

Marzieh Mohammadmiri – Sayad Nabavi

Place in Photography: How photographers encounter place

Abstract

A photograph intercepts place from its surrounding space. Place has such a significant role in photography that we often want to know where a photograph was taken. Drawing on human geography theories on the concept of 'place', this study aims to investigate photographers' approaches to place. It also explores how conceptual intricacies of place are represented in photography. Based on various types of place experience, concluded from the literature of human geography and the phenomenology of place, five photographers are analyzed as case studies to explore the experience of place in photography.

Although a few previous studies have investigated 'place' in photography, they have mainly focused on photography practice¹.

This research adopts a new approach which emphasizes the type of the photographer's encounter with place. It focuses on how place is experienced by the photographer as a human that is considered an indivisible part of place in phenomenological terms.

The findings of this study suggest that 'place' is a phenomenon that allows photographers to investigate the concepts of identity and attachment, cultural narratives and traditions, environmental challenges, as well as extremes of social realities. In fact, photographers' approach to place is comparable to that of phenomenologists and anthropologists.

Keywords

Place, photography, identity, nostalgia, place experience, Ansel Adams, Eugen Atget, Larry Sultan, Adrian Salinger, Thomas Struth

¹ WEST BRETT, D.: *Photography and place: Seeing and Not Seeing Germany after 1945*. Routledge, 2016. in her book *Photography and Place* analyses how major historical discontinuities in 19th century Germany and places related to trauma, memory, and history influenced the visual field. These discontinuities are used to generate a new interpretation of postwar photography of 'place' in Germany. Moreover, a study of some renowned German photographers illustrates the notion of place as a bold encounter in their photography. VAN GELDER, H. and H. WESTGEEST: *Photography theory in historical perspective*. John Wiley & Sons, 2011. in a chapter of *Photography Theory in Historical Perspective* named 'place and space in photography' which stresses the significance of 'place' in photography more than any other medium and investigates 'some extraordinary examples from contemporary photography that variously draw the viewer's attention toward the too often

ignored features of photography'. (Van Gelder & Westgeest, 2011:115) HULBERT, S.: *Photographing the altered landscape*. RMIT University: Australia. 2011. p. 194. Photographic research investigates human geography of place and landscape through a phenomenological method that aims to understand the approaching altered landscapes of Australia. He explores the capabilities and limitations of digital devices to photographing the Australian landscapes.

Introduction

'In all photographs, we have the same act of cutting off a piece of space and time'² and photographs deprive remove places from their original spatial surroundings³. Therefore, place seems to be an inseparable part of the slice that a photo captures from the world. Photography 'probably more than any other medium, evoke a sense of place, and frequently we want to know where a particular photograph was taken'⁴. But what are place and space? What do we mean by place in photography? And how do photographers face and experience place?

Different scientific fields such as sociology, anthropology and geography have taken note of the concept of place for a long time. Many researchers have emphasized the complexity of the concept of place, e.g.^{5, 6, 7}. Therefore, it is worthwhile to unravel some of these complexities and investigate how place is experienced in photography.

Through a comparative review of the place theories and drawing on case studies of five photographers this research is limited to the study of place using theories of human geography and the phenomenology of place and therefore other approaches to place in photography are beyond the scope of this research. Furthermore, all theories on placelessness and non-place are not included and the photographers

adopting this approach are not investigated.

Space

Understanding the concept of place cannot be fully achieved without considering the difference between the terms place and space. Space - unlike place - is an open and abstract expanse. 'It is amorphous and intangible and not an entity that can be directly described and analyzed...In general; it seems that space provides the context for places but derives its meaning from particular places'⁸. According to Cresswell⁹, space is a more abstract concept than place. Space separates places from each other, and it is a meaningless realm.

