Urban Planning and Cultural Identity

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WILLIAM J.V. NEILL

PREFACE

Development, Kathy and George Mechem and Tom Nicholas. The following individuals were interviewed in the summers of 1999 and 2001: Revd Wendell Anthony, President Detroit Chapter NAACP; Gloria Robinson, Mayor's Executive Office and former Planning Director, City of Detroit; Paul Bernard, Planning Director, City of Detroit; Paul Tait, Executive Director, Southeast Michigan Council of Governments; Ed Hustoles, former Director of Planning for SEMCOG; Eric Lupher and Paul Goode, Citizen's Research Council of Michigan; Mary Kramer, Editor, Crain's Detroit Business; David Blaszkiewicz, Detroit Renaissance Inc; David Newman, Chief of Staff to Michigan Representative, Samuel Buzz Thomas III; Professor Mary Andrews, Associate Dean, Human Ecology, Michigan State University; Professor Robin Boyle, Associate Dean, College of Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

In Belfast the influences on one's understanding of how identity is embedded in place are too numerous to mention, let alone unravel. Emotional distance is more difficult when excavating through the sedimented memories of home where personal remembrances like my sister Christine 'going into town' interweave with collective experiences and constructions of the past. My involvement with the Irish Branch (Northern Section) of the Royal Town Planning Institute has, over the years, provided a valuable window on the world of planning practice. Frequent intellectual sparring sessions with planning consultant Dr Patrick Braniff, Senior Research Fellow at Queen's University, Belfast and, like myself 'Belfast-born and bred', has reassured me that empathy across difficult cultural divides is far from impossible and can be fostered by common roots in place.

Thanks are due to the Institute of Governance, Public Policy and Social Research at Queen's University, Belfast for granting me the breathing space of a Sabbatical Fellowship to complete this book and to Karen Agnew for producing the final manuscript with much care and good humour when mine was flagging. Two referees provided valuable feedback and for that I am also most grateful. The responsibility for making sense of it all remains, of course, mine.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For Susanne

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CHAPTER 1

KNOWING YOUR PLACE: URBAN PLANNING AND THE SPATIALITY OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

> There is within us only that dark divine animal engaged in a strange journey –
> that creature who, at midnight, knows its own ghostliness and senses its far
> road (Loren Eiseley, *The Night Country*, 1971: 54).

As Americans say, if life serves you up a lemon, make lemonade. Whether being born into an Ulster Unionist identity position in Northern Ireland makes it justifiable to liken one to a bitter fruit of dubious value is a matter of real debate. It is one of a number of questions of identity and its relationship to spatial planning that are considered in this book. What is not in question, however, is that 'one thinks of identity whenever one is not sure of where one belongs' (Bauman, 1996: 19). When one's cultural identity is challenged at its roots it can cause a defensive lashing-out from what Castells has called the 'trenches' of 'resistance identity' (Castells, 1997: 8). This is indeed an apt spatial metaphor at a personal level, since the real trenches of the Somme burn deep in the identity-consciousness of Ulster Protestants. Alternatively, when one's identity is questioned, it can cause one to think. To be off-balance and insecure in some primary or core identity can be, to use the terms currently in vogue, to occupy a position on 'the edge', an ill-defined 'borderland' from which the socially constructed nature of other identities wrestling with the problems of 'Us' and 'Them' can be better appreciated. This creates the possibility of proactively turning identity into a 'project' (Castells, ibid.) where it can be remade anew. This book examines the contestation over identity-building and the spatial constitution of this in particular in three different contexts, dealing respectively with German national identity in Berlin, racial identity in Detroit and ethnic identity in Belfast. It takes on board the well-made exhortation that the study of place in the planning field must put less emphasis on the notion of space as a 'surface on which things happen, a two-dimensional Euclidean "mosaic"' (Madanipour *et al.*, 2001: 7; Graham and Healey, 1999) and more on the meanings that are given to particular qualities of specific places. The selection of the three cities is based on places where the author was born and has worked or which have fired the imagination. As the philosopher and travel writer Alain de Botton has expressed it, 'it seems we may best be able to inhabit a place when we are not faced with the additional challenge of having to be there' (De Botton, 2002: 23). The case studies are united by a concentration on the 'city of the imagination' and the messy lived-in place world with which the planner is confronted. As such, the exploration of space unavoidably

