
Ten Geographic
Ideas That
Changed the
World

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Sense of Place

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Ignorance of Place, or King Lear in Las Vegas

I was on the main strip in Las Vegas, enjoying the regularly scheduled volcanic eruption in the tropical gardens of the Mirage Hotel, when a remark of King Lear's sprang unheralded to my mind: "I am mainly ignorant what place this is." A simultaneous rift opens in fiction and physics, and a confused old king is transported through time, space, and reality. The sidewalks are crowded with pedestrians, but they are mostly intent on their own fortunes or misfortunes as, clutching plastic cups of quarters for slot machines, they move between casinos and Lear attracts little attention. In the play he was, by his own admission, "not in perfect mind." The world around him was sane enough; his geographical problem was in his head. Here the opposite seems to be the case.

The streetscape of the strip is one of unpredictably juxtaposed scenes: seven lanes of traffic, signs three stories high, a Hindu shrine, buildings covered in decorations suggesting a Mississippi riverboat, an Irish pub, something Japanese, and countless other fancies, and, behind all of this, the modernist slabs of skyscraper hotels. Snatches of tropical bird songs come from speakers, carefully hidden behind signs advertising the time of the next volcanic eruption. A few yards away two full-size sailing ships engage in mock battle in front of a vaguely Caribbean village. When the last pirate has fallen from the rigging, Lear, his own distractions distracted by these marvelous scenes, wan-

ders off into a fragment of rain forest with a complex synthetic ecology of imported and fiberglass palm trees.

Public and private spaces here blend seamlessly into one another. Lear unthinkingly drifts out to the street again, then is attracted through a gilded classical portico and onto a moving sidewalk, which transports him regally to the Appian Way, part of the Forum Shops at Caesar's Palace. The architecture is Roman, the designer stores are Italian, and the crowds watching imagined statues of Bacchus and lesser deities as they burst into a regularly scheduled, animatronic laser show are mostly groups of Japanese tourists. A brilliant azure laser with slowly moving cumulus clouds is projected onto the domed ceiling until whatever time the mall closes, and then it fades through sunset to a starry canopy.

Along the street a temporarily abandoned lot, where the Dunes Hotel once stood and will stand again, has begun to revert to desert, and trash has blown up against the surrounding chain link fence. Beyond it is a preposterously impossible medieval castle, with roofs of bright red and blue, exaggerated towers, and fanciful fortifications. A monorail links this edifice to an immense glass pyramid surrounded by sphinxes, obelisks, holographic sculptures, and palm trees shaped in the ancient Egyptian manner (Figure 10.1). From its peak a laser light pierces the heavens with such intensity that whenever a mutual thinning of smog permits, it can be seen in Los Angeles. Across the street a cluster of Easter Island heads stare with disdain at the passing traffic and at a huge supine lion embedded in a massive block of a dark glass building. The lion's mouth is the entrance to the MGM Grand, with its 5,000 room hotel and theme park. Inside, statues of Dorothy, Toto, the Tin Man, the Lion, and the Scarecrow dance forever along the yellow brick road away from Oz and toward the casino.

Like Dorothy and her friends, King Lear is trapped in Las Vegas in a single dramatic moment. He is muttering repeatedly to himself: "I am mainly ignorant what place this is." His ignorance is understandable. Clearly nobody can be entirely sure what place Las Vegas is. It is tempting to assume that beneath the decorations and signs there is no here here, nothing intrinsic except a patch of semi-desert with chain link fences and wind-blown garbage. This assumption should not be made too quickly. If we look carefully we will see little pretense, and we will discern no real attempt to disguise the borrowing and contrivance. It is hard to imagine anyone being fooled into thinking that this is a real volcano or a real medieval castle. In this sense, almost everything here is an honest fake.

The Las Vegas strip is a remarkable conflation of the best bits of

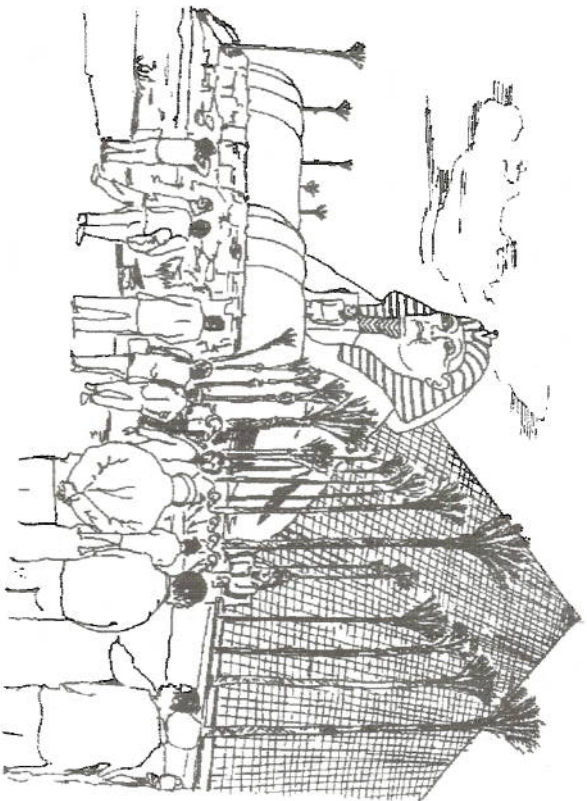


Figure 10.1. Tourists in Egypt in Las Vegas: The Luxor Hotel. Sketch by author.

geography and history, reconstituted and recombined. It is a place made of other places and other times, of fantasies where the real and the artificial slide easily into one another, created to house a dream of unlimited freedom through instant wealth. The designers of Las Vegas are not misguided; they have created somewhere that now attracts twenty-three million visits a year. And the tourists who make those visits are not deluded; they know all this is fabricated. They come because they like Las Vegas. For me, as a geographer, it is largely immaterial whether or not I agree with them. The real challenge is to get some critical understanding of what is happening here, or, in other words, to make sense of this place.

