Sense of place in everyday spaces: lessons for urban design

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Many philosophers and thinkers have lamented the loss of *place* in terms of the loss of contact of the body with the environment in post-industrialized societies. With the diminishing cache of places it becomes even more important to study spaces in the city that posses this character and genius loci. This paper investigates the qualities of a seemingly ordinary everyday space that imbue it with character and elevate it to become a *place*. The paper explores the significance of this space in everyday life and how it is transformed from an ordinary space of consumption to a meaningful place for meeting, interaction and human-human contacts, and a place for haptic experiences and body-object contacts in the community.

An extensive study of a neighborhood commercial street in Cambridge, Massachusetts revealed a handful of spaces that were extensively used for social interactions. Observations and interviews suggested that one of these spaces supported the majority of social interactions and was a concrete human space with a unique sense of place. The patterns of interactions at this location were documented and analyzed using sketches, drawings, notes, interviews, photographs and videos and by actively participating in the *phenomena* of this space. Observations show that this location on the street has a distinct hereness, a sense of being in it and enclosure, a sense of ease and safety that is at the core of the experience of place. By analyzing the various phenomena of this place this study suggests essential qualities for the design of public spaces to become places that will retain a sense of nearness, a connection between people and places, and will strengthen our sense of tactile reality.

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INTRODUCTION

Urban design is concerned with the creation of places of distinct identity; with both, special places in the city and also with everyday places. This paper focuses on ordinary everyday spaces that are typically in the neighborhood close to home. It employs a mixed-methods approach of environment-behavior research by using methods from behavioral geography as well as phenomenology to study the phenomena of everyday spaces as experienced by the people who use them. The study analyzes the phenomena to determine the qualities of the everyday space that imbue it with character and transform it into a place of significant meaning for its users.

1. PLACE

Place, it is suggested, is a central ontological structure of the human experience (Casey, 1993). According to Relph places are "fusions of human and natural order and are the significant centers of our immediate experiences of the world" (Relph 1976:141). Of the many definitions of place, the one put forth by Harrison and Dourish (1996) captures the notion of place

succinctly. They suggest that place is the result of space that is overlaid with meaning by humans. Continued contact and association with a space is critical to its becoming a place. Emphasizing this temporal dimension, Tuan suggests, "What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value" (Tuan 1977:6). Similarly, in discussing the essential experiential structure of place, Seamon (1979:70) argues that regularity of place use results in emotional attachment to place that he calls *at-homeness*. We develop an attachment to the spaces that we regularly associate with and ones that hold special meanings for us. The repeated use of such spaces of meaning in the landscape provides us with a sense of place that is essential to our experience of the world we live in.

1.1. Location of place-experience

Because most of us are inextricably linked to our place of residence, the home is at the core of the idea of place (Cooper-Marcus 1995). However, other settings at various scales in the neighborhood and the city are as much felt and identified by people as places (Relph 1976; Norberg-Schulz 1980; Oldenberg 1981, among others). In fact, while the home is the physical center of

place, other familiar places where the person feels comfortable outside the home make complete the experience (Seamon 1979). "Places occur at all levels of identity, my place, your place, street, community, town, county, region, country and continent, …" (Donat 1967:9 cited in Relph 1976:29). Hence, place-experience at home and at other settings outside the home is essential to our experience of the world and to our existence and well-being.

1.2. Loss of place
The increasing mobility of current society has challenged the notion of place. Many philosophers and thinkers have lamented the loss of place in post-industrial societies. This loss is articulated, for example, as a "loss of nearness" (Heidegger 1962), a "schism between people and places" (Arendt 1958), and "weakening the sense of tactile reality" (Sennett 1994). The current pattern, Relph suggests, "is towards an environment of few significant places – towards a placeless geography, a flatscape, a meaningless pattern of buildings" (Relph 1976:117). Existence in such a placeless landscape deprives us of meaningful associations and contact with people and the world in which we exist.

However, there are everyday spaces in our landscape that, if designed and managed with place in mind, have the potential to provide a connection between people and place and between people and people. In urban areas, public spaces such as streets still provide the opportunity to be designed to accommodate places of meaning near the home.

