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## PLACE

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### **PLACE AS AN ASPECT OF ENVIRONMENTAL EXPERIENCE AND GEOGRAPHY**

Place is a simple enough concept until you begin to think about how places are experienced, and then there is very little about it which seems entirely clear or unambiguous. As a geographical concept it refers to named localities, and it is this meaning which stands behind the frequently used definition of geography as the study of places, a definition with a robust life that has endured throughout the two-thousand-year history of the discipline. Until recently it was considered unnecessary to elaborate upon the meaning of the word 'place'; it was straightforward and self-evident.

Since about 1960, and simultaneously in geography and other academic fields such as architecture and psychology, a more complex notion of place has begun to emerge. It is not yet possible to be sure whether this is merely an academic elaboration of ideas previously taken for granted, or whether it reflects some fundamental cultural change in the way people relate to environments, though I suspect the latter is at least partly responsible. What is clear is that places have come increasingly to be understood as experiential and social phenomena consisting of territories of meanings and subject to all the inconsistencies of everyday life. And, as if this change in understanding were not difficult enough, it appears that there has been a parallel shift in the character of actual places as their interconnections and identities have been dramatically alerted by a combination of electronic communications, mass travel, and the growth of global business.

Philosophically and chronologically the changes in interpretations of place since 1960 reflect a trend from phenomenological approaches to the critical analyses of political economy. The following discussion follows the general sequence of this trend in order to summarize the most important arguments which have been made about place and to demonstrate how these arguments have

responded to shifts in the character of places. If it has a central message it is that place is a microcosm of geography—it is varied, changeful, eludes simple definition, is open to a variety of interpretations, does not respond well to reduction into simple categories, and to understand it requires keen powers of observation combined with flexible thinking.

### CLASSICAL NOTIONS AND DEFINITIONS OF PLACE

In ordinary language the word ‘place’ serves as a nebulous catch-all which refers to where something is regardless of scale or type of environment. The Australian desert is a place, so is Melbourne, and Monash University, and a house in the suburbs. Even this short list suggests why Aristotle declared that ‘The question, what is Place? presents many difficulties for analysis.’ He devoted a section of his *Physics* (Book 4, 209a–212b) to these difficulties, and resolved most of them to his satisfaction by concluding that place refers to the precise dimensions of the space which contains something—thus the place of a book on a shelf is the space which is exactly occupied by that book, and the place of a city is the area containing its buildings and roads. This interpretation stood behind the old geographical idea of place as whatever occupies a location, culminating perhaps in central place theory in which places have spatial attributes and no particular content.

The Aristotelian view suggests that a place-container and what is in it can easily be separated. This might seem like an innocent and accurate observation, but Eric Walter (1988), a social psychiatrist who has written an erudite account of place as a fundamental aspect of a mentally healthy life, suggests that this Aristotelian view is the philosophical foundation for policies of dislocation and uprooting, such as urban renewal.

Walter is obviously no admirer of Aristotle, and argues persuasively that the notion of place as a detachable container is a gross reduction of Plato’s earlier view, expressed in the *Timaeus*, that place is one of the great modes of being in the universe, ‘as it were, the nurse of all becoming’, and the receptacle of forms, powers and feelings (Walter 1988:120–6; Plato, *Timaeus*, 49a–52). This is an inestimably richer notion than the Aristotelian one, for it suggests that place is an interactive environment which influences and responds to whatever is within it. Plato’s argument led Walter (1988:215) to derive his own definition of place as the ‘location of experience; the container of shapes, powers, feelings and meanings’. This emphasis on meaning and experience indicates that there is a deep connection between a place and those who occupy it; the two cannot be separated without radically changing both of them.

The definition of places as territories of meaning rather than containers of things is more commonly argued from phenomenology than from Plato. Phenomenology is a philosophical perspective which considers the world as it is directly experienced, so a phenomenological understanding regards places as tightly interconnected assemblages of buildings, landscapes, communities,

activities, and meanings which are constituted in the diverse experiences of their inhabitants and visitors. From this perspective place is an existential phenomenon and places are not just geographical objects to be studied academically; they are where we live.

