A Pragmatic Sense of Place

Edward Relph

Ted Relph is a Professor of Geography in the Division of Social Sciences at the University of Toronto at Scarborough, a suburban Toronto campus. In his research and writings (sidebar, below), he has explored the nature and importance of places, landscapes, environments, and other taken-for-granted geographical dimensions of peoples’ everyday lives. A slightly different version of this essay appeared in Making Sense of Place: Exploring Concepts and Expressions of Place through Different Senses and Lenses, edited by Frank Vanclay, Matthew Higgins, and Adam Blackshaw (Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press, 2008). The editor would like to thank Frank Vanclay and NMAP Editor Julie Simpkin for permission to include Relph’s essay here. relph@scar.utoronto.ca. © 2008, 2009 Edward Relph. From Environmental and Architectural Phenomenology, vol. 20, no. 3 (fall 2009), pp. 24-31.

The flexibility of the word “place” allows it to encompass a rich range of possibilities. It can refer to social context but more generally implies something about somewhere. No definition is needed to understand what it means when we say, for instance, “Save a place for me” or “Victoria—the place to be” (as license plates claim), or even when it is suggested by philosopher Thomas Nagel that “the world is a big, complex place” [1].

On the other hand, this range of uses suggests that a place can be pretty much whatever we want it to be. I agree with John Cameron that “the breadth of the notion of place… is both a strength and a weakness” and that ways have to be found to avoid its being so inclusive that it means all things to all people [2].

In this essay, I argue that a pragmatic sense of place must be an essential component in the development of effective ways to cope with twenty-first-century environmental and social challenges. If place can mean whatever we want, this argument would be a vacuous exercise, so I will begin with some clarifications and restrictions.

Place & Placelessness

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz suggests that culture consists of webs of significance woven by human beings, in which we are all suspended [3]. Places occur where these webs touch the earth and connect people to the world. Each place is a territory of significance, distinguished from larger or smaller areas by its name, by its particular environmental qualities, by the stories and shared memories connected to it, and by the intensity of meanings people give to or derive from it.

The parts of the world without names are undifferentiated space, and the absence of a name is equivalent to the absence of place. Conversely, where communities have deep roots, it seems that their named places fuse culture and environment, and this fusion is then revealed in striking cultural landscapes. There is a scale implication here because, when the term “place” is used geographically (as in the expression, “The place where I live is…”), the reference usually seems to be to somewhere about the size of a landscape that can potentially be seen in a single view—for example, a village, small town, or urban neighborhood.

This sense of focus is, I think, a core notion of place corresponding closely with ideas of community and locality. I stress, however, that, since in ordinary language a place can be at any scale from the world down to a chair, large places must be loosely comprised of smaller ones, and smaller places are nested within larger ones [4]. In other words, while place may be spatially focused at the scale of a landscape, it is not spatially constrained.
The antithesis of place is placelessness, a sort of non-place quality manifest in uniformity, standardization and disconnection from context. If a place is somewhere, placelessness can be anywhere [5]. It is tempting to see place and placelessness as opposite types of landscape—to contrast, for instance, the distinctiveness of a small town on the Costa Brava with a placeless industrial suburb of Toronto—and to assume that place is good and placelessness is somehow deficient.

But this oppositional thinking is simplistic. Rather, place and placelessness are bound together in a sort of geographical embrace so that almost everywhere contains aspects of both. Place is an expression of what is specific and local, while placelessness corresponds to what is general and mass-produced. Thus, even the standardized uniformity of placelessness always has some unique characteristic, such as the arrangement of buildings.

And no matter how distinctively different somewhere may appear, it always shares some of its features with other places—for example, red tile roofs and white walls are a common feature of Mediterranean towns. These sorts of similarities make exceptional qualities and meanings comprehensible to outsiders.

In a world of unique places, travel would be enormously difficult because nothing would be familiar; in a perfectly placeless world, travel would be pointless. It is helpful, therefore, to think of place and placelessness arranged along a continuum and existing in a state of tension. At one extreme, distinctiveness is ascendant and sameness diminished; at the other extreme, uniformity dominates and distinctiveness is suppressed. Between these extremes there are countless possible configurations. Theoretically, at the midpoint they are equal, but in actual landscapes such a balance is probably impossible to identify [6].

