

EVERYDAY LANDSCAPE AND MEANING IN URBAN LIVING

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Abstract: This paper conceptualizes landscape from a temporal and spatial perspective which emphasizes peoples' interactions and activities as an inherent part of understanding the landscape itself. Today, peoples' interaction with the landscape has become more complex, largely owing to the changing notions of place in contemporary urban living. In this context, the paper examines the role and significance of the landscapes of everyday life in urban environment and delineates how it (re)constructs ordinary human and social meanings that are necessary conditions for our existence. The paper is presented in three sections. In the first section, it discusses the concept of everyday life and its relevance in the contemporary urban living. In the following section, it examines the complexities encountered in urban landscapes today. The third section of the paper discusses how meaningful interaction experienced with everyday landscapes offer valuable insights for addressing the challenges posed by the complexities of urban city living. The paper concludes by highlighting the need for attention towards the largely neglected or overlooked domains of 'ordinary' everyday landscape by designer professionals, which plays a crucial role in creating meaningful relationship between people and place.

Keywords: everyday, landscape, identity, design, urban

INTRODUCTION

"Landscapes are, in the final analysis placescapes; they are congeries of places in the fullest experiential and represented sense. No landscape without place; this much we may take to be certainly true". (Casey 2002, p.271)

Philosopher E.Casey's above statement not only immediately contends the parochial 'representational' view of landscape but also anchors landscape to a deeper experiential dimension associated with place. Geographer D.W.Meinig (1976) in his essay titled, 'The beholding eye' suggests, that a landscape can be seen from different

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perspectives as it may represent nature, a human habitat, an artifact of human activity, a system, a problem, a reflection of wealth, an expression of ideology, a history, a place, or an aesthetic reality. Meinig explains that, landscape when viewed as: “environment, embracing all that we live amidst, and thus it cultivates a sensitivity to detail, to texture, colour, all the nuances of visual relationships, and more, for environment engages all of our senses, the sounds and smells and ineffable feel of a place as well. Such a viewer attempts to penetrate common generalizations to appreciate the unique flavour of whatever he encounters” (Meinig 1976, p.53)

Both Casey (2002) and Meinig (1976) view of ‘landscape’ allows to interpret the term to be synonymous with ‘place’, embracing within it the complex interactions and experience associated with it. In *Landscape as Place-Relation*, W.A.Kohrt (2011) explains that “Landscape connotes a particular but comprehensive space that is given, that supports human activities, that is worthy of attention that it does not receive”(p.28). Similar notions of landscape echoes from T.R.Schatzki’s (2011) description: “Landscape, in sum, are thoroughly integrated into the timespaces of activity, as visual spectacles, as the contents of the pasts and futures of activity, far flung arrays of paths and places for human practices. In all these modes, the temporal-spatiality of landscapes is tied to the practices in which these activities are performed”. (Schatzki 2011, p.83).

Studying landscape as being intrinsically connected to human activities is crucial as it enables for a deeper understanding of people and place relationship. Given the all-encompassing quality of landscape, similar to ‘place’, in this paper, landscape is conceptualized from a temporal-spatial perspective to unravel the interwoven layers experiences of human activities along with the social practices. Landscape is comprehended here as that which “does not entail a dispersion of elements, but rather enables their ‘gathering together’-their interconnection and unification” (Malpas 2011, p.174).

The concept of ‘interconnection and unification’ is understood here in terms of bringing close, people and place through experience. Explicating on the complexities of interaction between people and place today, this paper examines the potential significance of everyday landscapes in creating meaningful place engagement. The quality of everyday life whether it is liberating or oppressed is dependent on the ways it is organised spatially (Upton 2002). The term ‘everyday landscape’ discussed in this paper represents everyday interactions

with the place encountered, along with its related experiential understanding.

When context of discussion emphasizes on the spatiality of experiences that paper employs the term ‘everyday landscape’ interchangeably with ‘everyday life’. The conclusions of this paper bring to focus the significant yet implicit aspects everyday landscape in the urban context, which is often ignored or overlooked in design thinking and practice.

