The Meaning of PLACE

Peter E. Smirniotopoulos

What may be needed is a built environment flexible enough to allow the quality of experience to evolve over time.

Of equal relevance to the future of urban places are the myriad and sometimes subtle byproducts of the ever-increasing integration of technology into daily life, such as the expectations—although it is unclear whose expectation it is—of 24-hour-a-day, seven-day, 2-week connectivity and accessibility and the continued hyper-specialization of talent in the marketplace. These trends, however, may portend the opposite of what the last century’s technophiles, futurists, and self-professed visionaries predicted for cities. Certain cities will flourish during the Information Revolution, not because they have the best fiber-optic infrastructure or the greatest access to venture capital, but because they offer their residents and visitors the quality of experience desired.

America’s preoccupation with the new has been heightened to an almost feverish pitch with the exponential rate of technological advancement. This fascination, unfortunately, has not been confined to cars, stereos, computers, and other consumer-oriented gadgetry. The exaltation of the new—as distinguished from the truly innovative—applies equally to how the places where Americans work, live, and play have been shaped since the mid-1980s. In particular, the last decade’s emphasis on place making has been most acute in the creation of new towns and single-purpose projects located outside the urban core, rather than in the revitalization of urban centers. These new projects often have more in common with a three-dimensional version of virtual reality than with the kind of real community that urban sociologist Jane Jacobs, in her seminal 1961 book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, described in detail. Jacobs’s intent at the time was to halt what she considered Robert Moses’s senseless and rampant destruction of her beloved New York City in the name of urban renewal. Her observations about the underlying qualities of inner-city neighborhoods and their relationship to other neighborhoods and to New York City at large—to which suburban development remains, some 40 years later, anathema—are equally applicable to all inner cities and urban areas. And these insights are as relevant today as they were when first published.

Creating—from whole cloth—a new place that conveys the feeling of authenticity seems eerily removed from honoring and building on those things that actually contribute to a sense of place. Ironically, modern place making regards the movie *The Truman Show* less a parody of new urbanism than a how-to video. The meaning of place has much more to do with substance and far less to do with style; yet stylistic concerns and imperatives continue to dominate discussions about place. This stylistic approach to place making, fostered by a seemingly endless supply of design and real estate industry conferences, symposia, and workshops, contrasts sharply with an understanding of the true meaning of place.

The true meaning of place is grounded in theories of cognition, the physiology of memory, the complementary disciplines of anthropology and sociology, and—perhaps most important—the basic human need for community and social interaction. These factors may be contrasted with the latest urban planning principles and architectural designs advocated by a handful of self-appointed place makers, primarily architects and urban planners, who create new built environments premised almost exclusively on canned nostalgia and excessive control of the built environment. They do this with incredible hubris and an almost arrogant disregard for real human needs and values, in much the same way that the early disciples of the International Style, led by many new urbanists, imposed a cold and dispassionate modernity on the world in
Finding a "Real" Place

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erceptions which place-related characteristics or ideas are going to work—and when—is almost impossible. But it is crucial, in appreciating the true meaning of place, to draw a clear distinction between sensation and experience. Sensation is an impression; it is transient and fleeting and will not be found out. Experience, by contrast, is substantial and enduring, the genuine article. Sensation is virtually experience actually. Sensation is a simonit; it can change—temporarily. Now people's real experience changes who we are. It is the Big Reality. People have a few/hot relationship with the big R. They spend their rational moments protecting themselves against it and the rest of their time tempting it in fantastic ways.

People even want their furniture and objects to look as though they have been around the block—exhausted, out of fashion, and willing to tell their stories through their present, tattered, and faded patina. It seems that no one really wants "new". This is increasingly true about places to which people elect to go repeatedly. Eco-tourism and vanilla adventures are growing proofs of the irresistible fascination that people have with the most important component of experience: unpredictable outcome. Create places where unpredictable outcomes are a possibility, and the site can be pretty much assured of popularity.