In short, things are rarely straightforward. For instance, distinctive identities can be borrowed, plagiarized, or contrived. At least two towns in the North American Rockies have reinvented themselves as Bavarian communities, and there are gondolas in Las Vegas and on Lake Ontario. This geographical borrowing of strong place identities is not uncommon, and where it occurs the qualities of place distinctiveness have been made placeless.

Spirit & Sense of Place

“Spirit of place” is a translation of the Latin genius loci. The Romans believed in a pantheon of gods, many associated with specific places. Each house, town, grove, and mountain was possessed by its own spirit that gave identity to that place by presence and actions. Though elements of a belief in sacred spirits of place persist—for example, in geomancy and feng shui—spirit of place now generally refers to a mostly secular quality, either natural or built, that gives somewhere a distinctive identity.

In this “profane” meaning, spirit of place is understood as an inherent quality, though subject to change. When a settlement is abandoned, as has happened with many Canadian prairie towns, buildings collapse and spirit of place fades. Alternatively, as somewhere is built up and lived in, spirit of place grows. In this way, even an initially placeless suburb gradually acquires its own identity, at least for many who live there.

Sometimes “sense of place” is used to refer to what might more accurately be called “spirit of place”—the unique environmental ambience and character of a landscape or place. I prefer to keep a distinction between sense of place and spirit of place, though clearly they are closely connected.

As I understand it, sense of place is the faculty by which we grasp spirit of place and that allows us to appreciate differences and similarities among places. Spirit of place exists
primarily outside us (but is experienced through memory and intention), while sense of place lies primarily inside us (but is aroused by the landscapes we encounter). From a practical perspective, this lived difference means that, while it is possible to design environments that enhance or diminish spirit of place, it is no more possible to design my sense of place than it is to design my memory.

Sense of place is a synaesthetic faculty that combines sight, hearing, smell, movement, touch, imagination, purpose, and anticipation. It is both an individual and intersubjective attribute, closely connected to community as well as to personal memory and self. It is variable. Some people are not much interested in the world around them, and place for them is mostly a lived background. But others always attend closely to the character of the places they encounter.

Exclusion & Extensibility
A strong sense of place appears to be partly instinctive but can also be learned and enhanced through the careful practice of comparative observation and appreciation for what makes places distinctive [7]. The deepest sense of place seems to be associated with being at home, being somewhere you know and are known by others, where you are familiar with the landscape and daily routines and feel responsible for how well your place works.

There are two crucial qualifications regarding responsibility for place. First, while it is mostly a positive attitude that contributes to social and environmental responsibility, sense of place can turn sour or be poisoned when it becomes parochial and exclusionary. NIMBY-ism and gated communities are familiar examples of negative place attitudes, but far more serious is ethnic cleansing [8]. This exclusionary tendency is always latent in sense of place. It can, however, be deliberately countered through the self-conscious development of a cosmopolitan perspective that grasps similarities and respects differences among places.

Second, sense of place varies over time. Thomas Homer-Dixon notes that, until about 1800, most people lived in rural areas, met, in their lifetimes, only a few hundred people, communicated by speech and walking, and rarely traveled more than a few miles from their birthplace [9]. A century later, this situation still applied to my grandfather, who lived most of his life in a village in South Wales where he ran a small construction firm and built the house in which he died 30 years later. Such a geographically-focused life must have led to profound place associations, where each person, house, field, road, and custom was familiar and known by name. In some remote areas and in nostalgic beliefs, this intimate familiarity lingers into the present, but it is mostly a pre-modern experience.

In dramatic contrast, our sense of place at the start of the 21st century is spread-eagled across the world. My daily 25-kilometer commute to work in Toronto is farther than probably most residents in my grandfather's village traveled in their lifetimes. Conferences on the other side of the world, vacations in distant places, emails to colleagues on other continents—all are commonplace.

