

Sense of Place

Knowing a place, involves the human experience in contact with the environment over time, along with things that make a place special and unique. This is why people become emotionally attached and love where they live.



Today's cultural forces of uniformity that give us identical big-box stores and fast-food restaurants across the land, also tend to create a bland monotony in the style of our landscapes. One size definitely does not fit all and lowest up-front price is not always a real value. There are many reasons why understanding our sense of place is very important to us.

"A sense of place results gradually and unconsciously from inhabiting a landscape over time, becoming familiar with its physical properties, accruing history within its confines."
--Kent Rydon

"The land was ours before we were the land's."
-- Robert Frost

"If you don't know where you are, you don't know who you are."
--Wendell Berry

"What makes a place special is the way it buries itself inside the heart, not whether it's flat or rugged, rich or austere, wet or arid, gentle or harsh, warm or cold, wild or tame. Every place, like every person, is elevated by the love and respect shown toward it, and by the way in which its bounty is received."
--

Richard Nelson, *The Island Within*



Is the *sense of place* becoming a lost sense? Today, people can spend so much time online, in their cars, at Starbucks, or in an office that they may have little connection to any unique place.

Every place has a history, family stories, memorable streams, trees, rocks and scenic views. In Pennsylvania (Penn's Woods), living with trees and four seasons is part of our life experience and sense of place. You might call it our ecological address. Sometimes, it is only after you have gone somewhere else and have come back that you appreciate the qualities of a place.

Our sense of place is where we define our identity and acknowledge the qualities we value in life. Knowing a place involves the human experience in contact with the environment over time along with

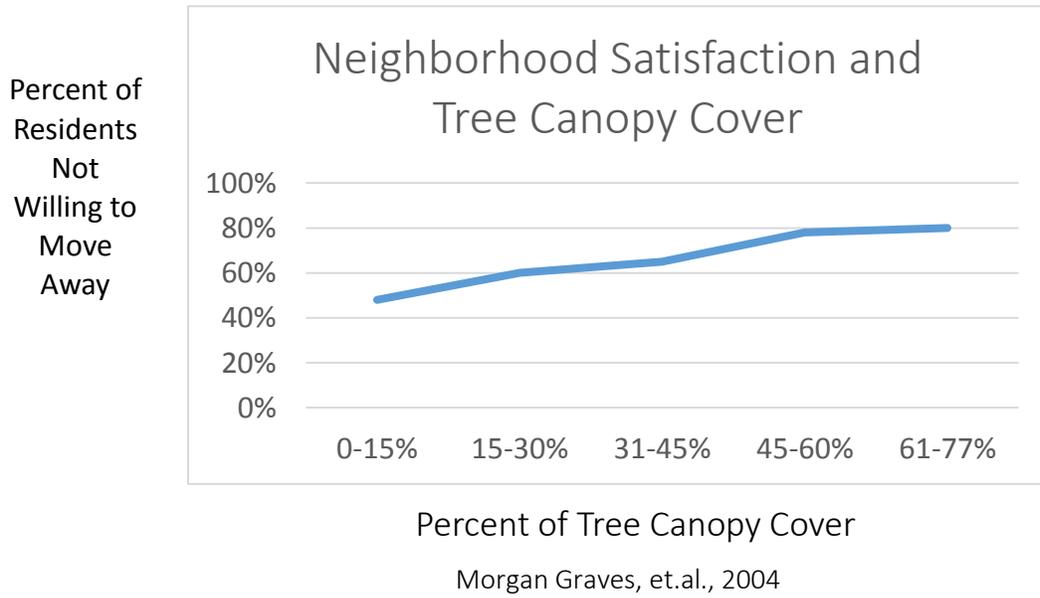
things that make a place special and unique like a stream, a wooded park, a tree-lined street or an old oak tree. Our sense of place grows from our own experience in relation to the nature and culture that surrounds us. A place is recognized with its history and provides a lasting reference and stability in our life. A place also makes where we live, our home.

