

Positioning Place in Site Analysis

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Introduction

As designers we are constantly on the search for data that might be useful for making good places. For student designers this inquiry often begins with the process of site analysis. How we approach site analysis, including the methods we choose and how we use them, creates a conceptual framework embedded with assumptions about which aspects of a site are most relevant to placemaking.

Two sets of paradigms can be seen to define the ends of the theoretical spectrum with respect to the relationship between site and place. The first frames place as having meaning that is embodied in the physical elements of site. The second characterizes places as socially constructed entities in which the physical characteristics of site are given meaning by human actors.

Two broad categories of site analysis approaches can also be identified: those that isolate particular aspects of site (and tend to focus on the physical characteristics of site) and those that strive to create assemblages of stories (visual, spoken, and otherwise) in order to create a more immersive experience of site. We see the former as more closely fitted with embodied place paradigms, while the latter seem best suited to constructed place paradigms.

We propose here that these approaches to site analysis, as well as the theoretical paradigms they seem to reflect, fall short of describing the complexity of site-place relationships because they fail to adequately account for the role of

human perception in defining what counts as 'good' place.

Thus, this paper offers a revised conceptual approach to the relationship between site, place, and perception. In its footsteps, we discuss the challenges different types of site analysis present in engaging this revised approach. It is our hope to provide a starting point for the development of site analysis pedagogy that is tailored to introducing beginning design students to these complex relationships, as well as one that helps students better evaluate their own role in placemaking.

Embodied versus Constructed Place

Characterizing that which makes a good place is neither obvious nor unanimous. Within the dense field of architectural canon there are two distinctly different attitudes towards defining place with respect to site. These two paradigms, which we refer to as *embodied place* and *socially constructed place*, can be seen as opposite ends of a sliding scale. Each offers a drastically unlike framework for how sites can come to be understood as places. Comparing these positions is useful as a way of unearthing some of the commonly unstated assumptions that we contend are implicit in what we include in site analysis and how we go about it.

Embodied place is based on an *a priori* notion of place rooted in phenomenology. This position asserts that sites are places waiting to be discovered. Thus it is the designer's responsibility to uncover, reveal, or make manifest the *genius loci* of a given site. One of the purest voices at this end of the spectrum is Christian Norberg-

Schulz, who makes this argument in *Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*.ⁱ For Norberg-Schulz, place is described as having two components: space and character. Space is discussed as the concrete limits of tangible three-dimensional space, and character refers to a general atmospheric quality or the particular nature by which space *presents* itself, that is, its identity. While Norberg-Schulz fervently cautions that a full understanding of place cannot be defined by a series of spatial relationships, he sidesteps any meaningful discussion of perception. Variations in how place is perceived by different actors and its contingent nature are left unaccounted for. For Norberg-Schulz good places will allow for 'dwelling'. Postulating that one can design any 'thing' that will afford the existential experience of dwelling to any 'one' is to assume that there is a direct relationship between meaning and physical form. In other words, physical forms have *embedded* within them *inherent* identity, thereby precluding the possibility that physical forms can be 'read', or perceived, differently by different observers.

This assumption can also be seen to underlay Christopher Alexander's *A Pattern Language*, as well as New Urbanist approaches to place makingⁱⁱ. Both propose in somewhat different ways that particular design elements or patterns can be relied upon to generate good places. Though the strategies for place-making differ, these theorists can be seen to suggest a relationship between meaning and form that can be uncovered, analyzed and reproduced to create dwelling, a sense of community, and and/or good urban space.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, *socially constructed place* proposes that there is an *a posteriori* recognition of how meaning is achieved in a site. Rooted in pragmatism, this position counters the idea that there is inherent meaning in the physical characteristics of site, instead proposing that all meaning is human construction. Thus, sites become places because of the meaning we assign to them...meanings

that are nuanced, varied, and subject to multiple interpretations. Thus, what we call "place" is a socially constructed narrative grafted onto objective physical sites.ⁱⁱⁱ Truth and meaning cannot be assumed, but are proven by perception and practice.

