

What is Our Sense of Place in the Time of the Pandemic?

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“Place is the most fundamental form of embodied experience – the site of a powerful fusion of self, space and time (Feld and Basso 1996: 9).”

In the last year and a half, since the pandemic struck, our places have radically changed from whence we conduct business, teach, and socialize with others. Most of us have been zoom-bound in our homes, affecting how we interact with others in business negotiations, teaching students, classroom materials, and even socializing. How has our displacement in moving from live classrooms, boardrooms, and conference rooms to home screen interactions on Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, and other video-communication platforms affected our relations with students and business clients through changed notions of place? This change of place, moreover, was not just a one-off week of distance, as we might experience traveling to remote locations but occurred over an extended time of 18 months. I’ve since learned about the profound effects of place on interactions of perception, thought and emotions, and the ways it influences how we relate, perform, engage, and succeed in our social relations with others.

I reflect in this brief essay on the importance of place in my life as an anthropologist who both teaches in a business school and works as a

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consultant on client-based projects. I consider the occasions of student-class interactions on zoom and a consulting project I was recently involved in for an international beverage client. The issues I explore are: How have our perceptions and sense of self modified our thoughts in these settings – what is lost and what is gained. How do we create a sense of ‘togetherness’ in the different places we occupy? What happens to our sense of presence when cues of context are absent, or controlled by select zoom images or home places? Do places have a hold on us, or give back in some way?

Moving from in-place to online: what is gained and what is lost?

From a business perspective, what did we get when we left in-person, face to face meetings and migrated to online meetings, classrooms, and friendships? What carried on over the past 18 months on zoom reflected the ways we were creatively forced to renew intimacy and social relations in zoom space. One great advantage of the virtual format we learned was that it not only kept us engaged with others as we sheltered-in-place, but that it was also more inclusive – everyone on zoom is on equal grounds; everyone has a chance to participate fully. This means including people in disparate locations, time zones and compromised situations, such as people located in different parts of the US and overseas (with no jet lag to contend with) or involving workers who were juggling the care of young children at home, while conducting classes or doing business. Another aspect of inclusivity in screen life is that status distinctions are reduced when people connect virtually. Aspects of the work environment that might otherwise be intimidating are not as apparent, such as a big office or corner office, administrative help and so forth. When workplace hierarchy is not prominently on display, people may feel more comfortable interacting at face value. Such advantages of online placement mean all can join equally. As a professor, I found that student team presentations or individual summary reports were well focused, allowing other students to attend, listen and respond more fully. Online was very effective in this case. We also learned to make direct eye contact, not by looking at the screen image of the person, but by looking directly into the camera. We learned about making appealing backgrounds from bookshelves, selecting background pictures, crafting displays, or choosing virtual backgrounds to project an image. We also found that involving more people equally in meetings can work better online than attending the countless tiresome office meetings, in terms of improving workplace efficiency, effectiveness and energy. These and other issues are now at the center of corporate discussions on rethinking how and when workers should return to work, for what meetings, and so forth.

As our business, political and academic leaders question what

going back to work should look like, they focus on what in-person and place achieves tangibly and intangibly; ultimately, what is the impact on workplace efficiency, effectiveness, camaraderie, and mental health? According to a recent HBR article by Rae Ringel (2021), the effect of serendipitous in-person interactions, of bumping into someone near the coffee maker or dropping by someone's desk, has been replaced in *zoomtime* with highly scheduled online interactions. The notion of bouncing ideas off others in brainstorming sessions still benefits from the dynamics of gathering people together, and can be done well online, she claims. When work goals are relationship-based that involve strengthening or repairing connections among team members, then it is better to conduct conversations live, in-person and hence be physically in the office; whereas activities that are task-based, such as giving reports, training or updates, are best done via zoom. Her focus, though, for determining the quality of how we should meet – online or in-person – is based on objective measures, according to time efficiency constructs. The more interdependent and complex the goal, she claims, the more likely in-person matters. But what Ringel doesn't address are the subjective dimensions of how place affects our personal identity and sense of self in such interactions, beyond tangible measures of work goals, efficiencies, and use of time.

As social scientists, we know that much of human interaction involves non-verbal communication that varies by social setting and social situations. Ray Birdwhistell in the 1950s famously estimated that 65-70 percent of social meaning is given non-verbally. According to anthropologist-linguist Elizabeth Keating (2020), facial expression, gestures, posture, proximity, gait, arm, and body movements are part of the way we communicate. Bodies talking and listening in conversation are highly expressive, but online much of this is subdued or hidden from view in social interaction. Erving Goffman, a sociologist in the 1960s, further discussed focused interactions and non-verbal communication and why they mattered. He said, it is not just the role of words in personal conversations that are important, but rather the role of sight (Goffman 1959). Each of us notices how we are being looked at by others in social interactions, revealing our presentation of self to other people. The small cues to our 'performances' are picked up by people and responded back by head nods, agreements, and so forth. Humans engage each other socially and keep each other in view through reciprocal means. This process allows us to judge and adjust how well the other person is listening to us. Do others confirm, react, disagree, to what we say? Keating (2020) claims, we see and read others in their subtle reactions, and we adjust correspondingly. But we lose this ability to observe others observing us when we don't know where their gaze is directed on our zoom screen.

