
On the identity of places

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There are two major reasons for attempting to understand the phenomenon of place. First, it is interesting in its own right as a fundamental expression of man's involvement in the world; and second, improved knowledge of the nature of place can contribute to the maintenance and manipulation of existing places and the creation of new places. The real difficulty lies, however, not in the justification of the study of place, but in the development of adequate concepts and approaches for this. These must be based on the recognition that, as Wagner (1972, p.49) expresses it: "Place, person, time and act form an indivisible unity. To be oneself one has to be somewhere definite, do certain things at appropriate times." Given this fusion of meaning, act, and context, it has sometimes been suggested that generalisations about places cannot be formulated. "Both region and writer, person and place, are unique", declares Hugh Prince (1961, p.22), "and it is in their distinctive qualities that we find their essential character." From this it follows that to capture, comprehend and communicate 'essential character' depends largely on artistic insight and literary ability. Such an approach is well illustrated in the work of many novelists and other artists, for example Ronald Blythe's *Akenfield* (1969), a study of an English village through the verbatim accounts of its inhabitants, or Lawrence Durrell's essays (1969) about the Greek Islands collected under the title *The Spirit of Place*. An alternative method is that of systematic and objective description and analysis in which places are considered only in terms of their general properties, for instance as gap towns, commuting centres, central places or points in isotropic space. In fact neither approach offers much towards an understanding of

places as phenomena of experience: the former is too specific and the latter is too general. What is required is an approach and attendant set of concepts that respond to the unity of 'place, person, and act' and stress the links rather than the division between specific and general features of places.

It is the purpose in this chapter to examine one such set of concepts and methods relating to the notion of 'identity' of place. This examination is based on the recognition that while places and landscapes may be unique in terms of their content they are nevertheless products of common cultural and symbolic elements and processes (Wagner, 1972, p.5). Identity of place is as much a function of intersubjective intentions and experiences as of the appearances of buildings and scenery, and it refers not only to the distinctiveness of individual places but also to the sameness between different places.

The identity of places

The notion of identity is a fundamental one in everyday life. Heidegger (1969, p.26) has written: "Everywhere, wherever and however we are related to beings of every kind, identity makes its claim upon us." Thus we recognise the identities of people, plants, places, and even nations. Possibly because it is so fundamental, identity is a phenomenon that evades simple definition, although some of its main characteristics are apparent. In particular the difference yet relationship between 'identity of' and 'identity with' should be noted. The identity of something refers to a persistent sameness and unity which allows that thing to be differentiated from others.