

Place, Truth, and Commitment

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Let me begin with an old claim, one that can be found in Aristotle, but is earlier than Aristotle: namely, that nothing is that is not placed. Place then is the fundamental notion in any thinking of appearance or presence, and so in any thinking of the world or indeed of ourselves. This ought to be a claim that takes a special significance for architects, since, surely, they above all others are explicitly concerned with *place*. Unfortunately, this is not always borne out by the actual practice of architecture, especially contemporary architecture. To take one example: for all its brilliance, the work of Zaha Hadid, whose death last week was such a shock, seems to have had little to do with place other than as mere site. Indeed, while her buildings often have a sculptural quality that can be understood as directly related to *space*, it is hard to see how those buildings relate in any significant way to *the places* in which they are situated. This is not only true of Hadid's buildings, of course, but applies to many contemporary buildings that often seem to be related only contingently to the places in which they appear – those places are mere sites. This is itself a function of the character of technological modernity to which architecture is closely tied. Modernity operates in and through a mode of spatialization in which things are increasingly rendered as part of a single encompassing system. As spatializing, that system is also both homogenising and quantizing. Architecture becomes both an expression of this form of spatialization and one of the means by which it operates.

Yet what would it mean for architecture to operate differently – to operate in a way that was indeed attentive to place – and why should it even try to do so? I want to address those two questions tonight, but I want to do so as part of broader account of the role of place in thought and practice – as part of a sketch of what I have elsewhere called a 'topographical' or 'topological' approach. Such an approach takes seriously the old claim I mentioned at the start – that nothing is that is not placed – and tries to understand what that means and might imply.

It should already be clear that to talk of place here is not the same as talk merely of space. Place implies space. Yet this is not in the sense that every place is in space – as if place were identical with simple location or position within a larger spatial expanse. This is the notion of place and space that seems to be at work in Cartesian and Newtonian thinking, and, in it, place seems reduced or reducible to the position specified by a set of coordinates within an extended plane or dimension. If we take seriously the notion of place as a *sui generis* concept, and if we attend to place as it presents itself phenomenologically, that is, as it appears in its own appearing, then it is not that place appears within space, but more accurately, space itself appears always and only from within place. Place is no mere position, since place carries a sense of openness and opening that position alone does not possess. Places have space, they give space – and it is this that is actually at issue in *being placed* as opposed to merely *being positioned*. But place is not a matter of space alone. Places have a certain openness that is the origin of space, but that openness is also dynamic and originary, it is an opening. Thus, if space names the *expansive* character of place, then time names its character as *adventual* – as an originary opening as well as an openness.

As opening and openness, place is not substantive – and indeed it withdraws in the face of that which emerges within it. It is thus that it is sometimes said that place *is nothing*. It is partly for this reason that the philosophical history of place has been one in which place constantly disappears in favour of other notions. Since place is that which allows the appearing of things, so it tends to give place to that which appears. Thus things readily come to the fore instead of place; space and time become dominant over the place out of which both emerge. Place becomes, as Aristotle said,

obscure and hard to find – a characteristic place shares with being – “being loves to hide” as Heraclitus says, and could have said of place too.

The tendency for place to disappear is evident, not only in the tendency for place to recede into the background – just as does the horizon of the visual field – but also in the way place constantly opens up towards other places. This indicates something of the relational character of place – every place implicates other places both within and without. This also means that the mode of appearance in place is itself relational – even though this too is often overlooked by the tendency for what appears to be given precedence over its mode of appearing. Nothing is that is not placed thus means, given the relationality of place, that nothing is except in relation. Yet crucially, this relationality is itself always a relationality that emerges in and through place – and as such it is a relationality that is like the relationality of a region – and this connects directly with what lies at the very heart of the notion of place, the idea of bound or limit. The relationality of a region is a bounded relationality.

To say that nothing is that is not placed is to point to the character of being, and so of appearing and presencing, as always occurring in finitude – being belongs to the here and the now. Neither openness nor opening make any sense except with respect to that within which they occur. The way place is tied to bound or limit is especially clear in Aristotle’s characterisation of *topos* as the innermost motionless boundary of that which contains – essentially an idea of place as inner bounding surface that is well expressed in the notion of the horizon. Yet the idea of place as bound is also at work in the Platonic conception of the *chora* as that which, through its withdrawal, supports things into emergence, giving them room in which to emerge. Only because the *chora* bounds, can it be said to withdraw and give room in this way.

Place is itself the bounding surface that, in its withdrawal, allows the opening up of the boundless. The idea of bound or limit that appears here is thus one that takes bound or limit to be essentially *productive*, rather than merely *restrictive*. Place is productive – it opens up – in this same way. Yet its productivity is based in its singularity and finitude: the world opens up only in and through the singularity and finitude of place. One might also say: only though the unity of place is the plurality of appearance possible – the productivity of place is founded in its unity and unity itself is always plural.

