

# Radically constructing 'place'

Ben Sweeting<sup>a\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Architecture and Design

\* R.B.Sweeting@brighton.ac.uk

**Abstract:** Place—what it means to be somewhere, or to be from somewhere—is a common thread running through the many systemic crises of our time. Place is a value under threat from globalisation, gentrification, networked technologies, human conflict and environmental disasters. At the same time, it is an underlying cause of some of the political and social tensions that are intertwined with these issues. Within architectural theory, place is strongly associated with phenomenology, the foundations of which are entangled with the sort of nativist politics that is currently resurgent around the world. In this working paper, I outline an alternative approach to place as a way to address its double-edged quality, building on Ernst von Glasersfeld's radically constructivist interpretation of Jean Piaget. In doing so, I establish points of connection between architectural discourse on place and the cybernetic foundations of systemic design.

**Keywords:** Place, Architecture, Radical Constructivism, Phenomenology, Systemic Design

## 1. Systems and places

Place—what it means to be somewhere, or to be from somewhere, and how we then construct this as an idea and in built form—is a common thread running through the many systemic crises of our time. Place is a value under threat from globalisation, gentrification, migration and the development of networked technologies. Many places are also very *literally* at risk from human conflict, climate change and ecosystem collapse. As well as being under threat from these systemic crises, place is, *at the same time*, a contributing factor to some of the political and social tensions that are intertwined with these issues. This double-edged quality is becoming ever more visible around the world in the reinforcement of borders and in current tendencies towards ever more specific units of political identity and nationhood.

While this may seem somewhat intractable, we can see some of this interaction between systems and places within our everyday experience. During this conference, several speakers have spoken about the importance of *getting the whole system into the room* where decisions are made (e.g. Jones, 2018). We might also ask, what systems are already implicit in the rooms that we enter? During the presentation of this paper at the conference, I located this question in the tiered lecture

theatre in which I was speaking. As Gregory Bateson (1972/2000, pp. 493-494) has pointed out, spaces such as this encourage a unilateral relation between speaker and audience, with the former standing to deliver a monologue to a mostly passive audience who sit and listen. This reinforces the epistemological error that we are separate from each other, in turn perpetuating the idea that we are separate from our environment, which Bateson goes on to identify as being at the root of the ecological crisis. That is, the way we place ourselves—and each other—in the world through the design and use of space has much wider systemic ramifications.

It is clear that place should be an important consideration within systemic design, and indeed it has been an emerging theme in RSD conferences and related publications (Ellefsen, 2017; Ruttonsha, 2016, 2018; Sweeting, 2018). Integrating a consideration of place within systemic approaches is, however, far from straightforward. The strengths of systems theory and cybernetics come at the cost of abstraction. Ross Ashby, for instance, stressed that “systems theory must become based on methods of simplification” and that “*the systems theorist of the future...must be an expert in how to simplify*” (Ashby, 1964/2001, p. 594, italics original). Similarly, Ashby’s influential introduction to cybernetics characterised it as the study of “all possible machines”, focusing on general principles and downplaying material embodiment (Ashby, 1956, pp. 1-2). This abstraction is part of what gives systemic approaches their tremendous reach and transdisciplinary potential, but in so doing it distances them from specific situations and material conditions. One way in which to counter this is by integrating more situated methods, as has been prominent within this conference series and the development of systemic design (e.g. Aguirre & Paulsen, 2014; Perera, 2018; Sevaldson, 2017). An alternative approach, and the one I pursue here, is to look to how place is understood in architectural theory and to develop connections between this architectural discourse and the foundations of systemic design.

## 2. Place in architectural phenomenology

In architectural theory, place is strongly associated with phenomenology, and especially Martin Heidegger’s later philosophy, through figures such as Christian Norberg-Schulz (1971, 1980, 1986), Karsten Harries (1997), and Kenneth Frampton (1974, 1983) amongst others. Although it is possible to draw aspects of phenomenology into systemic and cybernetic approaches to architecture and design in various ways (e.g. Jelić, 2015; Ruttonsha, 2018), there is little common ground between architectural phenomenology’s concern for place and the areas of architecture where systemic approaches have been most influential. Indeed, the prominent examples of Melvin Webber (co-author with Horst Rittel of the seminal paper on ‘wicked problems’ (Rittel & Webber, 1973)) and Cedric Price (who collaborated extensively with cybernetician Gordon Pask (Sweeting, 2016b)) are amongst those cited by architectural historian Christian Norberg-Schulz (1986, p. 27, including footnote 7) as disregarding the importance of place.

