

# Longing for the Ordinary – the Meaning of Authentic Places in the North-American Metropolis

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## 1 ABSTRACT

Under pressure of advancing technology, rapid growth and globalisation, the Northern-American metropolis changed radically over the last 50 years. The cityscape of American cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Houston represent fascinating processes of urbanisation. They became regional metropolises with extended post-suburban neighbourhoods and dispersed centres (Soja, 1989). Infrastructure in its broadest meaning eroded our orientation on physical presence and the meaning of proximity (Harvey, 1989). This regional urbanism serves an anonymous network society, and it does not include public space as we were used to know it. It resulted in a public realm that lost its scale, not only geographical and in time, but especially in the scale of human interaction (Koolhaas, 1995). Paradoxically – or not? – we see a growing desire for the romantic city, authentic spaces and ordinary places. This manifests itself in all kind of simulations of the past. Feelings of authenticity are tried to be reproduced in contemporary city centres, city extensions and shopping malls. But is that the ordinary space we long for? And what determines a sense of authenticity? Does the contemporary metropolis needs authentic places after all?

Building on the theme of the REAL CORP 2013 conference, this paper explores theoretically and conceptually how the compression of time and space relates to humans desire for authenticity, and the seeming disability of modernist planners in preserving it. The literature review aims to give an oversight of the various concepts of authenticity from a philosophical and conceptual point of view and to outline critiques on the commercialisation of public space in the North-American Metropolis. The review will offer a meaningful contribution to the debate of contemporary city development versus the connotation of authenticity in citizens daily live. This use of theory and philosophy, as basis for debate, is relevant for the originally technocratic-oriented planning discipline. Although it might feel uncomfortable at first, selected writers are beyond doubt constructive in broadening our view on the consequences of modernistic planning regimes concerning the issue of authenticity.

In this review I will outline two perspectives on the concept of authentic place, and two critiques of contemporary placemaking. The two concepts, defined by David Harvey (1996, 2000) and Doreen Massey (1993, 1994) originate (and criticize) the meta-concept of philosopher Martin Heidegger who argued that the construction of that place is one of the existential necessities for people to define themselves in relation to the material world (Heidegger, 1971). David Harvey criticizes Heideggers argument and elaborates on what he calls 'rootedness', a reactionary sense of place. Doreen Massey elaborates further on that, arguing for the redefinition of place as an inclusive and progressive site of social life. Michael Sorkin (1992) was one of the first to critique the heavenly 'disneyfication' of the public realm of the city, describing another layer that is driven by endless consumerism. Finally Sharon Zuking (2009) brings the discussion of authenticity back on Jane Jacobs and develops an argument for the restoration of the city's soul.

## 2 FAREWELL OLD CITY

Now we since the 1960's have witnessed 50 years of modernisation and transformation in the Western metropolis, the question of authenticity slowly seems to come back in. The vast development of infrastructures repeatability speeded up ordinary life and transformed the city into a increasingly generic urban fabric. The implementation of the North-American freeways from the 1950s onwards for instance, radically questioned the concept of distance and the meaning of central places. But also non-tangible infrastructures as the internet changed daily life in the metropolis. It eroded the meaning of place and distance, and by that – discrete and concrete – changed the perception of city space fundamentally. Nowadays people increasingly are longing back to the 'old city'. Profit driven developers have no difficulties in fulfilling this desire for romance. Faked authenticity then manifests itself in all kind of simulations of the past, in cosy stucco apartment blocks, Italian village like shopping malls and city extensions.

### 3 DEFINING SPACE AND PLACE

To put this literature review in the right perspective, first we define the rather vague concepts of space and place. Space is a more abstract concept than place. When we speak of space we tend to think of outer-space or the spaces of pure geometry. Spaces have areas and volumes, places have space between them. The Chinese geographer Yi-Fu Tuan linked space to movement and place to pauses:

*What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value (...) The ideas 'space' and 'place' require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom and threat of space, and vice versa. Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place (Tuan 1977:6).*

### 4 META CONCEPT: SPACE AS THE HUMAN CONSTRUCT

Martin Heidegger can help us understanding the importance of ordinary public spaces. Heidegger argues that a fundamental element in the construction of a place is the existential necessity for people to define themselves in relation to the material world. He contended that human beings originate in an alienated condition and define themselves, among other ways, spatially. The creation of 'place' roots them in the world, their homes and localities becoming biographies of this creation (Heidegger, 1971).

