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Space and Place

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Elvin Wyly

The Disappearance and Return of Space

As E. Barbara Phillips emphasizes, “after years of neglect, space is a hot topic in social theory and philosophy. In terms of its theoretical importance, space rivaled the spotted owl; it was almost extinct by the mid-twentieth century. ... Then, starting in the 1970s, space was brought back into social theory in a big way.”¹ One of the major forces in this renewed attention was Henri Lefebvre (1905-1991), a leading French intellectual who saw space as an inherent part of socio-cultural and political development. Lefebvre’s work in the 1960s and 1970s was not immediately influential in the English-speaking world, however, and it was only in the 1990s that his ideas achieved widespread recognition throughout the academy.

Lefebvre’s ideas on the “production of space,” therefore, entered an intellectual conversation *that had already been shaped by competing views of the role of space in urban life*. To generalize,

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

perspectives on space until the 1970s were dominated by a Cartesian, Euclidian rationality. René Descartes (1596-1650) was a French philosopher, physicist, and mathematician who developed analytical geometry, while Euclid (3rd century BCE) was a Greek mathematician who developed the principles of plane geometry. Cartesian and Euclidian perspectives yielded powerful, yet limited views of urban life, in which the analyst's task was to measure and map spatial patterns and spatial associations. This **spatial analysis** tradition dominated urban studies for many years, and it remains important today. Regularities in the spatial distribution of big cities and small towns can be explained in a framework known as central place theory. Analysts have refined sophisticated methods for classifying cities on the basis of their economic specialization. Others

Spatial analysis grew out of the logic and precision of Cartesian and Euclidian geometry. Geography even began to develop "laws" like physics and astronomy. Waldo Tobler's "first law of geography": all things are related, but near things are more closely related than distant things.

study the varied social and economic contrasts among neighborhoods inside cities: for some, the city seems to be divided into a series of concentric zones; for others, the city is carved into sectors radiating outward from the center; and others regard the city as a patchwork of "multiple nuclei" of distinct functions that attract and repel other land uses.

The Cartesian and Euclidian perspective on urban space alternated between two contradictory premises. On the one hand, space was often seen as nothing more than a backdrop, a container in which social and economic processes played out. On the other hand, models of spatial pattern and spatial interaction -- when empirically tested in a wide variety of circumstances -- showed a consistent, negative effect of distance on all sorts of measures of spatial interaction. Things close to

one another interact a lot, while distant things have less interaction. One of the most memorable summaries of this observation is Waldo Tobler's "first law of geography": all things are related, but near things are more closely related than distant ones. Space might be nothing more than an empty container, therefore, but all the measurements of spatial interaction seemed to suggest that space had its own causal powers. Thus the contradiction: space is a backdrop, devoid of content -- but with the power to shape human life and experience.

Contradictions like this eventually led to second thoughts about how much we can learn from spatial analysis in the Cartesian-Euclidian tradition. The obsession with measurement and mapping was attacked as "spatial fetishism," which is

"a term of criticism applied to approaches that accord space its own distinctive powers (cf. spatial separatism): the term has been most forcefully applied to locational analysis and spatial science, in particular their treatment of the so-called frictions of distance as a causal mechanism. Space *per se* is contentless

and only important when given status by human agents, as also occurs with nature.”²

Spatial fetishism: the criticism of spatial analysis approaches that assume space has its own distinctive powers.

In the last generation, leading thinkers have forged a range of alternatives, in “a general convergence on the *socialization of spatial analysis*, and, hard on its heels, the *spatialization of social analysis*: like simultaneous equations, each was seen to require the other.”³ Space and society are seen as processes rather than things, and there is now an emphasis on their mutual interaction. The experts who spend their time mapping and measuring cities have been reminded that all those detailed

patterns are produced by social and political struggle; the theorists who spend their time analyzing social and political conflict have been reminded that every social movement, every political drama, takes place in and through space. For Lefebvre and many other scholars in the humanities and social sciences, space is produced, consumed, performed, and always contested, always open to change.

