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Reconstructing Urban Boundaries : The Dialectics of Self and Place

Retrouver les frontières urbaines : la dialectique de l'être et du lieu

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Résumé

Drawing upon the self psychology of Heinz Kohut, this paper attempts to bridge the polarity between the built environment of the city experienced as a place which supports human aspiration and ideals, and the city experienced as a space which expresses and implements humanly debilitating economic and social forces. Through community functions which resist the forces of experienced space, individuals are reconstituted at the core of self experience while transforming space and reconstituting place in the process.

Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : lieu, urbanisme, communauté, identité, bâti
Keywords : urbanism, community, identity politics, built environment

Texte intégral

1   The conception of place in geography emphasizes the relation between subjective and objective perspectives. Place refers to the conceptual fusion of space and experience that gives areas an individuality, an identity of place (Entrikin, 1991 ; Soja & Hooper, 1993 ; Abrahamson, 1996). Thus, the geographical concept of place refers to the areal context of events, objects and actions. French regional geographers captured this sense

of place as context in the term *milieu* (Berdoulay, 1989). Their interests were to describe and understand the natural context associated with particular ways of life, but the concept can be extended to include the symbolic context that we create as agents in the world. This ability to socially construct places recognizes our freedom to create meaning, and place becomes the center of meaning creation.

2   This perspective in contemporary geography highlights the active agent and the societal contexts for action, but does not overcome the basic tension that exists between the relatively subjective, existential place and the relatively objective "materialistic" conception of place. When individuals objectify place, they remove themselves from the experienced place of objects and symbols and create distance between the subjective and the objective. The geographic concept of space strives for this objective, perspectiveless view, a "view from nowhere." Place conceived as space tends to fragment into homogenous "spaces" viewed through an analytic and detached use of rationality. Thus, we have the juxtapositioning of two different scales of human action. There is the objective, rational detached homogenous space associated with the global scale of economic action, and the local subjective reconstruction of place embedded in the life worlds of individuals.

3   We talk about the city as being alienating, anomie producing and fragmented, but from a detached perspective. Whether we use Marxist, Durkheimian or postmodern jargon, the city becomes an abstraction by being represented as removed from our experiences, even though we consider its effects on our experiences. The Los Angeles urban rebellion in April of 1992 exemplifies an extreme case of the disintegration and fragmentation of the postmodern city as disenfranchised, alienated individuals turned to mob action while the city burned for four days. The final results were 64 dead, over 2,000 injured, over 16,000 arrests and close to a billion dollars in property damage. By representing Los Angeles in this manner, objectively observable and measurable forces and events suggest subjective and personally lived conflicts and experiences, but without making explicit how these different approaches to the city as place interrelate.

4   This paper attempts to bridge this polarity by identifying a dialectic between the two notions of place established through the tensions between objects experienced as selfobjects, and the same objects experienced as detached and independently existing. This distinction is based on the self psychology of Heinz Kohut (Kohut, 1977), in which individuals are represented as experiencing objects either as a quality of self experience, or as independently existing with qualities and functions of their own. Experienced as selfobjects, the built environment is experienced as place, that is, as symbolizing selfobject functions. Experienced as detached, independently existing objects, the built environment is experienced as functional space. The second section of the paper will argue that the self is threatened by the modern city, which in large part is a result of the transforming influences of global and regional capitalist enterprise. The self becomes alienated in functional space by contributing to transformations which are self defeating. The third section discusses the reconstitution of self through selfobject functions of community, reconstituting place in the process. In a fourth section this paper illustrates the dialectics of self and place engaged with the self negating forces of space in the context of Los Angeles, California. The paper concludes with a way to understand how the dialectical tension between space and place is continually transformed and reconstituted through the built environment experienced in a variety of ways as selfobjects, or places, overcoming the alienating functions of objective space.

The Self and the City

5   An individual experiences a city not only as an independently existing arrangement which locates in space objects, actions, and relations, but also as a quality of an individual´s self experience as a center of strength and vitality for realizing ambitions and ideals. Experienced as a quality of self experience, a city symbolically recalls countless experiences of feeling strengthened and vitalized as a self. The locales, landmarks, and perceived objects of the built environment in time combine to evoke memories of self support and affirmation from individuals who have previously been experienced as qualities of self experience, or as selfobjects (Kohut, 1977). Whoever meets an individual´s need for self support and vitalization, functions as a selfobject for this individual, and in this respect is experienced not as independently existing, as an object, but only as a quality of the individual´s self experience. Recalling selfobject functions, the city becomes symbolically a selfobject, and thus is experienced not as independent from the experiencing self, but as supporting and affirming self experience.

