

“Building is Dwelling”: Phenomenological Understandings of Space and Place

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Abstract

The present essay maps the phenomenological contribution to the discourse of space and place. Instead of maintaining the intense differentiation between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* characteristic of Western thought after Descartes, phenomenological thought started out by laying emphasis on human embeddedness. Phenomenologists, centering the world around the subject, endow the latter with the freedom to construct his/her subjective world. The subject is, however, always placed somewhere; thus the self has not only a temporal, but also a spatial aspect. Accordingly, stability or continuance can only be conceptualized in the function of the self's matrix of spatiality and temporality. In the place/self interaction the active interface is the lived body that enforces habitus as well as responds to the place's challenges for the subject's habitual schemes by incorporating them by way of negation or adoption. In this way, the subject through his/her habitus-directed bodily activity inhabits the place.

Keywords: phenomenology, space, place, spatial embeddedness, embodied subject

The groundbreaking philosophy that firmly established spatial thinking in modern thought was Martin Heidegger's. Several thinkers contributed significantly to exploring the subject's relation to space such as Immanuel Kant or Edmund Husserl, but it was Heidegger with his *Being and Time* to revolutionize Cartesian thought by defocalizing “the priority of knowledge over practice” (Dreyfus 19) in that, instead of maintaining the intense differentiation between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* characteristic of Western thought after Descartes (Lefebvre 406), he laid emphasis on human embeddedness.

Gjermund Wollan argues that Heidegger's conception of *Dasein* describes the stance of “an interested human being, situated in a particular place and a particular time” (33). Heidegger thus contextualizes *Dasein* in the temporality of the past-present-future of experience, as well as in its situatedness regarding social space. In fact, Heidegger explicitly claims that *Dasein* is spatial (*Being* 111), “but Da-sein is ‘in’ the world in the sense of a familiar and heedful association with the beings encountered in the world. Thus when spatiality is attributed to it in some way, this is possible only on the basis of this being-in. But the spatiality of being-in shows the character of *de-distancing and directionality*” (105). *Dasein* experiences itself *thrown in the world*, which is an always already being-in-the-world, and the subject knows the world as the subject knows him/herself, so s/he encounters this known world as totality. The world of the subject, however, is not stable: the existentials, *de-distancing and directionality*, show exactly that *Dasein* is always in motion in that, on the one hand, it becomes conscious of itself in a reflective manner (as it interprets and reinterprets itself) and, on the other, it gets to know the surrounding world as it attaches the world to itself. For Heidegger the spatial metaphor of *de-distancing* denotes *Dasein's* absorbing character via (self-)interpretation, while *directionality* presupposes for him *Dasein's* “prereflective basis” (Wollan 33). As Heidegger explains,

The handiness which belongs to each region beforehand has as the being of what is at hand the *character of inconspicuous familiarity* in a more primordial sense. The familiarity itself

becomes visible in a conspicuous manner only when what is at hand is discovered circumspectly in the deficient mode of taking care of things. [. . .] Space, which is discovered in circumspect being-in-the-world as the spatiality of a totality of useful things, belongs to beings themselves as their place. (*Being* 104)

Prereflection orders things into their place. It, in fact, refers to *Dasein's* reflective filter of the world that renders things as handy; it is its filter of perception that dynamically creates continuation for *Dasein* in space and time, ensuring *Dasein's* dynamic temporality of past-present-future. Prereflective approach is responsible for the interpretation of the Heideggerian present-at-hand (“vorhandene”) as ready-to-hand (“zuhandene”), which means, on the one hand, a horizon of interpretation induced by past experiences, and, on the other hand, practically a constant coming-to-know of things as well as their meaningful emplacement into *Dasein's* world. The dynamic continuity resulting from this kind of dwelling is responsible for the subject's sense of place, which, then, does not only reflect a geographical constraint, but also a temporal one. In fact, time and place must be interwoven in this sense, as only in the function of past-present-future can the intentionality of different entities be understood.