Place

A place is a specific geographical position that secures its meaning from human values and interactions. It is a part of space that gains a distinguishing environmental characteristic because of its particular elements and factors. Thomas and Cross¹⁰ argue that place is not merely a geographical phenomenon, rather it is the integration of relationships and interactions. For example, a certain place can be defined as a tourist attraction centre, a religious site, or a wilderness site and each of these labels indicates the interaction between people and place which is associated with the place. Therefore, in defining a place, both geographical and social aspects are important, and it is organized based on the meaning that people attach to the place. Places receive meanings by events and occurrences, and their implications are combined with the goals, values

² METZ, C.: *Photography and Fetish: October*, 34, 1985, p. 85th

³ VAN GELDER, H. and H. WESTGEEST: *Photography theory in historical perspective*. John Wiley & Sons, 2011.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ HAYDEN, D.: *The power of place, Urban landscapes as public history* Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1995.

⁷ MALPAS, J.E.: *Place and experience, A philosophical topography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

⁸ RELPH, E.: *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion, 1976, p. 8th

⁹ CRESSWELL, T.: *Place, A short introduction*. UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

¹⁰ THOMAS, D.F. and CROSS J.E.: *Organization as place builders: Journal of Behavioral and Applied Management*. 9(1),2007.

and tendencies of human beings¹¹. A simple definition of place includes two characteristics: geographical position and human values, as Cresswell¹² briefly defines place as a 'meaningful location' or a space to which people are attached. Human's existence is undeniably connected to place, to the extent that humankind experiences itself through perception of and in the place. Pallasmaa¹³ describes his encounter with place in great details:

I confront the city with my body; my legs measure the length of the arcade and the width of the square; ... I experience myself in the city, and the city exists through my embodied experience. The city and my body supplement and define each other. I dwell in the city, and the city dwells in me.

Placelessness

In contrast to the phenomenon of place, Edward Relph has defined another concept in his book entitled *Place and Placelessness*¹⁴: 'placelessness'. He explores 'placelessness geography' in an environment from an anthropologist geographer's viewpoint. Augé¹⁵ in his book *Non-places, counts excess in time and greediness of people as the main characteristics of super-modernity and argues that non-places have replaced places due to the lack of identity, history and urban relations. Non-places such as highways, hypermarkets, ATMs and airport exit halls are temporary spaces for promenade, relationships and consumption*¹⁶. Nowadays, it can

be concluded from the studies on place and placelessness that these two concepts could be considered at the two opposite ends of the spectrum, and any setting may be located at a particular spot on this spectrum. Therefore, perhaps it is better to name 'placeness', including some degree of variety, meaning and uniqueness compared to placelessness that implies standardization and similarity in this spectrum.

Actualization of place in photography

Architecture aims to convert space into place to activate the potential content of a setting. A similar process can occur through photography. The medium of photography is capable of organizing a space by framing and adjusting the depth of field, shutter speed... giving it a new credit. A catalyst that converts any location into a place is a process of deep experience. Place, therefore, is a part of an environment that has been taken note of; an environment that is of a particular interest to us and has earned a meaning. Taking photos of a location reflects the photographer's attention given to the space making it meaningful. In fact, if there are no values and meanings beforehand, these are created when the photographer encounters the location within his/her photography practice. Therefore, photography can be considered as a place-making practice. During photography practice, the framed shot converts a space into a definable place.

Photographers encounter place in different ways, and place has been variously experienced by photographers. In order to analyze these approaches this paper studies various types of place experience from the human geography standpoint, and investigates the way each photographer has experienced and encountered place in their photographs. For this purpose, photographers who have specifically worked on subjects related to place will be reviewed. Various types of photographers' place experience will be discussed in the following sections.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² CRESSWELL, T.: *Place, A short introduction*. UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

¹³ PALLASMAA, J.: *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*. John Wiley and Sons. 2005. p. 40.

¹⁴ RELPH, E.: *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion, 1976.

