24 Sculpting Place Through Ceramic Maps

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Abstract

Place is a fundamental theme of geographic inquiry that has recently seen a renewed interest. As a multifarious concept, place can be a challenge to portray through maps. The influence of empirical science and new technologies on cartography can obscure meaning attached to place that is not observable. To better portray place, the role of art needs to be reconsidered in making maps. Domain, the collaborative artwork of a geographer and an artist, depicts the diverse meaning of place that continues to evolve in south central Virginia of the United States. Constructed of stoneware, glazes, and steel, the piece consists of panels portraying the contentious relationship between an ethnic neighborhood and a state-supported university. Collectively, the work presents multiple temporal and spatial perspectives showing property acquisition adjacent to the university.

24.1 Place

The concept of place is considered one of the fundamental themes of geographic inquiry. In the United States, understanding place was written into the National Geography Standards Project for primary and secondary education in part to provide a unifying rubric for the discipline (Boehm and Bednarz 1994, Smith 1996). At the college level, most introductory geography textbooks emphasize that all locales have certain characteristics that make them unique from any other (De Blij et al. 2007, Fellmann et al. 2007, Jordan-Bychkov and Domosh 2006, Rubenstein 2008).

While importance is attached to place, nomothetic approaches currently dominate the discipline. Technological innovations, like those associated with geographic information systems and global positioning systems (GIS/GPS), have profoundly impacted geography and have made it an integrating discipline as never before (Richardson 2004). Despite the expanding and exciting research frontiers
afforded by technology, recent years have seen a resurgence of humanistic modes of inquiry within geography. The launching of the journal *Health and Place* in 1995 and subsequent publication of *Putting Health Into Place* (Kearns and Gesler 1998) are two examples of the utility of this humanistic approach to studying issues that were once only viewed as belonging to the realm of empirical science. Place, as a concept, has endured the test of time and is deeply embedded within the discourses of human geography (Earle et al. 1996).

Understanding place, however, can be a challenge. As Franke (in Jordan-Bychkov and Domosh 2003, p. 25) wrote over seventy years ago, “The essence of place derives from a creative force at work over millennia; to comprehend and capture in prose this spirit of place is worth the sweat of the noblest among us.” More recently, Tuan (1974) notes the complexity of place as it involves items such as symbolism, sensation, values, and morality. He states that there is not one single type of place. One category is that of public symbol, which yields its intended meaning to those who see it because it commands attention and is meant to impress. Conversely, a field of care is a type of place requiring the inside knowledge of those who inhabit the area. Because fields of care are not easily identifiable visually, lengthy narratives are typically used to demonstrate this inside view.

Place is complicated as it is constantly changing. Sack (1997) developed a dynamic relational framework comprised of meaning, social relations, and nature to examine place. A place’s character depends on the mixture it draws from each of the three realms. Since meaning, social relations, and nature rarely go unchallenged at any locale, the mixing of elements is constantly changing, which in turn, changes a place’s character.

Both Tuan and Sack are geographers, but scholars outside the field have also thought about place. Smith (1996) provides an insightful review of how place has been conceptualized by diverse people throughout history and numerous disciplines with varying levels of theoretical sophistication. He concludes that these multifarious conceptions have created an ambiguity that is both useful and attractive when examining place and which rewards the reflective geographer.

### 24.2 Depicting Place Through Maps

Maps have the ability to communicate complex geographic information visually. Any introductory cartographic or GIS textbook will proclaim the utility of maps and spatial analysis for a variety of functions. However, communicating place through maps can be difficult; as Silberman (1999, p. 37) notes, “geographical maps are primarily about the external, physical world”. Such works, while useful in many environmental and land-use applications, can mislead in their appearance of accuracy. A topographic map, for example, does not convey aspects of social relations...