Spirit of Place and Sense of Place in Virtual Realities

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Abstract

About forty years ago, when print media were still in their ascendancy, Marshall McLuhan argued that all media are extensions of the senses and that the rational view of the world associated with print is being replaced by a world-view associated with electronic media that stresses feelings and emotions (McLuhan, 1964). In 2003 researchers from the School of Information Management Sciences at Berkeley estimated that five exabytes (five billion gigabytes) of information had been generated in the previous year, equivalent to 37,000 times the holdings of the Library of Congress and that 92.00% of this was on magnetic media, mostly hard disks, while only 0.01% was in print (http://www.sims.berkeley.edu, 2003). This SIMS estimate could be wrong by several orders of magnitude and it would still be clear that the era of the printed word is waning rapidly. We are well-advised to pay attention to McLuhan's suggestion that electronic media change how we think and how we feel.

Sense of place and virtual reality are both inextricably caught up in this cultural-technological upheaval. I have written about the concept of 'place' from a phenomenological perspective for many years and have achieved a reasonable understanding of its subtleties, but I have a limited knowledge of digital virtual reality and its technical attributes. Nevertheless, it seems to me that a mutual interaction is at work between what might be called 'real' place and virtual places, that digital virtual reality shares characteristics with other electronic media and that our experiences of real places are being changed those same media. This essay explores these issues particularly from the perspective of the distinction between spirit of place and sense of place.

Keywords: Sense of place, spirit of place, geography, virtual reality, authenticity.

Place and Existence

In his *Discourse on Method* Descartes brought into doubt everything except thought itself and concluded that thinking was the essence of existence. Modern concepts of objectivity have followed from his theoretical separation of mind from matter and body. Yet Descartes notes early in the *Discourse* (1967, Discourse 2) that he began his meditations in Germany and specifically in a room heated by an enclosed stove. Everything, even pure thought, has to happen somewhere, in a place. No matter how much we might like to ignore it, the fact is that existence is place-bound. It can also be said that place is existence-bound, an expression of intense human interaction with the world.

A life without places is as unimaginable as a life without other people. We all were born, live and will die in towns, neighborhoods, villages or cities that have names and which are filled with memories, associations and meanings. Places are so completely taken for granted that they need

no definition. They are the complex, obvious contexts of daily life, filled with buildings, cars, relatives, plants, smells, sounds, friends, strangers, obligations and possibilities.

This complex everydayness makes an abstract analysis of the concept of place unproductive because it will inevitably assume away the complexities. However, a phenomenological exploration that proceeds from the manifold ways places are experienced is helpful. This discloses at least three interwoven elements of place, each irreducible to the others. There is a physical setting or landscape of buildings, streets, hills, rivers and other features. Secondly, there are the activities that occur within this physical setting, such as shopping, working in offices, manufacturing, gardening, jogging and the daily routines of commuting. Thirdly, places are territories of meanings, meanings that arise from the experiences of living, working or visiting somewhere, appreciating its architecture, being familiar with its routines, knowing its people and having responsibilities towards it. At their most intense these meanings involve a sense of being someone who belongs to this specific place and whose own identity is irrevocably tied to its landscapes and activities.

The depth of the meanings that places have for us are informed both by the qualities of their settings, which I will refer to as spirit or identity of place and by our sense of place, or ability to appreciate those qualities. In everyday experience spirit and sense of place are inextricably intertwined, but it is helpful to distinguish them so that their relevance for virtual places can be made clear.

Spirit of Place

The term 'spirit of place' is a translation of the Latin genius loci. For the Romans, as for many other cultures, the world was a sacred space occupied by a pantheon of gods and spirits. Every forest grove, mountain, river, village and town was the home of its own spirit that gave identity to that place by its presence and its actions. With the progress of civilization the gods of places have lost most of their powers, so the expression 'spirit of place' now has a mostly secular meaning that refers to the distinctive identity of somewhere.

