Uncovering Competing Senses of Place in a Context of Rapid Urban Change

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5.1.1 Introduction

At the start of the 21ˢᵗ Century we entered the age of the Anthropocene, an epoch when human influence on the planet is instigating unprecedented environmental change. Flux and uncertainty have become the new norm. One central environmental change is rapid urbanization and urban change. While scholars have long considered urban space as fluid, complex and dynamic, the global challenges we now face have only served to compound that urban complexity and dynamism. Intense and rapid urban change challenges our understandings of the places of our everyday lives as their meanings, values and symbols – essential components of sense of place -- shift with the changing landscape.

In this chapter, we examine multiple, competing senses of place in a rapidly changing city in the U.S. through a lens of critical theory, which concerns itself with "forms of authority and injustice that accompanied the evolution of industrial and corporate capitalism" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 49). In particular, we analyse discourses around urban change in the city of Seattle, one of the fastest growing and dramatically changing cities in the United States, in order to uncover how hegemonic discourses are constructed and deployed to establish a normative order, and how those dominant narratives are challenged by divergent perspectives. Although the specifics of the urban change and discourse we highlight are fairly unique to Seattle, the broader dynamics around multiple competing senses of place vying for expression pertain to any city undergoing transformation. In analysing competing narratives and demonstrating the power of dominant discourses to create a falsely homogenized sense of place, this chapter offers a cautionary tale for vigilance against the erasure of multiple senses of place.

5.1.2 Evolving Senses of Place

Twenty years ago, Williams and Stewart (1998) defined sense of place as "a collection of meanings, beliefs, symbols, values and feelings that individuals or groups associated with a particular locality" that is "continuously constructed and reconstructed within individual minds, shared cultures and social practices" (p. 19). In seeking to broaden conceptualizations of sense of place, they emphasise the social and historical processes by which "place meanings are constructed, negotiated and politically contested" (p. 20). Later work on sense of place has also emphasised its socially constructed and contested nature. For example, Kyle and Chick (2007) argue that sense of place encompasses both subjective qualities and social context. Drawing on Hay (1998), they posit that place meanings are "conditioned by cultural affiliation" and that both personal meaning and social context play a critical role.

More recently, a 2019 special issue on sense of place in *Sustainability Sciences* suggests the growing importance of the subject now, when the pace and scale of environmental change has become "staggering" (Masterson et al, 2019). Although the focus of that issue is on social-ecological systems, it has relevance for understanding the processes behind, and responses to, urban change like that which we see in Seattle. For example, Ingalls et al. (2019) note that "place meanings are produced and compete across a highly uneven landscape of power wherein some place claims are privileged while others struggle to gain traction", and that "certain place meanings come to dominance when they achieve the status of 'normal'' although dominant claims typically face the threat of subaltern claims, and so the process of place-making is never finished" (p. 625).

Building on this work, and in keeping with the spirit of this volume, we pluralise and problematise senses of place in considering the ways that the space, identity, and the future of a rapidly changing city entail the contestation and navigation of multiple, competing senses of place. By senses of place, we mean *the constellation of place interpretations, meanings[1] and values continually formulated and negotiated among collectives of people developed in relation to the socio-physical characteristics of the space itself*. We wish to underscore several critical aspects of this definition. First, it involves multiple, competing and co-existing understandings of a place. Like ethos, senses of place have to do with the characteristics of a place drawn from the various experiences, beliefs and ideals of its inhabitants. Yet in pluralising and problematising senses of place, our perspective is a critical departure from an understanding of the construct as a singular, essentialised and dominant characteristic of a place. Second, these multiple and competing senses of place entail an active and ongoing negotiation, a process of sense-making that recognizes the agency of those involved. As Ingalls et al (2019) note, these negotiations take place in an uneven landscape of power as people struggle to determine whose place values and meanings get realised. Third, articulations of senses of place involve aspirational and normative projects in that various stakeholders compete to realise their vision for what a place is and should be. Finally, there is an emotional implication to these negotiations among competing senses of place, particularly in a context of change as people's identities, values, understandings and visions of place are challenged, triggering anxiety about an uncertain future for themselves and their place.

5.1.3 The Unsettled Nature of Urban Space & Place

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[1] We distinguish place interpretation from place meaning because we consider interpretation as an active process involving the intake of information/experience and making sense of that information/experience (meaning making), whereas meaning itself is the result of that process.

