

The Importance of Establishing Ties: An Architect's Reading of *The Little Prince*

SANDRA R.F. VITZTHUM
Norwich University

The Little Prince, by Saint-Exupéry, describes the importance of attachment to others. I think this argument for attachment can be extended to objects and places as well. Cultivating attachment to community is particularly important when the trend in America, as Joel Garreau points out in *Edge City*, is towards placelessness, mobility, and dissociation. Only through attachment can we dwell, both privately and publicly, in the full, sustaining sense of the word.

Saint-Exupéry defines attachment through the metaphor of taming or being tamed, presented in a touching scene where the little prince encounters the fox:

"What does that mean--'tame'?" asked the little prince.

"It is an act too often neglected," said the fox. "It means to establish ties. ...To me, you are still nothing more than a little boy who is just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you, on your part, have no need of me. ... But if you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world..."

"My life is monotonous," [the fox continued]. ... "I am a little bored. But if you tame me, it will be as if the sun came to shine on my life. I shall know the sound of a step that will be different from all the others. ..."¹

In other words, one becomes attached (tamed) by establishing ties.

Saint-Exupéry asserts that these ties bind the hearts of those involved rather than the minds and that these ties form the essence of our life: "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye."² Affirmation of the bond, or simply being reminded of it, produces the most fulfilling, enlivening emotions possible in the human heart. Further,

one only understands the things that one tames. ...[People] have no more time to understand anything. They buy things all ready made at the shops. But there is no shop anywhere where one can buy friendship, and so [people] have no friends any more...³

Saint-Exupéry also describes how ties are established and hearts are tamed:

"What must I do, to tame you?" asked the little prince.

(The fox explains that the little prince must come every day, at the same time, and that the fox will begin to look forward to his arrival.)

"If, for example, you come at four o'clock in the afternoon, then at three o'clock I shall begin to be happy. I shall feel happier and happier as the hour advances. At four o'clock, I shall already be worrying and jumping about. I shall show you how happy I am!... One must observe the proper rites..."

"What is a rite?" asked the little prince.

"Those also are actions too often neglected," said the fox. "They are what make one day different from other days, one hour from other hours. ..."

So the little prince tamed the fox.⁴

By gratifying our expectations over time, we gradually learn to trust that "other." Trust is, then, the tie of attachment.

Time is an important element here, not so much linear time as the expected fulfillment of cycles. Rituals are the means for establishing ties, as pointed out by Saint-Exupéry. They are interruptions of routine, but they occur on a special, anticipated cycle of their own. It is these special cycles that must be cultivated and never violated.

One other aspect of time which is very important is its passage. The fox explains to the little prince that it is the time wasted for his love that makes his love so important.⁵ In other words, attachment cannot be rushed. It must be savored.

A last quality of attachment that Saint-Exupéry mentions is responsibility. "You become responsible, forever," the fox tells the little prince, "for what you have tamed."⁶ Once a tie is established, one must not violate the trust of the other. This responsibility extends to sacrificing oneself to preserve the other, just as the little prince ultimately dies in order to return to his rose.

Objects cannot respond to one's attentions in quite the same way as people or animals, but I think we can become attached to them, too.⁷ We use the same coffee mug or pen for a long time; we are inexpressibly hurt if they are broken or lost. A piece of jewelry is cherished for the memories of the special person or occasion it evokes. The gardener is particularly proud of his salad, made of the vegetables he cultivated and nurtured. Indeed, our lives become richer when we allow ourselves to become attached to all the objects we come in contact with. There is of course greater potential for loss and pain, but Saint-Exupéry points out that that is what makes us most human. Accepting responsibility for these objects becomes a rewarding commitment rather than a burdensome chore.

Similarly, we can become just as devoted to our built environment. In fact, I think this is what distinguishes "places" from "spaces." At first a place is important simply as a setting for animate relationships, but eventually we become attached to the place itself. For instance, the place where the little prince and the fox meet, that little hillock with a tree, becomes inseparable from their relationship. To begin to meet in a new setting would redefine their relationship, since their rituals must be modified, so that eventually the new space would also become a place, a space with meaning.

