

# Feeling metropolitan: A framework for place attachment in metropolitan regions

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## Abstract

Place attachment involves cognitive and emotional elements that connect individuals and groups to specific places. While extensively studied, its expression at the metropolitan scale remains underexplored. This article addresses that gap by introducing the concept of spatial consciousness – comprising phenomenal, representational and intentional dimensions – as a key element of metropolitan attachment. Building on this concept, I propose an analytical framework with three core components of metropolitan place attachment: mental image, symbols and collective action. The framework is applied through a qualitative study of the Urban Master Plan for the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona (2011–2023), the first metropolitan plan in the region to incorporate citizen participation. Urban plans organise space and establish centralities and connections, while participatory mechanisms in metropolitan planning offer inhabitants opportunities to reflect on their relationship with the territory and to consider the metropolitan region as a coherent whole. By studying the observations of citizens and representatives of civil society in the process of citizen participation, as well as the views of the team responsible for the urban plan, I identify the components of metropolitan attachment. My findings suggest that such attachment in Barcelona is relatively weak among citizens and primarily shaped by cognitive elements. This study contributes to the literature on place attachment by highlighting the role of spatial consciousness in shaping attachment at the metropolitan scale.

## Keywords

built environment, citizen participation, community, metropolitan governance, place attachment, planning, policy

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## 摘要

地方依恋包括将个人和群体与特定地方联系起来的认知和情感元素。尽管“地方依恋”这一概念已被广泛研究，但其在大都市尺度上的表现仍有待深入探讨。本文引入空间意识概念（包括现象、表征和意向维度），将其作为都市依恋的关键要素，以填补上述研究空缺。基于这一概念，本文提出了一个分析框架，其中包含都市地方依恋的三个核心组成部分：心理意象、符号和集体行动。本文通过对巴塞罗那大都会区城市总体规划（2011–2023 年）进行定性研究，对该框架进行应用。该规划是该地区第一个纳入公民参与的大都市规划。城市规划对空间进行组织，确立核心区域与连接网络；而大都市规划中的参与机制则为居民提供了契机，去反思自身与其所在地域的关系，并将大都市区域视为一个有机整体。通过研究公民参与过程中公民和民间社会代表的意见，以及城市规划负责团队的观点，本文梳理出都市依恋的构成要素。本文的研究结果表明，巴塞罗那市民的这种依恋感相对较弱，并且主要受认知因素的影响。本文强调了空间意识在塑造大都市依恋方面的作用，为地方依恋相关研究做出了贡献。

## 关键词

建成环境、公民参与、社区、大都市治理、地方依恋、规划、政策

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## Introduction

In his seminal text *The Image of the City*, Lynch (1960) highlighted the importance of considering not only the city as a thing in itself but also how the city is perceived by its inhabitants. He was one of the first scholars to argue that physical space plays a social role, providing groups with ‘raw material for the symbols and collective memories’ (Lynch, 1960: 5). The literature on place attachment is extensive, primarily emerging from the fields of environmental psychology, geography, sociology and urban planning studies. It concurs that place attachment is a complex process including both cognitive and emotional elements, that is, meanings and feelings that connect people and spaces (Lewicka, 2011; Manzo and Devine-Wright, 2020).

Research on place attachment has primarily focused on different scales, such as neighbourhoods and cities (Hernández et al., 2020). However, there is limited research analysing the characteristics of place attachment in metropolitan regions. In this regard,

Lynch (1960: 13) stated: ‘We are rapidly building a new functional unit, the metropolitan region, but we have yet to grasp that this unit, too, should have its corresponding image’. More than 60 years later, people still identify a city with its streets, buildings and monuments, and feel attached to it. However, do people recognise metropolitan regions – spaces characterised by amorphous limits – and feel connected to them?

We explore the concept of attachment in a metropolitan region through the elaboration of the Urban Master Plan (2011–2023) of the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona. Urban plans are used to create a metropolitan image by organising space and establishing centralities and connections. Since the 1990s, the process of elaborating urban plans in Western countries has progressively included citizen participation to involve views other than those of the city’s planners in shaping the future image of the city (Healey, 2006). Experiences linked to citizen participation at the metropolitan scale are limited. More institutionalised systems of

citizen participation are found in the French *métropoles* (through a permanent consultative council), while there are some experiences in Helsinki and Montréal (for the design of the master plan), London (a youth council) and Greater Manchester (specific consultations) (Kuokkanen, 2016; Roy-Baillargeon, 2017). I argue that participatory mechanisms in metropolitan planning allow inhabitants to consider metropolitan regions and to reflect on their experiences with the territory, which can foster place attachment over time.

The rest of this study is organised as follows. The next section presents the review of the literature in urban studies that has addressed the topic of place attachment in metropolitan regions. The third section presents the research methodology and data. The fourth section analyses the contributions of citizens and representatives of civil society in the process of citizen participation, as well as the views of the team responsible for the urban plan. The final section reflects on the limits and contributions of the article and explains how it expands our understanding of place attachment in relation to the existing literature.

## Literature review

What connects someone to a place? This general and multidimensional question has led to extensive research across many fields. Nelson et al. (2020) attempted to elucidate the concepts of a sense of place, place attachment, place meaning, place identity and place dependence, which are usually used synonymously. Among these, place attachment has been the most commonly studied in recent years, with extensive research in the field of environmental psychology, geography, sociology and urban planning studies. Scholars have consistently sought to define and develop analytical frameworks to conceptualise the complex bond between

individuals and their significant places (see the reviews of Lewicka, 2011; Manzo and Devine-Wright, 2020; Smith, 2018). The varied application of qualitative and quantitative evaluation and measurement procedures to grasp this complexity remains a recurring debate in the literature (Hernández et al., 2020).

