Hybridity of Place vs. Identity of People: Reconsidering Placemaking in a Global Context

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INTRODUCTION

The concepts of "place" and "placemaking" have long been appealing for environmental researchers and designers. In architecture, C. Norberg-Schulz has advocated a phenomenology of architecture which emphasizes the importance of a sense of place. According to Norberg-Schulz, the Modern Movement has focused on the geometric properties of the "flowing space" at the expense of its symbolic meanings. Adopting the notion of *genius loci*, he proposes that architects should create places rather than design spaces: "[t]he existential purpose of building is...to make a site become a place" (NorbergSchulz, 1980:18). Humanistic geographers possess similar arguments. They warn the danger of geographers' obsession with the "objective" physical environment and accuse the destructive effects of modern technology on national landscape. Geographer E. Relph has coined the term "placelessness" to refer to physical locales which no longer have a "sense of place" to make themselves distinctive. For Relph, this has derived from "an inauthentic mode of existence in which both individuals and societies fail to recognise the realities and responsibilities of existence, and do not experience the world and its places for what they are" (Relph, 1976: 121). Urban researcher and planner K. Lynch in his book *A Theory of Good City Form* also espouses the concept of "place identity". "[S]ensible, identifiable places," for Lynch, "are convenient pegs on which to hang personal memories, feelings, and values" (Lynch, 1982:132). In the design sphere, J.D. Sime defines "place" as "a physical location which engenders a positive, satisfactory experience" (Sime, 1985:276). Accordingly, "placemaking" refers to the activities of creating such locations.

In much of this discussion, whether certain locations are "places" or "non-places" is often treated as self-evident and as inherent in territories themselves. As Relph once put it: "these are obviously ridiculous and absurd in their own right" (Relph, 1976: 128). If such claim is less questionable at a time when the meanings of social life are relatively stable and different communities are isolated from each other, I believe that it has become more and more problematic as the overarching global forces have driven the kaleidoscope of collective experience in motion and have rendered the encounter between different cultures no longer to be mediated by time and distance. In this paper, I would like to offer a partial reconsideration of the concepts of "place" and "placemaking" under current global conditions based on findings drawn out from the case study of Vancouver.* I argue that, as the tendency of globalization has hybridized the city in a more pervasive way compared with the previous situation, the issue of whose values are adopted in the making of place becomes a matter of social contestations.** Yet it is precisely at this moment that a recourse to place as a source of authenticity becomes one major strategy for the dominant group to defend its purified identity. Under such circumstance, an essentialist understanding of place may foreclose the possibility of transgressing separating barriers between different cultures. Instead of being guardians of some "universal" criteria of good city form, I propose, today's city designers should play a role of translators serving to help people better understand and recognize other cultures and ways of life.

LATE-TWENTIETH-CENTURY VANCOUVER AND ITS DISCONTENT

Since the mid-1980s, Vancouver, Canada's third largest city, has experienced rapid growth in terms of population, labor force, investment, output and trade (Hutton, 1994). Many of these changes are associated with the advent of the thousands of immigrants, mostly from Hong Kong and Taiwan (e.g., Taylor, 1989; De Mont and Fennell, 1989; Gutstein, 1990). The rapid influx of Chinese immigrants and accompanied investment has not only enlivened business and industry in Vancouver, but has also inscribed tremendous changes into the built environment. When I conducted my fieldwork in Vancouver, I was struck by the fact that not a few parts of the city were heavily Asian-influenced. When strolling on streets in Richmond, a rapidly growing south Vancouver suburb that had recently attracted many Chinese immigrants, I felt that the scales and styles of many buildings there were incredibly similar to those of Hong Kong. A *Maclean's* article describes the hybridized landscape vividly:

> The elegant compound curves of Lee's mirror-sheathed President Plaza embrace both a Sheraton Hotel, due to open in April, and the country's largest Asian-food supermarket, which is already doing business. On its shelves, Old Dutch Potato Chips share space with Korean kim chi and cans of grass jelly drink; a live seafood section boasts tanks of eels as well as lobster. Three floors above the shoppers, seven Buddhist nuns and monks clad in plain ochre habits are preparing to dedicate a 5,000-square-foot temple, the heart of a community centre that will offer adult education in Asian languages and crafts. ...Immediately to the south of President Plaza sits the Aberdeen Centre: despite its Scottish name, the bustling complex of shops and restaurants is owned by investors from Hong Kong (Wood, et al., 1994:28).