“The Report of My Death was an Exaggeration”

The revival of interdisciplinary interest in space, however, has coincided with the dramatic era of globalization over the past generation. This created a striking paradox. Just as many scholars in the humanities were recognizing the fundamental importance and complexity of space and spatiality in human affairs, an increasing number of economists and other social scientists were suggesting that space was becoming *less important*. The latter perspective also proved influential in the press, in politics and in popular culture, and in many quarters it became popular to wonder if the “end of history”⁴ was coinciding with the end of space as well. Peter Hall, one of the most prominent figures in city planning, summarizes the argument this way:

“You sometimes hear the argument that cities have no future at all. Some experts predict the “Death of Distance”: a world in which the traditional distance-deterrence effects, embodied in every locational model, diminish to zero and the entire world becomes a frictionless plain on which it is perfectly easy to locate any activity anywhere.”⁵

² Ronald J. Johnston (2000). “Spatial Fetishism.” In R. J. Johnston, Derek Gregory, Geraldine Pratt, and Michael Watts, editors, *The Dictionary of Human Geography*. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 776.

³ Derek Gregory (2000). “Space, Human Geography and.” In R. J. Johnston, Derek Gregory, Geraldine Pratt, and Michael Watts, editors, *The Dictionary of Human Geography*. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 767-.

⁴ This is a phrase most commonly associated with Francis Fukuyama, whose suggestion that the end of the Cold War culminated the long historical struggle for freedom, has been highly influential among many neoconservative thinkers. Fukuyama’s thesis emphasized that the collapse of the Soviet empire left Western conceptions of capitalism and individualist models of democracy as the only viable political option. Francis Fukuyama (1992). *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Penguin.

⁵ Peter Hall (2003). “The End of the City? ‘The Report of My Death was an Exaggeration.’” *City* 7(2), 141-152.

Advocates of this view cite an endless stream of statistics to make the case that the “friction of distance” is falling no matter how it is measured: telephone calls, international mail and courier service, international air travel, and almost any other kind of spatial interaction you can think of - all of them are becoming cheaper each year. The cost of a three-minute telephone call from London to New York, adjusted for inflation, fell from almost £500 in 1927 to about £63 in 1945, to £13 in 1970, and to £0.52 in 1996.⁶ International air travel, once a rare and exclusive luxury for the elite, is now widely used by the middle classes and even many low-income people.⁷⁸ And, not surprisingly, the diffusion of the Internet and various forms of wireless communication have prompted widespread predictions that distance no longer matters.⁹

In this environment, individuals as well as companies are finding it ever easier to locate wherever they find the right mix of amenities, at the most competitive cost. For firms, this involves finding locations with lower labor costs and more favorable (“business-friendly”)

Advances in transportation and communication technologies led to predictions of the “death of distance” and the “end of geography.”

But globalization has not ended geography, and it has not killed cities. Distance still matters. Virtual and face-to-face communication are complementary. The dispersal of economic activity makes certain “command and control” cities even more important.

regulatory climates -- and it also involves reconfiguring all of the firm’s operations so that certain processes can be spatially ‘spun off’ to low-cost sites; in other words, if a firm absolutely must have a New York or Tokyo presence, it will do everything possible to ensure that only the most essential functions remain in such high-cost locations. For individuals and households, the locational decision is driven by concerns of employment and residential amenities, and for an increasing number of upper-middle class professionals, work is becoming more independent, autonomous, and ‘footloose.’

Peter Hall wrote an insightful essay addressing many of these issues: “The End of the City? The Report of My Death was an Exaggeration.” Hall recognizes the declining costs of many kinds of transactions and interactions, but he synthesizes a growing body of research that provides reasons to question the end of space perspective. First, although the friction of distance may be falling, it never reaches zero, and so spatial interaction over

⁶ Cited in Peter Hall, “End of the City?” p. 141.

⁷ Although, to be sure, we must recognize the inherent contextual variation in a construct like “low-income” people. There is considerable travel by poor immigrants living and working in North America and Western Europe, for example, but these individuals typically have access to more financial resources than the absolute poor living in many parts of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

⁸ Indeed, upper-middle class travelers now lament the days of exclusivity, and airline pilots often complain that their occupation has been degraded nearly to the point of ‘bus-drivers in the air.’

⁹ See “How I Got the Story and Learned to Love Markets,” in Esther Dyson (1997). *Release 2.0*. New York: Broadway Books.

longer distances will never be completely without cost. Second, the key assumption of the ‘end of the city’ argument is that advances in communications will replace face-to-face interaction, destroying the need for human concentration or economic agglomeration. But there is considerable evidence that in-person and virtual communication are *complementary*. Agglomeration will weaken for routine tasks, but for specialized, fast-changing, and customized activities, complementarity will strengthen the powers of concentration and the allure of the urban. Third, a related insight was provided by Saskia Sassen, who showed how the increasing spatial dispersion and complexity of economic activity at the global scale actually strengthened the need for strategic spatial thinking: transnational corporations, for example, now monitor spatial variations in costs quite closely, and they also feel a powerful need to have a key vantage point in a city at the ‘center of the action’ to supervise their scattered operations. Key cities have emerged as “command and control” nodes for the global economy.

