

Implications

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Creating Spaces: Human Geography, Design, and Social Responsibility

Right now there is a good chance that you are thinking - "Geography? What is 'geography' doing in the title of this design newsletter?" You are not alone. Though diverse, growing, and increasingly important as a scientific discipline, geography (more explicitly human geography) remains largely under the radar in the design field. Often disparaged as the study of states and capitals, human geography actually incorporates numerous sciences, including: economics, political science, sociology, anthropology, the information sciences, and *design*.

Human Geography

But what is human geography? In short, it is the study of people and space. More than just analyzing and taking note of where people and their possessions are, however, geography studies the interactions and social habits of humans *within* and *across* all spaces. Basically, geographers critically examine how humans organize and identify themselves in space—how we create "places." Thus, the science of human geography does not look at location per se, as much as it does at the mobility of, access to, and barriers against human processes.

To examine these things, one must look at any number of variables and elements influencing human interaction within space. Geographers have developed tools and methods to help in this task, many of which can also be used in the decision making processes of design. Two geographic principles pertinent to good design will be reviewed in this piece: 1) the importance of scale; and 2) the social responsibilities behind the design and organization of space.

Scale

Scale is a crucial component in understanding the impact of our design decisions and actions. For simplicity's sake, geographers define scale as the level at which human interaction takes place. Scales are all inclusive, all human interaction takes place within space and, hence, within a scale. Scales of interaction range from the household (a family's squabble in the foyer) to the international political system (China's relations with Japan). Between these two extremes lie a plethora of other scales (i.e., county, neighborhood, home, etc.). Social activities operate at and through all scales, and these processes of human interaction are largely based on power relations.

Design as Control Mechanism

Space is never neutral—all space is sub-



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Where Research Informs Design

ject to conflict between those who have power within the space and those that would like more. An example of this would be a teacher dealing with an unruly student in the classroom; the space is designed to give the teacher authority, but this does not prevent an occasional student from contesting the teacher's power. Whether knowingly or not, humans organize spaces to: benefit, suppress, open up, close down, engage, segregate, exploit, persuade, entice... to mold and control interaction. Across all scales, we design space to give us security and to help us garner and maintain power over our environments, such as power over nature (building dams), control over our household (locking our doors), or command over other humans (prisons).

Social Responsibility

Thus, the design of any space empowers some and limits others. Those who design space must carefully consider this so that they do not inadvertently disenfranchise particular groups or individuals. Sometimes non-exclusionary design principles become legislated, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Yet often decisions fall on the designer to carefully think through the social implications of a project. A prime example of this might be found in the process of gentrification, which offers many benefits to urban communities but also has numerous, oft ignored, side effects (i.e., the eviction of long-term residents from their homes; the annihilation of particular community identities; etc.). There is no way a design can benefit everyone equally, but a thorough design often attempts to diffuse and alleviate the implications of its existence to the larger community in which it exists.

Unsustainable and purely “bottom-line,” economical designs seriously impact broader society as a whole (be it the neighborhood, the city, the country, or the world). At their best, poorly planned spaces result in discomfort. At their worst, they privilege some while

severely limiting, if not hurting, others. Thus, designs that ignore discussions of social impact can actually be seen as more than public nuisances; they can become public dangers, capable of devastating communities, identities, the quality of the environment, and of inducing new social tensions. This is why it is imperative that design be informed by contemporary research from a variety of disciplines and fields.

Geography's Contributions to Design

Human geography has much to contribute to the practice of design. For it shows us that design is entwined with social responsibility and public trust, and that the scale of our design goes beyond the dimensions of a building and travels the pathways of human interaction. Quite often designers are responsible for how space manifests itself after their project is done—for better or for worse. For it is designers who shape how a space can, and likely will, be used by others. By implementing geographic concepts into the planning and development stages of design, one is better able to visualize the impact that a particular space will have on its users. Geography helps us reduce and diffuse negative aspects of design by allowing us to look at the broader impact the designed space will have on everyone and everything associated with it.



—Ian Oas, Assistant Director, Informedesign

About the Author: Ian Oas is Assistant Director of Informedesign. He received his M.S. in geography from the Pennsylvania State University. Ian's book

reviews have been published in numerous geographic journals and he has written a book chapter forthcoming in *The Geography of War and Peace* (Oxford University Press).

Finding a Home: Basic Facts About Housing

As the old saying goes, home is where the heart is—but a house is not always a home. Yet, it is hard to imagine having a home without also having adequate and affordable housing. What makes a house a home? What is the relationship between self-identity and home? How can we facilitate the development of homes that support and promote the well being of children, families and communities? These are critical questions that lie at the root of the study of housing.