Scannell and Gifford (2010) presented the tripartite model to grasp the multidimensional nature of attachment, encompassing affective (emotional bonds), cognitive (meanings to the place) and behavioural components (action related). According to these authors, place attachment involves three key dimensions: the actor (who is attached?), the psychological process (how do people become attached?) and the object of the attachment (what is the attachment to?) (Scannell and Gifford, 2010: 2). The authors argue that perhaps the most important dimension of place attachment is the place itself. The place dimension is divided into two levels: social and physical place attachment. In this person–place–process (PPP) framework, place attachment is defined as ‘a bond between an individual or group and a place that can vary in terms of spatial level, degree of specificity, and social or physical features of the place, and is manifested through affective, cognitive, and behavioural psychological processes’ (Scannell and Gifford, 2010: 5).

The research on the place in the place attachment literature has traditionally focused on neighbourhoods or cities, where direct physical and social interactions are more pronounced (Hidalgo and Hernández, 2001; Jean, 2016). However, we live in an urban society where the ‘daily ballet’ (Seamon, 2020), that is, the different activities we do in our daily life and their relationship with the place in which we do them, occurs in a larger space than the neighbourhood or the city. My interest resides in analysing the cognitive and emotional elements

that characterise place attachment in metropolitan regions, which are blurred spaces. Indeed, the fragmented and polycentric nature of metropolitan regions often challenges the creation of shared identities. For this reason, research in urban studies has primarily examined place attachment through a territorial-scalar lens, emphasising governance as a key factor (Harrison and Hoyler, 2014). In contrast, the environmental psychology literature on place attachment often neglects the political and institutional contexts in which these relationships unfold (Lewicka, 2011).

My review of the place attachment literature in the field of urban studies follows the PPP perspective. First, similar to the literature in environmental psychology (Lewicka, 2011), more articles focus on the person dimension than on the other two dimensions. This first strand of literature explores metropolitan attachment through a political conception of the metropolis, mainly focusing on governance-related issues. Several studies analyse the individual and contextual variables that influence public opinion on metropolitan governance (see the special issue in the *Journal of Urban Affairs* edited by Lidström and Schaap, 2018; also Strebel, 2022). These studies used citizen surveys conducted mainly in European countries to explore the political aspects of what it means to be a metropolitan citizen. Specifically, the edited volume analyses citizens' support for metropolitan institutions and the factors that influence their views on metropolitan governance. For example, Eklund (2018) showed that participants in two Swedish city regions who felt mostly at home in their municipalities did not support metropolitan reforms. According to Strebel and Kübler (2021), ideology (left wing or right wing) and place attachment influence citizens' support for institutionalised forms of metropolitan governance. They used data from a population-based survey in eight West

European metropolitan areas in France, Germany, Switzerland and the UK to show that citizens' support for vertical or horizontal reforms is a function of their behavioural and emotional connection to the 'local'. In other words, they analysed the importance of place attachment at the local scale to explain citizens' attitudes towards local autonomy and interlocal cooperation (Strebel and Kübler, 2021).

Other research focused on the individual characteristics of the 'metropolitan citizen' explores the influence of commuting and spatial mobility (Kübler, 2018; Lidström, 2013; Wicki et al., 2019). According to research in Swedish and Swiss cities, cross-jurisdictional mobility for multiple purposes (daily commuting, shopping and residential relocation) increases the awareness of problems in other municipalities in the region. Citizens in metropolitan regions may also have common needs in relation to transportation, or they may own property in neighbouring municipalities. According to these authors, there might be 'consciousness' of belonging to a metropolitan region based on their everyday practices. In Polish cities, this relationship was also found among suburban citizens, who showed higher metropolitan mobility than core city inhabitants (Lackowska and Miłucha, 2018). Based on the case of Germany, Walter-Rogg (2018) showed that residents knew little about the regional planning association in Greater Stuttgart. However, she found that many residents felt attached to the metropolitan level because they were satisfied with the services provided by the institution.

Regarding the behavioural dimension, a second strand of the literature relates place attachment to the exercise and mobilisation of political claims. Some scholars (García, 2006; Purcell, 2003) sustain the existence of urban citizenship, urban and regional forms of citizenship or even metropolitan citizenship or 'metrozenship' (Yiftachel, 2015).

According to them, the traditional notion of citizenship associated with the nation-state is in crisis amid emerging forms and practices of citizenship. According to Purcell (2003: 573), citizenship is rescaled, territorialised and reorientated towards other scales, and new citizenship forms are being pursued by social movements, mostly in neighbourhoods, cities and urban regions. According to Yiftachel (2015: 734), ‘Metropolitan regions are, gradually, forming a living and political space, where material (rather than formal or legal) “citizenship” is being attained through residence, investment, work, invasions and struggles’. From this perspective, place attachment is linked to political struggles that occur around issues such as economic development, social cohesion and sustainability. In their special issue editorial, Harrison and Hoyler (2014: 2262) also consider that the capacity of grassroots movements to form their own alliances at a city–region scale is one of the key questions for future research in metropolitan governance. However, little empirical research has been conducted to analyse whether social mobilisation occurs at the metropolitan scale (meaning that social mobilisation is scaled up) or at the municipal and neighbourhood levels *within* a metropolitan region.

