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The Meaning of PLACE

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In the infancy of the Internet, many observers predicted that the proliferation of electronic communications and commerce would render human interaction superfluous. The consequences for cities were considered particularly dire, at a time when urban cores were just beginning to enjoy a renaissance following 50 years of suburbanization and the attendant "malling" of America.

Now, in the 21st century, such predictions have proven grossly overblown; the proverbial sky is not falling in on American cities. In fact, some of the Internet and technology-based businesses predicated on the "place is dead" theory of capitalist evolution have, themselves, dissolved into nothingness, victim of their own lack of sustained (or in some cases, initial) revenue-generating capacity and the resultant plummeting of artificially inflated stock values and evaporation of second-wave infusions of venture capital.

> 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 expectation—although it is unclear whose expectation it is—of 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-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, derided by many new urbanists, imposed a cold and dispassionate modernity on the world in

Finding a "Real" Place

Predicting 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 imposter; it is thin and fleeting and will be found out. *Experience*, by contrast, is substantial and enduring, the genuine article. Sensation is virtuality, experience is actuality.

Sensation is a simulator; it can change—temporarily—how people feel. Experience changes who we are. It is the big Reality. People have a love/hate relationship with the big R. They spend their rational moments protecting themselves against it and the rest of their time tempting it in ever-fascinating ways.

People even want their furniture and objects to look as though they have been around the block—exhausted, full of experience, and waiting to tell their stories through their plentiful flaws 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 odyssey vacations are growing proof of the irrepressible fascination that people have with the most important element of experience: *unpredictable outcome*. Create places where unpredictable outcomes are a possibility, and the site can be pretty much be assured of popularity.

The fundamental flaw of "themed environments" is that they have had the unpredictable edited out of them—which is fine 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 themed environment, if the chance that an unexpected wonderful thing might happen has been edited out in favor of security and predictability. But as the world becomes increasingly virtual and by definition, predictable, places that endure will be places where something wonderful, something unpredictable, might happen.

A "real" place—with emotional content and meaning—is what one gets when one connects deeply the character and intent of a project or a place to its resident culture.

So how does one contrive to make the unpredictable happen? The most successful, most enduring places are, over and over, new *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 *deeply* 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 nostalgia acting as a reliable tether for even the most radical idea and with prophecy offering a promising future inspired by all that has gone before.

Dvorak's *New World* Symphony initially shocked and then delighted audiences with fresh musical ideas framed by traditional American folk themes. He took the most obstreperous audience, the mid-19th century listener, to places of which it had never dreamed. Dvorak was able to do this because imbedded in his work was a deep affection and understanding of his audience's past. The Victorians recognized that the technology of trains, and the glass and steel sheds to house them, could be terrifying to rural people. So they tempered these new ideas, this new technology, by wrapping them in poetry and allegorical sculptures drawn from the stories of their culture.

The Guggenheim in Bilbao, Spain, is unmistakably mythological. It is Cervantes's vision of the soul of Don Quixote. The wrinkled armor of the spent conquistador, the tortured gesture, it all is there except for Sancho, and it is made of the same material as an F-18. Does it look old fashioned? Absolutely not. Is it deeply connected ? Certainly. Is it popular? Most definitely.

But when memory and prophecy are out of balance, what is left is what Robert Pinsky, America's poet laureate, warns against: "re-creation and nostalgia alone is not memory but spectacle—and spectacle may stand for the body of the past but not the soul . . .". That is part of what is missing in theme parks. Prophecy without its counterweight of memory often is what is found in those buildings and places that people refer to as "cold" or "intimidating."

People love to hear *their* stories told again and again: their stories are their "brand." Developers, planners, and architects who understand that people gravitate toward places where they can put *themselves* in the story will succeed in developing places that are cherished and filled with those who may or may not be "entertained."—**Henry G. Beer,** *co-chairman of COMMARTS, Inc. in Denver*

the first half of the 20th century. The cultural and sociological dangers of supplanting cultural context with false memories should not be dismissed in the name of creating "instant comfort" by emulating architectural styles of the past. This approach champions contextualism without context and creates an architecture of conformity, nostalgia, and, quite subtly, repression.

While openly acknowledging the important and healthy role the built environment can play in the evolution of place to help make it meaningful, planners, architects, and builders must assign appropriate emphasis to those characteristics without which human beings will form few real connections to a place. For example, true community gathering places—as contrasted with public spaces, regardless of how well designed—are critically important in engendering meaning and a sense of place from a societal and cultural, not a profit-making, perspective. However, there is a remunerative dimension to imbuing place with meaning: the real estate industry has the opportunity to "do well by doing good."

