**rediscovering place for *s*ocial town planning: observations and suggestions**

**Peter Fawcett (PhD Researcher) and Dr John Sturzaker (Senior Lecturer)   
Department of Geography and Planning, University of Liverpool**

**Introduction**

It is a regrettable fact that planning today has an image problem. In little over a century, planning has transitioned from being viewed as a grand (almost evangelical) movement - with direct bearing on the *‘…life and happiness of great masses of people’[[1]](#endnote-1)* - to a regulatory component of land-use control. But there is hope for planning. A number of campaigns and initiatives are now seeking to reconnect planning to its social origins, with a case in point being the *#Planning4People* project. A joint initiative by the TCPA and Webb Memorial Fund, the planning for people project seeks to reposition people and social justice back into the heart of town planning.

Rediscovering social town planning will not be a straightforward task, however. Many factors need to be taken into account, with arguably one of the most important being that of *place*. If we are to build a better society for everyone, then we must build better places for people to live, work and play. The crux of this, however, is that planning appears to have lost its ‘sense of place’. As we will go on to discuss, all too often, place (its richness and uniqueness) is reduced to space (a physical location) with little consideration of the long term consequences of this. To that end, we wish to take this opportunity to explore the societal importance of place and offer some suggestions as to how we can begin to go about putting place back into the planning equation.

**Place, more than a location**

Place is an *‘inescapable dimension of human life and experience’[[2]](#endnote-2)*. Yet, despite this – or, perhaps, because of it – it belies simple definition. Like the concepts of Health, Quality of Life and Sustainability, it is too elusive and far too relative to be defined in an exclusive sense. To answer the question of what is place, we must then first start by examining its composition and construction. To begin, we can start by saying that a place must be located in some setting – be it physical or virtual. This setting, in effect, serves as a container – or *space* – within which the fabric (features and characteristics) of a place are positioned and housed.

Although *spaces* are an important feature of towns and cities, they gain social significance through the activities and practices people perform within them. This ‘humanisation of space’, in which spaces are inscribed with meaning, effectively captures the essence of place construction. Through utilisation of the spaces within our towns and cities, people transform a procession of general characteristics into meaningful arenas of human experience. However, this is by no means a one-way process. While people might inscribe meaning into the material landscape of local areas, the activities and practices through which they do so conform to a level of appropriateness afforded by the landscape itself. The design and features of a would-be place – neighbourhoods, retail centres, houses, socio-economic opportunities, and so on – provide the collective foundation upon which people’s norms and values are based.

For planning, the starting point for policy makers and practitioners must thus be that places are much more than simply physical locations. Rather, they are settings of significant attached meaning. Moreover, their human dimension gives them a distinct temporal and spatial sensitivity. Given this, it is easy to see how common sense uses of the term *place* might fail to capture its true complexity.

**Place *in* society**

Isolating the mechanisms and pathways through which places influence people is a difficult task. This is made only more complicated by the *multidimensionality* of place itself – it is temporal, spatial, social and physical. Given that place affords people a certain ability to act in particular ways, we can say that place must have a consequential societal impact. This ‘place impact’, moreover, clearly differs in form and magnitude from place to place (and from person to person). The sticking point with this argument, however, is not in the demonstration of *if* but in *how* places matter to society – the notion of ‘environmental determinism’ cannot be relied on fully to answer exactly how and why people act and behave in the way they do.

If we put this issue to one side, the important message for planning here is that *‘place creates people and people create places’[[3]](#endnote-3)*. Again, the difficulty with this is that the mechanics of this process remain largely hidden from view due to the complexity of the factors at play. In seeking to illuminate this seemingly black-box situation, Macintyre and colleagues[[4]](#endnote-4) identify five key features of place and their relationships to health:

1. Physical features – environmental factors shared by all people, such as air, water, climate, etc.;
2. Environmental quality – both at home and work, including the provision of adequate housing conditions, secure and non-hazardous employment, and safe areas for children to play;
3. Neighbourhood socio-cultural characteristics – such as political, economic, ethnicity, religious history, level of community integration, crime, and community norms and values;
4. Provision of services – both public and private which support day-to-day activity, including education, transport, policing, health and welfare;
5. Reputation – how a community, service and amenity planners (and providers), and banks and investors perceive an area directly influences the infrastructure provision, development and self-efficacy of an area and its community.