The productivity of place, its plurality in unity, means that there is a curious interplay that occurs between the placedness of being, understood as a form of *determination* of being, and placedness as the opening up into the *indeterminate*, where indeterminacy is the obtaining of a multiplicity of possibilities – a multiplicity that is essential to the opening up of world. Being in place is thus a matter of both the ‘here’ and the ‘there’; of proximity and distance; of singularity and plurality; of sameness and difference. Indeed, it is only within and with respect to place that any of these notions possess real meaning or significance.

Human being itself resides in place – and only in place – so that who and what we are is itself determined by our finite mode of being in place. Here is one manifestation of the relationality, not only of place, but of the appearing that arises in and through place. As place is productive, so our own being placed does not function as some simple constraint that makes us less than we might be, but is instead that on the basis of which any and every possibility available to us is opened up. Our being bound to place is thus itself productive. It is only through place that we are opened up to what goes beyond any particular place. The human is thus the one who walks the boundary of the boundless.

If the dynamic structure of place is characterised by this interplay between the ‘determining’ and the ‘indeterminate’, then neither place itself nor individual places – nor the bounds and limits associated

with them – can be understood as capable of being given a unique or absolute determination. In this respect, place and its boundedness exhibits exactly the same character as the horizontality of the visual field – the horizon functions to constitute the field, and so in a sense to determine it, and yet the horizon cannot itself be made fully determinate. Here indeterminacy can be seen to be a consequence of productivity. Moreover, the very character of the boundary as *connecting* at the same time as it also *separates* means that the identity of the place that the boundary defines is also indeterminate – so that, as I emphasised earlier, every place has enfolded in it, and is enfolded within, other places. This does not mean that individual places lack any character that belongs to them, but rather that their character is such as always to admit of other possibilities, other descriptions – is always such as to implicate other places.

Inasmuch as human being, no less than any other kind of being, is also essentially placed, so the indeterminacy of place makes it impossible completely to distinguish human persons from the places and locales in which they live and in which their lives are articulated – as it also makes it impossible completely to separate individual lives from the lives of others, and so reinforces the intertwined character of the human and the placed. To think the human is always to come back to place. This does not mean, however, that place is to be understood as determined by the human. Place is not, contrary to the claims of Lefebvre, Massey, Harvey and many others, a construction of the human (whether via the social or the political). Place may itself come to appearance in relation to the human, and most importantly in relation to language, but place is not itself determined by the human. It is rather that which provides the ground of determination for the human.

In spite of the primacy of place, still much of contemporary thinking is characterised precisely by its neglect, sometimes even its refusal, of place – and especially by the neglect and refusal of what is central to place, namely the idea of bound or limit. In this respect, contemporary thinking remains within a clearly modern frame, since one of the characteristic features of modernity, perhaps even its defining feature, has been its opposition to bound or limit. Modernity, which also includes those varieties of modernity among which must be included the post-modern, can be understood as characterised by the attempt to abolish the limits on the human, to transcend the bounds imposed by place, to open up a realm of unrestricted spatiality – an attempt that can be seen in the concern with constant increase, whether of resources, productivity, wealth, or information, in the preoccupation with speed and immediacy, and in the increasing push towards supposedly globalized systems and perspectives.

Oddly, this modern project can be seen to be at work both in contemporary forms of bureaucratized and corporatized capitalism as well as in many forms of contemporary social scientific and even architectural thinking. In this respect, rather than constituting a turn towards space or place, the spatialized rhetoric that now abounds across many disciplines is essentially a mirroring in theoretical terms of the same modernist reframing of the world that has been gathering pace over the last few hundred years. It is thus no accident, for instance, that the language of networks, flows, and connectivity is to be found at the heart of contemporary corporate discourse no less than in much contemporary theory.

In architecture, or at least in the actuality of practice, ideas of bound and limit are harder to avoid – if only because both economics and physics impose certain absolute constraints on building and design. Yet architecture is no less characterised by a tendency to overlook and neglect place, and so also to overlook bound and limit, than any other area of contemporary endeavour. I mentioned the work of Zaha Hadid at the outset, and I would suggest that precisely through the way in which Hadid's buildings seem to manifest a desire for the realisation of an almost pure sculptural form, so those buildings are often strangely disconnected from the actuality of the places in which they appear. This may in fact, be part of their attraction – an attraction that belongs not only to Hadid's

work but to the larger body of contemporary architecture of which Hadid's work is exemplary: such work represents a certain assertion of the power of design over and against the material actuality in which any such design may be realised. Not only the self-assertiveness of design is at issue here, either, but also the self-assertiveness of that in whose service design is placed: capital, corporate interest, civic or national identity, the 'brand'.

