# The Centrality of Place: The Urban Imagination of Sociologists

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## The Great Cities Institute

The Great Cities Institute is an interdisciplinary, applied urban research unit within the College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). Its mission is to create, disseminate, and apply interdisciplinary knowledge on urban areas. Faculty from UIC and elsewhere work collaboratively on urban issues through interdisciplinary research, outreach and education projects.

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# The Centrality of Place: The Urban Imagination of Sociologists

About ten minutes from where I live, in Highland Park, north of Chicago, a house is being built. It sits at 1371 Sheridan Road and occupies virtually the entire lot, from one side to the other. A driveway runs from the road to the house, and to its *two* two-car garages that face the street. The house is massive, clearly too big for its lot, but just the right size for its owners. It cost at least a million dollars, and, when done, will be occupied by a commodities trader and his wife, both in their fifties. It is their dream house -- massive, high ceilings, 5,000 square feet, and with a toney address on Chicago's North Shore.

I know all this about this house because several months ago, a writer, Patricia Leigh Brown, wrote an article about it, and about the house she once lived in at the very same address.[1] Hers was a much smaller house, about half the size of this 5,000 square foot monster, and represented a much more modest lifestyle. She had heard from another former occupant of the same address that the old house was to be torn down, and a new house erected. The whole episode and change in houses spoke volumes to her. The destruction of the old house -- not even the one she had grown up in, but another erected on the lot -- and the creation of a new one triggered a flood of memories.

She writes: "When Bill Bernstein, who grew up at 1371 Sheridan Road after we moved on, learned that our mutual childhood home was about to be demolished last year, he flew in from Los Angeles with his sleeping bag and video camera. Unbeknown to anyone, he spent the night alone inside and filmed the house for posterity.

'I wish I could have brought my kids, to let them know more of who I am,' he said recently. He was speaking for both his siblings and, unknowingly, my sisters and me.

'You get to be our age, and you see the finish line,' he continued. 'I'm a big grown-up guy with kids now. But man, in my mind, I keep picturing that house.'

"It was a fine house to grow up in, no more, no less," Brown writes. "Now it has entered the domain of memory. But a tiny part of us all will always be there, tucked away, in the chimney."

Houses and memories, places where we lived and grew up, people with whom we played and cavorted, this is the stuff of urban sociology. We who observe the habitats of human beings see new places being built, others being destroyed. For Patricia Leigh Brown the destruction of her childhood home said something to her not only about her past but about our world today, and the deceptively easy manner in which one person's home can become another person's house. Her home had created for her a place of memory, of great affection, of familiarity, and of human warmth. The destruction of her place, and the creation of another, stirred up all these passions for her; it is precisely for these kinds of reasons that place has occupied so important a part in the studies of urbanists.

I want to talk briefly today about why place is important to students of urban areas, and why it should be important to all sociologists. To borrow an expression from my predecessor of last year, Barb Heyl, I want to talk across our differences, and to share with you my view of how the world of places works.

**The Chicago School**

In all the writing that has been done by and about the scholars of the Chicago School, the womb of urban sociology in America and abroad, little has been said of the importance of place to them. But place figures very significantly in their thinking, even though they did not write of it in just those terms.

The most obvious demonstration of the importance of place lay in the map that Ernest Burgess and his students devised of the city and of its pattern of growth and development. Maps are portrayals of areas, and they are used to identify specific domains in those areas. Burgess' map was novel in the sense that it described not the physical topography of Chicago, but rather its social topography. It is a set of specific places that Burgess perceived as having developed over time, with one place being demarcated from another. As most of you recall, there were several distinct places identified by Burgess: the central zone, or the Loop; the zone in transition which contained, among other specific areas, Little Sicily -- which is where I teach today -- Chinatown and the Deutschland Ghetto; and the zone of workingmen's homes, which, to the west, contained what Burgess described as the Second Immigrant Settlement.[2] The city was a set of places, or as Burgess and Robert Park depicted them, "areas," in which groups of human beings marked out their unique sites, established them as their residences, and began to develop a social life full of the richness and tragedy that was so much a part of the urban story at the turn of the twentieth century. Places were real both for the people who lived in them and for the sociologists who studied them. They were houses and neighborhoods, streets and alleys that came to embody the character of life of specific groups of workers and immigrants.

