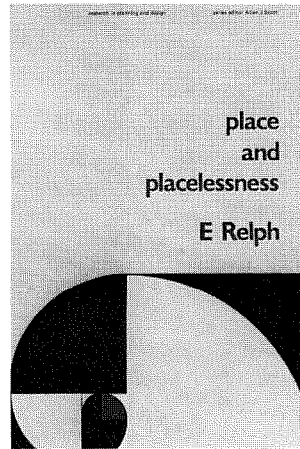


Reciprocal Reviews

In 1976, Edward Relph, a professor of geography at the University of Toronto, and Dean MacCannell, a professor of sociology at the University of California at Davis, published fascinating books about the sense of place that were in many ways dramatically opposed to each other. Relph's book, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion Limited, 1976), was a carefully conceived tirade against the placelessness of so many modern buildings, products, planning matters, and—ultimately—places. Drawing on phenomenology and, in particular, the writings of Heidegger, the concepts of authenticity and inauthenticity are central to this critique of the modern world. MacCannell's book, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), offers brilliant insights into the nature of tourism and tourist places. MacCannell accepts the phenomenon of tourism, suggests, in fact, that it is one of the most significant modern activities, and coolly analyzes the “staged” authenticity of tourist places. Both books have many insights for the designers of places, so we have asked the authors to review each others work in order to start debate. Here are some extracts. We hope that readers will continue the dialogue in future issues.



Edward Relph,
Place and Placelessness
(London: Pion Limited,
1976)

If there were a movement to combine social and aesthetic thinking into a new humanism with a solid philosophical base, then Edward Relph's *Place and Placelessness* would fall squarely into it. Since there is not, a careful study of his book might tell us why such a badly needed movement does not yet exist. Relph's position is clear cut: the rootlessness of human beings in modern society combined with single-function uses of space (e.g., specialized places for working, eating, playing) drain life of any apparent purpose. The absence of a strong identification with a particular place, in Relph's view, forces us to live our lives trapped in superficial relationships to other human beings while suffering from a chronic case of nostalgia. One symptom of this nostalgia he finds in housing design, where townhouses disguised as peasant cottages are supposed to satisfy the urbanite's longing for a rural past. Ultimately such devices only increase a particular form of alienation which Relph calls “placelessness.”

As a criticism of modernism, there is nothing new about his thesis. It is shared by most liberal humanists who have written on the subject in the last 30 years, including Jane Jacobs and Daniel Boorstin. But Relph has secured the same ground with a good deal of justification and an unusual sensitivity to human feelings about place. He has also done a superb job of

revealing the political program implicit in “scientific geography,” community development, and what he calls “technique-dominated planning, divorced from places as we know and experience them in our everyday lives, and quite casually ignoring or obliterating them.” (p. 89)

“Such narrow and scientific attitudes, conveniently subsuming ethical questions, are the basis for improving the efficiency of pacification programs in South Vietnam, for displacing single-family residences by high-rise offices in the interests of economic growth, or for flooding Indian lands for the construction of hydroelectric projects.” (p. 89) As an antidote to these modern pathogens, Relph proffers a Heideggerian theory of place as existentially experienced.

At first one might be tempted to set the book aside as just another weak reflection of the 1960s, no longer relevant to our current hard-nosed and practical approach to cultural and political affairs. But it would be foolish to do so. Much of what he says is essentially correct. A most interesting question is why humanist criticisms, especially powerful ones such as Relph's, fail. Why have all the manifestos not attracted an effective political following to counter the current selfish utilitarian approach to development and planning?

Before dealing with this question, I ought to note some characteristics of Relph's argument that distinguish it from merely left-or-right leaning criticisms of modernity. First among them is the observation that any solution to practical or applied problems, including the design and construction of environments for human life, requires the combined efforts of several disciplines. The second is a realization that interdisciplinary cooperation is impossible unless a common language is used and understood by everyone. Scientific method, statistical inference, and general systems theory have all functioned in the past as languages in the building of the modern world, but it is against precisely those products of interdisciplinary collaboration mediated by scientific rationality that Relph directs his most biting criticisms. That collaboration resulted in environments that were efficient from the standpoint of big business and centralized authority, but divorced from the intimate requirements of daily life. As a corrective, Relph suggests that we make phenomenology—not rationality—the common denominator of our collaborative efforts.