Sense of Place

Sense of place is not a theory that geographers invented and now offer as a service to the rest of society, nor is it a tool in the way that a map or central place theory are tools that unlock geographical puzzles. Shakespeare needed to know nothing of geography to grasp the importance of sense of place if King Lear was to get his bearings, and tourists

in Las Vegas need to know nothing of geography either to get there (tour packages do that) or to enjoy the juxtaposed place fragments (for which they have presumably been prepared by a lifetime of watching discontinuities on television). Sense of place is first of all an innate faculty, possessed in some degree by everyone, that connects us to the world. It is an integral part of all our environmental experiences and it is only because we are first in places that we can then develop abstract arguments about environment, economy, or politics. But in addition to this, sense of place can be a learned skill for critical environmental awareness that is used to grasp what the world is like and how it is changing. Geographers have reflected on sense of place as a faculty, and they have developed it as a skill, throughout the history of their discipline. They have often done this through writing, but they have done it more frequently, I believe, through their teaching, passing both the understanding and the skill of sense of place like cherished traditions from one generation to the next. It would be illogical to claim that sense of place, which has to do with specific contexts, has led to some universal change in environmental knowledge and practice. What it has done, and should continue to do, is contribute common sense and understanding to countless local changes to the world.

It is not only geographers who have attended to sense of place. Architects, psychologists, psychiatrists, artists, literary critics, poets, and even, though in my opinion with little success, economists, have all considered aspects of it. Most of them would have us believe that sense of place is invariably good, and that its enhancement can only make built environments more beautiful, our lives better, and communities more just. The geographical view is broader and less idealistic. For geographers, places are aspects of human life that carry with them all the hopes, accomplishments, ambiguities, and even horrors of existence. They see sense of place as a thread that ties each of us to our surroundings, and as a learned way for understanding somewhere on its own terms. As a form of environmental connection, sense of place is existential and political. As a learned geographical skill, it requires careful and critical observations of places and the recognition that surface appearances can reveal shared cultural traditions or disguise profound injustices. Indeed, the political desire to belong to some place and to participate in its traditions can fuel attempts at the systematic exclusion of all those who are believed not to belong. In contrast to those who may believe that a stronger sense of place can only make the world better, geographers try to remember that a persistent solution to social problems has been to destroy the places and communities where these occur, perhaps under the name of urban renewal or resettlement.

It is a perverse testament to the importance of sense of place that one of the most enduring of all military strategies is the destruction of places in order to undermine the will of a people. It is, of course, an even more powerful testament to the importance of sense of place that these places are invariably rebuilt by those whose attachment to them has not been destroyed.

In short, sense of place is a strong and usually positive faculty that links us to the world, but it can also become poisoned and destructive. As a taught skill, geographical sense of place has always aimed to grasp both what is good and what is bad in places, then to argue critically for changes that are just and enduring, yet responsive to diverse environments and cultures. This skill was first described by geographers over two thousand years ago. It was considered important then; it is essential now if we are to unravel the increasingly confused geographies of the late-twentieth century.

A History of Place in Geography

In antiquity it was a common practice for people to identify themselves by their name and the place from which they came, a geographical tradition, perhaps begun by Herodotus, which has sadly lapsed. Eratosthenes of Cyrene, a town on the coast of what is now Libya, was for some years around 225 B.C. the librarian at Alexandria and is the person usually credited with inventing the word and the idea of "geography." Not much is known about him. Apparently he was a person of many talents—a poet, mathematician, and historian as well as the first geographer. I imagine him to have been a lean and serious man, with a librarian's propensity to classify. He invented geography, I suspect, not in a moment of epistemological inspiration but out of desperation in order to organize all the information about different places he had gathered from reports of traders and travelers. His three books of geography, now lost, apparently consisted of an account of a measurement of the size of the earth, a map of the known earth, and a set of descriptions of countries.

From the little we know, it seems that for Eratosthenes sense of place consisted mostly of accurate knowledge of the locations of places. It was a far more complex notion for Strabo of Amasia, a town on the south coast of the Black Sea, who is perhaps the most famous geographer of antiquity. His multi-volume book, *Geography*, probably written between 9 and 5 B.C., is one of the oldest extant works of the discipline. Strabo acknowledged Eratosthenes (and is in fact the source of much that is known about him), yet dismissed contemptuously both his

cartographic approach and his claim to be the founder of the discipline. Instead Strabo, in accord with his beliefs as a Stoic, traced the origins of geography to Homer's insight that the earth and all its places had been created by the gods for the use of humans. This god-given geography had a providential order; some regions were endowed with good properties for human activities and other regions were poor. Humans must use their powers of foresight and reason, also provided for them by the gods, in order to recognize and respond to this providential order; if they fail to use reason they will probably end up eking out a miserable existence on some barren heath.