The New Urban Paradigm

As Phillips summarizes, “One new approach to city spatial structure ... is called the new urban paradigm, or, alternatively, the political economy model. It stresses the role of power in the allocation of urban land.”¹⁰ Social class, political systems, and struggles for meaning and control lie behind the deceptive simplicity and apparent neutrality of the city map. Key theorists in this area include David Harvey, Manuel Castells, Mark Gottdiener, all of them drawing inspiration from the work of Henri Lefebvre. The new urban paradigm goes beyond arguing that space (and cities) matter, and argues that urban space is a site of contestation and political struggle. For

Lefebvre’s spaces of representation: spaces that are redefined by the lives, experiences, and actions of those who occupy and use them.

Spaces of representation are at the heart of social movements, and they are at the heart of the urban experience.

Lefebvre, for example, Western history can be understood as a long process of taking social space farther and farther from the realm of the human body -- a “de-corporalization” as production, consumption, and everything else took place across greater distances. As part of this process, the space of individuals has been remade and redefined. Lefebvre encourages us to consider the subtle distinctions between how space is *perceived, conceived, and lived*. First, **spatial practices** help us understand the real, everyday material, physical spaces in which institutions, companies, and people organize their activities. In our lifetimes, spatial practices have come to be dominated by bureaucratic organization, management, and commodification: more and more of the experience of daily life in the city is organized around the drive to make

and spend money. Second, Lefebvre draws attention to **representations of space**. These are the languages and technologies of mapping, measurement, and surveillance that were pioneered in the Cartesian-Euclidian spatial analysis tradition. When adopted by powerful institutions -- such as the military or the police -- these languages and technologies promote unique ways of thinking

¹⁰ E. Barbara Phillips (1996). *City Lights: Urban-Suburban Life in the Global Society*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 432.

about space. Space becomes an abstraction, and the particular representations (maps) in the minds of police and military commanders are specifically tailored to the priorities of strategy and control.

These two approaches -- spatial practices, and representations of space -- should look somewhat familiar from our discussion above. These two concepts had been in around in geography long before Lefebvre. But Lefebvre went further, and added a new, third dimension. **Spaces of representation** are “spaces that are lived, experienced, and recoded through the actions of those that occupy and use them.”¹¹ Social movements redefine and remake space -- and redefine themselves in the process -- through parades, marches, speeches, and demonstrations. They challenge the everyday concrete bureaucratization of *spatial practices* by breaking the rules or defying expectations. They resist or disrupt the technologies of mapping and surveillance -- the *representations of space* used by state authorities or powerful corporations. Spaces of representation are how democratic social change quite literally *takes place*.¹²

Urban Utopias of Spatial Form and Social Process

David Harvey, in an ambitious book titled *Spaces of Hope*, takes this line of thought even further, seeking to understand the history of utopian social movements, and current questions of

The word “utopia” comes from the Latin and Greek ou (not) + topos (place).

Sir Thomas More introduced the concept in his book on an ideal island society, Utopia (1516).

the possibility of alternative forms of economic and political life. “Utopia” at once brings us face to face with rich paradoxes of space and place: the origins of the word itself are revealing. The modified Latin and Greek *ou* (not) + *topos* (place) were joined by Sir Thomas More (1478-1535), in a treatise describing an ideal island society, *Utopia* (1516). The word is now widely understood to describe any imaginary political system with perfectly-adjusted relations between the individual and the State. In More’s rendering, an island republic of philosophers presented the best of all possible worlds, but it was not long until the utopian hopes of Utopia were dashed in a quite personal way: More became Lord

Chancellor to Henry VIII in 1529, but after resigning upon a refusal to recognize the king’s divorce from Catherine of Aragon, he was eventually imprisoned, found guilty of treason, and beheaded. Yet *Utopia* became deeply influential, despite (or perhaps because of) the elegant simplicity of the idea. “More’s aim, and this is characteristic, was social harmony and stability (in contrast to the chaotic state of affairs in England at that time.) To this end, he excluded the potentially disruptive forces of money, private property, wage labor, exploitation (the workday is six hours), internal (though not external) commodity exchange, capital accumulation, and the

¹¹ Stuart Elden (2009). “Production of Space.” In Derek Gregory, Ron Johnston, Geraldine Pratt, Michael J. Watts, and Sarah Whatmore, eds., *The Dictionary of Human Geography, Fifth Edition*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley, 590-592, quote from p. 590.