A place that is meaningful, to which the participant develops a deep emotional connection, is a place that will be visited again and again. To borrow a term popularized by Web site developers and e-commerce gurus, meaning makes a place "sticky"; a place that is meaningful calls the participant back repeatedly, with great anticipation of each return visit. That deep, meaningful connection to a place can translate into increased retail sales, more nights spent in hotels, more frequent and larger food and beverage purchases, and increased visibility of and demand for residential products. These indicators of profitability will be

A New Sense of Place

"Geography is dead!" So proclaims *Wired* magazine editor and new economy guru Kevin Kelley in his book, *New Rules for the New Society*. Kelley sees advanced economies moving from a world of *places* to one of *spaces*, and he is not the only one. The past two decades were rife 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 scores of reemerging urban districts throughout this country. Not only artists and creative types but also high-tech companies are flocking to these urban districts, adapting and occupying older industrial spaces and run-down 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, lofts 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.

The simple fact is that Americans live in an increasingly insecure and unstable world, where traditional 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 draw on strong family ties and life-long friends. The "new society" annihilates many aspects of these older forms of relationships.

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Today, fewer and fewer people find a permanent identity in the company for which 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 to choose where they want to live. 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 source of identity, social interaction, experience, and community.

But the resurgence of place is not without its problems. The preference for urban living and community is generating tensions. This is appallingly clear in areas such as New York's Silicon Alley and San Francisco's Mission District, where authenticity is giving way to fad and fashion as a high-tech influx displaces local residents, artists, and musicians, provoking a well-deserved backlash. In just the past few months, dozens of people have fled San Francisco and Silicon Valley because their long-felt sense of place was being eroded by rampant techno-gentrification.

The need to find meaning in life and to settle in real communities will remain a powerful force in society for years to come.—**Richard Florida,** *founder and director of the Software Industry Center and the H. John Heinz III professor of regional economic development at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh*

long-lasting, not 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 quality and frequency of its use depends almost entirely on the uses that line it, with its design coming in a distant second 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 tectonics of the wrapper have less to do with the resulting experience than the nature and quality of its contents. While the semiotic power of architecture, design, and street-level appointments should not be overlooked, neither should they be allowed to become substitutes for what takes place within—or for the juxtaposition of varied experiences that may collectively comprise—a place.

A fundamental flaw in the design and development of new places is that they tend to be planned within an inch of their thoroughly contrived and overly controlled existences, orchestrated down to the smallest detail, leaving absolutely nothing to chance. Such control certainly makes these projects far more "bankable" on the front end. However, the comprehensiveness with which their future is preordained is the fundamental problem; over time, the predictability of activities and the orderliness of the overall design erode the quality of the experience offered and the underlying value of the asset. The same fate that has beset the enclosed shopping mall ultimately may befall new towns and themed shopping venues.

A State of Mind

A low-income neighborhood does not need to be a seen as a sorry sight that needs major redevelopment or as a blighted mess because the housing stock exhibits years of disinvestment. Such communities never exhibit on their architectural surfaces the 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.

Yet elected officials, city housing staffs, developers, the press, and the planning and architectural professions continue to pass judgment on such places and their contemporary denizens as breeding grounds for crime and depraved behavior and as unhealthy environments for raising children. Demolition and dispersal have been the order of the day for such places since the turn of the century, and today again we hear the same cry for "progressive" reforms as public housing is erased from our urban landscapes and collective memories are replaced by "healthier" mixes of incomes in projects bedecked with the current architectural images of middle-class propriety, like so many nostalgic stage sets from Norman Rockwell's version of the American way of life.

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There is no doubt that a thoughtful display of what the human hand can create can contribute to a sense of pride among residents of any place. But places are hollow shells without the life of their inhabitants, and higher incomes do not have a monopoly on creating the joys of life and a sense of place.

Place is a state of mind, not a real estate concept or an architectural innovation. Place is a human construct, subject to all that that entails, including the biases of those defining it or passing judgment on it. When one sees the residue of "free market" economies in the form of tired buildings and a worn public realm, one must look closely into the lives of those still there, who bring it meaning and purpose and for whom it is an extension of themselves. If these circumstances are disturbing, there should be second thoughts about demolishing the place and further thinking about how to bring economic justice to its inhabitants.—**Michael Pyatok,** *an architect with Pyatok Associates, which is involved in housing and mixed-use projects for low-income, inner-city residents in Oakland and Seattle, and a professor in the School of Architecture at the University of Washington in Seattle*