One of the difficulties in clarifying the relation between space and place is, not only that the two are necessarily connected, but that this concept for years tended to be understood only spatially. In such, place is most often treated as either a certain position in space or else as a certain portion of space. This way of understanding place is itself tied to a particular conception of space as identical with physical space, as it is articulated within the system of the physical sciences – articulated in terms of the measurable and the quantifiable. Heidegger comments on the modern concept of space and the way it has come to dominate the idea of place, stating:

*"For us today space is not determined by way of place; rather, all places, as constellations of points, are determined by infinite space that is everywhere homogeneous and nowhere distinctive" (Heidegger 1971:249).*

The concepts of place, and of space, that are at issue for Heidegger cannot be assumed to be identical with any narrowly physical conception, nor can it be assumed that place can be taken as derivative of space, or as identical with spatial location, position, area, or volume. In this respect, place should not be assumed to be identical with the "where" of a thing. Although this is one sense of place, it is not the only or the primary sense – place also refers us to that open, cleared, gathered "region" or "locale" in which we find ourselves along with other persons and things (Cresswell, 2004).

Central to Heidegger's philosophy is the notion of 'dwelling': the basic capacity to achieve a form of spiritual unity between humans and the material world. Through repeated experiences and complex associations, our capacity for dwelling allows us to construct places; to give them meanings that are deepened and qualified over time with a continuous flow of nuances. For Heidegger 'dwelling' was the very essence of existence, the things that makes humans humans. Heidegger used the illustration of a farmhouse in the German Black Forest to make this point:

*"Here the self-sufficiency of the power to let earth and heaven, divinities and mortals enter in simple oneness into things, ordered the house. It places the farm on the wind sheltered slope looking south, among the meadows close to the spring. It gave it the wide overhanging shingle roof whose proper slope bears up under the burden of snow, and which, reaching deepening down, shields the cambers against the storms of the long winter nights. It did not forget the altar corner behind the community table; it made room in this chamber for the hallowed places of childbed and the 'three of the dead' – for that is what they called a coffin there; the Totenbaum – and in this way it designed for the different generations under on the character of their journey through time. A craft which itself is sprung from dwelling, still uses its tools and frames as things, built the farmhouse" (Heidegger 1971: 160).*

Place as dwelling then is a spiritual and philosophical endeavour that unites natural and human worlds. A properly authentic existence to Heidegger is one rooted in place.

## 5 PLACE AS EVENT

### 5.1 Imagined rootedness

David Harvey in his work critiques Heidegger's concept of seeing place-as-dwelling as the 'locale of the truth of being' – the thing that makes humans humans (Harvey, 1996). Harvey points out that Heidegger's thinking was heavily influenced by the time-space compression in the Germany that was becoming a war state. It was this terror that forced Heidegger to withdraw from the world into his Black Forest farmhouse, a situation that for Harvey is hard to relate to:

*“For example, what might the conditions of ‘dwelling’ be in a highly industrialized, modernist and capitalist world? We cannot turn back to the Black Forest farmhouse, but what is it that we might turn to? The issue of authenticity (rootedness) of the experience of place [...] is a difficult one. To begin with... the problem of authenticity is itself peculiarly modern. Only as modern industrialization separates us from the production and we encounter the environment as a finished commodity does it emerge” (Harvey 1996:302).*