6   The built environment can be seen as a selfobject because locales and landmarks evoke memories of self support and self affirmation as one goes through life (Tuan, 1977 ; Revill, 1996). The neighborhood street, the neighborhood school and church, by evoking in individuals childhood memories of being self assured and enthusiastic for the future, function symbolically as selfobjects, providing individuals renewed self support and vitality. To the extent that individuals so supported reflect on and recognize this selfobject function of their urban environment, it appears as a place which is human and humanizing. This experience of the built environment as selfobject creates in this manner the experience and reality of place. The city appears in this light as an area which sustains and bolsters for individuals a sense of themselves as strong through having value, and through their ability to live according to values.

7   The city can also recall and intensify the self´s experience of selfobject frustration. When the objective characteristics of the city become associated with experiences of attacks on the self, or absence of self support, the city is experienced as either a hostile human space, or as a place indifferent to human needs and empty of human meaning. For self needs can be frustrated in two ways. Either the self can be ignored and unfulfilled as a self, or the self can be attacked and caused to feel intensely worthless and abandoned. Of the two types of self frustration, the first is far more devastating. If an individual is attacked as worthless, or as undeserving to be supported emotionally, at least the individual experiences contact with another´s emotional life, and however painful the result, experiences intensely being alive. Under conditions of complete indifference to self needs, an individual experiences a progressive loss of intensity, strength, and vitality, with a growing terror at being left alone in an empty, cold space, while sinking into self oblivion.

8   The following dream reported by a patient in psychotherapy illustrates this experience of total indifference. As he was walking inside the cold, icy heart, he experienced great apprehension, the foreboding of some great yet nameless danger to which he was exposed. He tried to appeal to someone, a shadowy figure, to help him, but the appeal was of no avail. Suddenly he was pulled through a crack in the wall and found himself in a blinding bright landscape. Despite the fact that this landscape looked in all details like a usual city scape, with many people present and all kinds of busy activities going on, it was unreal and the people in it were unapproachable. In the patient´s words, it was a "stainless steel world." Whereas in the world of the cold heart he could still at least appeal for help, now even such appeal was out of the question. The workmen and passersby were completely--in principle as it were, not because of their cold heartedness--unreachable. No communication with them was thinkable ; the

patient was trapped forever without escape. (Kohut, 1984)

9   The experience of the city represented by this dream is the experience of space, an arrangement of objects, activities, and relationships independent and removed from those experiencing it. Individuals experience themselves correlatively as isolated and progressively shrinking to oblivion as the objective and independent city seems to expand to ever greater inaccessibility. The experience of the city as independent and objective space thus symbolizes and contributes to the most devastating form of self frustration. Living in space in this way creates terror at the prospect of self annihilation through withdrawal of the support required for any experience of self value, vitality, and desire to continue living. The city and the world generally are not experienced as space through some random occurrence of psychological and epistemological forces. Situated within the dominant forces of globalizing capitalist enterprise and production, the city and areas beyond systematically and aggressively establish the conditions for being experienced as space.

The systematic production of space and self fragmentation

10   The need for personal respect and a sense of sustained and increasing self value is frustrated and exacerbated during late capitalism in the postmodern city. Capitalist emphasis on competition and continual profit maximization subordinates self needs to economic demands. Guided by capitalist indifference to our self needs, we engage in activities globally which have a more widespread and devastating impact on our human needs than the physical violence which erupts among us periodically. Human indifference to human needs is not the result of some characteristics of regional, national, or international organization or function which we can adjust piecemeal to address our self needs. However many attempts we may make to improve our experience of self value and purpose, we continuously thwart any such efforts through our capitalist-inspired activities and goals. Our lives become functions of our efforts to compete, not principally to establish or improve our human experience and environment, but to achieve and expand market share and dominance on a global scale.

11   The capitalist city, dominated by the impersonal goal of globalizing capitalism, takes on a life of its own and is experienced to this extent as an abstraction, that is, as divorced from any individual´s self experience. Individuals experience the city as homogenous space, as organized under the capitalist imperative for the homogenization and objectification of values through continually reproduced and reorganized mass production and consumption. The city thus is seen as functional *space* for capital accumulation (Urry, 1995). City planning becomes a function of capital efficiency (Foglesong, 1986 ; Boyer, 1987). The theoretician or planning professional uses the geographic notion of space as an objective abstraction that has functional, measurable qualities (Cruz, 1997).

