

## Radically Constructing Place

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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. It is *both* a value under threat from globalisation, networked technologies, gentrification, and ecological and humanitarian disasters, *and at the same time* a contributing factor to political and social tensions that are intertwined with these issues, becoming visible in the reinforcement of borders and in current tendencies towards ever more specific units of political identity and nationhood. As an emerging theme in recent RSD conferences and related publications (e.g. Ellefsen, 2017; Ruttonsha, 2016, 2018), place is an issue where systemic design and architectural theory can fruitfully contribute to each other. This is, however, not as straightforward as it might appear.

One of the most influential works on place within architectural theory is Christian Norberg-Schulz's (1980) *Genius Loci*. In this and related works, Norberg-Schulz turned towards phenomenology and in particular Heidegger's later philosophy. This enabled him to move from the abstraction that is characteristic of his earlier writing to understanding architecture in more concrete and qualitative terms. Phenomenological approaches such as that taken by Norberg-Schulz have been in retreat in architectural theory in recent decades. This has followed significant criticisms that are especially pertinent to contemporary discussions of place (e.g. Leach, 1998, 2005): (1) the theoretical underpinnings of phenomenological approaches to architecture are entangled with the nativism that is currently resurgent in our politics; (2) the regionalist approach that phenomenology has motivated has been co-opted by the global capitalism that it had sought to counter; (3) the tendency of phenomenological accounts of architecture to downplay the spatial consequences of social and economic factors is not tenable from a contemporary standpoint. Thus, while the phenomenological approach to place that has been pursued in architectural theory may have much to contribute, it is bound up with some of the very issues that are in need of being addressed.

In this paper I explore an alternative theoretical basis for understanding place. Although Norberg-Schulz is perhaps best known for introducing Heidegger into architectural theory, he also makes use of a diverse range of other references. While this is especially the case in his earlier work, many of these sources are still prominent in his thinking even after his turn towards phenomenology. These include Jean Piaget, who I focus on here. Piaget's ideas have, in parallel, been a significant influence on the development of the epistemological position known as radical constructivism (and the overlapping field of second-order cybernetics) through Ernst von Glasersfeld (1974) and Ranulph Glanville (2006/2014) amongst others. In this working paper, I reformulate Norberg-Schulz's discussion of spatial experience in *radically constructivist* rather than phenomenological terms, building on the role that Piaget's ideas have in his thinking and the connections that these ideas make possible.

This shift allows for a significantly different understanding of place, emphasising the personal and interactive qualities of spatial experience rather than the properties of spaces in themselves. This avoids some of the complications that arise with phenomenological approaches and may be used to initiate new connections to fields where constructivism has been influential, such as cybernetics, systems thinking, and design research. This, in turn, allows for some of the less tangible issues that are bound up with contemporary conflicts over place—such as the design of technologies and services—to be understood in similar terms to place itself.

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