2. THE STREET

Historically, streets in cities and towns were used as spaces to serve basic survival, communication and entertainment needs and to perform several political, religious, commercial, civic and social functions. Even in current times, streets are an important part of public open space in the city. For urban areas, streets are both literally and metaphorically the most fitting symbol of the public realm (Jacobs 1961; Rudofsky 1969; Jacobs 1993; Chekki 1994; Lofland 1998).

> Streets and their sidewalks, the main public spaces of the city, are its most vital organs. Sidewalks, their bordering uses, and their users, are active participants in the drama of civilization… (Jacobs 1961:29-30).

People depend on streets for functional, social, and leisure activities; for travel, shopping, play, meeting, and interaction with other people; and even for relaxation. Hence, even in the present times the street has a legitimate role as a public space to cater to multiple needs of its users.

2.1. The street as place
Scholars in various fields related to urban studies suggest thinking of the street as a social space rather than just a channel for movement. Streets that support stationary human behaviors and activities provide

opportunities for short-term, low-intensity contacts that constitute easy interactions with other people in a relaxed and relatively undemanding way (Jacobs 1961; Gehl 1987). It is suggested that these short-term, low-intensity contacts or weak ties are possible beginnings of deeper and more long-term social interactions and engagements between people (Jacobs 1961; Granovetter 1973; Greenbaum 1982; Gehl 1987). The daily comings and goings permit renewed and repetitive activities on the street that help in making the street a legible place for the users. Such streets become places "where we experience the meaningful events of our existence" (Norberg-Schultz 1971:19).

2.2. The neighborhood commercial street
The neighborhood commercial street or Main Street, due to its location in or near the residential neighborhood, possesses the ability to make it possible for local people to see and meet one another as a part of their daily routine. And because it is the location of various businesses it has the ability to house numerous types of places that may have collective community meanings resulting from repeated interactions and shared experiences of daily life. This paper examines the neighborhood commercial street as a public space with the potential to accommodate everyday places of meaning.

2.3. Places on the street
Around the world streets are a dynamic space of activity. But certain streets have a vitality that is so powerful that it is easily legible and identifiable. These are streets that Jacobs (1993) calls "great streets." In most cases, however, there are only specific locations on the street that anchor the vitality of the street. These are spaces that are easily recognizable and memorable and often define and reflect the vibrant character of the street. Such spaces of gathering usually achieve the quality of place on the street. Hester suggests that such places possess a sense of "collective-symbolic ownership" and are ones that people in the neighborhood hold "sacred" (Hester 1984:13). Although in these spaces people are seen engaging in ordinary activities of daily life, these places provide a comfort and at-easeness that is invaluable to our well-being.

3. THE STUDY OF PLACE

As stated in the introduction, the primary objective for this study was to investigate the qualities of a seemingly ordinary everyday space that imbue it with character and elevate it to become a place. As a part of the mixed-method strategy, the inquiry employed a variety of techniques, including structured and semi-structured observations (visual surveys), extensive field notes, diagrams, maps, sketches, photography, and face-to-face interviews with the users, and the author's first-person experience of the street. These methods provided information on people's behavior, attitudes and perceptions and on the ambience, characteristics and qualities of the special places on the street. Hence, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected,

analyzed, and presented in the study. It is suggested that a "survey design is useful when investigators want to find out in detail about a phenomenon, …" (Zeisel 1981:67). The first-person phenomenological inquiry provided experiences of specific individuals and the author involved in actual real-life places.

Additionally, although it is difficult to base generalizations on a few cases, case studies provide useful knowledge to suggest possible relationships between various factors (Yin 2003; Zeisel 1981). Miles and Huberman reiterate this view by stating that "… qualitative research lives and breathes through seeing the context; it is the particularities that produce the generalities, not the reverse" (1994:34).

4. THE STUDY

Figure 1: A view of Massachusetts Avenue at Central Square, Cambridge, MA.