For these pragmatists, the consequences of design are of more importance than the ideas that created them. This shift in evaluative criteria of architecture away from design aesthetics toward a more democratic pluralistic means of assessment is represented by voices like Margaret Crawford, who advocate for "everyday" urbanism^{iv}. Other positions akin to this also recognize that design can be a tactical act of improvisation by "non-architects." Teddy Cruz's bottom-up strategies for development based on the morphology of shantytowns are but one example. Typically disregarded, garage sales, street vending, vacant lots and ad-hoc lean-tos become fair game based on the significance they hold for their participants. That which constitutes them as good places cannot be summarized through formal analyses alone. In this case, good place is a purposeful space that engages the narrative of its users. Thus, for theorists at the social-constructivist end of the sliding scale, the designer's role in placemaking is to uncover and engage with the meaning (utilitarian or otherwise) it holds for users rather than to uncover *inherent* meaning in the physical elements of a site.

Extending the Sliding Scale: a Revised View of the Site-Place Relationship & the Designer's Role in Place-Making

While we associate ourselves most closely with the end of the spectrum that sees places as socially constructed, this paper contends that neither embodied place paradigms nor constructed place paradigms adequately describe the nature of placemaking. We propose instead a revised conceptual approach to the relationship between site and place, and

with it a different view of the designer's role in placemaking.

Places are as much ideas as they are physical locales. Although they are social constructions, they are composed of real physical elements that conjure associations beyond themselves. For example, the idea of San Francisco exists alongside its physical features, creating a distinguishable place identity that is recognizable to residents as well those who have never actually been there. Select tangible aspects of place come to stand for a larger constellation of physical elements and ideas. The Golden Gate Bridge, a single half-block of ornate Victorian rowhouses, and the Transamerica Pyramid become symbolic of San Francisco's people and values (real or imagined) - these elements perhaps in turn evoke West Coast liberalism, gay pride, the pacific coast and its opportunities, and more.

While these ideas condition how we perceive the physical elements of a locale, we do not all read these elements the same way. How – and indeed *if* – place is perceived is contingent on one's positionality.^{vi} One's positionality can be seen as a type of lens or lenses through which one sees the world. Individuals and groups of people perceive and experience places differently based on their own backgrounds, their self-identity, and how others see them. Thus the same 'site'^{vii} may be experienced as very different 'places' by different actors. This does not mean that there are no shared understandings of place; rather, there are many overlaps in meaning from person to person. Places may have distinguishable identities within the collective consciousness while simultaneously having multiple readings or associations for individual inhabitants.

In addition to responding to meanings held by potential users of a design site, we seek to extend social constructivist paradigms by emphasizing the impact the designer's own positionality has on constructing the narrative of a place. Like all citizens, designers see place both as a result of

their own positionality and socially constructed ideas. Designers (be they architecture students, practitioners, or everyday citizens) are neither neutral parties who reveal inherent meanings, nor objective observers who uncover socially constructed meaning. Rather, designers are themselves participants in a dialogical process of call and response between ideas about places and places' physical elements.^{viii}

The designer's own lens, along with broader social constructions of place, conditions how he or she sees the physical elements of place, including whether or not they are contributors to 'good' place. Designers' built works reflect their own interpretation of what constitutes good places. These built works become linked with new experiences, ideas, and memories. The perception and experience of these physical elements is constantly transformed as buildings rise and fall around them and natural landscapes shift in relation to them. Thus, place identity is not static. Instead, both the physical characteristics of place and its associated ideas/meanings are constantly shifting. Place, is constantly being created anew; it is shaped and reshaped in a dialogical process in which a place's physical characteristics respond to ideas about place, which in turn reshape the image of place, serving as touchstones for the creation of new memories (and myths) about place, resulting in new place identity, and so on.

We see site analysis as one of the key points in the design process where the relative nature of perception becomes manifest in this ongoing process of place-making. Which tools of analysis we use, how we use them, and the results they yield are, we argue, a reflection of our own positionality, which includes our own take on what makes good places.^{ix} In light of this, the next section discusses the challenges associated with commonly used site analysis approaches, illustrated by our own experiences in teaching introductory studios .