ESSENCE OF EVERYDAY LIFE

At a superficial level everyday involves the ordinary experiences and routines that are taken for granted to such an extent that it has almost become invisible. But at more philosophical level, “everyday life has been theorized as the sustaining ground, matrix and foundation for other social practices” (Sandywell 2004, p.161). Often it is, “the utterly ordinary that reveals a fabric of space and time defined by a complex realm of social practices - a conjuncture of accident, desire and habit” (Crawford 2008, p.6). Scholars from both humanistic and social sciences have discussed substantially everyday life as a defining element for one’s *raison d’être*. Some of the concepts of everyday life which resonate the above notion are worth introducing in this section as it guides this discussion towards the need for understanding urban landscapes in the context of everyday life and interactions.

H.Lefebvre’s seminal work titled *Critique of Everyday life* is central to the resurgence of everyday experiences where he emphasized everyday life as “a festival” (McLeod 1997a). He stated: “Man must be everyday or he will not be at all” (Lefebvre 1991, p.127) because of which he claimed that “ a revolution takes place when and only when people can no longer lead their daily lives” (Lefebvre 1971, p.22). Lefebvre defined everyday life initially as, “Everyday life, in a sense residual, defined by ‘what is left over’ after all distinct, superior, specialized, structured activities” (Lefebvre 1971, p.97). Thereafter, he explained how this ‘residual’ content functioned within our overall existence: “Considered in their specialization and their technicality, superior activities leave a ‘technical vacuum’ between one another which are filled by everyday life. Everyday life is profoundly related to all activities, and encompasses them with all their differences and their conflicts; it is their meeting place, their bond, and their common ground” (Lefebvre 1971, p.97).

Lefebvre stresses that it these relationships that help people to define meanings as they “represent the standpoint of the totality” (Debord 1961). The relationship between groups and individuals in everyday life interact in a manner which in part escapes the specialized sciences. Lefebvre (1991) emphasizes the significances of studying everyday life as it is the “human raw material as a proper subject which contributes towards a achieving the ‘totality-realization of the total man” (Lefebvre 1991, p.252). French Marxist theorist, Writer and Film maker G.Debord, in one of his talks titled ‘Perspectives for Conscious Changes in Everyday Life’ notes that, in a sense we are never outside of everyday life and we have to place everyday life at the centre of everything (Debord 1961). These notions transforms everyday life from being ‘trivial’ to be more a ‘splendor’, that potentially forms the basis of all specializations of activities. Amidst the rapid pace of urban living and dynamic changes of physical world, everydayness can be seen as a “positive continuity of endless repetitions” (Sandywell 2004, p.163), that possess the power to reconstitute the stability and meaning in the urban environment. The potential transformation that everyday life can bring is especially relevant to designers to counter the banality and mediocrity of most of the urban landscapes (McLeod, 1997b, p.27).

Understanding the domain of everyday life offers a “rich repository of urban meaning” (Crawford 2008b, p.7) that can facilitate towards developing spatial manifestation of the meanings but the main challenge lies on decoding its fundamental ambiguity. The sense of ambiguity of the term is because it “does not have an unequivocal or fixed referent” (Sandywell 2004, p.173). It is also utterly complex with embedded multiple overlapping layers of complex social and spatial practices. The complexities have further deepened in the contemporary context as, “The everyday is covered by new stories and turbulent affectations of art, fashion and events veil ever eradicating the everyday blahs. Images, the cinema and television divert the everyday by at times offering us to it its own spectacle or sometimes the spectacle of noneveryday: violence, death, catastrophe, the living of the kings and stars” (Lefebvre 1997, p.37).

To understand this condition of everyday Lefebvre identified two “simultaneous realities” (Crawford 2008b, p.7) that co-exist within the everyday life as “the quotidian which is the timeless, humble repetitive natural rhythms of life and the modern, the always new and constantly changing habits that are shaped by technology” (Crawford 2008b, p.7).

