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The Effect of Land Development in Small Communities on a People’s Sense of Place

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THE EFFECT OF LAND DEVELOPMENT IN SMALL COMMUNITIES ON A PEOPLE’S SENSE OF PLACE

by

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Abstract

Sense of place is an extensively researched concept that refers to the relationship (cultural, economic, societal, spiritual, and physical) between a person and their surroundings. Often a person’s sense of place, or connection to the land, can lead them to develop strong place attachment, or a human-place bond, with certain physical locations. Studies done on place attachment show that people with strong connections to natural areas where they live are more willing to demonstrate environmentally responsible behavior. This kind of behavior is important in the upcoming years, as communities begin to expand, develop more land, and use more resources. In some areas, it is the physical landscape that sets tangible limits to a society, but in wide open spaces, like the desert in Israel or the plains of Nebraska, it seems there is unlimited space to develop. How will we develop communities in a way that does not close off these open areas and disrupt people’s sense of place? What places are significant to people and how do they use them? How do residents envision these places being used in the future? Residents of a small desert community in Israel and a small agricultural town in Nebraska were interviewed on what natural spaces they use and how they would feel if those spaces were to be developed. Differences between the communities were found in the way they perceived the land. The desert dwellers saw the desert as a massive extension to their home. The concept of land ownership did not exist since all land in Israel belongs to the government. Residents of the farming community, however, view land in terms of economic property and delineated open farmland from designated recreational areas. Growth of a community in Nebraska means that a farmer has to give up land to the housing developer. Despite these differences, both communities express concern for the future of the balance between maintaining open spaces and progressing as a community. Further research could be done on the impact of tourism on sense of place, as it emerged as a possible route for both communities.

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INTRODUCTION

The concept “sense of place” can be defined within a variety of fields; anthropology, environmental psychology, geography, landscape architecture, and sociology (Cross, 2001). Each of these fields attributes a certain relationship between a person and their surroundings to be the defining factor in that person’s sense of place, whether it be their community, the physical surroundings, or ideological factors. Sense of place can be broadly defined as “cultural preconceptions that shape the way we respond to a place” (Cross, 2001). Cross concludes that some natural settings have a strong “spirit of place” inherent within them, meaning they affect all people in a similar way. She uses the Grand Canyon as an example, since the landscape is impressive and elicits an emotional or spiritual response to most visitors. On the other hand, smaller, more insignificant places may also become places of attachment to people due to factors separate from the physical landscape itself. This is addressed by Farnum in her 2005 study addressing local versus nonlocal attachment to public land. She finds that local attachment is more deeply rooted and based on experiential connection to places, while nonlocal attachment tends to be based purely on the aesthetics of a place.

One factor that influences the treatment of open spaces is the prospect of economic benefit. A later study conducted by Cross established “economic dependence” as one dimension of sense of place (along with “place identity” and “conservation ethic”) (Cross, 2011). Since this particular study of hers was done on agricultural land in Colorado and Wyoming, economic dependence was extremely relevant. Landowners who took Cross’s survey identified strongly with the economic value of their land; land that was providing food for their families. Economic dependence intertwined with a strong place identity, which led to interesting results. Landowners were ready to support conservation easements to protect the land they loved but refrained in doing so, due to the fear of the possibility of easements hindering their financial gain (Cross, 2011). This study demonstrates the complexity of sense of place and how it can influence policy.

On the contrary, open spaces that have not been developed into agricultural land could be used for tourism, another source of revenue for a community. Development of a space can increase a community’s
monetary worth but can just as easily change or even destroy a people’s sense of place. Residents of Alvaneu, a Swiss Alpine village, were interviewed on local landscape changes. Most participants in the study had pride in the fact that their place was “flourishing” in the sense of economic development. They had begun to embrace “soft tourism” by installing a golf course and hosting travelers in their homes. However, many responses also expressed a fear of an uncertain future (Klanicka, 2006). Similarly, the Niobrara River, a source of local tourism and place attachment in north central Nebraska, has been historically protected by the US National Park Service. Residents along the river have uncertainties about the future, anticipating that the growth of tourism may overpower the nature-ness of the area (Davenport, 2006). One landowner even said, “I like the river just as it is, and I don’t think it needs any more development…I wouldn’t want to see a big water slide down there for recreation or a carnival on the bank or…t-shirt sales.” Although the introduction of tourism to a community can be detrimental to open spaces (installations of golf courses, construction of hotels, t-shirt sales, etc.), tourism can have a positive impact on the environment as well. For example, natural areas could be further protected and preserved from development once they are labeled as sources of tourism (Avriel-Avni et al., 2010).