Barbara Brown and Douglas Perkins offer two relevant definitions of place:

Place...means permanence, security, nourishment, a center or organizing principle. ...[There is a] reciprocal relationship between individuals and place, an interlocking system in which the people and place define one another.⁸

Place is seen as a centre of felt value, incarnating the experience and aspirations of people. Thus it is not only an arena for everyday life...[it also] provides *meaning* to that life. To be attached to a place is seen as a fundamental human need and, particularly as home, as the foundation of our selves and our identities. Places are thus conceived as profound centres of human existence.⁹

This relationship is clearest when an object or person feels "at home" or "out of place." Most everyone has experienced the discomfort of moving, when a new home for each possession must be determined before we feel comfortable and "moved in." My husband only recently, after one year, said he felt at home in our house: he needed to experience an entire year's cycle of both nature and holidays to feel at home with our new setting for annual rites such as leaf-raking and setting up the Christmas tree. When separation from our accustomed place is brought about involuntarily by destruction or dislocation, we feel personally violated.

Brown and Perkins mention an alternative view, where human experience is thought to be separable from experience and, "as distinct and objective observers of settings,

humans engage in rational economic analyses of places, are able to specify the costs and benefits of bonds to places, and are willing to trade off one place for another when the benefits dictate." They found, however, that "the [theory of attachment] is more in keeping with accounts of individuals experiencing severe disruptions in place."¹⁰

Just as it is critical for us to understand people and to "see them with our hearts," we must similarly commit ourselves to place. When we experience place with as much care, awareness, and responsibility as the little prince devotes to his fox, we can begin to dwell in the sense that Heidegger made so famous.

I hope I have explained how we become attached to a special person, object, or place, and how important it is that we form these attachments. It is not hard for most people to identify with their immediate surroundings. It is much harder for Americans, though, to extend these feelings of attachment to larger realms, such as their communities. After defining community for the purpose of this paper, I would like to examine the forces that compel us to avoid commitment to community, and to explain just why I feel it is critical that we battle these forces.

Saint-Exupéry might define community as the group of people, objects and places with whom we establish ties. The focus here is our local community; other communities such as professional networks and Internet of course exist, but their rituals take place in a stunted sense of space. The physical community, in contrast, provides infinite settings for all the rituals of our lives, with all the different kinds of people we form attachments with.¹¹

Joel Garreau in *Edge City* talks about our increasing forsaking of physical communities for either isolation or participation in indirect communities:

'Community' today is different from 'government,' 'shadow government,' or 'neighborhood.' It is entirely voluntary and thus fragile. If you don't like the ties that bind you to others--for even the most ephemeral or transitory or stupid reasons--you can and may leave. ...In America, the most highly mobile society in history, people reach out in a myriad of directions for work and play. ...It may seem silly to see...references to 'the intelligence community'...or 'the journalism community.' But these turn out to be the real bands of brothers.¹²

Garreau seems to take the ideal of mobility for granted, however, as something that is overwhelmingly important for people. He assumes that committing oneself to place is automatically stifling. My personal experience, and that of people I have interviewed, however, does not substantiate this "all or nothing" view. We can become attached to place despite knowing we must someday leave it. Sociologist David Hummon points out that, despite increasing mobility, ties to neighbors and neighborhoods continue to be important.¹³

I think our reluctance to form attachments to our local

community has several sources. First, we fear the pain of separation, and, second, we fear our neighbors will not reciprocate our efforts. Third, there is a certain thrill and freedom in not obeying communal rules, in not being responsible.

In response, Saint-Exupéry explains that the pain that results from separation is not something to be avoided. Instead, the sorrow of separation makes us live even more intensely. As the hour of the little prince's departure draws near, the fox tells the little prince he will cry.

