

What planning needs from theorizing on place in times of global challenges

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Abstract

The paper argues for stronger integration of the theoretical notion of place in planning against multiple current challenges. It revisits some established and novel conceptual readings of place and outlines its implications for urban planning, arguing for the theoretically informed use of the place notion as instrumental in planning better cities for people. With its practical focus on shaping physical spaces in cities, urban planning delivers applied results and contributes empirically driven insights on the physical setting of cities. Notion of place, on the other hand, allows formalizing diverse social, subjective and intersubjective relations that shape our spatial experience in cities in no less impactful ways than its physical setting. The paper argues that conceptual potential of the term place for urban planning lies in bridging the physical realities of urban spaces with the human dimension of spatial experience at the level of middle range theories connecting empirical application with conceptual premises.

Key words: Urban planning, urban space, place, place-making, human-centered design

Introduction

Cities have undergone dramatic transformations since 'the world's first' city of Çatalhöyük in Konya, Türkiye, marked the transition from rural to a new urban type of settlement. Planning strives to respond to constant urban transformations. As any other institutionalized domain, for decades planning faces challenges of institutional inertia, path dependency, and rigidity of established paradigms (Blotevogel et al. 2014; Albrechts 2010) among others, that hinder the responsive potential of planning. At the same time, planning itself acts as a major agent of urban transformation, bringing novel challenges of growth and development that uproot established ways of living. In the age of planetary crisis and accelerating global changes, the responsibility of planning is not only in providing adequate response by leading transformations but in ensuring continuity and upholding a human-centric approach in tackling the above (Good et al. 2017).

Place-based measures are an often-evoked response to the above conditions across many facets of planning. Yet, place is far from being an established conceptual term across planning landscape. While receiving some dedicated theoretical attention on its own (), the most common way for place to feature in planning remains at applied level in an ad hoc or common sense manner without underlying conceptual substantiation (Ellery et al. 2021; Strydom et al. 2018).

Meanwhile the term 'place' is a theoretically loaded notion, albeit no overarching theory of place exists (Cresswell 2015). Place is theorized across a heterogeneous landscape of spatial and social disciplines, spanning from geography, environmental psychology, urban and social studies, humanities, among others. Early systematic theorizing on place in spatial disciplines is attributed to humanistic geography as a critique of the overtly abstract notion of space that dominated the spatial disciplines in the 1960s (Tuan 1979; Relph 1976). Since then, a broad notion of place as space imbued with meaning enters common use. Along with it, the notion of place is being interpreted in many other ways within phenomenological, non-representational, feminist, critical and socio-constructivist veins, relational, post-human philosophies, psychological, cognitive and behavioral models, among many others.

The common conceptual feature to all of the above is a premise underlying a humanistic geographical approach: place changes the mode of our engagement with space. Depending on an adopted theoretical approach, sources, agents, impact and effects of such change can be conceptualized and grasped, entailing different practical

implications and methods to tackle it. Relational readings of place suggest that cities cannot be adequately governed without considering dynamic flows of people, resources and information that all play out on a local scale (Massey 2005). Feminist perspectives on place demonstrate how spatial experience differs along gender lines (Dyck 2005). Phenomenological approach brings forward an embodied and perceived spatialities which are closer to human experience of cities than abstract plans (Seamon 2013). Emergent novel approaches to place building on advances in GIS, data science, and other areas (Wagner et al. 2020; Rossetti et al. 2019; Mocnik 2023) conceptualize the mediating impact of digitalization and pervasive impact of geospatial technologies on human spatial experience.

Being so conceptually versatile, place can equip planners with a fertile framework to understand better a human perspective on space in the city in a multifaceted way. Planning better cities for people contains an underlying but rarely articulated question as to how do we engage with space shaped by and intervened to with planning means:

'The translation of social purposes into space then presupposes that something is known about how patterns of living and working can be affected, for good or ill, by the physical and spatial forms imposed on them. In fact, beyond common-sense and accumulated experience, little is known. p.217 Hillier (Hillier 2008).