Tourism and agriculture could contribute to or detract from a community’s sense of place, depending on the degree of impact they have on the natural surroundings and the overall value they provide the landowner.

In addition to the economic gain from owning land, a strong sense of place can be fostered through community. Community can determine land use, memories associate with the land, and the establishment of traditions. According to DeLind (2001), “civic agriculture” could be a strong determinant of community. Civic agriculture refers to food that is produced by and for the people who live on the land. She sees it “not only as an alternative strategy for food production, distribution, and consumption but also as a tool and a venue for ‘grounding people in common purpose’—for nurturing a sense of belonging to a place and an organic sense of citizenship” (DeLind, 2001). Again, the importance of an economic tie and a sense of livelihood associated with the land is emphasized in establishing sense of place. Resource management and land development should take the importance of community into account. “Day-to-day land management might change when people are recognized as part of the ecosystem” (Williams, 1998). Williams explains that once communities of people see
themselves as playing an active role in their ecosystem, their values and traditions will also play a role in the decision-making process.

Another term to introduce here is place attachment. A person’s place attachment very much shapes their sense of place in the form of an emotional attachment; a “human-place bond” (Kyle 2010). Although the development of place attachment can include economic dependence and social aspects, as outlined above in describing sense of place, it is commonly used to refer simply to the bond between an individual and a physical location (Kyle, 2010; Raymond, 2010). Analyses of place attachment have shown that people with strong connections to the natural areas where they live are more willing to demonstrate environmentally responsible behavior (Forsyth, 2015). This is significant moving forward, as those who are aware of and use the open spaces around them will be more willing to protect these spaces from housing developments or industry.

Community, emotional attachment, and economic factors undoubtedly play an important role in developing a sense of place, but the physical environment is what sets the tangible limits to the society that’s assigning meaning to a space (Stedman, 2003). Stedman’s research looks specifically at forested, moderately developed spaces surrounding lakes in Wisconsin, where there are clear limits between the physical environment and developed land. Participants in his study strongly associated themselves with the natural landscape but also appreciated the fact that there was development; the fact that they had neighbors and a source of community nearby. Sense of place encapsulates hundreds of factors that are all attached to the land itself. So how is sense of place limited in a setting where the limits and boundaries aren’t so clear—somewhere like open spaces in the desert or prairie? Stedman could see physical delineations between the natural entities of lakes and forests and development in Wisconsin. On the contrary, in places like the open desert or prairie, where obvious physical delineations do not exist, a people’s sense of place is what separates, identifies, and defines areas within the natural landscape. What prevents communities in these open spaces from developing into large cities? Are they limited by physical characteristics of the landscape or by factors associated to sense of place?

The current study looks at two communities; one located in the Arava Desert and the other in the Great Plains.
Kibbutz Samar, Israel

It could be said that the most open space present in nature is the desert. Deserts are often barren; void of water sources and of human developments. However, people still manage to create a sense of place within these spaces. This research will explore how members of the desert community Samar find their place within the openness of their natural surroundings. Samar is a kibbutz located in the Arava valley, a hyper-arid expanse of desert between the Negev highlands of Israel and the mountains of Jordan (see Appendix II). The Arava is characterized by little rainfall, high temperatures, and agricultural fields belonging to small Israeli communities, or kibbutzim. Kibbutz Samar was founded in 1976 as a democratic community and is now comprised of about 50 families, where everybody knows everyone else (Kibbutz Samar, 2014). The land contained within the gates of the kibbutz holds houses of the residents, a sports field, a horse stable, and artwork created by members. The kibbutz is also comprised of a solar field, a dairy cowshed, and the largest organic date field in Israel (Kibbutz Samar, 2014). Outside of this development, however, is the open desert. This research will delve into the sense of place that is established by kibbutz members in the desert and discover how they interact with their natural landscape.

The portion of this study on Kibbutz Samar will specifically contribute to a research project that is being conducted within the scope of the Regional Council Study on Open Spaces in the Southern Arava. Previous research has been administered through the form of surveys handed out to members of other kibbutzim in the Arava valley. The research has shown that kibbutzim members view the open desert and acacia forests, as well as agricultural fields, as open space that should be preserved. Of the previous research conducted on sense of place within kibbutzim undergoing development of land and population growth, most studies explore the contemporary theme of development and how people and land will be affected (Avriel-Avni et al., 2010). This research will delve into the sense of place that residents of Samar have created in the open areas surrounding their community. The study will also add to our understanding of how sense of place comes about and what natural and societal factors contribute to a people’s sense of place.
Ashland, Nebraska

