

# Psychological Concepts: An International Historical Perspective

## URBAN ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION: A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

During the last three decades, environmental education (EE) research has had some success in identifying factors affecting people's environmental understanding and personal behaviour. However, much EE has been targeted at school children, tending to focus on the natural environment, at the expense of urban environments in which much of the world's people live. This paper identifies the opportunity to integrate environmental psychology and community psychology into an empowerment-oriented model of urban adult EE. Many urban environmental issues reflect residents' limited discretion over local development decisions which can damage their sense of urban amenity and sense of community.

Reflecting on environmental psychology principles could enable residents to identify how their sense of environmental aesthetics, preferences, place, and privacy, are all affected by invasive changes to their local built environment. Exploring community psychology approaches could assist residents to identify the symbols and shared history reflected in their built environment that contribute to their sense of place, identity, meaning, and, ultimately, their sense of community.

Equipped with an understanding of environmental psychology and community psychology concepts, residents would be better able to argue their case in a technical language currently used by developers and bureaucrats to limit meaningful grassroots participation in urban development. Residents could be similarly encouraged to develop skills and confidence in identifying power relationships underlying their concerns, and engaging in personal and collective advocacy.

Keywords: environmental education; empowerment; sense of community; urban amenity

### INTRODUCTION

In some quarters, environmental education (EE) has been criticized for its political conservatism and focus on school children (Robottom & Hart, 1993) and the natural environment (Weintraub, 1995). It has served to raise awareness of environmental issues, but many of the solutions fostered are in terms of lifestyle changes – recycling, etc (Geller, Winett & Everett, 1982; Hines, Hungerford & Tomera, 1986/87; Learning, Dwyer, Porter, & Cobern, 1993; Sin, Hungerford, & Tomera, 1985/86) – rather than having an impact on substantive political level reforms.

While EE currently is largely absent from the debate on urban environments, it has the potential to play an important role in assisting residents to reflect and act on the importance of the physical aspects of their local neighbourhood to their personal and collective sense of safety and well-being (Baba & Austin, 1989), leading, ultimately, their participation in their local community (Arias, 1996; Perkins, Brown, & Taylor, 1996). It will be argued that EE can be an instrumental force in enabling residents to develop skills and confidence in personal and collective advocacy on urban amenity and heritage.

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