Understanding housing is no simple matter. Take, for instance, the search for home. For some of us, home is the town or neighborhood where we were born. Yet finding a home is not always a simple feeling of having roots. In the modern world, many people find home an elusive place, searching the world in the pursuit of a place to call home. As Lucy Lippard points out, for a growing number of people home is found in multiple places. And let us not forget that some people have no place to call home. The homeless have no address and no secure place in the world. Finding a home is not simple nor is it easy.

House As a Fixed Place

In considering these questions the issue of housing instantly springs to mind. The basic characteristics of housing make finding a home a complex issue. From a geographical standpoint, the most basic fact is that houses are fixed in space. Of course, this isn't always the case. Nomads pulled up stakes as the seasons changed and gypsy wagons were once a common sight in parts of Europe. Still, so-called mobile homes don't travel well.

The relative fixity of homes in space has a number of important implications. First of all, when we want to change our place of residence we must move and leave our house behind. Thus, we must travel throughout geographic space to find a new home. We must go to the house; generally speaking it won't come to us. We are in the market for a new home and unless we are lucky enough to be able to construct a new home of our choosing, we must find a home from among the choices offered by the market.

It is a truism that the more money one has, the greater number of choices are available in the housing market. Even middle-income families may have few choices. And even though discrimination in housing is no longer the barrier it once was, people of color often must choose from relatively few options. Indeed, much effort has been expended in increasing the housing opportunities for underserved populations.

Because a house is fixed in space the neighborhood that surrounds it is very important. A nearby barking dog can be an annoyance while the construction of a new road may increase noise and pollution levels and present a safety hazard to children traveling to and from school. These are what we call 'externality effects.' What one's neighbor does (or doesn't do) or

the actions of developers or government may well impact on the value of a dwelling. We must be aware of what is going on in the neighborhood and in the city itself. Often, we band together with our neigh-



bors to deal with issues such as new development or crime. Building codes, zoning regulations, and deed restrictions are just a few ways that we try to regulate and limit the impact of negative externalities.

Affordability and Scale

The second basic fact about housing is that houses are expensive. Most of us aren't able to write out a check to purchase a house. No, to buy a house we must find someone who is willing to loan us the



money. Because of this fact, those searching for a home must engage with the home finance industry.

Our efforts to finance our housing dream is influenced by a host of factors that operate at national and global scales. For instance, the cost and availability

of home mortgages are greatly impacted by federal policies, the structure of the global banking industry, and general economic conditions within and beyond the borders of the United States.

Assessing Value

The third basic fact about housing is that homes have value. Yet, the notion of value is surprisingly complicated. One way the concept of value has been conceptualized is to recognize that, as far as homes are concerned, there are two main types of value: exchange value and use value.

Exchange value is how much a house is worth in the housing market. As we make payments on our home loan we gradually reduce the balance and gain some equity in the house. If we are lucky enough to purchase a house in a rising housing market we gain

equity as home values increase. Because our home is our most important investment, we are rightfully concerned with exchange value. Any perceived threats to exchange value are sure to cause residents great concern and often ignite protest.

Interestingly, an effort to protect our investment in housing often makes it more difficult to construct new homes. Homeowners often object to new developments, especially when they feel it threatens their exchange values. Housing researchers understand that the NIMBY (not in my backyard) syndrome increases the cost of new development. Designers can play an important role here. Homes, which are designed to fit into existing neighborhoods, will be easier for residents to accept. Commercial developments can also be made to blend in and designs that aim to create a sense of community may actually be welcomed.

But housing is not just about money and here is where the concept of use value comes in. **Use value** is the utility of the home. An adequate house protects our health; keeping us warm in the cold, dry in the rain and cool in the heat of summer. A good house keeps us secure, but a nice house in an insecure neighborhood will not do. These are all examples of use value: homes that are healthy and secure have high use value for the occupants. Deterioration of the house or neighborhood may reduce its use value. So might aging or infirmity; a house that is not accessible doesn't have much use value to someone who has experienced a debilitating stroke. Design that takes into account the changing needs of occu-



pants will help to preserve use value. And thinking about housing in this way helps us to maintain our focus on the user.

Use value also includes the way a house may promote or sustain the occupant's identity. Most of us are quite proud of our houses. They are an important symbol of our status and reflect our ability to navigate the tricky waters of the housing market and the housing finance industry. They reflect our caring about the community in which we reside. Our neatly trimmed lawn has a message: I am contributing to the well being of this neighborhood, I am an asset to this place and I belong here.

