

# Cities, Identities and Memories – An analysis of Padmatheertham

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**Abstract** - Identity of a place is subjective; it is rooted in the multiple narratives of the people and their associations. An essential component in evoking a sense of belonging to a place, identity is a product of several tangible and intangible elements. The image and memories play an important role in defining the identity of a place. A place is said to exist both as a physical being and a series of mental image (a resultant of peoples' collective memory). The study analyses the relation between memories and places in the formation of identity. The image of a place is a two-way interaction between space and observer, resulting in a heterogeneous palette that is temporal and dynamic. The resultant variations influence the continuity of collective memory difficult for the deterministic approaches to capture. Isolation of people from the city's design processes lead to alienation and loss of identity. The exercise undertaken explores the collective memory of Padmatheertham pond in Trivandrum and its future potentials in re- defining the identity of the city. Padmatheertham, is a 13th C temple pond situated in the heritage precinct of the Padmanabhaswamy temple. An iconic structure, it lay witness to the developments in and around the fort area of Trivandrum city. Once buzzing with people and activities, the pond today is shut to the public, only visible to the eyes of a tourist camera. Through a case of Padmatheertham, the paper argues that it is possible to further city's identity only through peoples' participation in the place making processes.

**Key Words:** Identity, collective memory, place attachment

## 1. INTRODUCTION

"What is identity? Firstly it is a process not a found object. It may be likened to the trail left by civilization as it moves through history. The trail is the culture or identity of that civilization" [1]

Every place has physical, functional and emotional values. The permanence of structures are related to the emotional values of the citizens of the city. The city design can be considered as a temporal work of art, which has temporal variation of sequences reflected by different people [2]. It exists both physically and as memories of people associated with it. Not only the built elements, all the moving elements including people and their activities are important in the image formation of a city. It is a product of millions of people who are experiencing and building the city. The image is never a static one, it may possess a static image for a limited period of time but dynamic in details. "Thus a city

cannot be considered as an end product, it is only a continuous succession of phases" [2]

The identity of the city is therefore the resultant of the collective images and the experiences that it invokes. This study examines through a case of Padmatheertham, how people's association with a place evokes memories and image of the place is constituted in their minds.

## 2. THEORY: IMAGE, COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND THE PLACE

According to Kevin Lynch the process of building an image is a two way process, where the environment provides a set of distinctions and relations and the observer's perception determines the meanings according to their need and experiences. An image therefore, can be analyzed based on the three components- the identity, structure and meaning. Here the identity means the uniqueness of an object which distinguishes it from other. The structure indicates the relation of the object to the observer and to other objects. This would eventually provide a meaning to the observer- practical or emotional. Hence even if one is seeing an object for the very first time, they can identify and relate because, the image conforms to the one from their memory. According to this theory there are individual images, group images, public images etc. are stitched together to form the overall image of the city. "These images should be open ended and adaptable to change" [2]

M. Halbwachs in his book 'The collective memory'[3] explains how a person or a group develops an attachment to a particular space. He explains this process with a simple example of home and the family. Our home, its furniture arrangement and décor details recall the memory of our family and friends whom we often see in this background. Each aspects and details of a place communicates some meaning to the inhabitants. Also each event is fitted within this spatial framework. Due to the permanence of the physical elements in a city these images evokes memories of events in the past. "The place a group occupies is not like a blackboard, where one may write and erase figures at will. No image of a blackboard can recall what was once written there. The board could not care less what has been written on it before, and new figures may be freely added." [3]. Aldo Rossi reflects this idea of collective memory in his arguments: "The city is the locus of the collective memory. This relationship between the locus and the citizenry then becomes the city's predominant image, both of architecture

and of landscape, and as certain artifacts becomes part of its memory, new ones emerge” [4]. Therefore, every urban artifact, be it buildings, streets, trees, cultural complexes and so forth contribute to the collective memory of the people. “The loss of identity of the city is also the loss of collective memory” [4].

It is important to understand that the persistence or continuance of a city can be revealed through its monuments. These are the indicators of the city’s past and narrate a firm history of its course of development. These structures indicate what a city was before by showing how they are different from the present. “According to the theory of permanence<sup>1</sup> in order to explain an urban artifact, one is forced to look beyond it to the present day actions that modify it” [4]. Therefore, time is an important parameter in analyzing an urban artifact, as the present form of the city is not the final one. As noted by Rossi, the city changes continuously and therefore its original references might cease to exist.