Isolative and Assemblage Approaches to Site Analysis

Commonly used methods of site analysis fall into two categories, which we refer to as *isolative* and *assemblage* approaches. Isolative approaches are designed to focus attention on particular and singular aspects (or related aspects) of the site in question. These include strategies like mapping particular characteristics of site that are pre-determined to be important to the forthcoming design project. They edit out other types of information in an effort to make sense of the complexities of a site or place. They can thus be said to 'enframe' information.^x

One site analysis tool that intuitively acts to enframe information is photography, which demands that the photographer establish a focus and point of view, and literally crop particular aspects of site, keeping them out of the frame. This allows, for example, for the pile of trash in the foreground to be edited out in favor of the stunning light falling through the trees, thus creating a partial impression of the site. In addition, photography reflects the positionality of the photographer, in that they choose what to photograph based on what is seen as valuable about a site – that is, what it has that might provide the basis for making good designed places.

Like many other tools or techniques, photography can be used with either isolative or assemblage approaches to site analysis. However, unlike isolative tools where the author deconstructs information by preselecting variables to identify and study, *assemblage* techniques reconstruct narratives through overlay and juxtaposition to find the relevant variables, themes, and ideas. Following an isolative approach one might use photography to document aspects of a site that are understood in an *a priori* way to contribute negatively or positively to place. In contrast, following an assemblage technique, one might troll the internet for images of a place taken by many different actors, then assemble them to

identify patterns that might reveal the preferences of the crowd.

We have used both types of analysis in our teaching in the core undergraduate studios at the University of Oregon. During the initial four terms of their design education, students are gradually introduced to the complexity of place through projects whose sites become progressively less abstract and increasingly more accessible so that by their second year they are designing buildings in physically accessible local sites within our region. To prepare them for this, the first five assignments in a six-project journey contain sites that are all hypothetical with varying degrees of 'placeness', commencing with a 'site' composed of a paper-board plane and ending with an imaginary sloping site on a lake in the Pacific Northwest. The sequence culminates in the second term with the sixth project, the last in this sequence before they transition into traditional projects with accessible local sites. In this sixth project, students design a Bath House for one of a number of international locations. In recent years, project sites have been located in cities like Stockholm, Saigon, Havana, Amsterdam, Barcelona and Reykjavik.^{xi}

Their Bath House project is the students' first experience with trying to understand a real place and in turn fit their design moves to the particularities of that place and culture. Since students cannot physically visit the site, their starting point for understanding context is *ideas* about place (including popular myths) rather than the physical locale itself. This brings their positionality with respect to how they interpret their design context front and center, in turn making the need for appropriate modes of site analysis that can engage human perception and values particularly pressing.

For the Bath House project, we have students to identify and map Kevin Lynch's classic elements from *Image of the City* in their own places of focus, as we are sure many others have done^{xi}. The typical method is to identify the paths, edges, nodes, landmarks, and districts within or

surrounding the given site as independent overlays. Once these elements have been identified they are merged into a single document. This master overlay acts as an interpretive lens to assess strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities of the site based on the clarity of visible patterns.

We have found this isolative approach helpful because it provides students with tangible data about aspects of place that are understood as important elements for assessing the legibility of a site. Students can fairly directly derive concrete design moves that could then be incorporated into their own work, thus making it tempting to translate them directly into a methodology for placemaking where response to site context is executed by mending broken relationships between existing paths, nodes, landmarks etc. and defining new ones. The simplicity of this kit-of-parts approach offers a reasonable panacea for the burden of placemaking in design sites that are inaccessible or overwhelmingly complex—as in the case of our Bath House project. However, it reduces the act of placemaking to a formal game of proportion, pattern-finding, massing studies, hierarchies and patch-work.