Spirit of place mostly has to do with natural landmarks or remarkable built forms. Thus Venice and within it St Mark's piazza, have a powerful spirit of place; so do Lower Manhattan, most of the old towns of Provence, the Rocky Mountains and Machu Picchu. A place with distinctive spirit or identity is attractive – literally so, because it often attracts artists and tourists - though the reasons for attractiveness seems to be impossible to pin down. The architect Christopher Alexander (1979) systematically tried to do just this. He considered things such as scale, the use of local building materials, the shapes of spaces, color, picturesqueness, order and harmony, but concluded that while these are all important, none is essential. So he chose to use the enigmatic term "the quality without a name" to characterize places that we recognize as attractive and distinctive but can't say exactly why. He also argued that the ability to create this elusive quality had been pushed aside by the rational and placeless processes of modernism.

Spirit of place is both an inherent and an emergent property. This is to say that while it seems to lie within landforms and built forms, it also arises incrementally through the accumulation of physical changes and associations that come from somewhere being lived in for a long time. It is not immutable. Prior to the 17th century the European Alps were considered hideously ugly and sensitive travelers closed their carriage curtains to avoid seeing them. And even the blandest suburban subdivision will in time develop a distinct identity, at least for its residents. Only

infrequently and in remarkable instances does spirit of place seem to be a product of deliberate design – the Taj Mahal, a Capability Brown landscape garden, or Frank Lloyd Wright's *Falling Water* might be rare examples. More commonly, a designer concerned with spirit of place might aim to create layouts and a built environment that will encourage its emergence, in other words to set the scene for its development.

Sense of Place

The term 'spirit of place' is a rather awkward and unfamiliar expression. I have used it because 'sense of place' is, confusingly, often used to refer to precisely what I have just described as the spirit of place. I think 'sense of place' is better reserved to refer to the ability to grasp and appreciate the distinctive qualities of places. There is a strong connection between the two – thus somewhere with a powerful spirit of place will help to engender a strong sense of place and a community with a strong sense of place is more likely to effect changes that will create a remarkable spirit of place. Nevertheless, the distinction between the two terms is, I think, useful for understanding and designing places both virtual and real.

Sense of place is synaesthetic. It combines sight, hearing, smell, movement, touch, memory, imagination and anticipation. It is a faculty that varies widely between individuals. Some are not very interested in the world around them and devote themselves to matters such as fashion or economics; places for them are little more than the incidental backgrounds to other concerns and their sense of place is weak. By comparison, those who attend closely to the character and diversity of the places they encounter and this includes most geographers, have a well-developed sense of place. It may be in part instinctive but I believe sense of place can also be learned and developed through careful observation and openness to and appreciation of the differences between places. And it is a faculty that can be widely shared throughout a community, a shared sense of local history and geography that manifests itself in a combination of pride and commitment to place improvement. Short of some yet-to-be discovered process of social engineering, sense of place cannot be designed.

Electronic Media and Sense of Place

Sense of place is, at least in part, dependent on cultural context. It was, for example, of little interest for architects and planners during the modernist period of the 20th century. It is also dependent on the prevailing medium of communication. There is nothing especially mysterious about this. Communications involve the movement of goods, people and ideas from place to place. They are, McLuhan (1964) proposed, extensions of the senses because they overcome constraints of bodily space and time.

Until about two hundred years ago the vast majority of people lived their whole life in one place and must have developed a deep connection with it, either one of belonging or possibly one of being hopelessly trapped. In the early 21st century, with motor vehicles, air travel and the internet, we move around the world faster and further than any previous generation. Our sense of place has to be very different from that of our predecessors. I think that many of us have traded the previously deep but narrow sense of place for a broader but shallower sense of many places. This is not necessarily a bad thing. An intense and deep sense of place can all to easily contribute to parochialism, the exclusion of strangers and at its most poisoned to xenophobia and ethnic cleansing. Our lives are more cosmopolitan than those of our ancestors, our sense of place may be less intense but it is also much better informed and more open to differences.