Why would anyone want to study the city in this manner -- why map out places where different groups settled, and where businesses emerge? For one obvious reason, above all others -- the one that makes the study of cities to sociologists so compelling. Sites like Little Sicily and the zone of transition are sites where *real* people lived, worked, played and died -- where immigrant parents came into America, children were raised, where conflicts and agreements were made, where all the dirt and grime of social life occurred. The study of places like neighborhoods is the study of real settings lived in by real people. Sociology was borne in America out of a desire to help people improve their lives, and surely this spirit of caring and nurturing the newly-migrated in Chicago at the turn of the century was very powerful among many social scientists and social workers. To connect with and study people meant to see them in their real surroundings, their neighborhoods and homes, accompanied by their friends and family.

Park put it this way in one of his writings about community and society: "sociological research may very properly begin with the community. . . .(because) the community is a visible object. One can point it out, define its territorial limits, and plot its constituent elements, its population, and its institutions on maps.[3]

Yet, at the same time that researchers like Burgess would see the city as a set of places, others, especially his close friend and intellectual ally, Park, would see them as a set of territories, or habitats. That effort to make sociology scientific began with the application of biological metaphors

to the nature of place, itself. Scholars like Park saw the city not merely as place but as territory in which the fights and conflicts among different social groups occurred. It is easy enough to make this conceptual leap, to move from a real place and real people to a concept of territory, or habitat, and conflicting groups. And once one makes this metaphorical move, a whole family of other ideas can easily be imported with it.

Thus, to Park the city became the localized site for competition and conflict. Immigrant neighborhoods were not simply home any longer, but battlegrounds that people sought to defend. Some groups were victorious and others were not, and Park saw in the nature of these territories the struggle for existence. Life's battles were written in the conflicts that took place over which group would become dominant in specific areas of the city, and which would become losers. By shifting metaphors, and by moving from the real to the abstract, Park tried, as others of his day did, too, to place sociology on a firmer scientific footing. Chicago was no longer a city with a time horizon but a site in which the struggle among competitors occurred. People no longer were real, but members of abstract aggregates who fought to sustain their own existence. In the effort to make sociology scientific, Park created a distance between himself and the places of real people living real lives; it is as though by distancing himself from the objects he studied he thought he could create a body of knowledge that was both more scientific and objective. Or, to put it another way, by creating objects out of the world's real subjects, Park attempted to set sociology on a scientific footing.

Indeed, what emerged from the work of the Chicago School was the two very different trajectories that *place* would take us over the course of the twentieth century -- place as a real site of land and space where real people worked hard to make a living; and place as an abstract entity where abstract groups struggled between themselves to establish their dominance. The tension between place as real and place as habitat, or territory, between the struggles of real human beings and the struggles of abstract groups, would continue to weave its way across the work of urban sociologists over the course of this century. On the one hand, there emerged from the Chicago School the detailed ethnographies of individuals and groups that could be as real and gritty as Nelson Algren's stories about life on the streets of Chicago; and on the other hand, there also emerged the layers of abstractions about human ecology, about natural areas, about competition and succession. Sometimes urban sociologists have managed to creatively blend the two angles -- the real human beings with the abstract struggles, weaving place as neighborhood and place as territory together, and showing how the one was constructed out of the other. One of the finest works of this genre is that by Gerry Suttles (*The Social Order of the Slum*), who manages to show how the places of cities become encoded as the territories of gangs, and how the gangs mark out their places with their own insignia and their daily gatherings at particular sites, with particular individuals, specific gestures and the like. By using a grounded approach, Suttles was able to show how places take on their more abstract social character.

