Key here is the range of variables to which people form attachments. As such the 'personalities of historic urban places' approach:

- ✓ **Embraces the relational, emotional and interactional** nature of people and historic urban places
- ✓ **Encompasses a widened temporal lens** that equally privileges the recalled, felt and imagined dimensions of historic urban places: heritage is simultaneously about the future, the present and the past
- ✓ **Recognises fluidity**: emotional attachments to historic urban places are not fixed in time
- ✓ **Foregrounds people** and in particular recognises the wide-ranging expertise needed to understand why historic urban places matter
- ✓ **Pluralises**, rather than fixes, the meanings of historic urban places.

The research also found evidence of people feeling detached from historic urban places or showing few signs of attachment. The same combination of interlocking parts was found to influence this lack of attachment. As the personalities of historic urban places are fluid, plural and malleable they can evolve which in turn can influence the formation of new attachments or disruptions to existing attachments. Similarly, any changes to the personalities of historic urban places can also influence the ways in which attachments can be nurtured and sustained as places evolve.



RECOGNISING EMOTIONAL COMMUNITIES

Within the emerging people-centred approach there is an emphasis on how people relate to historic urban places. Traditionally we have explored this through the concept of community, defined as “common interest, identity or geography” in the Community Empowerment Act (Scotland) 2015. This report builds on that definition by putting it into conversation with the concept of ‘emotional communities’⁷ which places a focus on the emotional dynamics within communities. In the context of this research emotional communities are defined as *those people who respond emotionally to and develop emotional attachments with historic urban places*.

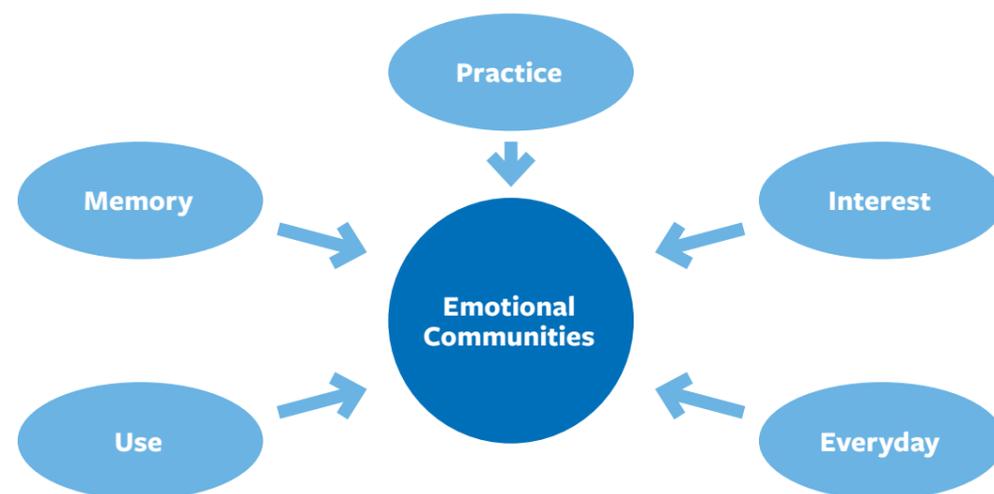
The research identified five main types of emotional communities.

Type	Main characteristics
Emotional communities of practice	Individuals who are involved in shaping the future of historic urban places
Emotional communities of interest	Individuals who coalesce around a shared interest in aspects of historic urban places such as history, technology, architecture
Emotional communities of the everyday	Individuals for whom historic urban places are part of their everyday rhythms, rituals and life patterns
Emotional communities of use	Individuals who have a specific use(s) for historic urban places such as to work or to play
Emotional communities of memory	Individuals for whom historic urban places form part of their memory

Key Points

- ✓ A number of different emotional communities can exist, yet this does not necessarily mean that there are any hierarchies or divisions between the communities.
- ✓ Membership is fluid – people can belong to one or more groups with dominant and minor pairings.
- ✓ Members of emotional communities can express different emotional responses and have differing intensities of attachment to the same place whilst maintaining membership of a group.
- ✓ Emotional communities are overlapping and interwoven, fluid and unbounded, they can quickly emerge and disappear, they can be durable and embedded and they can be oriented towards the past, present or future.