The pluralisation and problematisation of senses of place derive from the nature of place itself. As Gieryn (2000) notes, "Places are not only materially carved out of space but interpreted, narrated, understood, felt, and imagined – their meanings pliable in the hands of different people or cultures, malleable over time, and inevitably contested" (p. 455). Moreover, urban space overall is inherently contested, "a shifting landscape of experimentation" of society (Peck & Tickel, 2002). Urban space is "difficult" in that it is fundamentally ambiguous, comprised of competing forces that reflect the timeless, humble reiterative rhythms of everyday life that are, at the same time, new and constantly changing (Lefebvre, 1991). Thus, urban space as a whole, and the places that make up urban life,[2] are in constant communication and defined by a complex realm of social practices (Chase et al, 2008, p. 6; see also Purcell, 2008).

The everyday experiences of urban space and urban life are essential for considering changing senses of place as these create personal and collective demands on the socio-spatial order. "The practices of everyday urbanism … inevitably lead to change not through abstract political ideologies … but through specific concerns that arise from the lived experience" of urban dwellers (Chase et al, 2008, p. 10). However, when it comes to shaping urban space today, economic growth has become the imperative, arguably more than the lived experience of place. As Eizenberg (2013) notes, the history of urban transformations has been inextricably linked with capitalism as space has become a dominant means for using, producing, and controlling economic surplus (see also Harvey 1989). Thus, neoliberalism—the dominant political-economic strategy of late capitalism—"uses space as its privileged instrument" (Benner & Theodor, 2002, as quoted in Eizenberg, 2013, p. 4). Urban space is perceived and acted upon as a commodity that not only shapes the urban political and social structure, but influences the spatial organisation and experience of everyday life (Tajbakhsh, 2002; Eizenberg, 2013). As a result, cities are becoming ever more unequal and segregated (Purcell, 2008) as people experience greater socio-spatial precarity.

Everyday urban space remains a crucial arena of debate and discourse around culture and society, revealing tensions between oppression and resistance (Chase et al, 2008). The goal of the everyday is to orchestrate what Bakhtin (1981) calls "dialogism" - the constant interaction among meanings. This is what occurs when language becomes relativised, de-privileged and contains competing definitions of the same idea (as summarized in Chase et al, 2008, p. 8). In this chapter, we attempt to "dialogise" the city

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[2]Here, we follow the general argument of Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) that what begins as undifferentiated space evolves into place as we come to know it and endow it with meaning and value. Thus, place refers to the specific locales and loci of meaning that constitute urban space and reflect people's lived experience of that space.

and unpack the multiple senses of place expressed by its inhabitants and the local media in the context of dramatic change. In doing so, we examine the ruptures that come with intense change, recognizing that the value of the rupture lies in revealing both the limitations and possibilities of urban life.

5.1.4 A Discursive Approach to Senses of Place

An examination of multiple competing senses of place lends itself particularly well to a discursive analysis as place interpretations (processes of meaning making) and meanings themselves (i.e. resulting content of that interpretive process) are socially constructed and expressed through linguistic practices (Di Masso, Dixon, and Durrheim, 2014). As Ryan (2018) notes, "when people talk about something or when we act, we always draw on or activate certain meanings – resources or discourse. We often do so within dominant discourses, which characterize ways of talking, writing, thinking, behaving and theorizing that prevail at certain times in certain arenas of life" (p 15). Like Ryan, we treat discourse(s) as "socially organized frameworks of meaning that define what can be said and done" (Burnam, 1994, p. 2 as quoted in Ryan 2018). These discourses "form regimes of truth which present like social facts except that they exist in a state of fluidity and are coextensive with movements of power" (Ryan , 2018, p. 16). Following Ryan, we consider how discourses around urban change act to legitimise particular senses of place, how they reveal assumptions about what is normal or desirable, and how they serve to strengthen or weaken particular realities and viewpoints by the focus of the discourse. In considering what discourses are muted, we offer views that challenge the "undialogized" hegemonic view of the city.