Investment from ethnic Chinese reached its peak in 1988, when the former site of EXPO '86, covering one sixth of downtown Vancouver, was sold for 200 million US dollars to Hong Kong billionaire Li Ka-Shing and his associates. While it will take 10-15 years to complete the whole project, the mammoth high-rise apartment towers that have been built so far have already greatly reconfigured the core. Compared with other high-rise residential projects in North America, these buildings look slimmer and their footprints are generally much smaller: they seem to me have more in common with typical residential buildings in Hong Kong. In fact, I was told by several of my interviewees that Vancouver had now become "Hongcouver".

These big commercial and residential projects within the metropolitan core have been accompanied by suburban housing development. During the recession in the early 1980s, some developers almost lost everything. But in the mid-1980s, according to a Vancouver developer, "things started to move, ...and 99 percent of it was triggered by foreign, mostly Hong Kong and Taiwan, investors"(Mitchell, 1998: 206). In many local developers' minds, most rich buyers from Hong Kong hold that palatial house and sumptuous decoration represent the power of the family; they believe in *feng shui*, a traditional Chinese geomantic practice which pays careful attention to the flow of *qi* (cosmic energy) and the balance of *yin* and *yang*. In order to derive maximum profit out of the venture, these nuances in aesthetic and spatial demand were immediately captured by Vancouver developers and reworked into a hybrid housing style. Although all the houses targeting at wealthy Hong Kong buyers are apparently Western-style rather than Chinese-style, they share some particular features that form a readable "Hong Kong Chinese taste". Most of these houses are much more spacious compared with surrounding single-family detached houses. Their entranceways are particularly large and often have double doors. Quite a few of them are box-shaped, clad in colored brick, and having large window areas on facade. Their yards are often paved by stark cement and surrounded by a stylist hedge or a fence.

Locals started to use the term "monster houses" in the late 1980s to satirize the aesthetic qualities of these huge dwellings of wealthy immigrants. And it is those built within elite neighborhoods such as Kerrisdale and Shaughnessy that received the most vociferous local opposition among many changes brought by immigrants. The Kerrisdale was initially established as a British, upper middle-class suburb of Vancouver. It was characterized by a relative uniformity of architectural style that incorpo-rated motifs from rural England as well as an English picturesque landscaping. Between the World War II and 1980 Kerrisdale remained largely unchanged in terms of its population mix and landscape. But since the mid-1980s, as many rich Chinese immigrants moved in, redevelopment has been conducted everywhere in the neighborhood. Many houses were sold and replaced by "monster houses." A few mature trees were cut down to make way for new development.

These transformations triggered many harsh criticisms and protest movements (e.g., Blain, 1990; Malcolm, 1990). A Canadian identity were invoked as defenses in the struggles against change. A petitioner wrote in a letter to *Western News*: "Canadi-ans see monster housing as an arrogant visible demonstration of the destruction of Canadian culture. Yes, we have a Canadian identity and Canadians should beware of persons who say we don't while they try to rebuild Canada in a different mould for their own purpose and profit" (Mitchell, 1998:204). In their efforts of maintaining heritage by keeping Chinese capitalists from buying houses in their neighborhoods, many petitioners had equaled "Canadian heritage" with British culture. Jud Cyllorn, the founder of a local organization that advocates the preservation of Western cultural values, claimed bluntly in an interview that Canada's "British culture, which is based on trust", has given way to an "Asian culture [of] individual greed." He lamented, "In 22 years, we have completely changed who we are and what we believe in. ...Anything I say is not to raise hatred against anyone, but only to raise disgust at our own laxity and stupidity in surrendering our country without even a whimper" (Wood, et al., 1994). But history tells a very different story.

