
PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY
School of Public Policy

VIVA VOCE
The Living Voice

A Place in the World
Geography, Identity, and Civic Engagement in American Life

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What follows is an effort to describe the shape and goals of a very unusual conference that Professor Ted V. McAllister and I have organized to be held at the School of Public Policy on March 11-12, 2011. We think that you will recognize in this account that it brings together many of the best distinctive qualities of the School of Public Policy, as a policy institution which is grounded in the deepest questions about human nature and human flourishing.



It was not that many years ago that the lives of most Americans were confined within a narrow local radius, in what historian Robert Wiebe revealingly called “island communities.” The ability of these island communities, and the individuals who inhabited them, to communicate across large distances was limited by the unconquerable expanse of space and time—by the vast physical distances that separated them, and the immense amount of time it took to traverse those distances. Far from being a puzzle or an enigma, one’s “place in the world” was a given for most men and women. With rare exceptions, the person that one became and the life that one lived were inextricably linked to the geographical location where one was born and raised. Such factors were understood as the structural mold of one’s worldly existence, nearly as hard and fast as one’s biological makeup.

But a cascading array of technological and social innovations has, with astonishing speed, rendered those barriers obsolete. Rapid communications and inexpensive travel have eliminated the isolation of provincial life, and resulted in the unprecedented mobility of both individuals and entire populations, the blurring of national identities and porousness of boundaries, and the nearly unimpeded global flow of labor, capital, and goods. All these things erase distances and erode barriers that had formerly been an inescapable part of the human condition. We inhabit an ever-shrinking and ever more interconnected world—a world in which it is theoretically possible for every living person to go anywhere that he or she wants to go, and to be made literally, or at least virtually, present to any other person, in ways that would have been barely conceivable even 50 years ago, and promise to become ever more vivid and transformative in the future.

There is much to celebrate in these developments. They give crucial support to one of the most powerful and fundamental, and universally appealing, of all American ideas: the idea of freedom. We embrace freedom because we believe fervently in the fullest breadth of human possibility, and share a deep conviction that no one's horizons in life should be dictated by the conditions of his or her birth. But it is equally obvious that something is now seriously out of balance in the way we live. All the technological wizardry and individual empowerment have unsettled all facets of life, and given rise to profound feelings of disquiet and insecurity in many Americans. No one can yet reckon the human costs of such radical changes, but it sometimes seems that those costs may turn out to be far higher than we have imagined. Are we careening blindly into uncharted and potentially dangerous territory, carried forward by the sheer momentum of change?



Accompanying this disquiet is a gnawing sense that something important in our fundamental human nature is being lost, abandoned or sacrificed in this headlong rush, and that this “something” remains just as vital to our full flourishing as human beings as it was in the times when we had far fewer choices on offer. We also sense that the national-scale or global-scale interconnectedness of things may be coming at too high a price. Could it be the case that the variety and spontaneous diversity of the world as we have known it for all the prior centuries of human history is being gradually leveled and effaced, and insensibly transformed into something standardized, artificial, rootless, pastless, and bland—a world of interchangeable airport terminals and franchise hotels and restaurants, a world of smooth surfaces designed to facilitate perpetual movement rather than rooted flourishing? Could it be the case that one of the chief things neglected by this pattern of ceaseless movement is precisely the opportunity to live lives of self-government and civic engagement, the kind of lives that thinkers since the time of Aristotle have regarded as the highest expression of full human flourishing?

These concerns should not be confused with feelings of nostalgia, such as one finds in sentimental discourse about lost “community,” often emanating

from individuals who would not for a second tolerate the kind of constraints on individual liberty that “thick” communities of the past always required. We are not proposing a rejection of modernity. Instead, we seek to discover how, given the American people as they are, and American economic and social life as it now exists—and not as those things can be imagined to be—we can find means of fostering the richer and more various public life that we seek. The recovery of “place” in our personal and public lives appears to be central to this undertaking.

And not only to that undertaking, but such a recovery is, paradoxically, also central to the health of the very dynamism whose effects it seeks to restrain. In fact there are compelling reasons to believe that, if we were to achieve an entirely fluid and protean world devoid of established physical points of reference, such as settled communities and stable families, and completely lacking in the shared reserves of common histories, memories, and loyalties that such stability promotes, it would be impossible to provide a foundation for the psychological or moral formation of strong, confident, resourceful, and resilient individuals, intelligent and virtuous citizens, or for durable and effective institutions. These are the very kinds of individuals and institutions that a republican form of government, a virtuous and active citizenry, and a free economy based on innovation and enterprise must be able to count on, if they are to survive. Such things do not grow spontaneously on trees or emerge unsought from the waves. They must be rooted in certain fixities of social and moral life that can only flourish in settled places.

