

The allure of 'place', 'sense of place' and 'placemaking' for ecologically sustainable urban development

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Abstract

Since its rise to prominence in the 1970s and 1980s, place scholarship has drawn many qualitative and quantitative scholars into its fold. Yet ideas of 'place', 'sense of place' and 'placemaking', particularly ecologically-focused placemaking, remain fuzzy theoretical concepts and their application in practice is similarly diverse. This paper analyses multidisciplinary and phenomenologically-focused place scholarship and practice within the context of an increasing interest in the opportunities 'place' raises in the face of significant urban ecological challenges. Such an analysis reveals that despite much scholarly and practical work, tensions remain between urban places as they are designed and positive ecological outcomes, and between place-responsiveness and ecological-responsiveness. Despite these gaps, the work of urban environmental place scholars and environmentally-committed place practitioners (city-makers) suggests ecologically-focused placemaking can foster positive socio-ecological change and is worth pursuing. An analysis of the theoretical place scholarship suggests research pathways to detangle and delve into ideas of place and placemaking. Specifically, it seems that initially, at least, we need to better understand the contribution of movement, memory and community to our everyday lived and emplaced experiences. Another challenge for ecologically-focused placemaking is to determine how such multidimensional ideas of place inform our ecological responsiveness – our sense of environmental responsibility and our pro-environmental behaviours and practices. In this vein, I reiterate calls by a number of scholars and suggest that ecologically-focused placemaking may benefit from drawing on non-western ideas of place and sense of place. Similarly productive may be pursuing the power of narrative as a means to respond creatively to today's urban ecological challenges.

Introduction

Since its rise to prominence through the work of human geographers Edward Relph (1976) and Yi-Fu Tuan (1974) in the 1970s and 1980s, place scholarship has drawn many qualitative and quantitative scholars into its fold. Yet ideas of place, sense of place and placemaking, particularly environmentally-focused placemaking, remain fuzzy theoretical concepts and their application in practice is similarly diverse. This paper does not attempt to replicate the numerous scholarly articles on ideas of place (for just two of many reviews, see Gieryn 2000; Lewicka 2011). Instead, it analyses multidisciplinary and phenomenologically-focused place and placemaking research within the context of an increasing, and relatively recent, interest in the theoretical and practical questions and opportunities 'place' raises in the face of significant urban social and ecological challenges (IPCC 2014; UN-HABITAT 2013). In this context the possibilities of place are alluring; with greater place responsiveness seen by many scholars and practitioners to hold answers to at least some of these challenges. Yet as architect and scholar Paul Carter suggests, the task remains to explore how we can better encourage dialogue between placemakers and place participants (Carter 2009, p. 6). This project is particularly important in the field of environmentally-focused urban design and city-making. For despite significant academic and practical work, tensions remain between i) urban places as they are designed and positive ecological outcomes, and ii) place-responsiveness and ecological-responsiveness (Cameron 2003, p. 105). This brief analysis of scholarly work points to the importance of further research to help city-makers (whether scholars or practitioners) better understand the theory and practice of ecologically-focused placemaking.

This paper is divided into two sections. The first discusses place scholarship, focusing on the major contribution of phenomenology to environmental ideas of place and placemaking as they have been explored by a range of social science scholars as well as by design and planning scholars, professionals and urban communities – a group I refer to as (environmentally-focused) city-makers. I note that the literature reveals a significant shift in ideas of place from bounded and relatively static to a focus on movement, elasticity and historical engagement. The paper then turns to the questions ideas of 'place', 'sense of place' and the contemporary practice of environmentally-focused placemaking raise and that require further investigation. Specifically, I suggest that ideas of movement, memory and community point to opportunities to explore the gaps between environmental design intent and positive environmental outcomes and between place-responsiveness and ecological responsiveness. Drawing on John Cameron (2001, 2003), I use the term 'ecological responsiveness' because it implies a holistic, attentive and action-oriented approach to ecological issues, acknowledging important environment–organism interrelations (Hayward 1998,

p. 5) and implying responsibility, action and awareness (Cameron 2001). In the context of ecological and place-focused theory and practice, I then introduce literature that draws on non-western ideas of place. I suggest that these philosophies coupled with contemporary understandings of phenomenology may, with further study, offer lucrative pathways between the end goals of many environmentally-focused city-makers; between place-responsiveness and ecological responsiveness.