"A CITY OF COSMOPOLITANS"

In his address to the Union of Canadian Municipalities in1910, L.D. Taylor announced, "I am the mayor of a cosmopolitan city – I should rather say of a city of cosmopolitans whose sense of cityhood...has...self-consciousness and the self-importance of youth" (Roy, 1980). This was certainly true. Vancouver has been a multicultural mix since the very beginning of its brief history. As early as 1891, the census of Canada already documented more than 42 countries of origin among the 14,000 people living in Vancouver. Orientals even outnumbered the white from continental Europe: 840 to 560 (Wood, et al., 1994). The Chinese were among the province's first immigrants, drawn up from California by the Fraser River gold rush of 1858 (Yee, 1988; Li, 1998). During the 1890s, the Japanese began to arrive. A surge of Japanese immigration into the area at the turn of the century brought

Asians to more than 10 per cent of Vancouver's total population. In 1904 immigrants from East India came to the province for the first time (Norris, 1971).

Asians remained the largest and most visible non-British group, but, as R.A.J. McDonald reminds us, historical records reveal that the city's category of "outsider" was much broader than this. Italians offered the best example of the way in which southern and eastern Europeans were perceived as outsiders inferior to northern Europeans. During the prewar boom a large amount of Italian laborers flooded into the city (Norris, 1971). Until 1913, its Italian population had exceeded 4,000. Because they were southern European, Roman Catholic and poor, these Italians had become very threatening to Vancouver's "British character" for the dominant social thought. As a longshoreman said to the BC Commission on Labor, "Italians live on macaroni and the Russians on salt herring and bread. ... That is impossible for us"(McDonald, 1996:208). Besides immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, loggers were another group of people who were white but were excluded from the dominant community because of their distinct life pattern: being single men without family, living in a masculine community, and being isolated in the forest (McDonald, 1996).

The hybrid composition of population manifested itself in the urban landscape. Settlements for immigrants were largely located in the inner city, among which Chinatown and Little Tokyo were most visible. Early Chinatown's two-story, frontier-style buildings were leased from whites. Between 1900 and 1910 Chinese merchants bought land and erected their own buildings (Yee, 1988). These new buildings adopted a hybridized architectural style constituted by both Western and Chinese features. Major Western features included bay windows and cheater floors. Chinese architectural features included tiled roofs, latticed windows, moon-shaped doors and recessed balconies. These made Chinatown structures resemble town buildings of south China (Lai, 1988). Unlike those in Chinatown, buildings in Little Tokyo had few distinctive architectural features. But still, there existed a hybrid urban culture which differed Little Tokyo strikingly from the rest of the city: "The area was apart as if a ghetto wall defined it. It was possible to shop at Japanese-owned stores, to live in Japaneseoperated boarding houses or hotels, to congregate at street corners, to sit in soft drink and ice cream parlours, to eat traditional Japanese foods in cafés...." (Adachi, 1976: 131).

Most immigrants lived in cheap hotels and crowded rooming houses in downtown areas. Lacking home and controlling little private space, they had made public streets an integral part of their lives (McDonald, 1996). Streets became meeting places of people from different cultural backgrounds for both recreational and practical purposes. As one observer put it, during the prewar years,

> the street corners were filled with music, on one corner the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) singing "Solidarity' Forever", on another a religious group singing "There is honey in the rock for you my brother", and on yet another the Salvation Army band booming out "We will understand each other when the mists have rolled away."... The streets also fulfilled economic needs. For some, like Greek ice cream pedlars, they were a place of business. For others, such as transient labourers, streets were the equivalent of the union man's Labour Temple....(McDonald, 1996: 224).

When loggers bored of the forest, they usually headed for Vancouver's Gastown, the downtown heart of the new city. Their presence had inscribed distinct masculine character into the urban landscape. As M.A. Grainger described in the beginning of his 1908 novel *Woodsmen of the West*, "As you walk down Cordova Street in the city of Vancouver, you notice a gradual changes in the appearance of the shop windows." Shop windows now displayed "faller's axes, swamper's axes.... Your eye is struck at once by the unusual proportion of men in the crowd, men that look powerful even in their town clothes." (Grainger, 1908:1-2).