¹⁵ AUGÉ, M.: *Non-lieux*. Verso: London, New York. 1995. p. 122

¹⁶ Ibid

Place experience and photographers Ansel Adams and Attachment to place

Attachment to place is affected by factors such as length of residence, rituals and customs, the interaction of the individuals with each other, and shared experiences¹⁷. The relationship to the material environment and the physical quality of the place, special events, and symbols are other influential factors on human's attachment to place¹⁸. Ansel Adams was one of the pioneer masters of landscape photography as well as an environmentalist. 'Wilderness had always been for Adams a mystique: a valid, intangible, non-materialistic experience'¹⁹: he preferred natural landscapes to cityscapes for photography all the time. Adams has described his very first visit to Yosemite Valley as extremely impressive. 'That first impression of the valley... was a culmination of experience so intense as to be almost painful'²⁰. He had a strong attachment to 'Yosemite Valley' and shot for many years in this area. This photography experience helped him discover and record new aesthetic qualities in this place. He used photographic techniques to privilege a monumental quality in natural landscapes.

In 1955, together with Nancy Newhall, Adams held an exhibition in America entitled 'This is the American earth' to show the significance of protecting the environment and wilderness through a communal and aesthetic view, and to make Americans conscious of existing tourism development policies. According to Robert Turnage's²¹ paper, along with

¹⁷ RELPH, E.: *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion, 1976.

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ TURNAGE, R.: *Ansel Adams: The Role of the Artist in the Environmental Movement*, in *The Ansel Adams Gallery*. 1980.

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

Edward Weston, Adams was sensitive about the significance of natural places in humans' life at a time when Cartier-Bresson and his other fellows considered 'social significance' as a necessity for photography. In addition to this preoccupation, Adams is considered to be one of the pioneers in the realm of sublime landscapes.

Eugene Atget, rootedness, and nostalgia

Places to which we are most attached are literally fields of care; the settings in which we have had a multiplicity of experiences²². We have roots in such places. The Rootedness causes a complete commitment and responsibility and as a result of which one tolerates a place and takes care of it²³. A good example of photographers with such an approach to place is Eugene Atget. It seems that Atget's job was taking photos for other artists. However, documenting all landscapes, streets, parks, and architectural details in Paris and its suburbs indicates that he had a deep commitment to caring for the city. He realised that the emergence of modernity would change old landscapes, buildings and as a result, the image of the city. 'Rootedness in place' obliged him to shoot the same place or even a specific tree in a park of Paris over and over to document and archive the changes that happened due to the spread of modernity.

The act of commitment includes accepting limitations and weaknesses and so does the commitment to a place. Relph²⁴ believes that when the relationship between a place and a person includes tension, the need to stay causes 'drudgery of place'- the melancholia that accompanies a feeling of oppression and imprisonment in a place- and the desire to leave

²² RELPH, E.: *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion, 1976.

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid

causes 'nostalgia', both of which are annoying. Shafiei Kadkani the Iranian poet also expressed a desire to escape from a place and nostalgia for it at the same time: 'I wish humans could take their homeland with them wherever they liked the same as violets in soil boxes'²⁵. Nostalgia is a kind of humans' encounter with a place. 'Nostalgia is yearning for aspects of one's past, a yearning that may include but is not limited to one's homeland'²⁶. In addition to documenting culture and places in France, Atget expanded the formal and expressive possibilities of photography. Grundberg²⁷ argues that some of Atget's photos are eternal and poetic and strongly reflective of his sense of nostalgia. He points out that 'More than any other photographer, Atget makes explicit photography's ability to render all things nostalgic, so that the past seems to ache in us'. He showed Paris not as a city that is being modernized, but as an abandoned city. There are no symbols of modern Paris such as the Eiffel Tower and the Opera. In his photos and in the place of those symbols of modernity, he concentrated on old places that are on the verge of destruction.

Larry Sultan and home

Home is the foundation and basis of human's identity and existence²⁸. The deepest type of place attachment is an attachment to home which is an experience that is rooted in a special, familiar and meaningful place. Yet it is like a window to the unfamiliar and diverse world²⁹. In

²⁵ SHAFIEI KADKANI, M.: *Through a Leaf's Eyes*. Sokhan, 1978.

