

### **Some initial thoughts and approaches to Place**

The term place has been defined and used in a number of different ways by a range of writers. Some geographic locations are judged to possess a 'sense of place', a characteristic that other locations may be judged as lacking. Within this view, place is a perception of the location held by people (rather than being solely a function of the location) and is associated with characteristics that contribute a uniqueness, a specialness, an attachment, a belonging and so on. On this basis, space is often taken to refer to structural aspects of a physical setting whilst place refers to the use of the space by interacting people. (An example is Eva Hornecker: Space and Place – setting the stage for social interaction. Department of informatics, University of Sussex).

Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (Space and Place: The perspective of Experience) has outlined a spectrum of different interpretations. He added ideas of time and outlined how place, space and time interact through different understandings of them. He suggests that space can be associated with freedom and that place can be associated with safety. At the same time he suggests that place does not necessarily always have a positive set of associations; a sense of fear might also go with a sense of place.

His definition of place derives from the idea that a place comes into existence only if people give it meaning and differentiate it from wider 'unspecial' space. Once a locality is named, described, mapped, identified etc it becomes separated from other localities and takes on characteristics and values of its own. If these characteristics then get built upon/built up by social processes then the locality gains a stronger sense of place.

The view that space (as an environment of objects) merely represents a located set of opportunities whilst place arises from sets of mutually-held cultural understandings about behaviour and action, is also put forward by a range of other writers (eg Re-Place-ing Space, Steve Harrison and Paul Dourish, Xerox Paulo Alto Research Centre and Cambridge Lab). For them place is a location that has been invested with understandings about cultural expectations, behavioural appropriateness etc.. They are spaces that hold some form of value – in the way that a house may also be regarded as a home. A place overlays a space but has had something added, whether this be a social meaning, a set of conventions, or some cultural belief or understanding.

Residential differentiation, for many people in modern societies, creates such collective identities and sense of place. These help to reinforce and protect (from change/deviation) the locality's key cultural heritages through transmission of cultural awarenesses and residential ties. There are links from ideas of place to ideas of community, although both are concepts

open to variable interpretations (The Social Construction and Reconstruction of Community, G Bateson, PhD 1996, University of Central England – now Birmingham City University).

Some writers reverse the distinction above and see place as the geographical location which is transformed into space by people walking/talking across it. Others distinguish geometrical space from anthropological space – the first being given/existential and the second being constructed/produced in realities or in dreams etc.

Whichever way round we wish to use the terms, the 'sense of a place' may represent a strong identity felt by residents, visitors, or people studying the locality. Such an identity goes well beyond the opinions of single individuals and is the outcome of collective social processes (which, admittedly, depend on the interactions of individuals). It can be added to by being written about, painted, photographed or captured in music – any of which may be in response to natural, geographical features of the local landscape or in response to human activity across that landscape.

Writing about places takes a number of forms. Where these go beyond mere factual descriptions, in which the reader is given a tour or is presented with a map/layout, the more 'evocative' writings about places invite the use of metaphor: sayings/stories/images that organise the ideas about a place. There is a belief that space is transformed into the place by the application of stories, beliefs, interpreted practices and so on. These are not discrete things: Stories, for example, act as one way in which relationships can be interpreted and reinforced or changed within a broader culture. The ways that places (localities or organisations) rely on stories is a fruitful area for analysis.

Whilst space and place have been described as distinct things, in reality they are much more interrelated. Space is not an abstract set of geometrical arrangements but a setting for people to act out their everyday lived experiences. Phenomenological approaches, such as those of Merleau-Ponty, (eg Phenomenology of Perception, New York Humanities Press, 2002) make use of the idea of situated space. Dourish sees social actions as embedded in settings that are cultural and historical as well as physical (P Dourish, Where the action is: the foundations of embodied interaction, MIT Press 2001). Hornecker points out that people cannot escape spatiality. Space surrounds us, we operate within it. Through this people appropriate space, interpret space and imbue it with meaning. Interacting with space brings psychological meaning for people.

The distinction between space and place may be further extended when considering cultural activity via social electronic media; although maybe this simply requires the space to be defined as some form of an electronic location and a sense of place developed through electronic social interactions of various kinds.

There are different views of the extent to which the people using spaces can be regarded as active, creative artists or as passive, consuming, users of space. Michel de Certeau (*The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Rendall, 1984, University of California Press, Berkeley) points out that although social research methods can study language, tradition, symbolism etc it has difficulty explaining how people accommodate these things in their everyday life practices. He sets out the tactics available for these people to reclaim a sense of autonomy in the face of commerce, culture and politics; and argues that the study of everyday life practices is one way of penetrating the obscurities that these things bring. Amongst the everyday practices are the inhabiting of spaces – walking in cities and so on. As people walk through cities they weave spaces together in particular subjective ways. These cannot always be satisfactorily captured objectively (eg through drawing maps to trace routes taken, as maps try to fix too rigidly the flow of life) since it is the experience of walking, of passing through spaces, that counts.

