Creating Ordinary Places: Slow Cities in a Fast World

PAUL L. KNOX
College of Architecture & Urban Studies, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA, USA

ABSTRACT This paper explores the interdependence between urban design and the social construction of place. Following the recent contribution to the discussion of sense of place, authenticity and character by Jivén & Larkham (Journal of Urban Design, vol. 8, 2003, pp. 67–81), it is suggested that architects, planners and urban designers should be attentive to the theoretical underpinnings that are relevant to place-making. The emphasis here is on the relationships between the pace of life and the capacity of urban settings to facilitate the routine encounters and shared experiences that underpin the intersubjectivity that, in turn, leads to the social construction of place. These issues are placed in the context of the ‘fast world’ of globalization and of grass-roots reaction to its consequences, as illustrated by the Slow City movement.

Introduction

Central to good urban design is the capacity of the built environment to foster a positive sense of place in the ordinary places that provide the settings for people’s daily lives. Sense of place is always socially constructed, but in ordinary places—physical settings that do not have important landmarks or major symbolic structures—the social construction of place is especially important. It is also important to recognize the ‘betweenness’ of place: that is, the dependence of place on perspective (Entrikin, 1991). Places are constructed by their inhabitants from a subjective point of view, while simultaneously they are constructed and seen as an external ‘other’ by outsiders. A neighbourhood, for example, is both an area centred on people and their homes, as well as an area containing houses, streets and people that others may view from a centred or an outsider’s perspective. Place is both a centre of meaning and the external context of people’s actions.

A fundamental element in the social construction of place is the existential imperative for people to define themselves in relation to the material world. The roots of this idea are to be found in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, who contended that men and women originate in an alienated condition and define themselves, among other ways, through their sociospatial environment. People’s ‘creation’ of space provides them with roots—their homes and localities becoming biographies of that creation (Heidegger, 1971). Central to Heidegger’s philosophy is the notion of ‘dwelling’: the basic capacity to achieve a form of spiritual unity
between humans and the material world. Through repeated experience and complex associations, our capacity for dwelling allows us to construct places, to give them meanings that are deepened and qualified over time with multiple nuances (Norberg-Schulz, 1980).

Yet the construction of place by insiders cannot take place independently of societal norms and representations of the world: what Larissa Lomnitz has called the ‘cultural grammar’ that codifies and frames the social construction of spaces and places (Lomnitz & Diaz, 1992). People’s territoriality and sense of ‘dwelling’ are informed by broadly shared notions of social distance, rules of comportment, forms of social organization and so on. There is an important dialectical relationship between social structures and the everyday practices of the ‘insiders’ of subjectively constructed spaces and places. We live both in and through places.

Place, then, is much more than urban form (Aravot, 2002). It is both text and context, a setting for social interaction that, among other things, structures the daily routines of economic and social life; structures people’s life paths (providing them with both opportunities and constraints); provides an arena in which everyday, ‘common-sense’ knowledge and experience is gathered; provides a site for processes of socialization and social reproduction; and provides an arena for contesting social norms.

A crucial concept here is that of the lifeworld, the taken-for-granted pattern and context for everyday living through which people conduct their day-to-day lives without having to make it an object of conscious attention (Madsden & Plunz, 2001). People’s experience of everyday routines in familiar settings leads reflexively to a pool of shared meanings. People become familiar with one another’s vocabulary, speech patterns, dress codes, gestures and humour, and with shared experiences of the physical environment such as streets, markets and parks. Often this carries over into people’s attitudes and feelings about themselves and their locality and to the symbolism they attach to that place. When this happens, the result is a collective and self-conscious ‘structure of feeling’: the affective frame of reference generated among people as a result of the experiences and memories that they associate with a particular place (Williams, 1973).