For Heidegger the objective, geometrical world cannot be detected as “[objective] space is still veiled in the spatiality of what is at hand” (104). The ready-to-hand expresses exactly the domestication of objective space by *Dasein*; that is, entities can only exist for *Dasein* if contextualized in *Dasein's* system. In an interconnected mode, *Dasein* is also embedded in this space, while it shapes space as space's centre. *Dasein* in Heidegger's interpretation is the point of departure for any exploration of the surrounding world. As he explains, “[t]his world is always already from the outset my own” (118), and “the world at hand [is] where *Dasein* dwells in *taking care*” (119); so the space disclosed around *Dasein* belongs to *Dasein's* spatiality, and *Dasein* relates to this known world with active engagement and familiarity (see Critchley 160, Wollan 37). *Dasein's* spatiality denotes two things: for one, *Dasein* is thrown into the world (objective space veiled over) in the manner of always already being-in-the-world along with other entities (“being-there-too with them” [*Being* 118], “Mitda-sein” [119]), establishing *Dasein* as a temporal-spatial entity, which has an objective quantifying character such as the body; and, secondly, it refers to the spatiality of the ready-to-hand evolving around *Dasein* including itself (118).

Heidegger breaks spatiality into smaller units. Place gains meaning not only as position of an object somewhere as a part of totality: “The actual place is defined as the place of this useful thing for [. . .] in terms of a totality of the interconnected places of the context of useful things at hand in the surrounding world” (103); but place has the essential character of belongingness. This suggests relatedness to other entities, as well as, in the function of de-distancing and directionality, place also expresses “whereto” (103)—a term denoting for Heidegger the contextualization of places in a broader spatiality, which is part of *Dasein's* spatiality:

We call this whereto of the possible belonging somewhere of useful things, circumspectly held in view in advance, and heedful association, the *region*. [. . .] The kind of place which is constituted by direction and remoteness—nearness is only a mode of the latter—is already oriented toward a region and within that region. Something akin to a region must already be discovered if there is to be any possibility of referring and finding the places of a totality of useful things available to circumspection. This regional orientation of the multiplicity of

places of what is at hand constitutes the aroundness, the being around us of beings encountered initially in the surrounding world. (103-4)

Region refers thus to the texture of places and, likewise, place reflects the directionality of *Dasein's* spatiality that comes to expression in region. "Region is linked to our use associated with things, ready-to-hand. In this way, region forms a limited action and tools context" (Wollan 36); that is, region embraces the different functions and objects of the different places. Furthermore, region also denotes, besides, directionality, interrelation between places. As Eugene Francis Kaelin claims, "the tool's placement is fixed with respect to a definite direction: there, relative to a certain here (*dort und da*) established by a human being's involvement of itself in its environment. The hither point and the thither point of the relationship create a region that is the actual 'whither' of the human involvement in its world" (82-83).

Heidegger's approach to being is a very practical one in fact. He represents *Dasein* as the node of being, and *Dasein's* spatiality refers not only to its body as spatial form, but also as a prereflective scope of semantization of things; subjects thus dwell in the place-world with an inert understanding of the surrounding world. Familiarity with the world is the way the world comes into being for the subject, that is, the way the subject encounters and makes sense of the surrounding world through his/her place-world.

Heidegger's understanding is also touched upon and enlarged on by other thinkers. Jean-Paul Sartre emphasizes the embodied experience; for him the subject cannot be severed from the body. He speaks of the body as both object as well as "contingent form" and "for-itself" (*Being and Nothingness* 408). Sartre understands the subject as embodied subject, which "must be wholly body and it must be wholly consciousness" (404). This is why it is through that body the subject maintains a relation with the world. The world, or space, for Sartre, as for Heidegger, is hidden as an "indefinite multiplicity of reciprocal relations [. . .] and can not even be represented" (405). It is Being-for-itself (Sartre's coinage of what Heidegger calls *Dasein*, and what is the embodied subject for Merleau-Ponty) that renders order in the world by being the point of reference in the world: "[the] world can not exist without a univocal relation to me" (406). The relation between the world and the subject is established through the subject's "engaged knowledge" (407), which is the "only engaged upsurge in a determined point of view which one *is*" (407).

The embodied subject and his/her lived experience gain also relevance in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy: for him "[t]he body itself is the perceiving subject: the point of view of the world, the time-space structure of the perceiving experience" (Sadala 286). Materializing *Dasein* as phenomenal body (see Marcoulatos 2) in this way, he emplaces the body in the world similarly to the spatiality of Heidegger's *Dasein*. The embodied subject, through its "motor intentional activity" (Kelly 386)¹, explores the surrounding in a "spatiality of situation" (*Phenomenology* 100). Thereby understanding is not rendered a function of form (Aravot 209), but one of emplacement in time and place and of the body's intentionality. As Merleau-Ponty elaborates in *Phenomenology of Perception*:

