Topic: Changing Places
3.2.2.2 Meaning and representation

What you need to know
How people engage with and form attachments to places
How people represent the world to others, including how everyday place meanings are bound up with different identities, perspectives and experiences
How external agencies create place-meanings and how these shape the actions and behaviours of others
How places can be represented in a variety of different forms that give contrasting images to that presented formally or statistically
How past and present processes of development can influence the social and economic characteristics of places

How humans perceive, engage with and form attachments to places and how they present and represent the world to others, including the way in which everyday place meanings are bound up with different identities, perspectives and experiences.

The ways in which people form attachments to places

- Place and sense of place are social constructions (the process of a space becoming a place is known as 'spatiality') and represent the external (objective) world mediated through subjective human experience. Every human who has contact with a place will perceive and engage with it differently, therefore representing it in a unique way to the world. A space is, objectively, a location with a grid reference and describable features. It becomes a 'place' as individuals lay ascribe to that location a series of emotions, reactions and develop a set of meanings associated with it.

- Attachment (or resentment) to a place is mediated through birth or life events, the media and iconography. Life events definitely have the strongest effect on an individual's emotional attachment to a place, either positively or negatively. A city park, for instance, might concurrently remind a parent of happy days playing with their children, a teenager of the time they had an argument with their best friend, or an elderly person of the time they sat on the bench by the tree feeling lonely. How each of these people represents the place to others will be inextricably bound up with feelings and emotions.

- The media has increasingly had a role to play in the mediation of space and making of place. Television, film, art, music and social media have a powerful influence over how a place is perceived externally. London, for instance, may be simultaneously represented as a deprived, crime-ridden place in programmes like Luther and Eastenders; as a friendly, warm place in films like Paddington; as a fast-paced, hi-tech commercial hub in James Bond films and as a place for the rich and beautiful in Made in Chelsea. The reality is, of course, much more complex than any individual media suggests, but it does affect how non-Londoners perceive the city.

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The way in which everyday place meanings are bound up with different identities, perspectives and experiences

- Dominant socio-economic groups present a place in a very deliberate way but how that place is experienced by individuals is likely to vary significantly from person to person. This depends on many factors but includes age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, length of residence and role in society. Thus, a recent female migrant from Syria is likely to perceive and engage with a place in a very contrasting way to a teenage boy who has lived in the place all his life, goes to the local school and plays football for the local football team. Place-perception is an internal, subjective geography, but may be shared by a much larger group.

- Each place has multiple identities and this can be a source of richness or a source of conflict. If a place becomes influenced by non-dominant socio-economic groups, this is known as **'othering' of space**. Examples include the 'queering of space' (for example, in Kemptown in Brighton which has a significant minority LGBT community) and the **'gendering of space'** (whereby new architecture and landscaping takes gender issues such as public safety into account). Gang-culture can dominate the perception of an inner-city/outer estate residential area despite the actual members forming a very small proportion of the total estate population. The othering of space can represent both the celebration of diversity as well as conflict between different groups of people.

How external agencies, including government, corporate bodies and community or local groups make attempts to influence or create specific place-meanings and thereby shape the actions and behaviours of individuals, groups, businesses and institutions.

Placemaking

Placemaking is the process whereby planners and architects (among others) create public spaces which promote people's health, happiness and well-being. The approach taken by government, corporate bodies and local groups varies by how much consultation takes place between the community and the planners, but in essence, the process of placemaking aims to generate an intentional sense of place and attachment by designing places which are inclusive and culturally-aware.

Why do different players and stakeholders placemake?
- Rebranding an area (regenerate the image to external groups to make it more attractive)
- Urban renewal and revival
- Social inclusion
- Preservation of heritage
- Economic regeneration
- Housing need
- To attract inward investment

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Government attempts to create place-meanings

A government's primary objective behind placemaking is to attract inward investment into an area. This is in order to regenerate a local area by improving its economy, infrastructure and built environment. The process is largely top-down (i.e. decision-making is made at government level with minimal consultation with the people in the communities the projects will affect) and involves large budgets. Projects often focus on a single strategy in order to create or enhance place-meaning and this coincides with many rebranding and reimaging projects:

- Market-led – this involves private investors wanting to make a profit. For example, encouraging restaurants, wine bars or shops to invest in an area.
- Top-down – this often involves a public-private partnership between the local authority and private investors. Examples include Salford Quays, central Manchester redevelopment, Silicon Roundabout, London.
- Flagship development – this is a large-scale, one-off project which is hoped will kick-start further regeneration. Examples include the Millennium Stadium, Cardiff and the Waterfront, Belfast.
- Legacy – these projects aim to continue the regeneration started by major sporting events such as the London Olympics in 2012 in the Lea valley.
- Events – these involve using major events such as becoming a European City of Culture as a catalyst for cultural development of a place. Examples include Glasgow in 1990, Liverpool in 2008 and Hull in 2017.

