

# **THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PLACE**

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PREFACE MY motivation in writing this book grew out of an increasing awareness that there exist a number of different studies, in a wide range of discrete areas (geography, planning, psychology, architecture, urban sociology) which all have a common concern: how people make sense of and cope with their surroundings, whether it be nature trails or nursery schools, crowded kitchens or city centres. Furthermore all these studies appear to have a special interest in what are variously called "pictures in the head", "mental maps", "urban images" and so on: the notions which we ourselves have of the places we experience . Yet no overview of this material appeared to exist beyond the introductions to books of readings. No attempt had been made to draw this material together and provide even the rudiments of a framework for it. It struck me as a worthwhile task to undertake because its potential ramifications are so great. As I proceeded with this task it dawned on me that what all the diverse profession and disciplines shared was an interest in "places".

The idea of "place" seemed to be one which, if explored, could provide a concept which would act as a bridge between the various fields of enquiry. However, further consideration suggested that central to the interest in "places" was the desire to understand the ways in which we represent them "in our heads". That is how the term "psychology" has crept into the title of this book-not as a belief that psychologists are the only ones for whom its contents are relevant, but as a way of indicating that the focus of the book is on individuals and their comprehension of places. Although I took psychology into the title for this book, in the text I have eschewed, in the main, any reference to studies performed within the major psychological rubric, the laboratory experiment. This was not as much a deliberate policy as the desire to deal with research clearly and directly related to the experience of the environment. By their very nature laboratories lead to an abstraction of particular stimuli from their natural habitat. Even the so-called "simulation" of environments by the use of photographs, slides and their like leaves much to be desired in the way of real motivations or experiences, on the part of the respondents.

I therefore found myself avoiding studies which did not draw immediately and materially upon actual surroundings, unless their point was very obviously pertinent to the issues at hand. It surprised me that, once the above guidelines for the book had emerged, the research of quality available was limited, but it was even more intriguing to discover how powerful was the message of those authors who had originally turned people's attention to the psychology of places (yet how few of the implications of their work had been explored). I even found that most of the research problems still being actively pursued were clearly nascent in work carried out in the early part of this century.

The objective of the book thus emerged to provide, first, a sketch of the attempts which have been made to explain how we conceptualise places, and second, an outline of the methods which have been used to study those conceptualisations. The third objective, of pointing the direction in which to look for the applications to decision-making of the products of the explanations and methods, followed inevitably from the first two objectives. My hope was that if the book were at a sufficiently introductory level it would enable members of the various disciplines to begin to benefit more fully from talking and working together. Like any village marriage-maker I shall judge the success of my introductions by the health and number of the offspring produced.

## THE BOOK AHEAD

THIS book is about the psychological processes which enable us to understand places, to use them and to create them. It is not about any of those topics so favoured by experimental psychologists: space perception, object perception, colours or shapes. Rather it is concerned with those situations in which people live and work, converse with others, are alone, rest, learn, are active or still. This does not mean it is concerned with activities alone, or only with the buildings which house them. It is about those units of experience within which activities and physical form are amalgamated: places. However, my use of the word "place", in this book, is slightly unusual, and so in Chapter One I attempt to put it in perspective, by showing how places have their impact, how our understanding of them influences our actions and how places are qualitatively different from objects. If we are to understand people's responses to places and their actions within them, it is necessary to understand what (and how) they think; and thus this book will concentrate more upon conceptual systems than behavioural systems. This is not to dismiss the great importance of the actions of others in influencing the course of our lives. It is rather to look within the individual for the causes of his actions, at his interpretation of the context within which he finds himself. Thus if we are led to believe, by the facade, say that a particular building is a youth club, then we are likely to enter it in a different frame of mind and behave, at least initially, somewhat differently within it than if it looked like a Methodist chapel. Our understanding of the situation may be thought of as producing, or at least influencing, our behaviour.