12   The fact that processes take place over space, the facts of distances, of closeness, of geographical variation between areas, of the individual character and meaning of specific places and repair - all these are essential to the operation of social processes themselves (Massey 1984).

13   Spatiality then is taken by Massey to be an integral and active feature of the processes of capitalist production. Specifically, Massey argues that there are a number of distant spatial forms taken by the social division of labor. With the globalization of capital,

labor is disciplined through deindustrialization, selective reindustrialization and concentration of economic nodes of activity (Soja, 1989). The expansion and penetration of capitalist forces rearrange areas as economic space. Geographers have written extensively on the production of space and the imperatives of capitalism restructuring capitalist production to flexible production units (Lefebvre, 1993 ; Scott, Storper, 1986 ; Storper, Christopherson, 1987).

14   This literature treats places as abstract spaces, objectifying places in analyzing spatial segregation of a fragmented dual workforce and a differentiating labor market. A geography of a low wage immigrant population, of the creation of an underclass in the inner cities, of closed communities, and of yuppie gentrification emerges as competition is heightened between various groups for scarce resources, such as affordable adequate housing, quality employment, education, health services and recreation.

15   However much insight and path-breaking exploration these interpretations offer to our understanding of place in cities under late capitalism, this macro-level theorizing says little about the impact that the abstracting of places as functional spaces has on individual human agents. By supplanting the place of symbolic meanings with the imperatives of capitalist expansion and penetration, the local human meaning of place becomes unstable and lost.

16   The rapid transformation of places that we associate with late capitalist cities has been described as a source of the destruction of the meaning of places (Walter, 1988). The term "placelessness," which has been used to refer to the creation of standardized, homogenized landscapes that diminish the differences among places, signifies one aspect of the loss of meaning in late capitalist cities. Thus, the importance of specific places to self experience shrinks to irrelevancy.

17   Simultaneously, capitalist forces are increasingly experienced, in association with expanding spatial dimensions, as withholding from the ambitions, ideals, and endeavors the support necessary to a strong and vital self experience. The experience of expanding boundaries and indifference to self needs weakens the city´s ability to symbolically support the self and to provide an experience of space and the self extended in strength and purpose. In effect, then, capitalist globalization expands urban boundaries, diminishing selfobject functions by weakening these functions and increasingly threatening the self with self disintegration and alienation. It does this in the built environment by creating placelessness, destabilizing and destroying "meaningful" places necessary for support and vitalization of the self´s experience of value.

18   The city becomes, as selfobject experience, at once support and threat to the self. The community of selfobjects, which is the basis for the city experienced as a place of self support, becomes as well the basis for the city to be experienced as a diminishing place of self support. For under the contradictory forces of community and capitalist competition, which expands constantly to global dimensions, every self experiences the need for selfobject support and the inclination to provide it, while also experiencing denial of the need and any desire to provide it.

19   This seemingly unresolvable contradiction within human experience and action between self needs and economic and social demands is manifested in the geographic notions of space and place. However, human agency resists the dehumanizing side of this contradiction by recreating meaning and self support as individuals interact with the built environment.

Self reconstitution and resistance by

recreating the selfobject functions of community

20   Community can be defined in many ways. In the context of place and the experiences which constitute it, the concept of community is defined as a variety of individuals who mutually support one another as selfobjects, and who share a common set of symbols of this support. Furthermore, such a community is territorially based in the sense that the commonly shared symbols of selfobject functions are experienced as related in place. Through the experience of sharing a common place, individuals experience one another through the symbols which recall their shared experience of strength, vitality, and purpose. The city is thus a community as a past and continued variety of self experiences supported and revitalized through the mutual selfobject functions of a variety of individuals sharing a common place. These employ diverse forms of what Toni Morrison (1990) describes as a 'kind of literary archaeology' which uses the 'basis of some information to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply.' Thus, creating modes of representation in the built environment.

21   The city, through its traditional symbolic associations with supportive selfobject functions of community, acts as a bulwark against strains imposed on the self by capitalist economic and social forces. Among the objects, activities, and relations commonly experienced by individuals, are those which as symbolizing selfobject functions, constitute the city as place. Other aspects of the built environment, however, also represent the depersonalizing functions of capitalist enterprise and thus establish the city as homogenized space. The city thus functions as both support and threat to the self, since it is a place of self support which is continuously diminished through global forces indifferent to the self. To the degree that the community of selfobjects positively provides support to ambitions and ideals of its members, means are sustained for resisting the self frustrating and self disintegrating functions of capitalist space.