"A knowledge of places," Strabo wrote at the beginning of his *Geography* (section 1.2.12), "is conducive of virtue," and virtue means living in harmony with nature (Strabo 1917). Geographers, with their knowledge of the cosmos, wide travel, and careful observations, were especially capable of evaluating places and the ways of life of people. This acute sense of place enabled geographers to interpret the providential order of landscapes and to distinguish good settings from unpropitious ones. They could also advise others on how to recognize or achieve for themselves the Stoic ideal of living virtuously, and accordingly Strabo directed his book especially to political and military leaders.

I admire Strabo's view of geography, and my interpretation is probably biased by this admiration. His *Geography* is not a classical foundation for environmental ethics in the 1990s, as my account would seem to imply. His many-volume book is mostly an uncritical list of details that has been described as "an atlas in prose"; some of the information in it is quite fantastic and not at all reasonable or grounded in observation. Nevertheless, it is no misrepresentation to suggest that Strabo believed that geographers have a special sensitivity to the qualities of specific places and that their training allowed them to see through the surface forms of landscapes to a subtle and divine order. Strabo's understanding was therefore in marked contrast to that of Eratosthenes, for whom place was factual and objective, largely a matter of location and shared properties.

This difference in interpretation of place is one that has echoed through the discipline of geography ever since. Since Strabo, geographers have often written carefully observed and thoughtful accounts of places but have written little about the idea or sense of place. For those working in the tradition of Eratosthenes, the objective qualities of places, especially their location, have mattered most. For other geographers the uniqueness and virtue of places have been more important. Nicholas Entrikin (1991), a geographer from Los Angeles, has recently

tried to embrace this ambivalence by describing it as "the betweenness of place"—meaning that sense of place sits somehow between the objectively shared properties of environments and subjectively idiosyncratic experiences of them. From the objective vantage point, place is regarded either as location or as a set of shared relationships. From the subjective perspective, place is a territory of meanings and symbols. "To understand place," Entrikin (1991:5) has written, "requires that we have access to both an objective and a subjective reality. . . . Place is best viewed from points-in-between." In other words, with something borrowed from both Eratosthenes and Strabo.

I think this is too theoretical. Observation of somewhere always reveals shared or borrowed elements (such as the pyramid, Easter Island statues, and imported palm trees in Las Vegas), which can appropriately be described as displaced or placeless, and intrinsic or distinctive characteristics (such as Caesar's Palace or the one-of-a-kind strip in Las Vegas). The placeless bits are the outcome of general, and probably objectively developed, processes, yet they have been incorporated into a specific context. We experience a world of subjective specifics, not one of objective generalizations, and it is not possible to situate oneself self-consciously at points between what is objective and subjective. Enquiries into place should begin with specifics, then through those explore the interesting questions about how the intrinsic and the placeless aspects fit together, and in what sort of balance.

Here's an example taken from John Ruskin, the nineteenth-century critic of art and of industrial society. In the preface to his book *The Crown of Wild Olive*, published in 1866, he describes a stream at Carshalton pools in the south part of London, once clear and unsullied, but by then overwhelmed by development, where "the human wretches of the place cast their street and house foulness: heaps of dust and slime, and broken shreds of old metal, and rags of putrid clothes" (Ruskin 1866:386). Half a dozen men, in one day's work, could clean it up, but, Ruskin comments astutely, that day's work is never done. He walked up the hill from the stream and came upon a new tavern, in the front wall of which there was a recess about two feet deep that was fenced off with an imposing iron railing serving no purpose except to protect the refuse blown behind it.

Now the iron bars that, uselessly, enclosed this bit of ground, and made it pestilent, represented a quantity of work that would have cleansed the Carshalton pools three times over—of work, partly cramped and deadly, in the mine; partly fierce and exhaustive, at the furnace; partly foolish and sedentary, of ill-taught students making bad designs. . . . Now how did it come to pass that this work was done instead of the other; that strength and life were

spent in defiling the ground instead of redeeming it; and in producing an entirely (in that place) valueless piece of metal, which can be neither eaten nor breathed, instead of medicinal fresh air and pure water? (Ruskin 1866: 387–388)

A pointed question, one that could be asked of many places now. It led Ruskin into a blistering critique of nineteenth-century industrial economies.

Ruskin's description sees no issue about betweenness, no problem of oscillation between the objective and subjective aspects of Carshalton. Rather, he discovered *in* the specific characteristics of this place the embedded significance of widespread industrial practices. Abstract process is revealed through the particularities of the place. A well-developed geographical sense of place is one that looks carefully at local idiosyncrasies, keeps an open mind about them, and then sees *through* these to the larger patterns and processes they signify. The inverse moral to this is no less important. Social theories and abstractions, for instance about progress or economic growth, have substance *only* in the actual lives of individuals in particular places.