The appeal of place theory & placemaking practice

A fascination with ideas of 'place', 'sense of place', and 'place attachment' have drawn scholars from fields as diverse as planning and design to psychology and the social sciences (e.g Howard 1945; Lewicka 2011; Lippard 1997; Massey 2005; Mathews 2005; Relph 1976, 2008; Tuan 1974). Indeed, the potential of place has long been taken up by professional and committed city-makers, including leading community figures, who have drawn on its ideas to maintain and develop urban communities that enable their members to thrive (e.g. Alexander 2002; DPCD 2010; Howard 1945; Jacobs 1971; Places Victoria 2012; Thoreau 1854; Whyte 1988). Today, 'placemaking' is increasingly popular and there are a growing number of professional 'placemakers'; those whose aim, in the words of one Australian government agency, is to create "living spaces that promote people's health, happiness and well being, today and in the future" (Places Victoria 2013) (see also Partners 2011; Village Well 2014). These place-focused projects sit within the context of an extensive literature discussing the social and health benefits of place attachment (Lewicka 2011), including the importance of urban green spaces (Kellert, Heerwagen & Mador 2011; Lee & Maheswaran).

In the environmental context, the possibilities a greater sense of place, often referred to as *genius loci*¹, presents to tackle significant socio-ecological challenges and to encourage positive change has also been enduring. The work of many scholars (Cameron, Mulligan & Wheatley 2004; Mulligan 2014; Relph 2008; Seamon 2000) and a surge in design and community-based environmental action around the world (e.g. betterblock.org 2014; Lloyd EcoDistrict 2014; Sustainable Chippendale 2014), suggests that ties to place are just as important as ever. And recently, placemaking projects encouraging positive social and ecological outcomes, including greater ecological literacy and pro-environmental practices in homes and communities, have emerged to reconnect city dwellers with ecologically rich and complex urban environments (e.g., see *Gould League Programs - Meeting Government Priorities* 2012; Eco-Cubby 2009-12; Mobbs 2011; One Planet Living 2012). Despite the increasing prevalence of social and ecologically-focused placemaking in the urban design and

¹ Relph (2008, p. 314) disagrees with this, arguing that genius loci is spirit of place is shared and exists outside us, while sense of place is "the faculty by which we grasp spirit of place".

sustainable urban development contexts, however, it remains a relatively under-examined concept and practice.

One reason for the enduring appeal of place may be the concept's multidimensional depth and, in the view of many scholars, its foundational place, so to speak, for human experience. Since the significant work on the importance of place by Relph and Tuan, sense of place advocates from diverse disciplines have drawn on phenomenological ideas as advanced by Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty to explain its importance. A phenomenological perspective understands our experience of the world as emplaced; that is, we experience the world intersubjectively and it is our continual, intentional and pre-reflexive engagement with the objects and beings within the world that gives rise to our everyday lived experiences. Building on such phenomenological views, many sense of place advocates distinguish between spaces or "no places" that are devoid of emotional connections and places that are meaningful to us (Vanclay 2008). Place has historically been understood as restful, unique, bounded and imbued with "historical continuity" (Lewicka, p. 209). As we will see, however, the multidimensional nature of place means it resists any straightforward definition. As Relph and Cameron have suggested, this is both a strength and a weakness (Relph 2008). Indeed, given the proliferation of place-based practice, Relph's argument that we need a more pragmatic sense of place to deal with environmental and social challenges is sensible (Relph 2008, p. 311). He suggests that places are named and therefore significant territories, defined by their environmental qualities and imbued with memories, stories or shared experiences. Relph's definition, although very influential, is just one of the many definitions of place drawn on by scholars and city-makers today. To achieve a more pragmatic sense of place, more work is needed to discover how theoretical ideas such as his stand up in the face of lived experience and place-based environmental practice.

