

Sense of Place

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The Place of “Place”

The concept of place occupies a curious position in everyday thought and scholarly discussion. On the one hand, you know more than you think you do: everyone can recall the deep meaning and significance of experiences in a particular place and time, and, upon reflection, each of us would be able to provide a rich narrative of the ‘personal places’ that have been important in our lives. On the other hand, we rarely stop to consider our terms, and the implications of alternative definitions.

In *City Lights*, E. Barbara Phillips begins with a question, “How important is a sense of place?”(1) and then she provides a few vignettes to make the case that:

- “ 1. The sense of place can have a powerful, even magical, impact on us - even at the unconscious level.
2. People perceive and attach meaning to physical space in various ways.”(2)

And yet lurking behind Phillips’ valuable discussion of perceptions of the built environment, considerations of environment and behavior, experiences of personal and social space, insights from environmental psychology, and visionary plans of grand designers, we confront a puzzling irony.

Nowhere do we find an explicit definition of *place*.(3)

Dictionary definitions provide a starting point. James S. Duncan, one of the most prominent humanist geographers, begins an entry in the *Dictionary of Human Geography* with concise, albeit rather frustrating, precision: “place A portion of geographic space.”(4)

But the *New Webster’s Encyclopedic Dictionary* confuses the situation once again: after a pithy first entry (“**place** [pleis]

1. n. a particular part of space, *this is the place where they first met*”(5) we’re deluged with no fewer than fifteen additional definitions of the word used as a noun, and six usages as a verb. Perhaps we don’t know as much as we thought about this simple, elusive concept.

Place as *noun*: region, locality, community

In contemporary urban studies, we can distinguish between two main approaches to the definition of place. The first is as a noun. Place is indeed “a particular part of space,” although most urbanists would immediately add that such space is “invested with meaning, history, and symbolism by various individuals and groups.” This conception of place grows out of an enduring tension in the humanities and social sciences, between the search for generalizable or even universal knowledge, on the one hand, and a deep respect for local uniqueness, context, and contingency, on the other. Key debates in the 1970s sharpened the contrasts between place and space: “Place was seen as more subjectively defined, existential and particular, while space was thought to be a universal, more abstract phenomenon, subject to scientific law.”(6) An influential school of thought that emerged in these years “was concerned with meaning and contrasted the experienced richness of the idea of place with the detached sterility of the concept of space.”(7) Similarly, John Agnew drew attention to “sense of place, the local structure of feeling.”(8) Not surprisingly, the local conception of place is closely associated with ideas of community.

The significance of locality and place

This line of thinking is enormously powerful. Individuals’ perception of the spaces they encounter in the city are deeply influenced by “filters of reality” -- cultural filters that relate

our experiences through the lens of shared understandings; social filters that give different views based on position, power, and social role; and psychological filters that help us to make sense of information on the basis of our own individual needs, memories, experiences, myths, hopes, and fantasies. These filters help us to understand the multiple and sometimes contested meanings that come to be associated with functional buildings and urban spaces: the symbolism and historic resonances of monuments, architectural landmarks, heritage buildings and officially-recognized historic sites, from the Pentagon outside Washington, D.C., as “Fortress America” to the Basilica of Sacre Coeur in Paris as the symbol of betrayal of revolutionary ideals, to the contestation of urban redevelopment in South-Central Los Angeles: “Do inner-city neighborhoods want to be remade in the image of corporate culture? Must success always look like a Marriott Hotel? ... A cluster of glass high-rises? Or are we prepared to acknowledge that, for integration to occur, the corporate culture must also be remade?”(9)

The regional, local, and intrinsic features of place are a central theme in academic work as well as novels and other popular discourse; but one of the most influential figures on the topic was John Brinckerhoff Jackson, prolific author and longtime editor of *Landscape magazine*. Jackson’s perspective was a fascinating fusion of insights on the authentic character of places, and their relation to an underlying commonality in American culture. In *A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time*, for instance, he describes the new view of the land made possible by aviation in the twentieth century: “we were the first generation to become accustomed to seeing the earth from the air.”(10) But for Jackson, this new perspective was most revealing of the essential character of American places in the Midwest; flying “in the East meant seeing familiar landmarks from an unfamiliar perspective; it was only when I looked at the multicolored pattern of rectangular fields and checkerboard towns, repeating itself over and over from one horizon to the other, that I discovered the typical American landscape.”(11)