The Disappearance of a Perfect Sense of Place

Old psychology texts often included a diagram of a homunculus, a creature the shape of which is determined by how much of the brain is devoted to sensations from various regions of the body. This is not an attractive thing. It has a tiny body, short limbs, a huge face with large lips, big feet, and bigger hands. The sense of sight is located in the *area striata*, substantial sections in both halves of the brain, and, if these are included, the homunculus also has monstrous bulging eyes.

Some of our senses have organs that conduct information from the world to our brains, and others do not. Unfortunately the homunculus is missing both an organ and a cortical region for the sense of place. An extra organ for this—another nose, perhaps, or a third eye—would no doubt clarify environmental relations enormously. As it is, all we can say is that sense of place is a synthetic faculty, unifying the information reaped by other senses. It is probably best thought of as a web having no fixed location in the brain. But one thing about it is clear: it overlaps extensively with the part of the memory reserved for nostalgia and golden ages because almost everything written about sense of place extols what is old or traditional and decries whatever is new.

The age of perfect places is not fixed in history. For some, such as the social psychiatrist Eric Walter (1988), that age was the classical period

when the worlds of the gods and humans apparently coincided. For others it lies in the Middle Ages or the Renaissance; for Tony Hiss, a journalist from New York who has written on *The Experience of Place*, it seems to be any time in the northeast United States before about 1930. More elusively, Christopher Alexander, an architect originally from England now living in California, has discovered it in any setting that possesses "a quality without a name"—his term for good properties of places we can recognize well enough but somehow cannot precisely define. The illustrative photos in his book *The Timeless Way of Building* include many vernacular settings, Greek and English villages, and fragments of central Paris and Amsterdam, and he writes specifically of a Japanese farm where the carp swim in a pond as though for all eternity. Alexander's (1979: 164) argument is that wherever love, care, and patience are in adjustment with environment, then "human variety, and the reality of specific human lives, can find their way into the structure of the places."

The usual explanation for why old places were so much better than recently built ones can be found, for example, in an argument made by Michael Ignatieff (1984: 138), a cosmopolitan (his self-description) Canadian philosopher and journalist living in Europe, in his book *The Needs of Strangers*. Until the beginning of the present century, he writes, most people's lives were bounded by the distance they could walk or ride in a day. Local dialects and identities were strongly marked and were reinforced by building styles based on the use of local materials and regional traditions. A concordance of social values, technologies, and environment prevailed, a concordance expressed in an ancient language about roots, spirits of place, and the need to be long somewhere. Sense of place was indeed a powerful and positive force.

In 1913, Vidal de la Blache, a prominent French geographer who took great delight in the diverse landscapes of his home country, wrote an essay on the character of geography in that he defined the discipline as "the study of places" (Vidal de la Blache 1913). The landscapes that attracted Vidal's attention were filled with a diversity of places, relatively shielded from outside influences by distance and by the resilience of local cultures. It seemed entirely appropriate that geographers, with their long-standing concern for the appearance of the world, should be dedicated to making sense of this diversity. It was, of course, recognized that the boundaries of real places were permeable. Travelers, pilgrims, scholars, and itinerant artisans brought with them knowledge from elsewhere, but that knowledge was invariably adapted to local traditions, building styles, and narratives, rather than being imposed on them.

There seems to be good reason to believe that in the premodern world the local ways of doing things rested in a fine balance with imported, universal practices, and the result was an intelligible diversity of landscapes—every place was distinctive yet not so different that it was incomprehensible to outsiders.

Theoretical knowledge sometimes has such force that it leads to substantial changes in the social order and the ways people live. This could be claimed, for example, of Newton's physics and the various philosophies of the Age of Reason: first these were thought, and then the world changed to conform more closely to their image. At other times, the world itself changes and theoretical knowledge struggles to keep pace, to find ideas and images that will explain what is happening. Between 1850 and 1950, and to some extent even now, geographical understanding of places has struggled to keep pace with reality. Even as Vidal wrote in 1913, his definition of geography was obsolete. For decades the resilience of local culture had been under assault from technological and political processes. In the entry under "Geography," the *Oxford English Dictionary* provides two revealing quotations from the mid-nineteenth century that illustrate this well. "We have seen the railroad and the telegraph subdue our enormous geography," wrote Emerson in 1854; in 1859 Lever declared that "Science has been popularized, remote geographies made familiar." Even then there was a feeling that a new logic of geography was emerging, one in that the distinctiveness of places would be suppressed. Walt Whitman, ever attuned to what the future was bringing, caught a whiff of this change, ironically in his precisely located poem "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" in *Leaves of Grass* (1855): "It avails not," he wrote, "time nor place—distance avails not."

In this matter geographers were hopelessly out of touch with their own subject. In their research and writing they mostly ignored cities and industrial economies and instead continued to study regions unaffected by these dramatic changes. It was almost as though most of them had come to an agreement to maintain a comfortable belief in the importance of regional diversity regardless of the evidence. It was, in fact, not until the 1950s that geographers began to write about the new economic and urban processes (as Pat Gober notes in Chapter 9 of this book). I do not believe it is an exaggeration to call this a long period of collective blindness. It was as though an entire discipline had been restrained in a Plato's cave of its own devising, determined to seek out regional variations and place distinctiveness no matter what. It is a salutary lesson of how easy it is to ignore the evidence of one's own senses, including the sense of place.