Everyday urban environment demands designers to accept spatial experiences to exist around this duality. Lefebvre (1997) points out the reason for the undesirable attitude towards everyday life as: “Some treat every day with impatience; they want to change life and do it quickly, others believe that lived experience is neither important nor interesting and that instead of trying to understand it, it should be minimised, bracketed, to make way for science, technology, economic growth, etc” (Lefebvre 1997, p.37) .

Lefebvre’s concepts of everyday addressed themes that are intrinsically connected to architecture especially where he views everyday life as a methodological confrontation of both modern life and past but more importantly determines the points where new forms are appearing which are rich in possibilities (Lefebvre 1991). Though everyday life reflects the “ordinary”, yet ordinary is what the “real” (McLeod, 1997b, p.24) is, which is why “the everyday, established and consolidated, remains a sole surviving common sense referent and point of reference” (Lefebvre 1997, p.35). As these “points of reference” remain quintessential for an existential understanding of the world, it implores a spatial interpretation that alleviates spatial complexities of contemporary urban living. Everyday life embodies at once the most direct experience of oppression and strongest potentialities of transformation (McLeod 1997b), so a careful study of the everyday urban landscapes proves to be a rich domain for comprehending spatial challenges and negotiations in urban living.

COMPLEXITIES OF URBAN LANDSCAPES TODAY

People’s conception of urban landscapes has undergone drastic changes due to the impact of globalization on spatial practices and perception of the physical world. Several theories emerged that aimed to comprehend and address the changing dynamic relationship between people and places. D.Massey’s (1991) “global sense of place” which argued that with geography of social relations changing, it allows for a different interpretation of the place and an extroverted sense of place that “integrates in a positive way the global and the local” (Massey 1991, p.27). This notion echoes as a response towards understanding the growing debate on the increasing sense of dislocation, which people are encountering with the succession of cultural imports that dynamically changes the place and the way people relate to them. When multiple new urban forms emerge through these diversities, C.Petcou (2002) notes that conflicting relationships are avoided as the

present context enables people to find new situations for re-defining their identity. Petcou (2002) explains that at this point there is emergence of “extra-territorialisation”, a state in which the identity is evolved within an empty context without any reference and territoriality. He emphasises that this extra-territoriality manifest itself more obviously within the contemporary cultural territoriality than the existing built environments. As people tend to live amidst sense of anonymity being connected with their family and professional network through technology, Petcou identifies people’s existence occurring in two extra-territorial directions: “One towards the anonymous local and other towards the abstract global” (Petcou 2002, p.284). Petcou concludes saying that though this extra-territoriality remains open to the emergence of other types of territoriality, our societies would probably end up being multi- territorial in nature.

“With the increasingly pervasive commodification and homogenization of life and landscape and the extreme social stratification associated with globalization” (Upton 2002, p.707), everyday urban living is presented as complex and unattractive. Complex, in terms of unequal urban development, that is political, social, cultural and symbolic in nature. Unattractive, as the routine and rapid pace of urban living seldom allows one to accommodate and appreciate the essence of everyday life. The complexity of the existing spatiality in urban landscapes is evidenced through these discussions which are developed around the dynamics of socio-cultural and spatial relationships.

Further digital technology in the 21st century has redefined ‘reality’ per se - virtual relationships, cyber communities and virtual places have all had an impact in re-conceptualizing the relationship between place and people. The verisimilitude of digital illusions has ensconced our needs further, making us unaware of how they distance us from reality. The forever shrinking quality of time today has allowed the experiences of space and time to become fused into each other, and we witness what Professor D.Harvey has referred to as a distinct reversal of two dimensions - a temporalisation of space and spatialisation of time (D.Harvey 1990).

The design approaches to urban landscape tend to be more visual, and spatial design disciplines are often being criticised for creating largely exaggerated visual experiences. Often the choice in exploring the designed landscapes remains illusory as they are based on the pre-determined possibilities that focus on highly controlled behaviour

(P.Harvey 1996). This has led to lack of spontaneity and freedom in urban experiences, which is necessary for creating a sense of restoration and belonging.