And if there is a typical urban landscape, then understanding it begins with Kevin Lynch’s landmark *Image of the City*.(12) Lynch classified urban landscape elements into five types: paths, edges, nodes, districts, and landmarks. In their interaction with the urban environment, people make sense of the city with reference to these elements, and for him, “it is the job of the city planner and urban designer to make the city’s image more recognizable, vivid, and memorable to the city dweller. Clear images, Lynch believes, give people emotional satisfaction, an easy framework for communication, and personal security.”(13) Lynch’s work occupies a fascinating position: it proved highly influential in the prevailing climate of modernist city planning that reached its peak in the early 1960s. It proved essential reading for an entire generation of ‘behavioral’ geographers concerned with mental maps, cognitive images, and perceptual issues. But it has also been influential in later postmodern movements in landscape architecture and urban design that directly challenged the ideas of modernism.

Phillips also provides two valuable case studies. First, Las Vegas presents an instance where the built environment communicates in ways that are far from subtle. To a greater degree than many other places, Las Vegas seems to appear similar even when viewed through different social, psychological, and cultural filters. Second, the case of Pruitt-Igoe -- an award-winning architectural design for a low-income housing project built in the 1950s that was demolished as a terrible failure only twenty years later -- highlights an ongoing debate over the role of environment and behavior. Does a bad environment -- a hedonistic town like Las Vegas, or a crime-ridden public housing project like Pruitt-Igoe -- produce bad people? For many influential commentators, the answer is yes. Growing up in high-rise public housing projects, for example, is seen as dangerous because the physical environment is not a “defensible space;”(14) in part because of this reasoning, high-rise projects are being demolished in favor of low-rise townhomes with a mix of poor and middle-class residents. Living in automobile-oriented suburbs is believed to promote isolation, making it difficult for neighbors to get to know one another when their first priority upon arriving at home is to drive into their enclosed garage; an influential group of planners, architects, and landscape

architects is now working to promote a “new urbanism,” part of which involves redesigning subdivisions to promote social interaction on close-knit sidewalks, among homes with porches, and the like.(15)

Despite its influence in many planning and policy circles, environmental determinism is ultimately flawed. To the degree that the built environment does shape behavior, it reinforces influences drawn from many other non-environmental political and social forces. Although a high-rise, crime-ridden public housing project is a dangerous place to grow up, the danger is rooted more in the shared experience of poverty and exclusion from opportunity than in the physical layout of the buildings. Indeed, one of the remarkable ironies of the policy movement of the last decade to demolish “the projects” in U.S. cities was the lack of enthusiasm by the New York City Housing Authority: the program’s emphasis on the ‘pathologies’ of high-rise design made little sense in a city where rich and poor live in high-rise structures.

Place as process: A global sense of place

An alternative definition of place has become increasingly influential in urban studies in the last decade. *Place is the process by which social, economic, and political relations produce meanings for and through particular spaces; these social relations are never entirely local, and thus any attempt to mark out a ‘place’ by drawing boundary lines, or by identifying fundamentally unique historical factors, is doomed to failure.* “What gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus.”(16)

Doreen Massey provides one of the most vivid account of this new line of thinking on place. Writing in the early 1990s, a time of widespread anxiety in Western Europe and North America as globalization and accelerated ‘time-space compression’ was disrupting established regional economic systems and local cultures, Massey wondered,

“...to what extent does the currently popular characterization of time-space compression represent very much a western, colonizer’s view? The sense of dislocation which some feel at the sight of a once well-known local street now lined with a succession of cultural imports -- the pizzeria, the kebab house, the branch of the middle-eastern bank -- must have been felt for centuries, though from a very different point of view, by colonized peoples all over the world as they watched the importation, maybe even used, the products of, first, European colonization, maybe British ... later US, as they learned to eat wheat instead of rice or corn, to drink Coca- Cola, just as today we try out enchiladas.”(17)