The fact that contemporary architecture may indeed concern itself with space and spatiality, does not of itself mean that it is also concerned with place. The very concern with one may be part of a refusal of the other. Modernity's spatializing tendencies are themselves part of modernity's refusal of place – and so the refusal of bound and limit. But why should such a refusal be problematic? Why does it matter whether we concern ourselves with place or with space? The answer is that we have no choice here. Just as who and what we are is determined by place, so our concern with place can never be wholly lost, only covered over. All of our thought and action begins in place, as it must, since only in place can anything appear or come to presence at all. So in forgetting or overlooking place we forget or overlook that to which we are nevertheless always already turned, *already committed*. It is a commitment we may forget, but can never evade. Being is being in place and being in place is orientation; only on the basis of such orientation is any human being or activity, any human 'living' or 'building', possible.

To say this is not to invoke any spurious notion of 'authenticity' or the need for 'authentic dwelling'. Both such terms are terms I would avoid since both carry problematic connotations and tend to obscure rather than illuminate what is at issue here. But it is the case that in emphasising the way we are already given over to a concern with place, just in virtue of the placed character of our own being, so one might say that the concern with place is itself tied closely to our parallel concern with truth. To attend to truth is to do no more than attend to what is and to the manner of our speaking about what is. What could be more basic – or issue a more basic demand – than this? To attend to truth, to attend to what is, is to do no more and no less than to attend to the place in which we find ourselves, and to what appears before us and with us in that place. Truth, as I use it here, is not some form of relativized truth, even though it is always a placed truth, since there is no sense of truth other than that which arises in the place of our speaking. Though truth belongs to that place, it nevertheless opens to the world, in the same way that place also opens to the world. Truth arises in place, and belongs to place, as it also arises in, and belongs to, the place in which human beings encounter one another. Truth is thus essentially founded in the mode of revealing that belongs to place. This sense of truth is absolute, even though it is not eternal – just as place, though it opens up to the world, nevertheless does not itself possess any claim on eternity .

Our standing in relation to place and our standing in relation to truth does not bring with it any claim on eternity, and neither does it bring any claim on certitude. We are committed to place and to truth, and that commitment is what opens up the possibility of a human mode of being, but it does not do so in a way that is essentially finite, and so remains indeterminate and questionable. To stand in place and in the truth is to stand in the midst of questionability, to stand in a way that demands questioning, that demands criticality.

The failure to attend properly to place and so to truth is to fail to attend to the commitment that we already have as human beings – it is also, therefore, to fail to attend to our own being as human. Again, to come back to place and truth is to come back to the human, but it also brings with it a genuinely critical stance – as is inevitable given the way place itself brings bound and limit into view. Critique is, in this sense, constituted *topographically* – it is an activity, a mode of reflection and action, that depends on attentiveness to bound, to limit, and so also to place and to truth. Perhaps nowhere is this clearer than in Immanuel Kant's construal of his own critical project as a form of 'rational geography' that aimed to found knowledge by mapping its proper bounds – hence Kant's

original conception of the first *Critique* as an inquiry into 'the bounds of sensibility and reason'. The topographical nature of critique might also be seen to underpin Martin Heidegger's emphasis on the primacy of questioning – such questioning, and the listening or responsiveness with which it is also intimately connected, is essentially a matter of orientation towards the place out of which questioning emerges and to which it always turns us back. Here too the connection between critique, questioning, and *reflection* – the last of these understood as a returning of vision, and so as having an implicitly placed character – reinforces the topographic structure at issue.

This topographic structure not only belongs to critique in some general sense, but also to critique as it drives ethical thought and behaviour, and also, I would argue, as it drives a properly democratic politics (such a politics being understood as essentially based in the capacity for public decision-making and debate). This is a particularly important conclusion since all too frequently any thinking that gives salience to place has been assumed to be ethically problematic and politically reactionary, even to the extent that it has been taken to provide the foundation for and impetus towards exclusionary and even violent attitudes and behaviour.

The considerations adduced in the preceding pages ought already to cast doubt on the idea that there is any such general argument against place, or against any thinking that gives centrality to place. In fact, such arguments typically rely on treating place in a way that actually goes against the character of place itself: they tend to disregard the way place is itself bound up with both identity and difference as well as with plurality and indeterminacy; they tend to ignore the productive character of place in its relation to the human – and so ignore the ontologically basic character of the relation between place and human being; and as they thereby also overlook the productive character of bound and limit, so they tend also to overlook the necessary foundation of critique in a recognition of bound and limit, and so in a recognition of place.