Modernism and Placelessness

Premodern places looked as they did largely because of their geographical and cultural context and their relative remoteness. Their appearances were as much a matter of necessity as anything else, and little about living in them was romantic. I can attest to this because I grew up in a village in South Wales overlooking the Wye Valley—barely a village, more a scattering of houses—that had no running water or electricity until the mid-1950s. In part because of its backwardness, this was a strongly independent community; everyone knew and was known by everyone else, and many people lived their entire lives never traveling more than a few miles away. The village possessed remarkable resilience in the face of hardships, such as winters when the roads were blocked for weeks by snow. But for all the positive qualities this was not a particularly comfortable or convenient place to live, and in the 1970s, when life in the countryside became attractive for middle-class people from cities, many of the local residents jumped at the chance to sell their property and moved to nearby towns. Their damp little cottages were deeply renovated by the newcomers, or replaced by neat subdivisions of big houses with suburban sidewalks and street lights. The new residents commute long distances to work (some to London, more than 100 miles away), take their holidays in Florida or Turkey, have revived moribund festivals and created a new community life. One old pub has been converted into a French restaurant with a clientele that includes Hollywood movie stars. The village is in the same location where I grew up, but it really is a different place.

I do not see anything remarkable in the changes that have occurred here, except perhaps the relative lateness of their arrival. Since 1900 similar geographical and social changes have permeated villages, urban neighborhoods, and towns around the world. These changes, which have come in two waves—modernism, then postmodernism—have profoundly altered the appearance and the meanings of places.

In the decade at the beginning of the twentieth century, when Vidal was celebrating geography as the study of places, groups of artists, poets, and architects across Europe were simultaneously struggling to cast off the baggage of tradition and to reinvent society and art along lines that reflected the new technologies of electricity, automobiles, and mass production. They looked to the future and not to the past for their inspiration. The results were dramatic and unprecedented: the abstract paintings of Braque and Picasso, the dancing of Duncan and Nijinsky, and the ascetic geometric and unornamented buildings of Gropius, Le Corbusier, and the Bauhaus. This was modernism. It was a

grand social theory and it allowed no space for tradition, convention, decoration, or local culture.

If there was an early nerve center for modernism, it was the Bauhaus, a design school based at Dessau in the eastern part of Germany in the 1920s. The Bauhaus members were an eclectic group of artists and architects who developed unornamented, streamlined, and geometric designs for everything—chairs, typefaces, fabrics, electric light fixtures, kitchen appliances, houses, offices, factories, city plans, and their own school buildings. The aesthetic principle behind these designs was that they should appear to be functional and futuristic (though anybody who has tried to sit in Bauhaus chairs knows that function was sometimes only in the appearance). The social ideology behind them was democratic—they should be capable of being mass-produced and thus available for everyone. Houses, said Walter Gropius (1965:39–40), the architect who was the director of the Bauhaus for many years, should be mass-produced in factories, and every part of the house should therefore be standardized. Distinctiveness would be the result of individual expression using these standard parts, not historical style or locality. In other words, modernist designs have no need for geography; they are equally applicable anywhere.

This proved to be a valuable precept. When the Bauhaus was closed by the Nazis in the early 1930s, its architect members scattered according to their political inclinations either to North America or to the Soviet Union, where they could continue to do much as they had in Dessau; in the former they came to specialize in glassy skyscraper offices, and in the latter they designed geometrically arranged suburbs of apartment slabs. In the 1950s and 1960s, when cities in Europe and North America were expanding rapidly or being radically renewed, Bauhaus architects and their modernist disciples were conveniently available with their placeless designs. These fit so well with the intentions of international business that the two soon became almost indistinguishable. Holiday Inns, McDonald's, Sony, IBM, Volkswagen, and Shell have standardized buildings or products—everywhere. If reconstructed city centers and newly constructed suburbs retained some distinctiveness it was usually because of old road patterns or names; the components of them—such as office buildings or franchises—were often identical regardless of location. The balance between the local and the universal had been shifted, and sameness had begun to overwhelm geographical difference.

As they awakened in the 1950s from the discipline's long doze, a group of geographers noticed this emerging uniformity and celebrated it in theories of uniform space and central places (see Chapter 8 of this

book). In the 1970s a second group began to look differently and saw little reason to celebrate. For them it was apparent that the diversity of places so long revered in their discipline was being systematically eradicated by a modernist consortium of architects, planners, and international business, with the help of some of their colleagues in geography. They protested, not loudly and not stridently, but thoughtfully and deliberately. The focus of this intellectual protest was Yi-fu Tuan's widely read book *Topophilia* (that literally means love of place). In the introduction Tuan was explicit that his interest was not with applied knowledge that would change the world, but with how we might better understand ourselves by understanding our environmental attitudes. In *Topophilia* he wrote of place and diversity as aspects of positive environmental experiences. He wrote of home and nostalgia, of utopias, of personal experience, cosmos, and symbolism. He wrote of ideal places and of environments of persistent appeal such as the seashore, the valley, the island, the wilderness and the mountains. He wrote of matters that many of his modernist colleagues thought were extinct. In fact, it turned out that he was gently announcing the next wave of change.

