

## Who Defines and Manages the Environment? The Significance of Lay Senses of Place

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John Eyles

McMaster University, Canada\*

The purpose of this paper is to examine the significance of the images of the environment held by ordinary people, i.e., those using a particular environment as an arena of everyday living and who are not "environmental professionals," such as architects and planners. Although some of the suggestions of the paper may be of relevance for such professional practice, it is couched in terms of a humanistic geography which recognizes, along with Ley (1978), that this geography must take account of three dimensions: the centrality of anthropomorphism, the social nature of experience and (the often forgotten) constraints of context. These three elements shape not only the study of sense of place, but sense of place itself. Further, it must not be assumed that images and senses of place are significant for all people at all times and in all places. This seems to be particularly the case when most of our places—work, neighborhood, internal structure of the dwelling—are designed and built for us by architects, planners and developers. Over one-half of the British population now lives in suburban developments. Thus, most people do not create the spaces and places in which they live in a physical sense. Those spaces and places are largely given and pre-determined. They remain amenable, however, to manipulation in the senses of physical re-arrangement and re-definition and of psychological and social creation.

Thus, the broad parameters of living are pre-determined but people, consciously and unconsciously, positively and negatively, actively and passively make or rather remake the spaces in which they live. In this remaking, in this environmental manipulation, we may see a form of environmental management, and even the control of spaces and their uses are appropriated. In this, the environment is seen as a resource for living as a way of satisfying needs and wants. In such satisfaction, the appropriation of space is determined by its provision of use values. We thus have a rather particular (indeed, marginal) way of treating resources and their management; a way which may be juxtaposed against the dominant view of resources (including the environment) as being exploitable and management as being concerned with the achievement of control and progress (Eyles, 1986). In these remakings and appropriations of places and their meanings, it is possible to see the potential for challenging the established ways of

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\* Department of Geography, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ont. L8S, Canada.

seeing and doing things. While on an individual basis, such challenges may be relatively unimportant (unless of course the individual is part of a group of environmental professionals and experts in which case she/he may well be seen as visionary, e.g., Le Corbusier, Lloyd Wright and now the postmodernist architects). On a group level, however, they may result in bases of resistance and the marginalization of places by the dominant group, e.g., gang turf, particular blocks in ghetto areas. A fuller discussion of the bases of such resistances may be found in Eyles and Evans (1987), although it must be said that vast majority of individuals and groups define and use spaces and places in ways that conform to or are containable within the established modes of existence (see below).

### ENVIRONMENTS FOR LIVING

This conformity may be partly explained in terms of the pressures of everyday living and by the fact that even our discretionary time is spent in environments and places not of our own making or choosing. While this is particularly true of state socialist societies where housing shortages mean that choice in housing allocation is virtually nonexistent, it also applies to many in capitalist nations. It is, however, frequently argued that those with access to sufficient capital or to credit facilities can enter the owner-occupied segment of the housing market, where they are free to choose where they live. All writers recognize that that freedom is constrained by income levels and the need to live in close enough proximity to work so as not to make the journey to work particularly onerous. Others pose a more fundamental question, asking what kinds of choices are available to individuals (see Harvey, 1975; Castells, 1977). If the choice is simply between similar houses but on different estates in different locations built by a different mass production builder, is it a choice at all? Such a choice may then appear as constrained as that for those in public housing. Further, the reduction of choice in the owner-occupied sector may be seen in the ways such housing is marketed and sold. Great emphasis is placed on buying a particular life-style, i.e., choice through purchasing style, which emphasizes as one set of values: luxury, value for money, exclusivity, and affordability (see Eyles, 1987).

In the main, the environments created for owner-occupied living are mass-designed and constructed by mass building corporations. In such environments, interior design of dwellings and their relative locations (close to the countryside and away from commercial facilities) are seen to be important. Developers provide the amenities which families were felt to demand with respect to dwelling structure, facilities and location (see Michelson, 1977). Indeed on a general level they succeed, as the many surveys of residential satisfaction demonstrate a preference for suburban living. But we must note that not all social groups are satisfied with these given places. Age is a significant differentiating characteristic. Young people, in particular, find little for themselves in what are essentially locations to raise dependent children. In such suburban locations, there is little that can be re-made for the teenagers and young adults. Much will then depend on their mobility. Similar problems of isolation, usually compounded by relative immobility, affect the elderly.