Now the body is essentially an expressive space. [. . .] The body is our general medium for having a world. Sometimes it is restricted to the actions necessary for the conservation of life, and accordingly it posits around us a biological world; at other times, elaborating upon

¹ Sean Dorrance Kelly explains that in the Merleau-Pontian understanding motor intentionality has motor and behavioral aspects and the way it relates to objects reflects the understanding of these aspects (386).

these primary actions and moving from their literal to a figurative meaning, it manifests through them a core of new significance: this is true of motor habits such as dancing. Sometimes, finally, the meaning aimed at cannot be achieved by the body's natural means; it must then build itself an instrument, and it projects thereby around itself a cultural world. (146)

Spatializing the subject through embodiment, Merleau-Ponty imposes restrictions by the body on the subject, not only physically, but regarding the interpretation of the world. As Kelly points out, bodily activity seems some time independent of the subject's will (390), as if the subject acted unconsciously. However, Merleau-Ponty identifies the body as the mediator between self and the world, where the self gets the upper hand in giving meaning to its environment by using and transforming the surroundings.

In a similar manner, Gaston Bachelard conceives of place through the inhabiting practice of the subject. When considering the subject's creative imagination, he claims, "the soul comes and inaugurates the form, dwells in it, takes pleasure in it" (xviii), creating a "*felicitous space*" (xxxi). Imagination as conceptualized by Bachelard appears very similar to Heidegger's idea of *Dasein's* spatiality. For Bachelard "the original and miraculous leap of the spirit" (Thiboutot par. 25) interprets any work of art, that is, any phenomena it encounters in the world. In this way, subjects establish an original space of dwelling: "Space that has been seized upon by imagination cannot remain indifferent space subject to the measures and estimates of the surveyor. It has been lived in, not in its positivity, but with all the partiality of the imagination" (Bachelard xxxii). Negating the integrity of objective space in the encounter with the perceiving subject comes more to the foreground in his discussion of the house: "the house image would appear to have become the topography of our intimate being [. . .] [B]y remembering 'houses' and 'rooms,' we learn to abide within ourselves [. . .] [T]he house image moves in both directions: they are in us as much as we are in them" (xxxiii). Time and space in Bachelardian epistemology build an organic unity with the subject. As in Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, this does not only mean that the subject determines the *genius loci*,² but also that the subject is emplaced in a particular temporal-spatial paradigm: the subject responds to the challenges of the surrounding world in the function of his/her own temporal-spatial history.

It is clear on the basis of these thinkers that the subject's temporal-spatial structuring of spatiality is inherently an active and practical one, not detached from the environment, but embedded in it. Edward Casey, among others, establishes the link between the subject and his/her environment by, what he calls, "*habitus*."³ On the one hand, similarly to Merleau-Ponty, Casey identifies the body as the link between the self and "lived place" ("*Geography*" 683); on the other, he insists on a "*core of habitudes*" (686), something that connects place with the geographical self. Merleau-Ponty addresses this issue through the differentiation of the visibility of the body and the invisibility of what is beyond (before) the body, the "*latent content of the past*" and the "*elsewhere*" (*Visible* 114). In fact, he too suggests that there must be something beyond the limitation of the body in time and space that is responsible for the continuation of the embodied self in these two strata in the visible

² Christian Norberg-Schulz's *Genius Loci* describes the phenomenon by which the place is endowed with meaning, transcending geometrical form (see Thomson).

³ Wollan reminds us that Heidegger uses this term he borrows from Thomas Aquinas to "describe[] people's association with everyday objects" (32)—an understanding rather similar to Pierre Bourdieu's for whom *habitus* is "universalizing mediation" (79) to "reproduce regularities [as] history turned into nature" (78).

temporal-spatial structuring materialized in, around, and by the body. He expands his concept of the lived body to an idea of a “spatial and temporal pulp” that goes beyond a presentism and materiality of the body, to allow also an intentionality shaped by habitus.

Habitus is the practical understanding of Heidegger’s prereflectivity of *Dasein* as it grants the scheme of understanding of any place as well as the continuity of the subject in other places: “A given habitus is always enacted in a particular place and incorporates the features inherent in previous such places, all of which are linked by a habitual bond” (Casey, “Geography” 686). Habitus provides the subject with a temporal-spatial reality; that is, past experiences, places, and habitus dynamically condition the subject’s present habitus and action, while through the habitual bond the continuity of historicity is ensured. Habitus is, thus, also directly connected to the subject’s intentionality as it is the underlying motor of directionality as well as the realization of intentionality in a particular place.