Postmodern Place Revival

In 1968 the architect Robert Venturi took a group of graduate students from Yale University to Las Vegas to investigate the commercial strip there. Modernists, insofar as they were able to bring their attention to bear on it at all, could only condemn the profusion of lights, signs, architectural fragments, and aimless spaces; to them it was dysfunctional architectural sewage. What Venturi and his students saw, however, was a wonderful vitality of architectural styles, decorations, heraldic signs, and ceremonial spaces. This was a way of seeing they had learned in part from J. B. Jackson, perhaps best described as a geographer by choice, who had been writing eloquently about ordinary American landscapes and sense of place for almost half a century (see, for example, Jackson 1970).

Learning from Las Vegas (Venturi, Scott-Brown, and Izenour 1972) punctured the modernist bubble in architecture. Since then, buildings of all types have been increasingly decorated with colored trim, peaked roofs, Romanesque arches, and neoclassical columns—sometimes all at once. This self-consciously historical and decorative approach has come to be called the postmodernist style.

Postmodernism is more than an architectural fashion. It has counterparts in literature, art, and philosophy, and the term has been muddied by obscure academic debate. The idea is nevertheless clear

enough; it describes something that simultaneously comes after and takes issue with the major tenets of modernism. Modernism stood for the future, for standardization, for undecorated functionality; postmodernism celebrates the past, difference, decoration, and unpredictability. It does this with an affected sense of irony because it exists only in relation to modernism, and underneath their decorative facades postmodern buildings are decidedly high tech, with steel frames, air conditioning, fiber optic cables, and talking elevators.

Some origins of postmodernism seems to lie in the various protest movements of the 1960s—civil rights, anti-war demonstrations, the women's movement, and environmentalism. Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) was a polemic against modernism and a plea for protecting urban neighborhoods, and it was in neighborhoods that many protests against urban renewal and expressways erupted. Matters of history, which in architecture and planning had been suppressed for several decades, were now suddenly rediscovered and given the shield of heritage to protect them from further threats. Until about 1965, heritage concerns were limited to the protection of a few politically significant sites such the birthplaces of presidents; in 1968 there were no entries in the National Register of Historic Places in the United States, but by 1978 there were almost twenty thousand. This discovery of history was accompanied by a renewed enthusiasm for geographical diversity. Distinctive places had never entirely lost their appeal as tourist attractions, though in cities in the 1950s many were willfully destroyed by urban renewal or suburbanization. After about 1970, anywhere with a picturesque townscape, good scenery, pleasant climate, sand beaches, or ideally all of these together, became desirable as a place to live or as a tourist attraction. The village in which I once lived in South Wales was designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and attracted a new breed of residents; towns in Provence that had almost been abandoned as inefficient backwaters were renovated as communities of second homes for Parisians or the British; and inner-city neighborhoods of decaying houses in New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Toronto were gentrified by young professionals.

This revival of sense of place is not without its difficulties. The condition of postmodernity, as geographer David Harvey (1989) has called it, has become aligned with increasingly subtle forms of exploitation even as it apparently celebrates differences. He comments that sense of place in a postmodern world is exploitable for profit, and writes, "the search for roots ends up at worst being produced and marketed as an image. . . . At best, historical tradition is reorganized as a museum

culture . . . of local history" (Harvey 1989:303). Bliet's Hill Museum at Ironbridge in Britain, the supposed hearth of the Industrial Revolution, is made up of authentic industrial buildings that have been trucked in to create a town that never existed, staffed by the otherwise unemployed of the late twentieth century dressed in period costume to act like the workers of the mid-nineteenth century. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of such historical settlements have been created around the world. Most of them do, at least, have some relation to local history and geography, albeit moved and sanitized. But this connection can be stretched a very long way, and is not essential. London Bridge has been moved to Arizona, and gondolas ply the waterfront in Toronto.

The message behind all this is simple: people prefer distinctiveness, therefore distinctiveness should be created. In this creative process geographical context is a useful resource but no constraint. Any interesting locality with strong popular appeal will do. An important question now, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1988:131) has written, is "what happens to reality when it is shipped abroad?" The simple answer to this is theme parks, which replicate and idealize otherwise remote environments and places so that visitors can enjoy the best of everywhere without the hardships of travel. A slightly more complicated answer is manifest in the strip in Las Vegas, which is being transformed into a sort of theme park without walls, a walk-in hologram, a virtual geography of the best place and time images from ancient Egypt, Polynesia, medieval England, the tropics, ancient Rome, or anywhere that appeals to the imagination. The strip is, paradoxically, a distinctive place comprised largely of fanciful fragments of other places. Similar geographical confusions, albeit on a less sophisticated scale, can be found in the mundane settings of the food courts of shopping malls, with their array of international fast food franchises, or in new housing developments that freely borrow their street names and building styles from around the world. We live, Clifford Geertz (1986: 121-122) observes, more and more in an enormous collage, among migrations of cuisine, of peoples, and of architectural styles.

