

WALKER ART CENTER

A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time

Author(s): J. B. Jackson

Source: *Design Quarterly*, Spring, 1995, No. 164, Sprawl (Spring, 1995), pp. 24-27

Published by: Walker Art Center

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4091350>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Walker Art Center is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Design Quarterly*

JSTOR

A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time

by J. B. Jackson

This essay is excerpted from the 1994 book of the same name, published by Yale University Press. Reprinted with permission.

The truth is, Americans are of two minds as to how we ought to live. Publicly we say harsh things about urban sprawl and suburbia, and we encourage activity in the heart of town. In theory, but only in theory, we want to duplicate the traditional compact European community where everyone takes part in a rich and diversified public life. But at the same time most of us are secretly pining for a secluded hideaway, a piece of land, or a small house in the country where we can lead an intensely private nonurban existence, staying close to home. I am not entirely sure that this is a real contradiction. While we agree that scatteration and the dying central city are both of them unsightly and illogical, we also, I think, feel a deep and persistent need for privacy and independence in our domestic life. That is why the freestanding dwelling on its own well-defined plot of land, whether in a prosperous residential neighborhood or in impoverished urban fringes, is so persistent a feature of our landscape. That is why our downtown areas, however vital they may be economically, are so lacking in what is called a sense of place.

“Sense of place” is a much used expression, chiefly by architects but taken over by urban planners and interior decorators and the promoters of condominiums, so that now it means very little. It is an awkward and ambiguous modern translation of the Latin term *genius loci*. In classical times it meant not so much the place itself as the guardian divinity of that place. It was believed that a locality—a space or a structure or a whole community—derived much of its unique quality from the presence or guardianship of a supernatural spirit. The visitor and the inhabitants were always aware of that benign presence and paid reverence to it on many occasions. The phrase thus implied celebration or ritual, and the location itself acquired a special status. Our modern culture rejected the notion of a divine or supernatural presence, and in the eighteenth century the Latin phrase was usually translated as “the genius of a place,” meaning its influence. Travelers would say that they stayed in Rome for a month or so in order to savor the genius of the city. We now use the current version to describe the *atmosphere* to a place, the quality of its *environment*. Nevertheless, we recognize that certain localities have an attraction which gives us a certain indefinable sense of well-being and which we want to return to, time and again. So that original notion of ritual, of repeated celebration or reverence, is still inherent in the phrase. It is not a temporary response, for it persists and brings us back, reminding us of previous visits.

So one way of defining such localities would be to say that they are cherished because they are embedded in the everyday world around us and easily accessible, but at the same time are distinct from that world. A visit to one of them is a small but significant event. We are refreshed and elated each time we are there. I cannot really define such localities any more precisely. The experience varies in intensity; it can be private and solitary, or convivial and social. The place can be a natural setting or a crowded street or even a public occasion. What moves us is our change of mood, the brief but vivid event. And what automatically ensues, it seems to me, is a sense of fellowship with those who share the experience, and the instinctive desire to return, to establish a custom of repeated ritual.

I realize that this definition automatically excludes many localities which a careless use of the term endows with a sense of place. I think it is essential that we *do* exclude many current usages. But to return to the American scene, particularly to the average American western town or city, I would say that for historical reasons few of them have structures or spaces which produce any vivid sense of *political* place. What until very recently we have had are spaces and events related to the *family* and the small neighborhood group. By that I mean not merely the home—which in the past was the basic example of the sense of place—but also those places and structures connected with ritual and with a restricted fellowship or membership—places which we could say were extensions of the dwelling or the neighborhood: the school, the church, the lodge, the cemetery, the playing field. Ask the average American of the older generation what he or she most clearly remembers and cherishes about the home town and its events and the answer will rarely be the public square, the monuments, the patriotic celebrations. What come to mind are such nonpolitical, nonarchitectural places and events as commencement, a revival service in a tent, a traditional football rivalry game, a country fair, and certain family celebrations. For all of these have those qualities I associate with a sense of place: a lively awareness of the familiar environment, a ritual repetition, a sense of fellowship based on a shared experience.