In some degree this recognition informs almost all the recent discussions of place, though different disciplines do bring their academic perspectives to bear on it. For example, the book *People Places* by landscape architects Clare Cooper-Marcus and Wendy Francis (1990) discusses the qualities of urban squares and public spaces in terms of their built forms and the ways in which people use and experience these. In contrast, Sharon Zukin (1992:12), a sociologist with an orientation to economics, defines place as 'a territory...a concentration of people and economic activity...a cultural artifact of social conflict and cohesion'. And John Logan and Harvey Molotch argue in *Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of a Place* (1987) that the attributes of a place result from social action rather than the qualities in a piece of land. Geographical approaches tend to be more inclusive and to understand places as combining landscapes, social and economic activities, and meanings, though the relative importance accorded to each of these elements can vary tremendously depending on the character of the place and the bias of the geographer.

## HOME

A difficulty with definitions which stress meaning is that they expose accounts of place to the accusation of being subjective and having no broad relevance. This is a false charge. Place experiences and meanings are not locked up in the minds of individuals, rather they must be considered to be intersubjective—in other words, shared, because they can be communicated and make clear sense to others. The most pervasive expression of the intersubjective character of place experiences is probably found in the sense of home, which appears to be almost universally felt. Wherever it may be, home is a centre of meaning, a familiar setting in an uncertain world, it is the place where one belongs and is best known. Homelessness, in contrast, describes both a socially unacceptable condition and the loss of a fundamental aspect of human existence.

Discussions of home and sense of home are often conducted in the language of plants, especially in terms of roots. To have a strong sense of home and belonging is to have roots; to be forced to move is to be uprooted. This organic language is scarcely incidental. It implies that to have a home place is natural; it is metaphorically to belong to the earth. This is the meaning which the philosopher Martin Heidegger and other existential writers have chosen to emphasize. For Heidegger place was to be understood in terms of 'dwelling', which is a fundamental connection between human beings and the earth, and a manifestation of the very essence of existence (Heidegger 1966, 1971; see also Kolb 1992:149–54). To dwell in a place is to be in a world complete in itself; it is both to exist and to take responsibility for the existence of other beings; it is to be at home.

This interpretation has to be qualified. If you happen to live in an anonymous apartment slab in suburban Moscow, or a squalid *favela* threatened by mud slides in São Paulo, such notions about home and place and the meaning of existence will be radically truncated. One's home may still be a familiar shelter in an alien world, but it will not be cosy and nice. Existence is not without its burdens and home, indeed all types of places, can be constraining and tedious. Homes have to be maintained, and there is considerable drudgery in doing that, usually falling upon women. Small towns and villages can be prisons to their younger inhabitants who wish for escape to the anonymous freedoms of big cities. In short, experiences of home, as those of most places, are ambivalent. They involve a fluctuating balance of feelings of attachment and of entrapment, though the former sentiment is perhaps the prevailing one.

### **SPIRIT OF PLACE OR *GENIUS LOCI***

In less agnostic cultures than those which now prevail in the urbanized world it was, and in some areas still is, believed that localities were occupied by spirits or gods who served both as their guardians and as a source of their identity. Mount Olympus was the home of Zeus, and every mountain top, grove and spring was the home of some lesser deity who had to be acknowledged and propitiated. The idea of spirit of place, often referred to by its Latin name as '*genius loci*', has its origins in this polytheistic sense of environments as consisting of diverse sites, each with its guardian spirit.

In its relatively secularized modern meaning, spirit of place refers simply to the inherent and unique qualities of somewhere. It is this idea which is explored by the architect Christian Norberg-Schulz in his book *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (1984). He argues from Heidegger's philosophy that 'place is evidently an integral part of existence' which can be best understood phenomenologically, and using this approach he examines several distinctive landscapes including Prague, Khartoum and Rome. These are locations with a strong spirit of place because they have strong visual properties which may reveal a sense of mystery about natural forces, or manifest rational order, or express some equilibrium of these. Norberg-Schulz (1984) concludes with a familiar refrain—that modern architecture and town planning are deficient in these properties of distinctiveness, they are monotonous and demonstrate a loss of spirit of place.

As a secular concept *genius loci* has a great deal to do with aesthetic qualities; it is, in effect, a way of considering places as works of art. Adele Chatfield-Taylor, writing in Lipske's book *Places as Art* (1985:8), has written that places 'can satisfy our desire for beauty, stir our deepest feelings, link us to our history'. This type of thinking appeals to architects and planners who want to do more than design skyscrapers and plan subdivisions. So Kevin Lynch, in his textbook *Site Planning* (1962:225) proposed that places, and he clearly means



places as objects of design, 'should have a clear perceptual identity: recognizable, memorable, vivid, engaging of attention, differentiated from other locations'. Since perceptual identity in urban settings is largely a matter of distinctively built forms and well-constructed spaces, this suggests that the spirit of place is something which can be designed. And perhaps it can, given suitable social conditions and creative architects such as those of the old parts of Rome and Prague. But the evidence is that, divine or secular, *genius loci* is elusive. Even though we may recognize that somewhere has a powerful personality it is invariably difficult to identify how this is constituted and even more difficult to reproduce it. This is why new developments so often seem utterly out of context. This is fortunate. Humanity has sufficient powers of control without adding to them the ability to create the lesser deities of place. What can be done is to protect distinctive places which now exist and then perhaps to find ways to create the conditions which will, in time, allow *genius loci* to emerge.