Finally, the third dimension of the place attachment framework relates to the place itself, its social and natural characteristics. Several studies, mainly related to urban planning and geography, analyse symbols, narratives and spatial imaginaries as they provide shared references that connect individuals to a larger spatial identity (Harrison et al., 2020; Healey, 2006; Paasi, 2003, 2013). This attachment has been conceptualised as spatial consciousness, which is articulated through three distinct but interrelated perspectives: phenomenal, representational and intentional (Galland and Grønning, 2019: 1–2). Briefly, phenomenal organisation and content is related to the experience of a

particular phenomenon. This experience is grounded in perception, which is inherently connected to both sensory and cognitive faculties. A vivid experience comes along with a mental reconstruction, where a mental image of the phenomenon is formed (i.e. the metropolitan region). Representational organisation and content are linked to the capacity for identification, that is, the ability to recognise a pattern as a phenomenon and to distinguish it from others. This involves tangibility, imagination and the potential to represent and transfer the experience of a phenomenon into an image (i.e. symbols associated to a metropolitan region). Intentional organisation and content are concerned with politics and collective action. That means engaging with patterns that can be rearranged according to a specific spatial order (i.e. an urban plan).

In summary, place attachment to a metropolitan region is a complex, multidimensional process in which emotional and cognitive bonds emerge (see Table 1). Given the intricate nature of place attachment, especially in metropolitan contexts, my research explores the following questions: what are the components of metropolitan spatial consciousness; and how do individuals articulate their attachment to metropolitan spaces through cognitive and emotional dimensions?

Episodes of planning activity provide a framework for the emergence and development of spatial consciousness (Healey, 2006). Incorporating citizen input into urban planning through workshops, debates and public consultations allows individuals to reflect on their daily experiences, articulate collective needs and shape shared imaginaries of the metropolitan region. I argue that the process of designing a metropolitan plan – particularly through participatory mechanisms – creates opportunities to build metropolitan spatial consciousness and, in the long term, fosters place attachment. The

**Table 1.** The PPP framework in urban studies.

Dimension	Concept	Explanation	Methods used
PERSON	Political attitudes	Individuals' perceptions, opinions and orientations towards political phenomena	Surveys
PROCESS	Political mobilisations and claims	Collective expressions of demands, or actions in the public sphere	Qualitative analysis, discourse analysis
PLACE	Spatial consciousness	The awareness and use of space as socially and politically meaningful	Urban analysis, spatial ethnography
	→ Phenomenal (mental image)	How individuals perceive and mentally map spatial environments	Cognitive mapping
	→ Representational (symbols)	How space is symbolised and invested with meaning in politics and culture	Semiotic or narrative analysis, visual elicitation
	→ Intentional (collective action)	How groups actively create or contest space through coordinated political acts	Observations, mapping protest dynamics

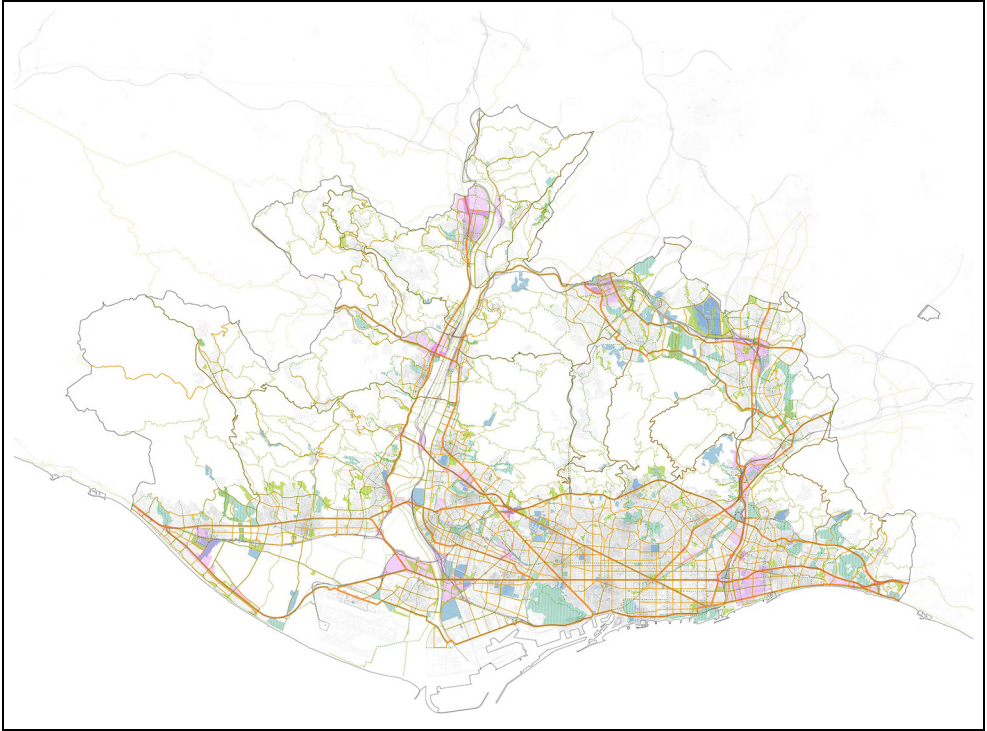
Source: Author's own elaboration.

development of Barcelona's Urban Master Plan (UMP, 2011–2023) serves as an example for examining conceptions of place attachment.