Cresswell (2004) argues that it is not possible any more for large numbers of modern dwellers to retreat to farmhouses in the Black Forest or anywhere else. He links Harvey's critique on Heidegger to the contemporary efforts to make places more distinctive and visible and to provide a sense of pride and belonging. As Harvey notes this takes often the form of 'heritage' where a sense of rootedness in the past and in place is provided for the consumption of locals and tourists. Something that we nowadays can easily refer to – for instance the San Diego 'Gas Lamp district' (fig. 1) – an urban area being cleaned up and marketed as a form of heritage. Signposts appear with kitschy 'old' maps and detailed histories. All of this we can relate to as a search for authenticity and rootedness. In his text Harvey refers to the work of Yi-Fu Tuan when he borrows the argument that being rooted in place is a different kind of experience from having and cultivating a sense of place:

*“A truly rooted community may have shrines and monuments, but it is unlikely to have museums and societies for the preservation of the past. The effort to evoke a sense of place and of the past is now often deliberate and conscious” (Harvey 1996:302).*



Fig. 1: San Diego Gas Lamp District – 2012 (by author).

Harvey continues by stating that place is often seen as the locus of collective memory, an argument he shares with others like Christine Boyer (1994). This locus, being a site where identity is created through the construction of memories, linking a group of people into the past.

*“The preservation or construction of a sense of place is then an active moment in the passage from memory to hope, from past to future. And the reconstruction of places can reveal hidden memories that hold out the prospect for different futures” (Harvey 1996:306).*

This construction of imagined places is important to Harvey, he would later dedicate the book *Spaces of Hope* entirely to the theme (Harvey, 2000). Harvey portrays in both of these works place as a deeply ambiguous facet of modern and postmodern life.

On the one hand investments in place can play a role in resisting the global circulation of capital but on the other it is often quite an exclusionary force in the world where groups of people define themselves against threatening others, who are not included in the particular local expression of place.

## 5.2 The sense of place

Doreen Massey's paper 'a global sense of place' (1994) is in many ways a response on Harvey's way of thinking, a response that hinges on a redefinition of place as an inclusive and progressive site of social life (Cresswell, 2004). Her plea is for a new conceptualization of place as open and hybrid – a product of interconnecting flows, of routes rather than roots. This extroverted notion of place calls into question the whole history of place as a centre of meaning connected to a 'rooted' and 'authentic' sense of identity; forever challenged by mobility.

Harvey's critique on Heidegger was already echoed by Doreen Massey in her paper 'power geometry' (Massey, 1993). Although her work has also been important in bringing ideas of place and space to greater prominence in contemporary theory, nevertheless, Massey explicitly criticizes what she takes to be the "Heideggerian view of Space/Place as Being" and raises a variety of objections to such an account (Malpas, 2007), claiming that:

*"There are a number of distinct ways in which the notion of place which is derived from Heidegger is problematical. One is the idea that places have single essential identities. Another is the idea that the identity of place – the sense of place – is constructed out of an introverted, inward-looking history based on delving into the past for internalized origins... Another problem with the conception of place which derives from Heidegger is that it seems to require the drawing of boundaries... [Another aspect of] the Heideggerian approach, and one which from the point of view of the physical sciences now looks out of date, is the strict dichotomization of time and space..." (Massey 1993:64).*

Massey describes a twofold problem with the definition of place as a merely static and rooted reaction to a dynamic and mobile world. First she argues that it may be the case that people do need a sense of place to hold on to – to be 'rooted'. Secondly Massey sees the flow and flows of global movement not necessarily as anxiety provoking. The reactionary sense of place that troubles Harvey is for Massey marked as problematic by at least three interconnected ways of thinking. Being: the idea that places have single, essential identities, the idea that the sense of place is constructed out of an introverted inward-looking history and the conception of place as something that requires the drawing of boundaries (Massey 1994). In her paper Massey describes Kilburn, a neighbourhood of London where she lived for years. Her description is a celebration of diversity and hybridity, an evocative mix of people of multiple ethnicities living and working side by side:

*"While Kilburn may have a character of its own, it is absolutely not a seamless, coherent identity, a single sense of place that everyone shares. It could hardly be less so. [...] Moreover, not only does Kilburn then have many different identities (or its full identity is a complex mix of all these) it is also, looked at in this way, absolutely not introverted. It is [...] impossible even to begin thinking about Kilburn High Road without bringing into play half of the world and a considerable amount of British imperialist history [...]. Imagining in this way provokes in you (or at least in me) a really global sense of place" (Massey 1994:174-175).*

Massey's Kilburn is, in her words, a 'meeting place' where a particular 'constellation of social relations' comes together in place. Her observations of Kilburn draw towards a – what she defines – new extrovert, progressive and global sense of place. This definition of place is marked by:

- (1) Place as process
- (2) Place as defined by the outside
- (3) Place as site of multiple identities and histories
- (4) A uniqueness of place defined by its interactions

Reviewing the outlined perceptions of place by Heidegger, Harvey and Massey it seems important to notice the very local context in which they developed there concepts or to what context they refer. Heidegger uses the complete, romanticised and slightly naive, isolation of the Black Forest farmhouse. David Harvey refers

to Guilford, a place that sees itself under threat from difference and seeks to create clear boundaries to distinguish itself from the threatening outside. Massey's Kilburn on the other hand is a place of radical openness, in this perspective it is not surprising that her considerations are different. Where Harvey sees place as too reactionary, Massey's context allows her to suggest that it is okay to seek identity in place because that identity is never fixed and bounded.

## 6 THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE.

### 6.1 See you in Disneyland

Michael Sorkin's book 'Variations on a Theme Park' (Sorkin, 1992) was one of the most critical contributions with great impact on the discussion on urban renewal at the moment of publishing. In the early 90s he was one of the first to draw a problematic conclusion: in a predominantly suburban America, Disneyland was one of the few places where real urbanity can be experienced on a manner that is not threatening.

A safe place where all the infrastructure is organised well, where everything works and where everything is neat, where reigns an utopian ethos of pleasant living. According to Sorkin it is no wonder that private developers have taken Disneyland as an example for their new projects. Around the world, Disney is the benchmark (Sorkin, 1992).

Sorkin abhors this Disneyfication. The illusion of parochialism and universal happiness for all, based on an almost completely passive way of leisure – a world without work – is his problem. For Sorkin even worse is the lack of freedom of choice, a result of cutting away everything that might disturb people – nonconformity, the aberrant. His most fundamental objection, however, focuses on the lack of democracy, of real citizenship. Sorkin uses television (another popular 90s phenomena in urban critical theory) as a metaphor:

*"[...] the structure of this city is a lot like television. TV's main event is the cut, the elision between broadcast bits, the seamless slide from soap opera to docudrama to a world from our sponsor. The 'design' of television is all about erasing differences among these bits, about asserting equal value for all the elements in the net, so that any of the infinite combinations that the broadcast day produces can make 'sense'. The new city likewise eradicates genuine particularity in favour of a continuous urban field, a conceptual grid of boundless reach" (Sorkin 1992:xii)*

Sorkin argues that what is missing in the city is not just a matter of any particular building or place, rather the spaces in between, the connections that make sense of form. Liberated from its 'centres' and edges – due to advanced infrastructures – and by a new world order bent on a 'single citizenship of consumption' (Sorkin, 1992), the new city threatens an unimagined sameness even as it multiplies the illusory choices of the TV system. Sorkin sets out three characteristics that mark this city, and outline his book. First is the scattering of stable relations to local physical and cultural geography, the loosening of ties to any specific space. Second is the obsession with 'security', both technological and physical. Third is the realm of the city turning into one of simulations, the city as theme park. Universal Studio City Walk functions then as a great example, being the ultimate fusion of being completely isolated – heavenly monitored and an extreme constellation of the fictive.

