

"Sense of Place" and Selected Conceptual Approaches to Place

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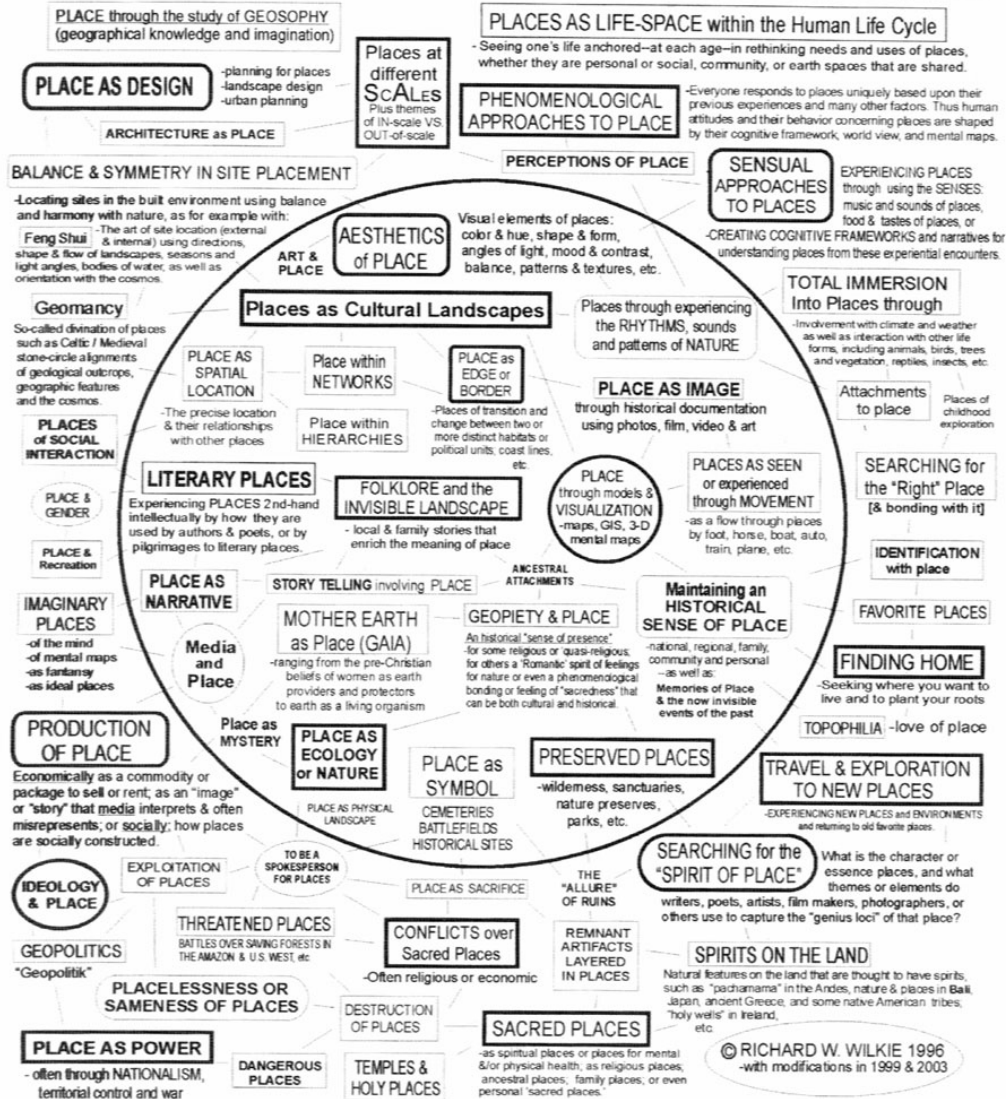
The focus of this essay is, first, the concept of "place" and how scholars construct paradigms from an ever-expanding list of meaning and definitions. I present a visual framework of existing conceptual approaches to "place" in an attempt to show how these concepts cluster and interconnect. Verbal descriptions of non-linear multi-dimensional complexities such as these border on the impossible, especially in a short essay like this one. Without using a visual graphic, this would be like describing how to construct a complex building without the assistance of drawings that reveal the sub-layers, with all their structural connections. But blueprints are not easy to read either, and some people will look at them—as they might at the visualization that I present here—and feel that it tells them nothing. A conceptual framework, from which to understand where particular kinds of studies of "place" fit, however, is needed.

A second approach that I am using in this article is to discuss "place" and "sense of place" from the perceptual, experiential, and phenomenological perspectives of place. This has been the focus of much of my research and fieldwork over the years while studying migrants in rural Argentina attempting to adjust to new places, and from courses I have taught since 1972 on "Environmental Perception and Sense of Place."

In addition, I taught a seminar entitled "Spirit of Place" the first time in 1975, and regularly since the late 1980's. Within these courses, an ever-expanding world of themes and approaches regarding "place" evolved. Most of these paradigms are found within the field of geography, but others fall within the realms of related disciplines and areas of thought in the academic community.