## Data and methods

The Metropolitan Area of Barcelona (MAB) was created by law from the Parliament of Catalonia in 2010 and was constituted after the local elections in May 2011. It is an indirectly elected, second-tier local government with competencies in urbanism, mobility and water and sewage management. The MAB has other minor responsibilities in terms of economic development, social cohesion, international relationships and cooperation. The institution is mainly funded by transfers from the municipalities, secondarily by fees associated with services and marginally by taxes. The metropolitan council consists of 90 members: 36 mayors and a variable number of councillors determined by the municipal population. Thus, the political relationships of metropolitan-area citizens are shaped and expressed through local elections. Barcelona's mayor has held leadership in this system since 2011.

I selected the case of Barcelona for several reasons. First, it is the only metropolitan government in Spain, offering a unique governance model that is essential for studying metropolitan attachment. Second, the MAB holds exclusive and binding responsibilities for urban planning at the metropolitan level, making its policies and strategies particularly relevant for this study. Third, the MAB developed an ambitious citizen participation programme during the creation of the UMP, highlighting its commitment to engaging residents in the planning process. Fourth, Barcelona's metropolitan region shares governance models and planning challenges with other European metropolises. Without direct elections for a metropolitan mayor or assembly, legitimacy is rooted at the municipal level, making these findings relevant to other metropolitan contexts. Lastly, Barcelona is an excellent case study due to its diversity in population size, socioeconomic status, urbanism, geographic characteristics and legal status across its 36-member municipalities. The UMP documents recognise all territorial differences, outlining the growth model for this territory as a 'metropolis of cities'.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the plan portrays



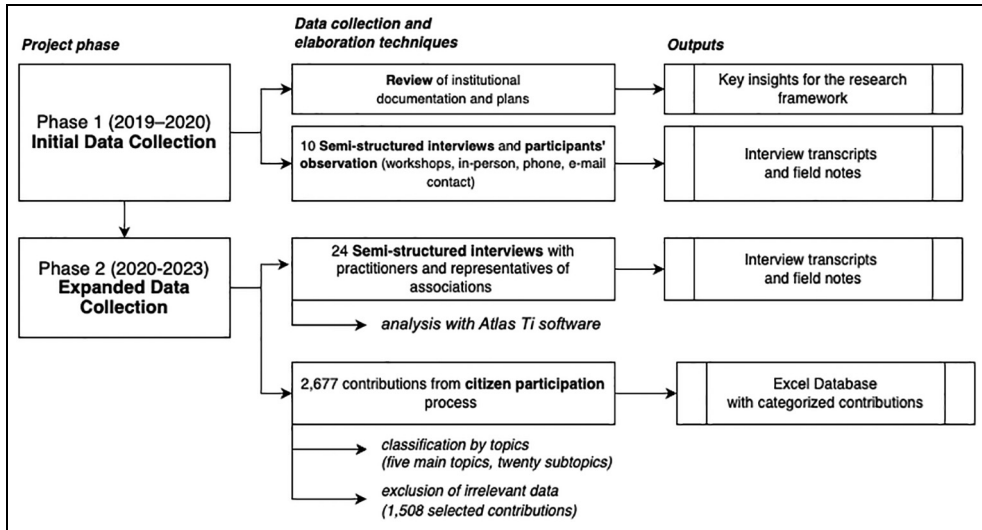
**Figure 1.** The Urban Master Plan of the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona (social and urban infrastructure). Source: AMB (Àrea Metropolitana de Barcelona).

the territory as a cohesive entity with inter-connected metropolitan focal points. Analysing the case of Barcelona provides an excellent opportunity to understand the components of metropolitan attachment in a fragmented territory.

The UMP was obtained from the sum of three layers. First, existing local and metropolitan central spaces are understood as points or areas that generate and attract flows of people for their cultural interests or the concentration of services and professional, leisure and consumption activities. Second, the plan identifies green and blue infrastructures formed by a system of axes and green spaces that connect the large natural spaces shared between different municipalities (beaches, rivers, mountains and forests). Finally, the territory is linked by a

system of avenues and metropolitan streets, which allows the structuring of the urban territory, structuring the fabrics, defining the public space and enabling movement and social relations (see Figure 1).

The MAB exclusively oversees the UMP, defining urban conditions for the coordinated development of 36 municipalities and guiding future urban actions to implement its provisions and achieve objectives. The planning process evolved in four phases: municipal interviews (2011–2013), knowledge gathering through workshops and publications (2013–2015), Advance Plan approval and exhibition (2016–2019) and public consultation (2019–2023). On 21 March 2023, the Metropolitan Council formally approved the UMP. Between September 2019 and January 2020, individual citizens and civil society



**Figure 2.** Data flow chart.  
Source: Author's own elaboration.

representatives had the opportunity to comment on the Advance Plan and to suggest improvements. What were their reactions towards the plan? Did the proposal lead to debates around the metropolitan attachment? To answer these questions, this study conducted a documentary analysis of institutional documentation and plans, contributions from the citizen participation process and 34 semi-structured in-depth interviews in a two-phase project (see Figure 2).