Facing with social isolation and the absence of family, these "outsiders" had made streets, hotels, and gambling houses their homes, the places where they could talk and laugh. With each group carving a niche in the landscape, Vancouver became a site of differences; the city of a pure British heritage turns out to be a myth.

GENIUS LOCI?

One thing we should note is that, although Vancouver has always been a *hybrid* place, the current global conditions have allowed multiple ethnic identities to be manifested in the built environment in a more pervasive way compared with the previous situation. In the past, most immigrants arrived with little capital (in both economic and symbolic sense). Facing prejudiced attitudes and discriminatory policies in the wider society, minorities often responded by turning inward and constructing self-contained ghettos that clustered in a central location in the inner city. These ghettos remained distinct parts of the jigsaw puzzle of the larger city and were isolated from the domain of respectable society. This residential pattern had remained largely intact for a long time. For instance, as late as 1971, when approximately one in six Vancouver residents lived in the urban fringe, people of Chinese origin accounted for only one in every forty suburban dwellers (Ley, et al., 1992). In contrast to the earlier generations of immigrants, many Hong Kong Chinese who now come to the city possess both wealth and know-how that have equal value throughout the present global grid designed to facilitate capital mobility. Some of these new immigrants are even much more wealthy than the members of the host society. They not only conduct large-scale real estate transactions and redevelop the land for their profit, but also buy homes in the settled suburbs which were previously the preserve of an Anglo-Canadian mid-dle class and elite. While they appear as invisible capitalists in the investment of the downtown commercial properties, these wealthy Hong Kong Chinese become highly conspicuous as the investors of suburban homes by inserting different interpretations of

lifestyle and consumption pattern into the very heart of the "white" landscape.

The situation in which different cultures are no longer isolated from each other but coexist side by side within one territory has rendered an essentialist understanding of place problematic. To take just one example. During the late 1980s, the removal of large trees on "monster house" lots was a source of great local anger in the city and had given rise to many protest movements. In the Chinese *feng shui* belief, a positive place should be beneficial for the health and well-being of its residents. Trees are related with *qi*, the cosmic energy that is crucial in creating such a positive place for living. If trees grow at a wrong location, they will block *qi* and bring back luck. In order to create a good place, these trees have to be removed. By contrast, for Anglo-residents, trees symbolize local memory and heritage. The destruction of trees is therefore related with the loss of a traceable tradition and a communally remembered past. It would be interesting to recall here K. Lynch's account of a general character of place in his book *A Theory of Good City Form*. He writes, "a good place is one which, in some way appropriate to the person and her culture, makes her aware of her community, her past, the web of life, and the universe of time and space in which those are contained" (Lynch, 1982:142). Lynch certainly admits that the symbols and the means for place-making are alterable across different societies; nonetheless, he tends to believe that there can be universal criteria like this to assess whether a place is good or bad since "human perception is a constant" (Ibid.:150). But the above example shows clearly that the criterion he raises that a good place should make one "aware of her community" is a specific historical and social Western construction; other cultures may have different visions of what make a good place. Ironically, although many recent formulations of the concept "place" are based on M. Heidegger's works, this constructed nature of the beings of things has already anticipated in his early book *Being and Time* when he insists that "one *is* what one does" (Heidegger, 1962:283). For Heidegger, the situated use of equipment is more fundamental than the substances with determinate and context-free properties: "When equipment for something or other has its place, this place defines itself as the place of this equipment — as one place out of a whole totality of places" (Ibid.:283).

