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On Finding Ourselves: Theology, Place, and Human Flourishing

Elaine Graham

[A]Topographical Humanity

It is interesting to note that Marshall Berman's famous aphorism about the relentless change of modernity was made in response to the redevelopment of his old neighborhood in New York under the modernist planning of Robert Moses. As familiar streets were redeveloped to make way for urban freeways, Berman observed, "I felt a grief that, I can see now, is endemic to modern life . . . All that is solid melts into air."[1] Berman was quoting from Marx and Engels's observation in *The Communist Manifesto* that the rise of the bourgeoisie was ushering in a new world order of capitalist social relations bent on dislodging older hierarchies and traditions in the name of remorseless change.[2] From his own experience, Berman was noting the very same tendency of modernity to sweep away all feelings of belonging, memory, or value in the face of efficiency and function. Berman's grief is for the loss of more than his physical bearings.

This chapter is about being "lost" and "found," and of the significance of space and place for "finding ourselves"—not just on a grid reference, but as fully human. Tim Gorringe's groundbreaking work on culture and the built environment will inform some of my reflection on this, and in particular his understanding of human nature, and human cultural practice, as a dialectic of the material and the metaphysical. As he argued in his book *Furthering Humanity*, culture "is what we make of the world, materially, intellectually and spiritually . . . In constructing the world materially we interpret it, set values on it."[3]

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[1] Berman, *All That Is Solid*, 295.
[2] Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, 83.
[3] Gorringe, *Furthering Humanity*, 5.

That is both an elegant summary and affirmation of human creativity—one that for

Tim is grounded in the nature of the triune God—and an important synthesis of the worlds of

material culture, technology, and the built environment with those of language, story,

theorizing, and religion as forms of symbolic cultural practice. For some theologians, such a

coupling of "immanence" and "transcendence" speaks powerfully of humanity made in the

image of God, since the facility for self-transcendence reflects the transcendence of God.[4]

Tim's work has also been influenced by Henri Lefebvre in taking the "spatial turn" in

social theory,[5] whereby place and space are not neutral phenomena but describe the

interpretative process by which humans invest meaning in their inhabitation of concrete

space. As Tim notes, "To be alive is to write contemporary meanings into our environment."[6]

This is an account of what I might term "topographical humanity." The philosopher Jeff

Malpas has argued for an understanding of philosophy as "topographical," meaning that to be

human is to inhabit place and to reflect on experience in a reflexive and dialectical fashion.

"Finding place is thus a matter of *finding ourselves*, and to find ourselves we need first to

rethink the question of the nature and significance of place."[7] Space, place, and accounts of

human flourishing are closely intertwined in the work of many contemporary social theorists,

and it is my intention to consider some of them in order to answer further the question of

where—and how—humanity is understood to find authentic being, especially in the context

of urban living.

In his work on urban culture and the built environment, Tim is part of a broader

movement in contemporary social theory, geography, urban studies, and theology that reflects

what is often known as "the spatial turn."[8] Lefebvre's idea of "the right to the city" articulates

a critical theory that fuses experiences of spatial dwelling and political activism as linked

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[4] Hefner, *Technology and Human Becoming*; Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human*.
[5] Gorringe, *Built Environment*, 26–36.
[6] Gorringe, *Built Environment*, 194.
[7] Malpas, "Finding Place," 39.
[8] Soja, "Writing the City Spatially," 50–55.

forms of human self-realization, and represents a powerful exposition of cultural practice—of world-making and meaning-making—as the arena of self-actualization. The right to the city "aims at pointing to the way in which contemporary urban existence must be transformed to make cities for humans."[9] Space is fundamental to the quest to "find ourselves" as fully human subjects. In the face of alienation wrought by the dominance of global capital, can urban communities "find themselves," spatially, politically, and ontologically?

Other writers have focused on the terminology of "home" and "homeplace" as an antidote to what is regarded as the "dislocation" of much urban experience. But here, we move away from a purely historical materialist version towards one that, in secular and theological work alike, looks to elements such as story, tradition, and spirituality as essential ingredients of physical and existential locatedness.