²⁶ GREENBERG, J., et al.: *Handbook of experimental existential Psychology*. New York: Guilford press, 2004

²⁷ GRUNDBERG, A.: *Photography view; Eugene Atget-His art bridged two centuries*, in *The New York Times*. 1985.

²⁸ RELPH, E.: *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion, 1976.

²⁹ Ibid

Larry Sultan's works, the concept of home explicitly and implicitly has a significant role: His interest in the human's eternal endeavour to inhabit is visible in his projects. He depicts people who have left their homes and have immigrated to a strange land - 'Homeland' - creating porn scenes in the houses of his former neighbourhood - 'The valley' - and on top of all, his childhood home - 'Pictures from home'. Sultan has showcased the physical and emotional dimensions of home in his photos.

His interest in place and especially in the notion of home is more clearly observable in his project 'pictures from home' compared to his other works. 'Pictures from home' is a Project that lasted about 10 years during which Sultan took photos of his parents in the house where he was raised. Sultan wrote in a statement on the work in 1992 that the force motivating him to work on this project was hardly expressible:

It has more to do with love than with sociology, with being a subject in the drama rather than a witness. And in the odd and jumbled process of working everything shifts; the boundaries blur, my distance slips; the arrogance and illusion of immunity falter³⁰.

The statement above shows that Sultan started to investigate the concept of home by choosing his parents as subjects, but his attachment to this place caused him to gradually change his role from a witness and photographer to the subject of this work. 'Sultan almost obsessively photographs his parents, capturing them in both brutally honest and heartbreakingly sweet moments'³¹.

Wolf³² states that there is a type of pseudo-documentary, glamorous and large format that mixes the staged scenes with more traditional concepts of documentary photography, while simply breaking the borders of the two genres.

His more recent collections showcase place more impartially. In the collection 'homeland,' Sultan takes some staged photos of immigrant workers in California landscapes. The guest curator, Helfand³³ highlights some of these photos:

While rooted in the California landscape and its particular dynamics of terrain and labor, this image suggests a dreamlike place, with the abundantly blossoming cherry tree borrowing motifs from Asian art³⁴.

Sultan (n.d.) in his statement about this project wrote: 'These places represented a small and vanishing patch of paradise that existed just outside the boundaries of property and ownership'. He wanted to showcase the bitterness of immigration and enthusiasm for home through these photos. A place which provides him with a free realm and a haven away from the judgment of others³⁵.

Adrian Salinger and personal places

Other than public places that people experience, there are private places that are significant to people and represent their individuality. Some of these private places have been physically separated from the public world. Relph³⁶ explains that the personal place may be, for example, part of the home belonging to a member of the family such as a room,

corner or drawer used exclusively by the individual or by others who have his/her permission. However, particular places might bear some certain meaning to a person to the extent that they may be seen in their dreams³⁷. The American photographer Adrian Salinger states: 'our bedrooms tell stories about us; they become the box of our memories, wishes and self-awareness'³⁸ The photo book of *In my room by Adrian Salinger that was created in the 1990s visualizes teenagers in their bedrooms. The portraits of these people in their personal place show the significance of this place for an individual, especially at adolescence. The period when a person is passionately and seriously seeking independence and initiating their senses of individuality against others, including their family and society. The private place bears some personal meanings for an individual, and it is replete with* items showing the taste, interests and mindset of the owner representing their identities. According to Salinger, she has not staged these photos: 'I told them not to clean the room and not to prepare it in any way'³⁹. Therefore, she has addressed the subject documentarily and has integrated place photography and portrait so that they complement each other in representing the person's identity.

Williams⁴⁰ argues that Salinger has tried to capture the internal functions of this private place that resembles a home in their homes for the teenagers; in this way, she approaches the inner world of the person residing at this place. In the 1990s, a personal room played the main role in showing the identity of a person. Nowadays, although social networks

32 WOLF, K.: *Homesick: On Larry Sultan at LACMA*, in *Los Angeles Review Books*: LARB: Los Angeles. 2015.

33 HELFAND, G.: *Larry Sultan*: Asian Art Museum. 2013.

34 Ibid

35 Ibid

36 RELPH, E.: *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion, 1976.

37 Ibid

38 FULLEYLOVE, R.: *Photographer Adrienne Salinger's series of teenage bedrooms from the 90s*, in *It's nice that*. 2016.