Articulating this questioning is pivotal in theorizing on place. Spatial and urban planning as 'knowledge-centered epistemic practices' (Alexander 2016) which link knowledge to organized action towards spatial organization of social relations (Lake 2017), are concerned with theoretically grounded knowledge in no lesser extent than with an empirical realm of action. The present paper argues that theorizing on place falls under both these concerns.

Theoretical body of planning is heterogeneous and subject to long-standing academic debate (Allmendinger 2017; Alexander 2016). Difficulties to determining clear boundaries between theoretical, empirical and applied domains, as well as extensive borrowing from many other disciplines and subjects are recognized as characteristic to planning discourse (Allmendinger 2017). In such state there is a recognition and call for theoretical efforts across different levels, from fundamental theorizing on linking spatial forms to societal processes (Löw 2018), to stronger conceptual support for planning actions, and empirical evidence-based planning. While fundamental theories comparable in ambition and grasp to social theory of space (Hillier 2002) might seem as far reaching and distant prospects requiring solid theoretical advancements, the place theory can fulfill the need for middle-range (design-level) theories (Marshall 2012; Hillier and Netto 2002; Cuthbert 2007), bridging conceptual underpinnings with empirical and applied implications at the level of specialized planning domains (such as spatial and urban planning referred to in the present paper).

In what follows, the paper will outline arguments towards more systematic purposeful theorizing on place as a socio-spatial notion from the perspective of spatial and urban planning in its concern of spatial organization of urban space and its physical settings in pursuit of social goals. (In this light, all references to planning in the present paper refer to spatial planning and urban planning insofar as they are preoccupied with urban space and planning cities). First, the paper will sketch out instances of how place features in planning discourse and practice. Then, the paper will proceed with outlining implications for three broad approaches to place in its humanistic, relational, and phenomenological readings, arguing for the latter as instrumental in linking theoretically grounded human perspective on urban settings for planning.

Place of place in planning

While advocating for stronger integration of theoretically grounded notion of place in planning, one faces challenge of theoretical ambiguity of the very notion of place. The elusive nature of place evading a clear definition is a commonplace statement in much of place literature: "Place is a human relation. There is no set of immanent ontological features adhering to a given site that would allow us to define it as a place" (Prieto 2012, p.13). However, complexity of place definition does not have to imply that it is an indeterminate concept bound to ad hoc readings. Rather, it attests that place lends itself to be conceptualized through various approaches leading

towards sometimes remarkably different directions.

In spatial disciplines the starting point for theorizing on place often becomes space. This does not add certainty to understanding of place. Instead, it creates a conceptual state prone for terminological ambiguity, where the terms space and place go hand in hand, as one is being defined through the other, or what the other is not. Widely quoted metaphorical phrase of Yi-Fu Tuan "if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause" (Tuan 1979) illustrates such characteristic vagueness and interlinked thinking about the two notions. Already heterogeneous discourse around geographical space draws the notion of place into self-referential circle: space as fundamental stuff of geography is rarely explicitly talked about in spatial disciplines (Thrift 2003), while place is being commonly defined as 'space imbued with meaning' (Cresswell 2015).

Similar situation appears with usage of the terms 'space' and 'place' in planning (Davoudi and Strange 2009). Fundamental theorizing on the nature of space is not absent, but often carried on higher theoretical levels across other disciplines and discourses (Kühne and Berr 2022), rarely featuring as an explicit issue that requires own planning disciplinary reflection, or a proper conceptual explication from planning practitioners in planning handbooks. It is not uncommon that a table of content from a handbook on urban planning does not feature a chapter or a section on what is urban space that we ought to plan. Instead, the focus could be given to 'making plans', not ordering space, as a main concern of urban planners, as for example (Crane and Weber 2015). Such focus is illustrative of the conceptual position of the two notions in literature which supports planning practice: space as object of intervention remains obscured or hidden within other agendas.