For his part, Tim would argue that we need an account of human flourishing that is rooted in an account of God—and more specifically, God's self-revelation as Trinity. While Lefebvre's account of human flourishing appears to be about autonomy and self-actualization—self-creativity—a theological account would speak not so much about *finding* as *being found*. But it is not only theologians who would say that the vision of the good city needs to be tempered by factors other than human self-interest. How we find ourselves is ultimately about being placed in relationship—both spatial and cosmological—to a range of "Others" across time, culture, and species, but also to a divine horizon.

The Right to the City

[EXT]At the heart of critical urban theory is the critique of the actually existing city and the unmasking of the ways in which its topography has been the result of different economic, political, social and cultural processes that are neither *ad hoc* nor inevitable.[10][/EXT]

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[9] Mendieta, "The City to Come," 444.
[10] Ibid., 442.

Interest in the "right to the city" in contemporary social theory occurs against a suspicion that global economic trends, centered on neoliberal restructuring, are seeing a shift away from social democratic interventions on the part of the local and national State in favor of the growing power of unelected transnational capital. The impact of such global restructuring, it is argued, is felt most acutely in urban contexts, and it is here that the most concerted analysis of the relationship between global capitalism and urban governance has taken place. As the democratic decision-making and fiscal interventionist powers of elected governments are attenuated in favor of the priorities of global capital, attention has turned to urban citizens' ability to influence the political process; and as an antidote to trends of disenfranchisement and marginalization, commentators have focused on Henri Lefebvre's work as a metaphor for the renewal of the democratic process and as a rallying cry for new social movements campaigning for the empowerment of urban communities.

In *The Right to the City* (1968), Lefebvre regarded urbanization as essential for the rise of capitalism. Space does not constitute the "physical arrangements of things," but "spatial patterns of social action and embodied routine."[11] Lefebvre conceived of a threefold configuration of space: perceived space, conceived space, and lived space.[12] "Perceived" space denotes the objective, physical space experienced in daily life; "conceived" space refers to mental constructions or projections of space, often termed "representations of space." "Lived" space is a kind of synthesis of perceived and conceived space, and represents a person's actual experience of space through strategic action that transcends the other two: a *praxis* of reflexivity, inhabitation, and transformation. Lived space (*le vecu*) is that inhabited by *l'homme totale* or the fully self-actualized person. This is the "third space" of imagination and creativity; of self-expression and resistance, encapsulated in "the Moment," akin to a

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[11] Shields, "Henri Lefebvre," 212.
[12] Lefebvre, *Production of Space*.

Romantic expression of a free spirit.[13] Such practices are often the workings of marginalized groups who represent alternative styles of life. It creates a "trialectic" of insurgent relations in which "lived space" defies the conceived space of urban planning and redirects the "perceived space" of banal and overdetermined consciousness.

The production of urban space entails the reproduction of prevailing social relations; material and symbolic interact in producing the conditions of urban space. We can perhaps begin to see how the dialectic of "physical" and "metaphysical" culture begins to emerge in Lefebvre's work, whereby the built environment both embodies and shapes the moral imagination. Social relations are inscribed in space: our imaginaries of space inform social practices that construct the material worlds and topographies that accommodate their inhabitants. Thus, the construction of place, as David Harvey states, is highly dependent on the political economy of capitalism that is "necessarily growth oriented, technologically dynamic, and crisis prone."[14]

Like Lefebvre, Harvey characterizes the quintessential quality of capitalism in its attitude to space and place, in the "tension between place-bound fixity and spatial mobility of capital."[15] Capitalism brings about the total homogenization of space, bringing about a sense of placelessness; but not only do city landscapes all look the same, they are denuded of their specific function or even of any continuity with their own history. There is a kind of "forgetting," too, to the economic impact of globalization, which in its drive to construct mass-produced space, completely destroys any sense of authentic place.[16]

Lefebvre repudiates any notion of democratic decision-making resting in the workings of liberal political economy. Rather, the generating source lies in the movements of capital that engender the economic relations that underlie the production of urban space. It is

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[13] Shields, "Henri Lefebvre."
[14] Harvey, *Justice*, 295.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., 296.