The fundamental flaw of "natural environments" is that now the "natural" is unadventurably edited out of them—which is the with a lot of people. People do not always want an "experience." A vacation taken from inside a tour bus can turn an entire country into a "trendy environment." The flavor of an unexpected wonder which their rather nice mountains have been added on to is the virtual security and predictability. But as the world becomes increasingly virtual and all its definition, predictable, places that endure will be places where something wonderful, something unexpected, might happen.

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How does one contribute to the make the unpredictable happen? The most successful, most enduring places are, over and over and now and old. The old looks better for the new, and vice versa. A "real" place—with emotional content and meaning—is what one gets when one connects directly the character and intent of a project or a place to its resident culture. Virtually all things that endure have memory and prophecy in perfect balance, with no stage acting as a reliable actor for even the most radical ideas and with prophecy offering a promising future inspired by all that has gone before.

Dovetail World cemeteries initially showed and then delighted audiences with fresh musical ideas formed by traditional African folk themes. He took the most obvious audience, the

mid-19th century listener, to places of which he had never dreamed. Dovetail was able to do this because it was interested in his work as a deep affection and understanding of his audience. The Victorians recognized that the technology of trains, and the glass and steel streets to house them, could be terrifying to the people. So they tempered these new technologies, this new technology, by wrapping them in porosity and alchemical images drawn from the stories of their culture.

The Guggenheim in Bilbao, Spain, is in a remarkable mythology. It is Gorton's vision of the soul of Don Quijote. The wrinkled form of the spent conquistador, the tortured gargoyle, it all is there meant for Sancho, and it is made of the same material as an F-11. Does it look old fashioned? Absolutely not. It is deeply con- nected? Certain it is popular? Most definitely.

But when memory and prophecy are out of balance, what is left is what Robert Pirsig, American poet laureate, warns against: "recreation and nostalgia based on memory but mythology and speci-ficity may well be the soul of the body, but not the soul.

That is part of what is missing in theme parks. Prophecy without our countermemory of myth in which it is found in those big buildings and places that people refer to as "cool" or "interesting.

People love to hear stories told and again and again of the same "trans" Conservative planners, and architects who understand that people gravitate toward places where they can put themselves in the story will succed in developing places that are cherished and filled with those who may or may not be "entertained."—Henry B. Hoen, co-chairman of COMARKS, Inc. in Denver

A New Sense of "Place"

"Geography is dead." So proclaims World magazine editor and new economy guru Kevin Kelly in his book, New Rules for the New Economy. Kelly sees advanced economies moving from a world of places to places of space, and is not the only one. The past two decades were ripe with predictions of the end of the influence of geography and the eclipse of place by technology.

Ever since the 1950s, experts have been predicting that a combination of new technologies—from the automobile to advanced telecommunications—and people's preference for larger and larger homes would essentially kill off cities.

But in the past decade or so, a new sense of place has emerged. People are experiencing a craving for real community, authenticity, and a truer sense of place. Take a walk through any one of the scenes of unregulating urban districts throughout this country, but not artful and creative types but also high-tech companies are flocking to these urban dis-tricts, adopting and occupying older industrial spaces and random neighborhoods that once were given up for dead. In Seattle, roughly 50 percent of all high-tech businesses are in and around the downtown core, in a technology district stretching from Pioneer Square to Belltown. In Pittsburgh, folks are selling like crazy and the hottest neighborhoods are in the city's urban districts. High-tech companies are abandoning the suburbs for funky spaces downtown, and in Pittsburgh's old wholesale produce district, the Strip. Developers cannot keep up with demand.

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Local institutions have ceased to provide meaning, stability, and support in life. In the "old society," many people took their cues from, and found their identity in, the corporation. Others lived in the town they grew up in and could strong family ties and lifelong friends. "The new society" pronounces many aspects of older relationships.

