

Place
a short introduction

Tim Cresswell



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Defining Place

Human geography is the study of places. It is, of course, many other things but it is, on an intuitive level, a discipline which has place as one of its principle objects of study. Students signing up for geography degrees and courses will often cite their interest in different places around the world. Despite this general enthusiasm for the study of places there is very little considered understanding of what the word 'place' means. This is as true in theory and philosophy as it is among the new students signing up for university geography courses. Place is a word that seems to speak for itself.

The popularity of place is an opportunity for geography. It is also a problem as no-one quite knows what they are talking about when they are talking about place. Place is not a specialized piece of academic terminology. It is a word we use daily in the English-speaking world. It is a word wrapped in common sense. In one sense this makes it easier to grasp as it is familiar. In another sense, however, this makes it more slippery as the subject of a book. As we already think we know what it means it is hard to get beyond that common-sense level in order to understand it in a more developed way. Place, then, is both simple (and that is part of its appeal) and complicated. It is the purpose of this book to scrutinise the concept of place and its centrality to both geography and everyday life.

Think of the ways place is used in everyday speech. 'Would you like to come round to my place?' This suggests ownership or some kind of connection between a person and a particular location or building. It also suggests a notion of privacy and belonging. 'My place' is not 'your place' – you and I have different places. 'Brisbane is a nice place.' Here 'place' is referring to a city in a common sense kind of way and the fact that it is nice suggests something of the way it

looks and what it is like to be there. 'She put me in my place' refers to more of a sense of position in a social hierarchy. 'A place for everything and everything in its place' is another well-known phrase that suggests that there are particular orderings of things in the world that have a socio-geographical basis. Place is everywhere. This makes it different from other terms in geography like 'territory', which announces itself as a specialized term, or 'landscape' which is not a word that permeates through our everyday encounters. So what is this 'place'?

Cast your mind back to the first time you moved into a particular space – a room in college accommodation is a good example. You are confronted with a particular area of floor space and a certain volume of air. In that room there may be a few rudimentary pieces of furniture such as a bed, a desk, a set of drawers and a cupboard. These are common to all the rooms in the complex. They are not unique and mean nothing to you beyond the provision of certain necessities of student life. Even these bare essentials have a history. A close inspection may reveal that a former owner has inscribed her name on the desk in an idle moment between classes. There on the carpet you notice a stain where someone has spilt some coffee. Some of the paint on the wall is missing. Perhaps someone had used putty to put up a poster. These are the hauntings of past inhabitation. This anonymous space has a history – it meant something to other people. Now what do you do? A common strategy is to make the space say something about you. You add your own possessions, rearrange the furniture within the limits of the space, put your own posters on the wall, arrange a few books purposefully on the desk. Thus space is turned into place. Your place.

40.46°N 73.58°W does not mean that much to most people. Some people with a sound knowledge of the globe may be able to tell you what this signifies but to most of us these are just numbers indicating a location – a site without meaning. These co-ordinates mark the location of New York City – somewhere south of Central Park in Manhattan. Immediately many images come into our heads. New York or Manhattan are place names rich with meaning. We might think of skyscrapers, of 9/11, of shopping or of any number of movie locations. Replacing a set of numbers with a name means that we begin to approach 'place'. If we heard that two planes had flown into 40.46°N 73.58°W it would not have quite the same impact as hearing that they had flown into New York, into Manhattan, into the Twin Towers. Cruise missiles are programmed with locations and spatial referents. If they could be programmed with 'place' instead, with all the understanding that implies, they might decide to ditch in the desert.