There is more than this to the impact of communications on places and sense of place. McLuhan's key argument is that each medium of communication not only carries people or ideas, but also transforms the cultural environment of which it is part. The printed word created an environment in which linear logic and reason flourished and could be widely disseminated. This logic included a detached approach to place-making, clearly expressed in the remark of Descartes that old towns, by which he meant medieval places, were "badly proportioned in comparison with those orderly towns that some engineer designs at will upon some plain…" (Descartes, Discourse 2). This sort of abstract placelessness reached its zenith in the international architecture and urban renewal of the 1950s and 1960s that aimed to undo previous place diversity.

Over the last half century this attack on diversity has been reversed at the same time that electronic media have undermined the authority of the printed word. Electronic media carry information and our extended senses around the globe in a few seconds and then turn them back in on themselves, collapsing time and space and creating a global village in which everything, regardless of how remote and exotic it may have been, now seems somehow familiar and immediate. McLuhan's argument is that as the environment created by media of communication changes, so perceptions and ways of thinking are changed and though the electronic technologies that make the global village possible are based on rigorous logic, they nevertheless engage our feelings and emotions. We live in an age when feelings are in the foreground and reason is in the background.

Even if you find this argument spurious, it is certainly the case that coincident with the recent growth in use of electronic media there has been a huge cultural or post-modern shift that has affected art, literature, philosophy, science, geography, architecture and town planning. In all of these there has been a move away from the objective, rationalist perspective that seeks a uniform account of the world, to a view that acknowledges the validity of many different perspectives.

In terms of place this shift is manifest in the rejection of modernist strategies, such as those for urban renewal that aimed to replace everything old with something new and a reawakening of commitments to locality and the qualities that make places diverse. Consider the world-wide movement to protect heritage, a movement didn't exist before the 1960s, villages in Italy and France that fifty years ago had been almost deserted have been reoccupied because of their strong place identities and even the resorts in Las Vegas have been redesigned to reproduce qualities of Venice, New York, Paris and Egypt. A sense of place informed by electronic media involves an acknowledgment of geographical diversity.

This is no simple reversion to the diversity of the pre-modern world when geographical constraints of distance and transportation meant that most lives were lived in a narrow area and the only option was to use local building materials. The spirits of places generated in that context and now so much admired, were mostly a consequence of technological and economic limitations. In contrast, electronic media, along with modern means for transporting building materials, span the globe. The former geographical constraints have been almost completely transcended, glass and steel reveal nothing of their place of origin and Carrara marble is used everywhere. The modernist reaction to this was a placeless one - develop designs that worked anywhere. Postmodernity has largely dismissed this approach and celebrates diversity. The electronic age presents a deep paradox for place design – electronic and modern communications enhance appreciation of distinctiveness yet simultaneously undermine the factors that have always been instrumental in creating distinctive places.

The Ability to Design Anything and Virtual Places

This paradox is captured by Bruce Mau in his book/exhibition/web site called *Massive Change* (2004), in which he raises the god-like question "Now that we can do anything, what will we do?" Mau offers a manifesto for the power and freedom of design in the new real world, but his question is equally appropriate for the designers of virtual places. He envisions elegant, sustainable designs for almost everything and this may well be possible for new products intended to meet specific needs because those very needs provide constraints – in other words forms follow function. However, function is the aspect of place that is most effectively dealt with using the modernist approaches that have lost acceptability. Freedom of choice in place design seems to lead easily to inauthenticity and the reproduction of simulacra of the most popular place identities from around the world. Thus there are Bavarian developments in Brazil, subdivisions of French chateaus in Malaysia and Italian hill-towns masquerading as shopping malls in Arizona. Identities of new residential and retail developments are often invented by focus groups and presumably the only constraint is that the place theme is sufficiently familiar to be marketable and to make a profit.

In virtual worlds, including those of novels and movies, there is even greater freedom of choice. Not only are there no pre-given heritage and local traditions, there are also no planning bureaucracies, no NIMBY neighbors, no need for sustainability, no budget and no need to make profit. Theoretically, the identities of virtual places depend only on the whims of their designers and they can be as exotic as imagination allows. In practice this is not the case because imagined places have to bear resemblances to real places if they are to be comprehensible. Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1974) describes impossible settings, but it is nevertheless sufficiently about the forms and landscapes of cities, with which we are all more or less familiar, for his strange cities to acquire substance in our imaginations. Indeed this familiarity has permitted the philosopher Bruno Latour (2004) to create a web site *Paris: Invisible City* that extends Calvino's ideas to an entirely real context.

