

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Live Places: A Brief Introduction

Maurice Amiel · Tuesday, March 3rd, 2015

What is a place?

A place is a meaningful location in space, the meaning being usually associated to the “where,” “when” and “what” or “who” is therewith located.

If the place is of a tool, its meaning will be usually instrumental and practical. If the tool is no longer used or if the tool belongs to a particular person, additional layers of meaning are accrued to its place.

If the place is the location for an activity or of an event, that place may bear its name: think of “fireplace,” “birthplace,” “marketplace,” “showplace,” or “workplace.”

Language is a good means to explore actions related to place: think of “to misplace,” or “to replace,” or “to placekick,” for example.

Language is also a good means to explore values associated to a “person-thing-place”: think of “irreplaceable” and it may feel differently applied to a thing or to a person.

Places therefore have meanings spanning the whole range of human endeavors and response: banal and instrumental, symbolic and emotional, private and public, etc. Meaning of places is sometimes important enough, in terms of identity and history, for people to rise and protect these places from destruction or disfiguration.

It is therefore not surprising to arrive at the notion of LIVE PLACES given the spatial nature of life generally, and fundamentally.

What is a live place?

A live place is one the meaning of which is associated with a deep feeling of satisfaction, or with a deep sense of being alive: aware, functional, oriented and connected, be it just spatially or mostly psychologically and socially.

The reality of this notion is most evident when we are searching for a place in which to live.

Take this example provided by Natalia Ginsburg, in her collection of essays titled *A Place to Live*:



Years ago, when our apartment in Turin was sold, we decided to look for a place in Rome, and this search for a home took a very long time.

It took a long time for her family to weed thru the various “types” of places to live in, from apartments to villas, and to negotiate the fundamental difference of criteria for the choice of such places: a large garden for her and a roof top view for her husband!

The short story titled *A Place to Live* recounts in terse but sympathetic terms the process of search, negotiation and decision...and when it was all done, she describes her feeling of having finally forgotten all of it, as she had made her own “burrow” in the apartment they chose, smack in the heart of Rome, with an old courtyard and a top floor location ... but what a neighborhood!

An exploratory perspective

I intend to take you, in this new series of posts, through various live places, from home to shop, to roads and city districts, to symbolic and civic places, to downtown and city parks, basically to describe them, for the pleasure of it, and to try to understand the **civility** that makes them live for the satisfaction of it.

Why civility in relation to LIVE PLACES?

“... *here in this place where doors are left open ...*”

– Mary Kearney, “Home by now,” in *Good poems – American places*, edited by Garrison Keillor

This verse from a poem by Mary Kearney should give you a sense of it: *the sentiment of **mutual trust** that is basic to civility is also basic to a sense of being positively alive because it allows that sense to bloom, and find the resources to do so at home, in the shop and workplace, in streets and neighborhoods, in civic and symbolic places, etc.*

My experience of these precious places suggests that it is the presence of people in **active interaction with the human and physical context of these places** that establishes that feel of civility and mutual trust of live places.

The featured image of this post is of one such place: in a second-hand bookstore located on a side street of the original village heart of my neighborhood. The standing person is the owner and the seated one is a client, and they are engaged in discussing a particular book. *The cozy size of the store is crucial of course to make everybody feel part of the discussion!*

I know this may sound corny, but no less than the sharp observer of urban social mores that Jerry Seinfeld is, has made a whole series short videos on such situations in his *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee*.

The storyboards of these videos are evident: from the type of car and road selected in relation to his guest and their professional experience, to the coffee and food joints and their furnishing, equipment, fare and servers, *all are subject to manipulation, serious observation, far reaching associations, banter and laughter ...* one almost feels good just sharing, however vicariously, a bit of that feeling alive, regardless of the obvious brand name dropping.

“In finne” ...

... Given that winter is not letting us out of its grips yet, come spring and summer I will be back with illustrated accounts of such live place experiences and conversations with their users and occupants, as well as with examples drawn from pertinent readings and viewings.

Meanwhile why not look around and try to locate such live places that feel good and are meaningful to you, and probably to others with whom you may wish to share and discuss the experience.

If you wonder where to start, try places along daily routines and circuits **that you know, and where you are known**, because that is usually the result of long acquaintance, of shared knowledge and concerns, of a certain amount of mutual trust and of civility: the gas station, the morning coffee place, the lunch joint, the post office, the drug store, the small park, the newspaper and magazine stand, the car repair place, etc.

You may, afterwards, proceed **to places of interest to tourists** in your city and ponder the differences in what attracts them and what interests you; who knows, you may discover that plaque you passed by untold amount of times without really noticing it.

Can you remember, and what do you remember of, what was there **in that vacant lot** wedged between buildings that have kept traces, on their exposed sides, of adjacent buildings no longer up? What do you note particularly? What do you feel about it?

Finally, try to find **parts of the city that feel to you like live places**. Whether driving or walking, observe and note what you feel are the distinctive physical and social features that may be missing from places that do not feel so live to you.

Having done all of this, **you may wish to invite friends to share in your discoveries of live places ... as I hope to do for you!**

Photo credit Maurice Amiel

With thanks:

to the proprietor of LE LIVRE VOYAGEUR (The travelling book) in Montreal;

to my friend and cultural geographer Falken Forshaw, for bringing to my attention the Seinfeld video series;

to my friend, architect and historian Douglas Johnson who made the case for the essentially subjective nature of place experience, however modulated by the physical and social environment, and by the need for shared place-related expected behavior.

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