I suppose the process of replication and borrowing from elsewhere could be considered geographical quotation, or, less charitably, place plagiarism. Whether it is reprehensible or a source of enjoyment is not as important to me as the fact that a new logic of place and geography is at work here. The premodern logic was that place identity grew from the location and its traditions, and this revealed itself in geographical diversity. Customs and styles did move from region to region but these processes of borrowing were relatively subservient to local distinctiveness. The modernist logic was that place was irrelevant and geo-

Figure 10.2. "We have leased these places to stand to private corporations" (McLuhan 1964:73). Coca-Cola celebrating Montreal in a bus shelter sign. Photo by author.



geographies should be determined by international economic forces and fashions; the manifestation of this was placelessness in that locality was subservient and places came to look increasingly alike. The post-modern logic of places is that they can look like anywhere developers and designers want them to, and in practice this is usually a function of market research about what will attract consumers and what will sell. In postmodernity it is as though the best aspects of distinctive places have been genetically enhanced, then uprooted and topologically rearranged. Marshall McLuhan, the media guru from Toronto, anticipated this sequence. In *Understanding Media* (1964:73) he quotes Archimedes—give me a place to stand and I will change the world—then remarks caustically, "we have leased these places to stand to private corporations" (Figure 10.2).

Sense of Place versus Geographical Gullibility

Much of what is manifest in postmodern places is geographically irrelevant. It plays fast and loose with context and identity. It breaks long-established conventions about what places are and where they can be. The results, as in Las Vegas, can be seen as superficial and commercial, but they are also often self-consciously amusing, and I think we have to take care not to become too pompous and self-righteous in judging them. On the other hand it is important not to be too accepting and too gullible about what is going on because so much in postmodernism is about deceptions: concrete made to look like dressed stone, fiberglass made to look like palm trees, new buildings made to look like old buildings, and neotraditional new towns with quaint street patterns and regional styles of architecture developed by global corporations. It is important to know what belongs, what has been imported, and what has been invented in a place. **It is important, in other words, not to be fooled by what is going on.**

A major task in teaching a geographical sense of place now is to convey what might be called cheerful suspicion. This involves careful, unprejudiced observation of places and landscapes that is neither suspicious nor cynical. It requires that we sort out the elements of a place, how these relate, and their original contexts. The geographer Peirce Lewis (1979) has given a good idea of what this involves. He argues that the human-made landscapes are a valuable clue to culture, not least because they involve enormous investments of time, effort, and money; they look like they do for good reasons. If we look carefully we can usually discover those reasons, which may not always accord with the written and spoken claims of the builders. Lewis advises us that looking carefully requires us to treat almost everything as equal and connected; the homes of the rich and famous, trailer parks, skyscrapers, shopping malls, and lawn ornaments all have cultural significance. Such wide-ranging observation of ordinary things is astonishingly difficult for generations raised on textbooks and the expert opinions of others. Lewis is undaunted by this. He writes that one can "quite literally teach oneself how to see, and that is something most Americans have not done and should do." The alternation of looking, and reading, and thinking, he suggests, can raise questions we had not thought to ask, can reveal order in the landscape where we had seen only bedlam, and can otherwise yield remarkable results "that may be the road to sanity" (Lewis 1979:27).

What really matters about reading landscapes and developing a geographical sense of place is, I think, that these skills require us to learn

to look critically for ourselves at the world and its landscapes. Our lives are awash with secondhand information and images, whether from textbooks or television, and to accept these without question is, in some measure, to give up our independence of thought. I cannot imagine a more rigorous test of the veracity of what we are told than that of our own observations of landscapes and places. For some, this may be an instinctive faculty, but for the great majority it is something that has to be learned and practiced. There is perhaps no better way to do this than through the type of geography that investigates particular settings, especially through fieldwork that is systematic, open-minded, and looks to see what might lie behind facades. A geographical sense of place teaches us how to interpret the complex grammar of environment, how to look for the elements of a place, their historical development and original contexts, and how to understand the interactions of land uses and social processes. With such a skill at our disposal there is little chance that we will succumb to environmental gullibility; and unlike King Lear we should never find ourselves mainly ignorant of what place this is.

A Poisoned Sense of Place

Much of what is positive in sense of place depends on a reasonable balance. When that balance is upset by an excess of placeless internationalism, the local identity of places is eroded. At the other extreme, when that balance is upset by an excess of local or national zeal, the result is a poisoned sense of place in that other places and peoples are treated with contempt. In other words, sense of place carries within itself a blindness and a tendency to become a platform for ethnic nationalist supremacy and xenophobia. This tendency was apparent, for example, in the place cocoons that Europeans took to protect themselves from the unacceptable local contexts of their colonies. Bits of Britain were reproduced in India, and a Spanish way of life was exported to Latin America. The tendency was also manifested in Nazi Germany, where an obsessive love of national landscape and culture led to the brutal attempt to purify the homeland by removing whatever and whomsoever did not belong.

In the past quarter century, instances of a poisoned sense of place have become pronounced. Place attachment in the guise of ethnic nationalism has thrust itself forcefully and often violently into the foreground of international politics. This sort of divisive parochialism had seemed destined to disappear with the growth of international organizations and global communications. Frontiers would be taken down,

as in the European Community, and cultural differences would still be celebrated. Instead, a deeply paradoxical world is emerging, one in which cultural diversity is disappearing under an onslaught of global commercialism, even as old political affiliations rooted in history and place leap to the surface and are fiercely defended against ethnic outsiders. I have the impression from international television news that numerous areas in the world are filled with young men smoking American cigarettes and waving Russian rifles who want only to annihilate their cultural neighbors. In geopolitics it seems as though things are simultaneously coming together at a global scale and falling apart locally.