Whereas Samar is comprised of about 250 residents (Kibbutz Samar, 2014), Ashland is home to about 2,500 people (City of Ashland, NE, 2019). Despite a large difference in population, the two communities are similar in that they are both surrounded by natural spaces and are about a half an hour drive away from the nearest city. Ashland is a small town located on the eastern edge of Nebraska (see Appendix II). It is largely prairie land and wetlands that have been converted into agricultural fields. The town was established in 1870 alongside the Salt Creek and is largely an agricultural community, with many residents owning farmland surrounding the town. It is home to four baseball fields, a disc golf course, an elementary school, several restaurants and art galleries, a supermarket, and a public library. Ashland is also located near several “state tourism attractions,” including golf courses, state parks, and the Platte River (City of Ashland, NE, 2019). Little research has been done on sense of place within small Nebraska communities, save for Davenport’s study on the influence of landscape change in a community along the Niobrara River (2006). Much like the community studied by Davenport, Ashland has been facing an influx of tourists to local vineyards and nearby state parks and some residents may have the same concerns of participants in Davenport’s study; that nature will be disrupted by strangers and infrastructure for tourism.

Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this study is to determine what open spaces in the desert, prairie, and agricultural areas are used by their inhabitants, both in a cultural, communal and spiritual, and individual sense and how they are used. A focus will be put on how people delineate “places” out of an open landscape. Are certain open spaces more appealing to people than others due to ideological or practical reasons or due to aesthetic value in the landscape itself? How will these places be valued in the future of land development? The objectives are to identify and understand Samar’s and Ashland’s natural landscape and residents’ sense of place within them by answering these questions: Are the open spaces surrounding Samar/Ashland conducive to the community’s sense of place? Which open spaces do residents most strongly associate with? How do residents use those
spaces? How do they picture the future of these open spaces? Will development of land affect or hinder residents’ sense of place? By analyzing answers to these questions, common themes will be determined on the general attitude held towards future development and population growth and how these factors influence a people’s sense of place.

**METHODS**

Data was collected by interviewing long-established members of Samar and Ashland on their sense of place and place attachment. A total of 13 residents were interviewed (7 from Samar and 6 from Ashland) with a variety of ages, genders, and occupations. The “snowball” tactic was used to select participants by asking interviewees for suggestions on who else to interview. This tactic was based on participants’ knowledge of who most utilizes the open spaces surrounding Samar and Ashland. Interview questions (Appendix I) directed participants to identify specific places that they use and how they use them. Participants were also asked to share stories about the open spaces in order to evoke an emotional response. Finally, the interviewer inquired about ways in which the participants envision the future of the open spaces and their personal desires for the future development, or lack thereof, of the area. Interviews were conducted in casual areas, such as the interviewee’s home, backyard, or public sitting areas in the community. Conducting the interviews outdoors or in the participant’s home may have inspired more genuine answers as the participant was more relaxed and comfortable.

The interviews in Samar were conducted from 12 April to 12 May of 2018. Seven members (2 females, 5 males) of Samar were interviewed, ages 21 through 64 years old (21, 29, 52, 60, 60, 61, 64). All participants had lived on the kibbutz since its establishment approximately 40 years ago, except for the youngest two who were born on the kibbutz. All participants had some family living on the kibbutz with them. They all either worked within Samar or held regional positions at the neighboring kibbutz, Yotvata.
Interviews were conducted in Ashland from 25 March to 29 March of 2019. Six residents (3 females, 3 males) were interviewed, ages 25 through 78 (25, 37, 67, 69, 70, 78). All the participants had grown up in Ashland and some had left to attend college and then had returned. All participants still had some family living in the community and they all either worked somewhere within Ashland or had retired.

Data collected from the interviews were coded using NVivo software. Common themes and topics repeatedly brought up by interviewees were manually organized into nodes and linked to one another. Finding themes and identifying relevant statements were carried out by the researcher and are therefore influenced by the researcher’s interests. Places most commonly used by members of Samar or residents of Ashland were plotted on maps obtained from Google Earth, resulting in a diagram of the places most referenced by the residents. The researcher used these diagrams to gauge the importance of certain places to the residents over others and to discover commonalities among the places that residents have grown attached to.

As this study involves human participants, IRB approval was obtained for the interviews done in Ashland. However, the research completed in Samar was conducted before IRB approval had been attained. All information collected from interviews have remained confidential and participants’ names will not be disclosed.

