

## Place Within The Contemporary Urban Space

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### **Abstract:**

*This article aims to discuss the concept of place based on its evolution since the 1970s. It is argued that the existing places reaffirm the experiences of space that have meaning, while the uneven development of capitalism produces metropolitan fragmentation - often materialized in renovation and re-signification projects. The socio-spatial transformations observed in the contemporary metropolises tend to de-characterize traditional urban fabrics and their identities, and this reality is engendered above all by current urban services supported by the entrepreneurial management of space and the consumer culture. In this sense, the research focuses on the possibility of the existence of places in the context of fragmentation and loss of local identities. The articulation of the different processes of space modification legitimizes new paradigms that suggest questions about the relationship between space and its places, their contexts and scales of influence, the conflicts they entail and the search for maintaining places of meeting and exchange. The main assumption of this work is: the place can exist in the midst of a reurbanization process, which results in renewed landscapes contiguous to interstices that, sometimes, differentiate into voids or places. These interstices can symbolize the potential for resistance and permanence and currently allow for experiences of identification towards the urban - contrary to the context of permanent transformation and of the loss of symbolic references. In this context, this work aims to contribute to the discussion about the relationship between the unstoppable urban transformations and the manifestos and representations seen in small localities that survive the imposition of the socioeconomic interests of the capitalist society.*

**Key Word:** *Reurbanization; Re-signification; Symbolic Production; Place; Interstices.*

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### **Introduction**

This article aims to address the discussion around the category of place amidst the urban context that involves, among others, structural transformations of socio-spatial relations and metropolitan fragmentation (Massey, 2008). Everyday experiences in some remaining areas of permanent urban transformations enunciate meanings that conceive a symbolic production around their visitors and the producers of the space (Zukin, 1995). In the gaps between transformations, interstices emerge capable of creating ambiances and experiences for their users full of meanings and engendered by consumption practices specific to each micro-urbanity. The plot of these permanences represents places in the contemporary urban space.

While urban transformations generate places, they also rely on the creation of spaces that resemble or seek to recreate the experience of certain localities. This reality highlights the dialectical nature of the category used today by space producers, announcing its dual role as both a conditioning factor and a result of urban processes. Projects of urban renewal and re-signification often involve places - and the idea of these projects reaches a prospective social dimension that, in this context, can act as investment attractors. However, places are born circumstantially: the individual encounters it amidst the urban environment. Unlike the speculatively produced space, place is personal and non-transferable. On the other hand, the emergence of new spatialities linked to consumer practices results from the current appropriation of these renovated places, and these renovated places highlight the dissolution of traditional identities constituted in them throughout history (Zukin, 2000a).

Changes in horizontal and vertical levels generally redefine spaces and rooted experiences, especially after the systematization of current consumption practices. The different transformative dynamics deny the city and, consequently, the spaces that characterize it and that reaffirm the feeling of belonging (Serpa, 2019). The modification of the landscape participates in and contributes to recent experiences verified in these spaces, giving them new meanings. This context nurtures the constituents of studies on the meaning of the category of place in contemporary urbanism and provides a critical conditioning based on the micro-sociology integrated into the urban fabric.

In this sense, this work departs from the hypothesis that reurbanization processes often generate gaps that can either result in urban voids or favor the presence of places. The objectives of this work are: to define the concept of place based on scholarship and to discuss how the concept of place may be understood in the context

of the current urban specificities. The method involves reviewing some of the existing literature about the concept of place.

### **Place And Urban Space**

Place is an urban piece that acts in the intensification of relations between individuals and space. Due to its ambiance, it favors permanence, gathering, exchanges, and the creation of identities. The processes that gather the multiple experiences legitimized by their users are supported by the pact between being and remaining in place and the right to belonging. However, the idea of place is found amidst urban processes of creative destruction of landscapes and of identification spaces in the world's main metropolises. Many of the mischaracterizations present in the fragmentation of traditional fabrics, or even their annihilations, result from transformation processes engendered by capitalist production (Massey, 2008). These are mostly supported and dynamized by urban planning and its new entrepreneurial incursions (Harvey, 2005). In this sense, this work addresses the possibility of finding places in contemporary metropolises, which today experience permanent processes of reurbanization and re-signification. The current urban dynamic presupposes the creation and deactivation of places to the same extent that transformations can also act as support for the permanence of places and their symbols, because they generate interstices. This context is also conditioned by inflections in space resulting from metropolitan socio-spatial experiences on a local scale that overlap with an urban integrated to a global socio-economic and cultural dynamic.