Another issue with virtual meetings relates directly to conditions

of place and emplacement. Our “Peripheral Participation,” continues Keating (2020), is important and includes the contextual cues of our workplace professional environment - such as where you get coffee, walking the halls, the watercooler or refrigerator, but also the formal board room, offices and so forth. These contextual cues signal what types of conversations should occur, how formal or informal they should be, how long they might last, and what meaning to expect in their context. Accidental encounters and informal meetings are rich in meaning, and a message told in an informal setting means informal rules are being acted out typically by insiders to a firm, which outsiders or new business partners often have a hard time understanding or miss altogether (Ferraro and Briody 2017). Newcomers may learn about informal rules in an organization as they also learn about the spaces and places to create mental maps of who does what and what is said as important in a company. As a newcomer myself for a project with a client, I had to adapt to what the screen portrayed and to what mattered most in the meeting – the slide deck.

In a project for a non-alcoholic beverage, I recently worked on, in-person meetings were suspended, and zoom was instead used for our brainstorming format. In both virtual and in-person situations, we present slides to share our thoughts with others. But different in virtual context is that while the content is there on the slides, you cannot react real-time to non-verbal feedback because you cannot see people. The cues we take, of when to interject thoughts and adjust, are harder to see on zoom. In the meeting, we discussed the relevance of social context to drinking occasion. As the hired anthropologist, I presented ideas of ritual occasions, focusing on Richard Sennett’s (2012) notion that cooperation in rituals improve social relations and helps resolve anxiety by turning people outward in shared symbolic acts – the very point of cooperation itself. Even as the beverage client wanted to know about ways to gain relevance in social drinking occasions, my discussion on drinking rituals, while helpful may have been overly academic at times, making it likely that I lost some attendees. On the zoom screen with the client’s slide deck front-center, I lacked the visibility to read other people’s body language in context, to assess the likeability of my ideas presented and adjust accordingly. Indeed, I was also not presenting ideas in a boardroom which, when standing at the front, automatically asserts authority of the speaker.

Place as created on the screen, in this worksite environment, is thus critical to this sense of mapping out meaning of things said and where they are told, and how much power they hold. So, what does a sense of place actually mean and do for us, as anthropologists studying workplace dynamics?

Anthropological theories of place

“As people fashion places, so, too, do they fashion themselves” (Feld and Basso 1996: 11). This statement is the premise of Feld and Basso’s edited book, in which its authors discuss the reciprocal power of place, and the expressive and experiential ways places are “known, imagined, yearned for, held, remembered, voiced, lived, contested and struggled over” and ultimately tied to identity (ibid). Place, we learn, affects our bodies profoundly such that the lived body (Merleau-Ponty 1962) is the natural subject of perception and requires a physical site that is amenable to the body-subject which extends its own influence back onto the subject. In other words, places have operative intentionality that elicit and respond back to our corporal intentionality of the perceiving subject, what Keith Basso in the introduction calls “interanimation” (Feld and Basso 1996)

Place affects us profoundly. Perception happens with our whole body to affect our knowledge-production, such that our awareness, insight, thought, and the accumulation of observations in places through body movement or taken from successive points of rest, influence our thinking (think of Clifford Geertz famously gaining insights from ‘peering over the shoulders of natives’). Thus, if perception influences movement, and thinking a function of perception, then what we perceive and what we think depends on how we move, affirming Tim Ingold’s observation that “locomotion and cognition are the starting places of perceptual activity” (Ingold 2000: 166). Indeed, the first thing I missed when moving out of the classroom to online zoom classes was the walking and pacing in the front of the classroom and thinking as I spoke – the two are inextricably linked. What happens when we move to zoom panels on the screen, seated in our chairs? Do the screen faces become hyper-focused sites for place and movement, forcing an intimacy of eye contact that normally occurs with fleeting glances and whole-body contact?

“‘Knowledge’ needs to be reconstructed as specifically placial” says philosopher Edward Casey, “as a matter of acquaintance with places, know(ing) them by means of our knowing bodies” (Casey 1996: 45). In this sense, conversations, lectures, discussions, expression of ideas that occur on zoom, on a computer screen, entail ‘understanding’ in and through the characteristics of that place we are in. The screen, clarity of faces, voices heard, constitute an intensity of expression, and such focused intensity also contributes to us tiring quickly, as we know from zoom burn out. Casey (1996: 25) also notes how “places gather” – they gather things (various animate and inanimate entities) and experiences, histories, language and thought. Places have their own power and effect on us. Casey, following Heidegger, discusses the gathering power as having a particular “hold” on what is presented in a given place: “Think only of what it means to go back to a place you know, finding it full of memories and expectations, old things and new things, the familiar and the strange, and much more besides (ibid).” It gathers and orders people,

ideas, objects in particular configurations, holding ‘in’ occupants as well as excluding ‘out’ others, within its boundaries, as well as keeping and holding our thoughts and memories, so that ‘a place’ is generative and re-generative on its own schedule. We might then question, what kind of knowledge is constructed in workplaces and how do work environments give back or take from the worker? How is workplace dwelling different from zoom dwelling? If we acknowledge that places gather, we might consider this generativity in terms of the energy or ‘aura’ of human activities that occur in places, what they give out and how they are likely to give back.