Massey develops a concept of place that emphasizes process and interconnection between the local and the global -- indeed, she advocates a global sense of place. Her perspective emphasizes four inter-related points. First, place is never static: the social interactions that tie localities to global economic, cultural, and political interactions make for constant change, even if the view from a particular situation in a relatively short time period presents an image of relative stability.(18) Second, there is no need to define boundaries that close off a place from its wider context in the world. Although practical considerations may sometimes merit drawing boundaries in order to study a particular set of circumstances, such a practice can actually make it more difficult to understand place-as-process.(19) Third, “places do not have single, unique ‘identities’; they are full of internal conflicts.”(20) Indeed, many places are, at various points, defined in large part by conflict and struggle. Fourth, places do remain unique -- but not because of a fundamental essence that emerges out of a nostalgic sense of undisturbed history and locality. Places remain unique in the face of, and even because of, the turbulence of global flows, interactions, and intersections: places are made and defined through the local intersection of these changing social relations. As Massey puts it, “all these relations interact with and take a further element of specificity from the accumulated

history of a place, with that history itself imagined as the product of layer upon layer of different sets of linkages, both local and to the wider world.”(21)

Landscapes of Struggle

These kinds of insights are at the heart of radical new narratives of place and landscape. Don Mitchell, another prominent figure in this literature, has taken up many of Massey’s themes in a comprehensive effort to reconstruct the foundational category often closely associated with ideas of place: landscape.

Landscape seems to be such a simple term, referring “to the appearance of an area,” or “the area itself,”(22) and yet the word itself has been the product of centuries of struggles for meaning -- struggles that are now at the center of critically important debates over meaning and power in how might see any “area itself” today. In medieval England, ‘landscape’ referred to the land under the control of a particular lord, but by the seventeenth century the popularity of the Dutch landschap painters had altered the term to imply the appearance of an area, especially the visual representation of scenery elements in that area. By the nineteenth century, a more familiar, contemporary sense of the word began to take hold, defining landscape as “a portion of land or territory which the eye can comprehend in a single view, including all the objects so seen, especially in its pictorial aspect.”(23) At the time, German geographers were working in a tradition that came to be known as Landschafts-geographie, which essentially viewed geography as “landscape science.” The idea of landschaft inspired efforts to understand how the appearance or view of portions of land varied across different regions; thus was launched several generations of geographical studies that sought to classify landscape elements, to formalize the relations thought to exist between particular types of landscapes and different regions, and to specify the relationship between different landscape types and the processes that produced them.(24) And so when the geographer Carl Sauer sought in the early 1920s to provide a persuasive challenge to the dangerous ideas of environmental determinism, he drew on the idea of landschaft. While environmental determinism drew a causal link from the environment to people and society, for Sauer, landscape considered the interrelations between people and their environment -- with explicit attention focused on how humans altered the environment. “Sauer’s position was that geographers should proceed genetically and trace the development of a natural landscape into a cultural landscape. The difficulty with this methodology, as Sauer himself soon realized, was that it was seldom possible to reconstruct the appearance of the natural landscape, because the human impact on the face of the earth had been pervasive for many millennia. All landscapes had in effect become cultural landscapes. Thus the study of landscapes by Sauer and his students ... became the study of culture history.”(25)

The Saurian tradition dominated cultural geography for decades in the twentieth century, but the last twenty years have brought a renewed interest in landscapes using new approaches. In general, these new approaches place greater emphasis on a) the political, economic, and social processes that produce the appearance of an area, b) socio-cultural processes that mediate the creation or interpretation of such appearances, and c) the ways that areas with particular appearances -- specific landscapes -- can actually influence important political, economic, and social processes. To put it simply, people and societies produce landscapes, but not everyone ‘sees’ those landscapes the same way -- and, once produced, a landscape will make some ways of life and experience easier than others. Landscape research in the last twenty years has included wonderfully rich contributions exploring how landscape is “a way of seeing” rather than an objectively-defined territorial vantage-point;(26) how particular ways of seeing are advanced by elite classes with an interest in promoting certain kinds of views of themselves and their property;(27) how landscape interpretation can be likened to the performances in a theater;(28) and how landscapes can be understood as texts with individual or collective authors as well as readers.