This particular approach to discourse stems from Foucault and the post-structuralist view that not only challenges a singular sense of place but also problematises claims of authenticity that are implicit in claims of meaning. After all, a desire for a return to the so-called "authentic", along with ideologies of essential, unchanging and deep meaning have been enmeshed in practices of domination (Dovey 2002). The post-structuralist practice of pluralising goes hand-in-hand with a discursive approach in challenging a singular, hegemonic sense of place. In this way, discursive strategies "demonstrate how place meanings are socially constructed and therefore embedded in the structures of power in everyday life (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000 as quoted in Williams & Miller, 2020).

5.5.1 Seattle Context

Since 2010, the city of Seattle, located in the Northwest corner of the continental United States, has been one of the fastest growing cities in the nation. Ranked number one in growth nationally in 2016 (US Census Bureau, 2019), it has remained among the top five cities in the US for growth. In terms of sheer numbers, this growth translates to an average of an additional 15,685 people per year (Balk, 2017). A key part of this growth has been a boom in the technology industry. The city houses the global headquarters

of Amazon, and corporate offices of Google and Facebook, while Microsoft's headquarters lies just east of the city limits (Levy, 2019).

These and other companies have "contributed to a population and wealth boom and the attendant struggles that come with it", including "soaring housing prices" (Romano, 2019). For example, in 2018, the median household income for Seattle was recorded at $93,500 – a 35% increase from 2000 (Balk, 2019). Alongside these spikes in income came an increase in housing costs across the city. The median average cost of a single-family home grew 12.7% between 2017 and 2018, over double the national average of 6.1% (Rosenberg, 2018). Similarly, rent has increased from a gross median US Census estimate of $1,555 in 2017 for a two-bedroom apartment to $2,454 in 2019 (Zillow, 2019).

As the prices of homes rose, so too did the number of people living in a state of socio-economic precarity. The percent of Seattle's population living below the national poverty line of $25,701 per year for a family of four is now 12.5%, a significant difference from the Seattle median household income of $100,630 (Semega, 2019). Additionally, although Seattle's homeless population hovered around 9,000 people from 2010 to 2013 (Greenstone & Davilla, 2019), these numbers have risen annually, peaking in 2018 at 12,112 people, with a slight decrease in 2019 (Greenstone & Davilla, 2019). This larger trend caused city officials to declare a housing emergency in 2015 (*Homelessness Response*, 2019). All of these demographic shifts set the stage for the emergence of competing senses of place existing simultaneously, but not always peacefully, in the city.

5.1.6 Critical Moments of Unsettling Senses of Place

In this section, we examine two critical moments in Seattle's socio-spatial trajectory as our point of entry for a discursive analysis of the city's changing senses of place. Both of these cases have catalysed debate about Seattle's transformation and what it implies for the experience, identity and future of the city. The first case is the construction of the Amazon Spheres and the competing interpretations and responses that appear in local discourse surrounding these structures and their status as emerging icons of the city. The second is a television documentary entitled "Seattle is Dying" that examines the homelessness and drug "crisis" in the city, and the attendant responses it received in the mainstream and alternative local media. Together, these two cases reflect the full arc of socio-spatial precarity evident in the Seattle landscape. We systematically examine the narratives around each of these cases and identify prominent themes that emerge in the media debates in order to understand the competing senses of place being expressed in the city. For example, in Case One, we reviewed archival data for references to the Spheres in the local media before, during and after the completion of their construction, with particular attention to the use of

discourse in co-creating their symbolic values. For Case Two, we transcribed the documentary and conducted a content analysis of the ways that the city and place changes are represented, with a focus on the use of rhetoric to maintain a particular normative order i.e. the capitalist hegemony over society and state. Together, competing senses of place revealed themselves through fundamental ontological anxiety via debates about the struggle for "heart and soul of the city", in attempts to articulate the contemporary "Seattle ethos" (Licata, 2018).

5.1.6.1 Case 1: The Spheres

The "Amazon Spheres" are three multi-story overlapping orbs of steel and glass, built to provide working space and a lounge for Amazon employees (See Figure 5.11). The Spheres also serve as greenhouses for an extraordinary array of flora. As a private space for Amazon employees, they are open to the public in a limited fashion for tours. Their ultramodern aesthetic and state-of-the-art technology have made them symbols of hi-tech glamor, sustainability, and imagination. As such, they have become a lightning rod for debate about the changing senses of place of Seattle. Dramatically opened in 2018 by Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos with the command, "Alexa, open the Spheres!"(Shafer, 2018), the structures have been the subject of discourse from university classes on the future of the city, to popular media considerations of the Seattle ethos and where the city is heading.

