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The Dependency

This essay is about place. It is about community, which isn't the same thing as place. Mostly, it is about economic development — about what cities are going to have to do to compete in the twenty-first century. Significantly, that has much to do with fostering a sense of community and a sense of place.

What is a “place?” First, it is not a synonym for “location.” A location is a point on the globe; an intersection of longitude and latitude. Certainly every place has a location but not every location meets the test of being a place. I start with that contention by noting the titles of recent books from which I have taken many of the ideas that follow: *The Experience of Place*, *A Sense of Place*, *The Great Good Place*, *The Power of Place*, *Placeways*.

These are by all authors from different disciplines with different perspectives. But there are two very important common denominators. First, all of them deal with something called “place.” Second, for each of them, a place is imbued with something beyond its physical characteristics — something intangible, an experience, a sense, a power, a quality of being good.

If place is something more than a location, what is it? Place has been defined as “a location of experience,” as “the container of shapes, powers, feelings and meanings” and as “a matrix of energies.” The definition I like best comes from landscape artist Allan Gussow, who defines place as,

“a piece of the whole environment that has been claimed by feelings.”¹

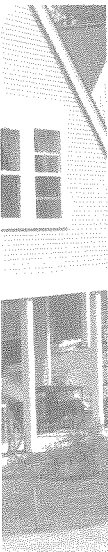
Psychiatric writer Winifred Gallagher has investigated the impact of place on human behavior. She writes, “In a very real sense, the places in our lives influence our behavior in ways that we often don't expect. A good or bad environment promotes good or bad memories, which inspire a good or bad mood, which inclines us toward good or bad behavior.” She talks about the effect of place on the level of fantasy in children, the crime rate, attitudes of office and assembly line workers, and urban decay.²

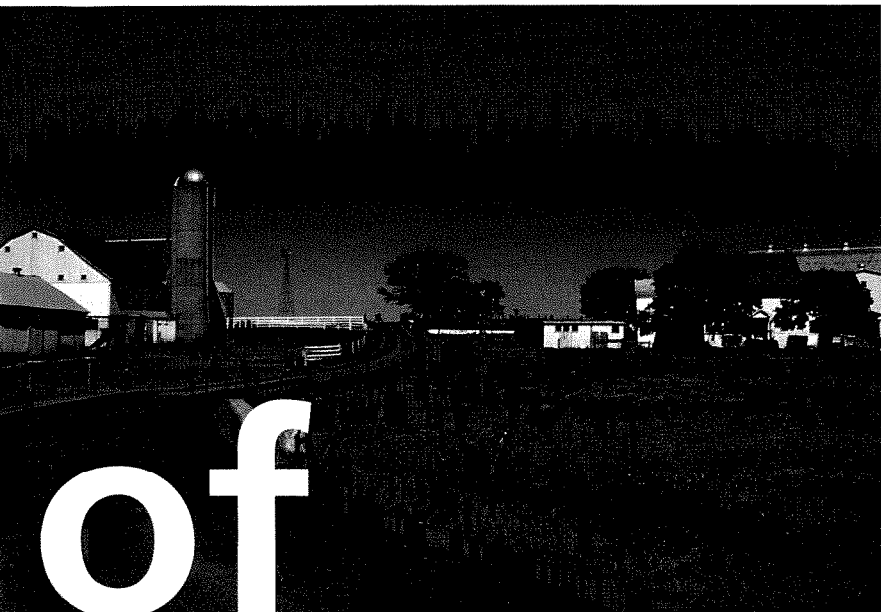
Sociologist Ray Oldenburg takes a different perspective. Oldenburg contends that human beings need what he calls a “third place” — home being the first and work being the second. He is rather specific about the characteristics of these “third places.” They are filled with people, they are not exclusively reserved for the well-dressed crowd, there are abundant places to sit, human scale has been preserved, and “cars haven't defeated the pedestrians in the battle for the streets.” Just think for a moment about your favorite neighborhood and see if it doesn't meet those tests.

Oldenburg's “third places” include public spaces within neighborhoods. He reaches the same conclusion as Gallagher does about place and personal safety, observing, “Attachment to

1. Alan Gussow cited in E.V. Walter, *Placeways: A Theory of the Human Environment* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 209.