The tension between place as real and place as abstract territory even became the basis for a considerable critique of the Chicago School by Manuel Castells, one of the most prolific students about cities today. In his book, *The Urban Question*, Castells argued that urbanists like Park and Burgess had a committed a major scientific error -- the sin of misplaced concreteness. He suggested that their notion of the city as place, as site and neighborhood, was all wrong. What they perceived in the way of real places and struggles among different groups in the city, he suggested, actually were struggles in the nature of modern capitalism. Place, Castells argued, was like an afterthought or residue in the battles between capitalists and workers. Those who possessed wealth occupied the dominant and central places of downtown, not because they were

central but because they had wealth. *Money made the city go round*, Castells argued, *not the city's public transportation system.*

Even today sociologists struggle to grasp the central meaning of place for cities. Mark Gottdiener and my good friend Joe Feagin (1988) write about the city today mainly in terms of the development of the city as a commodity, as real estate.[4] To them the meaning of urban places has come to be embodied in their definition as commodities, to be developed and exploited by modern capitalists. Moreover, in their eyes the tragedy of place for modern cities lies precisely in the tension between places as real, for their residents, and as commodities for property developers. The developers can move their capital around wherever and however they please, looking always for the best -- i.e. most profitable way -- to invest it. But to actual human beings, those commodities are homes and neighborhoods, places of affection and security, places that cannot and will not be moved because they are, after all, home.

### The Layered Meanings of Place

While we sociologists struggle in our effort to talk intelligently about places with real human beings and places as abstract, subject to broad social forces, real human beings themselves conduct their lives, imagining and living in places, giving them meanings that defy the simple effort of moving from concept to indicator. There are three meanings of place that figure very importantly into the lives of human beings: *place as hope and aspiration; place as community; and place as neighborhood.*

#### *Place As Hope and Aspiration*

One of the most important meanings that people attach to the notion of place is that of a site of hope and aspiration. When we think of a better world we think of something that we can construct, or dream about, something that is concrete, yet a place where we can fashion something new. Often the dreams of fashioning something new are borne out of the miseries of our lives at present. Places of hope come to embody dreams, and to drive our desire to move away from the present into a future site. When immigrants came to America in the late 19th century, they dreamed of it as the place where they could escape the harsh realities of brutal treatment at the hands of the czar, or other authorities, and where they could find opportunities for themselves to make a new life. Listen to some immigrants speak about America, and its urban settings, and what it offered to them:

From Irving Howe and Kenneth Libo, 1979:

> Abraham Cahan writes: "It was one of these letters from America. . . which put the notion of immigrating to the New World definitely in my mind. An illiterate woman brought it to the synagogue to have it read to her, and I happened to be the one to whom she addressed her request. The concrete details of that letter gave New York tangible form in my imagination. . .(yet) the United States lured me not merely as a land of milk and honey, but also, perhaps chiefly, as one of mystery, of fantastic experiences, of marvelous transformations. To leave my native place and to seek my fortune in that distant weird world seemed to be just the kind of sensational adventure my heart was hankering for."[5]

Or, yet another: (Marcus Ravage):

> "All my relatives and all our neighbors -- in fact, everybody who was anybody -- had either gone or was going to New York. Everybody who went there became a millionaire overnight, and a doctor or a teacher in the bargain. In New York, it appeared, education

> was to be got altogether without cost, by Jew and Gentile alike by day or night. . . .There, in America, was my future, as well as my family's."[6]

Our ancestors -- yours and mine -- imagined not something abstract, but a real place, a New York, a Chicago, an America where they could make their lives new, where they could make money, and where their hopes and dreams could come true. Even today immigrants invest places with their great aspirations and ambitions, to escape the present for the future. When I visited China several years ago, I was literally bombarded by people who wanted to come to America, to Chicago, where they dreamed of money and democracy -- *and especially money*. Their hopes and aspirations were tied to a specific place, something of their dreams.