Towards the southern tip of Manhattan and to the east of center is an area – a place – known as the Lower East Side. This is an area which has been known as a place of successive immigrant groups – Irish, Jewish, German, Italian, Eastern European, Haitian, Puerto Rican, Chinese. It is a little to the north of the infamous Five Corners – the setting for the film *The Gangs of New York* (2002). It is a place of closely-knit tenement blocks south of Houston Street – buildings once crammed with large families in small rooms. A succession of moral panics over immigration have focused on this place. It has also been a place of political uprisings and police riots. In the middle of this place is Tompkins Square Park – a little piece of nature in the city built to provide a place of calm in the hurly burly of metropolitan life. It was built in the 1830s and named after the US Vice-President Daniel Tompkins. Later the park became a place of demonstrations by unions and anarchists as well as a place for children and the preaching of temperance. By the 1960s it was the epicenter of a Lower East Side dominated by bohemian counter-cultures, squatters and artists and by the 1980s it was newly respectable – a place where the new cultural elite could savor city life. Needless to say, property prices meant that the buildings were now out of the reach of most people. Homeless people began to sleep in the park. Some of the newly respectable residents were scared by this and supported the removal of homeless people by the police. Once again, in 1986, the park was the site of a demonstration and riot. In the area around the park, from the 1960s on, residents were busy building 84 community gardens in vacant lots. In 1997 Mayor Giuliani transferred responsibility for the gardens from the City Park's Department to the Housing, Preservation and Development Department with the intention that they be sold off for development. The first four gardens were auctioned in July 1997 together with a local community centre. In May 1999, 114 community gardens across New York were saved from development when they were bought by Bette Midler's New York Restoration Fund and Trust for Public Land for a combined total of \$4.2 million. However the policy of privatization has continued, and gardens continued to be demolished.

If you visit the Lower East Side now you can dine in any number of fancy and not-so-fancy restaurants, bars and cafes, you can shop in boutiques and admire the brownstone architecture. You can stroll through Tompkins Square Park and visit the remaining community gardens. Crossing over Houston Street to the south you can visit the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in one of the old buildings that formally housed new immigrants. You could, in other words, see many manifestations of 'place'. The museum is an attempt to produce

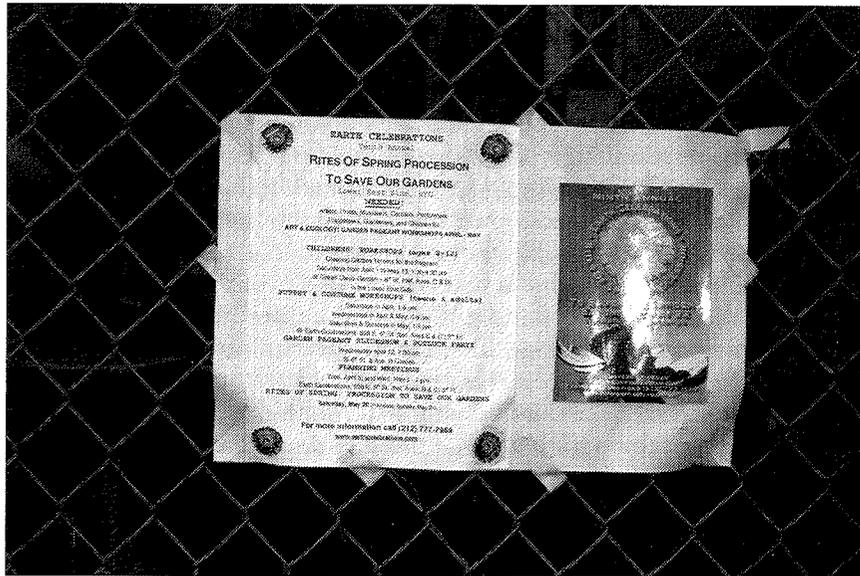


Figure 1.1 A flyer attached to a community garden fence in the Lower East Side on Manhattan calls for the gardens to be saved from the City government. (Photo by author)