Tree canopy contributes to stronger ties among neighbors, a greater sense of safety and adjustment, more use of neighborhood common spaces, healthier patterns of childhood play and fewer property and violent crimes.¹

Why People Love Where They Live

Neighborhood trees and landscaping provide significant emotional and spiritual experiences that are important to people’s lives and can foster a strong attachment to particular places and trees.²

A study in Baltimore, Maryland revealed that as the percent of tree canopy cover increases, residents are more satisfied with that community. The study also found that when neighborhood forest cover was below 15%, more than half of the residents considered moving away. When the canopy cover reached 60% or better, over 80% wanted to stay in the neighborhood. ³



¹ F.E. Kuo. 2005. The role of arborculture in healthy social ecology. *Journal of Arborculture*. 29 no. 5 148-55

² R.E Chenow and P. H. Gobster, 1990. The nature and ecology of aesthetic experiences in the landscape. *Landscape Journal*, 9, 1-18

³ Morgan Graves, et.al., 2004. Demographic and socioeconomic research team: Research Highlights. Baltimore Ecosystem Study.

According to the *2010 Soul of the Community Survey* of 26 communities and a random sample of more than 10,000 people, residents are most attached to their communities when they have:

- fun places to gather
- a welcoming atmosphere, and
- beautiful and green spaces to enjoy

These qualities consistently emerged as the leading drivers for community attachment over the study's three years of research. They beat out other possible drivers such as perceptions of local economy, leadership and safety, civic involvement, social capital, education, emotional well-being and basic services across all of the 26 cities included in the survey.

The survey also found that the communities having the highest performance in the top three qualities, had the highest economic growth.⁴

Therefore, increasing forest canopy in urban and suburban neighborhoods makes existing communities more desirable. Creating these "Green Neighborhoods" provides a wide range of environmental, social and economic benefits and can be an important tool for encouraging stewardship, revitalization and helping to reduce the negative impacts of sprawl. So step outside and enjoy the wonders of nature and the special place where you live.

For many people, being in nature and interacting with the natural world, brings a sense of peace, tranquility, and feelings of connectedness - with self, others and a higher power. Nature is also fundamentally linked to our human spirituality. Out in nature, we feel how we are connected to entities beyond ourselves and understand our interdependencies with other living beings. Nature also prompts us to reflect on the ever-changing nature of existence and what might lie beyond it. Nature provides a space in which we can connect spiritually both with ourselves and outside ourselves.^{5 6}

The elements of nature signify the principles of change. They are transformation, mutation, adjustment, flexibility, cyclicity, life, death, and magic. Nature invites us to change consciously and to welcome change. To many Native Americans, nature was the essence of consciousness.

⁴ John S and James L. Knight Foundation and Gallup, Inc. 2011. *Soul of the Community Study*.

⁵ R.E Chenow, and P.H Gobster. 1990. The nature ecology of aesthetic experience in the landscape. *Landscape Journal* 9: 1-18

⁶ Marcus, Clare Copper and Marni Barnes. 1999. *Healing Gardens: Therapeutic Benefits and Design Recommendations* (9Trans), New York, John Wiley and Sons.

Chief Joseph, Nez Pierce Tribe, 1880

*In our hearts we know the perfumed flowers are our sisters
The deer, the horse, the great eagle, these are our brothers
That the earth does not belong to man
Man belongs to the earth
And this also we know
All things are connected like the blood which unites one family
That man did not weave the web of life
He is but a strand in it
Whatever he does to the web he does to himself
So friend, do it this way and if you so do
The power of the universe will come to your assistance
But be sure your heart and mind are one
For all of creation is related and the hurt of one is the hurt of all
And the honor of one is the honor of all
And whatever we do touches each and everything in the universe
Each of us was put here in this time and this place
To personally decide the future of the world
Did you think you were put here for something less
So if you do it this way that is if you truly join your heart and mind as one
Whatever you ask for, that's the way it's going to be.⁷*



The following indicators can be used to track and design sense of place.

- The percentage of canopy covering the site. 60% canopy cover is the goal.
- The vegetation layers present on the site are in place --canopy, understory, shrubs, grasses and wildflowers. Having all 5 layers is the goal.
- The percentage of the site cover by native species is over 60%.
- The number of different native plant species present on the property. Having more than 25 species is the goal.
- The beauty and color present in each season (spring, summer, fall and winter).
- Pollinator gardens in place.
- Beautiful plants that create a special “wow” factor.
- Turf grass only used to cover play areas and walking paths.

⁷ Helen Hunt Jackson recorded one early Oregon settler's tale of his encounter with Chief Joseph in her 1902 *Glimpses of California and the Missions*.