4.1. The study area

Massachusetts Avenue at Central Square is the main neighborhood commercial street of Central Square neighborhood in Cambridge, MA (Figure 1). It provides for the day-to-day amenities of the neighborhood and serves as a destination for shopping, eating, entertainment and culture. Massachusetts Avenue is a historic street with mostly older building stock and only a few new buildings constructed in the last 40 years in the stretch of the street at Central Square. Almost all buildings are built to the sidewalk leaving no setbacks. Aside from a few newer buildings with commercial office space, all buildings range from one to four stories in height and accommodate a combination of small independently owned local businesses and national chain stores. A five-block stretch of Massachusetts Avenue at Central Square has been upgraded in the last decade to make it more pedestrian-friendly. These improvements include widening and resurfacing of sidewalks, creating curbside parking, planting of trees, and providing benches, bicycle racks, trash cans, and pedestrian oriented street lighting, and so on.

4.2. Methods

The upgraded five-block stretch of Massachusetts Avenue at Central Square was extensively studied from April to October in 2005. Behavior mapping, including structured and semi-structured observations, was conducted every hour from 7:00 AM to 10:00 PM on weekdays and 8:00 AM to 11:00 PM on weekends to understand the relationship between the temporal and spatial patterns of the people's behaviors and the physical setting – to examine how people used the streets. Hence, there were 30 behavior maps – 15 for the weekdays and 15 for the weekends – for the study area.
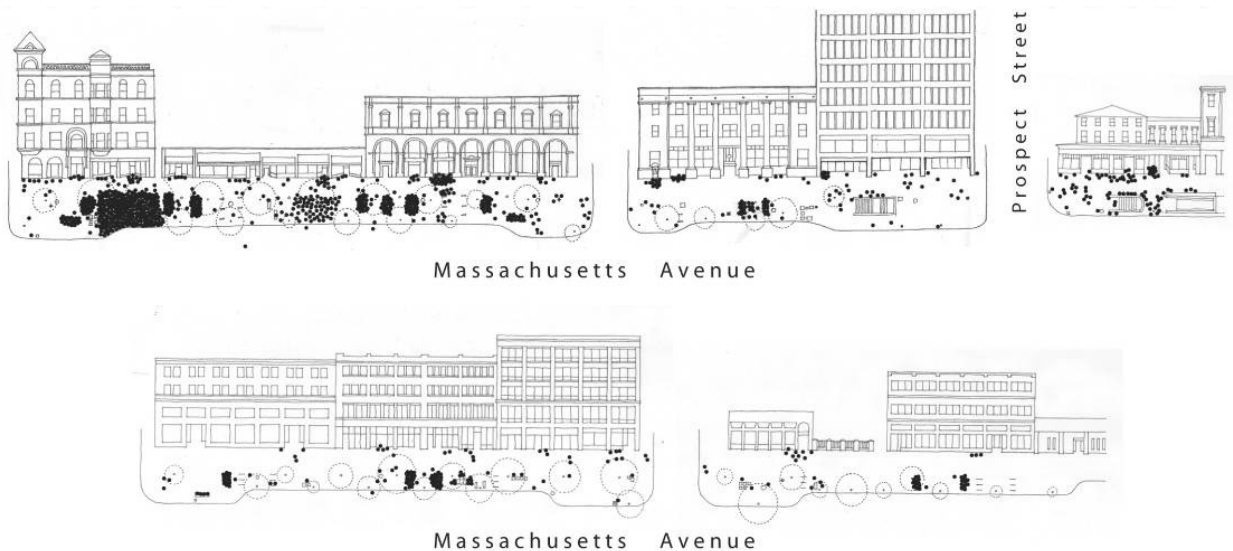

Figure 2: Behavioral map of people engaged in some stationary activity on weekdays and weekends on five blocks on Massachusetts Avenue at Central Square, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Data from thirty observations on each block spread throughout the day and evening. Each black dot represents a person.

Behavior maps provided information on when and what people did on the streets and where they sat, stood, gathered and socialized, and what facilities they used, either as a part of their daily functional activities or for recreational purposes.

Simultaneously, people who frequently used the street, were interviewed to understand their experiences of the street environment – the street, the buildings, the businesses, the people who used the streets and the ones that managed the businesses; and to find out what particular feelings did the places on the street evoke for them.

