

Reimagining place

Place for me is the locus of desire
- *Lucy Lippard*

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MFA Essay, Konstfack 2021
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In the beginning of the 2004 video essay *Los Angeles plays itself*, the Hollywood critical film theorist Thom Andersen states ‘The city is big. The image is small’. What Andersen refers to, as a long-time citizen of Los Angeles, is the way Hollywood tends to create a romanticised and narrowed image of its city through film. The three-hour long documentary by Andersen is built up mainly by the use of clips from different Hollywood movies through its history of filmmaking. By representing and reproducing these clips, he examines the ways the city has been depicted through decades. Utilizing and disassembling these misinterpreted images and stories, Andersen creates his own story which further reveals what he believes to be the truth. What interests me in Andersen’s case is the way he works with a city and its architecture, displaying the embedded social and political structures, by twisting the perspectives through the use and repetition of these historically recognizable clips. When he takes something that already exists and alters its presence or meaning, other questions might be evoked, making it more visible by exposing its opposites.

This is the city: Los Angeles, California. They make movies here. I live here.

Sometimes I think that gives me the right to criticize the way movies depict my city.

I know it’s not easy. The city is big. The image is small. Movies are vertical. At least when they’re projected on a screen. The city is horizontal, except for what we call downtown. Maybe that’s why the movies love downtown more than we do. If it isn’t the site of the action, they try to stick its high-rise towers in the back of the shot.

But movies have some advantages over us.

They can fly through the air. We must travel by land.

They exist in space. We live and die in time. (Andersen 2004)

The statement ‘The city is big. The image is small’ could in various ways be tied and applied to any city or place or segment of place. The different concepts concerning place are dependent on predetermined structures and images of what they’re supposed to perpetuate. Although, if you recognize these settled ideas, you could reimagine the notion of them and thereby be able to see another story; for instance, when creating an image based on your own experience living in a location that from the outer world has been fixed within certain forms of prejudice – the subjective gaze that this experience generates may contribute to a reevaluation of the place in a larger sense.

A similar take on this concept is elaborated upon in the following reference to an essay by Robert Smithson titled *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey* (1967, p.52-57). The essay is based on a story, or a walk, where Smithson begins his trip in New York City and when sitting on a bus going to Passaic he describes in detail what he sees through his window, fragments of what he reads in the newspaper and so on. I find it quite beautiful, and the descriptions are not at all accidental since they’re all connected to how he looks at this place. He writes about every so-called monument he sees – scenes out of the everyday that

everyone overlooks but that could be the statues of this area minted by construction and work.

When travelling from one city to another, Smithson compares them and notices the physical differences such as how the tightly packed and solid grounds of N.Y.C transform into a location full of holes when entering Passaic – with its lack of identity as a place under construction it, in that sense, appears historyless. Related to this there's one section in particular that caught my attention more than the rest when he describes the city of Passaic, New Jersey:

“That zero panorama seemed to contain ruins in reverse, that is — all the new construction that would eventually be built. This is the opposite of the ‘romantic ruin’ because the buildings don’t fall into ruin after they are built but rather rise as ruins before they are built. This anti-romantic mise-en-scene suggests the discredited idea of time and many other ‘out of date’ things. But the suburbs exist without a rational past and without the ‘big events’ of history. Oh, maybe there are a few statues, a legend, and a couple of curios, but no past — just what passes for a future” (Smithson, 1967, p.55)

Perhaps it's all about reimagination.

The notion of reimagination, I would suggest, is often tied to an imaginary and creative process, connected to culture and personal experience, but that (e.g. when creating a story or a work of art) could eventually be expressed physically. The word reimagination can be defined as, *to imagine again or renew, or to form a new conception of something (to recreate)*. Even if we assume that a Hollywood movie wrongfully represents a city, Thom Andersen is still, in a way, reimagining Los Angeles through these representations within his film, as he does it based on the images he knows from his own experiences. When entering this bus, travelling from the city of New York, Smithson brings with him the predetermined ways to look at a city that he's used to. So when he sees the contrasting scenes of Passaic, he applies the opposing structures of New York in the way he looks at the other through his window. We need the one to look differently at the other. When he brings this gaze to Passaic, he can see monuments in this unfinished place and notice these reversed ruins. When putting it down in text, he expresses this reimagined place physically by giving us the image of what could be the other, recreated truth.