Comprehensively Sorkin elaborates on the relation that he sees between Disney Land and the garden city, both in organization as in scale. Their location on the urban perimeter, at the intersection of highways and their strict internal order – radiating from a strong centre the parks are thematically zoned. Whereas the ground plane is dedicated to the pedestrian circulation, its perimeters and airspace are the terrain of extensive and expressive transport systems: trains, monorails and aerial gondolas. He sees it as a particular way of urbanism, one that accelerates trends that are everywhere noticeable. According to Sorkin the problems addressed by 'Disneyzone' are quintessentially modern: crime, transportation, waste, the relationship of work and leisure, the transience of populations and the growing hegemony of simulacrum (Sorkin, 1992)

Sorkin argues in extent that like world fairs, theme parks offer 'intensifications of the present, the transformation of the world by an exponential increase in its commodities. And for Sorkin the motion is essential in this experience, movement is ubiquitous and central:

*"Getting there, then, is not half the fun: it's all the fun. At Disneyland one is constantly poised in a condition of becoming, always someplace that is 'like' someplace else. The simulations referent is ever elsewhere, the*

*'authenticity' of the substitution always depends on the knowledge, however faded, of some absent genuine. Disneyland is in perpetual shadow, propelling its visitors to an unvisitable past or future, or to some (inconvenient) geography" (Sorkin 1992:216)*

Sorkin links Disneyland to an existing city. Los Angeles. Where historic themes describe the city's own self-description. The genius of the city resides – according to Sorkin – not simply in dispersal but in juxtaposition. The Disney visitor seeks and delights in the relationship between what he or she finds and its observes back home.

*"In the Disney utopia, we all become involuntary flaneurs and flaneuses, global drifters, holding high our lamps as we look everywhere for an honest image [...] Like television, it is a machine for the continuous transformation of what exists [...] into what doesn't [...]. It's a genetic utopia, where every product is some sort of mutant" (Sorkin 1992:232).*

## **6.2 The death and life of authentic urban places**

What was considered a 'typical', 'authentic', 'original' district was taken over by representatives of the wealthy middle class and everything that initially was so appealing – particularly the mixing of the population and the creative atmosphere – has disappeared. In Amsterdam this process of gentrification occurred for instance in the Jordaan: for long being a typical Amsterdam neighbourhood, but whereas nowadays all 'real Jordanezen' moved to periferal Purmerend or Almere. New York is the biggest offender of them all, the anonymous blogger Brooks of the Lost City blog viciously described Bloomberg's city as:

*"homogeneous, anodyne, whitewashed, suburban, toothless, chain-store-ridden, ordinary, exclusive and terribly, terribly expensive. A town for tourists and the upper 2 %. He took a world-class capital of culture, individuality and independent endeavour and turned it into the smoothest, first-class, gated community Houston ever saw" (Brooks 2010).*

Sharon Zukin in 'Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places' focuses on urban change that manifest in specific neighbourhoods. Building on the argument of Jane Jacobs but in the same time critiquing it (Zukin, 2009). To this end she analyses accurately what has happened in a few famous New York neighbourhoods like Williamsburg, East Village and the area around Union Square, but also a former no-go area as Harlem. Zukin distinct a pattern: ramshackle neighbourhoods get discovered by squatters, artists, immigrants and undergo a metamorphosis. There are then attractive shops with local products, restaurants with exotic foods and there is a dynamic, cosmopolitan atmosphere. The 'authentic neighbourhood' is born.

Jacobs showed a world that was disappearing in the time she wrote about it (Jacobs, 1961). There are no housewives any more who spend all day monitoring the street and talking with the grocer on the corner. Existence is mobile and has become hectic, we have barely the opportunity to deeply root into our neighbourhoods. Zukin argues that authenticity refers to the 'look' and 'feel' of a place, as well as the social connectedness that place inspires:

*"Yearning for authenticity reflects the separation between our experience and of space and our sense of self that is so much part of modern mentalities. Though we think authenticity refers to a neighbourhood's innate qualities, it really expresses our own anxieties about how places changes. The idea of authenticity is important because it connects our individual yearning to root ourselves in a singular time and place to a cosmic grasp of larger social forces that remake our world from many small and often invisible actions" (Zukin 2009:220).*

Zukin shows that cities are subject to the market and therefore sensitive to changes in appearance, taste and fashion. Whether we like it or not, Zukin argues, our preference for designer clothing, healthy food and audiovisual toys dispels vulgar and cheap eats tents and mass stores. Likewise, our desire to live in the large former warehouses ensure that such buildings are restored and made suitable for habitation. But this applies to everything that formerly sat dispelled and disappears. 'Authentic' is then a buzzword, obsolete before you know it.