Although there may be some market research to discover what people want, most mass-produced, owner-occupied, suburban housing is designed, created and located by builder-developers and their experts in the light of their particular imperatives which are, by and large, economic, emphasizing, for example, profitability and economies of scale. A person entering or moving within this sector of the housing market can choose between different expert creations. It is then possible to reshape this creation physically by expending time and money on its structure and garden. In the Anglo-American world, this is evidenced by the growth of Do-It-Yourself stores and garden centers. For those in public housing, no such choice or reshaping is possible, although in Britain recent Right-to-Buy legislation has meant that tenants in such housing have been able to purchase their dwellings and enter the owner-occupied sector with its greater apparent freedoms. But in the public sector, individuals are provided with a particular design which is relatively fixed and within it, they must make their lives.

In public housing, there has been much architectural faddism (Pawley, 1971). Emphases on building function and a deterministic view of the relationship between environment and behavior (often seen in physical terms alone) have meant that architecture has seen itself as visionary, while seeing those who reside in its creations as "fixtures" whose own experiences and meanings impinge little on the process of design. Thus, the building of deck-access slab blocks—streets in the sky—bore little relation to how people use streets and failed to treat sensibly the question of the spatial proximity between private space (especially living and bedrooms) and public space (the streets in the sky). Further, the 20 to 30 storey high, four apartments to a floor, point-blocks paid little attention to how neighboring develops, the problems of access and role of public as opposed to private open space. It is perhaps not surprising in such developments that people withdraw to their "guaranteed" private space, their apartments, and apply for transfers to low-rise public housing schemes or try and save to become part of the owner-occupied sector. As has been pointed out, this withdrawal leads to the abandonment of public places which are then no longer "policed" by having a community presence (see Newman, 1972; Coleman, 1985). In some instances and districts, the abandonment has been total, leaving decaying, unpopulated city blocks which may become part of the twilight marginalized world of the city. These public places are though seen as being insecure and dangerous, places of potential muggings, rapes, and meetings with drunks, prostitutes and drug addicts.

This view is of course an unforeseen consequence in that designers did not set out to create such images or spaces for such uses. Further, we may suggest that the meanings and uses with which these spaces have been endowed result from an environmental manipulation by those who require such places for their activities. Manipulation implies a forceful redefinition of the meaning of place and the appropriation of the place itself.

This manipulation does not take place in a social vacuum, but involves others—other residents, users, special groups (like the police or planners or politicians) and so takes the form of negotiation. But the outcome is that a sector of the environment has become "managed" by a particular group for its activities, the general perception of the area acting as a device to maintain the exclusivity of, what has become, an exclusion

zone. We should note that this zone need not operate for all people or at all times. Thus many central cities in capitalist societies are now becoming two distinct cities, one of affluence, enterprise and commercial development untouched by such exclusivity and one of poverty and disadvantage. Further, as Melbin (1978) notes, the city (and our senses of it) changes between day and night with different uses and meanings of place. And these "exclusion zones" need not be part of public housing projects. They may be a set of city blocks of gang turf with its graffiti markers and exclusive ethnic enclaves may be perceived as "no-go" areas for a significant proportion of the general population. With these examples, however, we are moving away from the physical reshaping of environment with its concomitant changes in image to the psychological and social creation of meanings as part of everyday life and which may enhance the liveability of the environment.

