Transforming Space into Place: Some Interactions in an Urban Plaza

Jürgen Streeck

The University of Texas at Austin, Dept. of Communication Studies, 1 University Station, A-1105, Austin, TX. 78712, U.S.A.
jstreeck@austin.utexas.edu

Abstract. This paper is concerned with relationships between space, place, and social interaction, exploring possibilities of moving from the analysis of the spatial organization of encounters and interacting ensembles to an understanding of how, in and through their interaction in a space, people transform it into a jointly experienced, meaningful, and memorable place. This exploration is conducted through the analysis of interactions of four different interacting units in a single space, the front of a church in a city in Colombia. They include a person talking on a cell-phone, a pair of children, a group of children, and a loving couple.

Keywords: space, place, emplacement, micro-ethnography, embodiment.

1 Introduction

This paper is concerned with relationships between space, place, and social interaction. It explores possibilities of moving from the analysis of the spatial organization of encounters and interacting ensembles to an understanding of how, in and through their interaction in a space, people transform it into a jointly experienced, meaningful, and memorable place. The paper is based on a video-based research project about social interaction in a South-American urban plaza, Plaza de la Trinidad, located in the working class neighborhood of Getsemaní in Cartagena de Indias, a city of 900,000 on the Caribbean coast of Colombia.

Plaza de la Trinidad, a small square of not more than 120 by 120 feet, dominated by the church, Iglesia de la Santissima Trinidad, and surrounded by one- and two-story houses, forms the intersection of most of the small streets that cross the neighborhood. It is almost impossible to get from one point of the neighborhood to another or from Getsemaní to the city center without passing through the Plaza, which thus forms the most likely location for chance encounters with acquaintances, an organic station [1] for social encounters. It is the space where acquaintances are made and where one becomes a publicly known person. Every night Plaza de la Trinidad becomes the stage for the social life of the entire community, the site where the people of the neighborhood collective make their community visible to one another. It is a truly Goffmanian world of co-presence, public performance, and civil
attention, the embodiment of an urban face-to-face society or Gemeinschaft [2]. It also illustrates what Cresswell [3] has noted about place: “place is about stopping and resting and becoming involved”.

The Plaza’s quality of being the main stage for public personal engagements and the community’s active self-representation as Gemeinschaft—a type of setting that has vanished from many urban centers in the industrialized world—gave me the incentive for this study. My objective is threefold: first, to find out whether the micro-analytic research methodology with which we study face-to-face interaction can be applied to massively complex interactions like the goings-on in a traditional town plaza—whether we can understand something about the build-up of the overall system from the interactions within and between interacting ensembles. Secondly, I am curious whether, with this research methodology, we can also explain how the Plaza operates within the overall social reproduction of the community whose main meeting place it is. And thirdly, and more simply, I have a longstanding interest in how architectural form enables and constrains, and is in turn interpreted by, social interaction [4].

We must clarify how the terms “space” and “place” are being used in contemporary research. I begin with the concept “space”.

2 Space and Spacing

Georg Simmel [5] is usually credited with being the first sociologist to have realized the important roles that space plays as a medium of social processes and structures. Simmel pointed out that certain units of social organization (Vergesellschaftung), such as states and groups are embodied and represented in spatial forms, including territory, border, and location. He noted, furthermore, that social relationships are marked by degrees of physical proximity and distance; and that spaces can take on qualities of personal uniqueness for persons and groups—a feature which, in English, is associated with the term place.

To discern spatial aspects of social interaction and organization, it is necessary to conceive space in relativist terms. In Newtonian physics, space was conceived as an absolute, that is, as a three-dimensional matrix, immutable and independent of human action. It was construed as a container in which organisms exist and events unfold. Einstein’s relativist construal of space, space is a function of the positions and relations among bodies, a "relational structure among bodies" [6], "relational order(ing) of bodies and social goods at a place" [6]. Spatial relations and spaces results from spacing activities and spacing practices. Giddens introduced the concept of stations to refer to the intersection of two or more paths, where individuals meet and engage in focused interaction, thereby coming to rest, so that the station becomes a place for them. Stations are contexts [1], “indices of what takes place or should take place in them” [7]. Taking a relativistic perspective on the role of space in social organization, we would thus focus on people’s spacing activities at the stations where their daily paths intersect and they form temporary interacting ensembles (face- engagements).