In novels, as in paintings and movies, generations of writers and artists have worked out conventions for presenting imagined realities that make sense to their audience. The limits of those conventions are often pushed of course, in the way that Calvino does, but these experiments are only possible because they relate to familiar practices. Digital reality is, however, such a recent medium that conventions for presenting virtual places are still being worked out. The fantastic virtual worlds of massively multi-player on-line games that ignore laws of physics, ecology and society can perhaps be regarded as experiments to find conventions of representation.

Electronic media and especially virtual realities, differ from print media because of the manner in which they engage the senses. Novels, like paintings, involve mainly sight and imagination; the reader is imaginatively engaged yet sensually detached. In digital virtual worlds one is both sensually and imaginatively immersed. This raises two issues. One follows from McLuhan's argument that electronic media create a different environment for thinking and perceiving; it is that methods for designing and presenting places developed for other media may have limited relevance. The second is the concern that digital worlds might have such presence that they are experienced as being indistinguishable from reality. I can well imagine that this might be seen as a goal for design but it is actually pointless – I am reminded of the fable about the prince who wanted a map of his kingdom so accurate that it recorded every detail and the cartographers

produced a map that exactly covered his kingdom and smothered everything. Virtual realities with a high degree of presence raise profound questions about the distinction between what is real and what is artificial, about the limits of technology and who controls it, about addiction and about which places are to be simulated for what purposes and whose purposes those are. These are not theoretical questions. In the virtual worlds of massively multiplayer on-line games there are markets in virtual property that trade in real money and there are reports that at least one actual murder has been committed because of the theft of a virtual gaming weapon (Li and Xiaoyang, 2005). The border between real and digital virtual worlds is already porous and the designers of virtual places have a responsibility to be alert to the consequences of this.

The substantial challenges for designing virtual places lie between the extremes of pure fantasy and perfect presence. In this broad zone, virtual reality has to find its own identity as a medium of artistic and technical communication, an identity that might eventually bear little resemblance to any other medium. With this in mind, I think it is appropriate to consider what characteristics of real places might be imported into digital virtual worlds and what might comprise authentic places.

Authenticity and the Relevance of Real Places to Virtual Places

Real places are existential phenomena, the meaningful and rather messy contexts of everyday life. This cannot be true for virtual places, which are not at all fundamental to our being and are not even necessary to the functioning of the Web. I find it difficult to conceive that existential feelings of rootedness and belonging to a place are in any way transferable except perhaps as a type of psychosis or addiction accompanying perfect presence. And in its precise, sacred sense *genius loci* cannot be simulated in virtual worlds any more than it can be created in real ones, because humans do not create gods and spirits.

This fundamental difference in existential character is reflected in the currently limited range of virtual places in comparison with real places. This will probably change, but at present the purposes of virtual realities seem to fall into just a few categories. The ones I can identify are: entertainment and games; education; the exchange of information; academic research; and technical training. For some of these it is necessary to reproduce accurately only those aspects of reality that are related to the specific purpose –thus a virtual environment to resolve architectural problems will emphasize built forms, one for flight training will reproduce flight decks and landing strips. Other things can be left out or treated in as outlines in the background.

However, for education, games and research it is important to design what might be called virtual geographical places, those that capture the manifold qualities of the real world. For these it is important to recognize, as I suggested above, that place-making in the real world in this post-modern era is far from easy and descends easily into inauthenticity.

Authenticity is a difficult concept but one that is unavoidable in a discussion of place-making. In its phenomenological and philosophical sense authenticity refers to an attitude toward existence that fully acknowledges human responsibilities and mortality. Authentic places are those that simultaneously reveal and respond to the qualities of spirit of place and reflect the existential realities of being. The more conventional meaning is that something authentic is original, not a fake or copy. So inauthentic places are those that have no relationship to context or offer the pretense that they are somewhere else. The shopping mall in Scottsdale in Arizona that looks like

a fifteenth century Italian hill town might be fun but it is inauthentic. Superficial copying denies authenticity, both in its existential sense and in the sense of originality.