Next, using sketches, drawings, maps, field notes, photographs and videos and by actively participating in the *phenomena* of the space, the author documented and analysed the patterns of activities and interactions on the five-block stretch of street.

4.3. Results of behavior mapping

Behavior mapping provided a snapshot of human behavior and activities on the street and revealed that a handful of spaces on the street were extensively used for stationary activities and social interactions. But it specifically suggested that one of these spaces, the street space at 1369 Coffeehouse, supported the majority of stationary activities and social interactions (Figure 2). Similarly, interviews indicated that people attached special meaning to a handful of locations on the street. Among these, 1369 Coffeehouse held multiple meanings and evoked feelings of attachment and sense of place beyond just a space for consumption.

4.4. The coffeehouse as place

On their website the owners of 1369 Coffeehouse state their goal of making a meaningful place for the community:

> We strive to create a comfortable, inviting atmosphere and to be an integral part of the community. Many friendships, including several marriages, have developed at 1369. Several books and many theses have been written at our tables. We take pride in being a good neighbor and local gathering place. We are dedicated to maintaining this feeling.… (1369 Coffeehouse website).

The people using the street unanimously agreed on the unique *place* quality of 1369 Coffeehouse and especially the street space it extended onto.

> I like the fact that people can hang around here and socialize and not just be a customer. It [1369 Coffeehouse] is a meeting area, a destination. Everybody comes here. It attracts [people from] all walks of life, all races, working class, families, … it has it's own unique aura about it. (R 39.1).

1369 Coffeehouse was one of the numerous businesses on the street to serve goods that could be consumed outdoors, which encouraged people to stay at the street. Like many other businesses on the street,

1369 Coffeehouse used the street space outside the store to put out furniture and furnishings. However, unlike the rest of the street, walking into the territory just outside 1369 was like walking onto a terrace. The experience of movement, as on the street before and beyond the 1369 space, was transformed into an experience of rest – a pause. The street was transformed into a place of stay rather than just a space of movement. At the street space outside 1369, one was in a place of its own distinct identity unlike the other parts of the street (Figure 3). Without using any physical barriers, 1369 was able to claim a physical territory on the street that was inviting to the passer by to stay.

> 1369 [Coffeehouse] is very personal. There is great outdoor seating. The music outdoors attracts people. It is a great place to sit and enjoy your day and people-watch. It is interesting to see all kinds of people. I frequently run into people without planning. (R 37.1).

There were distinct qualities that gave 1369 such a sense of place. These were both physical qualities as well as attributes of the way the owners and workers operated the coffeehouse.

Figure 3: The "room"-like quality of the street space outside 1369 Coffeehouse provided a sense of enclosure that was distinctly inviting.

5. QUALITIES OF PLACE

The open-ended interviews, the author's analyses and first-hand personal experience of the study area pointed to six essential qualities that transformed the everyday public space on the street to an identifiable place – flexibility, fluidity, multidimensionality, personalization, long-term constancy and short-term changeability. These qualities can be summed up in three themes that encapsulate the experiential character of place on the street – *continuity, adaptability and personalization.* These three themes that help the owners achieve this unique quality and make 1369 Coffeehouse a place in the community are

discussed below.

5.1. Continuity

Continuity is the quality of permanence of a place. Much of it is manifest through the mere ability to exist over time. It offers the capability for regularity of use that provides an at-homeness (Seamon 1979), which is essential to creating a sense of place (Relph 1976). Continuity supports routine and provides familiarity that leads to a sense of security and comfort in knowing what to expect, not only in terms of goods and services, but also with respect to continued contacts with the same people – both friends and acquaintances – as noted by this regular user of the street:

> I'm here two-three times a day. I walk here daily. It's exercise. It takes me out of my house. I come here to read. It's very relaxing for me. My friends know where to find me. (R 10.3).

Familiarity is particularly significant on neighborhood commercial streets since most of the users are people who live or work nearby, and who therefore are likely to come back to visit the street and stores frequently. Many people expressed a preference for stores that had been present for a long time, because they were familiar with the goods and services, and owners and workers.

> [It] is one of my favorites because it's been there for many years. I'm glad that it's still there. They have friendly service. And I'm welcome there. (R.19.1).