raises more questions for planning practice than can be answered in this volume but, based on the author's own personal and professional ethical stance, judgements are offered along the way. Maybe, like architects, who are not afraid to reach for the city of the imagination, planners need to nail their own colours more forthrightly to the mast. All the cities presented reflect a general dilemma (in an era of increasingly multicultural cities) of how to balance acknowledgement of cultural difference with a civic sense of what is held in common and what unites. As Thrift has recently pointed out, the myth that 'one city tells all' and that 'it all comes together in Los Angeles' or some other 'celebrity' city is a dangerous one. No one city can bear such a heavy interpretative load (Thrift, 2001: 34–5). It is likely to distract planners and planning theorists from addressing the particularity of place. Before examining how the spatiality of identity has entered into the urban-planning tales of the three cities selected and what we might learn from this as pulled together in a concluding chapter, a foray into the dense literature dealing with cultural identity, difference and spatiality is unavoidable. The object is to delineate some broad, orientating contours in a vast interdisciplinary literature without doing violence to the subtleties of what, at times, can be complex debates. As is often the case, the planning academic attempts to harvest concepts and insights from intellectual labours in less applied disciplines in order to adapt them for relevance to the world of practice.

IDENTITY IN QUESTION

To say that individual identity is possible only in relation to a cultural context is to state a truism. As put by Benhabib:

> Culture is the context within which we need to situate the self, for it is only by virtue of the interpretations, orientations and values provided by culture that we can formulate our identities, say 'who we are', and 'where we are coming from' (Benhabib, 2000: 18).

Hence, whilst Jenkins in his recent book on the social construction of identity cautions against the very use of the term 'cultural' identity because of the multiplicity of contested meanings to which the word 'culture' is attached (Jenkins, 1996: 179), the term nevertheless can be said to have valency because it calls attention to the fact that collective cultural identities imply a much greater sense of meaning for the social actors involved than the traditional sociological concept of 'role' (Castells, 1997: 6–7). As stated by Inglis: 'identity is constituted in terms of what is ultimately important to an individual. It situates a person in moral space' (Inglis, 2001: 8). A common-sense starting point for getting to grips with identity is suggested by

Hall when he describes identification as 'constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation'. Hall is quick, however, to point out and endorse the view that identity must not be reduced to some 'essentialist' and unchanging core but rather that it is always discursively formed and always in process (Hall, 1996: 2–3). This social construction of collective identities, which is always taking place in a context marked by power relationships, uses varied cultural building materials from history, geography, religion, sexuality and so forth (Castells, 1997: 7), not the least of which (and of particular concern to the planner) are the socio-spatial resources and potentialities considered later in this introduction. Identity is importantly 'marked out by difference' (Woodward, 1997: 9), implying the marking of symbolic boundaries and the generation of frontier effects. It requires what is left beyond the boundary, its 'constitutive outside' as Hall calls it (Hall, ibid. 3). Differences marking the boundaries of identity may be small or great. Sameness can indeed threaten our individual identity and cause us to hate. As Kohler puts it: 'the more strongly we sense how like us the other person is, the more threatening it seems that he is close to us' (Kohler, 2000: 24). Ignatieff in his study of ethnic hatred in the Balkans drew attention here to Freud's notion of the 'narcissism of minor differences':

> The common elements humans share seem less essential to their perceptions
> of their own identities than the marginal 'minor' elements that divide them. What
> Marx called 'species being' – our identity as members of the human race –
> counts for relatively little (Ignatieff, 1999: 48).

The chasm of difference between identities can also be great, as epitomized by the events of 11 September 2001 giving credence to the thesis of Samuel P. Huntington that the global future will consist of ethnic and religious, Us–versus–Them, cultural clashes between civilizations (Huntington, 1993). In this context, Edward Said has referred to the inflamed collective passions of the United States pursuing Osama bin Laden 'like Captain Ahab in pursuit of Moby Dick'. 'Demonisation of the other', Said adds, 'is not a sufficient basis for any kind of decent politics' (Said, 2001). September 11th and a subsequent degree of polarization of Western and Islamic outlooks on the world illustrate the point that what concept of difference matters most depends on the social circumstances:

> In conditions of peace, considerable blurring of ethnic boundaries may occur.
> People center their identities on their individuality, rather than on their ethnicity.
> They become husbands or wives, lovers or friends and members of a group
> second (Ignatieff, 1999: 52).