These localities are many of them out-of-date. As our cities have grown we have come closer together and acquired a more inclusive sense of community. Even so, I'm inclined to believe that the average American still associates a sense of place not so much with architecture or a monument or a designed space as with some event, some daily or weekly or seasonal occurrence which we look forward to or remember and which we share with others, and as a result the event becomes more significant than the place itself. Moreover, I believe that this has always been the common or vernacular way of recognizing the unique quality of the community we live in. The Old World farm village came to life whenever it observed the traditional farm calendar or the church calendar. The special days for plowing, for planting, for harvesting, the days set aside for honoring the local saint, were days when the local sense of place was most vivid. What made the marketplace significant was not its architecture, it was the event which took place there, the recurring day. It would be worth studying how special places have been abandoned over time, and how the event itself has been relocated.

Modern America, of course, has abandoned most of that traditional calendar. But to take its place we continue to evolve, in town after town, a complicated schedule of our own. What brings us together with people is not that we live near each other, but that we share the same timetable: the same work hours, the same religious observances, the same habits and customs. That is why we are more and more aware of time, and of the rhythm of the community. It is our sense of time, our sense of ritual, which in the long run creates our sense of place, and of community. In our urban environment which is constantly undergoing irreversible changes, a cyclical sense of time, the regular recurrence of events and celebrations, is what gives us reassurance and a sense of unity and continuity.

A remarkable book entitled *Hidden Rhythms* by Eviatar Zerubavel, published in 1981, is a pioneer treatment of what the author describes as the sociology of time: "the *sociotemporal order* which regulates the lives of *social* entities such as families, professional groups, religious communities, complex organizations, or even entire nations." Zerubavel writes that "much of our social life is temporally structured in accordance with 'mechanical time,' which is quite independent of 'the rhythm of man's organic impulses and needs.' In other words, we are increasingly detaching ourselves from 'organic and functional periodicity' which is dictated by nature, and replacing it by 'mechanical periodicity' which is dictated by the schedule, the calendar, and the clock."¹

There is no need to dwell on the ever-increasing importance of mechanical time in modern America with our insistence on schedules, programs, timetables, and the automatic recurrence of events—not only in the workplace, but in social life and celebrations. Nor need we be reminded that this reverence for the clock and the calendar has robbed much social intercourse of its spontaneity and has in fact relegated place and the sense of place to a subordinate position in our lives. Much has been written (notably by Ervin Goffman and Joshua Meyrowitz) about the disappearance of spatial distinctions and spatial characteristics because of the electronic media. In terms of the High Plains, I think it could be said that two factors contributed to an early shift from sense of place to sense of time in the organization of the landscape: the advent of the railroad with its periodicity—a decisive influence in the patterns of social and working contacts in the small railroad towns—and second, the almost total absence of topographical landmarks. Zerubavel, however, goes further in describing the social consequences of this sharing of schedules and calendars and routines, and the consequent downgrading of gathering places:

A temporal order that is commonly shared by a social group and is unique to it [as in a work schedule or holidays or a religious calendar] to the extent that it distinguishes and separates group members from “outsiders” contributes to the establishment of intergroup boundaries and constitutes a powerful basis of solidarity within the group. . . . The private or public quality of any given space very often varies across time. . . . By providing some fairly rigid boundaries that segregate the private and public spheres of life from one another . . . time seems to function as a segmenting principle; it helps segregate the private and the public spheres of life from one another.²

So in the long run it is that recurrence of certain days, certain seasons that eventually produces those spaces and structures we now think so essential. I believe we attach too much importance to art and architecture in producing an awareness of our belonging to a city or a country, when what we actually share is a sense of time. What we commemorate is its passing; and we thus establish a more universal historical bond and develop a deeper understanding of our society. Let me quote from Paul Tillich:

The power of space is great, and it is always active for creation and destruction. It is the basis of the desire of any group of human beings to have a place of their own, a place which gives them reality, presence, power of living, which feeds them, body and soul. This is the reason for the adoration of earth and soil, not of soil generally but of this special soil, and not of earth generally but of the divine powers connected with this special section of earth. . . . But every space is limited, and so the conflict arises between the limited space of any human group, even of mankind itself, and the unlimited claim which follows from the definition of this space. . . . Tragedy and injustice belong to the gods of space, historical fulfillment and justice belong to the God who acts in time and through time, uniting the separated spaces of his universe in love.³

1. Eviatar Zerubavel, *Hidden Rhythms: Schedules and Calendars in Social Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), xii.

2. *ibid.*, 141.

3. Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 16.



Nicholas Nixon
Albuquerque Sports Stadium
1974