Throughout the world, various attempts have been made to preserve built heritage for its architectural and cultural significance. Often times, these measures isolate urban artifact from its people and thereby detach them from the process of place making. Such preservation measures are common in India, where places of worship and mourning are transformed into leisure gardens. The monuments are reduced to landscape props alongside lawns and shrubs (both alien to the context!). The contextual alienation halts the formation of memories, rather they standardize the memories through a visual presentation of the inanimate. Moreover, conservation and demolition is always a topic of debate in any process of development. This is mainly because different groups place different values and emotional attachment to a place (which is again a resultant of collective memory).

Often times what is forgotten in this process is the idea of ‘place attachment<sup>2</sup>’. According to Scannell and Gifford [5] the framework for place attachment proposes ‘place attachment’ as a multidimensional concept with person, psychological process, and place dimensions. The first dimension is the actor- who is getting attached? This is based on the personal and collective meaning that they give to an object or place. The second dimension is the

<sup>1</sup> Permanences are presented in two aspects, as propelling elements and as pathological elements. If an artefact functions well with adaptations at the same time being an indicator past that permanence can be considered a propelling one. Eg. Palazzo Della Ragione, Padua. Pathological permanence is something that is isolated and detached from the present conditions. Eg. Alhambra in Granada.

<sup>2</sup> can be defined as “the extent to which an individual values or identifies with a particular environmental setting”[6]. It indicates the link and bond between people and a place.

psychological process- how are affect, manifestation and behavior manifested in the attachment. And the third dimension is the object of attachment- to what the attachment is to and the nature of the place [4]. Place attachment can be at individual or group level. At individual level it can be based on the personal connections to a place. And at group level it can be formed with the shared historical experiences or meanings. It can also be a religious based one. Places like temple and church brings worshippers close to their gods and people gives sacred meanings for such places. To summarize, the closeness to a place gives a person the sense of security and increases confidence [4].

Given this context of role of people in the process of image creation, collective memory and meanings attributed to the place, the case of Padmatheertham is examined.

### 3. CASE OF PADMATHEERTHAM

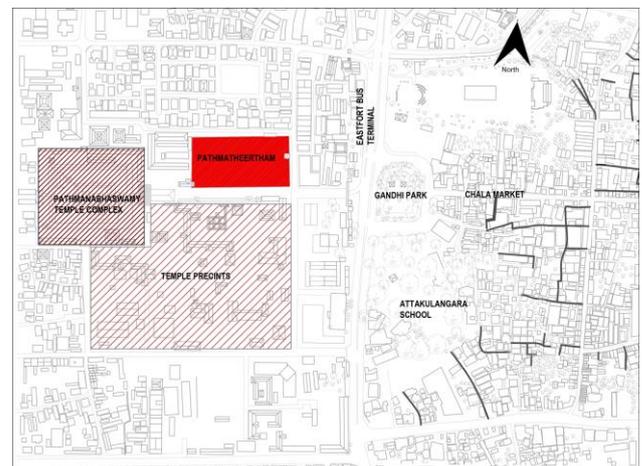


Fig.1 Location of Padmatheertham in the temple precinct

Padmatheertham is an ancient pond associated with ‘Sree Padmanabhaswamy’ temple, in the city of Trivandrum, Kerala, India. The oldest records<sup>3</sup> in history about the pond contains descriptions about Padmatheertham and a set of more than 18 water bodies<sup>4</sup> around the temple complex. According to historical texts, Padmatheertham is mentioned as ‘Agasthyatheertham’ and is believed to be a natural pond. In the 14<sup>th</sup> C A.D the pond was enlarged by the then King of Travancore Veera Marthanda Varma. Further, records suggests renovations undertaken by the successive kings<sup>5</sup> and administrators transforming the pond into its present

<sup>3</sup> 13th century book ‘Ananthapuravarnanam’ by unknown writer

<sup>4</sup> Padmatheertham was a part of an elaborate system of water bodies including Somatheertham, Varahatheertham, Sreekanthaswara theertham, Ananthatheertham etc.

<sup>5</sup> by Anizham Thirunal Marthanda Varma and Dharmaraja in 18th century

condition. Once an open pond reflecting the Padmanabhaswami temple complex has now been cordoned off to public, remains a mere treat to the tourist camera. Moreover, this area is a heritage spot according to the Trivandrum city master plan and also a declared high security zone. Historical images suggests that the temple pond played a major role in the life of its citizens. Bathing ghats lined the pond where people engaged in conversations and exchange of goods. However, today the steel fencing<sup>6</sup> detach the urban population from the water body which once belonged to the city and its people.