grounded in a particular form of Marxist social analysis in which the appropriation of labor value that generates a surplus sufficient to fuel the capital investment necessary for economic growth is reversed by forms of political agency that are a shorthand for the reclamation of ownership of the means of production. By seizing the "right to the city," citizens have the opportunity to contest the very logic of capitalism. "Since the urban process is a major channel of surplus use, establishing democratic management over its urban deployment constitutes the right to the city."[17]

For Lefebvre, therefore, "the right to the city is like a cry and a demand . . . a transformed and renewed right to urban life."[18] To assert "the right to the city" is to claim an agency in relation to the symbolic definitions and material configurations of urban space in which economic relations are produced and reproduced. For topographical humanity, social exclusion is "to be deprived access to the space in which we can be properly human."[19] By contrast, "the right to the city" envisages an alternative political economy, premised on the restoration or reappropriation of ownership and control of urban space and its surplus value to its citizen-inhabitants. In the process, a challenge to property rights strikes at the heart of capitalist political economy itself.

While Lefebvre's broad sweep of analysis may be inspirational, and has given rise to many campaigns for urban land rights and civic participation, we are still presented with the question of how to construct concrete strategies for getting from "here" to "there."[20] For a politics concerned with spatiality, for example, it is unclear as to the specific location of political decision-making within the right to the city. At what level—local, national, global— does such empowerment take place? Within conventional liberal democracies, the scale of democratic participation is easily identifiable, generally within a hierarchy of electoral

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[17] Harvey, "Right to the City," 37.
[18] Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, 158.
[19] Mendieta, "The City to Come," 446.
[20] McCann, "Space."

territories. But in a complex global society, would inhabitants of the city have the right to determine policies in their place of work as well as residence; or the corporate decision-making of the property developer who owns their local shopping mall; or for migrant populations to exercise their "rights" in the affairs of their country of origin? This may give rise to more flexible, meaningful definitions of democratic participation, in keeping with more mobile, fluid experiences of the "lived space" of global cities, but complicates models of political accountability and the workings of liberal democracy.

It is not easy to conceive of these in the abstract, as critics have noted. There is a tendency to conflate urban inhabitant with the working class, presumably as a result of Lefebvre's broadly Marxist analysis. Since social and economic antagonism, and conflict over urban space rests on the organization of capitalist social relations, then it is the working class who are to be at the vanguard of the challenge to the capitalist city by means of seizure of the right to the city. But in contemporary global cities, characterized by cultural, ethnic, and religious pluralism as well as economic division, is it not also expedient to challenge "the racist city, the patriarchal city, or the heteronormative city, all of which confront inhabitants in their daily lives"?[21] The politics of identity—not only class, but "race," gender, sexual orientation, dis/ability, generation—will complicate the way we think about and practice the right to the city, not least in situations where straightforward assertion of one set of rights may, potentially, conflict with others.

[A]The Rhetoric of Human Flourishing

How should we read "the right to the city": as a detailed strategy for transforming municipal governance, or as a form of rhetoric about human agency as the basis of human flourishing? There are some grounds for going with the latter. For David Harvey, the right to the city is more than a process of political empowerment; it is an expression of how freedom to exercise

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[21] Purcell, "Excavating Lefebvre," 106.

agency in pursuit of self-determination lies at the heart of what makes us fully human. "The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is the right to change ourselves by changing the city."[22]

The humanist thrust of Lefebvre's thought is inescapable. The right to the city is more than a political or legal statement of entitlement, but a manifesto on behalf of human self-determination. It speaks of "substantive moral promises" from the authorities that go beyond specific contractual promises to confer an inherent integrity and dignity to human potential. The right to the city is shorthand for all those social movements "that claim and project spaces in which human [*sic*] can dwell in accordance with the proper upright carriage of dignified human existence."[23]

Lefebvre's Romanticist and existentialist influences may provide further elucidation. The model of human flourishing underpinning the right to the city is one of self-actualization, of the immediacy of purpose and the capacity to act free of external impediment or constraint by unreasonable authority. In his account of urban life, Lefebvre focused on the immediacy of the everyday (*quotidienneté*) that is corroded by the routines and regulations of modernity and bureaucracy. It is a phenomenological reality in which we experience the concentration of goods, information, and people. The urban is thus both the place of the banality and conformity of the everyday and the potential site of transformed social relations. "What we make of the world" is no longer, apparently, of our own making, but someone else's; we are deprived of the material rewards of that labor, but also dispossessed of a moral agency, as creative, self-determining beings. Resistance to this entails capturing moments of illumination, spontaneity, and self-expression.