In the areas around the city of Stockholm, you find hundreds (if not thousands) of different factors altering the perception of a specific location. You can find a disruption where a street has been partially excavated, leaving a sense of a bare open wound, or an idle bus carelessly blocking an intersection – and when looking around, you can discern how the area is supposed to be, despite these obstacles that you have to find your way around. You can as well observe these situations in an empty garage where its genetic structural actualities have been reimagined due to the exposure of other ambits than for which it was built.

When I first visited one of these particular places, I found myself in a large construction site, peering upon a chasm in the ground that was mainly shielded by high steel fences. I stood

there looking through the fence – to break in wouldn't be that difficult, but what caught my interest was an old dilapidated tennis court just outside the main area of the site. Its red paint was still intact, but the fence had severed the court. A slab of asphalt had found its way down to one side where a car was parked. Somebody told me that there used to be two functional and active tennis courts there. Somewhat later, I sat by my computer browsing this area on Google Earth. When I found the right place, still looking though from high above, the one tennis court remained as a whole. A few clicks later, as I zoomed in, the image transformed. Now looking from the ground, the pictures had been updated so as to display the site as I had found it a few weeks earlier. The tennis court was no longer unscathed, rather desecrated, as the flat area of concrete was now, once again, a large quarried pit.

Cases of reimagination come in to play when entering not only a construction site, but all kinds of places that are constructed and built for a specific purpose: when a place, temporarily or permanently, loses its function or purpose it becomes something else. It could be an abandoned concrete pool, vacant in its absence of cause. Or an old tennis court, destroyed and reduced, only to make room for a provisional parking lot. Although it could also be a passage, a tunnel, a junction emptied out on an early Sunday morning. The notion of reimagination could be applied in finding other ways of using a certain place than what it was originally created for – such as parking your car in an old tennis court, or playing tennis in an empty parking lot.

This makes me perceive site differently. The dictionary definition of the word site would refer to it as *the spatial location of an actual or planned structure or set of structures* (Merriam-Webster, 2021, www.merriam-webster.com), which could be connected to a place and its embedded concepts; locations in the public sphere (or elsewhere) that have been built and created out of specific needs for a certain type of architecture or human actions – such as a garage and the ideas concerning its inherent function. The act of reimagination allows you to discern the ground materials of the place, its architecture and how the interaction and through that the meaning of it could be reconsidered. When the construction is exposed, leaving a vague sense of void, the stories it tells might shift too. Not only being mere by-products of generalised ideas of structure – these places become their own bodies of experience and knowledge. Their own sovereignty. There's no need for any large alterations to modify or highlight a perspective, but you have to some certain degree know what you see in order to rethink it. And if you dismantle a place's inherent details it may thereby contribute to creating a new narrative.

Some people like to wander the streets of a city at night. I believe the reason for this is that everything that composes the city during daytime – the buildings, the streets and the cars, people in transit, tourists, noise from a construction site – drastically changes when the night sets in. Suddenly all the life (structured or not) that takes place during our awake time is erased and replaced with another kind of life. The streets are vacant, and whenever you see a car that's not a bus or a taxi, you wonder what that person's doing there and where they're going – similar to when you notice a lonely person on the sidewalk or on the subway. The streets are transformed – they're no longer as dependent on structures such as traffic lights or intersections, nor filled with cars. It's interesting how bound we are to our predetermined interpretation of the sites that we're used to, which are mainly sprung from their structural characteristics, which are necessary in order to notice the transformation. The other image is dependent on these structures and how they play out.

Take space, for example. My interpretation of space is connected to a sculptural way of seeing it – as gaps that are the area in between objects, a phenomena that accentuates the relationship between things, dependent on being in contrast to the other. In order to recognize space you have to put it in relation to place, which could then be the objects. In his book *Space and Place, The Perspective of Experience*, the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan discusses how considerations of space and place are affected by our sense of time – he argues that spaciousness is closely associated with the sense of being free (Tuan, 1977, p.52) and therefore makes the conclusion that,

“Place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other. There is no place like home. What is home?” (ibid., p.3)

We are attached to one and long for the other, but of course they also rely on one another since we need the security and stability of place to be aware of the openness and threat of space. Even if we choose to see space as an existential void, embedded with notions of freedom or the possible fear of its unknown, we still have to put it alongside our sense of time to be able to recognize it at all. When Tuan talks about place as security and space as something less stable, he dismantles these concepts – yet he acknowledges the dependence between place and space.