Whatever the strategy, different themes can usually be seen in placemaking and rebranding projects:
- Art – through galleries and events, e.g. the Tate St Ives, Cornwall.
- Heritage – nearly always seen in placemaking projects, e.g. Saltaire, Bradford.
- Retail – the shopping experience is often a central part of a project, e.g. the Bull Ring, Birmingham.
- Architecture – planners usually choose between celebrating the heritage of a place or by promoting the place as modern and contemporary.
- Food – food festivals (e.g. Ludlow, Shropshire) and restaurants known for world class cuisine (e.g. Rick Stein's restaurants in Padstow, Cornwall) can be used to help reinforce an image of a place.

All of these strategies are designed to create new place-meanings and influence how people use the space. This could be to encourage new patterns of behaviour such as consumption (shopping, dining out) or to enable people to relate to the place in a more meaningful and positive way. At a national level, adverts by VisitBritain, VisitScotland, VisitWales promote a particular image of place in order to attract home- and foreign-tourists.

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Corporate attempts to create place-meanings

Corporate bodies usually work in partnership with public bodies (central or local government) to run placemaking projects. Their role varies from project to project but usually involves financial and planning input.

A recent example of such a project is Silicon Roundabout in Hackney, East London. Regeneration in this area was initially started by private sector web-based companies (companies were attracted to the location because of the relative deprivation and low rents) but later on attracted government support through the rebranding of the area as Tech City in 2010. The area is now the third largest technology startup location in the world after San Francisco and New York and companies located there include Cisco, Facebook and Google.

Community attempts to create place-meanings

An alternative, bottom-up, approach to placemaking has grown in influence since the 1960s and is seen as both a philosophy and a hands-on approach to improving neighbourhoods and communities. The process of placemaking encourages communities to plan and design new projects in their local area specifically so that they meet local needs and build a sense of place. It is a deliberately collective process and places great emphasis on urban 'liveability' and cultural identity as well as urban design and healthy living.

Recent examples of community-led projects to create place-meaning include Chicago, Illinois and Perth Cultural Centre, Western Australia. An extremely successful bottom-up project which began 20 years ago is Coin Street, London (see Case Study).

How places may be represented in a variety of different forms such as advertising copy, tourist agency material, local art exhibitions in diverse media that often give contrasting images to that presented formally or statistically such as cartography and census data.

Place representation

It is important to consider the reliability of the representations of place we are exposed to. Whether it is a photo in a tourist brochure or a story in a local newspaper, the image portrayed of the place will influence opinion and therefore decisions made about it – both positively and negatively. Photographs which are taken to represent a place are particularly subjective and reflect the both the photographer's and the commissioning agency's bias. Similarly, however, how we react to images and text also reflects our particular biases and feelings about a place – particularly if we already know the place.

The meanings conveyed through imagery may persuade people to visit or companies to invest in the place and can form powerful symbols of sense of place.

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When analysing representations of place, it is vital to consider some of the following ideas about reliability:

- Provenance – who produced the image and why?
- Symbols and metaphors in the text or image – what do they convey?
- Pastiche – is the image a copy of something done before, perhaps a painting?
- Details in the image which may not be intended to form part of the representation – e.g. people in the background, landscape features

Compare and contrast how visual and informal representations of a place differ from formal representations such as statistical data or geospatial data. Brighton, for example, portrays itself through promotional imagery, film, art, music and television as a cultural, trendy, wealthy and alternative place which is welcoming to all groups of people. Census data, however, reveals stark contrasts in levels of affluence and access to public services and has pockets of high deprivation scattered throughout the city.

How both past and present processes of development can be seen to influence the social and economic characteristics of places and so be implicit in present meanings.

Place meaning over time

Every place is a product of past and present processes of development – even new settlements – and this provides the stimulus which shapes character and meaning. The character of every place is unique because it is a product of unique processes. Geographers should, therefore, regard each new place as a palimpsest – something which has been changed over time but which still bears identifiable traces of its earlier forms. Sometimes these links to past processes of development are visible from the built and natural landscape – old industrial areas, for example – but in other situations links are embedded in people's memories and emotional attachments rather than a tangible form (such as memories of a pit village community long after the mine workings have been demolished). Both must be taken into account in contemporary placemaking and redevelopment projects because they form an intrinsic part of meaning and sense of place.