### SENSE OF PLACE

The term 'sense of place' is often used to mean the same as 'spirit of place'. This is confusing. It is more appropriate to understand 'sense of place' as the *awareness* of spirit of place, and as a faculty which individuals possess rather than a property of environments. Like a sense of judgement or a sense of responsibility, it is a synthetic faculty which embraces and extends the various senses of perception. Kevin Lynch (1962:9) explained that 'a place affects us directly through our senses—by sight, hearing, touch and smell'. To this list should be added imagination, memory and purpose.

Sense of place is not a mandatory requirement for survival, so there are many who pay scant attention to the world around them. Indeed, a detailed survey made by the geographer John Eyles (1985:123–4) of residents' attitudes to their small English town led him to identify four different senses of place, one of which he labelled 'apathetic' since those individuals had little interest in their surroundings. Another he called 'a social sense of place' because for many people places are defined chiefly by where family and friends are. The other two pay more attention to environments. Eyles calls them 'instrumental', an attitude which regards place primarily as a resource providing goods and opportunities, and 'nostalgic', which stresses heritage and old buildings.

Eyles's study indicates clearly that sense of place cannot be considered as a simple, undifferentiated attitude towards environments. There are considerable variations both in type and intensity of sense of place, depending on such things as familiarity, detachment, social status, gender and self-consciousness. With wealth, for example, comes the freedom to choose places to live. In contrast, the very poor are trapped in places they can afford, or in whatever is provided for them, so that their geographical experiences are constrained and their sense of place is relatively limited.

The degree to which gender effects sense of place is not entirely clear. Daphne

Spain (1992) argues that architectural and geographical space are differentiated by gender in most cultures and times, and some of her conclusions must apply to place, although she does not consider this explicitly. Eyles (1985) comments briefly that women identify places more with community than men, who are either apathetic or see them as built forms. This is reinforced by Dolores Hayden's research (1984) into the history of planning which indicates that women, when they have infrequently had the opportunity, tend to design places which encourage communal activities. From a different perspective, it is the case that women's experience of cities, especially at night, is much more constrained than that of men because of the threat of personal violence. It should follow that female experience and perception of environments differs substantially from that of men, and to that extent women's sense of place must also differ.

Degree of familiarity is a particularly important influence on sense of place, and makes it possible to distinguish what might be called an insider's from an outsider's experience, a distinction which cuts across gender and social status. Insideness is an aspect of the sense of place which comes with knowing and being known somewhere, and is mostly unselfconscious. It can be such a key component of someone's personality that they effectively identify themselves with their place and declare they can live nowhere else. Vestiges of such attachment to place can be glimpsed in homesickness, in characterizations of individuals by their home town ('She's a New Yorker') or in the local fan loyalty evoked by sports teams (even though these are mostly corporate ventures employing player-mercenaries hired from elsewhere).

An outsider's sense of place is relatively detached, and regards places chiefly in terms of ostensible and superficial characteristics. In this, as with most aspects of place, there are considerable variations. Different types of outsideness are found in the packaged experiences of mass tourism, in the standardized conveniences of international business travel which reduce the diverse identities of localities to comfortable familiarity, and in much professional expertise. The latter is mostly based on general and abstract knowledge, so it is assumed that it must have relevance anywhere. When this expertise is brought to bear on places their universal properties are stressed and specificities ignored, often with unfortunate consequences. *Planned to Death: The Annihilation of a Place called Howdendyke* is the pointed title Douglas Porteous (1989) gave to his study of the redevelopment of the village on Humberside where he had grown up. A combination of external economic pressures and planning based on theories about efficient new communities were responsible for remaking Howdendyke into somewhere which bears little relationship with its past.