Figure 5.1.1

Local news coverage by the Seattle Times and Seattle Magazine highlight the symbolic value of the structures. Since their conception, the Spheres have been heralded as indicators of Seattle's "futuristic ambition and industry" (Romano, 2019, p. A1) with an executive from Amazon declaring that the "buildings embody Seattle's ethos" (Shafer, 2018). Local government officials echoed that conflation of the city and the corporate architectural icon during the opening of the Spheres. Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan claimed "Seattle is the coolest city in the country, leading the way with innovative urban projects like the Spheres" (Shafer, 2018). Similarly, another local politician described the Spheres as "a permanent expression of [Amazon's] commitment to Seattle" (Day & Gilbert, 2018). This rhetoric works to weld Amazon and its vast economic dominance with Seattle's civic identity, resulting in a neoliberal distillation of Seattle as a cutting-edge visionary city.

Amazon's effect on the city has been a major part of the urban change discourse articulated in the Seattle Times. In 2019, the Times began a series entitled: "Amazon at 25 | A yearlong look at how a Seattle company has changed commerce, work and everyday life in its first quarter century". In one instalment, a former Amazon Web Service (AWS) executive claims that the coevolution of Seattle and Amazon has helped to "brand" the city "as a high-tech center for the country and, in fact, the world" (Romano, 2019, p. A17). He references Seattle's heritage of company associations when suggesting that the city has gone from "Jet City" -- a nod to Boeing's past success in Seattle -- to "Cloud City", underscoring Amazon's influence on the city's identity (Romano, 2019, p. A17). The executive further claims that Amazon's prosperity has been good "for the morale of the Pacific Northwest, and civic pride" (Romano, 2019, p. A17) extending this corporate and civic oneness to a regional level.

There is resistance to this singular celebratory vision of Seattle through the lens of Amazon and the Spheres. Journalists have referred to the Spheres as "the centerpiece of the retail juggernaut's $4 billion dollar urban campus" (Day & Gilbert, 2018), an "ostentatious display" (Romano, 2019, p. A17), and "a corporate vanity project" (Day, 2018). These points of view are further charged when put into the context of Seattle's affordable housing crisis and rising rates of homelessness. The widening gap between wealthy and poor within the city explains why one journalist writing on the Spheres refers to Seattle as "the lab where Amazon conducts its experiments in capitalism" (Clement, 2018). As an avatar for Amazon, the Spheres have become the site for protests, civic actions and press conferences. It was not accidental that one city council member held a press conference at the Spheres to discuss a "head tax" that would have charged $275 per employee for Seattle-based businesses making more than $20 million a year (Semuels, 2018). In a separate incident, a participant in a May Day protest for worker's rights allegedly threw a rock at the Spheres, creating a 4-inch scratch in a $10,000 dollar pane of glass (Green, 2019). In adopting the structures as the site for these moments of unrest, protestors further saturate the Spheres with

symbolic importance as places of resistance to corporate-led urban change, further fracturing any illusion of a singular sense of Seattle.

5.1.6.2 Case 2: Seattle is Dying

On March 16, 2019, a major Seattle television network owned by a conservative national broadcasting corporation aired a documentary entitled "Seattle is Dying." The journalist behind the documentary sought to address homelessness in the city along with the opioid crisis and shortcomings in the criminal justice system around drug arrests, co-implicating these three phenomena. The documentary aired nationally and catalysed vigorous debate about the nature and future of the city. It begins with the provocation, "What if Seattle is dying and we don't even know it?" then pursued the proposition thusly:

> This story is about a seething, simmering anger that is now boiling over into outrage. It is about people who have felt compassion, yes, but who no longer feel safe, no longer feel like they are heard, no longer feel like they are protected. It is about lost souls who wander our streets, untethered to home, or family or reality, chasing a drug, which in turn, chases them. It is about the damage they inflict to themselves, to be sure, but also on the fabric of this place where we live. This story is about a beautiful jewel that has been violated and a crisis of faith amongst a generation of Seattleites falling out of love with their home.