Figure 1.2 One of the gardens destroyed by the City Government in New York was Esperanza. People invest a lot in the places they create and were understandably angry at the demolition. (Photo by author)

a 'place of memory' where the experiences of immigrants will not be forgotten. The gardens are the result of the efforts of immigrants and others to carve out a place from a little piece of Manhattan for their community to enjoy nature. Some of the community gardens – often the first to be leveled – are the sites of *Casitas* – little houses made by the Puerto Rican community to replicate similar buildings from 'home'. They are draped with Puerto Rican flags and other symbols of elsewhere. Old men sit out in the sun watching baseball. Community meetings take place around these eight foot by ten foot buildings. They are, as the urban historian Delores Hayden puts it:

a conscious choice by community organizers to construct the rural, preindustrial *bohio* ... from the island as a new kind of community center in devastated tenement districts such as Lower Harlem, the South Bronx, and the Lower East Side ... Painted in coral, turquoise, or lemon yellow, these dwellings recall the colors of the Caribbean and evoke a memory of the homeland for immigrants who find themselves in Alphabet City or Spanish Harlem. (Hayden 1995, 35–6)

Other gardens, ones not planted by Puerto Rican immigrants, are more bucolic, replicating some ideal of an English garden. Yet others are wild nature reserves set aside for local school lessons on biology and ecology. All of these are examples of the ongoing and diverse creation of places – sites of history and identity in the city.

Meanwhile back in Tompkins Square Park there are still tensions between the needs of the homeless to have even the smallest and most insecure 'place-for the night' and the desires of some local residents to have what they see as an attractive and safe place to live and raise families – one that does not include the homeless. Again places are being made, maintained and contested. New York and Manhattan are places. The Lower East Side is a place. The Tenement Museum, community gardens and Tompkins Square Park are all part of the rich tapestry of place making that make up the area in and around 40.46°N 73.58°W. We will return to the Lower East Side throughout the book to illustrate the many facets of the use of 'place' in geography.

All over the world people are engaged in place-making activities. Homeowners redecorate, build additions, manicure the lawn. Neighborhood organizations put pressure on people to tidy their yards; city governments legislate for new public buildings to express the spirit of particular places. Nations project themselves to the rest of the world through postage stamps, money, parliament buildings, national stadia, tourist brochures, etc. Within nation-states oppressed



Figure 1.3 A bucolic scene in a Lower East Side community garden – a place for nature in the city? (Photo by author)



Figure 1.4 A casita in a community garden. Note the Puerto Rican flag hanging in the porch and the masks on the wall. Immigrant Puerto Rican groups in New York City place these in their community gardens to recreate something of the place they came from – to make themselves ‘feel at home’. (Photo by author)

groups attempt to assert their own identities. Just as the new student climbs on the bed to put the poster on the wall so the Kosovan Muslim flies a new flag, erects a new monument and redraws the map. Graffiti artists write their tags in flowing script on the walls of the city. This is their place too.

So what links these examples: a child’s room, an urban garden, a market town, New York City, Kosovo and the Earth? What makes them all places and not simply a room, a garden, a town, a world city, a new nation and an inhabited planet? One answer is that they are all spaces which people have made meaningful. They are all spaces people are attached to in one way or another. This is the most straightforward and common definition of place – a meaningful location.

The political geographer John Agnew (1987) has outlined three fundamental aspects of place as a ‘meaningful location’.

1. Location.
2. Locale.
3. Sense of place.

Perhaps the most obvious point is that all of the places mentioned above are located. They have fixed objective co-ordinates on the Earth’s surface (or in the Earth’s case a specific location vis-à-vis other planets and the sun). New York is ‘here’ and Kosovo is ‘there’. Given the appropriate scale we could find them on a map. The word place is often used in everyday language to simply refer to location. When we use place as a verb for instance (where should I place this?) we are usually referring to some notion of location – the simple notion of ‘where’. But places are not always stationary. A ship, for instance, may become a special kind of place for people who share it on a long voyage, even though its location is constantly changing. By ‘locale’ Agnew means the material setting for social relations – the actual shape of place within which people conduct their lives as individuals, as men or women, as white or black, straight or gay. It is clear that places almost always have a concrete form. New York is a collection of buildings and roads and public spaces including the community gardens which are themselves material – made of plants and statues and little sheds and houses with fences around them. The child’s room has four walls, a window, a door, and a closet. Places then, are material things. Even imaginary places, like Hogwarts School in Harry Potter novels, have an imaginary materiality of rooms, staircases and tunnels that make the novel work. As well as being located and having a material visual form, places must have some relationship to humans and the human capacity to produce and consume meaning. By ‘sense of place’ Agnew means the subjective and emotional attachment people have to place. Novels and films (at least