Outsideness need not be destructive. A self-conscious sense of place can be cultivated and refined by improving powers of observation through the open-minded exploration of environments, and by making imaginative attempts to understand what it is like to live in a place which is not one's own. Through such means it is possible to enter empathetically into situations where one is otherwise an outsider, and to understand them almost as their inhabitants do.

Practising a self-conscious sense of place is an essential skill for geographers and anyone who cares about the quality of environments. It is sometimes instinctive, but for most of us it requires, as Eric Walter (1988) observes astutely, a continual effort to exercise a subtle balance of intellect, common sense, feelings and imagination.

### TOPOPHILIA AND TOPOPHOBIA

Topophilia is defined by Yi-fu Tuan (1974:4), the geographer who gave the term a wide currency, as 'the affective bond between people and place or setting'. It is the 'human love of place...diffuse as a concept, vivid and concrete as personal experience' (Tuan 1974:92).

Topophilia is mostly a gentle human emotion induced by positive attitudes or by pleasant landscapes. Occasionally, however, when circumstances of both person and place are in a positive conjunction, topophilia can be a powerful and ecstatic experience, one which promotes great insights. If we are to believe autobiographical accounts, mountain tops are particularly conducive to such formative moments; Wordsworth climbed Snowdon at night, emerging through cloud to brilliant moonlight, and there 'beheld the emblem of mind/That feeds upon infinity' (*The Prelude*, Book XIV, 'Conclusion', ll. 70–1). Such experiences are not confined to poets; there is evidence that many people have intense topophilic encounters which provide touchstones of meaning by which much of the rest their lives are judged.

In *Topophilia* Tuan chooses not to stress such formative experiences. He writes instead about encounters with landscapes which provide a muted and sustained sense of pleasure, and the factors which influence these. On the human side good health, familiarity, culture, mythology and ideals can play significant roles in making places appear full of light and life. On the natural side there are 'environments of persistent appeal' (Tuan 1974:114), such as seashores, valleys, islands, and the middle landscapes of carefully tended countryside, which can promote topophilia.

Yi-fu Tuan's preference is to discuss felicitous environments and experiences. However, our environmental experiences are not all pleasant. Even landscapes of persistent appeal can be the source of ugly and disturbing events. The mountains which for Wordsworth were so uplifting can quickly turn frightening; there is little joy in being lost on a mountain-top in an unexpected storm. Such unpleasant experiences of places, in which the overwhelming desire is to be somewhere else that is safe and secure, can appropriately be described as 'topophobia'—repulsion by place.

Topophobia, like topophilia, involves an emotional bond between person and place—but one in which the relationship is essentially negative. The reasons for this can reside with the person's attitude and social context, such as depression, ill health, aesthetic repulsion, unfamiliarity, insecurity, or situation of despair. Alternatively, the reasons might reside in the character of the landscape.

Environments of persistent repulsion are well known to dramatists and the writers of horror stories—they include barren heaths, dereliction, storms, slums, and anywhere dark, dank, polluted, uncared for, and otherwise threatening.

### A THEORETICAL INTERJECTION

Topophilia and topophobia, like belonging and entrapment associated with home, can be understood as good and bad aspects of place experience. It is, I think, inappropriate to see them as independent for they are really two facets of a single phenomenon—experience of place—in which sometimes the positive aspects are dominant and sometimes the negative, but both are always present. The patterns within each of them, and the relationships between them, are complex and subtle, so there is little about the experience of place which is entirely unambiguous and predictable, though not everyone acknowledges this. For example, Winifred Gallagher (1993), in *The Power of Place: How our Surroundings Shape our Thoughts, Emotions, and Actions*, offers a simple deterministic account completely explained in the title.

A far more sophisticated view is the one argued by Nicholas Entrikin in *The Betweenness of Place* (1991) that place is a concept which does not fit into standard methodological and epistemological categories. Conventional thinking which separates objective and subjective approaches, and which divides the particular from the general, does not apply. Place, he suggests, has to be viewed both with regard to the objective characteristics of location and in terms of subjective experiences. Writing about place should consider both the particular features of localities and the generality of the idea.

Entrikin's argument is a sensible one. It reveals in an abstract way the tension which exists in all places between particular (or local) features, and general (or global) processes. In any environment there are things which are locally specific, such as festivals, building styles and historical events. There are also manifestations of non-local fashions and influences, such as gothic revival architecture, fast-food franchises and globally diffused pollutants. If the local and specific aspects of an environment are those which enable somewhere to be discussed as a 'place', then the non-local, international and general influences can appropriately be referred to as 'placelessness'. It is, I believe, misguided to treat these as two separate phenomena, or even to see them necessarily as being in conflict. Rather, they are each implicated in the other, the local in the non-local, the general in the particular. In some contexts, such as old villages with traditional cultures, the particular qualities of a locality dominate and placelessness is subservient; in other cases, such as airports, standardized design prevails and the specifics of the place are scarcely discernible. Whatever is local contributes to distinctiveness; whatever is placeless helps to make places comprehensible to outsiders. In some balance, then, the particular and the general in places always occur together, and always need to occur together.

