Perspective Essay

Making sense of 'place': Reflections on pluralism and positionality in place research

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Place research has roots in several loosely related critiques of positivist epistemologies.
- Place offers a framework for comparing pluralistic positions on knowledge and meaning.
- Describes inherent, instrumental, sociocultural, and identity layers of place meaning.
- Norms for sensible place-making may be grounded in place as *bios*, *ethnos*, and *demos*.
- Understanding place requires access to both objective and subjective views of reality.

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on critical pluralism and positionality, this essay offers a four-part framework for making sense of the manifold ways place has been studied and applied to landscape planning and management. The first element highlights how diverse intellectual origins behind place research have inhibited a trans-disciplinary understanding of place as an object of study in environmental planning and management. The second focuses on ontological pluralism as found in attempts to make sense of place meanings by (a) fleshing out four layers of place meaning that vary in terms of tangibility, commonality, and emotionality and (b) critiquing four methodological approaches to identifying place meanings. The third looks at making sense of place-making as a way to highlight ontological and epistemic pluralism in studies of the material and social-discursive practices that create, govern, and transform places. In particular it draws attention to the way place meanings, knowledge, and practices are always situated or positioned. The fourth highlights axiological or normative pluralism as reflected in various prescriptive notions of place-making as the outcome of deliberate efforts of people to try to shape, contest, and/or otherwise govern the landscape. These include place as *bios*, *ethnos*, and *demos* as normative ideals for prescribing what constitutes a good place and underscores the challenge of adjudicating across different conceptions of sensible places. This paper concludes by reiterating the ways that place research and practice can benefit from both a critical pluralist perspective and a heightened awareness of the diverse positionalities occupied by observers of and actors in the landscape.

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"[The] problem [is] how to combine the perspective of a particular person inside the world with an objective view of that same world, that person and his viewpoint included. It is a problem that faces every creature with the impulse and capacity to transcend its particular point of view and to conceive the world as a whole" (Thomas Nagel – The View from Nowhere, 1986, p. 3)

1. Introduction

Making sense of *place* in landscape planning and management has proven a formidable challenge. Over the past four decades a surfeit of place concepts has found its way into scientific research and popular discourse intended to describe people–environment interactions. Studies addressing such concepts as *place, sense of place, place attachment, place identity, place dependence, rootedness, genius loci, topophilia*, and *place-making* can be found in countless disciplinary and applied fields devoted to the design, planning, stewardship, and restoration of places that vary in kind and scale from homes, neighborhoods, and cities to parks, ecosystems, and

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landscapes (Beatley & Manning, 1997; Stewart, Williams, & Kruger, 2013; Vanclay, Higgens, & Blackshaw, 2008). Adding to the complex mix of empirically based scholarship on place, a diverse assortment of environmental activists, educators, designers, and planners has also adopted place ideas to provide prescriptive guidelines for promoting sustainable lifestyles (Ardoin, Schuh, & Gould, 2012) and protecting or improving communities, landscapes, and ecosystems (Beatley & Manning, 1997; Hayward & McGlynn, 1993). In addition to these descriptive and prescriptive interpretations of place concepts, within the domain of landscape planning and management there are at least two overlapping modes or levels of application. One centers on how people experience places. It aims to chart place-based meanings and sentiments as embodied in concepts such as special places, sense of place, and place attachment held by residential occupants, visitors, tourists, and other stakeholders (Claval, 2005; Gustafson, 2001; Manzo, 2005; Skår, 2010; Smith, Davenport, Anderson, & Leahy, 2011; Stedman, 2008). Another level emphasizes context sensitive governance of places, landscapes, ecosystems, etc. (Collins, 2014; Fischer, 2000; Kemmis, 1990; Stewart et al., 2013). Where the former generally addresses the *content* of place meanings, senses, etc., the latter focuses on *social processes* by which meanings are produced, consumed, and contested (Ganapathy, 2013; Larsen, 2008; Yung, Freimund, & Belsky, 2003).

