

Jean Robert

From place to space
(Archeology of Erehwon)

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From place to space **(Archeology of Erehwon)**

Reflexions proposed by Jean Robert in preparation of a seminar on "space and stress" at State College in 1989.

1. Place vs. space

Spaces are delimited by frontiers, contained in envelopes or defined by coordinates.

A place is bounded by a horizon.

Spaces have metrics, rules of construction, a curvature (or none) and can be represented mathematically.

A place leaves a unique imprint in the body's flesh; conversely, it is also an imprint of the body in the flesh of nature.

Spaces can be mapped, reconstructed, reproduced and represented at will by the application of their rules of construction. Spaces generated by the same rules are similar.

The place where my umbilical cord is buried is unique in the world.

Space is the receptacle of mechanical motion. Conversely, mechanical motion - the planned and institutionalized motion of our transportation age - opens space by tearing down places.

Places are associated with activities which have their end in themselves. Philia is such an activity. For Aristotle, it is the activity of which friendship is the perfection and a community the place.

2. Space and the perception of place

I remember the house where I grew up by its smells, the colors on the walls and I still feel the height of the staircase in my legs. The neighboring houses had faces, some inviting, other indifferent, some angry. That house was a home to me: the place from which, for me, everything started. To the Italian master builder who built it in 1910 - and engraved that date in a stone of the basement - it was a house that had to be mastered technically.

A place can be grasped and possessed, but never completely, never all at once. What my eyes tell my feet can't be "owned": "Der Gesichtsraum hat wesentlich keinen Besitzer", essentially, the space of vision has no owner, Wittgenstein wrote.

The depth between me and the horizon defines the reach of my eye. Within that reach, things can be grasped, but not all and not simultaneously. An intimate distance to my body prevents even close

things to be entirely visible. This intimate distance, Walter Benjamin wrote, gives unique objects their unique aura.

A place has an aura and a shadow side: both are inseparable.

Spaces are panoptical: "im Raum herrscht Lichtzwang", a light imperative dominates spaces. The rules of construction of spaces are also the rules of representation of objects.

A place is: it is not represented. It is unique. It cannot be reproduced.

"Space" and "place" are different modalities of perception. The others' unique place is, for the traveler, a landscape and for the modern commuter, a part of an homogenous "environment". The landscape is a framed "vista" of a place. What we call "the environment" is a region within boundless space.

Spaces are the containers of objects which can be exposed to pitiless light, counted, measured, reproduced, represented, controlled; the rules of construction of spaces are also means of mastering the world.

In pure "space", the flesh dissolves into pure form, explodes or, like in some painting by Francis Bacon, oscillates between being and nothingness. In *Timaeus*, Plato writes that, contrary to concrete places, space is experienced "in a dreamlike fashion". The modern driver's mind, when reflexes take command, drifts in a day-dream which is a space of injunctions.

A place is not only in the mind: it is in the heart, it is longed for. Without a place, the body is heartless.

3. The historicity of space

Western History is marked by the progressive mastery of spaces whose rules of construction are rules of representation and means of control. Before being a force of homogenization, the "westernization" of the world was a mastery of others' places by a knowledge of the rules of "space".

Western History can be conceived as progressive dominance by spaces that erode the sense of place. The knowledge of the rules of space might affect the basic categories of perception, its historical "a priori's". Readers are invited to reflect on how the rise of geometrical spaces and of precise rules of representation affected basic categories like:

- "inside-outside"
- this, and the other world
- the body's bilateralities
- day and night
- the living and the dead
- the close and the remote
- the visible and the invisible
- scale and size
- depth
- feminine and masculine domains.

4. The perception-shaping force of technology

I live in a world where many of my perceptions are shaped by my regular exposure to technologies. For instance, the speed of the vehicles I use to commute to work affects my perception of the landscapes I cross: it affects - shapes - the space and the time in which I perceive the landscape.

A "history of space" should also focus on the ways technology affects the fundamental categories of perception. I will attempt to illustrate it in reference to the history of the landscape. The transformation of the perception of the landscape by speed, I'll call its "vehicularization." Strictly speaking, it only starts with the first railroad. The "vehicularization" of landscapes gives them some properties of abstract geometrical space. It makes them, to a certain extent, "isomorphic" with spaces in which the world was represented; for instance, the parallel lines of the train evoke the vanishing lines of central perspective, the locomotive is an "arrow" or a "rocket" and its constant motion reproduces the uniform motion of ideal bodies in Galileo's laboratory.

Technology, I will argue, tends to transform the intimate experience of one's own place into a spatial experience exposed to light. A 19th century case study: Emil Rathenau, the German engineer who bought Edison's patents and introduced electric lightening in Germany also presented blueprints for "modern interiors" in which nights could be "as bright as day".

5. Mechanical metaphors "take command"

Giedion's Mechanization Takes Command¹ is still a corner stone for the study of the "mechanization" of everyday life. I will attempt to illustrate how the mechanization that "took command" was paralleled by a "spatialization" of intimate places which gave shape to the modern "private-public" duality and altered the relation between day and night. I invite participants to examine how the ways of speaking about the public and the intimate were affected by that change.

6. Space and the "misplaced concretization" of abstract concepts

I propose the following, strange hypothesis to your meditation:

The railroad changed the traditional perception of one's place. It contributed to shape a mind-frame that was ready to receive as "a fact" about any idea that could be visualized in a space.

"Energy" could be the case study. A concept of physics, it became the emblem which allowed homo transportandus to "bespeak" his experience of being shot like a galilean projectile. In Emil Rathenau's time, "energy" became the symbol of the aethereal materiality of modern times. It incited the

¹Sigfried Giedion, Mechanization takes Command, New York: Norton, 1969.

visitors of the great "industrial exhibitions" to visualize their bodies as power engines in coordinate space.

7. The body as a place of resistance against ultimate spatialization?

The body is lived in gestures, and gestures have a proper rhythm and a history. The technical mastery over spaces requires the acquisition of reflexes and routines which coordinate the senses in technically functional fashions.

It is thinkable that our memories of traditional rhythms and gestures are the ultimate remnants of "placeness" still left to us in an homogenized, place-unfriendly environment? Can we find a resistance on those memories?