# Placing Identity
### by Ellen Dunham-Jones

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Although Marc Augé's book *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* is quite specifically directed to anthropologists, his provocative argument will be of interest to those in the many disciplines engaged with the life of places, including designers, geographers, sociologists, and any student of contemporaneity. Director of Studies at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Socials in Paris, Augé argues for the need for the practices of anthropology and ethnology to recognize the significant impact of contemporary conditions on place and individual identity. Simply structured into thirds, his book begins with a discussion of the arguments supporting an anthropology of "the near" versus that of "the elsewhere"; he continues by defining the specific characteristics of traditional "anthropological place"; and he concludes by differentiating the "anthropological places" of localized cultures from the pervasive "non-places" produced, according to him, by contemporary conditions of "supermodernity." In addition to specifically defining places in terms of how they contribute to social identity, Augé calls attention to several distinctive characteristics of non-places, offering a critical discussion of generic contemporary conditions such as airports, shopping malls, highways, and so on. To this emerging area of study,

he contributes a much-needed vocabulary and discourse that focuses on social relations and individual identity.

Although his study is welcome, less so is his introduction of yet another term to describe contemporary life: "supermodernity." As a concept, supermodernity is comparable to postindustrialism, late capitalism, and the condition of postmodernity. Unfortunately, Augé himself does not make this comparison or distinguish his term. Instead, he consistently refrains from presenting his argument in the context of related research, with the exception of the work of a few carefully chosen, exclusively French authors. Augé argues that supermodernity is defined by conditions of excess, manifested principally in the acceleration of time, space, and identity. In contrast to modernity's temporality of linear progress, supermodernity is marked by a temporality of the immediate, divorced from the past. The postmodern collapse of the grand narratives of history loosens the present from the sense of an unfolding destiny.[1] Instead, we live in a perpetual now whose meaning lies only in its immediacy, an immediacy that is hyped and accentuated by media events and fashion.

The ubiquity of the immediate also operates spatially. Augé re-presents familiar arguments about how the technological shrinking of the planet results in greater global awareness, noting how the growing influence of and interaction between cultures challenge indigenous symbolic universes and identity. He then argues that, as place and history—the traditional reference points for collective identification—are destabilized by these processes, people are driven to give greater meaning to their identities through heightening their sense of individuality. Although arguments about alternative group affiliations as well as gender and racial identities could counter this claim, Augé's aim is to draw attention to what "identity politics" could mean with regard to the multiplicity of subject positions that characterizes supermodernity.

Nowhere is this increase in individualization more apparent than in the progeny of supermodernity, what Augé calls "non-places." These are defined not so much by what they are as by what they are *not*—they are the antithesis of places that foster a sense of belonging; in other words, traditional or anthropological place. Always focusing on aspects of socialization, Augé defines anthropological place as the idea that the inhabitants have of their relations with the territory, their families, and others. It is invested with meaning to the degree that it is a place of identity, of relations, and of history—in other words, to the degree that it bonds the individual and community to a social, spatial, as well as temporal continuity. Non-places, on the other hand, exude a sense of the generic or prototypical. They lack identity and relationships to anything local, and replace historical reference with the urgent, perpetual present. In one of his most original observations, Augé points out the degree to which wordless transactions and nonverbal communication dominate non-places. Signs provide instructions for their use: "No Smoking," "Exit Right Lane," "Cash Only," and that peculiarly French contrivance, the announced "Meeting Point." In contrast to the social positioning communicated by anthropological place, everyone in non-place is addressed anonymously. Personal identity is subsumed under the temporary condition of passenger, guest, shopper—consumer identities that result in solitary contractuality rather than contribute to an organic social whole. The silent purchase of the necessary ticket or the credit card transaction allows access to the chosen, but nonetheless predetermined, anonymous identity. Whereas the civic agenda of anthropological places sublimates individuality for the purpose of fostering group identity, non-places' treatment of everyone as the same, anonymous individual produces disengaged solitude. Although designed to handle crowds, non-places reinforce not individual identity but one's identity as a solitary individual. Their proliferation prompts Augé to speak of the need for an ethnology of solitude.

Augé also points out very perceptively how supermodernity alters traditional places. If, as Augé claims, anthropological places operate according to a formal diagram of routes, cross-roads, and centers, their functioning is severely disrupted by the imposition of the non-place ring and network. He gives as an example the construction of a typical bypass around the now-designated historic center of a town. The bypass itself represents the degree to which mobility and integration into the larger economic system supersede direct or immediate relations. The town's significance as a place is presented to motorists through commercial-looking billboards announcing its just-passed features. Rather than being integrated into the lived experience of the inhabitants, historic sites are aestheticized and circumscribed, made into spectacles to be viewed by tourists, into scenes rather than places.