Much of this new research has privileged questions of representation, and has paid careful attention to contingency, situation, and difference in how landscapes are perceived and experienced. Don Mitchell's work, however, serves as a reminder that these themes must be considered with caution; landscapes might appear quaint, peaceful, or natural to many viewers, and different people do have different landscape experiences and understandings. But landscapes are created and sustained by power, and some aspects of this power can be decisive: Landscape is "a powerful visual ideology; but it is also a structured portion of the earth within which people work and live and sleep, eat, make love, and struggle over the conditions of their existence."⁽²⁹⁾ In his influential *Lie of the Land*, Mitchell narrates a labor history of the California landscape to show how it was produced by migrant agricultural laborers, and how today's representations of an idyllic countryside help to conceal past oppressions (by ignoring and suppressing the artifacts of labor history) while sustaining current ones (evident in the heavy use of low-wage undocumented immigrant labor to maintain the beautiful upper-middle class suburban yards). Mitchell believes that we need to approach poststructural themes of contingency and representation with caution: "Allowed to float free, untethered to any material world, representations of landscape become pure ideology, able to be reshaped by all manner of powerful interests, and available to be put to use to structure and control not just meaning, but also the lives of those who live in the landscape."⁽³⁰⁾ It is for this reason that Mitchell sees great risk in the proliferation of an almost unlimited array of ways of reading landscapes:

"...to see landscape in such terms is almost to see it as static: the landscape passively 'represents' some history or another. In reality, the landscape itself is an active agent in constituting that history, serving both as a symbol for the needs and desires of the people who live in it (or who otherwise have a stake in producing or maintaining it) and as a solid, dead weight channeling change in this way and not that (there are, after all, only a few uses to which a defunct steel mill can be put). 'Landscape' is best seen as both a work (it is the product of human labor and thus encapsulates the dreams, desires, and all the injustices of the people and social systems that make it) and as something that does work (it acts as a social agent in the further development of a place)."⁽³¹⁾

A central task of anyone who wants to engage with landscape, then, is not only to reclaim lost or marginalized landscape representations, but to document the work that a landscape actually does to shape everyday life and recollections of history.⁽³²⁾

And so...

Place, then, is not so simple and one-dimensional after all, and neither is landscape. As a process, place is wonderfully rich and complicated, fascinating and frustrating, sometimes beautiful, sometimes horrifying. Although it may be confusing to verb a noun, when we appreciate the process of place, and the global sense of place, it allows us to grasp the realities of contemporary struggles over meaning that we can find in so many circumstances. Ordinary places belie histories of settlement, migration, work, life, death, love and caring, struggle and violence. Landscapes, works produced and maintained by labor, also do important work, encouraging some ways of living and understanding while ignoring or suppressing others. And if landscapes are always at work, then to understand their significance for our lives, we've got a lot of work to do.

- (1) E. Barbara Phillips (1996). *City Lights: Urban-Suburban Life in the Global Society*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 452.
- (2) Phillips, *City Lights*, p. 452.