The team responsible for the UMP provided access to all contributions submitted during the participatory process from three main sources: citizens' debates, sessions with interest groups and written contributions to the Advance Plan at the end of the comment period. In total, 1404 contributions were collected from participatory spaces. Moreover, 95 reports were received with comments on the Advance Plan, making a total of 2677 contributions (Àrea Metropolitana de Barcelona (AMB), 2023). After cleaning the database, there were 1508 comments.<sup>2</sup> The team organised the comments into the 40

most recurrent topics. Based on this classification, we grouped the comments into five main topics, which encompass a total of 40 subtopics: mobility, green and blue infrastructure, social cohesion and the economy, climate change and metropolitan governance. A final 'other suggestions' grouping included other varied aspects.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, interviews were held with the team responsible for the UMP and its programme of citizen participation, metropolitan and local councillors, as well as representatives of civil society, which included organisations with a broad scope (like the Association for Strategic Planning of Barcelona) and single-issue organisations (economic development, employers and industry, environment, housing, mobility).<sup>4</sup> The questions focused on metropolitan governance and the potential of the UMP to strengthen metropolitan attachment. Some of the questions were: what is your assessment of the UMP development process? Do you think the UMP provides an opportunity to foster metropolitan attachment? Why or



**Table 2.** Participatory spaces and type of actor.

	Individual citizens (%)	Representatives of civil society (%)	Municipalities (%)	Private sector (%)	Research institutions (%)
Citizen debates	47	35	14	4	—
Interest-group debates	—	21	38.5	18.5	22
Period of comments	6	43	45	4	2

Source: Author's own elaboration with data from the MAB.

why not? What do you think are the enablers and obstacles to building metropolitan attachment? Do you think that there are metropolitan symbols? If so, which ones?

## Results

The MAB designed a broad participatory process to discuss the Advance Plan, which was addressed to specialists and the general public. Between September 2019 and January 2020, the MAB organised eight citizen debates and 12 sessions with interest groups (professional associations, business associations, non-governmental organisations, firms, research institutes, trade unions, etc.) and collected written contributions to the Advance Plan. In total, there were 1047 participants in all the sessions. As shown in Table 2, individuals were invited to participate in citizens' debates but were absent in the thematic sessions with interest groups and residuals in the comment period. In contrast, representatives from municipalities participated mainly in interest-group debates and contributed significantly to the comment period. Representatives of civil society were active in the three participatory spaces, while the private sector and research centres mainly participated in thematic debates.

In the context of citizen debates, mobility and social cohesion were the most common items, followed by green and blue infrastructure. In interest-group debates, issues of social cohesion and economic development

were the most addressed, followed by climate change and mobility. As for the suggestions received during the comment period, the topics of green and blue infrastructure and mobility were referred to the most. Table 3 summarises the importance of each topic in the three participatory spaces.

In this article, I examine the content of proposals to determine whether individuals and representatives of civil society exhibit metropolitan attachment, and if so, what its characteristics are. The analysis is structured around the three interrelated dimensions of spatial consciousness: mental image, symbols and collective action (see Table 4).

The interviews provide additional insights into the presence or absence of metropolitan attachment. I have included quotations that are particularly relevant to the study of place attachment.

### *The mental image of the metropolitan region*

One dimension of spatial consciousness relates to how inhabitants experience the territory and form an idea of it. In contemporary metropolitan regions, mobility is a key element, and it is also a central aspect of the UMP. More access to public transportation was brought up in the citizens' debates and written comments on the Advance Plan. In citizen debates, observations are mainly localised, indicating the need for more buses and trains in specific locations. In contrast, the proposals sent in the comment period

**Table 3.** Topic of participatory spaces.

	Mobility (%)	Green and blue infrastructure (%)	Social cohesion and the economy (%)	Climate change (%)	Metropolitan governance (%)	Other (%)
Citizen debates	29.5	21.4	28.9	9.7	7.2	3.7
Interest-group debates	19.9	10.7	29	21.8	10.9	7.7
Period of comments	22.7	22.8	18.3	11.5	15.4	9.3

Source: Author's own elaboration with data from the MAB.

refer more to the entire metropolitan area. For instance, one key idea is to improve road and rail connections between municipalities by circumventing the city of Barcelona. Participants agreed that such development would enhance mobility through public transport across municipalities. Indeed, the issue of sustainable mobility across the metropolitan area is a recurrent topic. In the citizen debate the topic is more localised (e.g. building a bike line between two municipalities), while in the comments the idea is more generic (measures across municipalities to enhance the use of public transport and private non-polluting vehicles).

The design of the mobility network influences the mental image of the place. The mode of transportation used – whether by bus, train, subway, car or bike – shapes the journey and influences one's connection to the place. Both the citizen debates and written comments share the idea that the infrastructure associated with mobility is viewed as a frontier in the metropolitan area and an obstacle to accessibility. Specific highways and railroads were depicted as physical barriers for citizens. The proposal of metropolitan avenues for the UMP is seen as a way to minimise these obstacles and to connect the different parts of the territory together, although questions about implementation remain.

Interviewees from the UMP team shared this idea. The UMP highlights the importance of improving the transportation infrastructure to facilitate mobility between different municipalities. According to the interviewees, an efficient transportation network not only improves residents' quality of life but also promotes interconnection between communities, fostering social bonds and broader place attachment. Moreover, metropolitan avenues and paths should connect different municipalities and provide a metropolitan image shared by citizens. As one team member expresses:

**Table 4.** Components of place attachment in metropolitan regions.

Mental image	Perceptions and mapping of metropolitan spatial environments
Symbols	Spaces that have meaning for individuals
Collective action	Topics central to political debates that are subject to contestation

Source: Author's own elaboration.

If the scope we are referring to is not clearly defined, it becomes difficult to establish an identification. In this sense, the UMP clarifies this scope by mapping it out and identifying key elements, such as metropolitan avenues and major connectors.