The goal of this paper is to offer a framework for making sense of the manifold ways place has been studied and applied to landscape planning and management. In this endeavor two key philosophical commitments guide my analysis. First, I adopt a *critical pluralist* standpoint which holds that no one research theory or program by itself can successfully engage the various facets of place inquiry and bring them together into one view of reality (Patterson & Williams, 2005; Williams, 2013). In seeking to understand the world from multiple, competing vantage points, pluralism engages the various perspectives and reveals assumptions that are otherwise difficult to identify from within any particular vantage point. The critical part of critical pluralism means that critical reflection should also be directed at how well theory and methods are aligned with the stated objectives of the research. As a corollary to critical pluralism, the second principle is to recognize the subjective and unavoidable *positionality* (as opposed to "gods-eye" objectivism) of all observer-actors in the world. As suggested by the opening quote from Nagel, positionality holds that all observers may attain only a partial or incomplete comprehension of the world due to their embedded and inevitable positionality within any particular province of spatial–temporal reality. This applies both to so-called objective scientific observers who seek to stand apart from the world and to people going through their daily lives embedded in concrete places. In other words, our human-situated interaction with the world – whether by history, culture, geography, experience, or embodiment – conditions how we can understand it. This varied positioning means that while there is no unified platform from which all knowledge can be gathered and integrated into a single understanding, the concept of place does offer a powerful framework from which to comprehend and compare pluralistic positions through which awareness, knowledge, and meaning are generated.

To explore the implications of pluralism and positionality for place research and planning practice, this essay is organized around four perspectives or lenses that constitute different ways to read the phrase "making sense of place" (cf. Vanclay et al., 2008). First, read as "making sense of *place*" highlights how the diversity of intellectual origins behind place research has inhibited a trans-disciplinary understanding place as an object of study in environmental planning and management. The remaining three ways of making sense of place attend to different kinds of pluralism underlying place research. Thus the second perspective focuses on ontological and epistemological pluralism found in attempts to "make sense of *place*

meanings" by critically examining varying approaches to assessing place meanings or senses of place that people form through everyday interactions with places. The third perspective focuses on "making sense of *place-making*" as a way to highlight ontological and epistemological pluralism in varying accounts of the material and social-discursive practices that create, govern, and transform places. In particular it draws attention to the way place meanings, knowledge, and practices are always situated or positioned. The final reading, "making *sensible* places," turns to axiological pluralism as reflected in various prescriptive theories for what constitutes "good" places and place-making strategies as planners and others deliberately to try to shape, contest, and/or otherwise govern the landscape. This section describes a range of normative ideals for prescribing what constitutes a good place and underscores the challenge of adjudicating across different conceptions of "sensible places" and place-making. The paper concludes by reiterating the ways that place research and place governance can benefit from both a critical pluralist perspective, which heightens awareness of the diverse positionalities occupied by observers of and actors in the landscape, and understanding place-making as a normative practice in landscape planning.

2. Making sense of *place*

The central difficulty in making sense of place as an object of study in environmental planning and management is that it has tangled roots in several loosely related critiques of positivist epistemologies, modernism, and instrumentalism that surfaced in the early 1970s (Williams, 2014). First, place research is most often traced to the emergence of humanistic geography as an anti-positivist critique of mainstream geography's reduction of place to little more than location and container of human action (Relph, 1976). Second, an important but less recognized geographic influence on place research arose with the "radical" geographies and post-structural critique of positivist geography's inattention to the structures of power that make and contest place (Harvey, 1973). Third, place research was influenced by sociological concerns about the decline of community and neighborhood in the face of modern mass society (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974). Fourth, from psychology came various critiques of cognitive information processing theories of the mind in which the environment was reduced to a source of stimulus information rather than a locus of meaning (Bruner, 1990; Stokols, 1990). Fifth, much like the psychological critique, planning theory began to question the focus on instrumental or utilitarian models which viewed the environment as a means for promoting behavioral and economic goals to the neglect of deeply felt sentiments, symbolism, and identities tied to places (Appleyard, 1979). Finally, though not tied to place per se, a movement in consumer behavior emerged to challenge both instrumentalism and information processing explanations of buyer behavior, emphasizing instead a relational metaphor focused on hedonic and symbolic consumption, attachment to possessions, and identity affirmation (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982).

Taken as a whole, these various critiques were crucial to expanding the focus of environmental planning beyond what Nagel (1986) described as the "view from nowhere" and engage a *view from somewhere* or "the perspective of a particular person inside the world" (p. 3). When viewed as a somewhere, place is more than a backdrop for social action or container of potentially malleable attributes of separable and independent utility. The result is to reassert the importance of context, local conditions, and place-specific culture and experience in shaping knowledge, meaning, and well-being.

Despite these basic commonalities, the varied intellectual origins underlying place thinking have also contributed to considerable ambiguity regarding just what is meant by place. Early