Much of this would be questioned on theological grounds in terms of its emphasis on human autonomy and perfectibility. Tim would not be convinced by Lefebvre's manifesto's

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[22] Harvey, "Right to the City," 23.
[23] Mendieta, "The City to Come," 445.

dependence upon a model of human self-actualization. The hubris of secular modernist

planning programs rests, he argues, in its belief that perfectibility is possible. Citing Jacques

Ellul, he argues, "Cities represent the hubristic attempt to build an ideal place for full human

development, equilibrium and virtue, the attempt to construct what God wants to construct,

and to put humankind in the centre, in God's place."[24] Put more prosaically, it embodies the

belief that human societies can plan their way to perfection. Citing Reinhold Niebuhr,

Gorringe indicts much of twentieth-century urban planning for the heresy of "salvation by

bricks."[25]

 Similarly, as Clingerman argues, the quest for a *realized* Heaven will always fall

short, as "we will be journeying toward a place which is constructed within our own

limitations."[26] Heaven cannot be constructed by human dwelling and building, although this

is not to withhold from critical and constructive efforts, since it is: "simultaneously an

impossibility and a necessity, a task never completed but always undertaken in the fulfilment

of life . . . Heaven can never be completed by human hands alone. If we think of it to be

brought to fruition, Heaven becomes finite. The finite is a place among other places,

constructed in the light of the changing narrative of residents and visitors: constitutive

building blocks and delimited spaces. To build the infinite, the unthought, and the

indescribable is beyond the human condition, at least when this is left to our own devices."[27]

 Theologizing about place is thus not so much about a process of human self-discovery

but about glimpsing the potential for speaking about God "taking place"[28] amidst the

practicalities and specificities of human place. Building Heaven is a task of seeing and

interpreting—as Clingerman says, "a *practice* of thinking"—that enables us to find our place;

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[24] Gorringe, *Built Environment*, 19.
[25] Gorringe, "Salvation by Bricks."
[26] Clingerman, "Heaven and Earth," 50.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Bergmann, "Making Oneself at Home."

"we build Heaven through the reflexive practice of thinking about how we are emplaced in place, something potentially present in any place wherein we dwell."[29]

In all fairness, then, are we really supposed to see "the right to the city" as a work in progress, "both working slogan and political ideal"?[30] In fact, David Harvey locates Lefebvre's vision within traditions of utopian political thought.[31] Utopia, as simultaneously *outopia* (no-place) and *eutopia* (good place), may not intend to function as a concrete future so much as serve to displace the present, especially when characterized by apathy or fatalism. By implying that all futures are human constructions, such critical social theories function, as Mendieta remarks, to remind us of the constructedness of all social arrangements, however reified they appear, serving as both "seismographs and compasses"[32] for political action.

This does not obviate the need to consider the actual practices and strategies by which greater democratic participation is facilitated; but it does highlight the fact that at the root of such visions is an implicit account of human nature. In asking, "How do we find ourselves?" we are also asking, "What makes us human? What visions of flourishing motivate us?" It is significant to see how many secular writers have turned to a discourse of spirituality as a horizon against which to define the ultimate objectives of urban struggles for justice.

For example, in her work alongside indigenous communities in Australia and Canada, Leonie Sandercock has observed how resistance to the logic of centralized modernist urban planning expressed itself in opposition to that worldview in the name of alternative, traditional "spiritualities" that prized the sacredness of the land, the continuity of memory, and the fusion of material and metaphysical that they found absent in modernism's functionalist and technocratic progressivism. This alternative approach to the management of space manifested itself in the assertion of alternative methods of orientating oneself to the

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[29] Clingerman, "Heaven and Earth," 50.
[30] Harvey, "Right to the City," 40.
[31] Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*.
[32] Mendieta, "The City to Come," 446.

world: via spirits, gods, myths, and symbols. This was their way of "finding themselves," as people attached by the strings of memory and affinity with their environment and their nonhuman neighbors that they found distressingly absent in modernist city planning.