Lurking in the background, however, may be what Hall refers to as 'cultural identity' in the sense of 'a shared culture, a sort of collective "one true self" hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed "selves", which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common' (Hall, 1997: 51). Likewise, Castells conceives of 'primary identities', which for most social actors have a primary role in the organization of meaning and which frame other identities that people have (Castells, 1997: 7). Before considering the vexed question of the tension between understanding individuals as 'culture takers' or 'culture makers', and hence the matter of social agency now likely to be characterized as the 'structuration' debate (Giddens, 1984), it is appropriate to reflect on why culture has featured prominently on the academic radar screen long before the collapse of New York's twin towers.

CLAMOUR OVER IDENTITY

The fact that identity has been a topical subject both in- and outside academia for some time now can be crudely related to the collapse of the cold war and to globalization on the one hand, and on the other to the influence of what might loosely be called post-modernist theory, social movements and an associated identity-politics. Castells has referred to the paradox of an increasingly local politics as people strive to create meaning in a world structured by increasingly global processes (Castells, 1997: 8). In Europe we see the reassertion of national identities after the collapse of the attempt to create new identities under the umbrella of Soviet hegemony, and a pan-European identity project championed by political élites seems as yet a pale substitute for the very much alive national narrative of nation states. Ignatieff underscores the link to globalization:

> Globalism scours away distinctiveness at the surface of our identities and forces us back into ever more assertive defense of the inner differences – language, mentality, myth and fantasy – that escape the surface scouring. As it brings us closer together, makes us all neighbors, destroys the old boundaries of identity marked out by national or regional consumption styles, we react by clinging to the margins of difference that remain (Ignatieff, 1999: 58).

In seeing 'globalization' not merely as an economic process but also as a set of events that confronts cultures with each other and links them together, Kohler outlines three possible future cultural scenarios. The first, continuing Americanization, is counterposed against the possibility of global 'jihad' evoked by the writing of Huntington already mentioned. Here Ockman refers to 'the fatally interdependent

dialectic of "jihad versus McWorld" which played itself out with such dire consequences in September 2001' (Ockman, 2002: 19). A third possibility, which would require working for a political culture of tolerance, could anticipate an increasingly hybridized or creolized world culture with mixtures of cultural elements and traditions (Kohler, 2000: 25–6).

The Pandora's box of difference has also been prised further open by postmodernist theory and a wide variety of social movements. The post-modern critique of grand narratives has been much commented upon. The various blends of post-structuralism, deconstructionism and anti-foundationalism evident in the works of Baudrillard, Lyotard, Derrida and Foucault and crudely classified as 'post-modern theory' all, at least in different ways, 'criticized the universalist claims of the meta narratives of the Western Enlightenment' (Featherstone, 1995: 78). The critique of the mission of modernity to impose order on disorder and its totalitarian nature in this respect by squeezing out notions of 'differences' is traced by Allmendinger to the 1944 work *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Adorno and Horkheimer. This has its roots in Nietzsche's reservations about the Enlightenment project (Allmendinger, 2001: 16). Freud had gone some way towards intimating the nature of the problem of the human power to annihilate through regulatory order when he commented in 1908:

> Experience teaches us that for most people there is a limit beyond which their constitution cannot comply with the demands of civilisation. All who wish to be more noble-minded than their constitution allows fall victims to neurosis; they would have been more healthy if it could have been possible for them to be less good (Freud, quoted Donald, 1996: 188).

A prominent theoretical casualty in post-modern critiques of attempts to provide unitary general explanations of society and history has been the meta-narrative of Marxism. While class remains as a conceptual necessity for understanding the dynamics of society, as Anderson points out, we 'need to understand plural sources of oppression or antagonism in contemporary capitalist societies' (Anderson, 1998: 202). It is more difficult to defend the notion of class as a 'master category' in explaining social structure:

> Identities based on 'race', gender, sexuality and disability, for example, cut across class affiliations ... it is no longer sufficient to argue that identities can be deduced from one's class position (Woodward, 1997: 26).