Place in ethnic nationalism is synonymous with the culture into which one has been born and therefore synonymous with the territory of ethnic symbols and associations where one belongs. In 1993 the political philosopher Michael Ignatieff visited several parts of the world where desperate searches for political identity were underway, most of them consumed with violence. He found a close connection between the revival of parochialism and the collapse of civil order. He asks rhetorically, "If violence is to be legitimated, it must be in the name of all that is best in a people, and what is better than their love of home?" As civil order disintegrates, safety and survival become paramount: "where you belong is where you are safe" and you are safest among your ethnic fellows (Ignatieff 1994:6). The stronger the belonging, the greater the hostility to outsiders. It is but a short step to the politics of ethnic cleansing and the forceful removal of others so that your place and your people are secure. A sense of place that stresses uniqueness to the virtual exclusion of a recognition of shared qualities is an ugly and violent thing. It is indeed a poisoned sense of place.

A Realometer—The Commonsense of Place

Michael Sorkin has edited a book about late-twentieth century cities titled (with remarkable relevance for Las Vegas that it nevertheless fails to discuss) *Variations on a Theme Park*. In his introduction Sorkin (1992:xi) speculates about the obsolescence of time and space, and the emergence of an entirely new kind of "ageographical city . . . a city without a place attached to it."

This news of the death of geography is greatly exaggerated. Sorkin has mistaken mere change for disappearance. The world is not shifting in its entirety to a web of invisible electronic impulses. Places did not vanish in the nineteenth century as the railroad and telegraph made remote places increasingly familiar, and, for at least three reasons, they will not vanish now. First, the boundaries between cultures have

almost always been permeable to some degree, and the rapid global movements of peoples, ideas, and fashions that are occurring at the end of the twentieth century do not require that we abandon the ancient language of place, although they may require us to adapt it. Second, many premodern places remain, and a well-developed geographical sense of place can continue to enhance our appreciation of these by helping us to unravel the patterns of building and culture that give rise to their distinctive character. Third, tourism is now the largest industry in the world (if all the multipliers and air travel and so on are included), so we can be confident that distinctiveness in some form will be protected and created. Apart from anything else, a world without places and geographical variety would be boring and therefore not good for tourism.

The difficulty for Sorkin, as for many others who write of the geography of nowhere or the disappearance of places, is that their thinking and their language have failed to keep pace with changes in the world. The demanding challenge for an adaptable sense of place is to come to terms with how the world is changing now, and to do this it must understand the reconstituted geographies of postmodernity, sort out which geography is where, whose geography it is, whether it is largely an illusion, and whether any of what Strabo called virtue remains in it.

In his reflections about Walden Pond, Thoreau (1854: "What I lived for") imagined a Reolometer, a gauge that would enable us to know "how deep a freshet of shams and appearances had gathered from time to time." He had in mind something that would enable us to know how deep we had to dig before we came to "a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we call reality." Such a device is much needed, but the difficulty now is that there seems to be no hard bottom and no clear reality. All geographies seem to be, to a greater or lesser degree, in flux, filled with illusions and fraudulence, exploitable and exploited for political or commercial ends. It is difficult to know where to begin to grapple with this turmoil, but one possible point might be at the extreme of place belonging. Michael Ignatieff (1994:186) thinks that ethnic nationalism embraces a plane of abstract fantasy and a plane of direct experience that are nevertheless somehow held apart. It is as though they are standing back to back, looking in different directions. The abstractions of fatherland, of purity of race, of superiority, are not allowed to confront the realities of shared experience in particular places. People, apparently, censor the testimony of their own experience so that they can believe in some abstract ideal. This is

a powerful insight, one I suspect applies to much of post-modern life. What is needed to reduce this separation is a commonsense language of place that brings abstractions into correspondence with direct experience.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* is an excellent source of clarity in otherwise confused times. By common sense, it informs us in a quote taken from Leyland in 1651, "we usually and justly understand the faculty to discern one thing from another and the ordinary ability to prevent ourselves from being imposed on by gross contradictions, palpable inconsistencies and unmask'd imposture." Here is a possible basis for a realometer. There is nothing especially new in this; indeed, it is what geographers have taught in some fashion since Eratosthenes first struggled to organize the papyrus rolls in his library. A commonsense of place requires careful observation, critical reflection, and an awareness of interrelationships. I can think of no better, and perhaps no more challenging, task for geographers than to continue to teach these simple and important skills that they have long promoted.

Arguments for balance and reason have a long and excellent pedigree. This did not, however, prevent Clifford Geertz (1986:118), an ethnographer who is well attuned to the issue of diminishing cultural diversity, from describing this sort of concern for balance as a drifting out to an ambiguous end. Given the geographical evidence of what happens when absolutes or extremes about place are promoted, I think his criticism is misguided. It nevertheless offers an important caution. Reason and balance in sense of place, as in many things, can slide into feeble ambiguities. To follow the middle road requires determination and an ability to resist the easy seductions of nationalism and place fabrication. I am convinced, however, that for the geographer exploring the transferred landscapes and reconstituted nationalisms of postmodernity, a common sense of place is an essential foundation for a balanced attitude of judgment that celebrates differences yet recognizes that there is much that different cultures can share without undermining their distinctiveness.

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