RESULTS

Diagrams were generated based off places that were mentioned by interviewees (Figures 1 and 2). The places referred to were plotted onto maps of Samar and Ashland, respectively. Places that were identified several times by many participants are indicated by large plot points, while places mentioned by one or two participants are marked with small plot points.
What can be deduced from Figure 1 is that most of the places referenced are places that Samar residents have “made their own,” such as the bathtub that was placed at the base of Samar mountain, the An Moussa
spring, and the date orchards. All these places were developed in some way by the people and became gathering points for parties or relaxation. One example is a resident who helped create a small spring into a place that he still uses today: “We came and saw this small pond, like only one [person] can go there, so we took the water out and crushed it with hammers and stuff until it got bigger. And so…it’s ours. We didn’t start it, but we made it better, so we love it too.” This instance demonstrates that the resident now feels a greater connection with the spring because he influenced its current state of existence. The two exceptions of this observation are the sand dunes and the mountains behind the kibbutz, both of which are untouched by humans but still provide a suitable landscape for parties or the enjoyment of nature. Attachment to these natural landmarks was shown in the form of memories associated to the place, like hiking the mountains with friends and relaxing in the sand dunes during sunset, rather than through the process of altering them to fit certain recreational needs.

Ashland residents, in contrast, more commonly referenced areas that had been altered for the purpose of recreation. One place referenced often was Wiggenhorn Park, Ashland’s main city park which has a public pool, picnic shelter, playground, and splashpad. Other places included Mahoney State Park, a state-maintained recreational area, an area with a dog park that is used by the community for disc golf and sand volleyball, and the baseball fields. One of the older participants recalled many natural, undeveloped areas that are now managed by entities as recreational areas. He remembers swimming a Linoma Beach before it was made into a commercial campground, and hiking around at Crystal Spring, before it became an official Lutheran summer camp. More so than residents of Samar, participants from Ashland had a more distinct delineation between natural, open spaces and the town proper. It seems that they frequent specific locations that offer specific purposes, whereas participants from Samar imposed their own meaning onto places. A date field could be a place of labor, or of gathering, or a place to simply walk in the evening to get married in. In Ashland, the place often defines the action; one goes to Wiggenhorn Park if they want to have a picnic, the golf course if they want to golf, a winery if they want to attend a social event, and the bike trail if they want to get out and run.

The interview analysis also resulted in several themes (see Table 1) relevant to the study of sense of place that will be further discussed below. The factors influencing the formation of sense of place in Samar and
Ashland can be categorized into individual, communal, spatial, and temporal domains. These concepts encompass subcategories as well, all of which were deduced from the replies of interviewees.

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<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Communal</th>
<th>Spatial</th>
<th>Temporal</th>
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<td>Subcategories</td>
<td>Livelihood</td>
<td>Traditions</td>
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<td>Ownership</td>
<td>Desire to share</td>
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<td>Awe</td>
<td>Shared history</td>
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Table 1 Domains that influence the formation of sense of place in Samar and Ashland.

Factors shaping sense of place

Individual domain

Sense of place can be established on an individual scale. The individual domain encompasses a person’s livelihood, ownership, and awe they have regarding the open spaces. The open spaces play a major role in the livelihood of both Ashland and Samar residents; they are economically and emotionally supported by the open spaces that surround them. A sense of livelihood provided by the desert can be seen in comments made about laboring outside. Whether the residents are farming or giving tours, the open spaces provide them with an income as well as an opportunity to enjoy their beauty. A resident who works in the date orchard claimed that many people became farmers after moving to Samar just for the opportunity to work outdoors. “[Agriculture] attaches you to the earth, to the soil, to the seasons…When I work as a farmer, I’m using the open spaces.” Another resident who works in tourism said, “I live for it. [Part] of my work is to be in the open area. People pay for it. To take them to the open area.” The livelihood of residents is affected by sense of place even when they don’t work directly in the natural landscape. A 21-year-old resident who works within the kibbutz fence said, “you can’t live here without loving the nature and having the places you want to go, because that’s part of our life.” The desert has seemingly become the source of both spiritual and physical livelihood for the individuals of Samar. In Ashland, much of the open spaces are farmland and ranchland. When more homes are built and development occurs, land is taken “from a farmer’s corn crop.” That not only removes a source of revenue from the landowner, but it takes away land that may have been used in other ways. One Ashland
resident recalls walking the field near her childhood home and hunting for arrowheads. That field is gone now, as it was developed into an assisted living place. The participant said, “I don’t wanna be selfish about it; it’s just a change for us personally,” but is it selfish to mourn a loss of farmland and of livelihood? One Ashland resident pointed out that, “every time there’s change in a small community, it affects somebody. It’s the farmers that are affected a lot.”