2. Winifred Gallagher, *The Power of Place* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1993), 132





of Place

Top: Lancaster County landscape. Courtesy Pa. Dutch Convention and Visitors Bureau.
Center left: Winslow CoHousing, Bainbridge Island, Wash. Courtesy CoHousing Company.
Center right: Jim Thorpe, Pa., main street.
Below: North East Harbor, Me., waterfront.

the area and the sense of place that it imparts expand with the individuals walking familiarity with it. In such locales, parents and their children range freely. The streets are not only safe, they invite human connection.”³

Daniel Kemmis, the mayor of Missoula, Montana, is frustrated with political gridlock on the local level. But is his solution more government programs, more members of his political party in office, or more news conferences? No. Instead he takes a wonderful step back from the cacophony of politics and grounds himself. He writes:

“(W)hat ‘we’ do depends upon who ‘we’ are (or who we think we are). It depends, in other words, upon how we choose to relate to each other, to the place we inhabit, and to the issues which that inhabiting raises for us. If, in fact, there is a connection between the places we inhabit and the political culture which our inhabiting of them produces, then, perhaps, it makes sense to begin with the place, with a sense of what it is, and then try to imagine a way of being public which would fit the place.”⁴

Regardless of their particular perspective, Gallagher, Oldenburg and Kemmis reach the same conclusions: place has an immense impact on how we think and act as human beings; the quality of the built environment around us is, overall, getting worse instead of better; and there has been a marked shift away from the interaction between people and their place.

There is also a renewed recognition of the importance of a concept called “community.” One forum for this interest is an emerging national movement called “communitarianism,” led by sociologist Amitai Etzioni and joined by Common Cause founder John Gardner, presidential advisor William Galston, Columbia University law professor John Coffee, pollster Daniel Yankelovich and others. Their platform, spelled out in Etzioni’s book, *The Spirit of Community*, is multifaceted and much of it not germane to this discussion. But their definition of “community” is useful: “a place in which people know and care for one another — the kind of place in which people do not merely ask ‘How are you?’ as a formality but care about the answer.”⁵ Just as there is an intangible sense that makes a place out of a location, so there is an intangible spirit that makes

a community out of a municipality.

Others are researching, writing and talking about this concept of community as well. Harvard law professor Mary Ann Glendon expresses concern that “communities” are insufficiently recognized by the court system. Theologian John Snow bemoans rootlessness and the lack of communities to support families. Sociologist Robert Bellah and his colleagues contend that reaching *The Good Society* — the title of their most recent book — requires “paying attention,” by which they mean paying attention to community.⁶ Neighborhood activists, downtown associations, inner-city housing organizations, small town development groups are surfacing as major proponents of community in their locales.

The use of the word “community” is certainly not new. In the 1960s there was a call to community in the form of the “power to the people” movement. But that so-called community was out to save the world; today’s community is out to save the neighborhood. That community was naive but also decidedly self-righteous; today’s community is realistic and unpretentious without being meek. That community was ideological and decidedly on the left; today’s community is political but not particularly partisan and is much more “help ourselves” than “you have to help us.”

So we have one interdisciplinary group of thinkers, observers and theorists who are rediscovering the significance of place. At the same time we have another interdisciplinary group of thinkers, observers and theorists, joined by some local activists, who are proclaiming the critical importance of community.

In their search for meaning in place and community, these writers (none of whom represents him or herself as an historic preservationist or urbandesigner) have found what preservationists and other design advocates have already discovered. The character of our built environment, historic areas and others, is directly related to both the strength of our communities and the quality of place.

What virtually none of these writers has recognized is that the two concepts, community and place, are inseparable. “Place” is the vessel within which the “spirit” of community is stored; “community” is the catalyst that imbues a location with a sense of place.

Once understood in this context, many things

3. Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place* (New York, Paragon House, 1991), 210.

4. Daniel Kemmis, *Community and the Politics of Place* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 41.

5. Amitai Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community* (New York: Touchstone, 1993), 31.

6. Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swindler, Steven M. Tipton, *The Good Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 254.

begin to make sense. The anger that is deeply felt when a neighborhood landmark is razed is not a reaction to the loss of the building (it was only stone and wood, after all) but to the taking away of a piece of the community. This context also tells us why preservation is an overwhelmingly local endeavor, why the demolition of a building in your town isn't, frankly, too important to me, nor my neighborhood loss to you. Those aren't our communities. It explains why strong neighborhood groups are much more often found in older neighborhoods than new — the sense of place and the spirit of community have had time to reinforce each other.