This is not how most writing about place considers the matter. The

overwhelming tendency is to present the issue as one of confrontation. Occasionally, as in Le Corbusier's (1929) modernist polemics about cities, it is maintained that standardized international design will bring enlightenment from parochialism and the burdens of local history. Most recent arguments reverse this and claim that the bad forces of uniformity are destroying the good qualities of places.

### PLACELESSNESS

Tony Hiss (1990: xv) writes in *The Experience of Place* that 'the fading and discoloration of places has been going on for years'. And Michael Hough (1990:2) complains in *Out of Place* that 'The influences that at one time gave uniqueness to place—the response of built form to climate, local building materials, and craftsmanship, for instance—are today becoming obscured...' The clear message is that the ability to construct places rich in local identity and meaning has been lost.

The best evidence for the loss of this ability is placelessness, or the proliferation of modern landscapes which look alike. It is easy to see examples—suburbs, shopping malls, airports, corporate skyscrapers, international franchises, modernist housing projects, and so on. Perhaps more important than similarity of appearance, however, is the levelling of experience and meaning which placelessness apparently involves. It is quite possible for placeless environments to have distinctive appearances; for example, theme parks are imagineered to be 'unique', each with its own arrangements of quaint buildings, pretend mountains, fake lakes, roller-coasters and fantastic images, but they are all predictably similar fabrications. The real issue is not that they look alike, but that they feel so much the same, that there seems to be nothing truly distinctive about them.

Of course, something similar can be said about Greek temples, Gothic cathedrals, and Mogul forts, because they also employed standardized architectural elements. And in some respects these are placeless; however, each temple or fort was adapted to its site and situation, used local construction materials and was the product of intense craftsmanship, so it is now usually seen as emphasizing place rather than diminishing it.

Since the Enlightenment the adaptation of standardized techniques to locality appears to have decreased, with the consequence that placelessness has increased. There are several connected reasons for this. One is philosophical—the widespread adoption of scientific methods which stress the general and measurable characteristics of culture and nature over what is particular. A second is technological—the development of technologies such as those of concrete and air travel which have progressively overcome the constraints of locality. A third is social and economic—mass production and consumption, global trade, and the promotion of international design fashions. In the mid-twentieth century these effectively coalesced into processes such as urban renewal, suburban development and new town planning, with the result that many localities were profoundly

transformed. These processes have subsequently intensified with the emergence of what might be called a global mass culture in which electronic information, images and goods are disseminated to many places simultaneously, with scant regard for cultural history or political boundaries and permitting no time for local adaptation. Under such an onslaught perhaps place is destined to disappear altogether. This is presumably what Joshua Meyerowitz (1985) anticipates because he called his book on modern electronic culture *No Sense of Place*. In it he observes that electronic communication goes from nowhere in particular to anywhere in general, and that firsthand place experience is being substituted by vicarious television experience in which locality and variations in geography have little intrinsic importance.

Arguments of place decline have a powerful emotional charge. We almost want them to be true because they reinforce nostalgic concerns about the disappearance of a world of attractive villages and urban neighbourhoods where everyone knew and was known by everyone else. Eric Walter (1988:2) writes that we have now reached a point where 'for the first time in human history people are systematically building meaningless places', and this seems to confirm our topophobic reactions to ugly shopping malls and hideous housing projects. Be this as it may, I believe he is being too extreme. However deeply we may dislike certain modern landscapes, the very act of construction gives them some significance. And are we to dismiss as meaningless the lives of those who live and work in these 'meaningless places'?