### LIVEABILITY AND LAY SENSES OF PLACE

Designers (since Lynch, 1960) have long spoken of the legibility of cities in terms of urban markers, such as nodes and paths. Perhaps with gang graffiti, we may see both legibility and liveability, because they provide an explicit symbol which demarcates, visibly for others, the shared action space of a particular group. Less dramatically than with the gang, and also demonstrating that physical reshaping and social creation are points on a continuum of environmental manipulation, most people "remake" their spaces and places to make life more liveable. Before we remark on how this is done we may speculate on why this should be so. Obviously, we may say that that with which they have been provided does not fulfill their needs. The designs and locations may therefore be deficient, but with respect to which needs? While it is possible to list needs for specific phenomena, such as food, shelter, health care and so on (Harvey, 1973), we shall refer to generic needs—identity, security and stimulation (Ardrey, 1967; Eyles and Evans, 1987). Not only do certain of our activities—work, home-making, social interaction, leisure—go towards the satisfaction of these needs, but each need is itself also predicated on certain perceptions and meanings. These derive in significant measure from the containing social system. Thus in British society, identity depends partly on the status of birth, what a person does and where she/he lives. The social system, in turn, partly shapes what it means to be secure, have an identity and be active. This shaping is performed by the process of ideology or hegemony and its power lies in its ability to answer existential questions (Therborn, 1980). It can provide answers to the questions of what does or does not exist (e.g., certain types of identity cannot be pursued in particular societies with, for example, dissent in the Soviet Union being relabelled social hooliganism), what is good and not good (e.g., the images held by much of the white middle class in capitalist cities concerning the inner city and the suburb as places to live), and what is possible and not possible (e.g., a particular course of action may be deemed impossible to pursue in a particular society, as in the case of the annexation of suburban townships by city administrations in most metropolitan areas in the U.S.). Juxtaposing the work of some humanistic geographers (e.g., Tuan, 1977), place may be regarded as a center of felt value in this existential searching, in which people do not simply act as sponges

soaking up hegemonic values. They may also, on the basis of their own ideas, interests and experiences, impinge on hegemony. And we must remember that hegemony itself is a fractured, often contradictory, phenomenon (see Williams, 1977). But this impinging is the social creation (or reshaping) of everyday life, and it is most likely to occur in those arenas over which people appear to exercise greatest control and which they experience as meaningful actors, namely "family" and neighborhood life.

So not only are the environments and spaces in which people live and act mainly given and pre-determined, but so too are the values which become the meanings of particular places. But we cannot "read off" what people think of or how they will use particular environments. They seldom take their spaces as given and they may employ particular values in different contexts. The textures of meaning that a particular place has will depend on the new environment in question, individual attributes, circumstances and needs and the mix of values (societal, group and individual) present. Societal values (hegemony) can dominate the definition of these textures of meaning. In the Polish context, the overriding importance of the productive sector and the subordinate provision of housing by the state for workers, as at the steel complex at Nowa Huta and its associated housing estates mean that state imperatives are extremely significant in shaping the meaning of place. In Israel, the ideological, political and religious commitment to the continued existence of the Jewish state is the overarching parameter determining what it means for nearly every Jew to live anywhere in that nation. Further, the differentiation of the Jewish population along party, political and religious lines meant the construction of neighborhoods for the exclusive use of Jewish sub-populations, as for example in Haifa, constraining to an even greater extent the possibilities for the individual or group redefinition and remaking of space.

A recent study which has concentrated on these possibilities and their outcomes in terms of senses of place looked at a small town in the English Midlands (Eyles, 1985) in which it was possible to identify ten ideal-typical senses. All ten were firmly located in the sources of identity and forces and structures of the material worlds that shape how people live. They have greater or lesser impact depending on individual circumstances and attributes, which greatly influence how people shape their social worlds and reshape their environments. It is in this shaping and reshaping that the significance of lay senses of place may be observed. The most important sense of place was social—that place had little meaning without reference to social ties and interactions. Place was shaped by it being the location of family, neighbors and friends. In some instances, family dominated this shaping of environment in terms of either interactions or where the family's roots could be identified. Others gave the social a different meaning, seeing people and place as dimensions of a stage on which a particular life-style could be played. These individuals significantly reshaped and redefined what was present to suit their own ideas on how life should be lived. They did, however, tend to do this in a positive way, contributing to the social life of the place. Others used people and place more instrumentally, wanting a village-type existence without the interactions and obligations that such existence brings. They viewed people and place as commodities, as things to be acquired, used and ultimately

discarded. While their re-shaping was social in orientation, they shared a perspective with those who saw place as a means to an end, in terms simply of what it provided (or did not provide). This instrumental, rationalistic view of place in terms of work and leisure opportunities may be closest to that of planners and designers who want to provide "functional communities."