Casey emphasizes the body’s role in place-making. Reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty, Casey claims that “habitus is composed precisely of bodily schemata,” thus emphasizing “bodily engagement” (“Habitus” 716) in place-creation: “Only the body holds together, in one coherent entity, the sense of place, the past pertinent to that place (that is, via body memories), and the orienting power which place requires” (718). Casey thus places the body in the centre of place as the entity that gives place temporal and spatial stability.

This becomes more explicit in his book *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study*, in which he distinguishes two concepts of the body: body as intra-place and body as inter-place. In fact, he identifies two—the vertical and horizontal—aspects of the lived body. Body as intra-place establishes that the body is the organizing force in a given place; every object gains its place through the ordering of the body: “the body as intra-place is thus a place *through* which whatever is occurring in a given setting can take place: it is a place of passage for such occurrences” (196). Placing does not only signify a mere selection here, but also meaningful placing in relation to the body as a “place of anchoring” (196). Body as inter-place, on the other hand, denotes for Casey the connective aspect of the body as “[t]he lived body creates the inter-place in which the two epicenters of the here and the there are brought into concrete connection” (196). Different places are brought together in the place-world by the subject’s movement between and through them.

The subject absorbs place through habitus-directed bodily activity, in other words, by transforming place to the subject’s own likeness. Places become dwelling-places, places of habitation. As shown before, Bachelard conceptualizes the home as the expression of the subject’s being. In fact, studying the home can be seen as the mapping of the self of the subject. Similarly, Emmanuel Levinas sees habitation as “the outpouring of consciousness in things, which does not consist in a representation of things by consciousness, but in a specific intentionality of concretization” (153). Concretization corresponds to place-making in practice. However, habitation is not a detached or isolated process because subjects are always-already (fallen and thrown—to use Heidegger’s coinage) in the world, which is why “the consciousness of a world is already consciousness *through* that world. [Thus] the subject contemplating the world presupposes the event of dwelling, the withdrawal from elements [. . .], recollection in the intimacy of the home” (153).

Heidegger maintains a resembling notion of habitation when he claims that “to build is in itself already to dwell” (“Building” 146). For him dwelling is also an active phenomenon, which he compares to cultivating (147). Indeed, this word expresses not only maintenance, but also active engagement and transformation, or, rather, realization. Or, as he points out through the metaphor of the bridge, dwelling is like gathering or assembling of things in a

unique way (153). As being for Heidegger is always being-in-the-world, the act of gathering is always with relation to the centralizing *Dasein*—again as he claims about the bridge: “But only something *that is itself* a location can make space for a site” (“Building” 154).

The centralizing activity, which can be equated with habitation, draws things and relations around itself in an ordered way. This may be seen as the procreation of places, however, Casey insists that there is also an active interaction between self and place responsible for the maintenance of places, an interaction that belongs to the chemistry of places: “the self relates to the place of habitation by means of concerted bodily movements that are the activation of habitual schemes, their explication and exfoliation in the inhabited place-world” (“Geography” 687). The body as location and centralizing agent inhabits the place through bodily activity motivated by habitus. In this way, places become places of stability in as much the self can be seen as stable. As Casey claims elsewhere: “In the actions of the customary body, then, we observe the continuance of time in place—a continuance that connotes not merely maintenance but active incorporation” (*Remembering* 194). That is, habitation denotes that place is organically interdependent with the subject from a phenomenological point of view, and it directly follows the dynamic changes in the subject’s habitus.

In phenomenological understanding the heart of the world is the self. It is, however, always placed somewhere; thus the self has not only a temporal, but also a spatial aspect. The self goes out and meets the world (even though always-already in the world), in a sense creates it by giving it meaning. The self appears as the active agent that grants the world as totality (the world encountered by the subject) and stability. Stability or continuance can only be conceptualized in the function of the self’s matrix of spatiality and temporality. The concept of habitus conveys well the intentionality of the subject in practice. It suggests the structuring force of bodily activity based on the experiences of the past. Habitus corresponds, in fact, to the process of selection, simplification, and idealization of experiences, setting up a horizon of how to act in a given place. In the place/self interaction the active interface is the lived body that enforces habitus as well as responds to the place’s challenges for the subject’s habitual schemes by incorporating them by way of negation or adoption. In this way, the subject through his/her habitus-directed bodily activity inhabits the place.

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