URBAN PLACES *PAPER 1: spaces or places*

"people move through space and dwell in a place"
Richard Sennett, 2018

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Introduction:

This Discussion Paper explores the importance of understanding the differences between urban spaces and urban places. Cities all around the world are made up of a complex network of public and private land between the buildings and infrastructure that are often interchangeably described as "spaces" or "places". These spaces/places may be large open expanses or compact and intimate. People may move through them or spend time enjoying the environment and social interactions, therefore, understand the qualities of spaces and places is critical to delivering liveable, vibrant, culturally rich, and sustainable cities.

The Spaces or is it Places Question?

> *… we need an environment that is not simply well organised but poetic and symbolic as well. It should speak of the individuals and their complex society, of their aspirations and their historical tradition, of the natural setting, and the complicated functions and movements of the city world.* (Lynch, K. 1994:119)

Who better to start this section with, than landscape architect Kevin Lynch and the above quote from his seminal book, *The Image of the City*. Here Lynch presents quite a poetic brief for urban planners and designers especially in our contemporary Culturally diverse cities where we need to create an environment that speaks of the diverse individuals and their complex societies!

Professor David Yencken, writing in *Places not Spaces: Placemaking in Australia* (1995) states that:

> *A space suggests little that is specific or tangible. We refer to outer space and infer that it is an unknown and indeterminate area which we do not properly understand. Place by contrast is immediate, known and lived in. We move through space; we stop in and are directly involved in Places. (1995:11)*

Along the same lines as Yencken, Richard Sennett, Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics, in his 2018 book *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City*, states that: *As a general proposition, people move through space and dwell in a place.*

I generally agree with these propositions and suggest that therefore we need to better recognise the critical role of Placemaking in urban development and revitalisation projects. We must also acknowledge the challenge for planners and designers working to create places that speak of *diverse individuals and complex societies* especially when working with First Nations People to address *their aspirations and their historical tradition* and seek ways in partnership with these communities to preserve these essential qualities within *the complicated functions and movements of the city world.* While at the same time recognising the deep cultural association to 'Country' that First Nations Peoples have, as encapsulate in the saying the 'Country' 'Always was, always will be'. This is highly relevant to contemporary urban planning in Australia. In her 2018 article titled, *From an urban country to urban Country: confronting the cult of denial in Australian cities* Libby Porter proposes that:

> *While the refrain that Australia is an 'urban country' is a familiar and now global one—because most of us live in towns and cities—we appear unable and unwilling to grasp that this urban country is also urban Country.* (2018: 239)

Porter is making a strong argument that despite the historic concept of Terra nullius used by early Europeans to suggest that the Australian continent was an empty 'Space' or 'nobody's land' it needs to be understood as a 'Place' imbued with over 60,000 years of First Nations culture!

Addressing the question of First Nations People and their relationship to "Place" in an urban multi-cultural suburban setting, Associate Professor Kelly Greenop in her chapter titled *Before Architecture Comes Place, Before Place Come People: Contemporary Indigenous Places in Urban Brisbane*, in The Handbook of Contemporary Indigenous Architecture, writes about her research in the Brisbane suburb of Inala and explores urban aboriginal relationship to place through five criteria; meaning, attachment, identity, ownership and sovereignty. Greenop acknowledges that traditional owners are bound to place through their family and group identity and profound association to Country. The intent of her research in Inala looks at how First Nations People living in urban environments "have created in a contemporary placemaking tradition".

Greenop suggests that:

> *While many Inala Indigenous people share strong links to their traditional Countries, both outside and inside Inala, significance is also created in a contemporary placemaking tradition. The motivations in establishing place relationships, I argue are linked to the importance of place meaning, attachment and identity, which has key elements of traditional Country affiliations. Others have very few place identity links at all, but remain positive about the possibility of such links being re-established for future generations who grow up in a community with a strong Indigenous identity, and to which future generations will be able to claim a legitimate affiliation* (Greenop, K 2018:533)

And:

> *What is important to stress is that for some Inala people these contemporary links to an urban place represent not a break from traditions, but a continuation, an evolution of place meaning, attachment and identity, in a traditional process of linking to place alongside affiliates from an Indigenous community, adding to, rather than depleting their Indigeneity.* (Greenop, K 2018:546)

The Inala example emphasises that the relationship to place is an important social characteristic of First Nations communities in urban environments and that the sense of place is not just about the physical "place" but relies on the strengths of local community networks, support services and places for interaction and cultural expression and celebration.