Augé is hardly a nostalgic, but he is critical of supermodernity and insistent that anthropologists learn to recognize supermodernity's erosion of anthropological places' ability to foster communal identity. He warns ethnologists to beware of the "totality temptation"; i.e., the urge to see a place, a culture, and each individual as a complete, transparent totality, denying any degree of individualization, alienation, or difference. Such essentializing is suspicious on any account, but it is particularly problematic under the universalizing conditions of supermodernity, which diminish the isolation and containment of the cultural attributes of a particular place. Often operating as amateur ethnologists, analyzing the place and culture of a site, architects would also do well to heed Augé's warnings. Rather than simply assuming that the problems of non-places can be fixed by applying the traditional tools of place making, or that cohesive communities can be achieved simply through the construction of more traditionally organized places, architects need to be aware of the degree to which local cultures are becoming increasingly disengaged from place, increasingly absorbed in supermodernity.

Kenneth Frampton's writings on critical regionalism elaborated on Paul Ricoeur's description of this tension in terms of local culture versus universal civilization. In a lecture on the subject, Frampton specifically referred to Augé's description of non-places as further evidence of the need to resist assimilation into the global marketplace.[2] For Frampton, non-places represent the commodification of the environment, the imposition of the universalizing order of multinational capital and its landscape of anonymous buildings, as atomized as the anonymous individuals in non-places.

Frampton advocates the development of localized architectural movements that synthesize the modern and the traditional, and the architectural recuperation of what he calls "place-form" (site-specific building forms and practices) as the means to resist the further proliferation of universalizing non-places and to promote difference.

Augé, on the other hand, is less critical of non-places. His book's prologue is a brief narrative of a typical journey to an airport. As the traveler settles into his seat on the plane, he welcomes the solitude of being "alone at last." Similarly, in the epilogue, Augé describes the prohibition against drinking alcohol while over the airspace of Saudi Arabia as the "intrusion of territory into space," from which returning "after an hour or so to the non-place of space, escaping the totalitarian constraints of place, will be just like a return to something resembling freedom." Relative to the determinist, hierarchical, and totalizing space of anthropological place, the anonymity of non-place is presented as liberating. He likens non-place to Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia. The individual is alienated but free, free to be alone and anonymous, to step into multiple subject-positions; and to defer the kind of static, constraining identity associated with anthropological place.

So just where does freedom lie? In the anonymous but commodified and universal world of non-place? Or in critical regionalism's proposed world of differentiated but communally regulated places? Is the right to self-determination to be measured at the scale of individuals or communities? These questions parallel recent discussions in identity politics between the humanist appeal to communal political action and the antihumanist recognition of difference and fractured subjectivity. The ability of anthropological place to provide a common base, unifying individuals into communal political action, allies it with humanism. Augé's neorationalist formalization of place into a geometric diagram of routes, intersections, and centers further reinforces the humanist impulse to universalize an idealized order (though this could easily be considered a tautological argument, as it depends on Augé's universalization of the particularities of place into a single diagram). Against such a determinist and hierarchical system, the solitude and autonomy of non-places are more representative of the decentered and alienated antihumanist subject.

A series of books currently being published by ACTAR invites further speculation on the question of the relative freedoms and constraints of places and non-places. ACTAR, a collaborative group of photographers, designers, and architects based in Barcelona, produces the magazine *Quaderns d'Arquitectura*, one of the most intelligent and critical architecture journals available today, known especially for examining the relationship

between architecture and urbanism. This focus is evident, too, in the ACTAR book series and its accompanying exhibitions. Each volume documents a single city with beautifully reproduced untitled photographs, augmented by short critical essays. Idealizing diagrams and historical plans, the means by which architects have tried to understand the progressive order of a city from a humanist perspective, are deliberately omitted here, in favor of the more "realistic," and perhaps disorderly, view of the city provided by contemporary photographs. The titles produced so far are *Berlin, Atlanta,* and *Lleida Panorama* (Lleida, Spain), cities that have recently undergone significant growth and transformation.

The presentation of *Atlanta,* in particular, allows the reader to reflect on the city's status as a place or non-place. In *Atlanta,* the different styles of the book's two photographers, Jordi Bernadó and Ramon Prat, reveal the multiplicity of the city's identity. Lush in their tonality, the large-format, perspective-corrected, mostly black-and-white duotone photographs by both photographers studiously avoid the kind of picture-postcard views usually associated with books on places. Bernadó's preference for banal scenes shot at eye level gives his images the appearance of neutral documentation. The images are the equivalent of the ethnologist's presumably representative samples. Yet the empty foregrounds in wide-angle shots and the absence of people, familiar monuments, and any sense of intimacy reveal a very deliberate attempt to portray Atlanta as a surreal non-place.

Meanwhile, Prat's cropped and far more formalized compositions are comparable to fine-art photographs. He finds hidden correspondences in his carefully framed views. Compositional relations—a streetlamp visually collapsed precisely onto the corner of a building—allow us to see the city as an identifiable, relational place. In combination, the subtle tension between the approaches of the two photographers reminds the viewer of the selectivity and subjectivity of any attempt to define identity, either of people or place. Along with the equally independent and generally probing essays, which are unlinked by even so much as an editorial preface, *Atlanta* presents multiple identities.