Every person has feelings and attitudes about places that they have known and experienced. Many feel that certain places reach out to them or even speak to them—most often to attract and draw them in, but also particular places can repel them. Many times our relationship to a certain place is entirely unique to a particular time or series of events. More often, certain places have something of a collective sense about them in that a number of people may have had similar kinds of feelings of awe and revelation when they are there. For example, when Lawrence Durrell captured the spirit of place in the ancient Greek temples at Delphi in his writing, many related to it whether they have been there or not because they knew similar kinds of places where they had similar feelings. If one is as fortunate as I have been—to have sat high on the hill overlooking the ruins of Delphi and its ancient bowl-shaped amphitheater, looking across the Gulf

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of Korinthiakos to the southwest and the Peloponnesus Peninsula beyond—you might even relate directly to the feelings that Durrell expressed about the place in his essay “Landscape and Character” (*New York Times*, 1960):

Most travelers hurry too much. But try just for a moment sitting on the great stone omphalos, the navel of the ancient Greet world, at Delphi. Don't ask mental questions, but just relax and empty your mind. It lies, this strange amphora-shaped object, in an overgrown field above the temple. Everything is blue and smells of sage. The marbles dazzle down below you. There are two eagles moving softly on the sky, like distant boats rowing across an immense violet lake.

Ten minutes of this sort of inner identification will give you the notion of the Greek landscape, which you could not get in twenty years of studying ancient Greek texts. But having got it, you will at once get all the rest; the key is there, so to speak, for you to turn. After that you will not be able to go on a shopping expedition to Athens without running into Agamemnon or Clytemnestra—and often under the same names. And if you happen to go to Eleusis in springtime you will come upon more than one blind Homer walking the dusty roads. The secret is identification.

Elements of the term “place,” as it is known currently in humanistic geography, slowly began to evolve out of work of John Kirkland Wright in the late-1940's, David Lowenthal and Paul Ward English in the 1960's, and Yi-Fu Tuan, Edward Relph, and Anne Buttimer in the mid-1970's. Since that time, place has been used to denote bounded spaces where human identity and social interaction come together with memories and meaning. One approach within that framework is that certain places can have symbolic or even spiritual meaning for people. These special places can bring back a broad range of emotional feeling and intellectual responses when they are revisited, or even when visiting for the first time places about which one has only read or heard stories. For many people the discovery of special places through one's explorations can be nearly as powerful as revisiting one's own pantheon of sacred places. Some wanderers and adventurers spend a lifetime exploring the world piecing together a worldview out of the unique mosaic of places that exist—each with different combinations of climate, ecology and landforms, and each with a unique mix of cultures, built environments and organization of cultural landscapes. And of course, humans all respond to places differently though our senses—the sounds of music and rhythms of the dances, the smells in the marketplaces, the visual acknowledgement of how light and color are used within the textures and patterns of the place, the taste of food and drink, and even such things

as mentally noting where on the earth's surface these places are located with regard to other places—our global sense of place.

Yi Fu Tuan's term “topophilia” (love of place), John Kirkland Wright's term “geopietry” (a spiritual bonding with the historical sacredness of a place), and Anne Buttimer's term “the dynamics of lifeworld”—all acknowledge aspects of the feelings that I am writing about here. Humans seem to layer in their own previous experiences with those of family and friends, thus providing a hand-me-down oral history about places that adds human drama and texture to what would otherwise be only an invisible landscape of past human events. Out of these building blocks over the years, the importance of “place” and “sense of place” have become keystones for my teaching and research. I am also keenly interested in how writers, filmmakers, artists, photographers, poets and others have attempted to describe or capture the “genius loci”—the “spirit of place”—of particular places.

But places are also important in many other ways. I have come to appreciate more strongly a myriad of conceptual approaches to place that exist from within the broad array of disciplines in the natural and social sciences, the humanities, and from the realms of philosophers. Each perspective on place provides a different way of defining how it can be experienced, what it stands for, how it can be conceptualized, and it can be analyzed within the context of multi-dimensional perspectives and paradigms that have been created by humans. Under the umbrella of place and senses of place, I argue that at least 20 clusters can be identified in which a series of interrelated subsets of approaches to place can serve as entry points into the graphic framework that follows. These are: perception of place, exploring place, human senses and place, memories of place, identity with place, designing and building places, aesthetics of place, history and place, spirit of place, ecology of place, literature of place, images of place, locations of place, ideology and place, geopolitics of place, conflict and place, being placeless or homeless, place as sacred versus profane, the production of place—economically, socially, and in the media, and finally, the emerging modernistic feeling of being no place (often referred to as placelessness) or being caught in the sameness of places.

Clearly the conceptual framework presented in the graphic for viewing the related sub-fields in the studies of place—“The Multi-dimensional World of Place: A Geographer's Perspective”—is ongoing and not meant to be an end point. It is hoped, however, that this graphic can be used as a guide or starting point from which readers can enter into or continue previous intellectual journeys into the study of place.