Space and Place

The Perspective of Experience

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Preface

The life of thought is a continuous story, like life itself: one book grows out of another as in the world of political commitment one action leads to another. I wrote a book called *Topophilia* out of the need to sort and order in some way the wide variety of attitudes and values relating to man's physical environment. While I enjoyed noting the richness and range of human environmental experience, I could not at that time find an overarching theme or concept with which to structure my heterogeneous material; and in the end I often had to resort to convenient and conventional categories (like suburb, town, and city, or the separate treatment of the human senses) rather than to categories that evolved logically out of a ruling theme. The present book is an attempt to achieve a more coherent statement. To do this I narrow my focus to the closely related "space" and "place" components of environment. More importantly, I try to develop my material from a single perspective — namely, that of experience. The complex nature of human experience, which ranges from inchoate feeling to explicit conception, commands the subject matter and themes of this book.

It has often been difficult for me to acknowledge properly my intellectual debts. One reason is that I owe so much to so

many. An even greater problem is that I may well fail to acknowledge people to whom I owe the greatest debt. I have cannibalized them! Their ideas have become my own innermost thoughts. My unnamed mentors include students and colleagues at the University of Minnesota. I expect them to be indulgent toward any unconscious borrowing of their insights, for all teachers know it to be the sincerest form of compliment.

I do have specific debts, and it gives me pleasure to acknowledge them. I am deeply grateful to J. B. Jackson and P. W. Porter for their encouragement of my fumbling efforts; to Su-chang Wang, Sandra Haas, and Patricia Burwell for the diagrams which achieve a formal elegance that in the case of the text remains only an aspiration; and to Dorian Kottler of the University Press for the meticulous job of copyediting. I also want to thank the following institutions, which provided me with the resources to work on *Space and Place* with little interruption in the last two years: the University of Minnesota for granting me a sabbatical leave followed by a year's leave of absence; the University of Hawaii, where I first explored the themes of this book with a small group of sympathetic graduate students; the Australian-American Educational Foundation (Fulbright-Hays program) for an award to visit Australia; the Department of Human Geography at the Australian National University for providing a congenial and stimulating environment in which to think and write; and the University of California at Davis for a year of sunshine and warmth, human and climatic.

Yi-Fu Tuan

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Introduction

"Space" and "place" are familiar words denoting common experiences. We live in space. There is no space for another building on the lot. The Great Plains look spacious. Place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other. There is no place like home. What is home? It is the old homestead, the old neighborhood, hometown, or motherland. Geographers study places. Planners would like to evoke "a sense of place." These are unexceptional ways of speaking. Space and place are basic components of the lived world; we take them for granted. When we think about them, however, they may assume unexpected meanings and raise questions we have not thought to ask.

What is space? Let an episode in the life of the theologian Paul Tillich focus the question so that it bears on the meaning of space in experience. Tillich was born and brought up in a small town in eastern Germany before the turn of the century. The town was medieval in character. Surrounded by a wall and administered from a medieval town hall, it gave the impression of a small, protected, and self-contained world. To an imaginative child it felt narrow and restrictive. Every year, however young Tillich was able to escape with his family to the Baltic Sea. The flight to the limitless horizon and unrestricted space

of the seashore was a great event. Much later Tillich chose a place on the Atlantic Ocean for his days of retirement, a decision that undoubtedly owed much to those early experiences. As a boy Tillich was also able to escape from the narrowness of small-town life by making trips to Berlin. Visits to the big city curiously reminded him of the sea. Berlin, too, gave Tillich a feeling of openness, infinity, unrestricted space.[1] Experiences of this kind make us ponder anew the meaning of a word like "space" or "spaciousness" that we think we know well.

What is a place? What gives a place its identity, its aura? These questions occurred to the physicists Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg when they visited Kronberg Castle in Denmark. Bohr said to Heisenberg:

> Isn't it strange how this castle changes as soon as one imagines that Hamlet lived here? As scientists we believe that a castle consists only of stones, and admire the way the architect put them together. The stones, the green roof with its patina, the wood carvings in the church, constitute the whole castle. None of this should be changed by the fact that Hamlet lived here, and yet it is changed completely. Suddenly the walls and the ramparts speak a quite different language. The courtyard becomes an entire world, a dark corner reminds us of the darkness in the human soul, we hear Hamlet's "To be or not to be." Yet all we really know about Hamlet is that his name appears in a thirteenth-century chronicle. No one can prove that he really lived, let alone that he lived here. But everyone knows the questions Shakespeare had him ask, the human depth he was made to reveal, and so he, too, had to be found a place on earth, here in Kronberg. And once we know that, Kronberg becomes quite a different castle for us.[2]