39 Ibid

40 WILLIAMS, M.: *The bizarre beauty of Adrian Salinger's 'Teenagers'*, in *IDOL*: Idol. 2016.

have taken up a part of this role, the personal place is still people's territory of privacy and solitude.

Thomas Struth, the identity of places, and sacred experience

Lynch⁴¹ defines the identity of a place simply as that which provides its individuality or distinction from other places and serves as the basis for its recognition as a separable entity. The three basic elements of place identity are physical setting, activities, and meanings⁴². Another significant aspect of identity is less tangible than those three, yet serves to link them: It has been variously termed namely, 'spirit of place', 'sense of place' or 'genius of place' (genius loci); all terms refer to 'character'⁴³.

Thomas Struth has paid special attention to the identity of place in a number of projects. He has categorised his photos in several groups each of which was shot from a particular district within a city and hung them on a wall in different sizes in the 'streets of New York' exhibition. Struth (n.d.) explains his approach:

I was interested in the possibility of the photographic image revealing the different character or the 'sound' of the place. I learned that certain areas of the city have an emblematic character; they express the city's structure. How can the atmosphere of one place be so different from another?⁴⁴

The approach of Struth in the New York project, as he has acknowledged, is to pay attention to the identity of place. A character that distinguishes each place from the other is the question that fills Struth's mind in his photographic quest. Moreover, Struth in

his experience of place within the city seeks the zones and streets which identity represents the identity of the whole city. Struth in 'unconscious places 1' focused on finding places of the city that 'express most clearly the nature of the city'⁴⁵. He was searching for a unique identity or in other words, the spirit of the city in European cityscapes. He named 14 of his photos that he believed depicted the spirit of the city in the most complete and comprehensive way 'the headlines'. Even in Struth's series, 'New picture from paradise', taken from jungles in different areas throughout the world, we can find traces of place identity.

'Struth recognises that some of the photographs are informed by certain motifs and elements relating to a specific culture'⁴⁶. For example, photos shot in Japan are a reminder of Japanese traditional gardens, whilst those shot in the pine forests of Bavaria draw on the formative significance of the motif of the forest—'Der Deutsche Wald'—in German art and literature⁴⁷.

Struth observed remarkable emotional and spiritual experiences in people who were visiting holy places as tourists or religious believers. 'Sacred experience' is also a kind of place experience. Eliade (1959) argues that religious experience involves the 'manifestation of something of a wholly different order, something that does not belong to our world'⁴⁸. This sacred experience leads to holy places wherein communication between three cosmic planes of earth, heaven, and hell is possible⁴⁹.

Struth has travelled to different cities around the world for 'unconscious places 2' in which he saw many cities for

41 LYNCH, K.: *The image of the city*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1960.

42 RELPH, E.: *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion, 1976.

43 Ibid

44 BEZZOLA, T. and J. LINGWOOD:

Thomas Struth, Photographs 1978-2010: The Monacelli Press: Munich. 2010.

45 Ibid

46 Ibid

47 Ibid

48 RELPH, E.: *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion, 1976, p. 15th.

49 RELPH, E.: *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion, 1976, p. 16th.

30 Larry Sultan "Here and Home" at LACMA. Aperture 2014 December 23rd]; Available from: <http://aperture.org/blog/larry-sultan-lacma/>.

31 WILLIAMS, M.: *Larry Sultan's Humanizing Investigations*. Artbound 2014 [cited 2017 August 8]; Film and media arts]. Available from: <https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/larry-sultans-humanizing-investigations>.