In Samar, the subcategory of individual ownership over the open spaces plays into a resident’s pride over the desert and the responsibility they feel to protect it. Pride and responsibility work together towards preserving the open spaces. Every interview referenced the two cases in which Samar stood up against the development of open spaces; the quarrying of sand from the Samar sand dunes and a hotel that is to be built in the neighboring Timna Park. In both instances, the residents of Samar protested and demanded that their land be preserved. This desire to preserve the opens spaces stems from a sense of individual ownership. One resident was especially possessive over the desert, saying “I consider it all mine” several times. She even claimed to own the air: “Sitting outside in my backyard and breathing air that nobody has breathed since 8 kilometers away makes me feel good, you know? My air.” The 21-year-old resident who grew up on the kibbutz could possibly have a stronger connection to place than people grew up elsewhere. He recalled several times that the Israeli military showed up and asked him and his friends to relocate, as they were hanging out too close to the Jordan border. His remembered his reply to the soldier being “we won’t leave, it’s our property, our space, we are here always. It’s nice that you are guarding us, but we are not going to leave.” The strong sense of possession over a landscape that residents have expressed show that ownership has a large effect on their sense of place.

A similar theme of ownership was expressed by participants from Ashland as well. One woman explained that her husband used to go walking away from their house, far into the fields, and along the highway and it was “nothing but open space.” Now there is a new gated community down the road (“million-dollar homes going up right next to our property”) and her husband has been stopped by new residents and questioned on if he lives in the community and what he is doing inside the facility. The woman and her husband are opposed to the new housing developments because more and more land that they owned has been taken away by
eminent domain in order to build bigger, paved highways and to run sewage to the new developments.

However, the older generation of Ashland residents are slowly passing on ownership to the next generation. According to one participant, the “older people” want to keep the town at 2,500 people, but the younger generations want “a Walgreens, a Chick-fil-A.” As ownership of land is passed around, some areas become restricted. One resident used to ride her horse through a woman’s land along the Platte River. That woman sold her land and it is now Mahoney State Park. Although having state park status will ensure that the land will be conserved, the Ashland resident can no longer ride her horse through a space that she used to enjoy regularly.

There have been similar occurrences with the abandoned rock quarries. Multiple Ashland residents recall swimming in the old quarries, where as now they are surrounded by housing developments and are privately owned; off-limits to public swimming.

The third category of individual factors is awe. This concept describes the love and amazement that residents feel regarding their visual surroundings. This encompasses a person’s spiritual and emotional attachment to the landscape. When naming open spaces in the desert surrounding Samar and ways in which they use them, residents often mentioned the beauty of flowers after flooding occurs, the views from Samar mountain, the stars at night, the colorful sands in the mountains behind the kibbutz, the gazelles, and the sunset, when the mountains in Jordan turn red. Many of the activities that residents mentioned include simply enjoying the view and “being in the desert.” The activities include sitting on a bench on top of Samar mountain, sleeping in nearby riverbed, or making bonfires in the sand dunes; all places where they can be in awe of the sky and the surrounding desert. There was less of a sense of awe expressed by Ashland residents. One participant mentioned riding her horse and “watching the seasons” and another mentioned seeing the sunset and oftentimes deer in her backyard. Another said, matter-of-factly, “I think we need open space. We’re from the Midwest.” She acknowledged that she is accustomed to and appreciates the open spaces simply because she grew up with them. “I’d be very sad to see this (gestures around) turned into all housing...It makes me kind of happy that it probably won’t be in my lifetime that it’ll happen. That’s true. We’ve grown up with these spaces and the land...”
Communal domain

Communal factors that affect sense of place include traditions of the community residing in the place and the desire to share the place with others, through education or companionship. Traditions that contribute to residents’ sense of place in the desert surrounding Samar include celebrating Passover satyr below Samar mountain, lighting a giant Menorah (made of seven barrels) on top of the mountain for Hanukkah, and creating large bonfires for Lag B’omer celebrations. Other than celebrating holidays at Samar mountain, another tradition is watching the floods after a large rain event. Most of the participants offered this up as a tradition, saying that all of Samar goes into the mountains, whether by foot or in cars, to watch the flooding. The only tradition mentioned by Ashland residents was “Stir-Up Days” which is a festival every summer where people take to the streets with parade floats and there are children games and live music. Other than that event, participants listed having family get-togethers at Wiggenhorn Park or going for picnics at Mahoney State Park.

Sharing one’s sense of place takes two forms: education and companionship. One resident who was born on the kibbutz said she remembers the adults taking them as kids “to the dunes to study; to look for snakes and for animals during the night.” Using the open spaces as a platform for education also helps build a connection between the place and the kibbutz residents from a young age. One participant from Ashland used to be a school teacher and would also tour her children around the town to learn about historical events. They would also visit an old cemetery and a hill where a Native American tribe used to live.