### *Providing symbols through green and blue infrastructure*

The second dimension of spatial consciousness is representational or identity based. In this case, researchers differentiate between the physical and social dimensions of attachment. According to the practitioners from the UMP, this plan is a tool for creating physical spaces that hold meaning and utility for metropolitan residents. The UMP recognises the importance of metropolitan paths, centralities and natural corridors as essential elements that can help establish a common attachment. These spaces serve as physical reference points and places where citizens can interact, share experiences and develop a sense of community beyond local boundaries. For team members (the majority of whom are urbanists and architects), emblematic urban projects and distinctive architecture can also play important roles in forming a metropolitan attachment. The development of unique infrastructure and iconic buildings not only serves as a visual landmark but also symbolises the values and aspirations of the metropolis, contributing to a common attachment.

Nearly half of the territory of Barcelona's metropolitan area is urbanised, but it also includes green, forest and fluvial zones. Lynch (1960) depicted these elements as

potential symbols for place attachment. In Barcelona, the metropolitan area is structured around Collserola, a forestland that covers 30 km<sup>2</sup> and borders four municipalities, including the city of Barcelona. Its profile is visible from all the municipalities, making it dominant to the view of the metropolitan area. The analysis of debates from individuals and representatives of civil society showed a general concern for the preservation of green and blue infrastructure. Most comments asked for the protection of green and forest spaces, including Collserola. However, the symbol of Collserola as the central park of the metropolitan area did not appear in the comments. Moreover, the analysis of citizen debates and comments reveals that people identify symbolic spaces, such as rivers and parks, but these references are always local. In the case of the proposals for the period of comments, they are much more technical, not only in the vocabulary used (e.g. the agroforest mosaic) but also in the type of comments (legal suggestions, technical ideas, etc.). In both participatory spaces, the comments agreed on connecting the different green and blue spaces and creating natural corridors between the municipalities, as well as metropolitan paths for pedestrians. Note, for instance, two comments: 'Connecting the different green spaces is one of the more positive aspects of this plan' and 'We need to overcome the barrier that the Llobregat River represents, on both sides'.

The analysis highlights that people recognise and value green and blue infrastructure, although they do not associate this value with emotion. Indeed, no comment in the sample included the words 'attachment',

‘emotion’ or ‘identity’. When asked why a metropolitan identity is lacking and how the UMP can contribute to metropolitan attachment, members of the UMP team offer various explanations. First, they point to the divide between Barcelona and the surrounding municipalities. As one member explains:

We all feel part of Barcelona’s sphere of influence, but often with a negative connotation. This is why everyone advocates for their own municipality – because there’s a sense of marginalisation relative to Barcelona’s power. The UMP aims to reverse the centre–periphery dynamic.

Second, they highlight the importance of local attachment. People have forged strong ties at the city or neighbourhood level, leaving little room for a broader attachment. This is why the UMP emphasises polycentrism. As one urban planner notes:

Proposing a polycentric metropolis establishes the foundations for a new space of interaction and connection. The ideal of the UMP is to create a common identity – a place where people can identify, feel a sense of belonging, and where this sense of belonging can embrace diverse personal identities.

Another member adds:

Avenues and centralities are distinctive elements already present in the territory, serving as reference points. The Hospital Clínic and Hospital Sant Pau are metropolitan facilities, but they also serve the local community. These two scales are always present in centralities. I envisioned specific physical reference points that address both local and metropolitan concerns.

In this context, a metropolitan councillor comments: ‘The term “metropolitan” is too abstract to establish an emotional connection’. Finally, the head of the UMP team states: ‘Perhaps it’s not necessary to foster a

specific identity, but at least there should be metropolitan consciousness’ (AMB, 2023: 362).

### *Building a political community*

Finally, the third dimension of spatial consciousness is related to agency and political action. Analysis of the proposals shows that some topics cause controversy between individuals and interest groups.

First, the issues of economic and urban growth and their consequences are central to the debate. While most comments argued for the need to develop economic growth, there were two minor opposing comments. Environmental associations and some individual citizens defended the need to decrease urban growth, while the private sector and entrepreneurial organisations argued for the need to enlarge key infrastructure (e.g. the airport and port) and to promote more land for industrial purposes to increase economic growth in the metropolitan area. Similarly, representatives from civil society criticised the length of the UMP elaboration process and its conservative character for opposite reasons. Representatives from associations fostering the economic development of the metropolitan area and its internationalisation criticised the plan for being too restrictive regarding planned urban growth. In contrast, environmental associations held that the plan fosters economic growth without considering the effects of climate change. Some critical comments acknowledged that the UMP does not refer to the concept of a climate emergency and its components. Note the comment from one of the participants: ‘In a scenario of climate change with rising sea levels that will submerge much of the Delta by the end of the 21st century, how are we still planning for more construction?’ This concern about the future and its impact on the UMP is echoed by a representative from an environmental association, who

adds: 'The drought scenarios are very severe and force us to change the way we operate and manage resources'.

Housing and social inequalities are also controversial topics. According to members of the UMP team, the plan aims to decentralise and redistribute wealth to avoid the concentration of resources in areas and ensure more equitable development across the metropolis. This equitable distribution contributes to the perceptions of justice and inclusion, which are crucial for place attachment. When citizens perceive that resources and opportunities are fairly accessible, tensions between areas are reduced and a more cohesive metropolitan community is promoted. The analysis of written comments showed that neither of these concepts appeared. Housing-related comments were more common in citizen debates, including the need to allocate public land to affordable housing. Note the comment from one of the participants: 'What will this plan bring about so that private developers are not the ones in control of housing?' Statements in the comment period also referred to affordable housing and urban regeneration and rehabilitation policies. Representatives from the private sector and entrepreneurial organisations highlighted the need for more housing units connected to a network of public transport systems. In contrast, non-governmental associations defending access to housing argued for more social housing. Interestingly, citizen debates and written comments rarely referred to gender inequalities or multiculturalism.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the issue of tourism is notably absent from the debates, with only two references found in the sample. These omissions may be attributed to the MAB's lack of responsibility in these softer policy areas, which probably explains why the UMP does not address these topics.