On the surface, this would seem to be a move in the right direction. The prestige of modern phenomenology is based, for the most part, on Edmund Husserl's demotion of scientific rationality and

his restoration of subjectivity and consciousness to philosophical authority. Husserl thinks scientific rationality is an inappropriate universal world view; it should be restricted to its proper role as the method for handling a series of technical exercises. If used in dealing with essences, phenomenology would—according to Husserl and his followers, including Relph—put us back in touch with ourselves, with others, and with our environment, or "life world," as the phenomenologists call it. Every vital modern movement from existentialism to abstract expressionism has been influenced directly or indirectly by these ideas. Relph comments:

The approach I adopt derives a great deal from phenomenological methods. These proceed from an acceptance both of the wholeness and indivisibility of human experience, and from the fact that meaning defined by human intentions is central to all our existence. The lived-world and its geography are thus taken as being irrefutably and profoundly human and meaningful, and place can be approached with as few presuppositions as possible concerning its character or form, for it is recognised from the outset that place has a range of significances and identities that is as wide as the range of human consciousness of place. (p. 7)

The difficulty with Relph's

position does not lie in his criticism of scientific rationality or in his insistence on the importance of the role of subjectivity in the creation and analysis of human habitats. Rather, it is undermined by his tendency to equate humanism with individualism, an idea which phenomenology, as it is practiced by Relph and others, seems to support and which is accepted and promulgated by common sense, the Catholic Church, and Western capitalism. His position ignores considerations of community, even of the effects of the simple presence of other human beings, except as extensions of the original, central, unified, authoritative subjectivity.

Phenomenology should question—and not just accept and advance—the unexamined assumption of a link between individualism and humanism, but the phenomenological reflection still goes on in terms of my consciousness vs. everyone and everything else.

The phenomenological viewpoint is, thereby, not unlike that of big business and centralized government, the very institutions which Relph wants to oppose, and in that sense Relph's use of phenomenology as a philosophical basis for his criticism of modernity is politically naive. Programs and operations, including large-scale construction of human habitats, if organized

using a phenomenological perspective, could succeed only if everyone involved were essentially a “good guy,” the kind of person that was once—though apparently no longer—thought to be dependably raised by proper upbringing and a liberal-arts education. Certainly the subjectivity at the center of Relph’s space is of a type sensitive to the needs and desires of others and concerned about the preservation of nature and tradition.

But there is also something too optimistic about his viewpoint. *Place and Placelessness* does not consider the dark side of space, aside from his criticism of the sterility of scientific rationality and his warnings about the consequences of neglect. He does not concern himself with the evil cures that have already been invented for “placelessness”: the atrocities committed in the name of the Fatherland, the “wholeness and indivisibility of the human spirit” defined as racial purity, and current explanations of antisocial behavior as motivated by “territorial instincts.” By making a methodological principle of the isolation of the individual from colleagues, comrades, peers, and adversaries, and by assuming that everyone is essentially well-meaning, phenomenology is open to easy manipulation by anyone who pretends to be concerned about others and

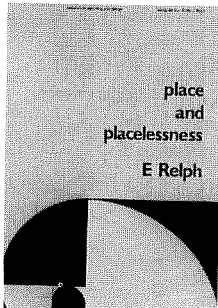
the environment, but who is in fact self-interested, bumbling, or just plain greedy.

The phenomenology of space is not only naive, it is also sociologically incorrect. In opposing individual subjectivity to the space that surrounds it (“place”), Relph has dropped from his analysis two considerations central to the definition of space and place: who else is there, and what are they doing? Relph writes, “Each place is unique and has a persistent sameness within itself.” (p. 61) Evidently he has not been in a bank as it was being robbed, or in a restaurant when some celebrity was eating dinner. Space influences social relations, and vice versa. Tight space requires persons to come into intimate contact with one another, forcing an exchange of small civilities even among the unacquainted. The largest spaces are equally marked by social organization: satellite photographs reveal that the border between Canada and the United States can be seen clearly from outer space, and some analysts have suggested that the visibility of this invisible line results from the different forms teaching, research, and extension take in the colleges of agriculture in the two countries.