Sense of place was also enhanced by sharing the place with others. A few tour guides in Samar share the desert in a formal setting by showing tourists their favorite spots. Residents in both communities also share their experiences in the open spaces by walking, running, hiking, or biking with one another. Another form of companionship in the desert is welcoming and sharing the space with newcomers. Although many residents expressed an interest in limiting the population size in the valley, they also acknowledged that the open space should be available to all who want to live in it. When referring to future population growth, one resident said, “There’s enough open area. I’m not inviting them, but if they want to come, they will come.” One of the tour guides said something similar: “This is my way about looking at open area: it must be open with everyone.”
Similarly, four of the six Ashland residents expressed excitement and interest in welcoming more people to Ashland. Someone said, “People come, and they live here and get very involved in the community...For your town to grow, it’s nice to hang onto those [open spaces] but yet you have to realize I think you’re gonna lose some when your town starts to grow.” For this resident, sharing the space with others is more beneficial than maintaining the current size of Ashland. Other residents of Ashland, however, are more reluctant to share as they would prefer more privacy. One man used to be able to walk out behind his house and fish in private. Now there is a house across the lake, which “changes the whole atmosphere.” Perhaps there is a desired balance between having a community and sharing spaces but also maintaining a level of privacy.

*Spatial domain*

Spatial factors can be broken into the unity of the open desert landscape in Samar versus the fragmentation of land observed in Ashland. and the perceived accessibility of the open spaces to the residents. When it came to Samar residents identifying places during the interviews, there was a common inability to identify specific “open spaces” due to the unity of the physical landscape. When asked to provide names of places or to delineate specific places out of the open desert, many participants gave looks of confusion. Comments like “I couldn’t even cut into parts…it’s one open area” were common. This may be due to the fact that there are few physical landscapes within the large expanse of desert. There are very few trails to follow or specific mountains to climb. One resident mentioned the consequence of not having trails in the vicinity. “In our area here, we’re blessed that we have this huge amount of open space and once you get outside, the fact that there aren’t any trails, it gives you a different perspective on what you see.” Therefore, it seems that, to many residents, the unity of their surroundings is due to there not being any spatial definitions or borders. This is almost the opposite of how Ashland residents perceive natural areas. There are specific fragments of farmland, outdoor recreation areas, and urban area. Participants would mention camping, but always at designated campgrounds at state parks or Linoma Beach.

Sense of place in Samar is not only affected by the openness of the physical landscape, but the amount of open space that a resident may feel is accessible to them. Residents expressed an appreciation for the
freedom available to them in wandering around in the open spaces. One 61-year-old tour guide said, “I use all the space around the kibbutz. I use it all.” Another resident who works with land management of the Southern Arava valley also expressed that “there’s no lack of open spaces and most of it is accessible.” Another resident, one of the kibbutz drivers, said, “I go hiking behind the kibbutz, like everywhere. Sometimes as far as I can go, I’ll walk straight, and I’ll climb as high as I can climb.” This alludes that there are no boundaries as to how far residents can roam in the surrounding desert. The only boundary referenced in the interviews was the border with Jordan, but even that was fluid at times. A 21-year-old kibbutz member laughed as he reminisced about a game he used to play with his friends: “When we were really small children, we went with the kindergarten to the dunes and we just peed to Jordan. And we were having this game that you cross the fence like, I’m in Jordan, I’m in Israel, I’m in Jordan, I’m in Israel. Look! I peed to Jordan! And it was a lot of fun, but now they build this 6-meter fence for smugglers and stuff…” It seems that the accessibility of places can be as easily defined by kindergarteners as national governments. Whether an area is perceived as accessible or not ultimately determines the boundaries of a place and, in turn, affects the resident’s sense of place. Again, the spatial domain in Ashland differs much from Samar in accessibility. There are many places that are regulated or off-limits to residents: golf courses, rock quarries, gated communities, campgrounds, state parks, and private farmland. While Samar residents can walk to most of the places they mentioned, residents from Samar have to drive if they want to go to most of the lakes or parks mentioned.

The spatial domain also sets the extent to which the two communities can grow. In Samar, the limit to growth is the wadis that were dug out for flood control when the community was established. The wadis are visible in Figure 1, splaying out diagonally on either side of the kibbutz towards the highway. Several participants pointed out that houses will be added onto the kibbutz but will never surpass the wadis. The physical boundaries in Ashland are the Salt Creek to the southeast and floodplains or creeks to the east and north. One participant claimed that the floodplains restrict the size of the town center, but not the housing developments. The community will maintain a “small-town atmosphere,” but more housing will be built outside of Ashland and their schools and facilities will have to grow in order to accommodate more people.
Temporal domain

Temporal factors are often overlooked in literature concerning sense of place. However, sense of place develops with time, whether it is the place itself changing or the resident’s relationship with it. By taking the temporal factors of sense of place into account, it can be seen how residents view the development of the open spaces. In the case of Samar, some residents emphasized the balance of developing the kibbutz in the future and maintaining the openness of the present. Citizens of Ashland also touched on this balance between growth and maintaining a “small town.” Surprisingly, a few residents of both communities had the perspective that their open spaces were not threatened and will always stay open. These two perceptions are labeled as balance and permanence, respectively.