Associations related to public transport and the environment are critical of the

current public transportation system in the metropolitan region. They agree that more investment in public transport policies and infrastructure is necessary to achieve more sustainable mobility across metropolitan areas. Additionally, they highlight the inequalities in the accessibility of public transportation between different municipalities, especially between the central city and the others. According to a member of a public transportation association: 'We must address the current imbalance between Barcelona and the other municipalities. It is essential to emphasise the value of the existing polycentric network of cities and avoid the dichotomy between Barcelona and the surrounding areas'.

As the literature review shows, citizens' views on metropolitan governance also affect their place attachment (Lidström and Schaap, 2018). Comments and interventions in the debates strongly emphasised the need for clear governance of the UMP, requesting better inter-administrative and sectoral coordination with existing plans. Many written comments expressed concerns that implementing the UMP would require coordination between public administrations and other public and private agents. They also stressed the need to furnish monitoring indicators for transparency. Moreover, some comments regarding the methodology of the UMP's participatory process highlighted the need for more inclusion and representativeness in debates and more time to debate the content of the UMP.

The issue of legitimacy emerged prominently in the interviews. Members of the UMP team acknowledged the lengthy and complex nature of the planning process, emphasising the ongoing need to balance adjustments and trade-offs. While they underscored the importance of citizen participation, they also expressed concern about limited public engagement, which they attributed to the plan's technical complexity.

The team highlighted their outreach efforts to involve associations and gather feedback, viewing citizen participation as essential to both place attachment and the plan's legitimacy.

The MAB's manager recognised the need to improve communication strategies in order to reach a broader audience and more clearly convey the UMP's relevance to everyday life. He regarded the plan's approval as a milestone in strengthening the institution's legitimacy. According to the UMP team, many citizens perceive the MAB primarily as a technical body focused on service provision and technocratic decision making. One metropolitan councillor defended the institution's low public profile, arguing that its relative invisibility enhances efficiency and helps avoid political conflict. In contrast, representatives of civil society organisations criticised the MAB for a lack of transparency and political accountability. For them, the UMP represents an opportunity to increase the institution's public visibility. Despite these differing perspectives, the extent to which the UMP has contributed to fostering metropolitan attachment remains uncertain.

## Discussion

Paasi (2013: 3) observes that the concept of 'regional identity' remains opaque to researchers, planners and policymakers due to its inherent ambiguity. A similar observation can be made about metropolitan attachment, which also lacks conceptual clarity. This article seeks to address that gap by examining the cognitive and emotional components of metropolitan attachment. While the place attachment literature is well established, it has traditionally focused on smaller spatial scales and the individual ('person') dimension, often overlooking the broader sociopolitical context (Lewicka, 2011). A limitation of this study lies in its intensive

case study approach, which involved an in-depth analysis of a single case rather than a broader comparative study. As such, the findings may not be generalisable to other metropolitan contexts. However, the aim was to conduct a qualitative, exploratory investigation, taking advantage of a unique participatory process – a methodological approach that could be replicated in other metropolitan regions.

Previous research on metropolitan attachment in Barcelona has mainly focused on the person dimension. Vallbé et al. (2018) analysed a 2013 MAB survey on citizens' support for electing a metropolitan mayor and broader metropolitan reform. Findings showed strong local attachment, particularly in small municipalities, while residents of smaller metropolitan cities exhibited weaker metropolitan attachment compared to those in larger communities. However, the survey lacked questions about the social and physical characteristics of the metropolitan area. The authors suggested a qualitative study to better understand what makes a place 'metropolitan' for citizens (Vallbé et al., 2018: 27). Insights from Barcelona's participatory process reveal that citizens weakly articulate metropolitan place attachment, including mental images, symbols and collective action (see Table 5).

The absence of a clear metropolitan image and symbolic references among participants contrasts with the vision of the UMP team, who viewed elements such as metropolitan avenues and connectors as central to fostering metropolitan attachment. However, citizens often struggled to recognise these features – even major landmarks like Collserola Park. Urban planning is abstract and complex for the average citizen; therefore, the plan must be implemented so that they can see the impact of the measures proposed. At the same time, the UMP addresses key future challenges (mobility, climate change, housing), all of which have a metropolitan dimension. In this

**Table 5.** Components of place attachment in the metropolitan area of Barcelona.

Dimension	Definition	Example
Mental image	Perceptions and mapping of metropolitan spatial environments	The shaping of mental images through mobility networks Territorial fragmentation caused by transport infrastructures Weak connectivity between metropolitan avenues and paths
Symbols	Spaces that have meaning for individuals	Local physical reference points Local blue and green infrastructure Local emblematic urban projects and buildings
Collective action	Topics central to political debates that are subject to contestation	Economic growth (Sustainable) urban growth Housing and social inequalities Access to public transport Governance (coordination, transparency, legitimacy and citizen participation)

Source: Author's own elaboration.

context, organisations contributing to the process recognise the importance of the metropolitan scale for public policy, but they do not clearly identify the specific elements of metropolitan spatial consciousness. Moreover, my findings suggest that cognitive components of metropolitan attachment tend to emerge first, while emotional bonds are more difficult to establish. This aligns with previous research that concluded that the metropolitan region did not generate any sense of belonging or emotional bonds among surveyed citizens (Vallbé et al., 2018).