In less than a century, both direct and vicarious place experiences have been enormously expanded. For large numbers of people today, it is normal to visit hundreds of places and meet thousands of people in a lifetime. The geographer Paul Adams uses the term “extensibility” to depict the unexceptional fact that lives now extend easily among many places across scales from the local to global [10]. Modern networks of communication allow and even require that we continually situate ourselves in wider contexts and make comparisons with distant places, many of which we may have visited or at least seen on television.

In short, sense of place today is far more diffuse and distributed than even two generations ago. As a result, sense of place must, in some ways, be shallower. I simply have not spent long enough living in one place to develop the deep associations that, for my grandfather, must have
been taken for granted. I do not mean to suggest that the current extended sense of place is weak or deficient—only that it differs from pre-modern, rooted experiences.

Indeed, some familiarity with different places facilitates an appreciation of the lives of others and provides an antidote for a poisoned, exclusionary sense of place. Familiarity with other places is also essential for grasping the connections between global processes and challenges and their manifestations in particular places.

Emerging Challenges
The twentieth century began with optimistic expectations that social and environmental problems caused by industrialization would be corrected through technological innovation and political reform. There were remarkable improvements in productivity and standards of living, but there were also genocidal wars, technologies of annihilation, irresponsible environmental damage, and a remarkable failure to reduce global poverty. It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that the twenty-first century began pessimistically with numerous expressions of concern that our civilization is generating insoluble problems usually characterized as global because they are widespread. What strikes me, however, is that their consequences will manifest locally, synergistically, and probably unpleasantly in the diverse places of everyday life. Attempts to deal with these consequences will need to be at least partially grounded in a carefully articulated sense of place.

In her *Dark Age Ahead*, Jane Jacobs suggests that “we are rushing headlong into a dark age.” Among other causes, she blames the decline of scientific objectivity, systems of taxation remote from local problems, and demise of community [11]. Martin Rees, the Astronomer Royal, discusses the challenges posed by climate change, terrorism, and possible technological error. He gives our civilization no more than a fifty percent chance of surviving to the end of the century [12].

Yet again, Thomas Homer-Dixon speculates that the problems we have created might exceed our capacity to solve them [13], while Howard Kunstler argues that we are sleepwalking into a future of converging and mutually amplifying catastrophes [15]. It is possible, of course, that such pessimistic predictions will amount to nothing. Critics highlight previous dire predictions that turned out to be wrong. This time, however, there are many interconnected, large-scale challenges arising simultaneously. The key message of commentators like Jacobs and Rees is that our responsibility to coming generations requires that we take action now.

The consequences of these challenges are uncertain, but even brief reflection suggests they will be locally varied and will, at least in part, require place-based strategies for their mitigation. For example, climate change is global but its consequences will be as locally varied as the weather. As droughts, floods, and hurricanes intensify and become more commonplace, one realizes that the infrastructure of both agriculture and cities—water supply, storm drains, flood walls, and so forth—has been designed for the weather of the past and is rapidly becoming obsolete.

This shift suggests that, regardless of the causes of climate change, substantial modifications to existing farms and cities will be needed to keep them productive and habitable. If they are to be effective, these modifications must be founded in the specifics of places, since the changes in weather patterns and environmental risks are regional or local [16]. Adaptations to protect New Orleans against more intense hurricanes have little relevance for dealing with longer droughts in Sydney or Melbourne.

The challenges of climate change will be exacerbated by rising costs of energy. It is widely anticipated that oil and gas supplies will peak globally in the next few years and decline thereafter, precisely as Chinese and Indian economic growth drives demand rapidly upward.
Energy costs will rise dramatically, and the spatially distributed ways of modern life will be seriously compromised. In the reduced energy economy of the future, it is inevitable that, for most people, high energy and travel costs will motivate an everyday life much more locally focused than currently.

Living with Differences Locally
Since the early 1970s, a demographic imbalance has developed with rapid population growth in the Third World and stagnation or decline in the First World. The economic disparities associated with this imbalance have been contributing factors to major migrations from developing to developed nations. One result has been the emergence of what Leonie Sandercock calls “mongrel cities”—cities with racially and culturally mixed populations.