All the above factors have increased the complexities and superficiality of urban living. Complexity in comprehending the multiple and overlapping layers of urban fabric and Superficiality, in terms of the experiential understanding of urban landscapes. All these multifarious factors have immensely impacted the way we interact with the physical world which has ensconced the essence of everyday life.

SIGNIFICANCE OF EVERYDAY LANDSCAPES IN THE PRESENT CONTEXT

The above section of this paper delineated the conditions of urban landscapes which rarely allow room for experiencing the everyday life reflected in Lefebvre's concepts discussed earlier in this paper. Urban landscape today is transformed to be as what Lefebvre (1991) describes as "overscribed, everything therein resembles a rough draft, jumbled and self-contradictory" (Lefebvre 1991, p.42), makes it appear ambiguous, hence it is difficult for people to interpret and attach meanings. It is critical at this juncture to address the growing lack of attention towards everyday landscapes, as design professionals focus more on more specialized activities of urban living such as shopping mall, theatres, theme parks etc. Everyday landscape becomes especially crucial, as they play an important role in addressing critical issues of urban living today which are discussed below.

Social meanings and needs

Q.Stevens in his book *The Ludic city* explains that: "Urban experience and social needs are more than mere conceptual abstractions; they can be understood by looking at everyday life on the streets, as its specific and diverse qualities, at the meanings it might have for those who live it, and in particular at the complex tensions which arise between different needs, different meanings and different users in space" (Stevens 2007, p.7).

Amidst the increasing diversity of urban societies, everyday landscape defines social life of people. It is through the exploration and navigation through the everyday landscapes, "the ordinary and unexceptional sites" (Upton 2002, p.720) and consistent exchanges that people learn the social meanings embedded in them. The

‘ordinariness’ of these landscapes allows “social events to evolve spontaneously” (Gehl 2011, p.21), as people tend to exhibit staged behaviour in overly designed urban environments. The spontaneity in everyday interactions produces a social ambience which Lefebvre described as: “The form of the urban, its supreme reason, namely simultaneity and encounters, cannot disappear. As a place of encounters, focus of communication, and information, the urban becomes what it always was; place of desire, permanent disequilibrium, seat of the dissolution of normalities and constraints, the moment of play and unpredictable”. (Lefebvre 1996)

The social ambience described by Lefebvre produces experiences that are concrete, practical and alive encouraging the “discreteness yet inclusiveness of the individual and the social. The unity is the foundation of all society: a society is made up of individuals, and the individual is a social being, in and by the content of his life and the form of his consciousness” (Lefebvre 1991, p.72)

Identity crisis

One of the most significant needs for understanding everyday landscape lies in its relation to the context of growing issues of identity crisis, alienation and displacement experienced in cities today. The identity crisis has a cascading effect which greatly affects the social cohesion. The social psychologist J.A.Scholte (2005) notes “Globalization has tended to increase the sense of a fluid and fragmented self, particularly for persons who spend large proportions of their time in supraterritorial spaces, where multiple identities readily converge and create lost souls. Hybrid identities present significant challenges for the construction of community. How can deep and social bonds be forged when individuals have multiple and perhaps competing sense of self - and indeed often feel pretty unsettled in all of them?” (p.253)

Scholte’s(2005) above description shows the extent to which transformation of peoples’ spatial relation with the urban landscapes defines the complexity of identity constructions and its consequent effect on society. Often the physical setting is overlooked in comprehending identity issues as, H.Proshansky et.al (1970) point out that, physical cognitive structures are more complex than social and personal cognitive structures. Being subtle, they tend to be remote from the awareness of the individual, because physical settings are backdrops against which events occur.