Yet it is precisely at this moment when the rootedness of place has been challenged that a recourse to place as a source of authenticity becomes one major strategy for the dominant group to defend its purified identity. In the case of Vancouver, by building "monster houses" into the elite neighborhood, the presence of wealthy new immigrants not only calls into question the privileged economic status of some members of the dominant group, but also displaces the binary of "us" and "them" previously imprinted in the landscape. In face of this crisis of identity, two responses arise. One is to dramatize the dissimilarities between "monster houses" and "authentic" English houses. Thus "monster houses", although they largely imitate Western-type built forms, show up for many Anglo-Canadian residents as completely outlandish. Many locals describe "monster houses" as a new genre of housing and never mention that they are indeed the mimicry of the "authentic" Western-style houses. The other response is to provoke a search for a distinctive "Englishness" as the natural essence of the place. "Monster houses" is considered to be "an arrogant visible demonstration of the destruction of Canadian culture" while this culture is presumably "British." This line of criticism is dramatized in a graffito on the wall of one "monster house" which asks in large, black, spraypainted letters: "Genius Loci?" (Mitchell, 1998:195). *Genius loci* is a Latin phrase which means "the spirit of a place" (Sime, 1985:275). By invoking the phrase, the graffitist presumes the place to be of a pure European heritage and implicitly excludes the newcomers of Asian ancestry as members of the place. However, as a brief survey of Vancouver urbanism in the early portion of the twentieth century shows, Vancouver has never been such a city of a pure British heritage. The notion of place here indeed supports a parochial sense of local attachment.

Therefore, if the state of different traditions living together within one community has made the city an increasingly hybridized place, people (especially members from the dominant community) are often eager to protect the purity of their identity through claiming the "sense of place" they experienced as the fixed, singular nature of the territory. The tension between the hybridity of place and the identity of people has made the issue of whose values are adopted in the making of place a matter of social contestations. Under this circumstance, the continuation of an essentialist understanding of place may foreclose the possibility of transgressing separating barriers between different traditions. It may even pave the way for the rise of cultural racism (as the case of "monster houses" shows).

How to reconcile the inescapable cultural clashes in the urban setting thus becomes one of the most important questions for city designers. I suggest that today's city designers, as key actors in the process of placemaking, should play a role of translators. That is, instead of being guardians of some "universal" criteria of good city form, city designers should transcend their monocultural standpoints and do justice to other traditions; instead of concentrating on the polarity of the own and the foreign, they should seek ways to help people better understand and recognize other cultures and ways of life. To be sure, some have already started to play such a role. In my field research in Vancouver, I learned that videos about other cultures were distributed in some neighborhoods to help people of different ethnic groups understand and get on with one another. I am confident that extensions of this type can open up opportunities to promote exchange and interaction. Indeed, in an interview with a Vancouver planner, I was told an interesting example of this. Currently, designers who know something about *feng shui* are particularly popular in Vancouver. And this is partly because that, besides Chinese clients, there are more and more local, white clients who come

to believe in *feng shui* and want their homes to be arranged following the rules of *feng shui*.

This example seems to me to be very revealing about the extent to which people can transcend the narrowness of monocultural constraints and develop a transcultural way of life. It also demonstrates that globalization is not simply a one-directional process of Westernization, as many have argued; rather, it can offer better chances for both non-Western and Western cultures to exercise influence upon one another (although the hierarchical order of identity will not easily disappear). It is time for city designers to adjust their working compass away from the focus on upholding the introverted sense of place to the direction of promoting mutual fertilization of different cultures.

NOTES

* I conducted my fieldwork in Vancouver in July 1999. More than thirty interviews were made with local residents, architects, and city planners.

** The word "hybrid" is truly a loaded word. A hybrid is defined by Webster in 1828 as "a mongrel or mule; an animal or plant, produced from the mixture of two species" (Young, 1995:6). Throughout the nineteenth century the notion "hybridity" used to be deeply inscribed in the discourses of scientific racism to connote the negative consequences of racial intermarriage. But since the 1980s, hybridity has been reconceptualized as a form of resistance in cultural criticism, and more particularly in post-colonialist theory (AlSayyad, forthcoming; Papastergiadis, 1997). In this paper the term "hybrid" will simply stand for "[a]nything derived from heterogeneous sources, or composed of different or incongruous elements" (Oxford English Dictionary, 1992).

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