In both its literal and its figurative meanings, “place” refers not only to a geographical spot but to a defined niche in the social order: one's place in the world. Thus, when we say that we have “found our place,” we are speaking not only of a physical location, but of the achievement of a stable and mature personal identity within a coherent social order, so that we can provide an answer to the questions: “Who are you? Where did you come from? Where is your home? Where do you fit in the order of things?” Hence, it is not surprising that a disruption or weakening in our experience of geographical place will be reflected in similar disruptions in our sense of personal identity. The two things go together, a fact we have tried to suggest in our conference subtitle.

But any effort to affirm the importance of place brings us into tension with the powerful forces that are shrinking and transforming our world. A national government or a global economy always tend in the direction of consolidation and uniformity, toward the imposition of a universal standard. The concept of “place” represents a counterforce to these huge structural tendencies. It is always grounded in the particular, even the provincial. Such affirmation is not mere attachment to the abstraction of “place” but to this place: toward specific hometowns and neighborhoods and countrysides and landscapes, each having its own enveloping aura of thoughts and desires and memories: that is to say, its own history, its own customs and traditions, its own stories, its foodways and folkways, its relics, and its tombstones.

Furthermore, what makes a “place” is not merely a loyalty to its past, but a conviction regarding the vitality of its present, and the lure of its future. Far from being static, a “place” must be a node of continuous human activity: political, economic, and cultural. These are the forces that make a living “place” different from a museum. A living “place” has to offer scope for the energies its people. This is why we emphasize the importance of fostering civic engagement, for it is only through such engagement that the virtues of self-governance and public commitment can be exercised.

Does a society that has entirely lost the sense of “place” also lose the ability to forge such connections, and perhaps even lose the desire to forge them? Do we, in losing our “places,” lose the crucial basis for healthy and resilient individual identity, and for the cultivation of public virtues through civic engagement? And if these dangers are real and present ones, are there ways that intelligent public policy can begin to address them constructively, by means of reasonable and democratic innovations which are likely to attract wide public support?



Such is the range of questions we propose to address in this conference. We seek to assess the erosion of “place” in our current sensibility, and to discover reasonable and realistic paths that would address it. We see the encouragement of renewed civic engagement as a key element in the array of

public-policy initiatives that we seek to devise. It is very easy to see this as an “optional” issue, or an “aesthetic” issue, the sort of concern best taken up when times are flush and there are less pressing items on the agenda. But we strongly disagree. We see this as an issue that goes to the most fundamental purposes of human society.

And at a time when the size and scope of our national government is once again an issue of heated debate, the proper form taken by our acts of civic engagement could not be more germane. The restoration of “place” goes hand in hand with the healthy revitalization of an engaged public.

It is a mistake to reject a renewed emphasis on “place” as fanciful or backward-looking. We are not advocating a repeal of the modern world. Far from it. Indeed, we believe that we must recover a more vibrant sense of place if we are to preserve the healthy dynamism of our society, and promote the highest measure of human flourishing. We want to help the modern world address its own deficiencies, before their ill effects undermine its very foundation. There can be no vigor or intrepid boldness in a society that is unable to provide the conditions needed for the formation of strong identities, the kind of men and women who are capable of innovation and pioneering thinking. Or, to put it in the words of historian William Leach, in words that link all the disparate strands of our inquiry, “People require a firm sense of place so they can dare to take risks. A society whose common store of memories has been beaten down or shattered is open to further disruption; for such a society cannot defend or protect itself from the stronger incursions of those who know what they want and how to get it.” A sense of “place,” in short, may be the essential basis of our freedoms.

We embark upon this project, then, with the belief that the weakening of the sense of place in American life is a deep and pressing problem, both as an early-warning indicator of what may be a critical weakening in our social makeup, and as a present-day problem whose causes and consequences need to be understood more fully, and whose effects can, we hope, be addressed by more intelligent and humane public policies. The accomplishment of that final objective is our hope, and our ultimate goal.



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“Place in the World”
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