Place, Community and Economic Development

Each of these writers has his or her own slant on why the sense of place or the spirit of community is important: for public safety, political participation, cultural development, aesthetic richness, neighborliness, legal balance, mental health, conflict resolution. Those are all important outcomes and I am sure place and community affect them.

What I know most about is economic development, and I can tell you the same thing is true: a sense of place and the spirit of community will be crucial for successful economic development well into the next century.

Let me begin with two simple facts of economic life. First, a community cannot survive without economic health, and second, economic health cannot be maintained without economic growth. While towns, cities and nations can stand the periodic ups and downs of business cycles, failure over the longer term to have economic growth will inevitably lead to economic decline. Economic decline is fewer jobs and lower pay for the jobs that do exist. Without jobs, people either move away or become permanent dependents of the state. Departure and dependency have the same end result — loss of community, however you define it.

While we do need economic growth, we don't necessarily need more people. It is possible to have economic growth without having population growth, through better education, higher productivity, innovation and import substitution.

We are in the midst of a major shift in how the economy functions. There are four interrelated aspects of this shift: globalization, localization,

quality of life as the critical factor in economic growth, location dependency being replaced by innovation and place dependency.

The first two factors are globalization and localization. For all the discussion we hear, globalization has only just begun. We are in a global economy, a global marketplace, and in coming years it will only be more so. Those that choose to opt out for the sake of parochial interests, provincial ideology or protectionist isolationism will simply be left out, doomed to economic decline, and their citizens will be the losers. "Think Globally, Act Locally" was the slogan of antinuclear activists in the 1970s and of environmentalists in the 1980s. From now on, it will be a slogan for economic development.

The exciting part of globalization is not the "think globally" part, it is the "act locally" part. Current trade policy debates largely ignore the vital role individual towns, cities, even neighborhoods have in the globalization process. But as Michael Porter writes in *The Competitive Advantage of Nations*, "The process of creating skills and the important influences on the role of improvement and innovation are intensely local. Paradoxically, open global competition makes the home base more, not less important."⁷ Porter maintains that the process of building skills, improvement and innovation are local because education, face-to-face communication and interaction with co-workers, and complimentary and competitive industries are also local.

Akio Morito, founder of Sony, calls this phenomenon "global localization." Richard Knight, a professor at the University of Amsterdam, argues that "Cities are in ascendance because they are the nexus of the global society" and that how individual cities fare "will depend on their ability to anticipate and adapt to the challenge [of globalization]." While some individuals can work for limited periods in technological isolation, certain industries, particularly knowledge-based industries, must interact with each other on an institutional basis. Further, the innovators within those industries are stimulated by random encounters with people and situations. That happens almost exclusively in cities. Business guru Peter Drucker ties this global localization to community. In *PostCapitalist Society* he writes that tomorrow's

8. Richard V. Knight, *Cities in a Global Society*, (Newbury Park, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1989), 223. Peter F. Drucker, *Post-Capitalist Society*, (New York: Harper Business, 1993), 214-215.

9. Philip Kotler, Donald H. Haider, Irving Rein, *Marketing Places: Attracting Investment, Industry and Tourism to Cities, States, and Nations*, (New York: The Free Press, 1993), 20.

educated person “must become a ‘citizen of the world’ — in vision, horizon, information. But he or she will also have to draw nourishment from their local roots and, in turn, enrich and nourish their own local culture.”⁸

The third factor is the importance of quality of life, which is the most significant variable in economic development decisions. What constitutes “quality of life”? A variety of lists have been made. But every item on every list I have read can be divided into one of two categories: the physical and the human. Do you think that it’s only coincidence that the physical might be redefined as “place” and the human redefined as “community”?

Quality of life is the amalgam of those things that make a place out of a location and a community out of a bunch of houses. That’s why the debate cannot be allowed to place economic development and quality urban design in opposition to each other. Today, for lots of reasons, economic growth will only take place on a sustainable basis where there is a high quality of life; and securing quality of life is at the heart of what preservation and community design is all about. When “quality of life” is defined by gated housing developments, then only three variables are considered important in the quality of life criteria: clean, seemingly safe (though usually illusional) and homogeneity. But that definition is neither how most Americans are going to live in the future, nor does it provide the human interaction nor the evidence of community evolution that in the end are more important elements for sustainable “community.”