In the context of urban planning and design, both terms acquire adjectives and attached to them wider connotations and definitions. It is common to refer to 'urban space' as space with particular geometrical and aesthetic properties that could only be discerned against the built form (Krier and Rowe 1979). In addition, other terms, such as 'open space', 'public space', 'place', 'public place' and more, are also used, sometimes interchangeably, and sometimes to denote different notions (Abusaada and Elshater 2021). Accepting such varied use, the term 'place' still resonates broadly with the humanistic geographical understanding of place through such distinguishing factors as knowledge, value and quality, lifestyles, experiences and meanings, identity and character, and atmospheres and sense of place (ibid).

In such a state, use of both terms 'place' and 'space' in planning becomes a separate subject of investigation (Davoudi and Strange 2009; Madanipour and Hull 2017; Strydom et al. 2018). Keeping in mind the wider debate on space as important overarching context, the remainder of the paper will refer to uses of the term 'place' in spatial and urban planning discourse on three levels - one of overarching theory, one of middle range theories and conceptual frameworks, and one of applied interventions and empirically driven planning practice. For each level, the paper will suggest concrete contributions that place theory can bring to planning.

On humanistic reading of place in planning

On a higher theoretical level scholars both from within geography (Relph 2015; Good et al. 2017; Bull 2008) and planning itself (Good et al. 2017; Bull 2008) evoke the notion of place towards a humanistic approach to planning. The notion of place serves there a similar critical role as in its humanistic geographical origins against the prevalent current of a positivist turn in geography and spatial disciplines, planning including. A humanistic approach re-orientes planning towards a situated perspective onto the lived world as it appears to us in our experience (Lake 2017). Place denotes such turn from abstract objectified space to experiential dimension of spatiality.

Major hindrances appear on the way of such re-orientation. Arguing for fundamental uprooting of primacy of space in favor of place requires ample theoretical efforts to re-work the very way of thinking about the focus and subject of planning, from fundamental underlying premises all the way down to empirical approaches. Along these lines, the above efforts meet limitations and critiques inherent to any attempt at integrating a qualitative paradigm to human-environment relations. These include focus on individual and subjective accounts over patterns and generalizable knowledge in a natural science fashion (Pocock 1983), and incompatibility with quantita-

tive methods and rapidly advancing GIScience (Leszczynski 2009), where planning tend to lean.

Turning to theoretically grounded notion on place, however, is not meant to bring over-individualization of diverse lived experiences, nor to channel planners' attention exclusively onto subjective perceptions of urban milieu by means of qualitative inquiry. On the contrary, place can be a fruitful notion to formalize experiential perspective on space by quantitative means in a way highly relevant and instrumental for planning. Elements of human perception (as in pioneering visibility analysis (Benedikt 1979)), cognition (Penn 2003), and even aesthetic preferences (D'Acci 2019) are already being incorporated in quantitative models of space. Correspondences are drawn between such measures and traditionally qualitative inquiries as in for ex. in phenomenological tradition of place and environmental psychology (Marcus 2018; Seamon 2007, 2013).

Theorizing on place from platial perspective advanced by place-based GIS can contribute to the above direction (the term 'platial' is used as the place-based counterpart to the space-based adjective 'spatial' (Westerholt et al. 2018)). Place-based GIS works towards operational modeling and representation of places aimed at grasping qualitative characteristics of meaningful spatial units converted into quantifiable variables and accessed through amply available georeferenced data (Tang and Painho 2021).

Among other concerns, the above efforts deal with division of space in the city, which is one of ever-present planning concerns, too. This question underlies not only methodological issues of modifiable areal unit problem, but in many instances can severely affect planning decisions and actions. Administrative census, postal codes, urban structural units, clusters of urban form typologies derived from geometrical plans all have their efficient application for varied planning purposes. However, oftentimes such approaches do not grasp how people organize and divide their space. It is recognized that we differentiate and discriminate urban space: to us it appears in the form of islands of places along undifferentiated space (Zeihner 2003). Conceptual and methodological efforts on spatial footprints of places (Westerholt 2019, 2025), linking geometrical composition of places with functions (Papadakis et al. 2020), grasping fuzzy place boundaries (Gao et al. 2013; Davies 2020) to formalize it for spatial analysis can offer more efficient ways than costly participatory mapping neighborhoods techniques and similar qualitative inquiries into perceived division of space in the city.