### 3.1 Place attachment survey



Fig.2 View towards temple from the pond (source:Indian express)

Padmatheertham possesses a strong relation to the history and people Trivandrum. It was a background for many historical events and memories. It was one of the major spot of community meeting and rituals. The senior citizens of this area still maintain a strong bond to this place and its surroundings. The study of place attachment was done with the help of a questionnaire survey. The survey was done for both the visitors (shopkeepers, workers and temple visitors) and the permanent residents in the area. The survey was conducted on 40 individuals, out of which 22 were permanent residents. Semi structured interviews were also used since it allowed the participants to discuss their answers and reasons. The place attachment was rated on 6 based on their responses to the selected statements in the questionnaire, with 1 point given to the each statement they agree.

The analysis was done on basis of the following parameters.

1. Age
2. Gender
3. Occupation

<sup>6</sup> It is believed that the fencing was installed by the city administration after a case of attempted suicide in the pond more than a decade ago.

4. Religion
5. Proximity to the pond
6. Relation to the pond
7. Period of relation
8. Consistency of visit
9. Memories(social and personal)

The average degree of place attachment of all samples taken is found to be 4.1 out of 6. Samples with rating below 4 were considered non-attached and others as attached. On the total of 40 samples 23 shows attachment to the pond and 17 were non-attached.

Table-1 : Sample Statements

Statement	Agree	Disagree	No opinion
	“The image of Padmatheertham evokes me the memories of my childhood”	65%	25%
“I identify strongly with this place”	60%	35%	5%
“I would be sorry if I had to move from this area”	50%	50%	-
“I would be sorry if the image of this place had changed”	65%	35%	-
“I feel commitment to this place”	55%	45%	-
“I feel proud about this place”	80%	20%	-

It was found that the place attachment values are not dependant on age of the respondent. However, it was noticed that the older people were showing more attachment to the place compared to the younger residential population. About 85% of the people above 60 years are found to be highly attached to the place. However, it shows relation to the period of relation. People who are related to the pond for more than 30 years have high place attachment to the pond. In this case the average index of place attachment was found to above 5. Most of the recent residents who have been around below 10 years are found not to be attached to the place. The attachment also showed values independent of occupation, however, the temple workers and the workers have very close association to the pond showing high attachment to it. The female population shows very less attachment to the pond mainly because the lack of association with the pond and its surroundings even though they live in the neighbourhood. However, a study of historical photographs suggest that both men and women had equal access to the pond. The resident population is showing more attachment to the than the non-resident population even though there is not much variance in the value of degree of attachment

Another important aspect of the study was the frequency of visit to the pond. Frequency of visit is not showing much relation to place attachment in the case of Padmatheertham. This is mainly because the senior citizens who were the regular visitors of the temple are unable to or disinterested in visiting the place nowadays. But they are highly attached to the place at the same time. Also it is observed that the shopkeepers who visit the place daily do not have a mental attachment to the pond. 55 percent of the surveyed samples have childhood memories related to Padmatheertham in which 42 percent of people have memories about the bath and friends 20% of people remembers the memories related to their family members while seeing the pond. These people showed high place attachment values (an average of 5.3/6). For the rest of people the first memory comes to mind are about god, temple, rituals, kingship, tourism etc. A few of the shopkeepers and visitors were very eager to talk about the climate and cool breeze from the water body.

### 3.2 Memories though anecdotes



Fig.3 View towards temple from the pond : past (source: Sharath Sunder)

97 year old Krishna Iyer

Mr. Krishna Iyer has been living near the temple for more than 80 years remembers Padmatheertham as an active spot throughout the day, where people used to take bath and swim irrespective of gender and caste. Separate spots were provided for different caste, especially for women. The bath in Padmatheertham was considered spiritual rather than a daily activity. People used to travel 3-4 kilometers daily to take bath in Padmatheertham. The banks of the pond was also spaces for artists and philosophers to meet and share their ideas (the story of meeting between famous poets Kunjan Nambiar and Unnayi Warriar is famous). He also talks about the festivals and rituals related to the pond. 'Murajapam' was an important ritual conducted once in every six years, which was mainly indented to drain and clean the pond. The oil lamps were an important feature which kept the place active till 10 pm in those days.