What is lost in using Lynch's elements this way is his acute awareness of the role positionality plays in defining place. As Lynch writes, "*Nothing is experienced by itself, but always in relation to its surroundings, the sequences of events leading up to it, the memory of past experiences . . . Every citizen has had long associations with some part of his city, and his image is soaked in memories and meanings . . .*" In the case of the Bath House project, we would be remiss if we thought that our non-native formal reading of a site through drawings and photographs could encapsulate all of the meaningful data about a place and its value to its citizens. When Lynch's five elements are repurposed as a generative grammar for making good places, one might assume that legibility can be understood without engaging the fuzzy lens of perception. However, Lynch is clear in noting that the elements were originally

identified via analysis of human perception, in which city dwellers were asked to recall their impressions of the city and to describe the attributes they found most relevant. Lynch extracted the elements where the density of those mappings of mental imagery and associations aligned/coincided/collided. Thus the five elements are not an assumed formula for legibility. Instead the recipe for legibility is hooked around the notion of collective perception. This collective perception, or narrative is constructed through an act of assemblage.

We have therefore sought to balance the isolative-method use of Lynch's elements with a complimentary assemblage approach. Hoping to reveal place memories, narratives, and meanings (including physical aspects of place that have meaning to the residents of and visitors to our various cities) without pre-determining what those might be, we have charged students with gathering images and stories of our particular cities from on-line sources including blogs and YouTube videos, in addition to literature, film, and music. This might be described as a sort of immersion approach to understanding place, in which students swim amongst a variety of voices that provide a range of different images, stories, and points of view.

This assemblage approach has been useful in opening up a dialogue with students about the notions that (a) there is no singular or definitive definition of place, but instead many ways of perceiving place, and (b) that the physical characteristics of place are only part of the equation of what makes good places and that what makes them successful is that they have meaning to the people of that place. However, we have found it challenging to begin to sort out the voices behind these stories and to evaluate whose point of view they represent (including evaluating whether or not it is primarily the particular student's point of view talking), and thus their validity and meaning for the people in Havana or Stockholm or Saigon. Furthermore, we are viewing these images and hearing these

stories through the lens of our own positionality as cultural outsiders and long for a set of site analysis techniques that can help us to see through insider's eyes. Lacking these tools, we are left with the assemblage itself but little that helps us to critically evaluate the components of and relationships between its elements.

Thus, we see isolative approaches to site analysis as useful because they help beginning students understand a complex constellation of information in a digestible, manageable way. In addition, they are useful for describing or cataloging the physical aspects of place, thus establishing basic parameters for design. However, they do little to call attention to the role of the site analysis methods themselves in establishing what is valued about place and thus shaping the designer's perception of place. In contrast, assemblage approaches begin to allow for a means of assessment that is more in line with social-constructivists' call for more democratic and pluralistic readings of place, but leave the site analyst in danger of getting lost in the muck of relativism. While we therefore see these approaches as complimentary, we nevertheless propose that a better set of site analysis tools is needed; one that can serve as an interpretive lens that helps us critically evaluate and synthesize the data gleaned from these two modes while also framing them in terms of the role the methods themselves play in shaping perception of place. The next step, then, is to work to find *synthetic methods* that aim to recombine subsets of information gleaned from these existing approaches.

Concluding Thoughts

Architecture is an act of place-making. However, introducing beginning design students, who are at the eve of abstract thinking, to the idea of site as place rather than physical locale is inherently difficult. First, the data we require students to retrieve from a site and the methods we ask them to use to extract and make sense of it reflect particular sets of ideas about what makes meaningful places. These ideas are typically not

stated explicitly; nor are they neutral. Secondly, conventional techniques of site analysis are often too tidy to handle the messy reality of place. Site analysis methods that require abstraction are reductive—focusing narrowly on physical characteristics rather than a more comprehensive interpretation of place that engages the nuance of individual perception. If our students are to make places that have sufficient and positive meaning for the people that inhabit them, then we must develop tools of analysis that help us “see through others' eyes” to the extent that it is possible. Likewise, understanding one's own assumptions about what makes good place is equally important and can be explored by engaging student positionality in selecting and employing site analysis techniques. Beginning design students have not yet been socialized in the values of architectural culture and by default bring with them their unveiled positionality to the table. This makes the beginning design studio an ideal environment to begin a conversation with students about the role of perception and positionality in place-making.

