The Appropriation of Space

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In this paper, I study some aspects of urban environment using the concept of non-place introduced by Marc Augé in 1995. I first define the concepts of space, place and non-place. I then explain why nomadism plays an important role in the way that we appropriate urban space. I discuss the role of narrative architects and how they intervene in the politics of space. And I conclude by questioning the supposedly superiority of places over non-places.

Spaces, places and non-places

A place is a meaningful location. According to John Agnew, it has a location (e.g. longitude and latitude), a locale (the material setting for social relations - e.g. walls, ground) and a 'sense of place' (Cresswell, 2004). By sense of place, he means that the place is a space invested with meaning. In a slightly different formulation, Robert D. Sack defines a place as a "phenomenon that brings social and spatial together and in part produces them" (Cresswell, 2004).

The sense of place is an elusive notion. We can however roughly describe it using the three following attributes (Wark, 2007):

- The place's identity, e.g. possibility to name the place.

- The social practices taking place, e.g. praying in a temple, selling in a market, eating in a restaurant.

- Traces of memory, e.g. literature, pictures about the place.

Marc Augé describes a non-place as a space that cannot be defined as relational, historical or concerned with identity (Augé, 1995). Highways and airports are examples of non-places. He goes further and describes how the sense of place is simulated in historic towns, making places and non-places distinct and opposite.

As Marc Augé puts it: "Our towns have been turning into museums (e.g. restored, exposed and floodlit monuments, listed areas, pedestrian precincts) while at the same time bypasses, motorways, high-speed trains and one-way systems have made it unnecessary for us to linger in them".

My argument is that non-places are much more frequent and rooted in human nature than Marc Augé suggests. This has direct consequences on how space is negotiated on a day to day basis. Transmission of identity, history and social practices is fragile. A sense of place relies either on a group of people assuring its continuity or on authoritative power.

Places between sedentism and nomadism

Humans are incredibly adaptive and can accommodate very well either sedentism or nomadism. These two lifestyles are profoundly in us and even though we mostly have a sedentary life, our approach to space remains in many aspects nomadic.

Renting a home is a semi-nomadic configuration, either by choice or for pecuniary reasons. The rent is often concluded without any knowledge of the history and identity of the home. The sense of place is rarely transmitted from the landlord to the tenant, assuming the landlord has any sense of place for his property. Blocks of Victorian houses in London for instance have surely a history, but unheard of by most of its inhabitants. They are furthermore easy to commoditise because of their similar configuration. Only their physical structure influences the social practices of their inhabitants.

One might argue that this physical structure is informed by British tradition and in that sense transmits a persistent sense of place; because it forces inhabitants to manage their space in a certain way. I would however not give a disproportionate importance to this transmission and consider that these houses are mostly non-places, as functional and anonymous as an airport. In many cases, houses are not bequeathed anymore from one generation to the other, and its sense of place is lost.

A difference between these places and non-places though is that inhabitants need to make them their home, and rapidly reinvent a brand new sense of place. The need to feel at home is described at length by Gaston Bachelard. As he points out, this feeling could be reduced to the image of the hermit's hut, the simplest expression of what being at home means (Bachelard, 1957). We are all nomads. We all have this image of the hut in our imagination. We can make nearly every place our home, and move the next day. The sense of space is disposable. It is not an anomaly of modernity, but in human nature.

For a nomad to appropriate a space, it might be faster to deal with a non-place in the first place. It avoids any complicated negotiations with a pre-existing identity. It is not

always the best option and I'm not advocating systematical anonymity. Dealing with a place and its pre-existing identity can also be helpful to invent or reinforce a narrative that the inhabitant can use to give meaning to his or her own life. A place is often the symbol of some support, such as the house from the parents, or the car from the company.

I talked so far about houses, but the same process is observable in many other types of places: working places, places of celebrations, entire neighbourhoods. Doreen Massey says that "each place is the focus of a distinct mixture of wider and more local social relations, an understanding that its character can only be constructed by linking that place to places beyond" (Cresswell, 2004).

A sense of place can be created nearly from scratch by the occupiers, who prefer to treat the space as a non-place. That sense of place might be ephemeral or persistent depending on the intentions of the occupiers; it is their freedom to choose between nomadism and sedentism.

It remains that the overall and much contested trend is towards nomadism. It can be attributed to 'time-space compression', "a term used to describe processes that seem to accelerate the experience of time and reduce the significance of distance" (Harvey, 1989). It is the direct consequence of trains, cars, airlines, television, and the Internet. Information is instantaneous; the world is reduced to an in-flight map. Commuting is the norm and anyone who wants to 'succeed' in life has to move constantly.