On relational reading of place in planning

Place appears in many instances at the level of conceptual frameworks applicable to concrete domains, relation, and areas of planning actions to address manifold crises, from climate change, economic depression, to social fragmentation and migration. Place-based policies to promote local solutions (Barca et al. 2012), place attachment in public participation (Manzo and Perkins 2006), sense of place to foster stewardship of locales (Chapin III and Knapp 2015), place-making initiatives to improve public spaces (Palermo and Ponzini 2014) are among such instances. Place receives dedicated theoretical attention and being reflected upon in such role (Castello 2016; Madanipour and Hull 2017).

Prominent in the above instances are relational interpretations of place. Relational take on space calls for shifting focus from a static view onto dynamic relations among agents, seeing place as a site of complex emergent interrelations across scales in the context of globalization (Massey 2005). Such perspective allows incorporating multi-network actors, complex sets of relations, and non-linear dynamics playing out in spatial dimension, among many others (Graham and Healey 1999; Madanipour and Hull 2017). In this, relational conceptions of space and place support planning practice in setting up frameworks of actions and relations for multiple agents and actors on access to and distribution of material resources (Robertson 2018).

Relational approaches to place speak to a widely theorized tradition of seeing space as socially produced (Lefebvre 2017). This tradition approaches space and place via social praxis at different scales. Critical socio-constructivist school (Lefebvre 2017; Harvey 2012) argues against the objectified and reified totalizing order of space, calling for seeing space as a product of socio-economic relations (i.e. global dynamics of capital (Harvey 2012)). Non-representational approach (Thrift 2008; Anderson 2016) propounds a performative reading of space and

place as being constituted and reconstituted by human actions, or individual tactics of moving through and ordering space in everyday life (De Certeau 1985).

Reading space and place as products of individual human and collective social relations equips us with conceptual lenses to investigate cities as socially produced dynamic entities at higher theoretical and conceptual levels. As such, the above theorizing on place is often not directly applicable to planning and design actions which shape and intervene into cities as built physical entities. High level of abstraction in much of such theorizing, and at times almost exclusive focus on the social risk neglecting “everyday physicality of the spaces in which human beings live”. (Hillier 2008, p. 218). Instead of ‘humanizing space’, place risks abstracting its social meaning from its physical settings.

Meanwhile, a holistic notion of place can allow us to argue that ‘meanings of place are not simply attached to places; they are already part of it.’ (Muminovic 2015). Place locales, that is, physical settings where everyday-life activities take place, including visible and tangible aspects of a place such as buildings, streets, parks, etc., comprise a constituent element to place, not its mere passive background. Interpretations of place as assemblages ((Latour 2005)) works towards the shift from immaterial relations to material settings (Muminovic 2015; Dovey 2020). The latter are attributed with agency over not only receiving and hosting, but producing place meanings.

Even closer attention to the agency of physical settings on shaping place experience and its meaning is brought by the actor-network theory for architecture and design domains (relevant for the present inquiry on the level of ‘urban architecture’ in how it shapes our spatial experience on urban scale) (Yaneva 2009, 2022). This approach brings us one step closer to the applied domain of planning where it delivers actual planning solutions and design choices that form place settings in the most immediate and straightforward way of physical shape of locales.

Actor-network approach not only introduces non-human actors to the set of proactive agents shaping and co-creating our lived experiences (Dincer 2020). The approach re-configures the very way of seeing nonhuman material actors, from static material objects to materialized but constantly re-negotiated and re-constituted materialities that themselves are evolving products of socio-material dynamics (Yaneva 2009). Theorizing on place along this direction can not only bring a human perspective on space, but on the entirety of its material settings:

It is not only the architects, his or her clients, de Certeau’s pedestrians, Benjamin’s flâneurs that do not live in Euclidian space: it is also the buildings themselves! If there is an injustice in “materializing” human embodied experience, there is an even greater injustice in reducing matter to what can be drawn. (Latour and Yaneva 2017) p. 105

Alongside the argument for bringing place for humanizing space from the hold of geometric abstraction place can also ‘humanize’ built form of the city as shaped by planning and lived by us. Of course, urban space can only be discerned against urban form, as the latter configures the former. In this way, distinction between material settings and urban space could only be drawn to certain extent by formal or conceptual means. Yet, oftentimes this distinction pervasively underlines much of inquiry and theorizing on space and place. Engaging with deeper theorizing on place in a holistic way allows us addressing place meaning, spatial experience and place settings under one conceptual term.