My results contribute to ongoing debates in the place attachment literature, particularly in urban studies. First, I address the existence of multiple place attachments (Hidalgo and Hernández, 2001), especially the coexistence of local and metropolitan attachments. In Barcelona, citizens hold clear attachments to local images, while metropolitan spatial consciousness is less pronounced in the participatory process. Indeed, one of the main mantras of the process of elaboration of the UMP was the idea of a 'metropolis of cities', that is, a metropolitan region composed by different and

singular municipalities but which can also be imagined as a whole. This difficulty in visualising a unified metropolitan image in Barcelona is partly due to the dominant role of the central city, which structures local identities. The size and fragmentation of metropolitan regions, along with the differing attachments of citizens in central cities versus suburban areas, are central issues (Lidström and Schaap, 2018: 4). These questions have been addressed in the existing literature in relation to individuals' political conceptions of metropolitan regions (Kübler, 2018; Strebel and Kübler, 2021; Walter-Rogg, 2018). A key challenge for future research on metropolitan attachment is broadening its comparative focus.

Second, my study confirms that citizens develop their metropolitan spatial consciousness through mobility. As noted, it was the most discussed issue in the citizen debates, emerging as a key component of the metropolitan experience. Lidström (2013) and Lackowska and Mikula (2018) argued that frequent cross-jurisdictional movements for work, leisure and residence contribute to a functional understanding of the metropolitan

space. However, in Barcelona, this does not necessarily translate into an emotional bond, as the metropolitan region may be seen as a place to pass through rather than a space of belonging. For Lidström and Schaap (2018: 3), commuters in metropolitan regions tend to have opinions on metropolitan planning, public transport and environmental policies at a metropolitan scale. While I cannot fully test this idea in Barcelona due to limitations in my data, it presents an important avenue for future research. Transport plans, infrastructure and policies play a crucial role in shaping citizens' experiences of the metropolitan region. Future research could explore how different transportation systems (public/private, individual/collective) impact place attachment in metropolitan regions.

Lastly, my findings engage with the literature on metropolitan governance and citizenship. Unlike Stuttgart (Walter-Rogg, 2018), Barcelona does not have a directly elected metropolitan assembly. Mayors and councilors sit on the metropolitan council as representatives of their municipality, with no electoral campaigns or electoral programmes at a metropolitan scale. Does the direct election of metropolitan representatives enhance place attachment? Is the existence of a metropolitan institution necessary for fostering metropolitan attachment? According to Yiftachel (2015), 'metropolitan citizenship' can arise as a result of political struggles around issues such as sustainability, social cohesion and economic development. My analysis of the UMP participatory process highlights disagreements on economic and urban growth, as well as access to public transport and housing. In contrast, key issues like gender, multi-cultural inequalities and tourism received little attention, as they fall outside the UMP's scope. The mobilisation of citizens around these topics could play a key role in fostering a stronger metropolitan community by encouraging engagement and collective action. In this regard, I share Yiftachel's


(2015: 736) concern about the need to adopt new methods to study urban society.

In conclusion, my study contributes to the literature on place attachment by developing an analytical framework based on the concept of spatial consciousness and showing how urban planning can help foster metropolitan attachment. As challenges such as social inequality, climate change and tourism increasingly manifest at the metropolitan scale, it is essential to further explore the cognitive and social connections that citizens form with these spaces.

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## Notes

1. All the documents of the UPM are accessible at: <https://urbanisme.amb.cat/>.
2. The 2677 contributions were classified in an Excel database. The three types of comments were classified identically by the topic of the contribution (five main topics with 20 subtopics). Only in the database regarding the suggestions of the period of comments is the information sorted by type of actor. In the citizen and interest-group debates, I lacked this information. However, I knew that 82% of the comments from citizen debates came from individual citizens and representatives from civil society, so I assumed that the majority represented these two collectives' views. Differently, I could not include in this qualitative analysis the interest-group debates because almost 40% of the comments came from municipalities. As for the suggestions for the comment period, I excluded the comments from municipalities and research institutions, which account for almost half of the comments. The resultant 1508 comments were classified into five topics and then sorted alphabetically to identify the dominant topics. I used keywords to search for specific concepts, like metropolitan 'citizenship', 'consciousness', 'solidarity' or 'identity'.
3. Mobility refers to all comments related to public transport (train, bus, metro, tramway), intermodality, road systems, transport infrastructure, etc. Green and blue infrastructure includes all the comments referring to geographical elements that structure the metropolitan territory. The social cohesion and the economy category comprises all the comments related to housing, economic development, public facilities and services in the metropolitan area. Climate change refers to all comments about the impact of the climate crisis, renewable energies, circularity, pollution, etc. Finally, metropolitan governance includes comments about citizen

participation, regulations and the methodology of the working groups.

4. The last 11 interviews were held in the framework of the Master Dissertation on Urban Studies by Fabregat (2024), which the author supervised. Interviews lasted between 30 and 75 minutes. They were recorded and transcribed, and then analysed with Atlas Ti software through coding. Content analysis included labelling and organising sections of the data to identify and categorise themes and concepts such as metropolitan 'citizenship', 'consciousness', 'solidarity' and 'identity'. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Interviewees cited in the text provided written consent. The original quotations have been translated into English. This project was approved by the University of Barcelona's Bioethics Commission (Institutional Review Board, IRB00003099).
5. In citizen debates, the participants were 64% male and 36% female. I lack data regarding the cultural origin of participants, but direct observation and comments for interviewees indicate a lack of cultural and ethnic diversity among participants.

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