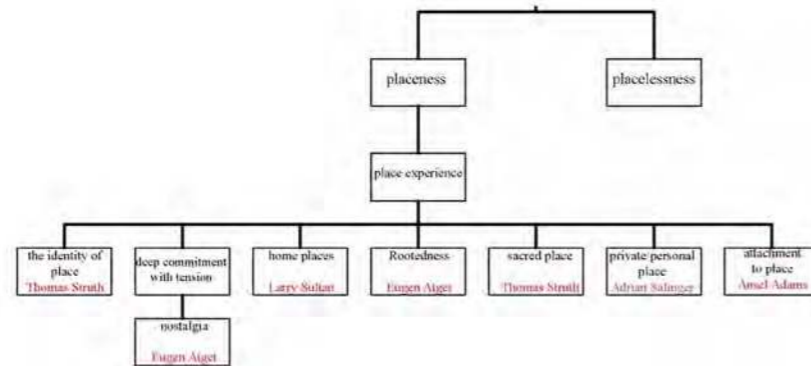
the first time. He wanted to maintain the emotional distance he felt between himself and the place so that he could view the place objectively and from an outsider's standpoint without the interference of his opinion or narrative⁵⁰.

Conclusion

By studying the definitions of place, the role of place in photography and the function of photography in giving a meaning to a space, it can be concluded that photography is a place-making practice. That is to say, the photographer can actualize a place by photography practice. The frame of a photographer cuts a slice of space, and photography practice together with the subject of the photo makes that part of the environment meaningful and as a result, changes it to a place. Over the history of photography, different places have been experienced by photographers in different ways. These approaches are adaptable to various types of place experience extracted from human geography studies. These types of anthropological and phenomenological approaches to place existed in the mind of some photographers whether consciously or unconsciously. Ansel Adams' experience of one of his main photography sites, i.e. Yosemite Valley corresponded to a strong attachment to place theory. Struth has consciously devoted several photography projects of his to examine the identity of places, or the important photography projects of Sultan are related to the notion of home. Rootedness and nostalgia can be easily discerned from Atget's approach to Paris and his deep commitment to this city in his photography career. The role of personal places in the identity and maintenance of the individuality of humans is completely observable in

Salinger's famous photo book. All types of place experience together with its photographic case study have been briefly organised and ordered in a table that can be studied in the contents page.

The noteworthy point concluded from this study is that phenomenologists' understanding of place is similar to photographers' interaction and encounters with place. In other words, the photographic experience of place is very close to the phenomenological approach to it. Therefore, a photographer can possibly do phenomenology of place through photography practice.



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Authors

Mrs. Marzieh Mohammadmiri, M Arch, Lecturer
Islamic Azad University of Shiraz
 (Sadra new town, Shiraz, Iran)
marzieh.mohamadmiri@gmail.com

Mr. Sayad Nabavi, M A, Lecturer
 University of Tehran (Enghelab Square, Tehran, Iran)
S.nabavi@ut.ac.ir

Profile of the authors

Marzieh Mohammadmiri is a Lecturer at IAU of Shiraz mainly teaching contemporary art and architectural photography. She received her B Arch. from the University of Shiraz and M Arch from the University of Guilan both in architecture. Her major research interest is interdisciplinary studies that bridge architecture and arts. Her recent exhibition 'Iran Photo: 24 Photographes Iraniens' is held in Paris, France; and her recent research included analysing patterns inspired from Iranian philosophy (National conference on sustainable building 2013) and sense of place in public spaces (University of Guilan 2013).

Sayad Nabavi is a Lecturer at Tehran University, where he teaches composition, including photography practice and theory, visual culture, and contemporary art studies. His current research interests include the history of photography in the postcolonial condition and analogy of trajectories in photography histories in Middle East. Some of his recent articles are fine art photography and an issue called objectivity, interaction between documentary photography & art photography through history, historiography in Iranian Art Photography, the Contemporary Currents in Iranian Art Photography.

50 BEZZOLA, T. and LINGWOOD J.: *Thomas Struth, Photographs 1978-2010*. The Monacelli Press: Munich. 2010.