The relativistic nature of the place-people relationship is a factor which is still to be fully understood in planning policy and practice. That people and place simultaneously interact and shape one another is a point that has been highlighted before, for example in Hugh Barton and Marcus Grant’s ‘health map’[[5]](#endnote-5) . A final point to note here is that not only do we not fully understand the symbiotic link which exists between people and place, but that the development of much of this relationship is unwritten; links between particular activities and places form in distinct ways – beer and pub, or popcorn and cinema. As such, it is critical that planning appreciates that the places we build today will mould the norms and values of not just the current but future generations.

**So, what for social town planning?**

The importance of place for planning has been explored by a number of authors in previous editions of this journal. Time and again, the need to hold place in mind when undertaking any form of planning exercise has been underlined. In the special issue on *Recreating Social Town Planning* (November, 2015), Neil McInroy eloquently explained that ‘place-blind’ economic strategies – especially those founded on ‘new spatial economics’ – cannot deliver the fairer and more equitable society we seek. Building on this, and other articles, we present three observations (and suggestions) which we consider need to be factored into planning if true social town planning is to be realised.

**Place, not space**

To put it plainly, much of extant planning policy and practice demonstrates a clear misunderstanding of the places in which people live their lives. While some might argue against such a claim, our own studies have found a number of policies and practices which have failed to appropriately value place. Rather than viewing place *within* context, it is often the case that place is viewed *as* context. An example of this in practice can be seen in the adoption of the physical boundaries of a development proposal as the place, as opposed to much broader setting in which it lies. In doing so, the result is that the richness and meaning, and relationships between and within places, is omitted from the planning process. Moreover, places and the communities they serve are often viewed as separate from one another.

As of way of illustration, we can take here the recent redevelopment of a district centre in a medium sized town in England. Challenged by issues such as above average unemployment and a weakening economic base, the local authority took the decision to revitalise the area’s retail centres (as one way to tackle these issues). Forming part of this, the no longer fit-for-purpose district centre was completely redeveloped. Our issue here lies not in the decision to redevelop the centre, but in the approach to and understanding which underpinned this task. Examination of policy, coupled with results from interviews, points to the local authority viewing the centre not as a place but as an opportunistic space. A space whose purpose was to attract and, as show in the design, to serve the anchor stores and major commercial operations.

In one specific case, such was the desire to attract profitable operations that community consultation read less like a democratic process and more like an educational endeavour in which people were to be taught why they should want the development. The development in question has brought much needed employment to the local area, but the jobs provided are primarily low-paid, low-skills and insecure – what some have called “McJobs”. It may be the case that such jobs can actually exacerbate existing social (and economic) insecurities[[6]](#endnote-6). In addition, the consideration of the actual impact the said operator (and wider centre) would have on other aspects of the community, in particular health and well-being, was diminished by a lack of understanding, or wilful ignorance, of place. For example, the construction of a third well-known fast-food restaurant was, in part, claimed not to have any potential additional adverse health impacts because the main centre development already had two such existing examples – the idea that a third development would increase overall fast-food access and, not least, consumption, appears to have been largely absent from consideration.

In all, there is a need for planning to resist the impulse to treat place as space, and consequently to adopt a ‘placeless’ approach due to the difficulties the alternative holds. In short, place must not be seen as a passive receptor for development, but rather an integrative component of the development process.

**The planner - provisioner not maker**

In the activity of place making, it is the community and not the planner who holds the role of maker. Despite the traditional perception of planning as a place making discipline, it is ultimately the community who transforms the products of planning into places. As such, planners need to be recast as ‘place provisioners’, their role being that of a coordinator of the type of development necessary for communities to make successful places. In no way does this belittle the task of the planner, if anything it highlights just how complex planning really is and is more reflective of what they truly do.