The incorporation of detailed sociological knowledge into the design and analysis of space raises an interesting question: Can a place have a meaning—

that is, influence life sufficiently to cause us to think, see, and act more freely—that is not anchored in a subjective form of consciousness that is tied or housed in that place? If the answer is “no,” Relph’s analysis and approach are essentially correct. But I think even Relph would agree that there is another way of looking at space and place. Instead of identifying subjects with stabilizing, objective spaces, consider the possibility that the making of space never ends. It begins perhaps with an architect, but it is remade at every moment by its users, not just in their minds but by their presence and by their acts. Thinking of space this way redirects our attention away from the subject at the center of the space and toward the ways changing spaces can point and direct our subjectivity. Following this line of thought, we might eventually arrive at an analogue to Lévi-Strauss’s remark about primitive myths, that “space is good to think with.” Now where is the subjectivity? It is in the phenomenological subject, but it is also in space. The spaces that have been made by human beings are a form of language that no one can read very well.

Relph’s analysis of “authentic places,” which he defines as space that is lived in and used, marked by human intentions, carries him beyond the phenomenological subject into analyses



of actual factories, homes, and neighborhoods. Those are often superb; they combine details in a way that opens the reader's eyes. In these analyses, Relph is on the verge of deciphering the meaning of the specific places he analyzes from Liverpool to Disneyland without recourse to phenomenological subjectivity. But he never quite gets there, because he cannot, or will not, accept the possibility that one effect of living in a space and making it authentic is polluting it. Relph would like a clear and simple working definition of pollution as things he does not want mixed in with the positive or authentic. But our attitudes toward things like filth, graffiti, and pollution are not clear and simple. An explorer once described how overwhelmed with joy and relief he was when he came across some tin cans and other rubbish after having been lost for several days in an unmapped area of Baja, California. If the cans had been left in his own backyard, he would have had quite a different reaction. Beethoven scratched his initials on the backs of his quartet of Guarnerius stringed instruments (extremely valuable even in his day) to remind his friends who came to play not to wander off with them. Today the instruments are displayed graffiti-side out in the Beethovenhaus in Bonn. Obviously notions of what constitutes defacement

change with the defacer and the circumstance. Pollution is only a clear and simple matter to those who have agreed to read the evidence in the same way. It might better be defined as a modification of the environment by something to which society attaches no value. Once it is defined in this way it is possible to discern two ways to eliminate pollution: one is to eliminate the pollutant; the other is to upgrade its social value. At the present time, we seem to be shifting to this second mode of cleanup. Once again, the smoking stacks of factories are being pointed to with the pride they elicited in the nineteenth century.

Relph has correctly identified the two poles of modern culture as the authentic, at one end, and the tacky, polluted, and superficial, at the other. But he is wrong in suggesting that we can clean up and eliminate the slick, superficial, or dirty side of modernity and enjoy a happy future of perpetually authentic existence. About midway through his book, Relph provides a low, oblique air photograph of factories and working-class neighborhoods in Chicago, all blanketed in smog, with the following comment: "The richly varied places of the world are rapidly being obliterated under a meaningless pattern of buildings, monotonous and chaotic." (p. 118) He does not mention that Chicago is

regarded as the typical American city by sophisticated Europeans precisely because it is unplanned, dirty, industrial, and pragmatic.

Authenticity is irretrievably an inauthentic category that owes its existence to our conviction that modernity is "slick" and "superficial." If anyone has ever led an authentic life, it would be impossible for him/her to know it. Only partly modernized peoples, distressed by the condition of their lives, are nervously concerned about "authenticity." The inauthentic and the authentic are reciprocal in essence, and we need much more sophisticated critical paradigms to find our way out of the impasse of modernity.

Toward the end of his book Relph switches without any explanation from a phenomenological to a semiotic framework for his analysis. In analyzing the facade of an X-rated movie house, he begins to find meaning in the sign (the "X") and completely abandons the phenomenological subject in his search for the meaning of the place. But he does not probe the implications of his shift; I, for one, would like to see him begin his next work there.

Dean MacCannell