

CHAPTER 4

On the Interaction of Here and There. Places in the City

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Abstract: The paper focuses on place and place experience in a city. It examines the nature of place experience, especially the experience of place edges. Looking at the writings of urban planner and urban theorist Kevin A. Lynch, architecture historian and theoretician Christian Norberg-Schulz and philosopher Edward S. Casey, the paper seeks relevant terms to account for the edge experience. Especially in the works of Casey one can find a series of key observations and terms for constitutive relationships of places and their edges. These findings are confronted in the paper with the specific place experience of the park on Štefánik Square, in the city of Liberec, Czech Republic, with its *Monument to the Fighters and the Victims for Freedom of the Country* by the Stolín brothers (2000). To deal with ambivalences of the place experience named in the paper, I introduce the term 'fold' as a way to capture and understand how interconnected these ambivalences are.

Keywords: Place, Sense of Place, Place Experience, Edge, Place in the City, Fold

1 Introduction

For the majority of people, a city environment is the most common frame of everyday life. It is already a well-known fact that the majority of people on planet Earth live in cities. And it is also safe to claim that the number of people living in cities all around the world will rise in the near future.¹ The city thus becomes the basic framework for the experience of the world or in a more general sense, for our existential experience. From a historical point of view, this is a recent fact. Since the industrial revolution, the development of cities has been almost furious.

¹ According to the UN report *2018 Revision of World Urbanization Prospects*, in 2050 68 % of the world population will live in urban areas. In 2018 the number was 55 %.

Yet there is no vocabulary which could fully describe qualities that are constituting places in the city, nor do we really know how to fully grasp where we find ourselves when in the city. In this paper, I shall look at the complexity of places and their edges and confront the findings with one particular place in the city of Liberec, Czech Republic. Through an examination of this specific place experience near the Technical University of Liberec and the Regional Gallery, I show how intricate the grasp of the edges, and consequently the nature of this place, are. It is a place I repeatedly visit because of the unique *Monument to the Fighters and the Victims for Freedom of the Country by the Stolín brothers* (2000) and these experiences inspired me to find out more about the nature of places in the cities in general.

My view is based on a few basic assumptions. First, I see the city as an ambivalent context. On one hand, the city is made of firm mass forming clear borderlines and paths that we can take. The city is thus something clearly determined that generates a certain type of action, even though it is necessary to bear in mind that cities are living organisms and thus always changing. At the same time, their firm structure allows for innumerable variations and creates a complex network that develops in all possible directions. Still the structure of the city enables us to be oriented, to have a sense of place, and to identify with certain points or locations in the city. It is worth mentioning here that places in the city take various forms including frictions that create folds between inside and outside, between private and public, between interior and exterior (Mongin 2015, p. 17). To make my case as easy as possible, I try to avoid frictions of private and public spheres and focus in my case study on a public park with a public work of art.

Broadly speaking, to have a sense of orientation in the city, a balance of places and flows is a crucial matter as much as the conjunction of continuity and discontinuity of movement. In this context, continuity means the possibility to cross innumerable edges of places, to move between places. Discontinuity means in such a polarity the basic way places differ from each other. If the structure of the city is based merely on discontinuity, edges tend to be impenetrable and consequently the city dissolves to fragments. However, neglecting the discontinuity threatens to ruin the edges completely, which may lead to uniformity. The role of the edges of places is central in the experience of the city. It may seem that edges of places are the most easily describable features of places because they allow the experience of place to happen. In this paper, however, I argue that edges are complex and worth noticing because they build key relationships and connections in the city structure. More

precise and deeper reading of place edges will help us to understand the qualities of a place and grasp the city in a more profound way.

2 Where the Place Starts and Ends: Edges

In this section, I shall focus on the vocabulary we use to describe the experience of a place and particularly its edges. The fundamental quality of a place is that it is somehow enclosed. Looking at the overlapping fields of philosophy – especially phenomenology – and architectural history and theory, one finds several key authors who examined the notion of place and place experience.² I rely here on one particularly relevant study by the American philosopher Edward S. Casey, a well-recognized authority in the field of place studies. However, before I do get to the study *Place and Edge* (Casey 2015, pp. 23-38) it is worthwhile discussing the works by Kevin Lynch and Christian Norberg-Schulz, who both contributed significantly to the understanding of place and place experience.