Writing about the notion of "Place' in the landscape architectural context, Anne Whiston Spirn, in her 1998 book, *The Language of Landscape*, explores the notion of "Identity" and the "Power of Place" and writes:

> *A place in particular, a tapestry of woven context: enduring and ephemeral, local and global, related and unrelated, now and then, past and future. Landscape context is a fabric whose strands are narratives of landscape elements and features, both the persistent and the fleeting. Many stories have been shaped over tens of thousands of years, others over several human lifespans, still others are just now emerging.* (Whiston Spirn, A.1998:161)

From a more built form perspective, Lynch is focused on the image of the city, its look and feel and analysing the design/structural urban elements that make up that image, others such as Professor Ali Madanipour have also reinforced in their writing about the urban condition the significance of meaning, in the context of a discussion of the differences and similarities of the questions around 'Spaces' verses "Places'. Madanipour suggests that:

> *Whereas space is open and is seen as an abstract expanse, place is a particular part of that expanse which is endowed with meaning by people*. (Madanipour, A. 1996:158)

William Neill in his 2004 book, *Urban Planning and Cultural Identity*, suggests that *space may be distinguished from place in that the latter involves the assignment of symbolic meaning to objects*. He goes on to state that *it is difficult to think of space that is not a place of some kind, since it will be designated with meaning of one sort or another within some culture frame* (Neill, W. 2004:11). Indeed, like Madanipour and Neill I have always thought of many soleless spaces as urban stages waiting to become places through the theatre of cultural life, a metaphor taken up by Arzu Ispalar Çahantimur and Gözde Kırlı Özer in their 2018 article, *Space and Time Travelers Exploring Cultural Identity of the City*. They provide the following discussion exploring the concepts of 'place' v 'space':

> *Space and place have a crucial role in understanding the city. There is a variety of metaphors to characterize life in the city. To see social interaction as a drama unlocks a rich vein of metaphors: image, theme, plot, script, roles, back-stage, protagonist, and audience. These can all be utilized to describe and explain social interactions. To be more precise, these interactions are socio-spatial. They all take place. They occur in a spatial setting. Space is not just backdrop. Space and place are crucial to what performances are given and how they are received. We can picture the city as a variety of settings all with differences in appropriate behavior.*

And:

> *An urban artifact can be a city itself or a building, a district, and it is hard to describe it because of its ambiguity of language and the importance of personally experiencing it. The city as a work of art is nature and culture and also imagination and collective memory. Cities can be read as multi-layered texts, a narrative of signs and symbols, which are hidden in the design of the built environment that gives*

> *expression, meaning and identity to the political, social, and cultural forces spread out throughout time.* (Çahantimur & Özer 2018: 24)

In the context of above discussions, I would suggest that the city should be considered as a cultural phenomenon and its 'Places' should be examined both as the product of cultures and as the site for ongoing cultural expression and associated drama. As Maree Pardy, from the School of Philosophy, Anthropology and Social Inquiry at the University of Melbourne, in her 2009 article titled *Multicultural incarnations: race, class and urban renewal* reminds us:

> *People make themselves and their worlds in the spaces they inhabit and through the relations they engage in those spaces. Place in this sense is much more than urban form; it is the space of dwelling – being in the world, in relation to others, sharing and contesting space, engaging and ignoring each other, living with both conflict and in accord.* (Pardy 2009:13)

Pardy's reference to *Place in this sense is much more than urban form; it is the space of dwelling* is supported by those who describe squares/plazas as "outdoor rooms".