The search for the sense of place within urban theory engenders a discussion around the conceptualization of contemporary phenomena that have become frequent and can no longer be analyzed as punctual events. With the escalation of globalization, facilitated by what Edward Soja (1993) calls the "geographical transfer of value", the reproduction of space has assumed huge proportions, especially due to the suppression of borders and distances. According to the author, contemporary metropolises are characterized by fluidity, heterogeneity, and increasingly complex geographical arrangements (Soja, 2000). Beyond produced geographies, the landscapes of metropolises also become central to the current production of space, which relies on the idea of the annihilation of space by time (Harvey, 2005). On a local scale, this dynamic results in overlapping daily experiences, backed by permanence and identities, as well as by the fragmentation of urban experience. The symptom of globalization creates spatialities that sometimes resemble other metropolises while the interstices in their surroundings still carry characteristics of a small scale. In this sense, the articulation of experiences subjected to the capitalist production of space and its developments highlight the dialectical experience of transformations and reminiscences in the daily life of metropolises. This intricate and moving scenario is only possible when staged in the urban environment.

The urban, as a process and virtuality, manifests itself as a form that encompasses the encounters and meetings of social life. In the words of Henri Lefebvre (2016, p. 80) it distinguishes itself from the city by assuming the importance of clarification around the contradictions of meanings between habitat, segregation, and urban centrality - or their uses and forms. Since these contradictions are fundamental to social practice in space, their reading becomes important. "It is a symptomatic reading par excellence, not a literal one"<sup>1</sup> (Lefebvre, 2016, p. 81). Given the fragmented reality of the contemporary metropolis, the category of place becomes a theoretical alternative to the analysis of urban space that involves, beyond its materiality, the elements of socio-spatial relations and their symbols. This period is marked by the dimensions of the reproduction of social relations of production, which characterize the current urban process as a new spatio-temporal space that surpasses the rationality of the industrial phase and inaugurates abstract space. The abstract reality is characterized by contradiction and market orientation, supported by current public-private partnerships and the culture of consumption. Urban practices linked to the development of abstract space tend to conceive homogenizing technical projects, as is the case of the reurbanization processes facilitated by Public-Private Partnerships (PPP). These aim at creating closed units and often fail to consider local identities. Henri Lefebvre (2019) argues that these projects end up inciting positions of differences, or the return of particularities. After all, "no urban place is identical to another"<sup>2</sup> (Lefebvre, 2019, p. 56).

In urban studies, place integrates the sphere of everyday life and is born from practices exercised in space, even when territorialized in interstices of areas resulting from ultramodern urban renewal processes. As part of the urban, place participates in a never-static process, and reconstitutes itself based on its intrinsic transformations, its multiple combinations, encounters, and representations of spatio-temporality (Massey, 2008). Place gathers different identities and consists in a flexible delimitation. This complexity ensures that, unlike other urban areas, place transcends its intangible condition by also depending on its architectural and urbanistic characteristics. In this sense, more than a product of social relations, place "permanently reconstructs itself in its indissociable connection to the equally complex world of humans"<sup>3</sup> (Haesbaert, 2008, p. 12). Doreen

<sup>1</sup> Original in Portuguese: "Trata-se de uma leitura sintomal, por excelência, e não literal". Translated by the author.

<sup>2</sup> Original in Portuguese: "Nenhum lugar urbano é idêntico a outro". Translated by the author.

Massey (2008), when writing about the search for place and its meaning, addresses the idea that the urban process stands beyond the critique of capitalist production of space and possibly offers alternatives for analyzing this urban environment based on the concept of place.

David Harvey (1996) contributes to the discussion by characterizing place as “the locus of imaginaries”, “institutionalizations”, “configurations of social relations”, “material practices”, “forms of power”, and “elements in discourse”. The author proposes that this conjunction be a component of the concept of place: a micro-territory “internally heterogeneous, with dialectical and dynamic configurations of relative ‘permanences’ within the overall spatio-temporal dynamics of socio-ecological processes” (Harvey, 1996, p. 294). Critical urbanists, such as Harvey, focused in the 1970s on the relationship between the local and the global in specific localities (Zukin, 2000b, p. 105). While local culture and daily life guarantee unique constructions of symbols and social practices, the landscape is conditioned by the development of an urbanity linked to globalization and global intercommunication. This analysis allowed the association between the material transformations of the urban and symbolic representations, which were referred to as “symbolic production” in Sharon Zukin’s research (1995).

The symbolic production encompasses the re-signification of places and the creation of images influenced by the accumulation of distinct representations of urbanization backed by symbols. Sharon Zukin (2000b) argues that the market exerts forces in the realm of change, and the place simultaneously acts in defense of maintaining its homogeneity, even if that demands variations and variability. “The place represents the pressure to produce a homogeneity among social groups (a ‘local community’ or a ‘local culture’, constituted by the notion of space) and creates stability of the local community over time”<sup>4</sup> (Zukin, 2000b, p. 107). This reflection demonstrates Zukin’s concern as someone who studied gentrification in detail in New York. However, the author of the present work does not agree with the idea of freezing places and producing homogeneity, as it is impossible to avoid external influences and the intrinsic transformation process of the urban, as also discussed by David Harvey (1996) and Doreen Massey (2008).