In the field of urban theory and perception of the city, the urban planner Lynch presented a strong argument for the value of the human experience of the city. At the beginning of his notorious book *The Image of the City* (1960), Lynch writes about the experience of and in the city: “Nothing is experienced by itself, but always in relation to its surroundings, the sequences of events leading up to it, the memory of past experiences” (Lynch 1960, p. 1). While the importance of this quotation will become clear later on, for now my aim is to focus only on Lynch’s view on edges in the city. I skip the key terms he uses, legibility and imageability, even though both terms have a relevance for the understanding of a place. To be in a place one must be able to recognize its edges or borderlines, must be within it. It should be noted that there is an important distinction between place and space. Place experience differs from space experience in one crucial way: space is limitless, boundless and open to infinity; on the contrary, what makes something a place is the presence of some kind of limit or enclosure.³

² In recent architectural practices of architects like Steven Holl, Peter Zumthor, Rick Joy, Bijoy Jain, to name just a few, the concept of place is important. In architectural theory and history, Juhani Pallasmaa and Robert McCarter as well as Pierre von Meiss, and Tomáš Valena contributed key ideas to the place studies. All these authors are more or less influenced and inspired by phenomenology, namely by Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jeff Malpas, but also by the ‘post-phenomenology’ of Peter Sloterdijk.

³ More on the difference of place and space thinking in architecture can be found in Šenk (2019, pp. 91-114).

When Lynch thinks about edges, he is not really interested in the introspection of place experience or in the way edges reveal themselves. In his reading of the city, Lynch is keen to identify elements that in fact serve as a kind of limit. Lynch (1960, p. 62) states: "Edges are the linear elements not considered as paths: they are usually, but not quite always, the boundaries between two kinds of areas." However, a few paragraphs later he mentions pathways as possible boundaries too. Most of the time these limits divide two areas. It is vital for Lynch to plainly name these city elements because they are formative for the experience of the city. However, the edge itself is mostly identified with a specific material or a geographical element or a combination of both. Lynch does not put much of an emphasis in his research on how we actually perceive the edge in our experience as he does not strive to describe or understand what it means to be in place. He cares more about the structure of the city and its experience.

In the writings of the Norwegian architectural historian and theoretician Norberg-Schulz, the concept of 'sense of place' has a significant position. One can even claim it is one of the key concepts he is working with. Notably, he also published a book, *Genius Loci, Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (1980) on this issue. The significance of place for Norberg-Schulz cannot be overstated because it is a fundamental expression of the relationship between humans and the world. The sense of place is a form of this relationship that makes the world meaningful in our experience. Place is thus a fundamental condition for a human being in his strive for orientation in the world. We can also substitute the term with others like *imago mundi* or *microcosmos*, as Norberg-Schulz (1980, p. 17) does, to stress the idea of place as a world in a palpably specific and also enclosed situation.

The sense of place is one of the ways in which we can identify ourselves with our environment and thus see the environment as meaningful. It cannot be a random spot in an undivided space, for a place is unique. To capture the singularity of place we have to grasp its complexity and according to Norberg-Schulz, we can only perceive it as a total phenomenon. It is impossible to reduce the sense of place to one feature of the place.

Having said that, Norberg-Schulz is also clear about the changeability of place. Every place changes according to the season and light conditions and yet this fact is not an obstacle for its continuous presence. The Norwegian author even uses the term *stabilitas loci* by which he means our need for the continued existence of a place (Norberg-Schulz 1980, p. 18). Only such continuity can be a ground for

our orientation in an ever-changing world. The question, however, is exactly what guarantees this continuity.

To answer this question Norberg-Schulz also tries to identify the structure of a place. We already know there must be some form of enclosure. The edge of a place can take different forms: it can even be a change of texture of the earth (Norberg-Schulz 1980, p. 58). Thus, his understanding of the notion of edge is close to Lynch's view, as both tend to identify the edge with a specific material and do not really strive to name the relationships between the experience of being in the place and the experience of leaving it. For my further focus on the edge of a place, it is important that Norberg-Schulz (1980, p. 59) stresses the openness of the edge and the way in which, in his view, all spatial structures are based on centrality and longitudinal schemes.

To make a brief summary, even though place and sense of place are vital concepts for both Lynch and Norberg-Schulz, a subtle analysis of the edges of places in the city and their role are missing in their conception. Even though both authors understood the role of the edge, and especially Norberg-Schulz understands place as the existential anchor, they address places as whole cities and look for repetitive qualities of places in a city rather than address particular place experience in the city.⁴ The relationships and connections between places and flows in the city are not considered.