¹² See also Derek Gregory (2000). “Production of Space.” In R. J. Johnston, Derek Gregory, Geraldine Pratt, and Michael Watts, editors, *The Dictionary of Human Geography*. Oxford: Blackwell, 644-647.



Utopia. The woodcut cover of Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516). Source: public domain image, via Wikimedia commons.

market process (though not a market place). The happy perfection of the social and moral order depends upon these exclusions.”¹³

More's *Utopia* inspired countless hopeful experiments over the course of several centuries. But for Harvey, “All these forms of Utopia can be characterized as ‘**Utopias of spatial form**’ since the temporality of the social process, the dialectics of social change -- real history -- are excluded, while social stability is assured by a fixed spatial form.”¹⁴ Hundreds of small settlements were established on the basis of key elements of Utopian thinking on the relations between individuals and a small, unobtrusive state; North America in the nineteenth century provided an especially

fertile ground for utopian experiments. “The infinite array of possible spatial orderings holds out the prospect of an infinite array of possible social worlds. What is so impressive about subsequent utopian plans when taken together is their variety.”¹⁵ Among several examples, Harvey considers designs for a planned settlement in the United States, New Harmony, that was based on the ideas of Robert Owen, a British reformer and socialist whose *New View of Society* (1813) was premised on an explicit belief that the social and physical environment helped to shape individual character. And yet the plans for New Harmony made clear that utopia required separation, fortification, and discipline. Utopias of spatial form are defined in large part on the basis of excluding the intractable chaos of their surroundings, and such spatial manifestations

¹³ David Harvey (2000). *Spaces of Hope*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 160.

¹⁴ Harvey, *Spaces*, p. 160.

¹⁵ Harvey, *Spaces*, p. 161.

survive only through authoritarian measures that destroy the presumed balance between individuals and the state.



New Harmony, Indiana. A bird's-eye painting of a community proposed by Robert Owen, from an engraving by F. Bate, London, 1838. New Harmony was established in Indiana in 1814 by a group of separatists from the German Lutheran Church, who moved from Harmonie, Pennsylvania. Source: public domain image, via Wikimedia Commons.¹⁶

market process (though not a market place). The happy perfection of the social and moral order depends upon these exclusions.”¹⁷

Utopias of spatial form proliferated across North America in small town settlements in the nineteenth century. With the spread of industrialized urbanization as the century wore on, utopian sentiments began to animate the many attempts to deal with the worst excesses of oppression, pollution, and crowding in the “shock cities” seen to embody all that was most fearful about the new era. Urban planning became the search for and tangible expression of what Peter Hall describes as “Cities of Imagination:” “Much if not most of what has happened -- for good or for ill -- to the world’s cities, in the years since World War Two, can be traced back to the ideas of a few visionaries who lived and wrote long ago, often almost ignored and largely rejected by their contemporaries. They have had their posthumous vindication in the world of practical affairs; even, some might say, their revenge on it.”¹⁸ Harvey devotes careful attention to Ebenezer Howard (1850-1928), whose single book on “Garden Cities” stands as perhaps the

¹⁶ The Indiana University - Purdue University Indianapolis partnership (IUPUI) maintains a document collection on the New Harmony utopian settlement; see <http://www.ulib.iupui.edu/kade/newharmony/newharmony-in.html>

¹⁷ David Harvey (2000). *Spaces of Hope*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 160.

¹⁸ Peter Hall (2002). *Cities of Tomorrow. Third Edition*. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 2.

single most influential treatise in the history of town planning,¹⁹ and the Swiss architect Le Corbusier (1885-1965), made famous by his statement when he first began to write under that name around 1920 that a house is a machine for living.²⁰ Howard's thoughts inspired a generation of "new towns" on the outskirts of large cities, many of which endure today, while

Utopias of spatial form are idealistic experiments in design that ensure social stability through a fixed boundary and the exclusion of difference or social change.

The dream of utopians of spatial form: we can build a new society if we can experiment with new ways of living in a closed, clearly-defined space.

machine for living, can be realized.