Tuan considers, in reference to Heidegger (Heidegger develops his thoughts about dwelling and how building belongs to dwelling in his text *Building, Dwelling, Thinking. In Poetry, Language, Thought* from 1971), that a place is defined by the notion of dwelling, inhabiting and therefore knowing about it. And since place is dependent on, or derives from, experience, a place should be seen as a special kind of object. With its concentration of value from this personal experience it's an object in which one can dwell (Tuan 1977, p.12). These objects embedded with value have the possibility to cut through space in order to change notions of it, which doesn't necessarily need to be experiences of e.g. home, or comfort, but that could be applied to spaces within the utilitarian mundane.

“If we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place” (ibid., p.6)

This pause could then take form as an interruption within a city – a bus blocking an intersection, a half-raised ruin or a traffic jam. When this pause occurs, it occurs as an encapsulation of time and space, allowing the interruptions to be interpreted and experienced unto themselves. It has created a knot in time and a break in the (predetermined) flow of space, causing you to recognize the site in a different way. Similarly, when getting caught in a traffic jam instead of just driving from A to B, you find yourself in this break and time passes differently.

Connected to this pause, or knot in time, in thinking around space and place, another reflection upon these concepts comes to mind: if a place is considered something we know of and make use of, then a location where time stands still could be defined as a non-place. A place that has lost its function could be a non-place when no one is there using it, but becomes a place again when acknowledging it – and the knot would then be untied.

The French anthropologist Marc Augé defines the difference between place and non-place in his book *Non-Places, Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1995). Connected to Tuan's ideas of the differences between place and space, Augé refers to place as something that is to be defined as relational, historical and therefore concerned with identity. But instead of reflecting on the other as *space*, he makes the conclusion that a place that is not determined by these concepts is a *non-place* – it still allows movement, but it's connected to notions of capitalism and travel. Augé states as well how supermodernity – our present rushing forward in the senses of capitalism, creating events that we're obligated to register at any one time – produces non-places. By non-place Augé means spaces which are not themselves anthropological places, in the sense that they are listed and classified and assigned to a circumscribed and specific position (ibid., p.77). He argues that a non-place is a place where human beings remain anonymous – it could be a place that's meant for transfer, like motorways and airports, but it could also be for example hotel rooms and shopping malls.

Overall Augé refers to non-places as those that mainly focus on circulation and consumption, meant only for temporary dwelling with no personal connotations tied to them. If you take the airport for instance, it is described as a space formed in relation to certain ends – this will affect the relations that individuals have with these spaces which further extends to how we all basically lose our identity when entering an airport (ibid., p.94). Such places are usually odd and specific in that they are defined partly by the words and texts they offer their 'instructions for use' (ibid., p.96), such as in an airport where the individual is always required to prove its innocence. Still Augé continues that the same things apply to the non-place as to the place, that it never exists in pure form – places reconstitute themselves in

these matters in which the relations are restored and resumed. In this he too acknowledges that the distinction between place and non-place derives from the opposition between place and space.

“[...]a person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer or driver” (ibid., p.103)

Here, the notion of non-place is dependent on time (maybe even encapsulates it) – a non-place is where you pass to get from A to B, where you follow instructions and don't dwell except if you have a specific purpose for it connected to these structures.