3 Edward S. Casey: Place and Edge

The previous considerations serve well as an introduction to look more closely at the study *Place and Edge* by Edward S. Casey (2015, pp. 23-38). This paper is crucial in this context because the American philosopher focuses exactly on the experience of the edges of place in a city. For his examination he does not choose a random experience, as Casey observes the immediate experience of a place in the city where he lives, New York (110th St.). He literally starts with the most common of experiences in the city, namely, the experience of leaving home and getting out on the street. It is possible, however, to question the notion of street as a place because naturally a street can or even should be considered a flow. The distinction is not clear as some streets have a character of a place for a number of reasons including state of traffic, width etc. To get the reader into the place experience, Casey starts to describe all the elements that participate in its character. The place where he finds himself consists

⁴ To make it crystal clear, Norberg-Schulz makes for instance an analysis of Prague in *Genius loci*, while my case study here is focused on just one square.

of material elements such as cars, houses, or trees as well as immaterial elements such as the rhythm of car movement, people movement, and sunlight, just to name a few. As he shows, in general it is not that difficult to conceive and capture where we are, we know how to describe it and what vocabulary to use to share it. What is difficult though is to find a clear line where the sense of place actually starts. It is even difficult to find the language to describe such an experience.

There are of course terms and vocabularies that are used on a daily basis in fields like city geography. However, as Casey shows, these are not adequate to capture the experience of a place. City geography is a fit tool for administration and urban planning, but the single person experience takes part in it only on a very limited scale. The description of place is common part of the city geography vocabulary but it captures the place from the outside, almost from an objectifying distance (Casey 2015, p. 25), where the edges are represented as specific lines and points on the map.

Casey is instead trying to get inside the place experience and therefore starts with a recognition of the role that bodily presence plays therein. In his endeavour, as already stated, he begins with the simple experience of leaving a house. At home, there is a clear line between outside and inside, and we are familiar with both parts. The experience we have of the opposite street façade is different because it is only made of the outside part. The edge experience here reveals something typical of place experience: the edge changes as we move. We cannot identify the edge with one simple thing or element because it has many aspects that constitute the experience (colour, texture, height, architectural style).

If we follow Casey on the streets we encounter many other edges immediately. There is a sidewalk, there are shops but there is also the sky. He appears to be in a world where things 'ready-to-hand' prevail with one major exception, which is the sky. The quality and texture of edges that form the ready-to-hand things or manmade are significantly different from those that are not. We can for now stay with the ready-to-hand context, for which Casey tries to capture the complex nature of place edges with specific relationship terms. The first relationship is the edge-edge relationship. One edge is never solitary in our experience, it is always connected with different edges (Casey 2015, p. 28).

It may seem for a moment that Casey is doing a rash move here. So far it is not clear what the edges are, except that the edge is a complex element and he already speaks of edge/edge relationship. However, we should bear in mind that the edge/edge relationship is not a relationship

of two well defined and closed (mostly material) entities. The edge/edge relationship idea reveals the constitutive quality of place edge: it is the blending and intertwining that is constitutive for the edge experience. Casey goes on to specify the edge/edge relationship with two specific modes of the relationship. He creates a basic taxonomy of edge relationships and explains them with examples:

In certain cases, it signifies the *sharing* of edges – sometimes clearly distinguished as with the chock-a-block edges of stores next to each other on W. 110th St.; sometimes so deeply merged that we cannot tell them apart, as when a table top is made from pieces of the same wood so finely glued together as to be indistinguishable in their edges; and sometimes distinctively different but such that we cannot say to which thing or place the edge belong [...] (Ibid.)

The other possibility is edges that are not shared and yet closely collude. Casey writes:

In this instance, we can discern two variations: edges that are separately distinguishable but together outline a given physical object (and to this degree belong to it), and edges that interact with the immediate background of the same object, thus sprawling edges in this background that do not belong intrinsically to it (e. g. of a building as profiled against a car or of hills in Central Park seen through tree branches): negative edges in that they belong in the first place to another object, as we witness in the edges of shadows. (Ibid.)