Sandercock argues that a major challenge for 21st-century urban planning is to find ways “for stroppy strangers to live together without too much violence”—in other words, to find ways to deal with ethnic conflicts and the politics of difference [16]. Sense of place is very much at stake here because of the extensibility of immigrants’ experience back to their home countries and because immigrants must establish connections with places originally built by cultures often vastly different from their own. One likely result will be tensions among different cultural groups.

The solutions to these tensions, Sandercock claims, will need to be worked out at the local level so that different groups can find ways to express their identities in neighborhoods that are neither ghettos nor zones of exclusion. For this, she suggests, there is no appropriate general theory. Instead, the need is a continuous process of place making that is curious about spirit of place, learns from local knowledge, and respects diversity.

Global & Local Together
International migrations are one component of globalization—the integration of the world into a single economic system connected by supply chains and flows of people, capital, and information. These global flows are controlled and monitored through a network of some 100 “world cities” such as Tokyo, London, New York, Sydney, and Singapore [17]. World cities are characterized by hub airports, stock exchanges, corporate headquarters, international institutions, and facilities for media production.

In many ways, these world cities are infused with placelessness in that they are oriented more to the global marketplace than to their region or nation. But these global cities also incorporate a local aspect. While transnational offices and manufacturing facilities can bring jobs, kudos, and economic prosperity, they can also be abruptly relocated to other world locations where labor costs are lower or circumstances more profitable. When this happens, local communities suffer as jobs move away, people lose income, and inequities intensify [18].

Municipalities everywhere, but especially world cities, must find ways to protect themselves against such sudden shifts in the global economy over which they have little or no control. Even Thomas Friedman, a journalist with an unalloyed enthusiasm for globalization, suggests that such shifts pose a major challenge for finding a healthy balance between preserving a sense of local identity, home, and community, yet doing what is necessary to survive in a global economic system [20]. In other words, the need is a clear sense of place that also acknowledges the spatially-extended character of the economic systems underpinning our lives.

Climate change, the end of cheap energy, globalization, ethnic tensions in mongrel cities, and other complex challenges have arisen as pressing issues only in the last 25 years. The impacts of these challenges have a global reach, but their individual and combined consequences will
be very different in *quartiers* of Paris, villages of Somalia, suburbs of Las Vegas, exurbs of London, skyscrapers of Shanghai, or *favelas* of São Paulo.

Mitigation strategies will need to be founded in the particularities of places because there the consequences will be most acute. But there is another, more philosophical, reason why place will be central to future planning strategies: There has been a deep epistemological shift away from the rationalistic assumptions of modernism—assumptions that promoted universal, placeless solutions to environmental and social problems—to an acknowledgement of the significance of diversity.

**Deep Epistemological Change**

Sandercock celebrates the demise of scientific objectivity because she sees it as a repressive instrument of powerful groups with vested interests [20]. In contrast, Jane Jacobs considers its demise to be one cause of a potential dark age [21]. What both thinkers agree on is that scientific objectivity is in retreat, a view supported by many philosophers of science.

Stephen Toulmin, for example, notes that early twentieth-century scholars shared a confidence in scientific method but then declares: “How little of that confidence remains today” [22]. In 1989, Thomas Nagel suggested bluntly that “objectivity... is just one way of understanding reality” [24]. Modernist, rationalistic ways of thinking (which prevailed for 400 years and underpinned the development of industrial civilization) have lost their impetus as we enter a period of postmodernity.

It is difficult to assess the depth of this epistemological shift, not least because it is partly masked by the persistence of elements of the modernist paradigm locked into habits of thought, legislation, and established practices. Nevertheless, the shift is revealed in increasing political and legal challenges to those practices, in the importance given to heritage preservation (modernism swept aside everything old), in the widespread acknowledgement of the merits of differences of all kinds (modernism celebrated uniformity), and in the empowerment of women, Indigenous peoples, and minorities (modernism was patriarchal and colonialist).