## **7 REACTIVATING THE ORDINARY**

Recreating a sense of urban vitality means that one does not just introduce 'publicness' as what would be 'places to meet'. As argued before, it requires a deeper understanding of the city. The goal would be to keep working on the locus of the city and one might completely has to rediscover or reactive it. It are the

singularity of residuals from the former city with its civic events, failed attempts and its particular natural setting. All those have an intrinsic order and logic, but require an almost simple way of looking to the city. Turning this understanding into a laboratory, I have been working on a project that reactivates and reconnects urban spaces in Downtown Los Angeles (Beijer, 2013).

Los Angeles downtown's rich diversity of 'theme districts' lacks continuity in the experience of the public realm. Great micro-environments are of a distance from each other that is too far to walk, while downtown at the same time is utterly inconvenient to drive. Empty plots and big parking lots are opportunities for further intensification and when located around interesting zones, public parks and other means of public transport - they can serve as location for monorail stations. Hereby the laboratory is not about the monorail in itself. Building on Los Angeles' rich history of exaggeration, the rendering of this exploration plays in the realm of optimistic utopia.

Instead of homogenising the urban landscape and turning the diversity into an nondescript themepark, the monorail helps to manifest the various identities and characters. Just by being an nondescript generic element itself that only connects great micro spheres. Overlaid histories from 1888 to 2011 (fig. 2) of the historic 'hotspots', show the arguments of this thesis. Attractive and meaningful spaces don't just suddenly appear, most of them are residuals from earlier urban ecologies. Former time frames are mapped (grey tones) on the next phase (purple), questioning the relation between morphology, centrality and infrastructures.

Rendering a future where ordinary and authentic places are not just a gimmick or only get articulated through decorative shells. But a future where the ordinary place is one of historic existence. Intrinsic logic that one conceives through feeling it, realizing it without the oppressive demand to consume it.