successful ones) often evoke a sense of place – a feeling that we the reader/viewer know what it is like to ‘be there’. We often have a sense of place about where we live, or where we lived when we were children. This is what the author Lucy Lippard has called *The Lure of the Local* (Lippard 1997). It is commonplace in Western societies in the twenty-first Century to bemoan a loss of a sense of place as the forces of globalization have eroded local cultures and produced homogenized global spaces. We will return to this issue of ‘placelessness’ in Chapter 2.

Agnew’s three-part definition of place certainly accounts for most examples of place. In addition, however, it helps to think of place in distinction to two other familiar concepts in human geography – ‘space’ and ‘landscape’ – both of which are occasionally substituted with the word ‘place’.

Space and Place

An advertisement for a large furniture shop in my Sunday paper read ‘Transforming space into place.’ Such an advertisement cannot rely on an in-depth understanding of the development of human geography and yet it speaks to one of the central themes in the development of the discipline. The ad suggests that we might want to take the rooms we have recently bought or rented and make them mean something to us by arranging furniture in them – making them comfortable literally and experientially. Humanistic geographers are unlikely to agree that the mere purchase of furniture is going to enact such a transformation but they will recognize the intent.

Space is a more abstract concept than place. When we speak of space we tend to think of outer-space or the spaces of geometry. Spaces have areas and volumes. Places have space between them. Yi-Fu Tuan has likened space to movement and place to pauses – stops along the way.

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)

Consider the relationship between the sea and land along the coast between Seattle and Vancouver. In his book *Passage to Juneau* (1999)

the travel writer Jonathan Raban tells of his trip by boat along that shore. Alongside his travel narrative he tells of the voyage of the explorer Captain Vancouver in his ship HMS Discovery in 1792. Vancouver’s task was to map the coast and name it as he went – making it a place of empire. Naming is one of the ways space can be given meaning and become place. Vancouver’s journal reports the seemingly nonsensical movements of natives in their canoes in the sea around them. Rather than taking a direct line from point A to point B the natives would take complicated routes that had no apparent logic. To the native canoeists their movements made perfect sense as they read the sea as a set of places associated with particular spirits and particular dangers. While the colonialists looked at the sea and saw blank space, the natives saw place.

Two world-views were in collision; and the poverty of white accounts of these canoe journeys reflect the colonialists’ blindness to the native sea. They didn’t get it – couldn’t grasp the fact that for Indians the water was a place, and the great bulk of the land was undifferentiated space.

The whites had entered a looking-glass world, where their own most basic terms were reversed. Their whole focus was directed toward the land: its natural harbours, its timber, its likely spots for settlement and agriculture. They travelled everywhere equipped with mental chainsaws and at a glance could strip a hill of its covering forest . . . and see there a future of hedges, fields, houses, churches. They viewed the sea as a medium of access to the all-important land.

Substitute ‘sea’ for ‘land’ and vice-versa, in that paragraph, and one is very close to the world that emerges from Indian stories, where the forest is the realm of danger, darkness, exile, solitude, and self-extinction, while the sea and its beaches represent safety, light, home, society, and the continuation of life.

(Raban 1999, 103)

Raban recounts the visit of the German geographer Aurel Krause while working for the Bremen Geographical Society in 1881. He was astonished by what he saw as the local Tlingits’ ignorance of their place in the world, which to him was dominated by the enormous mountains that towered behind the small strip of land they inhabited beside the sea.

In spite of the fact that the Tlingit is constantly surrounded by nature, he is only acquainted with it as it offers him the necessities of life. He knows every bay that lends itself to fishing or the beaching of a canoe . . . and for these he has names; but the mountain peaks themselves, even though they are outstanding on account of their shape and size, are scarcely noticed by him.