In January 2018, the European Ministers of Culture adopted the Davos Declaration "Towards a high-quality 'Baukultur' for Europe". The Davos Declaration stresses the central role of culture for the quality of the built environment. In the 2021 article *Baukultur Quality System: eight criteria for a high-quality Baukultur* published as part of the Davos process the writers suggest that:

> *… a place goes beyond the physical expression of space through built structures and in-between spaces. It is perceived as a dynamic, relational socio-physical construct. A place assigns meaning and triggers emotions, influences how people perceive, experience and value their built environment. Places embody a materialised form of social and political history and structure with a reciprocal impact on socio-political processes.* (Davos 2021:11)

The concept of '*Baukultur*' is defined as a neutral description of every human activity that changes the built environment, such as existing buildings, monuments, and other elements of built heritage. In addition to architectural, structural and landscape design and its material realisation, '*Baukultur*' is expressed in the planning processes for building projects, infrastructures, cities, villages, and open landscapes. To me '*Baukultur*' is in line with my thinking regarding the concept of Planning Culturally which places culture at the centre of city building.

Place: Form & Function

If we consider Richard Sennett's statement that, "*As a general proposition, people move through space and dwell in a place"* we can start to build a picture in our minds of a sense of scale relating to both space and place. For example, when we move through space it usually involves transit corridors such as local roads/streets, highways, and other transit infrastructure such as bus and rail corridors. These are generally designed and constructed to meet the need to get from one location to another with the least interruptions as possible without the need to "dwell". Despite current trends to apply art and design to transit infrastructure to improve the quality of the transit experience, it does not make them "places" just more attractive "spaces" to move through. Theorists such as Jane Jacobs who specifically focused on the concept of "street life" as highlighted in her 1994 book *The*

Death and Life of Great American Cities, calls for urban planners to learn from the vibrant street life of New York where communities have turned streets into places where local cultural life is enacted.

From a scale perspective, places may be large or small! For example, the great plazas of the world represent significant public places where hundreds of indeed thousands of people can gather for cultural, social, and religious reasons or indeed to take part in political gatherings. Examples include Wenceslas Square in Prague were, in 1989, hundreds of thousands of people demonstrations during the 'Velvet Revolution'; Red Square in front of the Kremlin and the site of massive military parades; or Piazza San Marco, the tourist cultural heart of Venice. Also of scale, most cities have expansive public places such as parks and gardens for people to spend time in as groups or as individuals. In cities with culturally diverse and transnational populations parks can be vital gathering places for cultural groups on weekends or non-workdays, I witnessed this first hand when working in the Gulf States where, for example construction workers from the Indian sub-continent would gather in parks to talk and play cricket on their day off. As the workers are sending as much money as they can to their families back home the park is ideal as it is a free place without time constraints. Likewise in plazas around the world I have witnessed groups of elderly residents access the free places to get together to sit, talk or play board games with their peers, often always settling in the same seat day after day, weather permitting. In Asian cities such as Hong Kong and Taipei the parks in the early morning are alive with elderly residents dancing to music, exercising, practicing yoga and or many forms of martial arts. Parks provide an essential cultural role and address the varying needs of local cultural groups; therefore, local authorities must be cognisant of the cultural and religious patterns of behaviour when making maintenance of modifications to the park infrastructure etc.

As Jane Jacobs reminds, the parks of great value to communities are often the midsize local 'neighbourhood parks' which are *generally intended for general bread-and-butter use as local yards* that become places through local community use and respect. It is critical that these neighbourhood parks are designed, wherever possible, in collaboration with the local community to take into consideration the cultural perspectives of local users. These, places provide an opportunity for ethnic interaction and the development of loose social ties. The function as a leisure destination, a place encouraging short or sustained interactions such as, mingling, observing, and lingering. Clare Rishbeth suggests neighbourhood parks play a role in mediating social interactions and promote intercultural togetherness across diverse cultures and ethnicities. The active neighbourhood park is not just one open space, for regular local users it has a sense of place and include micro-spaces. These micro-spaces provide locations of mundane behaviours such as children's playgrounds. that these are not just locations for children's play and sport, but places of everyday encounters. Rishbeth (2018) reminds us that, *Spontaneous encounters in these places have the potential to result in social ties and friendships over time; not only for the active participants in play activities but also for the supervising parents*. However, the downside of city parks is that they can be in danger of becoming neglected no-go zones unless the local authorities and local park users maintain and frequent them to ensure they remain viable and sustainable meeting places. Jacobs reminds us that *neighbourhood parks themselves are directly and drastically affected by the way the neighbourhood acts upon them*. (Jacob, J 1994:95)

From an urban planning and design perspective many city centre "dwelling" places may be small and intimate providing quiet refuges from the hustle and bustle of city life. Beautiful pocket parks include examples, such as Paley Park in New York, this block size park between high rise buildings has a back wall waterfall, lush vegetation and a variety of comfortable seating options making it an ideal place to enjoy a coffee, work remotely, or simply spend time and relax from the pressures of Manhattan's urban life.