22   This enabling function of a community of selfobjects is recreated and advanced in place by resisting the homogenous placelessness of capitalist activities while reconstructing places for self support. The emergence of ethnic enclaves, closed communities, and alternative lifestyle communities are all reconstructions of place through shared selfobject experiences which transform specific built environments into ones which are invested with symbolic meaning. These specific ways of reconstructing place provide a place of self support that stabilizes the self within a community of selfobjects which support and vitalize shared values and ambitions symbolized in built environments.

23   Human agents can resist capitalist expansion, which destabilizes place by creating homogenized functions and spaces for capital accumulation, by reconstituting the self through selfobject functions which energize and infuse the self with meaning. Interacting with the built environment of late capitalism, the self reconstructs place using those experienced selfobjects that are collectively shared in community. Thus the community of place, objectively existing but symbolically embedded in subjective experiences, resists the transformation of place into space.

24   At the same time, pressures to expand space continuously threaten self experience with self disintegration and self annihilation. Experiencing this pull into the "stainless steel world" of urban space, individuals reassert, with renewed determination and a sense of urgency, their experience of place and community by providing one another the selfobject affirmation and support their shared symbols of community recall and

promote. The negating functions of spatializing capitalist urban organization call forth in reaction renewed efforts at constructing communities and experiences of the city as humanized and humanizing.

25   In the case of ethnic enclaves, the use of public space, signage, and architectural design are all visual manifestations of the function of a community of selfobjects. In the case of alternative lifestyles, the creation of places of emancipation or liberation transforms the built environment creating new meaning in the built environment which is experienced as a place of safe, supportive selfobjects. Closed communities are attempts to construct places of safe haven from the diverse "other" by creating an exclusionary built environment. Territoriality is manifested as a place of self objects which empower the self to exclude as an undesirable "other" any event, object, or action which threatens self support and vitality.

26   Still, these resisting and reconstituting efforts by communities are continuously threatened by forces of self fragmenting and annihilating spatialization. From time to time community self support and resistance breaks down, followed by self fragmentation and consequent eruption of violence fueled by desperation. Selfobject communities reconstruct selfobject support in the wake of such episodes of self fragmentation, renewing resistance to self disintegrating forces of continually encroaching space. These dialectics of self and place with negating space can be represented through the complex characteristics of Los Angeles, California.

It all comes together while falling apart in Los Angeles, California

27   Los Angeles, as a world city, has had its built environment transformed into rising skyscrapers of global corporate power and inner city enclaves of poverty and despair ; closed communities in the outlying areas trying to keep the "other" out of their reconstructed white affluent communities ; places of liberation with supporting and comforting alternative lifestyles ; and ethnic enclaves that add a flavor of foreignness and exoticism. All of these communities are embedded in the angelino built environment creating what seemingly is a fragmented, alienated space. The City of Angels has been dubbed by many as one hundred suburbs trying to find the center. A certain image and attitude of Los Angeles, of live and let live, were abruptly and violently shaken four days in April of 1992.

28   Statistics on casualties, arrests, property damage and the physical extent of rioting show that the urban rebellion in 1992 was the worst urban disturbance in modern United States history, surpassing the urban riots of the 1960s (Cruz, 1993). What was striking about the urban rebellion was the abruptness and widespread geographic extent of the rebellion. The rebellion was not contained in the large concentrated areas of African American neighborhoods, but spread to Latino areas in Pico Union/Westlake, Hollywood, Venice in affluent West Los Angeles, Pasadena and Pomona in the San Fernando Valley. More Latinos were killed and arrested during the disturbance than any other group (Cruz, 1993). Poor whites, Latinos, African Americans all exploded their frustrations onto the urban built environment.

29   Los Angeles is considered a world city in which the global expansion of capital has restructured the angelino economic landscape. The economic redevelopment and revitalization of the Central Business District of Los Angeles during the 1980s is closely tied to the increasing globalization of the local economy. The influx of foreign capital

into Los Angeles has been expanding since the 1980s, making Los Angeles a major financial center for global capitalism. Investing in real estate, office complexes, industry, hotels, retail shops, restaurants and entertainment facilities, more than half the choice properties in the Central Business District of Los Angeles is presently owned by foreign corporations or by partnerships with foreign companies. Led by Japan, Canada, and the United Kingdom, foreign capital has financed as much as 90 percent of recent multi-storey construction (Soja, 1989). This reinvestment in the downtown district of Los Angeles has given the angelino CBD a face lift. Much of the current skyline of downtown Los Angeles is a direct result of foreign capital investments.