The basis of both individual lifeworlds and the collective structure of feeling is intersubjectivity: shared meanings that are derived from the lived experience of everyday practice. An important part of the basis for intersubjectivity—and therefore an important consideration in urban design—is the routinization of individual and social practice in time and space (Lefebvre, 1991). Successful urban places—from both the insiders’ perspective and an outsider’s perspective—not only have the lineaments of good urban form but also an underlying dynamic of activity—routine encounters and shared experiences that make for intersubjectivity (Sherman, 1988). In Sherman’s terms, successful urban design must go beyond ‘surface appearance’ to foster what Whyte (1980) documented in The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces: routine encounters and shared experiences (see also Gehl, 1996). Thus, among the attributes of successful places we should expect to find plenty of opportunities for informal, casual meetings and gossip; friendly bars and pubs and a variety of settings in which to purchase and/or consume food; street markets; a variety of comfortable places to sit, wait and people-watch; a sense of ease with changing seasons; and, above all, a sense of belonging, affection, hospitality, vitality and historical and cultural continuity (Montgomery, 1998).
Creating Ordinary Places

The Fast World

Ordinary places, then, are constantly under social construction by people responding to the opportunities and constraints of their particular locality (Groth & Bressi, 1997; Jivén & Larkham, 2003). As people live and work in places, they gradually impose themselves on their environment, modifying and adjusting it to suit their needs and express their values. At the same time, they gradually accommodate both to their physical environment and to the values, attitudes and comportment of people around them: the classic sociospatial dialectic (Soja, 1980). People are constantly modifying and reshaping places, and places are constantly coping with change and influencing their inhabitants.

Over the past couple of decades, however, people and places have been confronted with change on an unprecedented scale and at an extraordinary rate. Economic and cultural globalization has resulted in a ‘network society’ dominated by flows of capital, ideas and people (Castells, 1996). Globalization has generated a ‘fast world’—a world of restless landscapes in which the more places change the more they seem to look alike, the less they are able to retain a distinctive sense of place, and the less they are able to sustain public social life (Bianchini, 1988; Comedia, 1991).

The fast world is very much a product of the expansion of capitalism on a global scale. In the global economic system, time costs money, and the inevitable result has been a steady acceleration in the pace of life. The fast world consists of people and places directly involved, as producers and consumers, in transnational industry, modern telecommunications, materialistic consumption and international news and entertainment. Within the fast world there is now an intense connectedness that ties together 800 million or so of the world’s people through global networks of communication and knowledge, production and consumption.¹

The pivotal moment in the creation of the fast world was the ‘system shock’ to the international economy that occurred in the mid-1970s. World financial markets, swollen with US dollars by the US government’s deficit budgeting and by the huge currency reserves held by countries belonging to the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, quickly evolved into a new, sophisticated system of international finance, with new patterns of investment and disinvestment that led to some radical socio-economic changes. New social formations emerged as part of new, post-industrial societies in most Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development countries. A new, transnational material culture emerged around the consumption of globally branded products. As money accelerated around local, national and international circuits of capital, so the pace of everyday life quickened (Virilio, 1991), accompanied by the attenuation of public social life (Augé, 1995; Putnam, 2000). The increased pace of life itself became an issue associated with morbidity and mortality in cities (Levine, 1990; Sadalla et al., 1990; Garhammer, 2002). Meanwhile, new urban forms began to emerge in response to the new economic logic and the new social structure: postmetropolis (Soja, 2000), the 100-mile city (Sudjic, 1993), boomburbs and edgeless cities (Lang, 2003), splintering urbanism (Graham & Marvin, 2001) and an urban geography of ‘nowhere’ (Kunstler, 1993).

Heidegger (1971) had anticipated the effects of telecommunications technology, rationalism, mass production and mass values on people’s capacity for ‘dwelling’ and the social construction of place. The inevitable result,
he suggested, is that the ‘authenticity’ of place is subverted. City spaces become inauthentic and ‘placeless’, a process that is, ironically, reinforced as people seek authenticity through professionally designed and commercially constructed spaces and places whose invented traditions, sanitized and simplified symbolism and commercialized heritage all make for convergence rather than spatial identity.