Today, fewer and fewer people find a permanent identity in the company they work. More and more people are on their own, with no big company to guide their choices and to structure their lives. In fact, the new society makes it more feasible for people who want to live in. In this kind of environment, people are paying more and more attention to where they live. Place matters more in their lives. Place becomes an important part of people's identity—much more so than the company for which they work. People are not looking just for a job, but a place with many, many opportunities—a thick labor market. They are looking for other interesting people, for places that are filled with diversity—where anyone can "plug in" and make a life. Place is the physical context in which people can actualize all facets of their lives—work, home, leisure—a sense of identity, social interaction, experience, and community.

But the resurgence of place is not without its prob-lems. The preference for urban living is something that is being considered. Is it socially responsible to be a resident of an eco-friendly building? Is it socially responsible to buy a home in a green neighborhood? In the past few decades, demand for eco-friendly buildings has been increasing, and this trend is expected to continue.

The need for a new kind of environment is not just a matter of personal preference. Many people have found that urban living offers a rich diversity of experiences and opportunities. The concept of "place" is not just about living in a particular location, but about experiencing a sense of belonging and community. This is something that has been missing in the past, and is now being rediscovered.

Long-lasting, short-lived, if the nature of the place is not contrived but genuine and the meaning of the place is not virtual but real.

Human beings attach meaning to place through experience and memory; the two are inextricably tied together (see "Finding a Real Place," on opposite page). Experience has less to do with the design of the buildings than with the activities that occur within and around them. While the street is arguably the most visible public place, the frequency of its use depends entirely on the use that line, with its design coming in a distant sec- ond in importance. Moreover, some of the most memorable places are those that have been adapted to preserve the existing building stock—which often already has independent meaning for local residents—in new and creative ways. The nature of that reuse will do more to determine the meaning of a place than the quality of the architecture or the integrity of the restoration.

The saying "It's what's on the inside that counts" applies as much to places as to people: the design, color, and textures of the wrap-
A State of Mind

A low-income neighborhood does not need to be a scene as a sorry sight that needs market development or an illegal mess because the housing stock exhibits years of disinvest-ment. Such communities never exhibit their architectural curvature in rich social and personal histories that have grown there over the years and continue to be nourished in spite of the lack of livable wages, discretionary income, and home repair; not excepted officials, city housing staffs, devel-ops, the press, and the planning and architect-ural professions continue to pass judgment on such places and their contemporary denizens as breed- ing grounds for crime and deprived behavior and an unhealthy environments for raising children. De-molition and dispersal have been the order of the day for such places since the turn of the century.

Shopping malls started to become passé during the last decade, to the point that an industry has arisen almost overnight to repos-i-tion and redevelop them. Their defining characteristic, which ini-tially differentiated them from the traditional downtown shopping district, is an enclosed, controlled, and often sterile environment. The shopping experience at the Gap, for example, is indistinguish-able from store to store across the country, so that the exact same teenagers had been cloned to fill all available sales and cashier pois-itions. Similarly, the ubiquitous Starbucks, the “McDonalds of coffee,” provides the consumer with a nearly identical experience, with modest variations in interior design and decor, whether one is sipping a Frosty Frappuccino® in Reston, Virginia; San Francisco; or Overland Park, Kansas. While it may be comforting to know that one can go almost any-where in the United States to purchase stove-washed jeans, foaming-to-perfection cappuccino, or crispy French fries, this ubiquity and lack of diversity among product types—as well as patrons—crossexactly the quality that the experience might otherwise have. Is it any wonder that the frequency of visits to enclosed shopping malls, as well as the amount of time spent there, has declined precipitously over the past ten years? Many people say that they no longer go to the mall for the experience of shopping; they go to get their shopping done as effi-ciently as possible, in order to leave the mall as quickly as possible.

Conversely, main street shopping districts—that is, real com-mercial corridors in an urban context, as contrasted with the latest variation of the shopping mall, the main street-themed projects—is an en-vironment that carouses a real retail venue by providing quaint turn-of-the-century storefronts for national chains—are becom-ing increasingly popular with consumers and more profitable for tenants. These places often are characterized by locally and regionally owned businesses selling unique products and services that cannot be found elsewhere—certainly not at the mall—in idiosyncratically designed shops. The customer is, more often than not, greeted by the business owner or a long-time employee who actually knows the merchandise rather than by an indifferent college student hired to work the holidays, who could care less whether she or he is selling button-fly jeans, boots, or beef barbeque.