Understanding place thus implies attempting to understand how and why people interact with specific kinds of environment in particular kinds of ways. People may not come entirely ‘fresh’ to an environment. Childhood experiences of a primal landscape may be one key influencer of how they might respond, as may significant later experiences that carry strong emotional values for the person. Such experiences are often ones mediated through family, community, culture, nationality and so on. Where childhood experiences are strong influences, the particular landscape can form part of the structuring of the individual’s personality - acting as reference points against which other places may be later evaluated.

Place is thus associated with personal dimensions, psychological dimensions, cultural dimensions and so on. Yan Xu (*Sense of Place and Sense of Identity*; East St Louis Action Research Project, 1995, University of Illinois) sees sense of place as a factor that is able to make an environment psychologically comfortable or uncomfortable, and able to be analysed through variables such as legibility/readability; perceptions of and preferences for the visual environment; and the compatibility of the setting with the human purposes in action there.

Part of developing a sense of place is defining oneself in terms of a particular locality. (Topophilia: Yan Xu 1974). Understanding why people hold the views that they do has been a rich strand of exploration in sociology, human geography, anthropology and urban planning. Analysts of social action have often been additionally interested in the ways that place or setting might influence individual and collective actions.

Ervin Goffman (*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 1959, Penguin, New York) uses a theatrical metaphor within which different modes of behaviour and interactions can occur ‘frontstage’ or ‘backstage’. Anthony Giddens (*The Constitution of Society*, 1984, Polity Press, Cambridge) used the notion of ‘locales’ which go well beyond being simply spaces to

incorporate the ways in which such settings are routinely used to constitute meaning within interactions. William Whyte (*City: Rediscovering the Centre*, 1988, Doubleday, New York) provided detailed descriptions of how streets were used for social interactions within a changing city.

'Placeless' spaces are often associated with landscapes that have no special relationship with their specific location (eg 'This hotel room could be in any city in the world and you wouldn't be able to tell'). The link is often that such spaces are mass-produced to standardised formats, mass-designed or over-commercialised. It has been described as there being no sense of 'There' in that place.

Again Yan Xu, analysing people's remembrances for significant places, identifies the potential for feelings of loss of place (a humiliating loss of a sense of past, present and even future), placelessness (the distress at not having or being able to attain a sense of place) and rootlessness (an alienation brought about through lack of continuity or an overwhelming sense of change in the place).

On another tack: If places are socially constructed through the social uses of localities, does this just happen or can it be made to happen, ie can places be 'made'? Placemaking as a term began to be used in the 1960s/70s by people interested in the role of landscape in the design and development processes. These built on the work of people such as Jane Jacobs (*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 1963, Random House, New York) and William Whyte (*The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, 1980, Conservation Society, Washington DC), both of whom offered fresh ideas about designing cities for people to live in.

At the same time writers such as Henri Levebre (*The Production of Space*, 1974.) was looking at how cultural spaces were made, used and reproduced through continued practices. Social space came to be seen as being constructed around everyday lived spatial practices, conceived ideas of what is meant by terms such as space, and perceptions about what spaces represent for people. Places were spaces that could be remembered: could bring emotions, recollections and memories to mind. It became feasible to think more in terms of emergence, of produced possibilities. (Elizabeth Ellsworth, *Pedagogies and Place: Design*, 2005)

The architects and planners influenced by these writers were concerned with the ways that constructed forms might influence the daily experiences of people interacting with those plazas, buildings, waterfronts etc.. Architects and planners became concerned with producing spaces that act as places. One aim was to design places that connected into the rest of the locality through a sense of sameness yet retained a distinctiveness, a difference, about them.

Particular cases have been argued for engaging residents in placemaking eg within regeneration activities (an example is the 2010 publication by the Scottish Government: *Partners in*

Regeneration – Participation in Placemaking) and for the place of public art in cultural placemaking through fostering social and psychological relationships between individuals, communities and localities.

At a time of proposed shifts towards a bigger society there have been proposals for more open-source approaches to placemaking, using digital/social media to get collective views on the development of cities and other places. The open calls for views, the crowdsourcing of attitudes, and the broad electronic exchange of information are all aspects of this.

This short survey has intended to begin an exploration of some of the various approaches to ideas of place and space, how one may be related to (or built upon) the other, the emphases that might be available for residents, planners and writers/artists to use in relation to the determining of a sense of place for any locality, and how this might rely on the use of storytelling/interpretation-making. Hopefully some of this will be developed further.