Even great philosophers invest places with meanings. When Thomas More (1910) wrote his utopia he spoke not of something artificial or intangible, but of a real place where the benefits of humankind could be achieved. He imagined a place where no one was too rich nor too poor, where those who had much were willing to help those who had too little. "For in other places," he observed, "they speak still of the commonwealth, but every man procureth his own private wealth. Here where nothing is private, the common affairs be earnestly looked upon."[7]

***Place As Community***

I think that for many urban scholars, the appeal of writing about cities or even towns comes from their own hope to create something that is comprehensive, a new kind of place where all the wrongs of the past can be eliminated. In a deep and profound sense, we aspire to overcome the fragmentation and alienation of our own lives by seeking out, and developing, ideas about how to construct, and reconstruct places as communities.

While I can appreciate the recent efforts of communitarians to find and restore some sense of community across our land, the real appeal of urban studies is that one can find small self-contained efforts at constructing communities just about everywhere one turns. From the small town in Iowa to the large cities of Illinois, there are places that furnish for their residents means for making a living, going to school and having a home. Granted that the resources for doing things often come from elsewhere now -- like monies from state or federal government -- at the very least one has a sense that if you are studying something about housing in Chicago, or helping residents to find housing, or providing evidence that shows vast inequalities between areas for school resources, you are making an effort at helping to create community for some real human beings.

The settlement houses in Chicago on the near west side at the turn of the century were devoted to helping local residents improve their lives. The goal of such settlement houses as the Hull House complex, established by Jane Addams, was to help establish communities in which people could more easily connect with one another and make a good living. The settlement houses furnished day-care, education for local residents, financial aid for new immigrants. The settlement houses were, in a phrase, aimed at changing the city from only the place of hope and aspiration to the place of community, and people working in partnership with one another.

Even today we can see how areas of cities are transformed from merely physical places into places that display all the character of community. Those of you who have traveled among the many different cities in America must recall the vivid ways in which some groups make their physical spaces sport all the attributes of their communal lives. I am especially impressed with the ways in which the large murals in Latino areas signify both who the occupants of the places of these areas are, and what their dreams and struggles are all about. In a recent trip to San Francisco, my son

took me to the Latino area, and I observed in great wonder the walls of murals, brightly colored and displayed, of history and of politics. These murals told me much about who the residents of this place were: they established in clear and bright symbols the elements that made up this community, and the importance of visual exuberance to the construction of the community itself. Likewise, in London, one can travel across different parts of the city, and see in various activities, but especially the open markets, how the community is constituted, who the people are, and what elements of life are important to them. These public gathering sites and symbolic displays, evident in markets and in murals, provide a very visible and visual way of understanding the nature of place as community; and they have provided countless scholars with their own way into understanding social worlds.

***Place As Neighborhood***

Surely the most concrete manner in which place presents itself to us is in the form of neighborhoods. Neighborhood is the place where we grew up; where we developed our friendships; where we went to school; where many of our parents may have worked; what we remember best. When you return to the city or town where you grew up, where do you want to go? Back to your neighborhood, to find your home, to regenerate all the stored memories and meanings it has for you.

To many modern sociologists, neighborhood represents one of the essential meanings and definitions of place for people. Consider that when sociologists, John Logan and Harvey Molotch (1987), wrote their wonderful synthesis about cities they spent a good deal time of talking about the way that neighborhoods have *use-value* -- or are have meaning, in a general sense -- for their residents. City dwellers, they suggest, have many attachments to their neighborhoods. They possess their daily round in the neighborhood, the shops they go into, the places they may eat at, the array of specific vendors and sellers on the street. All of this goes into making the neighborhood feel comfortable and routine, and giving people a sense of security, of being at home when they are outside their houses. Neighborhoods also include, suggest Logan and Molotch, a set of informal support networks that become available at times of crisis -- like when you have to get the kids from the school and you don’t have a car, or when someone is ill in the family. Though we rarely see our neighbors in Highland Park, when my wife recently was recovering from major surgery, one of our neighbors from across the street came over, delivering some flowers that had been left there accidentally. We talked, she asked about my wife, and she offered to help out if we needed anything. And this all in the middle of winter, no less!