While I accept that placelessness must have serious consequences, because our individual, social and political identities are inexorably tied up with the places where we live and work, I do not think that categorical representations of placelessness as some massive, ahuman force of uniformity, or dismissals of it as meaningless, will be helpful in redressing these consequences. A more reasoned assessment is that increasing placelessness indicates a substantial tipping of the balance from what is particular in place towards what is general, and it has to be acknowledged that this has had the benefit of democratizing geography by making remote places more accessible. Relatively placeless suburbs and tourist resorts reflect great improvements in overall standards of living, and travel to international academic conferences would be far more difficult without the familiar conveniences of standardized airport terminals and hotel chains. In short, both place and placelessness are subtle and ambiguous phenomena, and just as attachment to place has negative aspects, so placelessness has positive aspects. Ignoring such subtleties will make it more difficult to grasp and redress the deepening imbalances between the local and the non-local because we will be deluded into expecting the obvious. And what now seems to be happening to local geographies is anything but obvious.

## PLACE EXPLOITATION

The idea of placelessness as a monolithic modernist uniformity invading landscapes, slowly obliterating everything distinctive, is not consistent with the subtle social and economic processes of the late twentieth century. There has, in fact, been a marked revival of interest in the overt qualities of place. In architecture and planning this has something to do with a post-modernist interest in historical and regional context, but in simple economic terms what seems to have happened is that the value of distinctive places has increased as they have become more scarce. Much of the impetus for this reawakening of interest in place identity comes from outside, and the primary motive is not so much to maintain the integrity of a place as to turn it into an attractive opportunity for money-making, an opportunity often realized through post-modern design and heritage planning. It has, in short, become worth while to invest in local identities. This is placelessness, but in a particular and most subtle guise.

Sharon Zukin (1992:15) describes one reason for this shift in attitude to place as being 'a simple imbalance between investment and employment: capital moves, the community doesn't'. As capital has become flexible, moving through the abstract electronic networks of financial markets, it seeks out the best locations for returns on investments. In these circumstances, David Harvey (1989:295) points out, the 'qualities of place stand...to be emphasized in the midst of the increasing abstractions of space. The active production of places with special qualities becomes an important stake in spatial competition between localities, cities, regions and nations.' What he means by 'qualities of places' could include an educated labour force, proximity to an international airport, an attractive landscape, an interesting history, or anything which makes a location stand ahead of its competitors.

Communities in economic decline because they have been bypassed by flexible capital have to do whatever they can to revitalize themselves, including the exploitation of their own place identity, commonly by reworking local heritage into a tourist attraction. This has been done most spectacularly with festival marketplaces, such as South Street Seaport on the waterfront in New York City, or Covent Garden in London, where former working environments have been remodelled into boutiques, outdoor cafés and cobbled streets with licensed street entertainers. Smaller-scale examples of this process include the industrial history centre at Wigan Pier in Lancashire, complete with The Orwell Restaurant, and the former sardine fishing town of Monterey in California, with Cannery Row architecture and Steinbeck's Lady Boutique. This sort of place resurrection may bring money into the local economy, but it also involves a radical metamorphosis. Formerly grimy and unpretentious working-class settings are turned into thoroughly sanitized and attractive settings for informative family outings and school trips. Destroyed buildings may be rebuilt, artefacts imported, dead traditions revived, and the otherwise unemployed of the

twentieth century dressed in costumes and employed to represent the employed of the past. Industrial production has been replaced by heritage consumption. And, with remarkable irony given that each of these reconstituted places is a deliberate attempt to foster local individuality, the design and management of exploited places is often done by outside development corporations which employ common design elements and images so that they all have a similar ambience. Manufactured place identity is placeless.

### **TOPOMORPHIC CHANGES AND DISLOCATED GEOGRAPHY**

Eric Walter (1988:23) suggests that place identities sometimes undergo what he calls 'topomorphic revolutions'—fundamental changes in the structure of their internal relations which occur in association with social transformations. He notes, for instance, that industrial tenements and slums of the nineteenth century had no precedent as elements of urban form, and that the ways which their residents found to relate to them necessarily had to be innovative. The same could equally well be claimed for twentieth-century automobile suburbs. In other words place has to be understood as contingent upon social and historical circumstances and not a geographical constant.

I suspect that a topomorphic revolution on a grand scale is now underway in the geographies associated with global electronic culture, and that placelessness—and its transformation into place exploitation—is a large part of this. It is difficult to gain a firm perspective on what is happening, partly because we are in the midst of the process and partly because so many of the changes fit into old structures rather than creating original forms. Unlike steel frames which imposed rectangularity on skyscrapers, or railways which were forced through landscapes to link cities, the recent technologies of polymers and electronics and gene splicing are malleable and mostly invisible. Plastic oak beams, genetically designed laboratory mice, and electronic marketplaces represent fundamental changes in the nature of things, yet leave them looking much the same. They confound assumptions about what is real or fake, about what is natural or artificial, about where is here and whether geography has any relevance.