While those who possessed an ecological sense of place (with environment important in its own right) are few in numbers; two other "reshapings" are more significant. One group, consisting almost entirely of elderly people, saw their living space in terms of the past. They lived nostalgically with the past being the most significant element in life. The other appeared to have no sense of place at all, seeming to be apathetic about where they lived. They simply acquiesced to life and place as they were, not because they were particularly good, but often because they felt they could not change anything themselves. In some ways, this group may represent a "captive audience" for environmental professionals. But their silence and acceptance of what they have been given should not be taken as approval. The burdens of life leave little time, will or resources to effect a re-shaping of the environment. Life is there to be lived through and put up with. In such a group lies a major challenge to architecture and planning. And because they put up with the way things are, does not mean that they will always do so or that the design professions should allow such acquiescence to assume that they have successfully predicted what people want. They may have but equally they may not have.

It must be recognized that this study concentrated primarily on a community which, through its affluence, can negotiate or impose its own definitions of place. They can define and manage the environment and for them the environmental professionals can make places more legible and liveable. But there exist, in the larger cities of societies like Britain, poor and working-class populations whose places (and senses of belonging and well-being) have been substantially modified or destroyed by such professionals in exercises of rezoning or redevelopment. Their places have also been substantially altered by the operation of market forces. The growth of central commercial areas, the desire of many elements of the service class to live close to work and the destruction of many traditional industries in the process of economic structuring have meant that many working-class groups are more manipulated than manipulating. Such changes can lead to the destruction of places, early examples of which can be found in Boston (Fried, 1963), their changing social composition as with the gentrification of some of the inner areas of such cities as London, Toronto, Sydney and Auckland, and their decline to house an acquiescent population hit hard by high levels of unemployment and reductions in social support services. On occasions, these communities can establish local bases of resistance to urban restructuring and redevelopment or plant closure (e.g., Norman Street, New York (Susser, 1982), some British coalfields in 1984-5), but such resistance is often shortlived or unsuccessful. In the main, such places are backwaters bypassed by "progress" and seen as marginal in the dominant view of the nature of the social, economic and environmental system. This does not mean that in such localities people have no sense of identity or place, but it may mean that the raw materials at their disposal to remake places are mainly themselves. The constraints of context underline the social nature of experience. The

ability to shape and manipulate place is thus constrained by occupational structure and work position. Individuals and groups may physically and psychologically remake space as well as use their social worlds so to do, but, for most, not only the poor, economic, political and ideological dimensions provide insistent answers to existential questions, these in turn influencing our (and environmental professionals') abilities to act.

## CONCLUSIONS

The significance of lay senses of place is that they inform on how people shape their environments and indeed their lives. This shaping, as we have been at pains to point out, is in reality a re-shaping because by and large people do not always make their lives in conditions and with values of their own choosing. This is not an attempt to claim that there are better ways in which people may live or different values by which they may give meaning to the world. We wish merely to point to potential constraints on thought and action. The main example employed demonstrated how particular people in a particular place "overcome" those constraints to define and manage their places. No one context is of course universal, and the effects of economy, polity and ideology are differentiated. But within all these constraints, it remains pertinent to discover how people shape their lives in the light of their perceived needs. This shaping, as manifested in how people think about and use their spaces and places, should engage (to return to a subtheme) the design professions. Even the enlightened appear to stop at providing humane (yet still imposed) design. Much of it undoubtedly works and is the undoubted product of past experience. Even with such a fundamental need as living space for a home, people will not put up with what they see as fundamentally flawed for long. At the level of use, it is easy to provide a checklist of what people may need and want (within income constraints) as many manuals do. But environments operate at the level of meaning too. Can meaning be designed into environments? It most obviously can (Cullen, 1961). But whose meaning is it? As some of our examples have shown, particular spaces can be given different meanings by different groups. Can meanings be designed—particularly those deriving from lay people? That perhaps remains an open question. But what does not remain open is the fact that concern about design and re-design is a luxury of relative affluence. For many, economic restructuring and ideological effect mean that existential searching (and defining place) is itself very much a luxury.

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