Recent ethological studies show that nonhuman animals also have a sense of territory and of place. Spaces are marked off and defended against intruders. Places are centers of felt value where biological needs, such as those for food, water, rest, and procreation, are satisfied. Humans share with other animals certain behavioral patterns, but as the reflections of Tillich and Bohr indicate, people also respond to space and place in complicated ways that are inconceivable in the animal world. How can the Baltic Sea and Berlin both evoke a sense of openness and infinitude? How can a mere legend haunt Kronberg Castle and impart a mood that infiltrates the minds of two

famous scientists? If our concern with the nature and quality of the human environment is serious, these are surely basic questions. Yet they have seldom been raised. Instead we study animals such as rats and wolves and say that human behavior and values are much like theirs. Or we measure and map space and place, and acquire spatial laws and resource inventories for our efforts. These are important approaches, but they need to be complemented by experiential data that we can collect and interpret in measured confidence because we are human ourselves. We have privileged access to states of mind, thoughts and feelings. We have an insider's view of human facts, a claim we cannot make with regard to other kinds of facts.

People sometimes behave like cornered and wary animals. On occasion they may also act like cool scientists dedicated to the task of formulating laws and mapping resources. Neither posture holds sway for long. People are complex beings. The human endowment includes sensory organs similar to those of other primates, but it is capped by an exceptionally refined capacity for symbolization. How the human person, who is animal, fantasist, and computer combined, experiences and understands the world is the central theme of this book.

Given the human endowment, in what ways do people attach meaning to and organize space and place? When this question is asked, the social scientist is tempted to rush to culture as an explanatory factor. Culture is uniquely developed in human beings. It strongly influences human behavior and values. The Eskimos' sense of space and place is very different from that of Americans. This approach is valid, but it overlooks the problem of shared traits that transcend cultural particularities and may therefore reflect the general human condition. When note is taken of "universals," the behavioral scientist is likely to turn to the analogue of primate behavior. In this book our animal heritage is assumed. The importance of culture is taken for granted; culture is inescapable, and it is explored in every chapter. But the purpose of the essay is not to produce a handbook of how cultures affect human attitudes to space and place. The essay is, rather, a prologue to culture in its countless variety; it focuses on general questions of human dispositions,

capacities, and needs, and on how culture emphasizes or distorts them. Three themes weave through the essay. They are:

(1) The biological facts. Human infants have only very crude notions of space and place. In time they acquire sophistication. What are the stages of learning? The human body lies prone, or it is upright. Upright it has top and bottom, front and back, right and left. How are these bodily postures, divisions, and values extrapolated onto circumambient space?

(2) The relations of space and place. In experience, the meaning of space often merges with that of place. "Space" is more abstract than "place." What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value. Architects talk about the spatial qualities of place; they can equally well speak of the locational (place) qualities of space. 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.

(3) The range of experience or knowledge. Experience can be direct and intimate, or it can be indirect and conceptual, mediated by symbols. We know our home intimately; we can only know *about* our country if it is very large. A longtime resident of Minneapolis knows the city, a cabdriver learns to find his way in it, a geographer studies Minneapolis and knows the city conceptually. These are three kinds of experiencing. One person may know a place intimately as well as conceptually. He can articulate ideas but he has difficulty expressing what he knows through his senses of touch, taste, smell, hearing, and even vision.

People tend to suppress that which they cannot express. If an experience resists ready communication, a common response among activists ("doers") is to deem it private—even idiosyncratic—and hence unimportant. In the large literature on environmental quality, relatively few works attempt to understand how people feel about space and place, to take into account the different modes of experience (sensorimotor, tactile, visual, conceptual), and to interpret space and place as images of complex—often ambivalent—feelings. Professional planners, with their urgent need to act, move too quickly to models and inventories. The layman accepts too readily from charismatic planners and propagandists the environmental slogans he may have picked up through the media; the rich experiential data on which these abstractions depend are easily forgotten. Yet it is possible to articulate subtle human experiences. Artists have tried—often with success. In works of literature as well as in humanistic psychology, philosophy, anthropology and geography, intricate worlds of human experience are recorded.

This book draws attention to questions that humanists have posed with regard to space and place.[3] It attempts to systematize humanistic insights, to display them in conceptual frames (here organized as chapters) so that their importance is evident to us not only as thoughtful people curious to know more about our own nature—our potential for experiencing—but also as tenants of the earth practically concerned with the design of a more human habitat. The approach is descriptive, aiming more often to suggest than to conclude. In an area of study where so much is tentative, perhaps each statement should end with a question mark or be accompanied by qualifying clauses. The reader is asked to supply them. An exploratory work such as this should have the virtue of clarity even if this calls for the sacrifice of scholarly detail and qualification.

A key term in the book is "experience." What is the nature of experience and of the experiential perspective?