Notes

ⁱ Norberg-Schulz, Christian. *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*. New York: Rizzoli. 1980.

ⁱⁱ Alexander, Christopher, Sara Ishikawa, and Murray Silverstein. *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1977.

ⁱⁱⁱ Zijlmans, Kitty, ed.. *Sites Seeing: Places in Culture, Time and Space*. Leiden: CNWS Publications. 2006. p 5.

^v Chase, John, Margaret Crawford, and John Kaliski. *Everyday Urbanism*. New York: Monacelli Press, 2008.

^{vi} The term positionality is intended to describe one's position in the world relative to both other human actors and to things (including as sites or places). One's positionality is affected by one's family history, education, race, gender, class ethnicity, cultural background, and so on. How one sees oneself and how one is seen by others is not static; instead, it shifts depending upon one's relation to other actors (See Michael Hames-García, *Identity Complex: Making the Case for Multiplicity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011, pp. 1-37)

The concept of positionality also draws on Craig Wilkins's argument that perception, and with it spatial experience, is not neutral but instead understood differently based on one's position as a member of a particular society. As Wilkins writes, "Space then – one's ability to perceive it, access it, etc. – becomes an essential element in the construction of identity and, concomitantly, entire societies as well. If that is the case, it is quite reasonable to assume that different societies might view space in different ways... For example, if space can be constructed differently across cultures, then perhaps it is not the universal, immutable, naturally occurring entity that we have been led to believe." (Craig Wilkins, *The Aesthetics of Equity: Notes on Race Space Architecture and Music*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, pp. 15-29, quote is from pp. 7.) Thus, positionality can be understood as relational in spatial terms in that one's perception of place shifts depending upon one's position relative to other actors in that space. Positionality, then, affects both how one sees the world and how one experiences it as a result of how one is viewed by others. This matters to place-making because how one is seen by others in a place affects how one is treated, which in turn affects the qualitative experience – or perception – of place, regardless of the objective physical attributes of that place. This re-framing of perception as relational – or contingent on one's positionality – mounts a challenge to the idea that there is any *a priori* meaning embodied in the physical attributes of place.

vii For us, 'site' as it is commonly treated within the context of site analysis exercises, is a location on the map that is defined by its particular set of physical characteristics. These include its topography, geographic location, vegetation, views, political boundaries (property lines, zoning restraints, and the like), drainage, solar access, relationship to prevailing winds, and so on. These features may be cataloged and described in a more-or-less neutral way – which is to say that they are at least in theory things that are objectively comparable regardless of the cultural context and background of either the cataloger or the site itself.

There is a great deal more to be said about whether or not objective data gathering and analysis is actually possible. For now, perhaps it is enough to acknowledge this difficulty and note that it is related to questions of perception, especially as they relate to perceptions of the cultural or racial "other." In the context of architectural analysis, this may be particularly relevant for designers working outside their native cultures, an increasingly common activity of professional architectural practice (including public interest work like housing design for disaster relief).

viii These ideas may be related to one's own experience and preferences; to broader ideas about a place that are constructed via popular culture, academic

discourse, and so on; or via stories told by clients, users, or neighbors of a site.

ix For example, the study of biological conditions, solar access, and watersheds have become for an increasing number of designers key aspects of site analysis as environmental protection has come to be valued as an aspect of good place-making.

x Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings, David Farrell Krell, ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1993): pp. 326, 330.

We draw here on Heidegger's discussion of the term enframing. He suggests that it can be understood to mean a framework that leads to revealing – a "producing and presenting" – something that "lets...presences come forth into unconcealment" (pp. 326). However, this is seen in a sort of yin and yang relationship with "a harboring and concealing" (pp. 330). We are using the idea here to mean that isolative approaches to site analysis, in focusing attention on particular pre-determined aspects of site, work to reveal those aspects but in doing so simultaneously conceal other aspects of site."

xi The project is the continuation of a series of assignments developed by Professor Virginia Cartwright, who also coordinates the first year teaching team of which paper authors Nettles and Williams are a part.

xii Lynch, Kevin. *The Image of the City*. Cambridge, Mass: M.I.T. Press, 1964