Philosopher Jeff Malpas' influential theory of place goes some way to explaining the concept's depth and inherently indistinct outlines. Drawing on a phenomenological worldview, Malpas develops Relph's and Heidegger's thinking, arguing that place is the fundamental reference point from which we experience the world (Malpas 1999, p. 15); it is what "mediates social life" (Gieryn 2000, p. 467). This primacy of place to human (and non-human) experience points to it as a concept and practice laden with ethical and political tension. Sociologist Thomas Gieryn (2000, p. 475) writes of the multiple ways place is politically-infused, including its capacity to create and sustain difference and its inherent yet impermanent power. Indeed, place can be divisive and posit problematic dualisms (see also Massey 2005). Specifically to the topic at hand, some of the apparent tensions ecological placemaking initially suggests include divisions between people and 'the environment', the human

and non-human, 'professionals' and local communities, and between the design objectives of form and function. These tensions must be acknowledged. However, as Gieryn's analysis indicates, it is the political dynamism of place that gives it its potentially transformative power; a power many environmental advocates and scholars argue is necessary if we are to disrupt the status quo approach to social and environmental change (Gieryn 2000; Gleeson & Low 2006; Hopwood, Mellor & O'Brien 2005). It is within this context that environment scholars suggest that reconnecting with our ecologically rich urban environments and awakening our sense of place may help to encourage positive socio-ecological change (Abram 1997; Mathews 2005; Plumwood 2002; Rose 2004; Seamon 2000).

The environmental argument for place has been advanced as ideas of place have shifted from a bounded, local and somewhat reclusive concept to an open, dynamic and elastic one. Relph's more recent reflections on his founding publication, *Place and Placelessness*, (see Relph 1996; Relph 2008), work by geographers Doreen Massey in *For Space* (2005) and David Seamon (Seamon & Sowers 2008), anthropologist Tim Ingold (2011) and sociologists such as Gieryn (2000) promote this dynamic view of place. These scholars join others from diverse disciplines, including philosophers (Abram 1997; Malpas 1999; Mathews 2005; Stefanovic 1998), ecologists, postcolonial and Indigenous studies academics (Cameron, Mulligan & Wheatley 2004; Rose 2004), educators (McInerney, Smyth & Down 2011; Stevenson 2011) and architects, planners and urban designers (Aravot 2002; Carter 2009; Sepe & Pitt 2014), who have in the last decade or so refocused their attention on the theoretical questions and practical opportunities 'place' raises in the face of our connectedness to (or disconnectedness from) our urban environments.

Ecologically-focused placemaking

Before turning to explore the shift in theoretical ideas of place and opportunities for further investigation, it is important to situate ideas of place in the urban design, planning and development context. As noted above, city-makers have long been involved in placemaking to create positive urban change and today placemaking has become an accepted indicator of good design practice (e.g. DPCD 2010). Environmental outcomes have also become key features of 'good' urban development (Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment 2003; Department of Infrastructure and Transport 2011; DPCD 2010), yet the environmental credentials of many projects vary. Importantly from a sustainability studies point of view, in recent years there's been an apparent rise in committed environmental designers and city-makers drawing on ideas of and community attachment to places to design and build urban eco-developments. Such developments often have explicit and ambitious ecological aims to create more environmentally responsible urban residents

and communities (e.g. *CoDesign Studio* 2010; *Gould League Programs - Meeting Government Priorities* 2012; *Downton* 2008; *Eco-Cubby* 2009-12; *International Living Future Institute* 2012; *Mobbs* 2011; *One Planet Living* 2012). The work of Christopher Alexander, Jane Jacobs, Kevin Lynch, environmental designers (e.g. - 2013; *Downton* 2008) and New Urbanists (Ellis 2002) as well as the influence of biomimicry (Benyus 2002; *Biomimicry 3.8 Institute* 2012), ecological footprint analysis and bioregionalism (*One Planet Living*), permaculture design (Holmgren 2002) and tactical urbanism (Lydon 2012) are some of the people, ideas and practices influencing the environmentally-focused urban design interventions undertaken today. They show that the methods designers and city-makers use to encourage more environmentally responsible living are diverse, seeming to vary as much as the designer's, developer's or community's environmental motivations for undertaking the project. Recognising this, Iris Aravot has argued that the persistence of fuzzy notions of placemaking means that many urban environments still suffer from "placelessness" (Aravot 2002, pp. 203-4). Much has occurred since Aravot called for a renewed emphasis on sense of place, but in light of the ecological challenges we face, expanding urban populations (WHO 2013) and subsequent urban development, the current contribution of ecological urban placemaking and the possibilities it raises for the future of sustainable urban environments calls for further investigation.