Places are defined by edges that take the form of one of the edge/edge relationships. Thus, the edge of a place is rather interactive in its nature, it does not arise from the substance of place. We have to focus on the relational features of edges and how they participate with the environment. That is why Casey now turns attention to the openness of the edge. He gets back to the 110th St. experience and focuses on the vistas opening at both ends of this street. They present a layered form of the edge and with parks at both ends that show how they can change in time. These edges are porous, open, and above all, they merge with the environment and at the same time can enclose a place; “they extend that place into what lies around it – they take it into the circumambient space” (Casey 2015, p. 30).

At the end of the text, Casey then comes up with two more distinctions of how edges are related to places. One is *terminus ad quem* and the second *terminus a quo*. The first one in its essence is a reflection

of the transition from one place to another. The second captures the experience of place as something that ends somewhere and I can see other places (Casey 2015, p. 35).

In the text we have examined, Casey introduces some key questions of how to define places in the city. In comparison with Lynch and Norberg-Schulz, he makes a scale shift that proves to be fundamental because on the level of direct experience he provides a taxonomy of relationships that constitute the place experience. While Norberg-Schulz emphasized the existential meaning of place enough and made a number of useful taxonomies of natural and artificial places, Casey captures the vagueness or even blurriness of place edges and shows how interactive the edges are.

Nevertheless, I also believe there are several motives that need further investigation. First, if we are already aware that the edge is interactive, it is worth exploring how viewing the edge as an event might be relevant. Second, especially in the case of places in the city, one cannot only define a place in the city with its edges but also through other places and actually edges that do not belong to an immediate visual experience of a place. Seeing the city as an overlapping network of places, webs of communications, and flows means also acknowledging that there are a number of symbolic and value-related connections that are present and have a certain impact on the identity of a place and consequently of the city, too.

4 Case Study: Park on Štefánik Square, Liberec

To show what I mean by these claims, I will consider as a case study one particular place in the city of Liberec, Czech Republic, namely the park on the Štefánik Square with the *Monument to the Fighters and the Victims for Freedom of the Country* by the Stolin brothers (2000).

The park is a public place that is located outside the historical core of the city and is a location that came about when the city was responding to major issues due to its rapid industrial development. Liberec is a city in mountain topography and there is therefore a lot of dynamic terrain movement and the place I focus on here is to be found on one traditional route leading to the city centre from the northeast. Nowadays, under the current polycentric condition of the city, the park has become one of the many urban centres. In the following, I apply Casey's findings to analysis of this place but also suggest a possible path for further investigation.



Figure 1: Park on Štefánik square with a view on Vítězná street, Liberec, 2000.
Source: Photo by Michaela Říhová

The park is a well-defined part of the city structure. It almost appears to be a green island clearly formed by surrounding streets. I picked this example precisely because, at first sight, defining its edges seems to cause no trouble at all. Since there is an evident line between the grass and the street, there can be no mistake where the grass starts. But should we focus just on this moment of transition, we would be stuck with views and terms of city geography, which, as has been said, do not capture the actual bodily experience. However, they may help to gain a basic overview. The Park has a triangle shape with terrain waves rising to the northwest side. Although there are grown trees, the overall character of the park is open and without any sense of strict order.

To make my case more explicit I start by dealing with the experience of this place directly from within. The Park finds itself in front of the barracks (a large closed area) and the other two sides of the triangle are lined with houses and villas. In my bodily experience, these are what make the edge so well readable together with the clear line of the grass with their firm and quiet presence. They embody a clear mark between public and private areas.

If I now keep looking around, I can follow the streets and especially the Vítězná street to the southeast. At the end of the road, on the horizon, there is a school building from the 1930s. The terrain creates

a movement from the high horizon with the school building at the top and then in my direction falling down to the crossroads with the Museum and the Regional Gallery (formerly the city baths) and from there it again slowly rises up to the barracks where it stops. Because of all these immediate experiences, it is impossible to identify the edge with just this line even though the transition between hard and soft ground is clear here. That would be a reduction of a too complex situation. The line certainly is a solid part of the edge experience but as we learn from Casey, edges are interactive and therefore, we have to look for edge/edge relationships rather than for a one clear (material) line. Now, to put it as bluntly as possible, the question is whether the just mentioned school building on the horizon is also part of the edge of the place where I find myself. The answer comes again from the nature of the edge discussed by Casey. It belongs to a different edge but in my experience, these collude and thus also connect one place with another.