Social movements for indigenous land rights were profoundly subversive of capitalist conventions of land as private property or commodity.[33] The emphasis within modernist urban planning on rationality, progress, and uniformity has sacrificed ways of dwelling and of understanding place as imbued with memory and meaning. Hence her use of the terminology of "desire" and "spirit" as repressed ways of inhabiting lived, rather than regimented or commodified, space.[34] "The work of urban, social, community, environmental, and even land-use planning is fundamentally a work of hope, the work of organizing hope . . . But where does this hope come from, if not from some kind of faith? . . . The faith at the heart of planning is very simple, it's our faith in humanity, in ourselves as *social* beings, in the presence of the human spirit and the possibility of realizing/bringing into being the best of what it means to be human."[35]

While Sandercock maintains a robustly humanist and nontheistic understanding of human nature, it is apparent that "faith"—not necessarily propositional belief but a vision of that which transcends the immediate and the concrete—is a central part of her scheme. Concepts of memory and tradition, similarly, inform many social theorists in their quest to articulate the values that are carried from one generation to the next and that have a significant impact in shaping cultural and political practices.

Sandercock also deploys spatial terminology to describe the connection between memory and the acquisition of full subjectivity. Memory "locates us as part of something bigger than our individual existences, perhaps makes us seem less insignificant, sometimes gives us at least partial answers to questions like 'Who am I?' and 'Why am I like I am?'

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[33] Sandercock, *Towards Cosmopolis*, 17.
[34] Ibid., 4; Gorringe, *Built Environment*, 216–18.
[35] Sandercock, "Spirituality and the Urban Professions."

Memory locates us, as part of a family history, as part of a tribe or community, as a part of city-building and nation-making."[36] The motifs of being heard into speech or becoming visible have been terms used by feminist scholars to describe the passage from object to subject, from hegemony to agency. While feminist theories and theologies have often privileged the language of hearing and seeing more than that of emplacement,[37] the question of how the women's movement has "made space" for women is also relevant here. The division of "public" and "private" has been hugely gendered, and even the concept of the "right to the city" may assume autonomous persons undifferentiated by the markers of gender, dis/ability, race, or age that fails to take account of the ways in which access to public space is a highly contested indicator of social inequality.

In that respect, the Womanist writer bell hooks' evocation of "homeplace" is another interesting fusion of place, meaning, identity, and political agency. hooks describes how in her childhood, "houses belonged to women . . . as places where all that truly mattered in life took place—the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls. There we learned dignity, integrity of being; there we learned to have faith."[38] For hooks it was not the public domain of formal politics, but the domestic environment, that served as a key site for articulating a sense of identity for her generation of African-Americans. Black women were their primary mentors, despite having to work long hours for white people, in gendered, low-status service jobs servicing white people's domestic spaces—cleaning, washing, cooking, and child care—before coming home. Here, a different dynamic pertained: not a place of enforced servitude but a mustering of the virtues of

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[36] Sandercock, *Towards Cosmopolis*, 207.
[37] "Emplacement" echoes Ricoeur's idea of "emplotment," which relates to the way narrative provides a structure to the various components of a story; emplacement describes the mediation between Lefebvre's trialectic of perceived, conceived, and lived space whereby we construct an account of "our place in place." Clingerman, "Interpreting Heaven and Earth," 47.
[38] hooks, *Yearning*, 41–42; see also McKittrick, "bell hooks."

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hospitality and nurture in order to create "spaces of care and nurturance in the face of the brutal harsh reality of racist oppression, of sexist domination."[39]

This was both a space protected from the pressures of racism, capitalist relations, and derogation of human dignity, but also a sanctuary for the revitalization of alternative visions and practices of citizenship. The domestic sphere, often an ambivalent space for women, is reconceived as what in Lefebvre's terms might be a "third space," of relative freedom to carve out new ways of living, as a space of limited but significant empowerment for Black women. "Homeplace" was the space in which Black women like hooks' mother could "find herself" and her family, independent of the power of "the white supremacist culture of domination to completely shape and control her psyche and her familial relationships."[40] In roles that appropriated and redirected the demarcations of gender and race, these Black women subverted gendered and racialized expectations about their service role in the economy by making homeplace into a "lived space" "that affirmed our beings, our blackness, our love for one another."[41]