Opportunities for further study: movement, memory & community

As we have seen, Aravot is not alone in her call for continued emphasis on place. Indeed, bringing theory and practice together to explore place as it is experienced remains an important and continuing task for environmentally-focused urban placemaking. To do this, three concepts that arise time and again in place literature yet contribute to its fuzziness need further consideration. These are movement, memory and community.

Ideas of place have long been associated with the local yet ideas of and ties to special urban environments – our homes, streets and communities wherever they may be in the world – remain important to people. Moreover, as Relph and others who call for environmental action make clear, global problems have local consequences (Agyeman 2005; AOSIS 2013; Relph 2008, p. 316). In response, scholars have shifted their view of place from static and physically local to a greater emphasis on movement. Tim Ingold's work is one ecologically-oriented and phenomenological theory that promisingly explores our lived experience and sense of place in the context of movement (Ingold 2011). He argues that being is not being "in place" but wayfaring along a bundle of pathways that are informed by history and unfolding life events. Places, he says, are "topics joined in stories of journeys actually made" (Ingold 2011, pp. 12-3, then 154). Paul Carter's (2009) work similarly speaks to this storied view of place and lived experience in his writing about the physical, conceptual and

political movement between the design of places and the way those places are experienced by those who use and contribute to them. Ingold's and other contemporary readings of place that prioritise the dynamic nature of our lived experience (e.g. Stefanovic 1998) point to its enduring appeal today. It is this idea of movement that is readily apparent in tactical urban and pop-up approaches to place-based projects such as Better Block's community street revitalisation interventions (betterblock.org 2014; Lydon 2012) and work by social enterprises such as CoDesign Studio. This shift in thinking about place as foundational *and* dynamic is an important move in place scholarship. The field now calls for more contemporary insights into how place is understood, how people in different communities experience it, and how it influences their everyday lives in terms of positive socio-ecological change.

The idea of movement suggests memory, both personal and shared, as another central yet underexplored concept in contemporary work on place. For Ingold, Carter and Relph, place experiences are forged in knowledge, in stories bound together by experiences past and present. Physical displacement is one example of the potential loss of place and the importance of memory to build or re-establish our place attachments in other geographic locations (Gieryn 2000; Mulligan 2014; Seamon & Sowers 2008). Meanwhile, Barthel and Isendahl (2013) have pointed to the importance of social-ecological memory as a key indicator of urban food system resilience and security, urging urban dwellers to more closely connect to their "urban life support systems". The work of these scholars builds on long held yet dynamic ideas of the city as a meeting place created and constantly reimagined in the context of its inhabitants, their past, present and possible futures. As Sepe and Pitt write, the city has come to be understood as the formation and locus of urban artefacts, collective imagination and collective memories (Sepe & Pitt 2014).

Similarly, ideas of community are discussed at length in place literature and are another aspect considered important in 'good' urban design (Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment 2003; Gieryn 2000; Lewicka 2011; Seamon 2000; Urban Design Group 2011). Many suburban developments, promote a sense of community as a positive attribute of life in these newly created places and ideas about community appear, critically and uncritically, in studies of 'environmental' place-based urban developments (Agyeman 2005; AOSIS 2013; Mobbs 2011; unknown 2012). Martin Mulligan has written that 'community' remains an ambivalent concept, often contested in meaning and practice, but he argues that engaging with ideas of community is still an important project for sociologists (Mulligan 2014). To unpack urban ideas of place it seems we need to delve further into ideas and experiences of community and memory.