(Raban 1999, 106)

The Tlingits had many names for the sea but the land remained unnamed and seemingly invisible. To the explorers the sea was empty space and the land full of potential places waiting to be mapped and named but this was the mirror image of the Tlinget 'sense of place'.

Space, then, has been seen in distinction to place as a realm without meaning – as a 'fact of life' which, like time, produces the basic coordinates for human life. When humans invest meaning in a portion of space and then become attached to it in some way (naming is one such way) it becomes a place. Although this basic dualism of space and place runs through much of human geography since the 1970s it is confused somewhat by the idea of social space – or socially produced space – which, in many ways, plays the same role as place (Lefebvre 1991; Smith 1991).

Place and Landscape

Another concept that frequently appears alongside place in geography texts is landscape. The idea of landscape has a very particular history which dates back to the emergence of mercantile capitalism in Renaissance Venice and Flanders. Landscape painting emerged with the rediscovery of the science of 'optics', new techniques of navigation and the development of a new class of traders. Landscape referred to a portion of the earth's surface that can be viewed from one spot (see Cosgrove 1984; Jackson 1997). It combined a focus on the material topography of a portion of land (that which can be seen) with the notion of vision (the way it is seen). Landscape is an intensely visual idea. In most definitions of landscape the viewer is outside of it. This is the primary way in which it differs from place. Places are very much things to be inside of. Again a literary example illustrates this.

In Raymond Williams' (1960) novel *Border Country* Matthew Price returns to the place of his childhood in the Welsh borders after spending many years at University in England. He is surprised at what he finds when he gets there. He has forgotten the qualities of life that made it a 'place' and replaced it in his mind with a 'landscape'. What follows is an examination of the gap between the idea of the village as 'landscape' and the idea of the village as a lived and felt 'place.' As Matthew realizes he has become an outsider in his own village he reflects on his change of perspective:

He realized as he watched what had happened in going away. The valley as landscape had been taken, but its work forgotten. The visitor sees beauty,

the inhabitant a place where he works and has his friends. Far away, closing his eyes, he had been seeing this valley, but as the visitor sees it, as the guide book sees it. (Williams 1960, 75)

Later in the novel Matthew gets back into the routine of the village 'It was no longer a landscape or view, but a valley that people were using.' No longer a view from a hill the valley was once again a place. Landscape refers to the shape – the material topography – of a piece of land. This may be apparently natural (though few, if any, parts of the Earth's surface are untouched by humans) landscape or it might be the obviously human, or cultural, landscape of a city. We do not live in landscapes – we look at them.

Place as a Way of Understanding

An important theme of this book is that place is not just a thing in the world but a way of understanding the world. While we hold common-sense ideas of what places are, these are often quite vague when subjected to critical reflection. Most often the designation of place is given to something quite small in scale, but not too small. Neighborhoods, villages, towns and cities are easily referred to as places and these are the kinds of places that most often appear in writing on place. There is little writing on the corner of a favorite room as place at one scale, or on the globe at another. Yet, as Tuan suggested, there is something of place in all of these. So, as it turns out, places as 'things' are quite obscure and hard to grasp.

But place is also a way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world. When we look at the world as a world of places we see different things. We see attachments and connections between people and place. We see worlds of meaning and experience. Sometimes this way of seeing can seem to be an act of resistance against a rationalization of the world, a way of seeing that has more space than place. To think of an area of the world as a rich and complicated interplay of people and the environment – as a place – is to free us from thinking of it as facts and figures. To think of Baghdad as a place is in a different world to thinking of it as a location on which to drop bombs. At other times, however seeing the world through the lens of place leads to reactionary and exclusionary xenophobia, racism and bigotry. 'Our place' is threatened and others have to be excluded. Here 'place' is not so much a quality of things in the world but an aspect of the way we choose to think about it – what we decide to emphasize and what we decide to designate as unimportant. This

concern the connections between place, identity and power they use place in radically different ways and from different political perspectives.

Finally in Chapter 5 I provide an annotated bibliography and lists of key readings and texts, a survey of web resources, pedagogical resources and possible student projects.