In postmodernity, no single approach, including scientific objectivity, is arrogated above others. Instead, there are multiple discourses to be heard and considered. Scientific objectivity has, of course, proven to be a particularly effective way of dealing with the world, and Jacobs is right to suggest it should not be quickly dismissed.

One can no longer assume, however, that scientific objectivity is the single best way to understand the world. The postmodernist position demands that every situation be grasped in its own terms; every action—scientifically based or not—can be contested. Whereas modernist planning aimed to provide comprehensive solutions to what were considered universal problems, postmodernity requires negotiated strategies adapted to specific individuals, groups, and conditions. In other words, in both theory and practice, postmodernity is oriented to diversity and therefore to place.

**A Practical Sense of Place**

There has always been a practical aspect to sense of place whereby it might be translated into buildings, landscapes, and townscapes. This transformation involves not just construction but all means of design, planning, making, doing, maintaining, caring for, restoring, and otherwise taking responsibility for how somewhere appears and works.

Until the nineteenth century, a practical sense of place was mostly unself-conscious as towns, villages, and farms were made without much attention to place as an identifiable phenomenon
of human existence. Builders presumably followed some combination of experience, necessity, tradition, and sensitivity to site. This local distinctiveness (which we now admire as tourists or as devotees of place) developed in large measure because it was difficult and expensive to move building materials very far. Traditions arose for the use of whatever was locally available.

Industrialization and modernism undermined these local practices, partly through the use of placeless materials like iron, concrete, metal, and glass; partly through the invention of cheap means of transport; and partly through the invention of styles that were self-consciously international. Guiding design principles were efficiency and standardization.

The outcome was an “International Style”—be it office buildings, multi-family housing, or interiors—that could fit almost anywhere. This largely placeless approach to design peaked in the 1960s and has faltered since, as modernism lost momentum. Today, the more dominant approach is that the diversity of communities and places should be emphasized rather than minimized in design. How this is to be done, however, is not entirely clear, although heritage preservation, ecosystem planning, and a critical reinterpretation of earlier regional traditions are some of the ways offered.

What is clear is that a postmodern approach to diversity cannot be based in a simple return to a pre-modern sense of place. Postmodernism may celebrate diversity in design and appearance, but air travel, electronic communications, and standardized technologies are invaluable for reasons of efficiency, safety, and convenience. A postmodern sense of place is simultaneously local and extended.

I have already suggested that, although the 21st century will present social and environmental challenges at a global scale, the individual and combined effects will be locally diverse. A practical sense of place will need be an essential aspect of any strategy to mitigate the global challenges. This practical sense of place must reflect the extensibility of postmodern life and grasp the broader, global aspects of the challenges it confronts.

What is needed is a “pragmatic sense of place” that integrates an appreciation of place identity with an understanding of extensibility. A central aim would be to seek appropriate local actions to deal with emerging, larger-scale social and environmental challenges.

Pragmatism
Over a century ago, William James wrote that pragmatism is “the attitude of looking away from first things, principles, ‘categories’, supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts” [24]. Pragmatism is an attitude that acknowledges change and variety: “The world we live in exists diffused and distributed in the form of an indefinitely numerous lot of ‘eaches’, coherent in all sorts of ways and degrees” [25].

In founding pragmatism as a philosophical movement, James and his contemporary, Charles S Peirce, declared that it should not be merely practical. Rather, they saw it potentially as a philosophical means of resolving logical and methodological confusions in science and philosophy.

Today the philosophical understanding of pragmatism has changed. Scientific research is a corporate and state-aided activity expected to get practical results—a development occurring at the same time rational, scientific arguments have lost much of their epistemological authority. One consequence is that neo-pragmatic philosophers like Stephen Toulmin and Richard Rorty now associate a tone of commonsense practicality with pragmatist philosophy. In the absence of a firm foundation for choosing between courses of action, these philosophers suggest the best strategy is to attend to James’ realm of consequences and facts. “We have to return to the
world of where and when,” writes Toulmin, “to get back in touch with the experience of
everyday life, and manage our affairs one day at a time” [26]. Rorty proposes that critical
thinking must now involve playing off various concrete alternative strategies against one
another rather than testing them against criteria of rationality [27].