This continuity in tenure of 1369 Coffeehouse translated into a familiarity with the goods and services and a friendliness with the workers of the coffeehouse as suggested by this user:

> I like the atmosphere there. It is very personal. People are very friendly and I know the people who work there. (R 14.1).

Figure 4: People shared significant events with friends at street space outside 1369 Coffeehouse.

People of the neighborhood came to the coffeehouse to share significant events with their friends and this added meaning to this ordinary space on the street (Figure 4). The continued existence of the coffeehouse was significant even to people who had moved from the neighborhood. A regular of the coffeehouse who had moved still returned and narrated that many others did too:

> People have changed due to the rents. It used to be neighborhood people earlier. It has changed from neighborhood people to a destination with more new people. But people who lived here [in the neighborhood] still come back here. (R 35.4).

Hence, continuity fostered the notion of stability that is at the core of attachment to place.

Figure 5: 1369 Coffeehouse was a place for people of various backgrounds, age, race and class.

5.2. Adaptability

Adaptability deals with the ability of a space to change on an ongoing basis as a response to the changing needs of the people and the environment. Although continuity is essential in the long-term, change in the form of flexibility is crucial in the short-term. Adaptability is also the ability for a space to be multidimensional; to be open to the needs of diverse groups or individuals. 1369 Coffeehouse was a place that was suitable to people of various backgrounds, age, race, and class (Figure 5) as reinforced by comments from the users:

> Different kinds of people hang out here. On this section [of the street] attached to 1369 [Coffeehouse]. The business owners are making some efforts to make it inviting. (R 26.3).

The street space at 1369 transformed during the day, the week, several times in a month and seasonally. This was a result of modifications that the owners and workers of the coffeehouse made to accommodate the needs of people, whether it was bringing out more chairs for patrons and others when street musicians set

up to play on the sidewalk or setting up more umbrellas to provide shade on a hot summer afternoon. The street space at 1369 often changed to accommodate the activities and life of the street.

But adaptability is also the ability for the users to be able to modify their setting to claim territory or to make it more comfortable, or both. This meant that the business owners had to forego some control of the space. People were able to move the furniture and furnishings to nearby locations, often outside the immediate domain of the coffeehouse, to suit their needs and to freely move in and out of the coffeehouse as needed (Figure 6 and 7). They were able to use the coffeehouse space and furniture to gather, meet, play music or a board game, and so on, even if they were not purchasing goods from the coffeehouse. This seemingly insignificant flexibility translated into the usefulness of the coffeehouse for multiple purposes for many people of different backgrounds and income groups. The comfort and ease created by this quality of adaptability led to place attachment that was reflected when people talked about the coffeehouse:

> 1369 [Coffeehouse is my favorite]. It is affordable and I meet my friends there. It has a good in-out flow. The tables on the sidewalk and the benches are great. It is a magnet for street culture. (R 32.2).
> I love the coffeehouse. You can sit there for hours. Sit there, read, [and] look at people. I do some of my work here. It's an atmosphere not as serious as a library. (R 26.2).

Figure 6: A street musician moves the coffeehouse furniture to suit his needs.

Additionally, this ability to modify and control private goods in an otherwise public territory involved a certain degree of negotiation, compromise, and accommodation of the needs of other people present at the street. People were obliged to interact with other people to move furniture or to ask for a chair. All of this resulted in opportunities for social interaction adding to the meaningfulness of the space.

Figure 7: The coffeehouse territory expands with the needs of street musicians.

5.3. Personalization

Figure 8: An employee of 1369 Coffeehouse personalizes the street-front by changing seasonal plants and flowers.

Personalization is the act of modifying the physical environment and an expression of claiming territory; of caring for and nurturing the claimed territory. Many businesses on the street had personalized their street-frontage with signs, displays and decorations, and by bringing out their wares, goods and services to the street. But 1369 Coffeehouse was the most personalized businesses on the street (Figure 8). By personalizing a space, people change the environment to meet their needs and specific activity patterns. This provides psychological security, a symbolic aesthetic, and the marking of territory (Lang 1987:148). By marking territories through personalization individuals or groups are also able to make the territory "distinctive and identifiable" (Edney 1976). One user of the street described it succinctly:

> Signs out on the street [in front of the coffeehouse] change every few days. They

tell you the special brews or flavors 1369 [Coffeehouse] is serving that day. And the flowers and planters – they change every few weeks. It's very personal and neighborly. Not like a corporate. (R 41.1).