Globalization, Place-making and the Heritage Industry

In the fast world, commonalities among places are intensifying and as a result the experience of spectacular and distinctive places, physical settings and landscapes has become an important element of consumer culture. Responding to this shift, developers have created theme parks, shopping malls, festival marketplaces, renovated historic districts and neotraditional villages and neighbourhoods. However, the more developers have competed to provide distinctive settings, and the larger and more spectacular their projects, the more convergent the results.

Globalization has meanwhile prompted communities in many parts of the world to become much more conscious of the ways in which they are perceived by tourists, businesses, media firms and consumers. As a result, places are increasingly being reinterpreted, reimagined, designed, packaged, themed and marketed (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990; Erickson & Roberts, 1997; Ward, 1998). In this context, sense of place can become a valuable commodity through place marketing (Duncan & Duncan, 2001). Seeking to be competitive within the global economy, many places have sponsored extensive makeovers of themselves, including the creation of pedestrian plazas, waterfront developments, cosmopolitan cultural facilities, festivals and sports and media events—the ‘carnival masks’ and ‘businessmen’s utopias’ of global capitalism (Harvey, 2001; Bloom, 2004). An increasing number of places have also set up home pages on the Internet containing maps, information, photographs, guides and virtual tours in order to promote themselves in the global marketplace for tourism and commerce. The question of who does the reimagining and cultural packaging, and on whose terms, can become an important issue for the quality of local life.

Central to most place marketing efforts is urban design, along with the deliberate regeneration and manipulation of material and visual culture in an effort to enhance the appeal of places (Assi, 2000; Wansborough & Mageean, 2000). In part, this manipulation of culture depends on promoting and reinventing traditions, lifestyles and arts that are locally rooted. The re-creation and refurbishment of historic districts and settings are so widespread that they have become a mainstay of a ‘heritage industry’. However, an important consequence of the heritage industry is that urban cultural environments are vulnerable to a debasing and trivializing process. As the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS) (2001) noted:

The particular historic character of a city often gets submerged in the direct and overt quest for an international image and international business. Local identity becomes an ornament, a public relations artifact designed to aid marketing. Authenticity is paid for, encapsulated, mumified, located and displayed to attract tourists rather than to shelter continuities of tradition or the lives of its historic creators. (p. 38)

As a result, contemporary urban landscapes contain growing numbers of inauthentic settings—the ‘degenerative utopias’ of global capitalism.
(Harvey, 2000). These are often influenced more by ‘imagineering’ and by images and symbols derived from movies, advertising and popular culture than by cultural heritage or local traditions. Increasingly, therefore, the fast world—with its transnational architectural styles, dress codes, retail chains and popular culture, and its ever-present business visitors and tourists—is associated with a sense of placelessness and dislocation, a loss of territorial identity and an erosion of the distinctive structure of feeling associated with ordinary places (Relph, 1976; Arefi, 1999; Ritzer, 2004).

**Going Slow: Mobilization against Globalization**

Yet the more people’s patterns of consumption converge, the more fertile the ground for counter-cultural movements (Castells, 1997; Drainville, 2004; Honoré, 2004). The more transnational corporations undercut the authority of national and local governments to regulate economic affairs, the greater the popular support for regionalism. The more universal the diffusion of material culture and lifestyles, the more local and ethnic identities are valued. The faster the information highway takes people into cyberspace, the more they feel the need for a subjective setting—a specific place or community—they can call their own. The faster the pace of life in search of profit and material consumption, the more people value leisure time. Also, the faster their neighbourhoods and towns acquire the same generic supermarkets, filling stations, shopping malls, industrial estates, office parks and suburban subdivisions, the more people feel the need for enclaves of familiarity, centredness and identity. The UNCHS (2001) notes that:

> In many localities, people are overwhelmed by changes in their traditional cultural, spiritual, and social values and norms and by the introduction of a cult of consumerism intrinsic to the process of globalization. In the rebound, many localities have rediscovered the ‘culture of place’ by stressing their own identity, their own roots, their own culture and values and the importance of their own neighbourhood, area, vicinity, or town. (p. 4)

New Urbanism, especially its neotraditional manifestations, represents the design community’s best-articulated response to this impulse. The deployment of traditional architectural styles along with urban elements such as alleys and public spaces surrounded by diverse housing types—all carefully codified in a private regulatory framework—has had strong market appeal and has generated an extensive literature (see, for example, Till, 1993; Al-Hindi, 2001; Hebbert, 2003; Southworth, 2003). Yet this ‘new civic art’ (Duany et al., 2003) is overwhelmingly concerned with urban form, shape and pattern, with little to say about the social construction of place or the reflexive and recursive relationships between people and places.