One writer goes so far as to suggest that now current theories of difference are an attempt to break from the stranglehold that class theory has exercised over the perceived constitution of social identity:

> Subaltern theorists of all sorts – feminists, African Americans, post-colonialists,
> gays, to name but some – have all argued for the separation of processes of
> gender, racial and sexual constitution from processes of class definition and
> formation. While arguing for an interaction between these aspects of identity,
> there has been a sensitivity to the distinctive autonomy of these processes
> (Gibson, 1998: 307).

Whereas the Enlightenment impulse was to overcome differences through whole-
ness, thus evading the sheer fact of difference (Sennett, 1992: 78), the impulse of
post-modernism has been away from universalistic ambitions and notions of total-
ity, system and unity towards 'otherness' and difference, fragmentation and local
knowledge (Featherstone, 1995: 44). Optimists see the latter as making room for a
wide variety of social movements and voices arguing from a range of identity posi-
tions and creating a more healthy and less monolithic 'cultural politics of identity
and difference'. Various planning writers see the possibilities of human agency in
confronting various forms of oppression and discrimination in creating from such
struggles 'sites of resistance' where people can redefine their identities anew. Soja
endorses the distinction made by bell hooks, for example, 'between the marginality
which is imposed by oppressive structure and that marginality one chooses as site
of resistance, as location of radical openness and possibility' (hooks, quoted, Soja,
1996: 98). With similar optimism, Sandercock, also drawing inspiration from the
African American feminist, theorist and cultural critic, bell hooks, empathizes with
those who contribute to the creation of theory by occupying and reworking insur-
gent spaces of difference 'on the borderlands' (Sandercock, 1998: ch. 5). While
both Soja and Sandercock would undoubtedly be swift to acknowledge that the
processes that work to construct identities and which frame the context for agency
are always embedded in frameworks of power that lead to 'unevenly empowered
differences' (Jacobs and Fincher, 1998: 6), it is sanguine to reflect that sometimes
the space for insurgent radical openness may be considerably constrained. The
spatial metaphor of 'the borderlands' of possibility, for example, as applied to the
context of Ulster Protestants living on the actual borderland of County Fermanagh
over the last 30 years, would have been regarded by many until recently as conjur-
ing up the radical choice between staying in a landscape of fear and changing
place. At a general level, however, a tension between optimism and pessimism can
be discerned at the heart of critical writing on late capitalism. As Dubiel comments
regarding the history of the Frankfurt School, which has been one of the seminal
arenas for such debate:

> In a slogan-like manner, the schism in the Critical theory of late capitalism could
> be equated with the opposition between pessimism and optimism, between

defeatism and naïveté, between a 'Grand Hotel Abyss' and an unpolitical
euphoria about communication (Dubiel, 1994: 130).

Since the current hegemonic paradigm in planning theory takes its persistently
optimistic major cue from the second-generation Frankfurt School philosopher
Jürgen Habermas, as a counterbalance it may be appropriate to consider reasons
for pessimism among other writers who have reflected on matters of difference and
identity. In the face of many reasons for pessimism and after a consideration of the
role of memory and place in identity-construction, this introduction concludes with
a reflection on the concept of 'citizenship', which has been a preoccupation of
Habermas, as a necessary if optimistic 'civic glue' within which difference can
embed. The striving and need for such 'glue' is a common aspect of the case
studies in the following chapters. In the last instance, however we have little choice
but to impose order on difference.