The concept of aura given to objects and places, was first described by Walter Benjamin (1968) in reference to original works of art, and can also apply to people. Benjamin described the concept of aura as acting from a distance from point of origin, as in what affect we might experience through thoughts, recollections, and memories. Rooms can have auras, such as the vacant classrooms we once inhabited, leaving traces of former times, becoming palimpsests of former activities as evident in the pencil scrawling’s left on desktops, traces of blackboard writings, or empty coffee cups in corners. These ‘auras’ not only suggest past human activities but perhaps on our return help recreate the thoughts, perceptions, ideas that once occupied those places. The aura of authenticity, however, states Benjamin, is negated in modernity by the desire to “bring things closer” (1968: 223), which is what zoom does in projecting onto the screen through the computer camera an image reproduction of the person to whom we are speaking. While the reproduced image of a person on a zoom screen might seem to support Benjamin’s (1968: 228) critique, that “the audience’s identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera,” what it more likely affirms, and what is also more strongly associated with place, is that the reproduced image of a person lacks an aura of “presence.” Edward Schieffelin (1985) details the work of actors in live performance as transforming us, not by symbolic means (or virtual representations) but by sensory cues and physical arrangements of space in the setting itself. Context is key in live performance for the influence of the actor to take hold upon us, and is characterized by the “creation of presence,” which “alter(s) moods, social relations, bodily dispositions and states of mind” (Schieffelin 1998: 194). “Every act has an expressive dimension,” he affirms, which “*belongs to the situation*” (1998: 197). Think only of how our situation of place has been altered on zoom space, and how projecting our presence to others through virtual space poses challenges for all of us, save for the best actors.

So, what have we learned in the 18 months of zoom emplacement and a gradual return to our places of work and classrooms? Karl Marx believed humans labor in environments (or places) in order to change them – producing things to consume, and consuming things to get ideas of

what then to produce. But what this activity also speaks to is the inter-dynamic of sense of place that works upon us. Place I believe is the generative blend for the collection, as well as the recollection of all that occurs in the lives of human beings, it's an event for the trajectories of inanimate things and social relations of people that animate them. Its power consists in coalescing these lives and things, each with its own space and time, into an arena of common engagement. In this sense, place is always active, animate, more as an event than things for which we collect or continually must discover and rediscover to invent new forms of knowledge and understanding that are activated by place. I believe we are transformed by the work we do and by the relations in which we are engaged in the places we work, such that we don't necessarily change the world or place by our actions as much as "we play a part from within the world's transformation of itself" (Ingold 2011: 6). In the places of our offices, classrooms, boardrooms and zoom rooms, we are perpetually making and remaking ourselves, coming into being in relations of place and social interactions with others. The ideas, personas, feelings, memories and so forth, that arise within the currents of these activities give active places the meanings we create.

We've also learned that places can be non-stable locations, situated apart from non-traditional ideas of dwelling and stationary sites. Anthropologists claim that movement, travel, and the spread of non-places are now part of modern life (Auge 1995, Rapport and Overing 2000). Indeed, Rapport and Overing posit, "The measure of modern life is of movement, networks, and situations of interaction, taking place on a global stage and much in terms of 'non-places'" (2000: 293). James Weiner writes about his research on Italian surnames in Southern Italy communities; identities formed through surnames that arose from countless interactions and movements of ancient communities, from "migrations of Phoenicians, Carthaginians, and Albanians," dating back to the eighth century, B.C. (Weiner 2002: 25). Travel and mobility are also central to Southern Lao people's belief in spirits – such as recognized in the *puutaa* spirit, which is as much transitory as it is local, not connecting to a single territory, but revealing an energy that is flowing and permeable, drawing in kin from distant places and time periods (High 2006: 259). So, if place and identity are not restricted to fixed localities of dwelling as Heidegger posited, but rather include, "instability and ethos as a property of social life" (Appadurai 1995: 207), then we can take senses of place as those activities created by individuals or groups of people reuniting in the same place at the same time, over periods of time, as, for instance, through scheduled class times of zoom meetings.

Finally, what I've learned over the past year is that people located in a place do not necessarily create connections with that place, such that dwelling in a place, "will always involve the deploying of an array of capacities of some sort" (Corsin Jimenez 2003: 149). As Hirsh (2018)

notes in his encyclopedic entry, “place is not out there but is a capacity of social relations; it is what people do, not where they are.” Place and identity are thus activities created and recreated, continually emergent in the social relations and goals of what people hope to achieve.

Even though zoom dominated our lives over the last 18 months and it’s good to get back to physical classrooms, at least for me, thinking about my sense of place and identity was integral to the people I met and interacted with, online and off. Understanding that a sense of place is vital to who we are but is also an activity and practice that ultimately people create and sustain through their efforts, relations, and capacities, reassures us that our sense of place can be created, irrespective of where place is actually located.

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