The category of place also became central to Humanistic Geography in the 1970s due to studies on phenomenology. However, that line of thought has already been surpassed by the new lines of research that have addressed the issue. In his work, the geographer Marcelo Lopes de Souza (2022) reinforces this change and the symbolic character of place. According to the author, the first plan or the immediate assimilation of place happens within the cultural-symbolic realm, which in a second moment develops into issues related to identity, intersubjectivity, and symbolic exchanges. The category encompasses the images and the sense of place, both immaterial, as well as place itself. Souza (2022, p. 117) states that “places deserve to be understood as spatial images in themselves”<sup>5</sup>. As spatial image, the place figures beyond just materiality. Pursuant to Massey (2008), place is born from everyday experiences, that is, it consists in a space experienced by frequenters in all its aspects and tangibility, endowed with local and external influences, and governed by the production of symbols. This is the meaning of place that underlies the present work.

### **Place And Being In Space**

The study of place, in its cultural-symbolic dimension, departs from its meanings: from them, it is possible to extract the senses of place (Souza, 2022). The sense of place, or the subjective feelings related to places, originates from an individual interpretation of space in its socio-cultural conception. Besides its sense, the analysis of place is based on two other elements: its locality and location (Cresswell, 1996). Locality represents the geographical point where place is located and allows delineating spatial relationships between places. The term location, from an economic perspective, is used to describe place. “Location and space are defined simultaneously, the constitutive matter of space being the set of relationships between the locations contained in them, and the specificity of space consisting in the specific way in which locations are related to each other”<sup>6</sup> (Deák, 2016, p. 47-48). Locations in capitalist space ensure the attraction of investments and new consumers due to a series of privileges such as easy access, proximity to already consolidated areas, and urban infrastructure. This reality results in the appreciation of land in the given location (Harvey, 2005).

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<sup>3</sup> Original in Portuguese: “se reconstrói permanentemente em sua indissociável vinculação ao igualmente complexo mundo dos homens”. Translated by the author.

<sup>4</sup> Original in Portuguese: “O lugar representa a pressão para produzir uma homogeneidade entre os grupos sociais (uma ‘comunidade local’ ou uma ‘cultura local’, constituída pela noção de espaço) e criar uma estabilidade da comunidade local ao longo do tempo”. Translated by the author.

<sup>5</sup> Original in Portuguese: “Os lugares merecem ser entendidos como as imagens espaciais em si mesmas”. Translated by the author.

<sup>6</sup> Original in Portuguese: “Localização e espaço são definidas simultaneamente, a matéria constitutiva do espaço sendo o conjunto de relações entre as localizações nelas contidas, e a especificidade do espaço consistindo na maneira específica pela qual as localizações são relacionadas entre si”. Translated by the author.

The creation of consumer destinations is motivated by the category of location, depending on the historical accommodations experienced by the space. By offering consumer services and simultaneously manipulating the symbolic attribute, these urbanities, in their market sense, ensure great symbolic and cultural efficacy. In the words of Celina Lemos (2007, p. 99): “In addition to offering more sophisticated services for the use and consumption of a small portion of the population, it [urbanity] has become a privileged locus loaded with great symbolism, where cultural fashions transited”<sup>7</sup>. The symbolic efficacy of the urban appeals to the users’ enjoyment of space, consumption in and of the urban, the *in-situ* landscape quality, and the collective symbolic capital *in visu* - factors dynamized by the construction of a new centrality. While the metropolitan experience enables the construction of these spaces, it seems to deny their intrinsic places in favor of a hegemonic vision facilitated by globalization (Serpa, 2019). The reading of these spaces and places often departs from an image created by capital, and highlights the city’s landscapes.

Place, territory, and landscape configure concepts related to being in space. Their dimensions and factors, both collectively and individually, are in a context of relation to their surroundings, and refer to social experiences in space, beyond their physical-temporal aspect. The search for the concept of place today demands understanding the spatio-temporal factors of the territory and the structure of the landscape. The geographer Angelo Serpa (2019, p. 63) emphasizes that the way one reacts to space changes according to it frequenter, because there are “moments and existential principles didactically related, but distinct as manifestations of being-in-the-world”<sup>8</sup>. In this sense, the experiences of place, landscape, and territory also encompass relations of being-in-the-world based on the specificity of spatio-temporal, cultural, urban dynamics, and the historical construction of these spaces. The spatial being relates to the urban as a producer and as a being that experiences the intrinsic transformations of its process. Place, landscape, and territory are part of the users’ daily lives, which are governed by contradictions, representations, and abstractions, are staged in spaces of power (where social practices occur), and are permeated by symbols in dialectical relations. Some authors tried to make theoretical approximations between the Lefebvrian triad of lived, conceived, and perceived space. While these are valid attempts, is the author of the present work believes that place, landscape, and territory do not lack a theoretical substrate for a specific discussion - even if supported by Lefebvrian studies.