The essence of this argument (which has its origins in the work of Mead, 1934, Kelly, 1955, and more recently Ham! and Secord, 1972) is that any act is made in relation to the context within which the individual thinks himself to be. In other words, the organism recognises, acknowledges, or in some way takes account of its context, failing which, action is difficult and appropriate action is impossible. Even an animal, which is thought of as reacting instinctively to a stimulus, must first be aware of that stimulus before it can act. Dealing with the infinitely more complex human being (in which instinctual responses, if any, are very rare indeed) it is clear that for sane survival the stimulus must be recognised, interpreted and reacted to in an appropriate way, bringing to bear all the internal mechanisms available for structuring experience. As a consequence, although in this book I shall turn to observation of behaviour from time to time, the central interest will be in those cognitive systems (rather than purely perceptual processes) which enable us to act appropriately in places.

So, this book is about places and the conceptual systems we employ in order to facilitate our operation within places; and perception will play a minor role in my argument. It is particularly important to examine the relationship of perception to cognition, because geographers and architects, as well as psychologists, have taken these technical terms from the laboratory (in which they blossomed) and assumed that they can be used in an identical way with reference to the environment (Goodey, 1971, Chapman, 1975, Koroscil, 1971). One further distinction may help to focus the content area of this book. That is the distinction between places, which are units of the environment, and objects, which exist within an environment. It is necessary to clarify this distinction, like that between perception and cognition, because of the widespread belief, among academics and laymen, that places may be regarded just as big objects. The consequence of this is that attempts are made to apply theories and methods developed from dealing with objects to the study and even the design of

places. It is a fallacy to which geographers (who are nowadays increasingly involved in the study of such issues) as well as architects and planners are liable.

**THEMES AND ISSUES** There is one particular advantage in examining the impact of our surroundings by studying conceptual systems of places, and that is that we are not tied to any given environmental scale. In the book ahead we will range from beds on hospital wards to regions of Britain. Underlying the exploration of this range is the assumption that the psychological processes involved are similar. As the book progresses readers will be able to judge for themselves the validity of this assumption, but it is an assumption which helps to bring the formulations of the psychology of place, which at times are rather abstract, closer to daily experience. For example it helps to show why we 'use similar words to describe' our feelings both about buildings and about landscape; and it helps to explain the layman's frequent difficulty in making the distinction between the architect and the planner. Indeed the bizarre political battles which sometimes occur in local authorities between different departments, such as the parks department fighting the housing department for land, or the planning department insisting that playgrounds are not the responsibility of the architecture department, are battles frequently caused by officials who forget that they are dealing in places. The number of square metres involved, or the size of the area which is a particular colour on a map, are the considerations which lead to confused conflict. When the experience of places is taken as a focus, then scale does not have qualitative significance and many conflicts can be resolved. In studying the cognitive systems pertinent to the environment, we focus upon two recurrent themes. One is the development of a theory which will enable us to describe and understand the structure of these systems. The other is an explanation of the procedures available for bringing these internal processes into public view.

One of the criticisms of many psychological theories is that they present a picture of people somehow less complex than we know ourselves to be. Fickleness, confusion, agitation, inconsistency and many other supremely human states are all part of the daily load, yet if a psychologist presents an account of them, they frequently seem to change into something less than fully human. As a consequence, in Chapter Two, when we explore theories of cognitive systems of place, we will draw upon the ideas of a physiologist and an economist as well as those of an architect. By combining their different viewpoints with those of cognitive psychologists we can begin to sketch the properties of these inner processes in a way which captures something of our daily experience. But we need to do more than just capture experiences of places. In order to develop a scientific understanding, we must record and measure them (our second recurrent theme).

