

A PHENOMENOLOGY OF PLACE AS INTERPRETED ON THE DALLAS COUNTY FARM

Introduction

Traditional resource management plans have primarily focused on only quantifiable aspects of place. This positivistic focus, concerned with predictive and a-historical truths, objectifies both the geographic and human context, which it evaluates. As a result, the constructed understanding of place is often little more than a single perspective, focused on abstracted conceptions of 'site,' as interpreted by an outside, rational 'expert.' Both, the qualitative nature of place and the multiple interpretations of its residents are discounted as subjective.

In contrast, qualitative research is as a humanistic commitment to the study of the social world, from the perspective of the interacting individual (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). Within this broad collection of interpretative methodologies, phenomenology presents itself as a single qualitative method, which allows the researcher to both document and analyze the subjective realm of individual experience. For the context of this research, phenomenology is defined simply as a "philosophical perspective, which suspends, in so far as this is possible, the presuppositions and methods of official science in order to describe the world as the world of intentionality and meaning" (Tuan 1971).

The intent of this study is not to prove that a phenomenological or positivistic approach is preferred, nor to develop a generalized theory of place. Rather, the intent of this contextually specific research is to develop a more holistic understanding of both the geographic and human context of the Dallas County Farm. As such, this section of the report will examine the qualitative aspects of place to supplement current 'objective' analysis of the 'site.' These interpretations, which are typically rejected by more conventional approaches of analysis, are highlighted throughout this chapter as the essential qualities of the farm.

Research assumptions and limitations

From a phenomenological perspective, the intentionality of man, or the inherent relationship between the object of investigation and the subjective interpretation of man, presents itself as the conceptual basis for developing an understanding of place. To more simply restate this foundational assumption, the transition of mere space into place requires human interpretation of the landscape. "Place embodies qualitative and experiential dimensions of a physical setting, which, before all else and like any lived phenomenon, presents itself to us as a matter of the heart" (Million 1992, p. 101).

As a limitation, it is very important to be clear about what this chapter of the report is attempting to investigate. A phenomenology of place, as experienced on the Dallas County Farm, is an attempt to understand the human experiences and interpretations of the existing physical setting. It is not attempt to objectify individual attitudes, values or preferences as observable "behavior." Therefore, as a caveat, this chapter represents the researcher's own interpretation of the qualitative aspects of place. Furthermore, these interpretations are drawn from a basis of limited subjective experiences and informal conversations on the farm. This report is not an end but

rather, a means to beginning a conversation about place, which needs to continue among local stakeholders.

Finally, this section of the report assumes that from a holistic understanding of place, we can more clearly define the subjective identity of a location. As such, the value of identifying and maintaining a spatial distinctiveness are assumed to:

- Reinforce the patterns of everyday life within a selected community (Hester 1993).
- Define a community's identity as a collective entity (Hester 1993).
- Help individual residents relate to the complexity of the modern day life (Hay 1998).

Inventory

The following inventory of human experiences and understandings of the Dallas County Farm are presented through the interpretive perspective of the researcher. This perspective is based on conversations with residents of Dallas County and initial visits to the site. This section of the report is not an unbiased analysis of the farm guided by objective assumptions of rational science. Rather, this inventory attempts to present a transparent evaluation of place against a backdrop of internal and external interpretations.

In "It was home: a phenomenology of place and involuntary displacement," Million (1992) constructs a conceptual framework to understand the subjective and inherently related objective realms of place. As such, Million's research provides a theoretical context and an interpretive perspective for this research. However, unlike Million's ontic and ontological interpretation of the Oldman River Dam, this report will stay focused solely on the "ontic" dimensions of place. That is, the emergence of place constructed out of a human need within a conceptual framework of a definable end.

Viewing from a distance

This first section of the inventory evaluates the external interpretations of the farm *by outsiders* and *as an outsider*. The three following concepts are highlighted throughout the section:

- Threat
- Identity
- Interpretation

Two groups within the community classify the external interpretations of place. The first group, the residents of Dallas County as a whole, is largely supportive of the current facility and farming operations. Strikingly, this population is uncritical of the techniques employed on the farm or the cost of its operation. The residents of Dallas County continue to conceptualize the farm as an icon within the community, perpetuating traditional concepts of place.