If we accept this argument, then it follows that communities must also take a more active role in planning. Rather than consultation, there is a need for community *engagement[[7]](#endnote-7)*. For this to be successful, however, the audience for planning must also be engaged themselves. That is to say, people must want to be involved in how their (and wider) areas are planned and developed. Two elements are thus perhaps needed: 1) education and information, including to young people, in order to educate future generations about the importance of planning and place; and 2) planning should stop treating people, planning and place as separate from one another. In talking to several passionate local planning authority members, a key area of complaint was that the planning system still fails to fully account for the people it impacts. Rather than being part of the process, it was expressed that people are positioned outside of it – as ‘winners and losers’. To be social, town planning must revise this arrangement in such a way that community (within the wider concept of place) are central to its principles and practices.

Engagement with communities must be at the correct scale and quality to be successful. More importantly, however, it must be in line with the participative and organisational capacity of the community itself. Each place is unique, and many incumbent populations perceive planning as a purely physical and not social exercise – they can often feel a level of despondency towards getting involved, and might simply lack the resources (time, money, etc.) to participate. Moreover, each place (including its populace) faces its own problems. Places thus require tailor-made solutions to address their problems, including in engaging people in the planning process, while top-level planning policy can provide a framework it must not negatively prescribe how local communities develop their areas.

**Place *in* planning education**

Throughout planning education, students are introduced to the idea of planning as an essential place-making discipline. Since 2001 the RTPI’s *New Vision* has branded the Institute, and consequently town planners, as being about ‘making of place and mediation of space’, and the Institute has required planning courses to deliver learning outcomes that include ‘creating high quality places’. This aim is supported by much academic and popular literature. However, if we are to understand how a place is significant and how it might be altered to improve people’s lives, we must first comprehend what it is and how it directs the human experience. Arguably, planning education is not good enough at doing this, perhaps in part because it is insufficiently well integrated with other professions such as architecture or public health. Initiatives such as the *Built Environment Professional Education project (BEPE)* or the Farrell Review seek to integrate the built environment professions in new ways, but do they go far enough? Perhaps the TCPA’s *Planning4People* project can be more effective at promoting place-making. But, as we noted in our introduction, that can only be possible if we understand what *place* is and how important it is.

**….concluding remarks**

Place is more than just a physical location, it is a meeting place for community interaction, a director of human activity and practice, and shaper of people’s norms and values. No doubt, many people reading this article will have their own well-informed understandings of what a place is (and is not). Yet, despite this, it is still important that we develop a common dialogue for place within planning. A dialogue which at least puts everyone on the same page, so to speak, in regards to at least some dynamics of the place debate. We hope this article can at least stand as a starting point for rediscovering place for social town planning. Finally, the policy ramifications of place (not only for planning, but more broadly) are huge. Why? Because *‘no person is an island [and] it is through places that their lives are lived and places are peoples, histories, classes and capitals, and…health’* [[8]](#endnote-8)

1. Bentley, E., & Taylorwith, S.(1909) . Housing, Town Planning, Etc., Act, 1909: A Practical Guide in the Preperation of Town Planning Schemes (1909). London. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Relph, E. (1976). *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion Ltd. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Macintyre, S., & Ellaway, A. (2003). Neighbourhoods and Health: An Overview. In I. Kawachi & L. F. Berkman (Eds.), *Neighbourhoods and Health* (pp. 20–42). New York: Oxford University Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Macintyre, S., Ellaway, A., & Cummins, S. (2002). Place effects on health: how can we conceptualise, operationalise and measure them? *Social Science & Medicine*, *55*, 125–139. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Barton, H., & Grant, M. (2006). A health map for the local human habitat. *Perspectives in Public Health*, *126*(6), 252–253. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Schmuecker, K. (2014). *Future of the UK Labour Market*. York. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A Ladder of Citizen Participation. *Journal of the American Planning Assocation*, *35*(4), 216–224. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Tunstall, H. V. Z., Shaw, M., & Dorling, D. (2004). Places and health. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, *58*(1), 6–10. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)