Narrative architects

People need non-places that are easy to appropriate. They need them because they might change of location in a couple of years, because they are already too busy managing their identity on the web, or get a sense of authorship on their career. Places imposing a strong narrative are for most of us more appropriate for travels or visits. We are the product of globalization and the free market; legacy is a constraint, tradition is a reduction of choice.

However, non-places are not as blank as they look. Architects, urbanists, politicians, health and safety agencies, cultural institutions, all participate in the design of urban non-places. They are narrative architects, a term borrowed from Henry Jenkins (Nitsche, 2008).

"Childhood is fun and colourful"; "It is nice to go to work every day by bicycle"; "Streets are not to sleep in"; "I live in a place full of history". These statements portray an idyllic life. They form together a narrative of the ideal urban life. Narrative architects design elements in non-places that will evoke these stories. Inhabitants will use these elements to reconstitute and internalize them. The evocative elements are even expected a-priori in an all inclusive package of the modern city lifestyle. Non-places that include these elements tend to sell better.

Let me start with the example of the playground, designers of a playground don't write any story for the children. But they know that the concrete objects they design for the playground will be associated with tales of mountains, castles and exotic adventures. They provide evocative elements that children will use to appropriate a non-place, and transform it into a heterotopia (Foucault, 1967). The concrete objects also provide a substitute for an unfenced environment perceived as not appropriate for children, or requiring an unreasonable amount of surveillance.

Using the same logic, one juts need to put lines on a concrete ground to associate this space with soccer, and significantly alter its use. These evocative elements produce generic senses of place that are quick to internalize and convenient to use.

American kitchens, British bathrooms, Western or Japanese-style living rooms are evocative elements that architect narrators uses to sequence the everyday life of their occupiers. Of course, anyone could imagine a house where they would take their shower in your living room, but most people prefer to stick with scripted homes.

With these evocative elements in place, it is harder to divert from prescribed customer scenarios (to use a marketing term from mass production). But it is possible and people find unusual ways to appropriate their space. "People are able to resist the construction of expectations about practice through place by using places and their established meanings in subversive ways" (Nitsche, 2008).

Politics of space

A sense of place is constantly negotiated and contested within a group. In their willingness to pacify public space, local authorities tend to take its control, and by doing so to erase the need for any dialogue, which prevents any contestation and negotiation of the public space, and de-facto its appropriation.

The best way to put in evidence the relation between places, values and power is to imagine the destruction of a place, or its disappearance from the map. This imaginary threat will allow any observer to name the groups or people who would protest, and the people who would agree with the destruction.

Places are signs of power. Good examples are old churches, once higher than anything else. They now compete not only with cultural centers, town halls and offices, but also with people's digital lives. Spaces do not only compete between one another to grab our attention. They now compete with mobility itself.

"Place is a form of fixed capital which exists in tension with other forms of capital. Political struggle over place often provide opportunities for resistance to the mobile forces at the origin of the time-space compression" (Cresswell, 2004). Green movements such as Tran-

sition Towns (*Transition Towns*, 2006) want to valorise the local for its more sustainable qualities. Local communities want to preserve their neighbourhood and way of living. Slow food restaurants want to fight against fast-food chains. They are all part of a 'militant particularism' movement (Williams, n.d.) that fights a time-space compression often associated with capitalism.

However, militant particularism could also be seen as a reactionary strategy to exclude outsiders. "Sentimentalized recovering of sanitized heritage sites" can marginalize people who are not part of that heritage. It can justify segregation by the "construction of a unproblematic identity" (Doreen Massey). This is what we can witness in gentrification and during projects that intend to 'restore' old districts, houses, 'historic' canals and churches. They 'rehabilitate' a neighbourhood and its identity that former, poorer inhabitants supposedly didn't appreciate enough. "Accompanying this production of sense of history and authenticity is a process of exclusion based on the identification of a threatening other beyond the walls of the town" (Cresswell, 2004).

Conclusion

I have shown how much non-places are useful for the nomads we all are and how easily we can create a disposable sense of place. Non-places are not totally blank however, they feature evocative elements designed by narrative archi-tects. These evocative elements mediate our appropriation of space. Whether or not places are more desirable than non-places is a question of values between nomadism and sedentism. The supposedly superiority of places over non-places is advocated for opposite reasons in progressive and reactionary rhetoric. What is certain however is the increasingly ambivalence of places in a globalized and digitalised world.

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