The appeal to place can of course be mistaken, and sometimes misused. Yet there is also considerable evidence to suggest that the refusal and denial of place, and the human connection to place, has been just as destructive as has any assertion of place-based exclusivity. This might be thought to be most obviously so in respect of the environment, where a disregard for place can be seen as making possible environmental neglect and harm, but such destructiveness is also evident in more immediate human terms. The Highland clearances and the enclosure movement in Britain of the 18th and early 19th C provide two such instances, but many more are evident in the experiences of indigenous peoples, from Australia – Tasmania provides a specially clear example – and around the world, in the face of colonisation and 'modernisation'. Moreover, displacement and the destruction of place have often been employed against individuals and communities from ancient times until the present as deliberate techniques of war and oppression. Thus the destruction of places, and the material culture associated with them, has been a widespread tactic in times of conflict across the twentieth century from Lhasa to Sarajevo. The Nazi assault on Jewish identity and culture in the Holocaust itself operated as an attack on the very possibility of a Jewish place in the world, involving displacement and dispossession as well as physical violence, cruelty, and murder.

There is no question that place can figure in problematic forms of action and discourse – just as other key ideas, whether of the good, the just, the virtuous, or the democratic, are similarly not immune from being drawn upon within what we may otherwise regard as ethically suspect or politically reactionary usages. That a concept is deployed to problematic ends does not imply that the concept is itself problematic – although it may well tell us something about the importance or centrality of that concept to human life and thought. If we attend to the character of place itself, rather than merely to the rhetoric that often surrounds it, then place not only appears as a central structure in the very constitution of things, and so also in the constitution of the human, but place also turns out to be foundational to the very possibility of the ethical and political. It does so in part

through its connection to the notions of truth, of limit, of questionability, and of critique, that I sketched above, but also through the way in which the human is itself constituted *as human* through its being given over to an essential placedness, an essential finitude, an essential limitation – an essential *fragility*. Turning back to place is a turning back to the human, but to the human understood as always in relation, always in place, always in question. In this respect, far from taking us away from the human, as Levinas claims, the turn to place brings us back into genuine proximity to the human, to ourselves as well as others, and so into proximity to the real ground of ethical obligation, ethical responsibility and ethical responsiveness – it brings us back to our own fundamental commitments in the world.

What of architecture in such a turn to place? Inasmuch as architecture is indeed so closely allied to modernity, so architecture might seem to find itself in a troubled situation – at once concerned with place in a direct way, and yet also prone to the forgetting and refusal of place. The problem is exacerbated by the character of the contemporary academy, in which architecture is itself partly embedded, as itself taken up by a concern with displaced and quantized modes of thought and practice. The concern with place is not, of course, merely a concern with place as itself the focus of inquiry. Part of what I have emphasised here is that the turn to place is essentially a turn back to our own place, and so a turn back that is essentially reflective, questioning, and critical – it is a turn back to our own selves and to a fundamental mode of self-questioning and self-critique. For architecture, or any practice, to attend to place is to attend to its own bounds and limits, to its own place or *topos*, and any such turn is likely to bring with it a turn back a certain sort of caution and modesty – the latter being qualities that are not often evident in much contemporary architectural practice. Such a turn back to place is not absent from contemporary architecture. Indeed, one might argue that it has always been there as part of a modest and humanistic strand within even architectural modernism itself – the ‘other tradition’ to which St John Wilson refers.

If I began with a reference to Zaha Hadid, it is perhaps appropriate to end with a reference to another figure whose work is sometimes seen as establishing the tradition of ‘iconic’ architecture to which Hadid’s buildings are often seen as belonging. The figure I have in mind is Jorn Utzon, and the building is Utzon’s Opera House on Bennelong Point in Sydney Harbour. Although striking in its appearance, the building is based around the basic form of canopy over a raised platform. The famous ‘sails’ were said by Utzon to have been inspired by a vision of piled clouds that he saw from a beach in Hawaii. Although Utzon had never been to Sydney when he formulated the design for the building, he had spent considerable time studying the topography of the site and the surrounding land and harbourscape. Utzon’s building is thus no mere formalist exercise, but rather represents the development of a basic architectural form, understood as oriented in a setting, developed in a way that is itself related to the elements around it. Could one imagine Utzon’s building anywhere other than Sydney? Or if one could, would it operate in the same way as it does on its Bennelong Point site? Utzon’s own architectural practice was characterised by a concern to design spaces that did indeed respond to the places in which they were situated, and that therefore also responded to the human engagement with those spaces. It is perhaps unsurprising then, that the influence of Utzon on Australian architecture has, for the greatest part, been in the direction of exactly that other tradition that St John Wilson describes – a tradition that is oriented as much to place as to the human, and to criticality as well as to limit.