THE GRAND HOTEL ABYSS

Sitting in the lobby of the Grand Hotel Abyss it is possible to contemplate the
death of visions of positive social change, the death of the traditional Cartesian
subject and, latterly and most alarmingly, the death of 'human nature' itself. Richard
Rorty, the American philosopher and a follower of John Dewey's liberal pragma-
tism, sees the current fixation on 'identity and difference' as the 'result of a loss of
hope – or, more specifically, of an inability to construct a plausible narrative of
progress' (Rorty, 2000: 50). The dangers of cultural relativism inherent in post-
modernism have been well noted (Eagleton, 1996: 134). As harshly put by one
critic, when authentic expression is demanded on the basis of 'pluralism, individual-
ism and difference':

> Culture can quickly become a mere assertion of values that defines the
> battlefield on which the only causes are honour, faithfulness and death – and
> certainly not problem-solving, learning and getting on with things ... A self that
> no longer wants to be tied to a work ethic or a political project looks for
> resonance and reflection in the soft and all-embracing medium of culture (Bude,
> 2000: 38).

In the academic world, one American writer on difference and identity notes that
conference attendees locate themselves publicly along a series of 'identity axes' to
the extent that the question, 'How does your work reflect the politics of your
(racial/gendered/sexual) positionality?' has overtaken the inquiry, 'What is your

theoretical approach?' (Awkward, 1995: 4). For writers who link post-modernism to the cultural face of turbo consumer capitalism the outlook for human agency can be bleak indeed. Identity can be seen as 'sold' and reduced to the pre-packaged lifestyle choices satirized in the movie *American Beauty*, where life is shallowly constructed on the maxim 'I am what I consume'. In the film *Fight Club* the deadening suffocation of this corporate programming is brutally rejected as male identity is sought in the authenticity of bodily fear, pain and danger in the here-and-now. However, as one critic points out. while *'Fight Club*'s political analysis may have been brilliant ... it offered no way forward' (Bunting, 1999). The popular book *No Logo* by Naomi Klein, reacting against the fear that the most powerful collective identities may be those that we buy, with our longings and desires pathetically projected onto lattes or trainers, does try to map out some space for rediscovering our identities as citizens rather than just consumers (Klein, 2000). While Klein is not a resident, more brooding critical theorists in the Grand Hotel Abyss are likely to see the task as considerable. For Fredric Jameson, a once 'semi-autonomous' and authentic culture has been transformed in 'the cultural logic of late capitalism' (Jameson, 1991) into a hyper-reality of depthless culture which has been 'set to work as the fuel for the now semiotic motor of capital accumulation' (Jacobs, 1998: 254). Jameson's work draws on the writing of Jean Baudrillard, with its nihilistic characterization of late modernity as a state where all referentiality and meaning are lost (Allmendinger, 2001: 41). This is depressing enough for a humanist sensibility which endeavours to cling to the notion that there are certain aspects of being that people share by virtue of their common humanity. However, post-modernist theory, with its emphasis on the constitution of subjectivity and sense of self linked firmly to the positions that we take up and identify with (Woodward, 1997: 39), can seem to squeeze out the possibility of a Cartesian sovereign self altogether as identity is theorized as constituted within regimes of symbolic representation with the 'death of the subject'. Powerful here has been the notion of 'interpellation', used by the structuralist Marxist writer Louis Althusser to explain the way in which subjects are 'hailed' or recruited into subject positions through recognizing themselves – 'yes that's me' (Woodward, ibid. 42). Althusser had drawn on the work of Jacques Lacan and his version of Freudian psychoanalysis. As opposed to a focus on subject recruitment at the psychic level, Michel Foucault has been a prominent French philosopher and social constructionist theorist, impossible to omit from any debate on identity, with his focus on identity construction through symbolic systems or discursive practices and their implicit power relations which insert individuals into subject positions. When 'baits feel like desires, pressures like intentions, seduction like decision making' (Bauman, 1996: 27) the notion of the subject as the centred author of social practice can seem rather threadbare. It is here that Grossberg rightly points to a paradox:

> How can the individual be both cause and effect (an old question), both subject
> and subjected? Or in other words, how and where does one locate agency? This
> problem has animated the large body of contemporary political and theoretical
> work on the production of subordinate identities and the possibilities of
> resistance, whether in the name of the subaltern, feminism, anti-racism or post-
> colonialism (Grossberg, 1996: 98).