As Harvey points out, the impulse for planning utopias of spatial form is alive and well. The new urbanist tradition of landscape architecture and town planning, best exemplified by the work of Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, has achieved widespread popularity because of its appeal to an idealized, nostalgic constructed memory of small-town America, complete with the white-picket fences and porches that, it is hoped, will encourage suburbanites to talk with one another and build a sense of community.²² And the impulse can even be traced to what some have taken to calling "degenerate utopias," such as Disneyland, which can be understood as a "supposedly happy, harmonious, and non-conflictual space set aside from the 'real' world

Corbusier's plans for high-rise towers came to animate decades of modernist pursuit of rational efficiency in Europe, in the planned capital of Brasilia, Brazil, and in the urban renewal program in the U.S., where "some of the biggest and most influential cities had followed a Corbusian model" only to find themselves a few years later "contemplating its abandonment. ... The classic case was Pruitt-Igoe: an award-winning 1955 project in St. Louis, which achieved notoriety by being blown up 17 years after it was built. That day, the demolition preserved for posterity on film, it became an instant symbol of all that was perceived as wrong with urban renewal, not merely in the United States but in the world at large."²¹ For Harvey, the ambiguous legacy of Howard, Le Corbusier, and many other influential planners and architects lies in the contradictions between the hopeful spatial imagination and the need to fix (and thus police) the boundaries within which the idyllic garden city, or the efficient

¹⁹ As Hall puts it, most writers have thoroughly got Howard wrong, but "They cannot claim that he made it difficult for them. In his 78 years he wrote only one book, and a slim one at that. First published in 1898 under the title *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, it was re-issued in 1902 with the title *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*. This was perhaps catchier, but it diverted people from the truly radical character of the message, demoting him from social visionary into physical planner." Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow*, p. 88.

²⁰ Le Corbusier is often regarded as a preeminent French architect, but he was born in Switzerland and only lived in Paris after about 1916. Le Corbusier was a pen name adopted in 1920, by Charles-Eduardo Jenneret. See "The City of Towers," Chapter 7 in Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow*.

²¹ Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow*, p. 256.

²² See, for example, <http://www.dpz.com>, and also Philip Langdon (1994). *A Better Place to Live*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, especially p. 113 ff: "Both ... came from families with cataclysmic histories.... Those calamities seem, if anything, to have fortified the two architects' resolve to lead a kind of cultural resistance against destructive and foolish practices."

‘outside’ in such a way as to soothe and mollify, to entertain, to invent history and to cultivate a nostalgia for some mythical past, to perpetuate the fetish of commodity culture rather than to critique it. Disneyland eliminates the troubles of actual travel by assembling the rest of the world, properly sanitized and mythologized, into one place of pure fantasy containing multiple spatial orders.”²³

But the story does not end here. The most provocative element of Harvey’s conceptualization involves **utopias of social process**. The word utopia is almost always equated with place --

Utopias of social process: political ideologies that are expressed in purely temporal terms, ignoring location and space.

*In our lifetimes, the dominant utopia of social process is **neoliberalism**: the promotion of free markets, economic competition, privatization, and de-regulation.*

those small, failed experimental towns, or those mythical cities and towns of the visionary planners’ imaginations -- and yet “Idealized versions of social processes ... usually get expressed in purely temporal terms. They are literally bound to no place whatsoever and are typically specified outside of the constraints of spatiality altogether. The qualities of space and place are totally ignored.” For Harvey, the key lineage of a utopia of spatial form runs from Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* (1776) through the political triumph of market conservatism inaugurated by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan: “The free-market juggernaut, with its mantras of private and personal responsibility and initiative, deregulation, privatization, liberalization of markets, free trade, downsizing of government, draconian cut-backs in the welfare state and its protections, has rolled on and on. For more than twenty years now we have

been battered and cajoled at almost every turn into accepting the utopianism of process which Smith dreamed as the solution to all our ills.”²⁴

The distinction between utopias of spatial form and utopias of social process allow us to see urban and metropolitan space in fascinating new ways.

First, it allows us to understand the precarious balance required in creating new economic and political institutions in societies where economies and cultures are increasingly transnational and far-flung.

Second, it allows us to understand that appeals to the inevitability of a utopia of social process almost always strengthen attempts to deal with problematic spatial challenges. Margaret Thatcher, regarded by conservatives as perhaps Britain’s most influential leader ever, famously

²³ Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, p. 165, 167.