86 years old Parameswaran

Mr. Parameswaran was born and brought here. His childhood memories of the pond are dotted with coconut farms. For Parameswaran, the festivals and rituals related to Padmatheertham evokes the memories of powerful reign of royal family. He talks about the strong wind that used to blow out the oil lamps which leaves the paths to the pond dark after sunset. The introduction of electricity and water supply systems about 70 years ago brought about major changes to the place. People started to use bathrooms and the act of bath became more private which eventually made the ponds less crowded. The iron grills were introduced for safety and sanity reasons in 1940s also affected the relation of people to the pond. Still Padmatheertham remained as an active community space till the start of 21st century.

89 year old Sreenivasan Potty

Mr. Potty was a priest in the Padmanabhaswamy temple maintains a close relation to both the Padmanatheertham and Sreekandeswaram pond. "I started working in the temple at the age of 16. We had to reach there everyday at 3 o'clock in the morning when there was no lamps on streets. We used to walk as groups with oil lamps after the bath in Sreekandeswaram pond. There was a separate part for priests in the Padmatheertham pond. It was mandatory to take a bath in pond everytime if any lower cast people touches our body. Some days this might repeat for four to five times. There was always a crowd around the pond for bathing. In my childhood we used to conduct swimming competitions with friends. It was great fun" says Sreenivasan Potty. The memories of his elder brother's accident in the pond also comes to his mind while seeing the pond. He shares his knowledge about the importance of bath and ponds in our culture. It was an excersice for the body as well as a community gathering.

78 year old Balakrishnan Unni

Mr. Unni is an Ayurveda doctor who was born and brought on the sides of the pond. He was proud to say that his entire lifetime was spent on the banks of Padmatheertham. In his childhood memories the surroundings were residential areas which was later converted to commercial buildings. He also has the clear memories about the installation of the fencing around. "The precast iron grills were brought in trucks and assembled in site. The time of 'Murajapam' used to be a holiday for schools because the priests from other places were accommodated in the nearby schools. It was like vacation for us" says Balakrishnan.

### 3.3 Past to Present: The transformation



Fig.4 View towards temple from the pond : present  
(source: author)

In the course of Trivandrum city's development as a temple town, Padmatheertham bear witness to changing human interactions. Beyond the religious metaphor of a temple tank, padmatheertham acted as an urban square nurturing social and economic values while maintaining a political identity of the place. Today Padmatheertham has been reduced to a mirror that reflects the architecture of the precinct, while remaining closed to people and therefore silent in its physical existence. The pond is visible only to the eyes of a tourists camera. Padmatheertham and its precincts reveal significance values that go beyond the historical, architectural and archaeological values, the pond also has significant associative, use based and micro-climatic values. It plays an important role in generating collective memory of the place defined by its changing socio-political contexts. Being the prime architectural identity of the city, an engineering intervention here could be defective, if not deface, the precinct. Padmatheertham is a living monument that is constantly evolving. It is the living relic of the past and breathing urban entity of the present. There is a need to reconnect human elements back to the city's most important landmark, such that the memories are not stagnant and the sense of place evolves [7].

### 4. CONCLUSION

Image and memories about a city are formed from the interaction of observer with a place. The meaning a place or event communicates differently to the different observers. For some, the image of Padmatheertham evokes the memories of childhood, for some other it is pure spirituality. All these plural memories are important in making place attachments such that any place in a city can act as its cultural identity. In the case of Padmatheertham, the pond indicates the culture of public bath in the context of

Trivandrum city. It was one of the major gathering spots. Although the function has been lost over time, the pond remains a symbolic indication of the past.

The collective memory of the inhabitants are linked to the place. This makes a community more attached to a place. The physical features such as architecture and monuments can create place related distinctiveness. The place provides the indications about one's distinctiveness or similarity. When the physical features of a space change (image), the associations tend to emerge. For example, when the oil lamps were installed in the surroundings of Padmatheertham, the space became more active. And later when the iron grills were installed the association eventually became weaker. Thus the change in the image of the city gradually erased the collective memory. The urban images can evoke emotions in the observers regardless of the current association, if they have memories related to that image.

The degree of place attachment is, therefore, dependent on various factors including the relation to place, period of relation, experience etc. People who have personal memories strongly identify themselves to the place, while social memories indicates identity of cities. In the case of Padmatheertham people below the age 30 seems show less place attachment compared to the elder people. It is mainly because of the loss of function and activity at that place. For the residents who have memories associated with a place, that physical remains of the place acts as urban remainders and, elements creating mental attachment. Therefore, the case of Padmatheertham suggests that it is possible to further city's identity only through peoples' participation in the place making processes. By dictating the memory to the people by reducing buildings as mere artifacts in the name of preservation can only bring a halt to the strings of memories and thereby reduce place attachments, in turn the building and precinct losing its essential meaning.

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