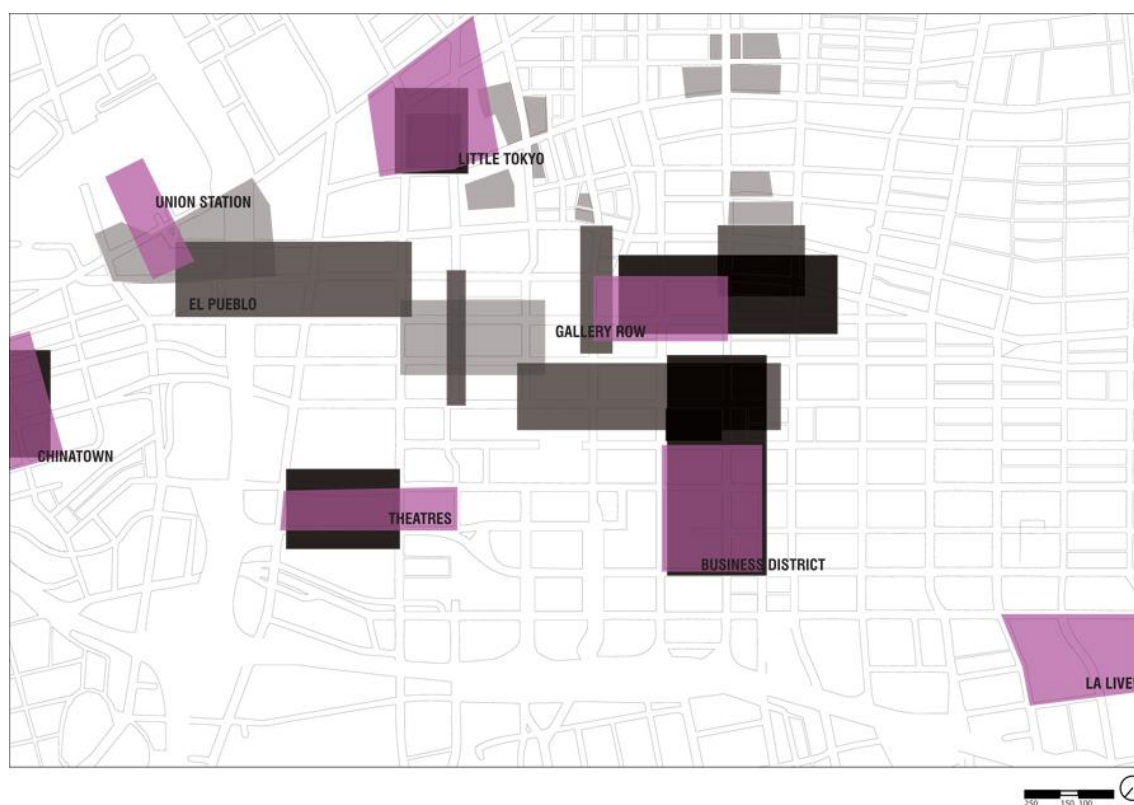


Fig. 2: The historic layering of contemporary hotspots (purple), from 1888 to 2011 in Los Angeles (by author).

## 8 CONCLUSION

One of the difficulties in clarifying the relation between space and place is, not only that the two are necessarily connected, but that this concept for years tended to be understood only spatially. Then Heidegger's overarching philosophical notion of 'dwelling' is an interesting perspective. Dwelling as a basic capacity to achieve a form of spiritual unity between humans and the material world allows us to construct places, give them meaning and nuance them. Harvey portrays place as a deeply ambiguous facet of post-modern life. The reconstruction of places thus can reveal hidden memories that hold out the prospect for different futures. Harvey points out that investments in place in the same time often can be quite an

exclusionary force in the world where groups of people define themselves against threatening others who are not included in the particular local expression of place.

The sense of being rooted in place, argued by Harvey is something we find back in Massey's work. But she is able to bring it closer to life in the complexity of the metropolis. Massey points out that the problematic definition of place as a merely static and rooted reaction to a dynamic and mobile world. She argues that people might do need a sense of place to hold on to – to be 'rooted' – but to her the flows of global movement not necessarily have to be seen as anxiety provoking. Whereas the notions of people as Heidegger, Harvey and Massey remain rather abstract, the concrete critique by Sorkin and Zukin clearly points out the problematic paradox the public domain of the metropolis is in. Sorkin argues that what is missing in the city is not just a matter of any particular buildings or places, rather the spaces in between, the connections that make sense of forms. Sorkin abhors the thematisation of public space; the illusion of parochialism and universal happiness for all and the lack of freedom of choice.

Existence became mobile and increasingly hectic and Zukin argues that we barely have the opportunity to deeply root into our neighbourhoods. Zukin argues that authenticity refers to the 'look' and 'feel' of a place, as well as the social connectedness that place inspires. She makes the argument that longing for authenticity reflects the separation between our experience and of space and our sense of self, that is so much part of modern mentalities. Though we think authenticity refers to a neighbourhood's innate qualities, it really expresses our own anxieties about how places changes. And then we can try to grasp the meaning of ordinary, authentic places in the city. A recommendation would be to start with leaving the city the city. Commercial driven urban development led to a public domain that became private, visualising a complete lack of democracy, of real citizenship. The thematisation of the street partly deluded the city by decorating it with false notions of romanticism, but also by making it increasingly exclusive and unjust.

The goal would be to keep working on the locus of the city, the collective memory. Rediscovering the singularity of residuals from the former city with its civic events, failed attempts and its particular natural setting. The preservation of a sense of place is then an active moment in the passage from memory to hope, from past to a better future.

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