The spatial practices of everyday life devised by people, help in developing the performative constructs (Butler 2006), which facilitate in effectively rearticulating and anchoring them to places. Urban life is defined by means of engaging with and developing behaviour which is unfamiliar, testing the usefulness of pre-existing social rules and roles. Today people participate in multiple discrepant situations and discourse through which they “construct different partial and simultaneous worlds in which they move and their cultural construction of physical world springs not from one source and is not in one piece” (Barth 1989, p.136). It is through the process of everyday spatial performances that people inscribe their identity in the environment. When landscapes encountered do not accommodate these performances, new forms are created or adopted within the landscapes through spatial tactics. Interestingly, sometimes in the process of spatial negotiations, “defensive reactions become sources of meaning and identity, constructing new cultural codes” (Castells 2000, p.69-70). Hence everyday landscapes not only enable negotiation with the dynamic changes of the urban societies, but also open new possibilities for restructuring and reconstituting identities.

Personal restoration

The anthropologist J.W.Bastian (1985) explained that landscapes acts as a strong metaphor as it plays a role of an expressive and evocative device communicating memory, morality, and emotion. The everyday landscapes also constitutes an imagined environment and the imagining that involves the discourses, symbols and fantasies through which people explore and ascribe personal meanings. Everyday urban landscapes can induce significant transformation to one’s overall perception of urban living, as they are filled with a range of activities and behaviours which are unselfconsciously repeated within a given physical settling and it is with these repetitions that one begins the process of attaching meaning to that context. This process would itself be dependent on “the reciprocal ‘introjections’ of the external world into the self, and the ‘projection’ of the self on the external world, such that there is equivalence - the one ‘reflects’ the other” (Leach 2005, p.304).

The psychoanalyst H.Kohut (2009) in his book, *The Restoration of Self*, explains about the dream reported by a patient in the sessions of psychotherapy. The patient explained as he was walking, he experienced a great yet name less sense of danger. Trying to appeal

and sought help from cold-hearted and unreachable passerby and workmen, he is suddenly pulled into a bright landscape where he finds lots of people and various landmarks as in cities. The patient recounts this landscape to be unapproachable as it was 'stainless steel world' where no communication was possible and felt he was trapped forever in that landscape (Kohut 2009). The experience of the landscape described by the patient is an experience evoked where people remain disconnected from the set of objects, activities and relationships within that landscape. The 'ordinary' everyday landscapes offer the sense of reality which provides security of anchoring oneself to the physical world through experience compared to the alienating "hyperreal" (Baudrillard 1994, p.149) nature of urban settings. And everyday landscapes by enabling depth, immediacy and authenticity in experiencing, acts as a powerful tool to overcome the "void and rapidity" (Virilio 2001, p.35 of contemporary urban living).

CONCLUSION

The depth and essence of everyday life can be realised only when it can be accommodated and practiced through physical settings. This brings to the forefront the importance of physical settings that define the landscapes encountered, which allows the manifestations of everyday life. Also, everyday experiences become highly pertinent today in understanding and defining "places of urbanity" (Castello 2010, p.31).

The everyday landscapes are critical in allowing spatial tactics, by which people comprehend various possibilities of situating themselves within the context. The above discussion highlighted how understanding everyday landscapes offer valuable insights for creating better places for people emplacement. Central to this understanding is the characteristic nature of interactions that define people's everyday spatial practices and behaviour. Studying landscapes of everyday life is crucial especially to understand this 'interaction', a reciprocal communication between place and people. This communication has a deep structure which is dictated by the meanings embedded to the physical settings. The more higher the congruence of meanings embedded in the everyday landscapes and the interpretation of them, more successful is its structure of communication. The result of which determines the extent of opportunities provided for nurturing everyday life and associated spatial practices. Comprehending these interactions helps in creating urban landscapes that are receptive to "everyday life

of conflicts, tensions, cracks, and fissures - a shifting ground that continually open to new potentials” (McLeod 1997b, p.28). These ‘new potentials’ enable people to engage meaningfully with their surrounding which facilitates in comprehending and connecting with larger landscapes of the city.

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