The roots of our identity, and the sense of our security, are also tied up in neighborhoods both past and present. We try to live in neighborhoods that we believe we can feel safe in; and often when urban residents decide to move, or want to change neighborhoods, it is precisely because they do not feel safe in them. This sense of trust and safety becomes woven into our daily lives, but also becomes rooted in our consciousness of who we are. When Patricia Leigh Brown returned to her home on Sheridan road, she was not simply returning to a place, but she was revisiting herself, who she once was as well as who she had become. This connection between neighborhood and identity, I think, is very strong - especially when we face difficulties in other arenas of our lives we seek refuge and safe haven in our neighborhoods.

Cities today can be thought of, in part, as assemblages of different neighborhoods. And these neighborhoods have taken on a considerable significance for their residents. How else to explain the fact that neighborhood organizations can emerge almost overnight, created by groups of neighbors seeking to keep out the next developer? My research in Austin, Texas, for instance,

uncovered countless neighborhood organizations that appeared almost minutes after a new developer brought in his trucks to tear down an old home, or to put up a new mall. Local residents worked hard to protect the integrity of their neighborhood through the creation of organizations, many of which proved successful in keeping out developers. Much of the history of that city, and I dare say other burgeoning cities, can be written simply by attending meetings of the local city councils, and keeping a close record of the identities and battles of neighborhood organizations and real estate developers.

The research today on neighborhoods and neighborhood organizations reveals how significant the nature of place is to our understanding of history and of social process. For it is on the site of neighborhoods that we find actual groups emerging and struggling, that we discover great wealth pitted against homeowners, that we find power pitted against the powerless. How these struggles of groups turn out is what determines the outcome of the historical play of capitalism and power in modern society. While we may conceive the world in terms of classes, races and gender, it is the manner in which struggles based on these dimensions actually works out in neighborhoods that determines how people will lead their lives. Because people invest so much of their energies into their neighborhoods, how they define them -- *who is in and who is out* -- says not only much about the neighborhood but also much about the workings of society at that time and in that place.

## Reconstructing the World Through Reconstructing Its Places

*Residents of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your property taxes!*

A century ago, America was engulfed in the conflicts of the industrial revolution. Those conflicts broke out in cities, where thousands of immigrants had rushed in, and where the battles took the form of struggles between workers and employers. At the time, it seemed that the way to reconstruct the world was essentially by reconstructing the workplace or, if not that, then engaging in the reconstruction of power by attempting to reconstruct local government.

Now, a century later, while we still can observe much of the social residue of that time, in the form of ossified labor unions and the wasting hulk of dead factories, many people have shifted their efforts to reconstruct the world to their neighborhoods, their communities, their places. Many seek to make their places in which they reside into places of their imagination. There thus can be no better sign of the importance of place than in the work and energies that thousands of people devote daily to remaking their urban residences.

Those of us who have a real and genuine commitment ourselves to remaking the world must begin to think about remaking its places. Again, this is a great advantage to social science of the centrality of place -- it not only provides us real objects to study but it also gives us a foothold into helping to bring about change in the world. I come from a University, in fact, where there is a considerable effort underway to remake the world by creating strong partnerships between the University and many local neighborhoods on the near West Side of Chicago, such as in the Pilsen area.

My own vision of this future, and of remaking places, is only slowly coming into focus. I see the way for improving the lives of many urban residents through the development of the resources already available to local sites. In particular, I have begun to think about the nature *of capital* in broader terms, in the kinds of inventive ways sociologists have proposed when they speak of *cultural capital*, for example, or *social capital*, to use James Coleman's expression. As a student of places, I like to think that there is something out there we can call "civic capital." I believe that civic capital consists of four different components: *a strong vision, and direction for a place; an equally strong*

*commitment to the idea of a place; alliances among the leading sectors of the place*, particularly the political and business communities; and *bridges that run between the leading segments of the place and its many citizens*, particularly the citizens groups that exist. Cities that have all four of these elements, I suggest, are rich in civic capital, and they can use it to get things done -- improve schools, for one, work hard to make relations between racial and ethnic groups work more effectively, perhaps even draw in new enterprises to help revive a declining local economy. In general, I think that civic capital can be cultivated and developed, invested and deployed, all in the effort to improve the lives of citizens in local places.