30   Concurrently with this inflow of foreign capital investment is the emergence in Los Angeles of a pronounced dualization of the angelino regional labor market. Not only have high wage, high technology industries located in extraordinary numbers in Los Angeles employing high wage workers, so too have industries employing in what might be the largest pool of low wage, weakly organized immigrant labor in the country (Waldinger, Roger & Bozorgmehr, Mehdi, 1996). The loss of high paying union jobs in the regional core was due to plant closings and layoffs during the period between 1978 and 1982. Throughout this period a significant number of plants closed in the inner core of the city (Soja, 1989).

31   This deindustrialization is accompanied by a reindustrialization of the core region, reflected in the growth of low paying jobs led by the garment industry and electronic industries. In both industries a significant proportion of the workforce is women and undocumented workers. Research on the apparel industry reveals that of the 125,000 jobs in this sector, as much as 80 percent have been held by undocumented workers, with 90 percent of all employees being women (Soja, Morales and Wolff, 1983). Thus, this selective deindustrialization and reindustrialization has fragmented the labor market based on race, ethnicity, immigrant status, and gender.

32   The service sector has also undergone similar labor market fragmentation. With the emergence of Los Angeles as an important financial market for international capital, there has been a rapid location of corporate and banking headquarters in the downtown district since the early 1980s. The angelino CBD forms one node of corporate finance connected to West Los Angeles via Wilshire Boulevard and the Miracle Mile.

33   Along with this expansion of yuppies in the high roller finance, real estate and corporate sectors, there is an expansion of low paying hotel, restaurant and domestic workers, along with an ever expanding informal service sector of street vendors. Such is the contrast of economic enclaves in such close proximity to one another in the core of the angelino CBD, that some scholars have called this phenomenon the "thirdworldization" of a first world urban core (Friedmann, 1986 ; Sassen 1991).

34   This seemingly fragmented city morphology creates a feeling of helpless disorientation as the self experiences increasing insignificance and aimlessness within a context teaming with objects, activities and their interrelationships. The built environment is increasingly experienced as a "stainless steel world," cold, indifferent, and meaningless in a placeless space. This is because activities structured by capital accumulation homogenize places, erasing shared memories of selfobjects and community. Places are reconstituted as spaces for the accumulation of capital, splintering social relations into fragmented, impersonal functions.

35   These fragments are the proliferation of ethnic enclaves scattered throughout the angelino landscape. At the same time Koreatown, Little Saigon, Little San Salvador, Chinatown, Little Tel Aviv, Little Tijuana, are all names given to the emerging built environment of community and the reconstructed place which attempts to reconstruct support and vitality, and therefore meaning and value to the self. Places of

emancipation for alternative lifestyles have recreated West Hollywood for upwardly mobile white gay men and the Silverlake district for low income Latino gay men. Reconstructed places such as Santa Monica, Venice, Pasadena, San Pedro/Long Beach have provided selfobject symbols for reconstituted self support and vitality.

36   It is our argument that community of place is constituted through shared experience of selfobjects symbolized through objects, events, and activities associated with a built environment, while the forces of globalizing capitalist competition and expansion continuously work against the constitution of place while promoting its transformation into impersonal space. By recreating locales and landmarks in the built environment as reflections of support and vitalization of the self, place is reconstructed within the overarching pressures of spatialization. Through the reconstruction of place, the angelino morphology, apparently an exclusively fragmented place, is recreated as a mosaic of community selfobjects providing self support to individuals within it. Thus, Los Angeles is recreated through a reconstructed local built environment as a transforming place which resists the expanding homogenizing spatial tendencies of Los Angeles as a world city. In this manner, Los Angeles is reinterpreted as having multiple shared selfobjects reflected in the built environment, making Los Angeles a mosaic whole of diverse selfobject communities, each supporting and vitalizing ambitions and ideals which find collective expression through place.

Conclusion

37   The city is experienced as an embodiment of two types of experiences, one symbolically self affirming and self supporting, and the other self rejecting and self abandoning. These contradictory experiences of the self interact with the built environment creating a tension between space and place. The postmodern city in late capitalism has given us a city morphology that is tension ridden, pressured by capital expansion and accumulation to destabilize place by redefining place as homogenizing space, while resisting spatializing pressures through a city morphology that is a fragmented collection of places expressing shared self vitality and strength. This polarity between space and place can be understood by exploring the dialectic nature of place and space. By reasserting the significance of human agency, the structures of space and place are more fully analyzed to reveal a dialectical relationship between self and space. Through self experience we see a spatiality that is threatening and emancipating simultaneously to the self, giving us the fragmented, ambiguous and conflictive built environment of large postmodern cities.

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