



“Not the Country of My Heart” Alumni Memories of Grinnell College



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Abstract

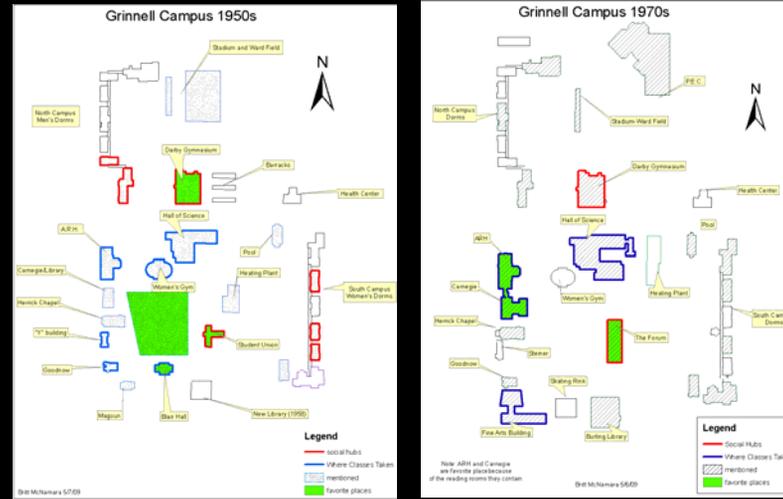
Alumni memories of Grinnell College reveal the importance of social spaces and the centrality of the people at Grinnell to creating a sense of place.

Introduction

The recent building projects on the Grinnell College campus highlight the way in which the physical campus is constantly changing. However, the area that makes-up the core of the campus (central campus, the north campus dorms, and the south campus dorms) has changed little since the 1960s. Place, though, is a lived experience created through the memories of small and large happenings (Tuan 1991: 692), or as one alumnus said, “*you have lots of feelings and memories invested in a place.*” As I asked alumni about the places to which they were most attached, it emerged that the college as a whole is more important than any individual experience or space.

Methods

I interviewed a total of 8 alumni from the Grinnell area, 4 who graduated in the 1950s and 4 from the 1970s. There were more men (5) in my sample than women (3). The interviews lasted from a half hour to an hour and covered basic information, such as major and dorms inhabited, as well as attitudes towards campus.



“The atmosphere on campus, the way people interacted, and the kinds of people who were students, the kinds of people who were faculty members hadn't changed very much so it didn't feel like a totally different place.”

Results

- The 1950s (see map above left):
- *Favorite places: Student Union (2 people), center campus, Darby, and Blair Hall.
 - *Dorms, important socially but not named as favorite places.
- The 1970s (see map above right):
- *Favorite Places: the Forum (2 people), the anthropology cluster and the classics reading room.
 - *The Forum also called least favorite place (by a person who also called it a favorite place).
 - *The Forum was the favorite place of a 1950s alumnus when he was a professor.
 - *The Longhorn, a bar and eatery off campus, was also a favorite place.

Conclusions

Rodman in her discussion of place noted that, “people embody place.” (1992: 652). Tuan echoes this when he suggests place is created through the accumulation of memories (1991: 692). Given these conditions, social places on campus take on more importance. They are the areas with the most memories and the greatest sense of place. The Forum is emblematic of these interactions. James Kissane '52 notes that it embodied the spirit of the college since its “atmosphere gave a welcome to interaction, to critical encounter.” (2006: 23)

The idea that Grinnell College is special because of its atmosphere came out in a number of interviews. One alumna from the class of 1961 noted, “*It helped open some ideas and thinking for me that shaped me for the rest of my life. The people I met, the attitudes, the underlying principles, the egalitarianism.*” Another alumnus from 1971 remembered, “*The students and faculty were really welcoming. I went to class. Faculty treated me like any other student. I could answer questions and participate in the intellectual ferment.*” For the alumni, the people are central to their memories of Grinnell College. It would not be a special place without the welcoming, intellectual atmosphere the Grinnellians around them created.

References

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- Rodman, Margaret C. 1992. Empowering Place: Multilocality and Multivocality. American Anthropological Association 94(3): 640-56.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. 1991. Language and the Making of Place. Annals of the Association of American Geographers 81(4): 684-

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