In an era of globalization, social and geographical mobility impacts on our cities as never before: many people are displaced, some as exiles, or in diaspora communities, while others are refugees who have had to leave their homes through persecution or political pressure. It may appear paradoxical, therefore, to see how many writers, including Tim himself,[42] have emphasized the importance of "home" and place in relation to cultural identity. Philip Sheldrake summarizes as follows: "First, 'home' stands for the fact that we persistently need a location where we can pass through the stages of life and become the person we are potentially. Second, we need a place where we can belong to a community. Third, we need a place that offers a fruitful relationship with the natural elements, with plants

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[39] hooks, *Yearning*, 42.
[40] Ibid., 46.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Gorringe, "Shape of the Human Home."

and animals and with the rhythms of the seasons. Finally, we need a place that offers access to the sacred . . . —perhaps, crucially, relates us to *life itself as sacred*."[43] "Home" is the difference between surviving and dwelling, therefore; and human houses and settlements are designed not only to provide basic shelter and to meet biological needs but to embody in microcosm a more expansive mapping of the cosmos and humanity's place in it.[44]

Martin Heidegger believed that the purpose of architecture was to provide places of "dwelling" and that this was closely related to the process of finding our place. In an essay titled "Dwelling, Building, Thinking," he speculates on the role of architecture in society.[45] For him, authentic living is premised on the ability to "indwell" one's surroundings, to build in such a way as to foster a harmonious relationship with the rest of creation—the so-called fourfold, which are, according to Heidegger, the earth, the sky, the gods, and our own mortality.[46] Heidegger's classic picture was of the cottage in the Black Forest, designed and located in such a way as to integrate completely with the surrounding environment, and thus expressing its connections to "earth and heaven, divinities and mortals" in the way it combined physical shelter from harsh weather with a place for spiritual dimensions and the memory of the cycles of birth, life, and death that have taken place within its walls.[47] To dwell certainly means a physical locatedness; but it also implies an authentic sense of identity that entails establishing harmony with one's surroundings, an awareness of the interconnectedness of sky, earth, and mortals.

As I have noted elsewhere, Heidegger's comments seem to me to be helpful if we want to put together a practical theology of how to position ourselves in terms of ethical cultural practice.[48] As Young and others—including the theologian Sigurd Bergmann—have

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[43] Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred*, 10.
[44] Gorringe, *Built Environment*, 83–86.
[45] Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking."
[46] Young, "The Fourfold."
[47] Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*; see also Gorringe, *Built Environment*, 84–85.
[48] Graham, "Being, Making and Imagining."

noted, this relationship to, between, and within the fourfold is in essence a spatial one: it is about "knowing our place," in terms of humanity configuring its activities of world-building against the horizons or parameters of infinity, transcendence, and nature.[49] To return to Tim's lucid summary of culture as the synthesis of material and metaphysical: to be authentically human rests in this unique propensity to build and inhabit "worlds" of material objects and those of the imagination. How can the process of reflection be directed towards informing activities of building that foster the practices of dwelling justly and authentically?

Movements such as Lefebvre's "right to the city" and the evocation of the power of the human imagination to see beyond the immediate and the tangible toward a new world encapsulates the conviction that humanity's capacity to determine its own destiny is not simply a program for political change or urban insurgency. They are deeply moral statements about what it means to be human. Building the good city entails thinking *and* acting differently—against the flow of ideological versions, against the corporate vested interests, in the direction of realizing the practices of participation and reappropriation.

The urban geographer Doreen Massey observed that identity is articulated "not as a claim to a place but as the acknowledgement of the responsibilities that inhere in *being* placed."[50] Whether an explicitly theistic perspective is identified, the business of "finding our place" implies that tradition, memory, and relationships to a range of Others, and not simply the self-actualization of human autonomy, is crucial for human flourishing. "Finding our place" entails more than the basics of subsistence but entails a fundamental way of thinking about what it means to be human and to imagine the conditions conducive for human flourishing. It is also, crucially, about belonging and being at home: matters of physical habitat but, crucially, also about being embedded in more comprehensive webs of meaning, memory, and significance.

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[49] Young, "The Fourfold"; Bergmann, "Making Oneself at Home."
[50] Massey, *World City*, 216.

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