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A Critical Elucidation of the Transition from Objectivity to Place through Encounter*

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Abstract

Despite the growing prominence of place-oriented approaches in architecture and urban planning, a coherent explanation of how objective space becomes lived place remains lacking. This article critically and philosophically examines the evolution of objectivity from its corporeal and quantitative conception to intersubjective, social, and embodied formulations. It argues that objectivity, even in its most expanded form, is a necessary condition for knowing space but not a sufficient condition for realizing place, because it remains grounded in a distanced mode of knowing. Drawing on the concept of "encounter," the transition from space to place is conceptualized as a categorical rupture in the human–environment relationship, through which the human being shifts from an external observer to a present participant in the environment. Accordingly, the "location–space–place" triad is critically reinterpreted: "location" represents the residue of classical objectivity, "space" represents expanded objectivity, and "place" constitutes the point at which encounter occurs. The analytical framework is examined through two practical manifestations of reductionism: the spatialization error in planning and the historicist error in conservation. The main finding is that the transition from space to place does not occur through the accumulation of objective data, but through a transformation in the human–environment relationship, perception of space, and understanding of the relations that shape it.

Keywords: Objectivity, Space, Place, Encounter, Location-space-place.

The initial idea of this article was formulated in the author's textbook for the second session of the Specialized Seminar 2 class (instructor: Dr. Seyed Amir Mansouri) and here it has been transformed into an independent article with theoretical expansion, systematic criticism, addition of research methods, and a stance against existing literature.

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Why is objective knowledge of space, even when expanded to include historical, social, and experiential dimensions, insufficient for the realization of place? Where does the fundamental limitation of the concept of objectivity lie in explaining place, and what role does the concept of "encounter" play in addressing this limitation?

Extended Abstract

Despite the expansion of place-based approaches in architecture and urban planning, a coherent account of how objective space becomes lived place is lacking. A critical-philosophical examination of objectivity-from the corporeal and quantitative conceptions of Descartes and Locke, through the intentional and intersubjective formulations of Brentano, Meinong, Kant, and Husserl, to the social-institutional accounts of Schutz and Searle and Merleau-Ponty's embodied threshold-shows that this expansion, although broadening objectivity toward events and social relations, remains confined to distanced knowledge and cannot explain lived human experience. Drawing on Ryle's "category mistake," the paper argues that the problem of place is not insufficient information but a fundamental limitation within the logic of objectivity.

Against this limitation, "encounter," grounded in Heidegger's being-in-the-world and, more decisively, in Levinas's encounter with the "face of the Other," is introduced as a categorial rupture in the human-environment relation. Through encounter, the human being shifts from an external observer to a participant within the environment. Accordingly, the "location–space–place" [جا–فضا–مکان] pyramid is reread analytically: location represents the residue of classical objectivity, space extended objectivity, and place the site where encounter occurs. This framework is distinguished from Relph, Malpas, and particularly Agnew's layered triad, arguing that the transition from space to place is a relational rupture rather than cumulative layering.

The framework is tested through two cases: the "spatial-determinist fallacy" in Iran's land-use planning documents and the "historicist fallacy" in restoration cases in Venice, Yazd, and Tehran's Oudlajan neighborhood. Both demonstrate that reducing place to recordable data can marginalize residents' ongoing everyday life. The central finding is that the transition from space to place occurs not through accumulating objective data, but through transforming the human-environment relation and genuine resident participation in perception and decision-making. It therefore reframes place-oriented practice as integrating objective knowledge with lived perception, meaning, memory, and everyday relations in decision-making.

The transition from "space" to "place" is not achieved through the accumulation of additional objective, historical, social, or physical data; rather, it requires a transformation in the nature of the human–environment relationship. This transformation occurs through "encounter," whereby the human being moves from the position of an external observer to that of a participant who is present within the environment. Accordingly, architectural and urban policies should consider lived experience, perception, meaning, and everyday relationships alongside objective data; otherwise, place may be reduced to measurable features, weakening everyday life and the living relationship between people and their environment.

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