Spatial images also represent active components of the landscape. They became indispensable for the investigation of space that was adapted to the predominance of urban services and the culture of consumption (Zukin, 1995). “Landscapes are the most striking expressions of a society’s material and symbolic relations with the nature of place”<sup>9</sup> (Leite, 2021, p. 21). The landscape encompasses the essence of what is invisible within the visible, or an aesthetic experience of cutting out a real-abstract image that is in constant change (Serpa, 2019, p. 63). In the words of Sharon Zukin (2000a, p. 83): “Landscape is the key concept for understanding spatial transformation”<sup>10</sup>. It represents the material and symbolic accumulation and re-accommodation of traces and memories in the urban, a construction that is not merely cultural: it encompasses the economy, politics, religion, and science, and is part of a system that is dynamic and open to the sensitive. According to Augustin Berque (1998, p. 84): “the landscape is a mark, as it expresses a civilization, but it is also a matrix because it participates in schemes of perception, conception, and action – that is, of culture”<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, the category of landscape allows the expansion of theory into practice. It enables the conception of images cut out in the imagination of each frequenter of space in the same way that it can enhance their action towards the urban. Despite this, the transformation of the landscape represents the new form of the geographical expansion of capitalist urbanity (Harvey, 2005).

In addition to the landscape, geographical expansion also concerns the transformations of territories that host spatial practices and experiences. Territories constitute the geographical mode of existence based on different scales of power relations. However, place is also permeated by these relations - in the same way that territory configures a space of everyday experience endowed with meanings. Angelo Serpa (2019, p. 63) argues: “the relations established between agents/subjects/groups/individuals/classes are marked by the unstable predominance of equality and difference, and the dialectic between difference and equality is what establishes place and territory as geographical modes of existence”<sup>12</sup>. In this sense, place and territory coexist amid the

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<sup>7</sup> Original in Portuguese: “Além de oferecer serviços mais sofisticados para o uso e o consumo de uma pequena parcela da população, tornou-se um locus privilegiado carregado de grande simbolismo, por onde transitavam modismos culturais”. Translated by the author.

<sup>8</sup> Original in Portuguese: “momentos e princípios existenciais didaticamente relacionados, mas distintos enquanto manifestações do ser-no mundo”. Translated by the author.

<sup>9</sup> Original in Portuguese: “As paisagens são as expressões mais contundentes das relações materiais e simbólicas de uma sociedade com a natureza do lugar”. Translated by the author.

<sup>10</sup> Original in Portuguese: “Paisagem é o conceito-chave para compreendermos a transformação espacial”. Translated by the author.

<sup>11</sup> Original in Portuguese: “a paisagem é uma marca, pois expressa uma civilização, mas é também uma matriz porque participa dos esquemas de percepção, de concepção e de ação – ou seja, da cultura”. Translated by the author.

contradictions imposed by the capitalist production of space, and their existence condoned with the forces of resistance around their maintenance. In this sense, territorial and landscape factors affect the place, as a state of the art of the experience of being in space, on different temporal and spatial scales, since the space exists in the midst of the dialectic contained between materiality and immateriality.

## I. Conclusion

The review of some of the literature about the concept of place shows that many social science disciplines such as geography, urbanism, and sociology, discuss place within the different but closely related fields of study. Even though the approach may differ, places usually have similar images and specificities which characterize the experience of the space with some connection attached to it. Within the context of fragmented metropolises and the complexity of the contemporary urban processes, the analysis of place, landscape and territory may stimulate actions and reactions from its users, as their relationship with space differs individually and based on local experiences crossed by external factors. Places conform to different significations and their variety is necessary to the maintenance of social and spatial diversity in the midst of the capitalist production of space. Whether due to its architecture, its preservation, or the renovations of use of these remaining spaces, many places are controlled by real estate appreciation, associated with the expectation of its creative destruction. The vacancy or temporary commercial use of residences erases the symbols of place as a space of urbanity to be enjoyed by its residents, who began to seek references in other localities - while this space awaits its new constitution of place. Therefore, the study of place is regarded as important for the social sciences in general as much as for the urban policies practices.

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<sup>12</sup> Original in Portuguese: “as relações que se estabelecem entre os agentes/sujeitos/grupos/indivíduos/classes são marcadas pelo predomínio (instável) da igualdade e da diferença e que a dialética entre diferença e igualdade é o que vai estabelecer lugar e território como modos geográficos de existência”. Translated by the author.