Moreover, the proliferation of neotraditional developments (and watered-down developer look-alikes) has begun to make New Urbanism an element of—rather than a response to—globalization. More and more urban fabric in Europe and North America is manifest in an ersatz, sanitized and Disneyfied form; while most of the better-executed New Urbanist developments remain artful fragments, exclusionary ‘privatopias’ that are abstracted from the fabric—both physical and social—of their host city. Privately planned and developed communities in the New Urbanist, neotraditional mould are popular with consumers because of their
perceived social status, implied security and real advantages in terms of the robustness of property values. Yet in spite of mandated mixed uses, diverse housing types and careful detailing, they tend to be rather prim, somehow lacking the character that is essential to a sense of place (Jivén & Larkham, 2003), and with little evidence of social cohesion, identity or vitality (Krieger, 1998).

**Slow Cities**

A rather different example of the impulse for people to rediscover the ‘culture of place’ is provided by the Slow City (CittaSlow) movement. The CittaSlow movement is more explicitly a grass-roots response to globalization and is closely related to the longer-established and better-known Slow Food movement. The aims of the two movements are different but complementary: In broad terms, both are in favour of local, traditional cultures, a relaxed pace of life and conviviality. Both are hostile to big business and globalization, though their driving motivation is not so much political as ecological and humanistic. The Slow Food movement was initially conceived as a direct riposte to globalization—a cultural barricade in resistance to the relentless hegemony of McDonald’s, Wal-Mart and other icons of globalization.²

The Slow City movement was formed in October 1999, when Paolo Saturnini, mayor of Greve-in-Chianti, a Tuscan hill town, organized a meeting with the mayors of three other municipalities (Orvieto, Bra and Positano) to define the attributes that might characterize a *città lente*—slow city. At their founding meeting in Orvieto, the four mayors committed themselves to a series of principles that included working towards calmer and less polluted physical environments, conserving local aesthetic traditions and fostering local crafts, produce and cuisine. They also pledged to use technology to create healthier environments, to make citizens aware of the value of more leisurely rhythms to life and to share their experience in seeking administrative solutions for better living. The goal is to foster the development of places that enjoy a robust vitality based on good food, healthy environments, sustainable economies and the seasonality and traditional rhythms of community life.

These ideas soon led to a charter with a 54-point list of pledges. The charter leans heavily towards the enjoyment of food and wine, the fostering of conviviality and the promotion of unique, high-quality and specialist foods. To be eligible for membership, candidate cities must have no more than 50,000 inhabitants and must pledge to introduce a range of measures from the promotion of organic agriculture to the creation of centres where visitors can sample local traditional food. They must also take steps to protect the sources and purity of the raw ingredients and to fend off the advance of fast food and cultural standardization.

Promoting local distinctiveness and a sense of place is almost as important to the movement as the enjoyment of good local food, wine and beer. This means that the charter also covers many aspects of urban design and planning. Candidate cities must be committed not only to supporting traditional local arts and crafts but also to supporting modern industries whose products lend distinctiveness and identity to the region. They must also be committed to the conservation of the distinctive character of their built environment and must pledge to plant trees, create more green space, increase cycle paths and pedestrianized streets, keep public squares and piazzas free of advertising billboards and neon, ban car
alarms, reduce noise pollution, light pollution and air pollution, foster the use of alternative sources of energy, improve public transport and promote eco-friendly architecture in any new developments. The movement is committed to the management standards embodied in ISO 9000 and to the environmental management and monitoring standards of ISO 14 000 (International Organization for Standardization, www.iso.org).