While phenomenological approaches remain influential, they have been in retreat within architectural theory in recent decades. This has followed significant criticisms (e.g. Leach, 1998, 2005):

- Firstly, architectural phenomenology is entangled with the nativism that Leach (1998) has characterised as the “dark side” of Heidegger’s thinking. This is manifest in the idea that some ways of dwelling are less authentic than others because they are less rooted in place. See for instance Leach’s (2005) critique of the all too sharp contrast that Harries (1997) constructs between mobile homes and traditional farmsteads.
- Secondly, the regionalist approach that phenomenology helped to motivate has itself been recognised as a product of the homogenising global capitalism it sought to counter (Jameson, 1997).
- Thirdly, phenomenological accounts of place have tended to downplay the spatial significance of social, political and economic factors, which are some of the most important aspects of what is at stake when we discuss place today.

Thus, while architectural phenomenology may have much to contribute, it is bound up with some of the issues that, from a systemic perspective, are in need of being addressed. We might therefore look elsewhere to inform our approach to place (see e.g. Cumberlidge & Musgrave, 2007; Gehl, 2010; Jacobs, 1961; Ruttonsha, 2018). Yet, the aspects of architectural phenomenology that make it problematic also offer an opportunity for critical reflection, and this is my purpose in continuing to focus on it here.

The work of Norberg-Schulz, in particular, offers a point of departure from which to integrate issues of place within systemic design. The phenomenological framing that Norberg-Schulz gives to his work is not what it first appears. Although he is perhaps best known for introducing Heidegger into architectural theory, Norberg-Schulz’s use of Heidegger tends to be illustrative, with his arguments supported by quotations from Heidegger but not dependent on them. As Jorge Otero-Pailos (2010, p. 176) has put it, “Norberg-Schulz used Heidegger as a theoretical mask to add philosophical credibility” to his primarily visual argument. Norberg-Schulz draws on an eclectic range of other references, including systems theorist Talcott Parsons and psychologist and epistemologist Jean Piaget. This is usually presented as a weakness of Norberg-Schulz’s work compared to more philosophically sophisticated writers such as Harries, in that the ad hoc character of Norberg-Schulz’s theoretical sources presents an unstable basis for his position. Yet, this instability also presents an opportunity to rethink place in different terms, avoiding some of the difficulties with which phenomenological approaches are entangled, while also bringing architectural and systemic considerations into dialogue.

### 3. Reformulating place in radically constructivist terms

Piaget is one of Norberg-Schulz’s most important points of reference. This is especially so in Norberg-Schulz’s earlier work, but continues to be the case alongside and after his turn towards phenomenology. In *Existence, Space and Architecture*, Norberg-Schulz (1971, pp. 9-14) uses Piaget’s concepts of accommodation and assimilation to set out an understanding of space in terms of an interactive relationship between people and their surroundings. He contrasts this with the tendency of other treatments of space to reduce it to either abstract geometrical description or sense

impressions and feelings. This forms a foundation to Norberg-Schulz's argument, independent of the concepts he draws from Heidegger.

Norberg-Schulz's use of Piaget offers a point of departure from which to understand place in constructivist terms and to bring it into dialogue with contemporary concerns in systemic design. This theoretical reframing is perhaps an odd thing to suggest. Yet, in the particular case of Norberg-Schulz, it is in keeping with how he himself developed his work, re-theorising his ideas in combination with new sources as he developed his position. My purpose is not to offer a reinterpretation of Norberg-Schulz's intentions, but to use his work to explore what is at stake in how we understand place.

At the same time as Norberg-Schulz's turn towards phenomenology during the 1970s, Piaget's work was the principal reference for the development of radical constructivism by Ernst von Glasersfeld (1974, 1982). Radical constructivism critiques the way conventional approaches to epistemology focus on the possibility of a correspondence between one's experience and the world beyond it. As Glasersfeld points out, the question of such a correspondence is unresolvable in principle. One cannot experience the world beyond one's experience, and so cannot evaluate such a claim. Glasersfeld draws on Piaget's studies of how knowledge is actively built up in order to reformulate the domain of epistemology to be concerned with how we make sense of the world of our experience. Glasersfeld's approach is primarily a critique of realism but he also differentiates it from what he refers to as "trivial" forms of constructivism, where while the knower's role is acknowledged, knowledge is still understood in terms of correspondence:

From my perspective, those who merely speak of the construction of knowledge, but do not explicitly give up the notion that our conceptual constructions can or should in some way represent an independent, 'objective' reality, are still caught up in the traditional theory of knowledge that is defenseless against the sceptics' arguments. From an epistemological point of view, therefore, their constructivism is trivial. Trivial constructivism manifests itself in professionals who treat the knowledge of others as subjective construction and never doubt the 'objectivity' of their own. (Glasersfeld, 1991, p. 17)