In that post-modernist theorists tend to be deeply sceptical about the proposition
that subjects have an interiority (Eagleton, 1996: 71), Eagleton likens such anti-
humanism to that of recently discarded structuralism, an approach to the study of
human culture which claims that individual phenomena have meaning only by virtue
of their relation to other phenomena as elements within a systematic structure
(Milner, 1994: 76). People move from the controlled cogs that Thompson famously
lampooned (Thompson, 1978: 99–102) to imprinted subjects. Both, for Eagleton,
behave 'as a kind of technocracy of the spirit, the final penetration of the rationaliz-
ing impulse of modernity into the inner sanctum of the subject' (ibid. 131). Com-
ments such as the ego is nothing but 'the superimposition of various coats
borrowed from the bric-a-brac of its props department' (Lacan, quoted Donald,
1996: 184) can sound chilling. There may be some comfort in the fact that, despite
the notion of 'a messy interiority which drove Michel Foucault up the wall' (Eagle-
ton, 1996: 71), in his later writings he came to address 'the existence of some
interior landscape of the subject'. This opens up the possibility of understanding,
for example, why some people are interpolated while others resist and requires an
understanding of 'the suturing of the psychic and the discursive' in the constitution
of identities (Hall, 1996: 16).

There is a final reason for humanists to seek comfort at the bar of the Grand
Hotel Abyss. The titles of two recent books give a new twist to aspects of identity
that provide fresh focus for academic debate. The book by Gregory Stock entitled
Redesigning Humans, which welcomes the use of genetic engineering to go beyond
what may be essential human nature, may be counterposed to the more circumspect
views of Francis Fukuyama, who moves beyond the 'end of history' to contemplate
Our Posthuman Future (Stock, 2002; Fukuyama, 2002). With the possibility of gene-
mixing from other species and the creation of genetic élites, a situation may arise
where a shared humanity is lost. With the possibilities of artificial intelligence the
dilemma is compounded. In his concept for the film *AI*, Stanley Kubrick endeavoured
to portray artificial intelligence 'not as a threat to human identity . . . (but) robots as
our future' (Maitland, 2001). The scriptwriter on the film, however, expresses doubts:

> The culture I live in has taught me to overvalue a highly constructed and
> unnatural idea of 'the natural' to the point that I would rather be dead, as a

species, than risk a computer generated future. My intellect is with the post-
modernists, with the reality of the 'virtual' and the idea that there is no 'natural'
but only constructions of language and the imagination. But my heart is not
(Maitland, 2001).

In relation to such new frontiers it has been well said that 'citizenship will require
some moral philosophy over the next decades' (Bunting, 2000).

MEMORY AND IDENTITY

If discourses are part of the means by which subjects come to be known and to
know themselves, central here must be discourses involving the construction of
memory. At the level of the self, a repository of cultural resources may be seen as
being organized biographically in the form of memory (Jenkins, 1996: 46). Speaking
at the level of collective identities, as Dolores Hayden reiterates, 'identity is intim-
ately tied to memory' (Hayden, 1997: 9). Indeed it is the present assault on memory,
with the constant bombardment of commercial images eroding a sense of continuity
between past, present and future, that can lead to pessimism concerning the possi-
bility of the construction of meaningful identities. Identity requires a narrative of con-
tinuity. Since the following two chapters highlight the contestation and negotiation
wrapped up in collective memory discourses involved in urban planning in Berlin
post-1989, this dimension of identity-building will be discussed in more detail in that
context. It is worth remembering, however, that memory is not something abstract
like history, that it cannot exist outside those people who do the remembering and
that it is not 'a passive receptacle or storage system, an image bank of the past'.
Rather, 'memory is historically conditioned changing colour and shape according to
the emergencies of the moment' (Samuel, 1994: x). Collective remembering can
take various institutionalized, cultural and ritualized forms. It is also constituted spa-
tially and, therefore, of major significance for urban planning.

PLACE AND IDENTITY

In her book *The Power of Place*, Dolores Hayden points out that social scientists
have frequently avoided the messy concept of 'place' in favour of more quantifiable
research with fewer epistemological problems. Yet the concept of place is powerful:

> If place does provide an overload of possible meanings for the researcher, it is
> place's very same assault on all ways of knowing (sight, sound, smell, touch and
> taste) that makes it powerful as a source of memory, as a weave where one
> strand ties in another (Hayden, 1995: 18).