It used to be that places were associated with a local environment, economy and culture, and the connections between these, though they may have been complex in practice, were in principle clear and direct. The identity of a place was something made locally, by the people who lived there, perhaps using elements from outside but always bending these to local needs. This is no longer the case. 'To a degree never known before,' Logan and Molotch (1987:249) observe, 'local interests in place are being shaped by the changing order of international spatial relations.' This is a radical transformation. In the geography of global culture it involves a sort of space-time-culture compression, the global village, in which a diverse mixture of international practices and tastes is being made more or less equally available everywhere. From this mixture of possibilities individuals or groups can select as they need or wish. The consequence is that any spatial variety



of place, and indeed placelessness, is now being supplanted by a locally constituted, social variety based on such things as ethnicity, gender preferences, reproduced best bits of other townscapes, or even tastes in music and clothes. So the process of forming place identity increasingly consists not in local development within a geographical context, but in the ways many similar fragments of global culture are combined somewhere. Distinctiveness is given either by the self-consciously preserved or reconstructed fragments of old landscapes, by an emphasis on a selective social activity, or by particular combinations of uprooted and transported global fragments. I am struck, for instance, by the gondolas which ply the modernist waterfront in Toronto, and Texas-style restaurants decorated with American antiques in the Victorian centre of Glasgow.

In the new geographical logic any place distinctiveness which is not inherited is largely an illusion because there are now few necessities about why anything has to be somewhere specific or have a particular appearance. Investment capital can easily move elsewhere and identities are mostly detachable images, to be contrived in any one of countless ways. In the strategies of global marketing the aim is to make money rather than to sustain local integrity. In this process place has apparently been divorced from context. It is as though the previously fixed points of reference of geography have been uprooted and can now be exchanged at will. Geography itself has literally been dislocated.

### THE RECOVERY AND DESIGN OF PLACE

Placelessness and place exploitation have met with three types of resistance. There have been countless local political reactions, often taking the form of neighbourhood protests against the threat of potentially place-destroying intrusions, such as new highways or corporate developments or even single franchise outlets. Such exclusionary protests have protected particular places, and the lessons learned can be used elsewhere, but these are essentially isolated actions which do little to address the larger issues of topomorphic change. Of more fundamental importance are those forms of resistance which either stress the need for personal sensitivity to places as a foundation for recovering something that is disappearing from the world, or emphasize the need to find technical ways to design and maintain distinctive places.

Yi-fu Tuan (1977:203) concludes his book on *Space and Place* with the remark that its 'ultimate ambition' is 'to increase the burden of awareness'. By making ourselves more aware of the subtleties and ambiguities of our experiences of place, and then raising questions about conventional planning practices, Tuan suggests that we can open up issues which planners and professionals have found it convenient to forget. Eric Walter (1988:213) similarly suggests that to redress the recent loss of ability to make meaningful places 'we can start by rebuilding ourselves. The archaic way of seeing, thinking and caring is not lost. We can bring it to the surface and change its position in the

structure of experience.' When this is done 'we may begin to enlarge public sensibility and to rediscover the expressive intelligibility of human locations'.

The main aim of Tuan and Walter is to show that place is a phenomenon of human environmental experience which should not be taken for granted. They also believe that solutions to the problem of a decline in place identity must lie first with select individuals, who by their sensitivity and their strength of reasoning will be able to convey the message that place matters. Presumably their hope is that this will result in a situation in which places will once again come to be made with all the distinctive qualities still apparent in the remnants of pre-modern landscapes.

This is undeniably a worthwhile hope. It is, however, far from clear how individual sensitivity and reason will combat processes of placelessness and the marketing strategies of place exploitation.

In *The Experience of Place*, Tony Hiss (1990: xv–xvi) connects personal sensitivity with what he calls a 'brand-new science of place'. First he recommends the development of 'simultaneous perception'—a sort of self-consciously diffuse experiential watchfulness—so that 'we can salvage experiences of place'. He then links this to the work of various landscape architects, environmental designers and regional planners who have developed scientific techniques for simulating, redesigning, and managing places. Through the methods of these place scientists we are, so Hiss claims (1990:100), 'finally in a position to get on with the job of making sure that all places are worth experiencing'. David Canter (1977:157), an environmental psychologist who once proposed the slogan 'The Goal of Environmental Design is the Creation of Places', might well agree. He would like to bring all the techniques of behavioural and environmental psychology to bear on this goal. Michael Hough (1990:2) begins his book *Out of Place* by suggesting that the question of regional character has become a question of choice, an argument which would seem to be consistent with what is happening in place exploitation, and therefore is a matter of design rather than of necessity. For him place design would use the methods of landscape architecture to build upon the local character and processes of the natural environment.