²⁴ Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, p. 176. See pp. 176-177 for insightful, hilarious, and frightening analyses of the reincarnation of Hegelian thought in the likes of Thatcher and Newt Gingrich. Even better, see Ali G’s interview with Newt, at www.lando.co.uk

declared that “there is no alternative” to the market, and shortly thereafter she put this new TINA doctrine into practice with an explicitly spatial urban political move -- dismantling the Greater London Council, which had stood in the way of several privatization initiatives. Many leaders in subsequent years have learned a great deal from Thatcher’s tactical and strategic sophistication. Today it is common for leaders attempting to achieve certain goals in a particular city, for example, to loudly proclaim the inevitability of globalization – in utopia-of-social-process fashion – to justify their preferred course of action.

Third, both the advocates of marketization-privatization and its challengers meet in *specific urban places*. Cities across the globe have become battlegrounds for challengers of corporate globalization (what has sometimes been called the ‘anti-globalization’ movement) who confront trade ministers and national leaders at period meetings of the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, and all sorts of other free-trade summits. A new urban system is being shaped by the dynamic tensions between alternative visions -- alternative utopias of social process threaten and disrupt, at least temporarily, the host cities’ attempts to present even the thin veneer of a utopia of spatial form.



Instant Living: Albuquerque, New Mexico, August 2004 (Elvin Wyly)

Sense of Place

The second half of our discussion today focuses on the concept of *place*. 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?”²⁵ 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.”²⁶

²⁵ E. Barbara Phillips (1996). *City Lights: Urban-Suburban Life in the Global Society*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 452.

²⁶ Phillips, *City Lights*, p. 452.

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*.²⁷

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."²⁸ 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*"²⁹) 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."³⁰ 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."³¹ Similarly, John Agnew drew attention to "sense of place, the local structure of feeling."³² Not surprisingly, the local conception of place is closely associated with ideas of community.

²⁷ 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).

²⁸ 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.

²⁹ Bernard S. Cayne, editor (1990). *The New Lexicon Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language*. New York: Lexicon Publications, p. 767.

³⁰ Duncan, "Place," p. 582.

³¹ Duncan, "Place," p. 582.

³² John Agnew (1987). *Place and Politics: The Geographical Mediation of State and Society*. Boston: Allen and Unwin.

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?"³³

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 Brinkerhoff 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."³⁴ 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."³⁵

And if there is a typical urban landscape, then understanding it begins with Kevin Lynch's landmark *Image of the City*.³⁶ 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."³⁷ 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.

³³ 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.

³⁴ John Brinkerhoff Jackson (1994). *A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, p. 3.

³⁵ Jackson, *Sense of Place*, p. 3.

³⁶ Kevin Lynch (1960). *The Image of the City*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

³⁷ Phillips, *City Lights*, p. 477.

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;”³⁸ 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.³⁹

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*

³⁸ 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.

³⁹ 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.

*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."*⁴⁰

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."⁴¹

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.⁴² 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.⁴³ Third, "places do not have single, unique 'identities'; they are full of internal conflicts."⁴⁴ 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

⁴⁰ Doreen Massey (1994). *Space, Place, and Gender*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 154.

⁴¹ Massey, *Space, Place*, p. 147.

⁴² "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.

⁴³ 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.

⁴⁴ Massey, *Space, Place*, p. 155.

imagined as the product of layer upon layer of different sets of linkages, both local and to the wider world.”⁴⁵

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,”⁴⁶ 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 we 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.”⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸ 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.”⁴⁹

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

⁴⁵ Massey, *Space, Place*, p. 156.

⁴⁶ 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.

⁴⁷ Marvin Mikesell, quoted in Duncan, “Landscape,” p. 430.

⁴⁸ 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.

⁴⁹ Duncan, “Landscape,” p. 430.

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;⁵⁰ how particular ways of seeing are advanced by elite classes with an interest in promoting certain kinds of views of themselves and their property;⁵¹ how landscape interpretation can be likened to the performances in a theater;⁵² 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."⁵³ 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."⁵⁴ 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

⁵⁰ Denis Cosgrove (1998). *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

⁵¹ Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels (1988). *The Iconography of Landscape*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁵² 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.

⁵³ Don Mitchell (1996). *The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 2.

⁵⁴ Mitchell, *Lie of the Land*, p. 9.

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.”⁵⁵

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.⁵⁶

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.

⁵⁵ Don Mitchell (2000). *Cultural Geography: A Critical Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 94.

⁵⁶ 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 Erztatz Colosseum.” *Ecumene* 8(1), 51-86.