There is some similarity between the ways that, in their respective contexts, Glasersfeld and Norberg-Schulz each attempt to move beyond the dichotomy between realism and idealism. However, radical constructivism is in sharp tension with Norberg-Schulz's view of place as an enduring quality, linked to landscape and persistent through social and economic change. While Norberg-Schulz does emphasise the active role of experience, he sees the meaning of place as something to be selected from possibilities already "inherent in the world" (Norberg-Schulz, 1980, p. 170). This interpretation can be characterised as trivial constructivism in Glasersfeld's terms. To understand place in radically constructivist terms is to see it as something that we are continually creating within our experience, rather than an already given that is to be discovered. This has significant consequences for the status of claims about the character of a place, such as the tendency of the phenomenological approach to see some places as more authentic than others. From a radically constructivist perspective, place is as much a matter of our participation as anything else:

just because someone experiences somewhere as placeless, does not mean that it will not be a coherent place for someone else or at another time. In this light, the way that Harries (1997) and Norberg-Schulz (1980) characterise mobile homes or suburban developments as lacking in place tells us at least as much about the authors as about the places they are trying to describe.

To adopt a radically constructivist approach is not, however, to say that place is arbitrary or to deny that the character of particular places can persist over time or between people. Stable and shared conceptions of a place can be understood as developing through recursive social processes. Factors such as history, landscape, and the built environment can be understood to act as *constraints* on what conceptions of place can be viably maintained rather than *sources* of meaning. Places that have particularly strongly defined and consistent characters, such as many of the examples that Norberg-Schulz (1980) focuses on, can be understood in terms of the recursive reinforcement of these constraints through the ongoing design of the built environment, such as where a building echoes or reinterprets its context. Norberg-Schulz advocates this process as a way of making our environments intelligible. To take a radically constructivist approach is not to dismiss the importance of this, but rather to raise critical questions about it. Who do particular attempts at placemaking serve? Where architecture contributes to a sense of place, whose interpretation is being reinforced? By strengthening one reading of place, which alternatives are excluded because they become harder to construct? In this way, a radically constructivist approach allows for place to be differentiated from the nativism with which phenomenology is entangled.

## 4. Connecting place with systemic design

One of the weaknesses of architectural phenomenology is that it has tended to see place as solely a matter for spatial disciplines such as architecture and planning, understanding it in isolation from political, social and economic factors. By contrast, understanding place in terms of radical constructivism suggests connections with cybernetics and, through this, with the framework of systemic design, allowing a broader treatment.

Radical constructivism overlaps significantly with cybernetics, with which Piaget's work has a number of sympathies and connections (Boden, 1979, pp. 126-148; Glanville, 2013; Glasersfeld, 1992; Pask, 1976, p. 19). The work of Ranulph Glanville has understood radical constructivism, cybernetics and design as closely interwoven with each other (Glanville, 2006, 2013, 2006/2014, 2014; Herr, 2015). Glanville is perhaps best known for his influential argument about the relation of design and research: that rather than design being one particular form of research, it makes more sense to understand research as a specific form of design activity (Glanville, 1999, 1981/2014; Sweeting, 2016a). He later generalised this argument, drawing on Piaget's account of how we establish the constancy of objects across our different experiences of them (Glanville, 2006, 2006/2014). Glanville argues that the Piagetian mechanisms of assimilation and accommodation form what is, in effect, a design process, creating the constant objects of our experience. Design can therefore be understood as an "essential part of thinking" (2006/2014, p. 231), leading to the conclusion that "to be human is to be a designer, and there is no more important human act than to design" (p. 237).

Combining the ways in which Piaget's ideas are taken up by Glanville and Norberg-Schulz, spatial experience can be understood as a design activity on the part of the experiencer. This supports the idea that place is something we create rather than something we find, as discussed above, while also forefronting the role of constraints within this. Consider, for instance, how place might be thought of in terms of Schön's (1992, p. 133) well-known characterisation of design as a "reflective conversation with the materials of the situation".

Understanding place in this way has the advantage of bringing it into a closer relation to fields that are not overtly concerned with physical spaces. It is easy to think of the design and experience of digital technologies, systems and services as intangible. Nevertheless, they become manifest in and shape our spatial environments, and are bound up with the economic, social and political issues that are characteristic of contemporary conflicts over place. The approach that I have outlined in this paper allows place to be understood in similar terms to these less tangible factors, providing a framework in which the role of place within the systemic may be addressed.

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