Achieving the goals of the CittaSlow movement requires, in the first instance, a strong commitment to the principles of the movement on the part of the city mayor. In the longer haul, success will inevitably depend on developing a new political dynamic that incorporates an alliance of city leadership, local businesses and residents in support of Slow City ideals. Membership of the CittaSlow movement is carefully controlled, and cities are admitted to membership only after trained local ‘operatives’ have prepared an initial report on the city’s commitment to Slow City principles, followed by a detailed audit report covering six key areas: environmental policies and planning; use of infrastructure; integration of technology; promotion of local produce and ways of life; hospitality and the rhythm of life; and sense of place. The movement is governed by an elected assembly of 10 city mayors, with a president, three vice-presidents and a chief operating officer—all of whom serve on a voluntary basis.

In 2001, the first 28 Slow Cities were certified. All 28 charter members were Italian, the majority of them located in northern Italy, particularly in Tuscany and Umbria. By early 2005, the list had grown to 44 (including Hersbruck, Schwarzenbruck, Überlingen and Waldkirch in Germany, Skondal and Levanger in Norway, and Ludlow and Aylsham in the UK) and more than a dozen other towns were actively seeking certification through pilot programmes—most of them in Italy but one in England (Diss), two in Brazil (Antonio Prado and Tiradentes) and one each in Switzerland (Bellinzona), Greece (Idra) and Croatia (Kastel ū rizo). More than 100 other towns from around the world have inquired about joining.

These are ordinary places, but they are places that consciously seek to reinforce their own identity and to facilitate an unhurried and enjoyable way of life for their inhabitants. They are towns where pedestrians can stroll, unhindered by roaring traffic; towns with abundant and varied spaces in which people can run into one another, sit, talk and enjoy communal life. Their municipal councils insist upon renewable energy and recycling and encourage local arts and crafts, traditional eating establishments that serve local cuisine and shops that sell local produce.

One obvious critique of the CittaSlow movement is that it could all too easily produce enervated, backward-looking, isolationist communities: living mausoleums where the puritanical zealotry of Slowness has displaced the fervent materialism of the fast world. However, Slow Cities do not want to be stultifying, uneventful places where there is no diversity and nothing for young people to do in the evening. Nor do Slow Cities intend to be antithetical to business, innovation or technology. Aware of the dangers of prescriptive Slowness, the CittaSlow movement hopes to propagate vitality through farmers’ markets, festivals and the creation of inviting public spaces. It aims to deploy technology in air, noise and light pollution control systems, modern waste-cycling plants and composting facilities. It seeks to encourage business through ecologically sensitive, regionally authentic and gastronomically oriented tourism.

Here, though, is another danger: that, paradoxically, Slow City designation becomes a form of brand recognition within the heritage industry. Because they
are small—50 000 inhabitants or less—the charming attractions of Slow Cities could all too easily be overwhelmed by tourism. So the more they flaunt their gentle-paced life, the faster they may end up changing. In this scenario, shop prices will rise, and cafés will lose their spilled-drink, smoky, messy, authenticity. The better known that Slow Cities become, the more affluent outsiders will choose to make their second homes in them. House prices will go up, and the poor and the young will be pushed out. The best defence against this threat is the propagation of the movement: the more localities that are enrolled, the less exclusive membership status will be, and the less attention any one of them will receive. In this context, much will depend on the success of the early adopters and the ability of the movement to use their accomplishments as the platform for a much broader membership.

Urban Rhythms and Encounters: Time, Space and Intersubjectivity

Whatever the eventual outcomes of the Slow City movement per se, its principles speak directly to the concepts of ‘dwellings’ and intersubjectivity that are key to the social construction of place and, therefore, to successful urban design. Fostering respect for seasonality and traditional rhythms of community life propagates recurring and interlocking patterns of events that make for cultural transactions and public sociability in the public realm (Montgomery, 1998). Elements of daily rhythms (such as mid-morning grocery shopping with a stop for coffee, the aperitivo en route from work to home and the after-dinner stroll) are all critical to the density of routine encounters and shared experiences that underpin the intersubjectivity that is the basis both for a sense of place and for a structure of feeling within a community. The same is true of elements of weekly rhythms, such as street markets and farmers’ markets; and of seasonal rhythms, such as food festivals, craft shows and arts festivals.