Despite much scholarly work on place, more research is needed to explore how movement, memory and community are infused and imbued in people's everyday experiences of place. Gieryn (2000, p. 482) writes that there is probably nothing of interest to sociologists not "touched by place". General definitions of the concept may, like the achievement of 'community', continue to evade distinct definition, yet we should not abandon it but delve deeper. This is particularly important if we are to move beyond the realm of theory and understand people's lived experience of place in urban environments and the possibilities of these for positive urban ecological change.

Phenomenologically-oriented research that seeks to better understand how experiences are shared and how ideas of community are shaped in ecologically-focused urban developments is one approach to help us gather such valuable insights into urban placemaking.

Ecological responsiveness

Determining whether and how movement, memory, community and possibly other concepts, as bound within our place-based experience of the world, inform ecological responsiveness is another challenge. As an academic, educator and environmentalist, John Cameron notes there remains a tension between the not necessarily commensurate goals of attempting to foster positive environmental outcomes and a greater sense of place-responsiveness (Cameron 2003, p. 105). However, he is still hopeful that improved place-responsiveness can lead to greater ecological-responsiveness and work by environmental philosophers Freya Mathews (2005) and David Abram (1997), not to mention the multitude of professional placemakers around the world, suggests his hope is well-founded. Meanwhile, calls such as Raewyn Connell's (2013) for a more democratic and expanded agenda in knowledge formation point to the importance of work by these and Indigenous studies scholars such as Deborah-Bird Rose (2004) who have explored the integration of non-western views with western phenomenological ideas of place. Their work suggests that by learning from non-western philosophies and Indigenous Australian ideas of caring for country, we can all foster more nuanced connections to the places we inhabit and engage in a more equal and caring stance toward our urban environments. In this vein, place scholars have also suggested the power of narrative to reveal and interpret social and ecological ideas and practices of place and sense of place (Carter 2009; Mugerauer 2010).

The depth of human experiences as discussed in the scholarly work on place and sense of place points to the opportunities place-based approaches hold to encourage ecological awareness and responsiveness at all scales. Importantly, the reciprocity at play (between humans and between humans and their environment) as we engage with the world may help us to work through the 'human or environment first' debate that continues to unhelpfully divide environmentalists of all

shades (Malpas 2008; Pepper 1996; Theilmann 2011)². Our anthropocentric position in the world is inevitable (Hayward 1998). However, understood through a socio-ecological lens that retains a view of the environment as underpinning our world, place-based approaches are seen to present us with an opportunity to respond creatively to ecological challenges. Martin Mulligan and Stuart Hill write that if we lose sight of nature, we lose sight of ourselves (Mulligan & Hill 2001, p. 8). Indeed, perhaps place-based approaches will help us tread a third, more sophisticated and nuanced path in which we acknowledge, respect and value the importance of other beings and other things in the world (Chamberlain 2010; see also Tuan 2004, p. 732) as we do our contribution to it and the places we inhabit.

Conclusion

Despite renewed scholarly debate and professional interest, placemaking and ecologically-oriented placemaking in particular, remain contested concepts that still suffer from fuzzy theoretical underpinnings. Yet many scholars and city-makers believe that despite the unresolved tensions discussed above, improved place-responsiveness can lead to greater ecological-responsiveness. In the face of significant urban ecological challenges that call for more responsive global citizens and communities, the work of city-makers practising 'sustainable placemaking' seems an important agenda to foster and support. More research is therefore needed to explore the gaps in the theory and practice of ecologically-focused placemaking. As sociologists, as ecologists, as interdisciplinary researchers investigating and analysing projects that are purposefully pursuing ecological placemaking in our cities, revealing the lived experience of those involved in these placemaking projects can shed some light on constructive steps to help city-makers achieve positive social and ecological goals. Building on Carter's call for improved dialogue between placemakers and place participants (Carter 2009, p. 6), in the urban environmental context, we might ask: How, in fact, do city-makers and urban communities envisage, frame and act on the possibilities of place to create positive socio-ecological change?

² It is worth noting here that linguistic dualisms, such as that of place and placelessness, are the subject of continued debate in place scholarship (Ingold 2011; Relph 2008; Tuan 2004). Dualisms may play important roles in society in some respects, as Tuan suggests, however many have also proved enduring and problematic.

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