Architects and urban designers interested in the patterns of late-twentieth-century development are fascinated by Atlanta. Rem Koolhaas's seminal study of the city in 1987 (republished in *Atlanta* as an essay) might have something to do with its appeal.[3] At a time when the models for postmodern urban designers were drawn from either Colin Rowe's studies of the figural spaces of the Nolli map of Rome or the suburbs depicted in Werner Hegemann and Elbert Peets's 1922 *American Vitruvius: An Architect's Handbook of Civic Art,* Koolhaas sought out Atlanta as an example not

of what the ideal should or could be, but of how the real city was unfolding. As the site of significant economic growth and unconstrained development in the 1970s and 1980s, a time of corporate diversification, mergers, and increased globalization, Atlanta is both a generic and prime example of late-capitalist, postindustrial development. Its downtown high-rises dot a checkerboard of empty parking lots. Atria, skybridges, and underground shopping complexes all work to reduce the activity on the street, turning the downtown focus inward; meanwhile, massive new mall-office-residential developments located at the intersections of spoke roads and bypassing highways spawn outwardly focused growth. Typical of what Joel Garreau calls "edge cities," Atlanta's growth reflects the decentralization of commerce and dwelling, and their dispersal on the suburban/rural periphery.[4]

Perhaps the most condemning of the book's essays is Rafael Argullol's, in which he refers to these "micropoli" as "an urbanism of war," fortified islands in the verdant countryside, enclaves of prepackaged consumer dreams that simulate a sanitized city while redefining the original city as a savage enemy. Koolhaas similarly finds Atlanta's new architecture deliberately divorced from city building (i.e., place making). He describes a site model in an Atlanta architect's office with five large, unrelated projects on it deliberately kept secret because the separate clients didn't know of each other's projects. "Alarmingly, it suggested that the elements that had once made the city would now cease to work if they got too close together," Koolhaas writes. Instead, both the downtown towers and the "perimeter centers"—the oxymoronic term for the Edge City mall-office complexes—sit isolated in their moats of parking, sporadically bordered by ornamental trees, oriented only to the highway.

The formulaic, hermetic, and ever-new aspects of such market-driven disurbanism fit neatly into Augé's definition of non-place. In fact, much in *Atlanta* reinforces his thesis. Bernadó's opening photograph of a McDonald's parking lot with its assortment of familiar icons sets the tone: the golden arches, American flag, trimmed landscaping, and utility poles could be absolutely anywhere. It is a prototypical non-place. The sole human figure in the photograph stands at an outdoor phone booth, with his back to the viewer. Above his head, in the distance, a highway sign points to Atlanta, the only clue as to where you are. The lack of relation between the physical structure of the city and the events that occur within it comes up repeatedly throughout the book. The photographs especially delight in displaying incongruity. Many of the texts, however, warn readers not to judge the city on appearances alone. Richard Dagenhart writes,

"In the new city of highways, parking lots, bridges, paths, and malls, relationships among the fragments are formed by circumstances, not formal or predetermined structures." Similarly, Koolhaas observes Atlanta's "intensity without physical density," and Randal Roark notes, "The city simply cannot be understood formally or architecturally and its true vitality is not revealed in what is physically visible."

But, what is this invisible intensity that allows for vitality without spatial order? Is it the thrill of mobility? Is it the constant change and flux in the environment that provide a sense of infinite possibility, infinite identities? Such an interpretation is consistent with the antihumanist identification of physical order with constraint, and the lack of physical order with individual freedom. This association, however, runs the risk of mistaking individual freedom for the free market. The invisible intensity propelling Atlanta is unconstrained capital. The only freedom being enjoyed is that of the architects. Koolhaas writes, "Working on new urban configurations, they have discovered a vast new realm of potential and freedom—to go rigorously with the flow." As it has learned to do so well, capitalism in Atlanta presents itself as offering choices and change, opportunities and freedom (and even difference, if only at the superficial level of fashion). While Atlanta may lack physical order, it is thoroughly embedded in the order of the postindustrial economy, under all the constraints and inequities that sustain such a system.

Ironically, both *Non-Places* and *Atlanta* reveal how easily the individualism of capitalism and the individualism of antihumanism can become compounded. By emphasizing concepts of difference and the inherently fragmented and multiple nature of identity, much of contemporary critical theory has undercut the possibilities for shared agendas. As Chantal Mouffe has articulated in her explorations of radical democracy, it is perhaps through the recognition of the nonshifting ground on which we stand, the places we share, that we can conceptualize our identities as individuals and as citizens in a way that does not sacrifice one to the other.[5] This is the challenge, as much for critical social theorists as for designers and analysts of places. While critical social theorists (such as Edward W. Soja) have begun to address issues of spatiality and the reproduction of uneven development, the conditions of places and non-places still need to be examined rigorously, so as to avoid further cases of mistaken identity.[6] ∎

Notes

1   See Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition Postmoderne: Rapport sur le Savoir* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1979).

2   Kenneth Frampton, "The Owl of Minerva," lecture given at the ACSA European Conference, Copenhagen, 1996.

3   This is the early, more critical version of Koolhaas's essay, which he reworked for publication in his book *Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1996).

4   Joel Garreau, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

5   Chantal Mouffe, "Democratic Politics and the Question of Identity," in John Rajchman, ed., *The Identity in Question* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 34.

6   Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989).