These rhythms, in turn, depend on certain kinds of spaces and places: not only streets, squares and public open spaces but also ‘third places’ (after home, first, and workplace, second—Oldenburg, 1999): the sidewalk cafés, pubs, post offices, drug stores, corner stores and family-run trattorie that are the loci of routine activities and sociocultural transactions. The nature and frequency of routine encounters and shared experiences depend a great deal on attributes of these spaces and places. Urban form should be permeable enough to generate casual encounters and should facilitate solitary as well as informal social activities (Montgomery, 1995, 1997, 1998; Gehl, 1996). Third places should accommodate ‘characters’, ‘regulars’ and newcomers as well as routine patrons and, like public spaces, should facilitate casual encounters as well as settings for sustained conversations.

Such issues link urban design to structuration theory, one of the most powerful and sophisticated tools of analysis in contemporary social science. Structuration theory addresses the way in which everyday social practices are structured across space and time. Developed by Anthony Giddens (Giddens, 1979, 1984, 1991: see also Bryant & Jary, 1991), structuration theory views human action as being based on ‘practical consciousness’, meaning that the way in which we make sense of our own actions and the actions of others—and the way we generate meaning in the world—is rooted in routinized day-to-day practices that occupy a place in our minds somewhere between the conscious and the unconscious. Recursivity, the continual reproduction of individual and social
practices through routine actions (time-space routinization), contributes to the
development of social systems and structures in particular locales.

Structuration theory holds that human landscapes are created by
knowledgeable actors (or agents) operating within a specific social context
(or structure). Agents are those influential human actors who determine the
immediate, observable outcomes of change—including, for example, architects,
planners and urban designers. Structures include the long-term, deep-seated
social practices that govern daily life, such as the networks and interactions of
community and family. The relationships between structure and agency are
mediated by a series of institutional arrangements—such as housing codes and
planning regulations—that both enable and constrain action. Successful places—
and successful urban design—must therefore be seen as the product not only of
key actors (architects, planners, urban designers, mayors and developers, etc.) but
also of the ‘cultural grammar’ of societal norms and forms of social organization
and the regulatory frameworks and codes of practice of governmental
institutions, professional organizations and formalized movements.

Notes

1. The ‘slow world’, on the other hand, consists chiefly of the impoverished places and regions
within less developed countries and accounts for about 85% of the world’s population.
2. Italian journalist and food writer Carlo Petrini, aghast at the announcement of plans to
open a McDonald’s restaurant in the Piazza di Spagna in the heart of Rome in 1986, was
the founder of the Slow Food movement. His reaction struck a chord with many others in
Italy, who recognized that fast food is culturally invasive and corrosive, a serious threat not only
to healthy diets but also to the sociability of eating and to valued patterns and rhythms of life.
The Slow Food movement was officially launched in 1989 with a manifesto that states its
aim as “rediscovering the flavours and savours of regional cooking and banishing the degrading
effects of fast food” (Slow Food Manifesto, available at: http://www.slowfoodusa.org/about/
manifesto/html). The Slow Food philosophy is what Petrini calls tranquillo—calm, unhurried and
restorative of body and soul.

References

Ashworth, C. J. & Voogd, H. (1990) *Selling the City: Marketing Approaches in Public Sector Urban Planning*
(London: Belhaven Press).
Architectural Conservation, 6*, pp. 60–69.
pp. 4–9.
Bloom, N. D. (2004) *Merchant of Illusion: James Rouse, America’s Salesman of the Businessman’s Utopia*
(Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press).
Routledge).
(Oxford: Blackwell).
Comedia (1991) *Out of Hours*: *A Study of Economic and Social Life in 12 Town Centres in the UK* (London:
Guilbenkian Foundation).