Home in the Big Picture

And this now brings me back to the first point: the search for home. Because homes are fixed in space, finding a home means taking up residence in a particular place. Since homes are costly we must interact with powerful institutions that may or may not support our search for home. If the family and neighborhood prospers, the exchange values increase and help provide the funds needed to send children to college or to fund a second home. If a house becomes



a home we achieve a sense of belonging and identity that is necessary for our well-being.

Those of us involved in the study of housing are especially mindful of the uneven distribution of adequate and affordable housing. We recognize that some neigh-

borhoods are better off than others and that some members of our society have more difficulty in finding a home than others do. Because housing is an essential human need, unevenness in the distribu-

tion of shelter is of great concern to those of us who study and teach about housing. Public policy, private business, and design professionals all have a part to play in efforts to provide a basic human need: adequate and affordable housing *for everyone* that promotes a feeling of belonging and being at home in the world.

—Jeff Crump, Ph.D., Associate Professor, University of Minnesota

Reference

—Lippard, L. (1997). *The lure of the local: senses of place in a multicentered society*. New York: New Press.

About the Author: Jeff Crump is an Associate Professor in the Housing Studies program, Department of Design, Housing, and Apparel. He received his Ph.D. in geography in 1989 at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. His main research interests include housing and urban policy, public housing policy and the labor geography of the Midwest. Jeff has published widely on these topics and his articles have appeared in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, *Society and Space*, *Environment and Behavior* and the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*.

Urban Planning and Design Professionals Participants

Contemporary urban planning has changed much from the old days of town hall meetings. The people and issues involved in successful urban planning have continued to grow and become more interdependent. Today planning is comprised of a complex web of changing policy and laws, information and computer technologies, and a variety of human actors. Due to the vast amount of influences involved

in planning, it comes as no surprise that some cities and towns do better than others. In addition to the city council or county board, actors involved in urban planning include:

- Public/Consultant Planners
- Constituents/Stakeholders
- Developers
- Design Professionals



Important Issues

As communities evolve and become more complex—both socially and structurally—so do urban planning issues. The core role of planning remains the creation and fostering of a community that can take care of the needs of its citizens in an efficient and fair manner. But new times have challenged cities in new ways, particularly concerning development and:

- Community growth/sprawl
- Housing
- Transportation/infrastructure
- Economics
- Environmental impact/sustainability

Though the issues largely remain the same, perspectives on these issues continually change and often pit one group of actors against another:

- Citizens and elected officials;
- Business developers and environmental advocates;

- Housing developers and affordable housing proponents; and
- Design professionals and urban planners.

Building Consensus

Conflict has always been part of the planning process, but architects and designers can act as important mediators, as they lie in a position to fight objectively for developments that will serve the community best as a whole—not necessarily swayed by politics, business, or developers.

Beyond the scale of a house or building, design professionals can contribute much to broader society. Through efficient and equitable design, communities become safe, healthy environments for everyone. Though not necessarily always active participants, designers can stay involved in their communities' planning processes in subtle ways by:

- Keeping in tune with local politics;
- Observing recent planning developments; and
- Attending planning meetings to share your views or expertise early on in the process.



Through consistent awareness of the planning processes going on in a community, one can participate, provide knowledge, and become more informed about the future direction and aspirations of the

town, city, or county. By being timely with reservations or educated complaints against a particular path of development, one becomes a dynamic participant and can help design the shape of tomorrow's community.

—Ian Oas, Assistant Director, *InformeDesign*

Related Research Summaries

InformeDesign has numerous Research Summaries written by geographers studying retail marketing, housing development, and sustainable, urban, and environment-friendly design. One realm of design research of particular importance to everyone is that concerning finding safe, secure, shelter—a home. Research in housing studies is shedding light on what a home is in a broader context by helping to identify the explicit interaction between design, identity, and the world lying outside our front doors.

“Factors Related to Owning a Home”

—*Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal*

“Residential Mobility Behavior of the Elderly”

— *Housing and Society*

“Children's Psychological Health is Related to Housing”—*Environment and Behavior*

“Urban Residents Annoyed by Traffic Noise”

—*Journal of Urban Planning and Development*

“Personalizing Apartments Increases Place Attachment”—*Journal of Environmental Psychology*

“Design of Sacred Space”—*Journal of Interior Design*

“Women's Concerns About Public Space”

—*Journal of Environmental Psychology*

“Land Management Practices”—*Landscape Ecology*

“Facility Plan Influences Learning and Socialization”

—*Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*

Photos Courtesy of:

Dave Hansen, Ag Experiment Station
University of Minnesota
(Hmong Family, p. 3)

Caren Martin, Director, *InformeDesign*
(Remaining photos)



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