The combination of a local customer base, augmented by a clientele drawn from outside the community by virtue of the uniqueness of the products offered and the quality of customer service (or the mere existence of customer service), creates a milieu in the store that further contrasts with the sameness and banality of the mall experience. The chance of running into someone one knows is just as good as that of meeting someone interesting and actually con-versing with them. These true urban places magically dissolve the barriers that otherwise keep people from conversing with total strangers; they exponentially multiply opportunities for surprise, delight, and genuine human exchange, instilling in participants an immediate desire to return as soon as possible, in great anticipa-tion of what the next encounter may bring.

These are places in which to see—and to be seen—for the pure joy of the experience. There is a diversity and dynamism among the patrons that make each visit exciting and memorable. If one wants the same kind of shopping experience in a mall, why not go to a mall where one will develop no desire whatsoever for human interaction, the answer is to go to an Applebee’s or a Chili’s or a TGI Friday’s any-where in the country, anytime of the day or night. There is a mind-numbing, excitement-killing consistency in the “experience” these establishments offer that is the antithesis of meaningful places. One could be anywhere; if one has a pulse, one would rather be any-where else.

However, if “being there” is just as important as the underlying mission—getting a cup of coffee, buying a book, browsing for an interesting gift—the main street experience cannot be replicated, no matter how nostalgic or quaintly charming the exterior aesthetics may be. In fact, some of the most interesting places are those that have reused the existing building stock in an almost haphazardly individualistic fashion, at least as compared with the excess of peri-od ornamentation with which many new main streets are festooned.

For example, Mishá, a purveyor of coffee in Old Town, Alexan-dria, just outside Washington, D.C., is devoted to two things: the quality of the coffee—which owner Mishá Elmenhorf imports from around the world and roasts throughout each day in an Ital-i-an roaster on the premises—and the quality of the experience of being in an eclectic, bohemian, and, most important, inclusive place. That sense of belonging is enhanced by Mishá’s manager, who knows by heart most regular customers and their favorite beverage.

At any given time of the day or evening, a variety of patrons repre-senting a wide range of ages, ethnicities, socioeconomic status, and ed-u-cational levels can be found conversing, reading, playing backgammon or chess, and even having meetings of various magnitudes. This is where briefcases, ties, and cell phones mingle in harmony with backpacks, tatoos, and body piercing, where construction workers and street people queue up for coffee with lawyers, doctors, arch-itects, and politicians.

While a small percentage of Mishá's clientele linger for hours on end, most stand in line for something to go—but there are those who visit Mishá for the people watching alone.

Stores like Old Town's Mishá offer an example of the funda-mental difference between real places and the imitations conjured up to create "atmosphere" in themed retail environments and en-closed malls. This does not mean, however, that places with real meaning cannot be developed in new, mixed-use environments or strategically interwoven into the existing urban fabric. What it does mean, however, is that design and control may have to take a back seat to creating a built environment that allows the quality of the experience to evolve over time. Moreover, much more time may need to be devoted to understanding the existing context and culture of the surrounding area, as well as the characteristics of the residents, customers, commercial tenants, and other users that a place is intended to attract—the much-celebrated market.

The same basic concepts and principles apply to all components of a mixed-use environment, including residential neighborhoods, work/live enclaves, and commercial establishments.

When it comes to making a place that is meaningful, the essen-tial ingredient is people. Places that are meaningful and memorable must be able to accommodate the stranger as comfortably as the reg-u-lars or the locals, a fundamental quality that Jacobs identified in 1961 as differentiating cities from other physical forms of social or-ganization. More important, have meaning and vitality; places must be able to evolve over time, and they must be adaptable enough to enable local entrepreneurs to create environments that counteract the monotony and ubiquity of the mall, that avoid the contrived and controlled image of themed retail venues and new towns, and that defy the banal and the boring—the inevitable byproducts of an over-ly homogenized environment.