The rhetorical devices in this framing abound.[3] Like much of the normalising discourse around neoliberalising urban space (e.g. Kohn, 2004) this comment assumes a consensual "we", a shared sensibility about what the city is and should be ("a beautiful jewel" – in reference to Seattle's moniker as the "Emerald City" bestowed upon it by tourism officials in the mid-1980s). At the same time, this commentary postulates an Other as distinct from, and perhaps lesser than, "us" – those who are "lost souls" -- creating a sense of danger by living outside societal expectations, thus privileging the perspective and urban presence of those who are housed and have families, while the dangers faced by unhoused people go unmentioned (See Figure 5.1.2).

The narrative jumps quickly to broader speculations about the city and its inhabitants as a whole. For example, when introducing a third-generation Seattleite who founded a Facebook page called "Seattle looks like Sh*t", the narrator calls the city a "post-apocalyptic landscape". Yet, competing interpretations

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[3] It is no coincidence, then, that the corporate owner of this television station mandated the insertion of conservative talking points in their news programming, causing turmoil among journalists frustrated with direction the station was taking (Rosenberg, 2018).

Figure 5.1.2

of change in the city are evident in comments throughout the documentary including this consideration of the city:

> A city is a living thing. It has a rhythm and a heartbeat. A kind of soul. It is a collection of ideas that we protect and defend, old ideas and new ones. And over time, the ideas blend into a collective, living, ever-changing dream. And the dream is nothing more, and nothing less, than a better life for our children. But behind the beauty and the ideals, behind the bridges and the ballparks and the beautiful buildings, the dirty work is the fight. Great dreams and great cities don't survive without a fight.

The notion of the city as a dynamic collection of ideas is congruent with academic discourse on urban space and sense of place. Yet the documentary's singularity of vision, its romanticisation of a "dream",, the idea of protecting and defending a very particular lifestyle decidedly couched in middle-class, hetero-patriarchal values are critical points of departure.

The pushback, from social service providers, homeless advocates and journalists alike has been swift and strong. For example, Tim Harris, the founding director of Real Change, a non-profit weekly newspaper that provides employment opportunities for homeless and low-income people, called the documentary "misery porn" that "conflate[s] homelessness, criminality and drug addiction into a seamless whole" (Harris, 2019). He critiques the location of urban social problems with the homeless themselves, rather than "upstream problems" of the political economy. Matching the tenor of the documentary, Harris calls scenes in the documentary "alt-right-style thuggery" where construction workers disruption of a head tax

rally at Amazon headquarters "are glorified as righteous popular anger". Tyrone Beason (2019), a Seattle Times columnist, noted that "we are fighting bitterly over what to do about" changes in the city, suggesting that the fight around competing senses of place is indeed contentious.

5.1.7 Conclusion

Intense and rapid urban change is a significant global challenge. Such change catalyses substantial shifts in senses of place as urban dwellers seek to "make sense" of this change and what it holds for the future and their place in the city. While we examined such change in Seattle, the lessons from this work are applicable elsewhere. As Pithouse (2008) notes:

> Visions of the future, presented as aspiration or inevitability, exercise tremendous power over certain kinds of decision making in the present. In cities where local elites are able to imagine a convivial future for themselves…the future is, above all, the idea of a 'World Class City'. This is the idea that guides and justifies the decisions of the technocratic elites….Their decisions produce broadly similar results around the world – the exclusion and eviction of the poor, the commodification of public space and public investment in projects for private profit.

A critical way to examine and challenge elite revisions of the city is through discourse analysis. As Ryan (2018) notes, discourse creates regimes of truth that present as social facts. Yet, that discursive reality does not go unchallenged. Discourse is, after all, a site of cultural struggle (Xu, 2007), and analysis of that discourse serves as a vital social critique to challenge normative arguments about place and the future of our cities (Herzog, 2016). Thus, we urge a continued line of such analysis in various urban contexts to unveil competing senses of place and challenge the normative order.

The examination of the discourse around urban change in Seattle offered in this chapter provides lessons about urban growth and change elsewhere. It supports the need for pluralising and problematising senses of place as a way to recentre marginalized voices and enable a more inclusive vision of the city to emerge. In doing so, it offers a way to reinvigorate urban governance by providing citizens groups with another lens by which to challenge hegemonic forces and advocate for the future of their city to accommodate the full citizenry.

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