According to this reasoning virtual places cannot be authentic because to be authentic is to be real. In other words, "authenticity" is simply an inappropriate concept to apply to virtual places.

Virtual places can, however, be more or less accurate reproductions of real places and more or less convincing on their own terms. In due course a virtual geography may develop with places that bear little resemblance to anywhere real but are comprehensible and have great presence within the conventions of virtual reality.

Real and Virtual Place-Making

I have suggested that the real post-modern world poses serious difficulties for authentic place-making and perhaps the best that can be done is to develop physical settings that aim to encourage the emergence of different types of activities and meanings as the setting is lived and worked in. Something similar should apply to virtual place-making – establish a foundation or framework that can then be adapted and modified through participation to create a strong spirit of virtual place.

Place-making, whether real and virtual, can take many forms, some quite superficial and some difficult. It is, for example, relatively easy to play the role of a Cartesian engineer and to lay out grids of streets and lots and to fill them in with what Jane Jacobs (1961) described as "desegregated sortings" of land use – a block for industry, a block for retailing, several blocks for residential uses and so on. And it is no great challenge for a developer of suburban subdivisions to follow well-established practices for leveling terrain and laying out curvilinear streets of houses in instant communities with invented identities such as Hunter's Glen or Foxmeadow Pointe. It has proven far more difficult to recreate the qualities that give rise to a spirit of place in its secular sense, that is, somewhere with strong visual identity, filled with activities and capable of fostering rich associations and meanings. This difficulty is precisely why architects and urban designers such as Jan Gehl, Kevin Lynch, Spiro Kostoff, W.H. Whyte and many others have devoted so much attention to trying to work out the properties of good urban form and what makes some streets and public spaces vibrant while others are deserted. Their discussions should be as valuable to the designers of virtual places as they are for the designers of real places.

Indeed, virtual place offers possibilities unavailable to urban designers. Real cities are big, expensive, cumbersome things, difficult and slow to change. They are subject to a plethora of bureaucratic regulation, there are tensions between planners and developers, there is never enough public money and single interest protest groups regularly undermine the public interest. In virtual reality these are complications that can be controlled or introduced selectively. It is far easier to experiment with the design of virtual streets and neighborhoods than with the planning of real cities.

Imagination and Sense of Virtual Place

The description of a place, regardless of whether it is fictional or real and regardless of whether it is in a novel or a computer, requires an act of selection. It is impossible to describe every detail, so authors choose elements of somewhere and rely on a combination of their own powers of representation and the imaginative abilities of their audience to fill in the gaps to create a whole

image of a place. Similarly the design of a virtual place involves an act of selection by the designer and an act of imagination to complete the details. Since virtual places are three-dimensional they offer more information than is possible in a movie or a novel and this might suggest that they need less imaginative input. However, many digital virtual places are interactive, can be explored from different directions and modified by those who encounter them. The exploration and modification of virtual places require an active and creative exercise of imagination. This may be a different sort of imagination from that used in reading novels but it is no less important. Virtual places don't have readers or viewers – they have participants. The original author of a virtual place in some fashion has to anticipate how participation might occur and to provide suitable cues and possibilities for it, though in a fully interactive virtual place, as in a real place, the imaginative involvement of participants will lead to changes that can in no way be anticipated. There are few rules or guidelines for this and the most compelling virtual places might be regarded as continuously changing works of art that reflect the combined imaginations of those who are simultaneously participants and authors.

A sense of virtual place will develop through such participation and engagement and it should not be unlike a sense of real place. It will involve many senses and emotions because it is mediated electronically, it will vary between individuals and it will also have a community expression. A sense of virtual place is, I suspect, an accurate description of the connection that the millions of players of on-line games have with their chosen virtual worlds. If this connection becomes obsessive and it has for some, then this can become dysfunctional. But for those who choose to explore different virtual worlds, a sense of virtual place can be considered a variant of and an addition to the current distributed sense of real place that simultaneously acknowledges geographical diversity and seeks ways to make places with compelling identities.

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