Everyday activities remind us of the variety of methods available for describing and representing places, such as photographs, maps, books; caricatures and the like. In Chapter Three the techniques which have been used by psychologists, geographers, architects and planners for revealing people's inner processes are compared and contrasted. From these comparisons we can begin to see why the residents of a rambling city like Tokyo rely on maps for directions, while the grid iron plan of a North American city generates a dependent on the numbering of blocks. We are then in a position to consider the general question of whether the reliance on particular modes for representing places does itself leave its mark on how we make use of our conceptual systems. For example, are land values more related to

city centre development if the maps commonly available emphasise the crucial location of that centre? Maps, of course, are a much-favoured device for locating and describing places. Yet, as discussed in Chapter Four, they have their problems. One of these is the extent to which they strengthen particular facets of our conceptual system, and this may have a particular impact in those situations in which we rely upon a schematic map, such as an underground railway system. But they may generally lead to an emphasis on the geometric structure of an area, in two dimensions, rather than the essentially three-dimensional experience of moving through it. A procedure which we commonly use for representing what we know of places, yet one quite different from mapping, is the estimation of distance. Given the wide use of distances in signposting, it is surprising that there has not been more study of the implications of distance estimations. In Chapter Five the few studies which do exist are discussed, we may pre-empt that discussion by mentioning the overall accuracy and consistency of distance judgments. Even though this accuracy occurs against a background of very great individual variation, it does demonstrate the sophistication of the cognitive process we develop for coping with our surroundings. Interestingly, it also lends support to the notion that our internal representations do contain information akin to that contained in cartographers' maps.

One simple, practical implication of these studies is that we may find it more appropriate than it is commonly believed to use distance information when, for example, assisting people with route finding. Although mapping and distance estimation do give much useful information about people's conceptions of place, they still leave great areas of our experiences untouched. Most notably, they do not give us insight into the feelings which people have about places or how they evaluate them. As a consequence Chapter Six is devoted to illustrating what can be learnt about place conceptions from the ways in which people describe places. What emerges is that there are two important aspects to descriptions. One is the evaluations assigned to a place by people, and the other is the range and type of activity associated with it. From this is apparent the extent to which even the most abstract or romantic accounts of places contain within them evaluations and expectations directly linked to the behaviour considered appropriate for them.

However, because of the richness and complexity of verbal descriptions, they reveal more clearly the difference between people than do the other procedures to be discussed in this book. It is therefore appropriate that in Chapter Seven we turn our attention to accounting for these differences. In the three previous chapters the range of ways in which conceptual systems may be explored are presented so that by Chapter Seven we are in a position to look at the origin and variation of these systems. In many ways the focal issue for utilising information derived from place psychology is the possibility of systematising individual variation. It is frequently the starting point for popular interest in the topic. In Chapter Seven it is argued that the major cause of differences between people in their environmental conceptions is the difference in their roles vis a vis the environment. In other words, their differing experiences give rise to differing perspectives. This has one very great implication for the processes used for creating environments. By virtue of being an environmental decision-maker, a designer's conceptual system is likely to be different from that of people not in that role. There is thus great possibility for a mismatch between creator and user. This mismatch may only be resolved by utilising the procedures which will be referred to in earlier chapters for making public the conceptual systems of all involved.

Chapter Eight draws the book to a conclusion by presenting the outlines of procedures which may be used for incorporating the place conceptions of many groups into design decision-making. In drawing up proposals for participation in this way we come to rely heavily upon the possibilities of identifying and describing the conceptual systems of the various interest groups. This puts considerable emphasis on our abilities to analyse complex systems and seems to imply that the use of computers may well become important for this purpose. The book proceeds, then, from an examination of the nature of those conceptual systems which enable us as individuals to create and make use of places. This leads to an examination of the ways in which we may elucidate and describe our internal representations of places. This finally puts us in a position to discuss variations between people and the consequent possibilities of generating new procedures for designing and producing places.

It is worth noting that by the end of the book we are able to comment on, the construction of places, whether it be the design of a living room, or the redevelopment of a city centre. This emerges as a goal because one of the implications deriving from our explorations in place psychology is that the identification and use of places in a clear and consistent way is of direct value to people. It also seems to be the case that, with the centralisation of decision-making and rapid communications, fewer conceptual systems are exerting increasing influence. The net effect of this is the increasing international homogeneity, the same architectural and urban forms being reproduced throughout the world. It is hoped, therefore, that the psychology of place will be one of the forces bringing back the possibility of a wider range of environmental experiences, through the creation of places more appropriate to their inhabitants.