When settlers first arrived to the Arava valley, they viewed the desert as something to conquer, but now they fear further development. Some participants mentioned that their ideal future for the area is returning to the past, as in, a time with less people and development. However, currently, “there is more car on the road, there is more noise, there is more tree and more irrigated areas.” One way to further Samar’s economic growth and also maintain the openness of the desert is to nurture a balance between the two. As one resident said, “the real dreams for the future is going back to the past. If we want to keep living, to see kids around, playing here, we must grow. Every place does. I just hope that we will take care of the open area.” Desired by the residents interviewed is a “balance between needing to make a living and keeping as much of the area open and free.”

One resident of Ashland pointed out that new housing developments have not taken “recreational land,” just old quarries and farmland. This seemed justified in their mind, since land that people use seems to be protected. They added that “each new housing addition has to have a certain amount of green space” to balance the addition of buildings with natural area. “So, no matter what development would happen...we have to set aside open space. That’s the way it is.”

Just as people in Ashland ensure that with new development comes new “green space,” some people in Samar suggested that the open spaces will be around forever. An unreasonable sense of security or permanence was detected that may come with loving or belonging to a place. In Samar, there was a strong desire to keep the
open spaces open. When asked how she wants the open spaces to be used in the future, one resident replied, “I want them to just stay open. To stay as natural as they can, as they are.” Some residents desire permanence so much so that they project it onto the landscape, saying that it has not been affected by development, nor ever will be. This creates a lot of hope in future use of the land. The 21-year-old resident said, “everybody here loves the nature, so no one will do unresponsible building” and another resident said that the open spaces will “remain open” and “be exactly the same” in the future. Part of the illusion of permanence can be attributed to the fact that the kibbutz is located within a nature reserve and therefore much development in Samar’s near vicinity is not allowed.

This reassuring sense of permanence is not help by many in Ashland. One woman said, “a lot of Ashland’s open spaces are the parks, which aren’t going way.” But she followed by saying, “there will be more selling of agriculture to acreages...I would like it if Ashland stayed just like it is now. But you know that that’s just not gonna happen.” All six people interviewed in Ashland were convinced that Ashland will keep expanding and eating up much of the open space. One optimistic man brought up the fact that Ashland is “surrounded on three sides by flood plains” and “will be protected to a certain extent,” but he was not convinced that development would stop; just that it would expand past the city limits, into a sort of suburb surrounding Ashland. That is where the new housing developments come into play. But he was not worried. He said, “I’m excited to be here and be part of that conversation...I’m optimistic.” One especially passionate, and not so optimistic, woman said, “people ask me, ‘why would you build right next to the highway?’ Well because it wasn’t a highway when we built here!” She exclaimed that her and her husband are “in progress of trying to stop progress...and that’s a fine line.” She effectively described “progress” as being pinched between the two nearby cities, which have been slowly expanding towards Ashland from two sides. “That’s how you feel; you’re being pinched.” While both Samar and Ashland are struggling to balance progress and conservation of space, Ashland seems to be experiencing inevitable growth whereas Samar has more of a constant population and a sense of permanence in their location.
EFFECT OF LAND DEVELOPMENT ON SENSE OF PLACE

DISCUSSION

Based off the findings of this study, the people of Samar treat the surrounding desert as an extension of their home. They spend time in the open spaces to celebrate certain traditions, exercise, or simply enjoy time with friends. The individual, communal, spatial, and temporal domains have equal weight in impacting the residents’ sense of place within the desert. The residents provided specific places that they feel an emotional attachment for, but they did not necessarily assign boundaries within the open desert; they oftentimes viewed it as a single entity. This is very different from Farnum’s study, where areas of natural landscape were clearly defined and separated from residential areas, just as it is in Ashland. In Samar, there are not easily identifiable chunks of nature that can be weighed against residential area, but rather scattered places located within a large expanse of open area. One would not be able to identify the whereabouts or intended uses of the places Samar residents go to in the desert without going with a resident as a guide. However, one could look at an aerial view of Ashland and be able to distinguish what are recreational areas versus farmland or urban development.