Quality of life is sometimes painted as the soft side of economic development, while infrastructure costs, tax rates and utility costs are the hard factors. Yet more and more institutional investors in municipal bonds are looking increasingly at the local quality of life to determine if they want to buy the bonds or not. Without quality of life, they reason, reinvestment won’t occur. No reinvestment means no economic growth. No economic growth means economic decline. Economic decline means less tax revenue. Less tax revenue means the bonds can’t be paid off.

The last factor is the shift from cities being location dependent to cities being place dependent. Think about how nearly all cities began; they were founded and grew because of their

dependence on a fixed location. They were located on a seaport, or near raw materials, at transportation crossroads, or close to a water source, or at a point that was appropriate as a military defensive outpost. They were location dependent.

The most far reaching book about tomorrow’s economic development strategy, *Marketing Places*, was written by three professors at Northwestern University who call their strategy “place development.” In part they write, “A place’s potential depends not so much on a place’s location, climate, and natural resources as it does on its human will, skill, energy, values, and organization.”⁹

Tomorrow’s cities (at least in North America, Japan and Europe) will be innovation and place dependent. Please note that I said place dependent, not location dependent. Our product will be knowledge and information. Information is a product whose inventory takes almost no storage space, can be created anywhere, can be transported instantly and cheaply, and can be adapted, expanded and modified at will. Cities will either innovate and build on the strengths of their place or they will decline. They will no longer be able to make excuses that, “copper prices are down” or “they moved the interstate highway interchange” or “a new harbor opened up down the coast.” The physical characteristics of a community, natural and manmade, new and old, are the corporeal manifestations of place and, by extension, community. All of the benefits that Oldenburg, Gallagher, Kemmis, and Walter see in “community” are decidedly diminished as the quality of the physical design and quality of the community are diminished.

There is one important economic consequence of these four economic trends that affect our cities — the matter of community differentiation. In the free market, it is the differentiated product that commands a monetary premium. If in the long run we want to attract capital, to attract investment to our cities, we must differentiate them from anywhere else. It is our built environment that expresses, perhaps better than anything else, our diversity, our identity, our individuality, or differentiation.

Missoula mayor Kemmis reinforces this. He says, “Any serious move by a local economic development organization goes hand in hand with an effort to identify and describe the characteristics of that locality which set it apart and give it a



Cities can attract capital and investment by recognizing what differentiates them from other places. Clockwise, from far left: Charleston, S.C.; Mercer Slough Nature Park, Bellevue, Wash. Courtesy Jones and Jones; Camden, Me., waterfront.

distinct identity.”¹⁰ The major reason preservationists struggle to maintain their city’s historic resources is to maintain the city’s distinct identity.

There is one dark cloud on the horizon — the so called “property rights” movement. This burgeoning movement is making a concerted attack on land-use regulation throughout the United States. We have to challenge this movement head-on. In forum after forum, point by point, we cannot allow their hogwash to go unanswered.

If quality of life is the significant variable for economic development, and if the physical environment is a major element of quality of life criteria, then there is no greater threat to sustainable economic growth than the elimination of those community-based enactments whose sole purpose is the protection of the physical environment, whether it is built or natural. In the name of real estate rights these myopic fast-buck artists are dooming the economic future of our communities, not the preservationists, environmentalists, urban design advocates and their allies. Yet the property rights advocates are getting away with claiming the opposite.

I want to conclude with two quotations that, I think, effectively convey both the importance of sense of place and the significance of the spirit of community. First, the widely admired American author Eudora Welty writes, in her collection of essays entitled *The Eye of the Story*:

*“It is our describable outside that defines us, willy-nilly, to others, that may save us, or destroy us, in the world; it may be our shield against chaos, our mask against exposure; but whatever it is, the move we make in the place we live has to signify our intent and meaning.”*¹¹

Nearly 150 years ago John Ruskin was referring to buildings but I think what he wrote applies to our entire communities as well. He wrote:

*“When we build let us think that we build for ever. Let it not be for present delight, nor for present use alone; let it be such work as our descendants will thank us for, and let us think, as we lay stone on stone, that a time is to come when those stones will be held sacred because our hands have touched them, and that men will say as they look upon the labor and wrought substance of them, ‘See! This our fathers did for us.’”*¹²

10. Daniel Kemmis, *Community and the Politics of Place* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 88.

11. Eudora Welty, *The Eye of the Story*, (New York: Vintage, 1990), 122.

12. John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), 176-177.