Rounding up the presented argument, in the last part the paper will outline such holistic take on place from a phenomenological perspective as instrumental in humanizing the city for planners from the perspective of place-making as engaged with the city in the most direct empirical way.

On phenomenological reading of place in planning

One of the most noticeable use of the term ‘place’ in planning appears in place-making. Place-making is a very broad umbrella term that can refer to bottom-up initiatives targeting small improvements at local scale, to top-

down city policies and actions aimed at redevelopment of entire parts of the city. Common for such efforts, regardless of their scale or origins, is their aim at improving quality of life in cities through converting urban space to lively and well-functioning urban places (Ellery et al. 2021).

Place-making engages with the city primarily at the empirical level of practical interventions, policies, projects, and case studies. In-depth theorizing on underlying conceptual understanding of the very notion of place is not common in the above (Strydom et al. 2018). Underlying understandings of place are diverse. Place-making approach draws upon humanistic geographical origins of place in conceiving meaningful engagement with space as premises for creation of places, recognizing place as first and foremost a social and human phenomenon (Strydom et al. 2018). Community-bound participatory place-making appears to lean towards relational understanding of place, as it considers relations among actors, stakeholders and social ties as constituents of places (Cilliers and Timmermans 2014). In promoting social events and emphasizing participation as a constant process of community building it taps into performative take on place. Finally, much of place-making efforts are realized via design and direct interventions and changes to physical appearance of urban spaces (Palermo and Ponzini 2014).

At times, place-making debates can appear to refer to a false dichotomy: what is primary, promoting community or delivering good design for places? In practice, however, the question addressed by place-making concerns how the two come together to create places. This demands a holistic concept of place to guide the practice.

Phenomenological reading of place offers a framework towards such holistic reading, as it attempts at discarding a dichotomous understanding of human-environment relations, conceptualizing the two in interconnected instead of juxtaposed way (Locke and McCann 2016; Seamon 2010). The phenomenological school approaches place as a specific category of direct human experience, intrinsic and even formative for human subjectivity. For this reason, it is often viewed as focused on human, subjective domains of place. Place appears deterritorialized and delocalized from its particular site, because the locus of phenomenological inquiry is centered on an inner subjective standpoint.

However, an approach to place grounded in the phenomenological account of human experience in fact opens up a way to integrate material settings of place into a holistic view of body-subjects of perceptual experience (Merleau-Ponty 2012). Physical settings of place in such a view are not abstracted from the perceiving subject into a neutral backdrop, but instead, all merge into a 'perceptual field' (Merleau-Ponty 2012), where subjective perception and objective external world are integral to each other.

Such premises bring important implications for place-making approach. It allows us interpreting an authentic place-making process as "an operation of synthesis' where goods and people are amalgamated to spaces by way of processes of perception, imagination, and memory" (Löw 2016, p.135) from a phenomenological perspective. Such process of synthesis constitutes no less important part of place-making along with actual arrangements of physical objects in space (Löw 2016). We endow a certain arrangement of things and settings in space with unity and meaning attributed to it, conceiving it as a place. Phenomenological inquiry into processes of perception, imagination and memory that synthesize place out of available to us physical settings grasps the lived city in its spatial and physical configuration as experienced by us in a holistic way. In it, the approach is doing justice for physical, material and tangible aspects of places as it brings them from the realm of abstract objective physical city to the actual lived city in the same way as place is meant to bring lived spatiality from the abstract geometrical plane.