It is important to state that movement in the park is not strictly directed by its design. The earth pathway leads only around the grass area and not into it although it is a free entry area; that is a conscious designers' decision by the Stolin brothers.⁵ The architect Petr and the sculptor Jan aimed to create an experience of the place that allows the visitor to decide freely on how to move around. Dealing with the task to create a contemporary form of a monument at the end of the millennium, they just wanted to avoid using the traditional figurative or abstract statue. First of all, the whole park is the actual monument, not just the newly added structure on its southwest part.

The land in the park was moved in a particular way to create a terrain wave which ends the terrain movement following Vítězná street. The new object-art structure is consciously decentred from this line. The position of the structure does not follow any clear axis in the park. The visitor thus has to find their own way to get into the structure. It is likely the visitor will only slowly get there because the form of the structure suggests at first sight an industrial utilitarian object like a ventilation system. From a certain distance, the objects seem passive but as you move in between the two blocks, they come to life. There are two wire cuboids filled with equipment presenting information, shining with lights and blowing air from several tubes.

⁵ Architecture theoretician and historian Monika Mitášová cooperated on the project.



Figure 2: Petr and Jan Stolin, *Monument to the fighters and the victims for freedom of the country*, Liberec, 2000.

Source: Photo archive of the artists

Is it possible to claim that the beholder grasps the place experience at this precise in-between moment? It certainly is a spot with the clearest edges. Yet we have to take in account that there is a different time horizon involved here. Being in-between here means both bodily activating the 'life of the place' and at the same time also kind of losing the sense of place because the displayed information brings in different places and times. One possible way to deal with such an experience is to use the term 'fold'⁶ that suggests continuity and condensed spatial and time experience. With the idea of a fold the edges seem to be temporal-spatial events. The idea of fold allows to capture the key place qualities of temporal-spatial continuity and close connection to other places in a city.

Last but not least, something more needs to be said about the form of the monument, because it supports the idea of fold. It has been said that places in the city take part in different connections and networks in the city and that their edges connect different places. It is also important to take into account the connections that are not based on direct visual connection. In this particular case, the monument uses the machinist

⁶ The term is loosely based on Deleuze's understanding of fold. I do not apply Deleuze's view of the term strictly here (see Deleuze 1992).

aesthetics with a tight connection to nature (park). To put it plainly, it unites technical and natural forms to get a strong sense of place.

In the case of Liberec, the city is an obvious link to the key neo-modernist building that serves today as a symbol of the region and that is justly considered to be one the best pieces of architecture built after the World War II in the Czech Republic (or Czechoslovakia). The elegant geometry of *Hotel and TV Transmitter Ještěd*, on the very top of the Ještěd mountain, both respects the extreme natural site and embodies the technical optimism of modern age with its cosmic-age-inspired design. Its architect, Karel Hubáček,⁷ contributed very much to the new identity of the city by designing several important buildings since the 1960s. There is no immediate visual connection between the monument by the Stolín brothers and the *Hotel and TV Transmitter Ještěd* (1973), but there is a formal, material, and even ideological one. This connection is part of the ‘fold experience’ in which one can expand the immediate bodily experience.



Figure 3: Petr and Jan Stolín, *Monument to the fighters and the victims for freedom of the country*, Liberec, 2000.

Source: Photo archive of the artists

⁷ In close cooperation with structural engineers Zdeněk Patrman and Zdeněk Zachař.

5 Conclusion

It may seem that the experiences of places in cities are the most common and unproblematic of experiences. However, as I tried to show in this paper, it is not a simple and straightforward experience at all. When we look closer on what constitutes a place, we realize how complicated it is to capture the complex nature of its key qualities. I was particularly interested here in the edges of places, simply because a place is best understood as a form of enclosure. However, a place certainly is not a cell made of four walls and an open sky. While considering the edge drawing especially on Casey's essay *Place and Edge*, it became clear that an edge is in its nature interactive and rather complex in its relationships and connections. Thus, when speaking of place and its experience it is important to acknowledge its ambivalence. Place experience is always singular and yet it is also an experience of a multitude through its edges and through the fact that it belongs to several networks in the framework of the city. It is an experience of enclosure and at the same time of openness and connection with other places.

Based on the case study of the park on Štefánik Square, in Liberec, and of its monument, I argued here that there are places where ideological connections have to be taken into account unless we lose key aspects of the place experience. Therefore, I suggested that the term 'fold' could capture both the enclosure and openness of edges as well as the condensed spatial and time experience. Such an approach could bring forward the relevant differences while at the same time preserving the stress on continuity as it was revealed in the consideration of edges.

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