"It is your own fault," said the little prince. "I never wished you any sort of harm; but you wanted me to tame you..."

"Yes, that is so," said the fox.

"Then it has done you no good at all!"

"It has done me good," said the fox, "because of the color of the wheat fields, [which will remind me of your golden hair.] And I shall love to listen to the wind in the wheat..."¹⁴

We also fear that our efforts to make attachments will not be reciprocated. In the end, however, we cannot wait for others to tame us. We must be willing to take the first steps, to invest the time and love. As Saint-Exupéry points out, eventually people and place will respond. In fact, it is the investment of time, the investment of repeatedly reaching out before trust is established, that makes the eventual bond meaningful.

A last source of opposition is our own stubbornness. There is a certain thrill in flaunting communal rules, such as traffic regulations or the Golden Rule. By showing others that we do not depend on them, we assert our independence. We are rude to others simply because we do not expect any more from them. It is easier not to cultivate friendships--not to chat with the cashier, for example--although I suspect these lost opportunities hurt some inner part of our souls as we lose just a little self-respect.

It is actually people who are most exposed to uncaring environments who have the most to gain from pursuing attachment. It takes plenty of work and time, but the rewards--fulfillment, identity, and understanding--are great. One suggestion is to focus on the small and immediate opportunities for attachment, and then work steadily on expanding one's realm.

As designers, we can work to create environments that encourage incidental meetings, dalliance, and rich visual input as the setting for future rituals. It helps enormously to be thoroughly familiar with a locale--hopefully living there

oneself for a substantial time--to become familiar with the intricacies of the inhabitants' lives and to know which seemingly inconsequential details are really vital and are cherished by others.

To conclude, there is a world of friends waiting to tame us, if only we learn to see them and reach out to them. This includes all the places we inhabit. Saint-Exupéry suggests we look for them with our hearts, not our eyes.

And the little prince went [to look at the rose garden.]

"You are not at all like my rose," he said. "As yet you are nothing. No one has tamed you, and you have tamed no one. ... You are beautiful, but you are empty," he went on. "One could not die for you. To be sure, an ordinary passerby would think my rose looked just like you. ... But [to me] she is more important than all the hundreds of you other roses: because it is she that I have watered [and cared for.]"¹⁵

NOTES

- ¹ Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, trans. Katherine Woods, *The Little Prince* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), pp.80-83.
- ² *Ibid.*, p.87.
- ³ *Ibid.*, pp.83-84.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.84-86.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p.87.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p.88.
- ⁷ Russell W. Belk, in his article, "Attachment to Possessions," in Irwin Altman and Setha M. Low, eds., *Place Attachment* (New York: Plenum Press, 1992), pp.37-62, suggests that bonding with objects is a way to extend ourselves or a way to make the objects part of us.
- ⁸ T. Cochrane, "People, Place and Folklore: An Isle Royale Case Study," *Western Folklore* v.46, pp.7 and 11, quoted by Barbara Brown and Douglas D. Perkins, "Disruptions in Place Attachment," *Place Attachment*, op. cit., p.281.
- ⁹ J. Eyles, "The Geography of Everyday Life," in D. Gregory and R. Walford, eds., *Horizons in Human Geography* (Totowa N.J.: Barnes & Noble, 1989), p.109, quoted by Barbara Brown and Douglas D. Perkins, op. cit., p.281.
- ¹⁰ Barbara Brown and Douglas D. Perkins, op. cit., p.283.
- ¹¹ See, for instance, Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), where the city has infinite meanings and readings, revealing the author's fundamental attachment to his community.
- ¹² Joel Garreau, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), pp.278-279.
- ¹³ Donald M. Hummon, "Community Attachment: Local Sentiment and Sense of Place," in Irwin Altman and Setha M. Low, op. cit., pp.253-278.
- ¹⁴ Saint-Exupéry, op. cit., pp.83-84.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.86-87.