Place is conceptualized prominently within the phenomenological approach (Buttimer and Seamon 2015; Relph 2014; Dovey 2009). The phenomenological tradition of place finds a close affinity with a humanistic geographical stance, as it draws into the focus human, subjective, affective, and perceptual dimensions of place. The phenomenological approach also contributes to capturing the embodied aspect of place as expressed in our bodily actions, which create and recreate places in constant flux (as in David Seamon (2015) notion of place-ballet). This

connects the phenomenological reading of place with the non-representational and performative interpretations.

The phenomenological approach has been criticized for its essentialist take on place, while its methods of radical empiricism and interpretative analysis have been associated with compromised objectivity and non-retrievability of results (Murray and Holmes 2014). These, however, do not discard the value of phenomenological approach as argued above, but call for theoretical and methodological efforts towards rigorous and instrumental apparatus. The phenomenological tradition evolves and finds novel interpretations ((Talebian and Uraz 2018)), and not so obvious affinities (such as the above-mentioned parallels with space syntax methods (Seamon 2007, 1994)). In this sense, the phenomenological account of place bears rich potential which translates and feeds into novel platial approaches, reaffirming its potential usefulness on urban grounds (Aravot 2002).

Conclusions

Theoretical, methodological and practical advancements of planning compete against ever increasing complexity of challenges which planning faces. Accelerated crisis dynamics at global and local scales acquire such recurring character that state of multiple crises becomes a new normal of planning as argued by some (Martin et al. 2022). In such a state, calls for more theorizing in planning should not divert planning efforts from pressing agenda, but amplify and support it. Present call for theorizing on place is made towards the above goal.

The paper outlined how the notion of place in humanistic geographical, relational, and phenomenological interpretations appears in planning at higher theoretical, conceptual and empirical levels, amplifying each use by suggesting potential contributions and synergies that are coming from theorizing on place.

The value of place in its humanistic geographical reading is recognized in calls for humanistic planning and planning for people. The paper argued that in addition to that, a humanistic geographical notion of place can offer a robust theoretical framework for operational and instrumental inquiries into human perspective on the city built on advances of quantitative, geo-referenced data and GIS-driven research.

Relational notions of place support planning in organizing and navigating complex relations and actions of multiple agents towards spatial organization of socio-economic relations. In addition to dynamic interactive understanding of planning outcomes as socially produced, the relational approach to space and place opens up a way to introduce novel agents which contribute to production of spatial relation in different ways. In particular, material aspects of our spatial experience become recognized, conceptualized and grasped by planning. Place locales which denote physical settings of places are active contributors, not passive holders of meaning in our engagement with spaces in urban context.

Phenomenological readings of place match empirical place-making efforts concerned with perceived aspects of physical urban features (as in perceived qualities of urban design for ex.). In addition to supporting the above inquiries, further theorizing along phenomenological lines allows integrating all material settings of places as perceived into the construct of spatial experience of the city under the notion of place grounded in a holistic view of human perception and environment. Novel methodological affinities allow phenomenological framework to support models accounting for spatial cognition, perception, psychological and emotional response to urban settings.

Adding the term place to planning vocabulary is not meant to inundate it with yet another vague label of indeterminate use. On the contrary, place as a key word can bring under its conceptual umbrella a wide range of theoretical issues, empirical studies and applied interventions since long carried out by planners towards balanced socio-ecological planning for sustainable cities for people.

Theoretical body of planning is heterogeneous and subject to long-standing academic debate (Allmendinger 2017; Alexander 2016). Difficulties to determining clear boundaries between theoretical, empirical and applied

domains, as well as extensive borrowing from many other disciplines and subjects are recognized as characteristic to planning discourse (Allmendinger 2017). In such state there is a recognition and call for theoretical efforts across different levels, from fundamental theorizing on linking spatial forms to societal processes (Löw 2018), to stronger conceptual support for planning actions, and empirical evidence-based planning. While fundamental theories comparable in ambition and grasp to social theory of space (Hillier 2002) might seem as far reaching and distant prospects requiring solid theoretical advancements, the place theory can fulfil the need for middle-range (design-level) theories (Marshall 2012; Hillier and Netto 2002; Cuthbert 2007), bridging conceptual underpinnings with empirical and applied implications at the level of specialized planning domains (such as spatial and urban planning referred to in the present paper).

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