“The traveller's space may thus be the archetype of *non-place*” (ibid., p.86)

Augé's arguments point out that non-place is mainly defined by the act of travelling and that this act constitutes the shared identity of its users. If on a journey, coming to a new place, it is the break between the spectator-traveller and the space of the landscape(s) this spectator is rushing through that prevents them from perceiving it as a place. According to Augé, when places like this exist only through the words that evoke them, their instructions of use, they become not only non-places, but *imaginary places* (ibid., p.101, 84, 95). So perceiving a so-called non-place as a defined place would be to create an imaginary one, such as the situation that emerges from an interruption or *pause*, within a space, compressing time. But these arguments also indicate that such a non-place derives from neoliberal and capitalistic ideas (concerning Augé's ideals it might even be the *foundation* of these places). Non-places such as malls and airports are all permeated by capitalistic notions, they wouldn't exist otherwise. We remain anonymous for a non-place is not a place that is relational and concerned with identity tied to the people living there and their contribution to defining it. Based on this anthropological view on place and the anonymity capitalism creates, an airport is then historyless and a place where time in a sense stands still and our common denominator is the identity of being passengers.

You can discern the similarities between the theories of Tuan and Augé – though a difference might be Augé's arguments concerning capitalistic influences and anthropological aspects. Tuan's concept of a 'pause' that interrupts a predetermined flow of space and transforms it into place could further connect this to the notion of reimagination – the interruption allows you to look at your surroundings differently. This pause could occur within Augé's non-place as well – what happens if you choose to dwell in an airport, or if you go there to work everyday; it's not home, but your purpose of entering the airport is not as a passenger. Then the concept of non-place becomes subjective, and this experience transforms it into an 'imaginary place'.

Congruent ideas are examined in Lucy Lippard's *The Lure of the Local: Sense of Place in a Multicentered Society* as well; she describes place as a portion of land/town/cityscape seen from the inside, the resonance of a specific location that is known and familiar and how the external world is mediated through human subjective experience (1997, p.7). Another argument, connected to non-places and the reconstitution of them, by Lippard is unfolded in art historian Miwon Kwon's work *One Place After Another*:

“She [Lippard] begins [...] from the basic premise that space is not a neutral container of void within which social interactions take place but rather an ideological product and instrument in itself. More specifically, she believes that the rapacious growth and transformation of capitalism have subsumed the distinctions of local differences and cultures, and that the particularity of places is continually being homogenized, genericized, and commodified to better accommodate the expansion of capitalism via abstraction of space (or creation of non-places[...])” (Kwon 2004, p.158)

When elaborating these ideas Lippard, as an art historian and curator, further connects them to the production of art – she writes in her text how *The Lure of the Local* is embedded in land, history and culture and the possibilities they hold for place-specific, place-responsible public art and photography that share the goals of a “humanistic geography” (Lippard 1997, p.14). The critique against how these ideas of art production as “humanistic geography” are repeating methodological strategies from anthropology is an argument with which I agree and that is once again examined and elaborated throughout the whole book by Kwon. The critique here lies in the notion of how this kind of public art reproduces certain structures of this expansion of capitalism. I would argue that one paragraph is significant in relation to the ideas of a site's identity as based on our interactions with it. Kwon writes:

“It seems historically inevitable that we will leave behind the nostalgic notion of a site and identity as essentially bound to the physical actualities of a place.... For it is predicated on the belief that a particular site/place, with its identity-giving or identifying properties, exists always and already prior to whatever new cultural forms might be introduced to it or emerge from it” (Kwon 2004, p.164)

The idea that the inherent properties and interpretations of a site give the site identity is what she claims is a belief that will be left behind as the site's identity doesn't exist independently of the cultures that interact with it. So if a garage is supposedly a non-place, born out of the idea of visitors, the structures within that site are set based on those concepts. The function of the garage is for cars to go there and park or turn, and the physical actualities of it are then the metal bars marking out where you should do this. A scenario in which this perspective might shift, however, is for example when people go there to skate these bars – it's no longer a non-place but transforms into a place that's been assigned a new function for interacting with it in a more meaningful sense.

In the beginning of *The Lure of the Local: Sense of Place in a Multicentered Society*, Lucy Lippard writes that places have influenced her life as much as, perhaps more than, people and that she falls for places faster and less conditionally than she does for people. She further

continues that she sees walking alone cross-country as a form of meditation and that motion allows a certain mental freedom that translates a place to a person kinesthetically (Lippard 1997, p.17). I share this feeling (and have been doing so since I was much younger), and connected to, or sprung from, the ideas and arguments I'm examining in this essay when looking at place, this is something that's often disregarded. My perspective is not in the sense of an anthropological one, a discipline of which I'm quite critical, but I'm interested in how these structures play out and how you could interrupt and work with them. And in order to do that I believe you have to acknowledge the role that we play in different situations or (non-)places.