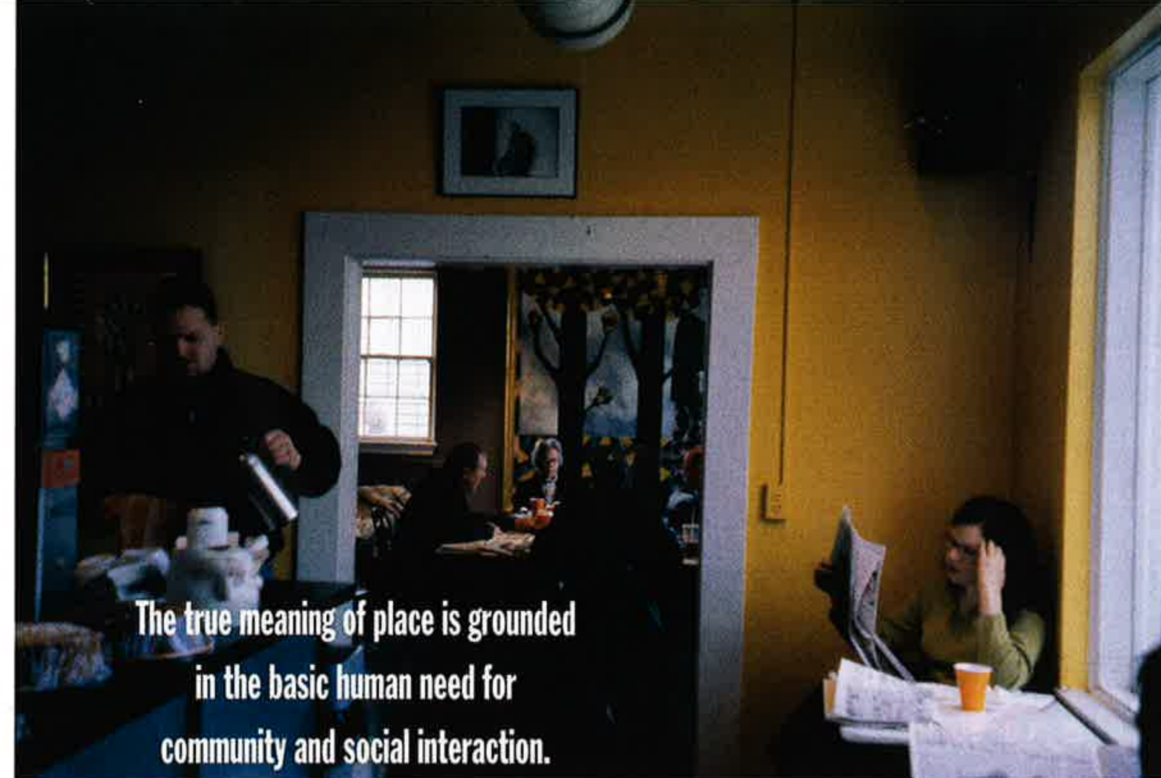
Shopping malls started to become passé during the last decade, to the point that an industry has arisen almost overnight to reposition and redevelop them. Their defining characteristic, which initially differentiated them from the traditional downtown shopping district, is an enclosed, controlled, and often sterile environment. The shopping experience at the Gap, for example, is indistinguishable from store to store across the country, as if the exact same teenagers had been cloned to fill all available sales and cashier positions. 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 anywhere in the United States to purchase stone-washed jeans, foamed-to-perfection caffé latte, or crispy french fries, this ubiquity and lack of diversity among product types—as well as patrons—erodes any 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 efficiently as possible, in order to leave the mall as quickly as possible.

Conversely, main street shopping districts—that is, real commercial corridors in an urban context, as contrasted with the latest variation of the shopping mall, the main street–themed retail environment that caricaturizes a real retail venue by providing quaint turn-of-the-century storefronts for national chains—are becoming 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 home for the holidays, who could not care less whether he or she is selling button-fly jeans, books, 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 conversing 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 anticipation 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 to see the same kinds of people, over and over again, with whom 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 anywhere 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 anywhere else.



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> A place that is meaningful, to which the participant develops a deep emotional connection, is a place that will be visited again and again.

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 quaint or Disney-esque 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 humble yet individualistic fashion, at least as compared with the excess of period ornamentation with which many new main streets are festooned.

For example, Misha's, a purveyor of coffee in Old Town, Alexandria, just outside Washington, D.C., is devoted to two things: the quality of the coffees—which owner Misha Elmendorf imports from around the world and roasts throughout each day in an Italian 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 Misha'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 representing a wide range of ages, ethnicities, socioeconomic strata, and educational 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, tattoos, and body piercings, where construction workers and street people queue up for coffee with lawyers, doctors, architects, and politicos. While a small percentage of Misha's clientele linger for hours on end, most stand in line for something to go—but there are those who visit Misha's for the people watching alone.

Stores like Old Town's Misha's offer an example of the fundamental difference between real places and the imitations conjured up to create "atmosphere" in themed retail environments and enclosed 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-coveted target market. The same basic concepts and principles apply to all components of a mixed-use environment, including residential neighborhoods, live/work enclaves, and commercial establishments.

When it comes to making a place that is meaningful, the essential ingredient is people. Places that are meaningful and memorable must be able to accommodate the stranger as comfortably as the regulars or the locals, a fundamental quality that Jacobs identified in 1961 as differentiating cities from other physical forms of social organization. More important, to 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 overly homogenized environment. ■

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