The relevance of pragmatism to a postmodern sense of place is clear. In postmodernity,
diversity is acknowledged in all its forms, and places are the diverse contexts of everyday life.
Since there is no longer an overarching ideology that justifies scientific approaches as better
than other points of view, new building developments and other place changes are almost
always contested. It is nevertheless essential to get things done and respond to challenges like
climate change and cultural conflict that, if nothing is done, will undermine the quality of life

A pragmatic approach may be able to accomplish this task through careful assessment of facts
and consequences, engaging people in discussions of the place and reaching imperfect but
workable agreements in regard to which strategies are most appropriate for dealing with the
challenges as they impact particular places.

A Pragmatic Sense of Place
A pragmatic sense of place combines an appreciation for a locality’s uniqueness with a grasp of
its relationship to regional and global contexts. It is simultaneously place-focused and
geographically extended. It is not a new way of thinking—in fact, aspects of it have always been
a part of place experience but are now widely latent.

A pragmatic sense of place is apparent in contrasting contexts like the designation and
restoration of World Heritage sites, locally inspired artworks and festivals that awaken sense of
place, supermarket chains that sell local produce, and advocates of the slow-food movement
and regional cuisine.

More generally, everyday life involves concerns such as health, education, pollution, and new
development—all local, practical concerns that are part of place familiarity and affection. At the
same time, everyday life involves distant travel and economic and electronic connections
around the globe. In short, a firm basis for a pragmatic sense of place is to be found in the
experience of place and in the background of contemporary everyday life.

It will not be easy to make explicit what many people know implicitly and to turn this
knowledge into consistent actions. To resist the poisonous place temptations of parochialism
and exclusion, a pragmatic sense of place requires the difficult exercise of what might be called
“cosmopolitan imagination,” which can grasp both the spirit and extensibility of places, seeing
them as nodes in a web of larger processes.

Cultural conflicts, climate change, water shortages, and the effects of escalating energy costs
will not fade magically into the background, nor is it enough to hope that muddling through
will be sufficient to deal with the problems. Strategies based on finding technical or political
fixes may be possible but are hardly wise, given that new problems will almost certainly arise
from unintended consequences of new technologies. Furthermore, there is no way to push the
epistemological genie of postmodernism back into the hermetically sealed bottle of rationalism,
so there can be no question that rationalistic, top-down solutions will be deeply contested.

Perhaps the most hopeful, reasonable strategy for dealing with emerging social and
environmental challenges is to find ways to mitigate their effects in particular places. This
strategy requires that every locality, place, and community must adapt differently. A pragmatic
sense of place can simultaneously facilitate these adaptations, contribute to a broader
awakening of sense of place, and reinforce the spirit of place in all its diverse manifestations.
Endnotes


4. An account of this nesting and the way in which places open out to larger sets of places is given in Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), p. 105.


6. Yi-Fu Tuan, in *Cosmos and Hearth: A Cosmopolite’s View* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1996), suggests that individuals are oriented either to a localist or cosmopolitan perspective. He argues that, although aspects of both are combined in our experiences of the world, they cannot be perfectly balanced, so individuals fall to one side or the other. He identifies his own orientation as cosmopolitan.


8. This idea of a poisoned sense of place is developed in Edward Relph, “Sense of Place,” in Susan Hanson, ed., *Ten Geographical Ideas that Changed the World* (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1997).


15. The UN-based Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is currently exploring ways to facilitate local strategies for adaptation to climate changes. One example is the IPCC Expert Meeting on Integration of Adaptation and Mitigation and Sustainable Development, La Reunion, February 2005; go to: [www.ipcc.ch/activity/workshops.htm](http://www.ipcc.ch/activity/workshops.htm) (accessed June 16, 2009).


17. See the numerous reports at the Globalisation and World Cities website of the University of Loughborough; [www.lboro.ac.uk/gawc/](http://www.lboro.ac.uk/gawc/) (accessed June 16, 2009).


21. This is a major theme in Jacobs’ *Dark Age Ahead*.