Personalization creates change in an otherwise familiar setting that provided stimulation and interest, and a reason to stop and look. Personalization added uniqueness to the setting that created an ambience that provided the much-needed layer of identity to the physical environment. Increased opportunities for personalization add those elements in the environment that are of prime interest to people (Gehl 1987) as corroborated by comments such as the following:

> I like 1369 [Coffeehouse] for the music they play, the artwork on the walls, the ambience. They serve you in a regular [glass] cup. (R 23.3).

Observations showed that 1369 personalized its street-front by spending considerable effort in altering and updating its interface with the street by frequently changing their show window décor, displays, planters, signs, often displaying their goods and wares on the sidewalk and thus adding a personal touch to their appearance. Such small gestures meant a lot to the users of the street:

> We need planters, awnings – things that give off that people are around. Something that makes the stores communicate with you. (R 42.9).

The personalized street space at 1369 Coffeehouse was like a "room" with a sense of enclosure distinct from the rest of the street (Figure 3). Upon entering that part of the street one experienced a sense of being "inside." Gestures and objects, as manifestations of personalization, suggest the presence of people and activity, and therefore of occupancy, adding a human touch to the environment.

> Signs associated with occupancy can do more than announce the existence of territorial claims; they can also be seen as visible evidence of caring. They can represent a feeling of attachment between the occupant and the physical setting, and as such they will be felt to add "warmth" or "intimacy" to a setting, which, in the absence of such signs, would be too "monumental" or "sterile" or "inhuman" (Brower 1980:189).

Personalization through the change of signs and displays also provided current information about schedules and events, and goods and services in the store, right at the street.

The articulated building façade with its permeable edge was particularly suitable for personalization efforts. The setbacks, alcoves, niches, nooks, and articulations of the façade created spaces for plants, signs, items for sale, and so on.

CONCLUSION

Continuity, adaptability and personalization provided a sense of security, comfort, a sense of community, visual stimulation and interest for the users of 1369 Coffeehouse. But most importantly, continuity, adaptability and personalization helped create an identity for 1369 Coffeehouse in the minds of the people who used the street. This offered a sense of place on the street for the people of the neighborhood.

Current urban design literature suggests that mixed-use neighborhoods with their own neighborhood commercial streets are a desired pattern of physical development to achieve a more vital, vibrant, attractive, safe, viable and sustainable pattern of urban lifestyle. Presently, there is considerable interest in revitalizing city centers by promoting mixed-use neighborhoods with neighborhood commercial streets to cater to the daily needs of shopping, eating out, and entertainment. But at a time when there is increasing competition from big-box retailers, it takes more than proximity to attract people to the neighborhood commercial street. The biggest competitive advantage of the neighborhood commercial street is its ability to be an easy meeting place for the local people. Neighborhood commercial streets will be successful if they are managed to support community-gathering places and if they integrate places of social meaning.

The findings of this study suggest that the private business owners as well as the public authorities play an important role in making neighborhood commercial streets a location for meaningful spaces close to home. Public authorities should help to preserve any community places, regardless of their use or appearance, and encourage supporting small, independent businesses that in turn have the ability to become places of meaning. Architecturally, private owners and public authorities need to demand buildings that are designed with more articulated street façades, especially at the first- and second-floor levels. Public authorities need to provide incentives for businesses to be able to appropriate spaces on the street for occupancy wherever suitable, to personalize their street fronts, and to encourage the private businesses to control and occupy the street territory with movable and semi-fixed objects and artifacts. Public authorities also need to provide physical street improvements such as wide sidewalks, trees, comfortable seating, and other physical artifacts that could help make the street a comfortable and pedestrian-friendly neighborhood space.

The findings of this study show that when an appropriate combination of characteristics is present, an everyday space on the street can attain a sense of place by becoming a place of meaning and attachment.

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