In Samar’s case, sharing their experiences in the surrounding desert, with one another or with tourists, was also found to be significant in the residents’ connection to place. This attitude of willingness to share the open spaces may be influenced by the general mindset of the kibbutz, since they share many of their belongings, such as money, cars, and food. In terms of future development of the area, residents expressed a belief that the open spaces will never be entirely converted to developed land. Whether this is a naïve outlook or not, it may be a common perspective to take on a place one feels a strong connection to. Along with sense of place comes a sense of permanence; that a familiar place will stay the same for its whole existence. Although residents are aware of the changes that the kibbutz has made to the surrounding desert since its establishment, they hold onto a perception of permanence; that much of the desert will remain unimpacted by their community. Temporal aspects of a place should be considered in future research on sense of place, because places change with time, as do relationships. In Ashland, where the sense of permanence is almost nonexistent, residents still count on there being open spaces in the future of their town. Open space, even if it is not being used towards a specific recreation or economic gain, seems to provide value to the residents, whether it is being able to watch the
sunset, having an escape from other people, or being able to walk, bike, or horse ride in nature. The mention of the open spaces and natural areas becoming inaccessible elicited responses like “it’d be absolutely really sad” and “it’d be devastating.” Unfortunately, some residents have already experienced loss of open space. Members of Samar stood together to protest the quarrying of sand from a nearby sand dune. Landowners in Ashland that were interviewed also protested their land being flooded for a lake housing development, but a portion of their land was possessed by eminent domain and it now privately owned. These stories give us an ominous glimpse into the future.

Understanding how these domains contribute to a people’s sense of place opens a door into identifying how sense of place can be preserved, along with the physical landscape, for generations to come. In terms of the broader research being done for the Regional Study on Open Spaces in the Southern Arava, the results of this study focus less on the specific places mentioned in interviews and more on examining broad themes. However, the diagrams in Figures 1 and 2 can aid in detecting which areas to preserve as well as help determine which physical attributes of the landscape contribute to peoples’ connection with places.

CONCLUSIONS

The shortcomings of this study are mostly due to the small participant pool. The participants in Samar were non-representative of residents in that they were mostly in the same age group and there were only two women interviewed. The participants also only represented the residents who are known to use the open desert. People who do not use the places outside of the kibbutz would most likely express a different sort of connection to or sense of place within the desert. The small participant pool also provided weak data since only seven residents were interviewed. Same goes for Ashland; even though a variety of ages and occupations were interviewed, only six perspectives were heard out of a community of 2,500. Therefore, the findings of this study and the conclusions made should only be lightly applied to Samar and even less so to Ashland.

There also is a question of whether these two communities can even be compared to one another. Samar is a significantly smaller community and the people have a completely different mindset than Nebraskans. For
one, Samar is a commune, so they are used to sharing everything they own, even their money. They are also surrounded by natural landscape, so growth to them is more a question of ethics. In Ashland, people live privatized lives and all the land is owned by someone. Growth in Ashland becomes a question of which farmer will have to give up land and lose some of their crop. These separate mindsets held by the people make it difficult to compare the effect that development will have on the communities.

Within Samar and Ashland, there is a seemingly large interest in the introduction of soft tourism. Many of the residents interviewed expressed an interest in tourism as a likely income to begin to replace agriculture in the area. The presence of strangers and tourists in places used by residents of Samar and Ashland would more than likely influence the community’s sense of place. There is a chance that, if tourism is introduced more heavily in the area, that the future will seem more uncertain for Samar residents, as was observed in the locals interviewed for Kianicka’s 2006 study. Future research could be done on desert tourism in the Southern Arava valley and tourism in small towns in the US as the business expands in the coming years.

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APPENDICES

Appendix I: Interview script.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS // SENSE OF PLACE

BACKGROUND

- How old are you?
- How many years have you been living in Samar/Ashland?
- How many people are in your family / how many children do you have?

WHAT

- Which open spaces are you aware of in the area surrounding Samar/Ashland?
- What are the open spaces/areas around Samar/Ashland that you use?
- What do you call those spaces and why do they have that name? (folk terms)

HOW

- How do you use those spaces?
- Can you recall an interesting story that’s occurred in the open spaces around Samar/Ashland?

WHEN

- How frequently do you use those spaces?
- Which times of the year?
  - Why at those times of year?
- Has the way that you’ve used those spaces changed over time?
- Have the places that you’ve used changed over time?

VALUE/EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT

- How would you feel if that space was no longer accessible? (shut down, develop)
- How do you envision the future of open spaces surrounding Samar/Ashland?
  - How would you like to see open spaces used, if at all?

Appendix II: Aerial photos and locations of Kibbutz Samar in Israel and Ashland, Nebraska.