These are clarion calls to action. It should be noted, however, that they require considerable shifts in perspective for design and planning professionals. Planning and landscape architecture, for example, are mostly concerned with tangible, material things such as street networks or trees. But a place is not just a material entity or a container of manipulable bits. It is also a location of experiences and meanings. To design a place is therefore to try to design meaning and value. For this there are no firm assumptions, no clear guidelines, and no body of established practice. And the science of place is useless because scientific methods cannot resolve issues of value.

A further, very important caution is also warranted. It is probable that any techniques developed for the scientific design of meaningful places will be equally useful for fabricating place identities for economic exploitation.

These concerns about placemaking have not gone unnoticed. Some designers maintain that it is impossible for professionals to design meaningful places for others, and that to do so would be an act of imposition which suppresses rather than generates significance. To minimize this possibility they emphasize self-help, usually by devising methods which allow communities in effect to create their own places. An excellent example of this is the work of Randy Hester, a landscape architect, who was asked by the residents of the island of Manteo in the Outer Banks of North Carolina to prepare a plan for economic development which would not undermine the most valued aspects of their daily lives and local landscapes. By participating in the community and talking with the residents he was able to identify a 'sacred structure' of valued places, which includes a local marsh, the drugstore, the Duchess Restaurant where locals gather for morning coffee, a statue of Sir Walter Raleigh and the town cemetery (Hester 1993). The plan for the town which Hester devised keeps tourists and related development away from these special places, so that their meaning for residents can be preserved.

Self-help design approaches to placemaking are political rather than merely technical in that they promote local empowerment. Their initial hope is that the processes of active involvement in design will lead to a revived sense of local responsibility. The larger hope is that they could lead to what Kenneth Frampton calls 'critical regionalism' (cited in Kolb 1992:165–6, 180). Unlike a strategy of simple place protection, which attempts to ignore or resist global forces of change and capital, often by resorting to nostalgia and heritage preservation, critical regionalism calls upon local resources to shape and mollify the impact of outside forces.

We can only speculate about how critical regionalism might apply in practice. It might lead to something like the 'place Utopia' imagined by Kevin Lynch (1981) in which there would be an 'urban countryside' comprised of a patchwork of regions, each with its own style of living, yet linked by electronic communications systems. At a less idealistic level it has to involve a careful attempt to discover what might be called a geographically responsible way of doing things, in which global processes and fashions would cease to be imperatives and would be used only when refracted through the lens of locality and implemented in a locally responsible way.

The balanced approach that is required by critical regionalism will not be easy to establish. First of all, there is the difficulty of finding local solutions for problems caused by processes which are not local. How, for example, is it possible to modify transmissions from direct broadcast satellites so that these respect local customs and accord with local interests? It seems that non-local process must always have an advantage because whatever is local operates at a smaller scale and is necessarily fragmented.

There is another, opposite, and no less difficult, problem to resolve. The forceful promotion of place carries with it the possibility of a descent into parochialism and sectarian politics. At its worst the unbalanced assertion of the

importance of place can serve as the foundation for strategies of regional purification and ethnic cleansing. In such cases, David Harvey (1989:351) notes quietly, 'respect for others gets mutilated in the fires between the fragments'. For all its merits, place is not an untarnished concept, and a strong attachment to place does not invariably have pleasant consequences.

### CONCLUSION

In the increasingly dislocated and fabricated geographies of the late twentieth century, places have taken on unprecedented forms and appearances. Whether we like these or not, our individual and social identities are still implicated in them, and we have no choice but to live and work or be unemployed in them. Given such inevitabilities I believe it is essential to redress the imbalance which has developed in favour of remote agencies and abstract universal processes, and to try to find methods to re-establish local integrity and responsibility. This is unlikely to be achieved by the uncritical use of a baggage of concepts such as *genius loci* and topophilia which assume that everything to do with place is good and placelessness is always bad. That will lead to crass simplifications which will ignore the subtlety and originality of the processes which are transforming the geographies in which we live. What is required is a broad-ranging and critical approach which acknowledges that place, like geography, is diverse, continually changing, ambiguous, and inclined to take on new forms as soon as the current ones have been explained.

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