The scale of a place is also a personal perception, people of different ages and cultures will experience and behave in a place quite differently, for some the small pocket park located between high-rise buildings may not be a refuge from the madding crowd, but rather a claustrophobic environment. Highlighting this issue Barrie Greenbie, in his book *Spaces: dimensions of the human landscape*, suggests that "*The essence of civilised life is sharing space with others without intruding or being intruded upon*."

I have previously written that, Greenbie uses the term proxemic to describe those places which have cultural resonance to individuals or specific groups of people, implying an intimate relationship exists with the space or a deep knowledge and understanding of the location as a cultural place. In this context, proxemic would also imply that the user of the public place understands the appropriate situational behaviour expected in that culture. Conversely, Greenbie uses the term distemic places in reference to cross-cultural behaviour on all social or economic levels, including the diversity of social and cultural experiences. This is a useful counterpoint to proxemic when considering those universal public spaces that are part of many world cities – spaces understood by all! (Brecknock 2006:62)

This concept of proxemic and distemic space was previously discussed by Edward Hall in his 1969 publication The *Hidden Dimension*. Hall states that Proxemics *'refers to man's use of space as an aspect of his culture: i.e. conversational distance, planning, and the use of interior space and town layouts*." This is an important consideration in urban planning on many levels of place planning, for example I have been told by young people of their desire for "edgy places." This would be a proxemic place where they can gather with friends away from adult supervision, but not too far away from adults in case of problems. We need to remember that as with the broader population there are many variations of "youth culture" and therefore no place fits all, and that as Rob White in his 1998 publication "*Public Spaces for Young People*" that we need to design places that take into account the *social differences between young people and which thereby offer flexible usage – this means that smaller publicly visible spaces and larger sized spaces can be combined to provide for different groups*. (White, R. 1998:14). Likewise, through consultation with culturally diverse communities, the women have discussed the need for places where they can feel safe in line with Greenbie's concept of *sharing space with others without intruding or being intruded upon.* This is especially true for mothers and carers with young children, who need space for the children to play and be active such as parks and plazas without feeling at risk or of being verbally harassed.

Place: Public or Private

Finally in this discussion of spaces and places it worth considering the issues relating to the ownership and access to the public realm. Generally urban spaces and places have been publicly owned and therefore publicly accessible to all the population, however increasingly spaces within our urban environments have become privately owned. For example, spaces within major shopping centres are obviously privately owned places, as are the less defined private spaces around many city buildings such as corporate office towers. While areas such as shopping centres are privately owned, they obviously make them "Publicly Accessible" to encourage their customers to visit and consume their products. However, in reality, access is based on the conditions of acceptable behaviour and the right of company security guards to remove or deny entry to those deemed undesirable. From what I have been told during consultations, the reality is that these conditions are most often applied against groups of young people, especially those from culturally diverse backgrounds, who just want a place to hang out. This is especially an issue for young people living in outer metropolitan suburbs where the shopping centre is the key local destination.

Conclusions:

From the perspective of Planning Culturally this paper has proposed that there is a strong relationship between the concepts of “spaces/places” and “distemic/proxemic”. Based on Richard Sennett’s proposition that*, people move through space and dwell in a place,* I am suggesting that in general terms we can propose that people move through distemic spaces and dwell in proxemic places. Therefore, planners and designers must give considerable thought to the scale, ownership and layout of public places and provide for a diverse range of people and cultural patterns of behaviour.

We started with Lynch so let’s conclude with his proposition that places, *should speak of the individuals and their complex society, of their aspirations and their historical tradition, of the natural setting, and the complicated functions and movements of the city world*. This is clearly a significant challenge for urban practitioners and as I propose requires a level of Cultural Literacy and high level of community engagement to achieve public places that meet the needs and expectations of our increasingly *complex society*!

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