- (3) Phillips' key terms for this chapter (p. 485) include arcology (architect Paolo Soleri's synthesis of architecture and ecology), the built environment (all things built by people that subsequently constitute the environment for most people), environmental determinism (a school of thought that explains behaviors in terms of environmental influences), imageability (Kevin Lynch's word for the visible 'legibility' of a city landscape), personal space (the 'bubble' around each person), and proxemics (the study of the use of space in social interaction, across different cultures).
- (4) James Duncan (2000). "Place." In R.J. Johnston, Derek Gregory, Geraldine Pratt, and Michael Watts, editors. *The Dictionary of Human Geography*. Oxford: Blackwell, 582-585, quote from p. 582.
- (5) Bernard S. Cayne, editor (1990). *The New Lexicon Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language*. New York: Lexicon Publications, p. 767.
- (6) Duncan, "Place," p. 582.
- (7) Duncan, "Place," p. 582.
- (8) John Agnew (1987). *Place and Politics: The Geographical Mediation of State and Society*. Boston: Allen and Unwin.
- (9) Herbert Muschamp (1993). "Things Generally Wrong in the Universe." *New York Times*, May 30, Section 2, p. 30; cited in Phillips, *City Lights*, p. 455.
- (10) John Brinkerhoff Jackson (1994). *A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, p. 3.
- (11) Jackson, *Sense of Place*, p. 3.
- (12) Kevin Lynch (1960). *The Image of the City*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- (13) Phillips, *City Lights*, p. 477.
- (14) The most influential force in policy and planning on this subject is Oscar Newman, an architect and city planner who adapted Jane Jacob's ideas on healthy urban spaces. Many critics see Newman's work as a severe distortion of Jacob's work, but there is little doubt that the notion of "defensible space" has become quite influential. "The term defensible space was born at Washington University in St. Louis, Mo., in the spring of 1964 when a group involved in the study of ghetto life in the now notorious public housing project Pruitt-Igoe, began an inquiry into the possible effects of the architectural setting on the social malaise of the community, and on the crime and vandalism rampant there. ... an endeavor was made to isolate those physical features which produced secure residential settings -- even in the midst of social disintegration and terror." Oscar Newman (1973). *Architectural Design for Crime Prevention*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Law Enforcement Assistance Administration.
- (15) For an accessible and engaging introduction to this movement, see James Howard Kunstler (1996). *Home from Nowhere: Remaking Our Everyday World for the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- (16) Doreen Massey (1994). *Space, Place, and Gender*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 154.
- (17) Massey, *Space, Place*, p. 147.
- (18) "One of the great one-liners in Marxist exchanges has for long been, 'Ah, but capital is not a thing, it's a process.' Perhaps this should be said also about places; that places are processes, too." Massey, *Space, Place*, p. 155.
- (19) And drawing boundaries, of course, always must exclude as it includes, creating many of the dangers of insularity and hostility to outsiders found in traditional conceptions of community. Massey seeks to "get away from the common association between penetrability and vulnerability. For it is this kind of association which makes invasion by newcomers so threatening." Massey, *Space, Place*, p. 155.
- (20) Massey, *Space, Place*, p. 155.
- (21) Massey, *Space, Place*, p. 156.
- (22) James Duncan (2000). "Landscape." In R.J. Johnston, Derek Gregory, Geraldine Pratt, and Michael Watts, editors. *The Dictionary of Human Geography*. Oxford: Blackwell, 429-430, quote from p. 429.

- (23) Marvin Mikesell, quoted in Duncan, "Landscape," p. 430.
- (24) Derek Gregory (2000). "Landschaft." In R.J. Johnston, Derek Gregory, Geraldine Pratt, and Michael Watts, editors. *The Dictionary of Human Geography*. Oxford: Blackwell, 431-432.
- (25) Duncan, "Landscape," p. 430.
- (26) Denis Cosgrove (1998). *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- (27) Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels (1988). *The Iconography of Landscape*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (28) Stephen Daniels and Denis Cosgrove (1993). "Spectacle and Text: Landscape Metaphors in Cultural Geography." In James Duncan and David Ley, eds *Place/Culture/Representation*. New York: Routledge, 57-77.
- (29) Don Mitchell (1996). *The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 2.
- (30) Mitchell, *Lie of the Land*, p. 9.
- (31) Don Mitchell (2000). *Cultural Geography: A Critical Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 94.
- (32) For several examples, see Mitchell, *Cultural Geography*, especially Part II, "The Political Landscape"; Amy Goodnough (2004). "Honor for Doctor King Splits Florida City, and Faces Reversal." *New York Times*, May 10, A1; Simon Romero (2004). "Texas Community in Grip of a Kind of Road Rage." *New York Times*, July 16, A14; and Loretta Lees (2001). "Towards a Critical Geography of Architecture: The Case of an Ersatz Colosseum." *Ecumene* 8(1), 51-86.

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