All of this exists not only in the realm of a sociological imagination but also in the realm of the real world. There are some cities, for example, that indeed seem to have more civic capital than other cities. Take the case of the Twin Cities, a favorite example of mine. On all four of these counts – *vision, commitment, alliances, and bridges* -- the Twin Cities seem to have done a whole lot better than other cities. In the mid-1950s, for example, an alliance of leaders decided that downtown Minneapolis needed to be remade, and so they undertook a physical reconstruction of the downtown area. The Twin Cities also score high in terms of the commitment of people, especially leading families to the city. Key families, such as the Daytons and the Olsons, have not only made money in the Twin Cities, but they have invested in philanthropy designed to help out local citizens and to keep the fortunes of the city alive. There also seem to have been strong bridges constructed between the leading sectors and the many citizens groups in the city, built, I might add, on a strong consensus about where the city should go. All of these elements have permitted the citizens of the Twin Cities to move forward in ways that many other cities have not. They were farsighted enough, for example, to invent a Metropolitan Council in 1967, that today provides the opportunity for making decisions that will help redistribute tax monies from rich suburbs to poorer ones. It also permits aggressive congressmen like Myron Orfield to push policies designed to build low-income housing in some of the richer suburbs.

Where civic capital exists, in other words, it seems available to do precisely the things that one wants to do to make the lives of urban residents better -- to put into place both political and economic machinery that can help make the lives of the impoverished better, and that can help redistribute monies from the richer places to the poorer ones.

Likewise, where civic capital does not exist, there seems an inability to get things done to improve the city. My favorite example is Milwaukee where, it just so happens, I grew up. Having done a long study there, I was profoundly distressed to learn of the disunity, the lack of civic capital that exists. Although there have been efforts to create a strong vision for the place, even involving different community groups, the city is better known today for its divisions than for its common views. There have been alliances between political and business figures, but those alliances have often led nowhere. Most striking is the absence of a commitment to place that exists in the Twin Cities. This is particularly true among the leading families of the city, those who built their fortunes from beer, or heavy metal -- the nonmusical kind -- or from leather. When the Uihleins, who built Schlitz, made their monies, they did not develop philanthropic organizations in the city. Instead they took their money and ran, buying up properties in nearby Chicago or investing in horses in Florida stables. Moreover, the city is notable, in the recent past at least, for the failure of bridges to be built between the leading sectors and the citizens' groups. Surely one of the strong reasons for this is the high degree of segregation, even racism, for which Milwaukee has become noted. This ugly force has proved debilitating to the continuing vitality of this place. Yet, I would argue, local residents can work to build bridges, even over the racial divide, as the history of places like

Atlanta shows. And when such bridges are built, they, along with other elements of what I call civic capital, can provide the foundations for moving communities in the right direction, and helping to improve the lives of all local residents.

It is the task of sociologists, particularly urban sociologists, to help us all to discover and to cultivate the civic capital of cities. If we are true to the calling of our profession, then we will try to make places of the imagination into places of reality for the real people who live their real lives there. I urge you, too, to help make these dreams come true -- to make physical places into genuine communities, to help construct the bridges across the broad divides.

## Notes

1. **The New York Times**, Thursday, November 14, 1996, p. B1
2. Burgess map, p. 55, Robert Park et al., **The City**
3. p. 182, “Community and Society,” in Park, **Human Communities**, Free Press, 1952
4. 1985; 1999
5. p.18 Howe and Libo
6. p.19 Howe and Libo
7. p. 250, Thomas More, **Utopia**, The Harvard Classics (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1910

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