The concepts of place, non-place and space prove integral as the basis of reimagination.

Non-places are created with the aim to maintain a frictionless transit of an anonymous generic multitude where you need the physical actualities – such as signs, or form within architecture – to define the function and further efficiency of a certain non-place. This reminds me of the first site that interested me in the beginning of my masters; a large tunnel in Gullmarsplan, a passage connecting the different parts of the inner and outer city. This junction is created by train tracks, motorways, bicycle lanes and pavements almost winding around each other (even though carefully structured). From inside this tunnel you can experience them all at the same time – through the sound from the cars, the heavy throbbing from the trains and the passengers always on their way, criss-crossing the different lanes. Yet you find yourself in quite a non-place, surrounded by the concrete walls of this functional architecture clearly pointing out the direction. You're supposed to pass by when going from one place to another and somehow it's like you've got nothing to do there, you're just an observer watching a show. I noticed that if you stop and stick around in this tunnel, people will glare at you – because of course you've challenged the conditions of space. But if you visit this location on an early Sunday morning, its appearance has made a shift. When few trains are passing and there's no people around, the notion of this place becomes something else. The functions of these inherent properties become blurry when no one is there activating them, which allows you to reimagine the story it tells.

Walking from the metro station in Hökarängen in the southern suburbs of Stockholm, you pass different kinds of places and non-places juxtaposed within the same location. Close to the metro there're several construction areas where modern, expensive houses are beginning to arise, but the larger part of this suburb is dominated by 50's residential buildings with a center square surrounded by grocery stores and pubs (this place was pioneering in the welfare state-architecture of Sweden). When you've crossed a couple of streets and found your way down, away from the centre and the metro, you find a green enclosure among the mid century buildings. It's surrounded by small cliffs – seemingly this place has once been blasted out of the rocky ground. Further down, in the middle of this area, there's a children's pool. A large but very low concrete structure with one small aluminum ladder that reaches from the ground

to the bottom of the pool. The depth of this pool is 33 centimetres, which seems to make the ladder rather unnecessary. The pool appears abandoned, emptied out, and on one side a fallen leaf has made a rusty mark in the concrete, leaving an image comparable with a fossil. You can read on a sign that the pool is active and filled with water during June and July, so when I last visited this pool on a windy day in November, I noticed a strange sense of void. Without activity this place had lost its function and was now a trifling area of concrete, waiting for the humans to activate it once again.

So I guess in one way the perspectives of these places have, through the span of time and (the loss of) activity, been altered and somehow it's connected to the presence or absence of human beings, and how our bodies are interacting in these situations – one may change the perspectives of a certain site by assigning it new functions *when* interacting with it.

While Robert Smithson reimagines the city of Passaic, emphasizing the ruins or a couple of lonely concrete beams of abandoned places as monuments, Thom Andersen reimagines the city of Los Angeles by the use of wrongfully represented images from Hollywood-movies. Utilizing the different, yet connected, theories by Lippard, Kwon, Augé and Tuan, I'd like to reimagine the predetermined cityscape through challenging, and playing with, the notion of space and place by altering its perspectives or embedded ideas of conduct.

Every space or place serves to compose themselves in fragments: The bus window, creating a dimension we cannot enter until the bus has halted at a destination. The uniformity of the tunnels through which we pass, with their ambiguous details and anonymous inhabitants, only noticed once we've exited. The asphalt in the parking lot, no more than a flat surface, but constricted to its currently designated purpose all the same. This is the subjective perception of the area we forever inhabit, always changing, limited to the extent of what we see. The structures, pieces, forms, all that we define as our place in existence, can be opened for reformation.

Of course, I know movies aren't about places, they're about stories.

If we notice the location, we are not really watching the movie. It's what's up front that counts. Movies bury their traces, choosing for us what to watch, then moving on to something else.

But what if we watch with our voluntary attention, instead of letting the movies direct us?

If you don't like one thing, complain about its opposite as well. The architecture is too eclectic, but it's also too uniform. (Andersen 2004)

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