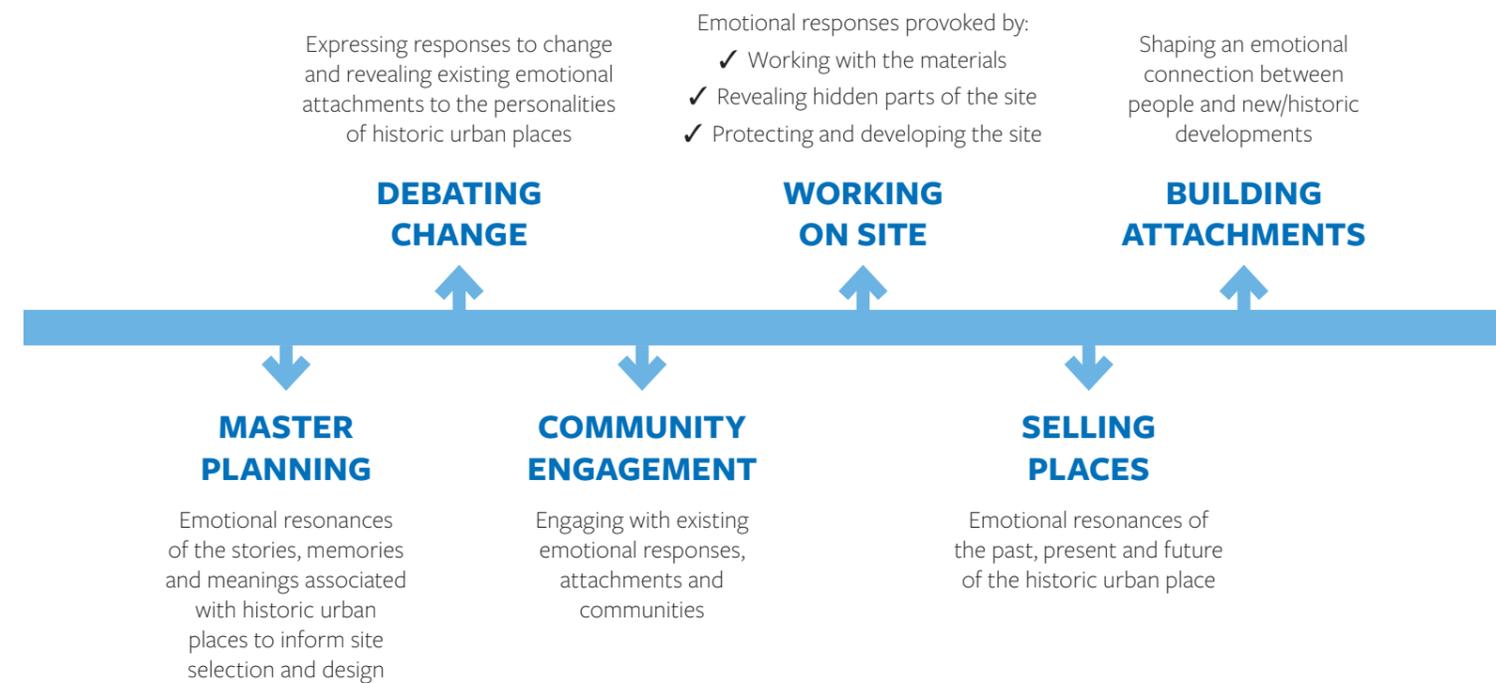
The concept of ‘emotional communities’ helps us to understand who responds emotionally and who develops emotional attachments to historic urban places.



LOCATING EMOTION WITHIN DECISION MAKING IN THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

Emotion, in the form of responses, attachments and communities, is rarely referenced in the rhetoric of the heritage and built environment sectors. However, the term can be found in documents produced by both Historic England and Historic Environment Scotland. *Conservation Principles* uses the phrases ‘emotional links’, ‘emotional evidence’ and ‘emotional impact’.⁸ Historic England also uses ‘attachment’ within its definition of Social Value, reflecting its belief that a historic place “may have fulfilled a community function that has generated a deeper attachment”.⁹ Similarly, in Scotland the phrase used in *Scottish Historic Environment Policy* (SHEP) was ‘emotional associations’.¹⁰ On an international stage the pattern is similar yet the 2008 Quebec Charter does use the word ‘emotion’ in its definition of Spirit of Place as the “tangible (buildings, sites, landscapes, routes, objects) and the intangible elements (memories, narratives, written documents, rituals, festivals, traditional knowledge, values, textures, colors, odors, etc.) that is to say the physical and spiritual elements that give meaning, value, emotion and mystery to place”.¹¹ However, none of the above terms are explained or defined and there is little sense as to how ‘emotion’ is to guide decision-making.

In the context of urban development, emotion in the form of responses and attachments and communities, was located across a number of different stages of the development process. The diagram shows a much-simplified visual representation of just some of the places where emotion, to a greater or lesser extent, informed decision-making.



These stages involve thinking about, working with and attracting people to historic urban places as they go through a process of repair and adaptive re-use. Emotion is located in the minds and actions of built environment professionals including those planning the site, campaigning against loss/change, working with/on the buildings, and those communicating the changes and selling any new units. Emotion is also located within the everyday practices of local residents as they shape and respond to the changes to historic urban places. Emotional responses and attachments are, at times implicit and at other times more explicit, but they are evident in a number of different projects as well as throughout the development process and across a range of emotional communities.

BETWEEN PHYSICAL AND PEOPLE-CENTRED APPROACHES: A ROLE FOR EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENTS?

Why do historic urban places matter? The heritage sector has generated a significant amount of evidence about why historic places matter – from its economic contribution to its potential for sustainable development. This report both extends this evidence base and calls for more engagement with the emotional dimensions of heritage by demonstrating just some of the ways in which emotion, in the form of responses, attachments and communities, shapes the reasons why and extent to which historic urban places can continue to matter.

Emotional responses are many and varied; attachments are not fixed in time and are shaped by the personalities of historic urban places. Communities share emotional responses and attachments to historic urban places based on a combination of context, time, and place. Common across each is the fact that emotion exists yet it often lies beneath the surface and is often only revealed and expressed during times of urban change. It can be difficult to access emotion although new methodologies are demonstrating that it does play a somewhat hidden and extensive role in the way a range of people relate to historic urban places.¹²

Emotion in the form of responses, attachments and communities, is also evident within the process of urban development. Emotional responses and attachments are located across the development cycle from conception through to delivery and marketing and also exist in a range of different emotional communities involved in this cycle, from built environment professionals to existing and future residents and users.

Whilst heritage theories and practices, nationally and internationally, are increasingly focusing on people-centred approaches the role of emotional attachments within this remains largely neglected. Within this context the question becomes, ‘what are the opportunities and challenges for these emerging heritage theories and practices if we were to embrace a fuller understanding of why historic urban places matter emotionally?’ and in the context of the broader urban environment, ‘how could the lens of emotional attachments be used to contribute to conversations around placemaking?’

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