The second group, individuals that had been empowered by various roles of leadership, views the farm as a "trust of the community." From this perspective, the farm is conceptualized as a use of

the land with a defined financial cost to the community. As a result, these individuals visualize the role of the farm as a justification of its cost. The human interpretation of place is intertwined with concepts of marketing and communication. Thus, the farm in this second perspective represents a communication means rather than a symbolic end.

These multiple external interpretations of the farm reveal little that we probably already did not know. Like objects, places mean different things to different people. The farm presents multiple identities across the plurality of individual interpretations. These identities include the following:

- An educational facility
- A traditional farm
- A care facility
- An opportunity for research and alternative practices
- A opportunity to construct a horse facility
- A relationship with the natural environment

At this point, it is important to note that maintaining a collective entity or advertising a constructed ideal implies the selection of a single identity among the existing plural interpretations of place. Therefore, an emergent understanding of the essence of the farm is a conversation that is necessary within the human context of selection and management. Without such a conversation, stakeholders could not begin to prioritize their interpretations, in the light of future change.

The final concept to be reviewed externally is that of threat. Threat is defined here as a perceivable risk to the human and/or physical context of any place. Externally, community leaders perceive no immediate threat to the physical context of the site. However, as we have begun to note, the physical context is only one dimension of place. Any change in the use of the landscape will directly affect individual interpretations and thus, human conceptions of the farm as a place. Therefore, even if the farm remains county land, the concepts of place could still be altered. Furthermore, because the concept of threat does include a certain dimension of time, it is important to note that in a political framework, threat is interpreted within four-year time periods.

Viewing from up close

The natural contrast of external interpretation is that of internal evaluation. Within this second conceptual framework of the inventory, the details of the physical settings are interpreted first by the evaluation of the insider and then again by the portrayal of the data. As such, the following presentation of internal perspectives details three constituents of place:

- Work
- Pleasure
- Name

One primary way that place is brought into being is through the very act of naming it (Million 1992). As presented in the previous chapter of this report (see Strauss, Chapter 1), both the farm

and care facility have undergone several rounds of naming and renaming. The implications of this process have affected how the farm and the residents of the facility have been viewed from the outside. However, in the context of this research it is not as important to note the social implications of title but rather, the concept of "fit" within the farm's current linguistic label.

The current name, Dallas County Farm and Care Facility, denotes the contemporary political distinction between the two physical entities. However, this same nominal distinction reflects current uses of the land, which are grounded in a collective familiarity and embedded within a history of the community. Thus, the name 'farm' itself reinforces a central identity of place that 'fits' in the human context of Dallas County.

A second means that place comes into being is through the experiential role of pleasure (Million 1992). Pleasure, like naming, reflects a human utility of the physical setting. More importantly, pleasurable participation of place deepens our caring for and relationship with the geographic context. Thus, an inventory of pleasurable uses on the site is also central to our developing understanding of the essential qualities of Dallas County farm.

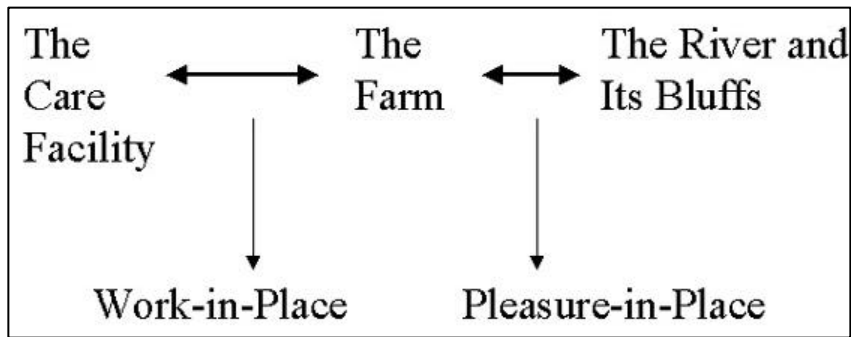
When questioned about which elements of the site are worth preserving, insiders reflect upon their use of the 'natural' context along the river corridor. The constituent pleasure-in-place extends beyond the boundaries of one's daily concerns and thus, alters the focus of the site away from the traditional uses of the landscape. Here, we again find the conceptual 'fit' between the physical setting and the human context. The pleasurable use of the river and its surrounding bluffs represents a conceptual balance within the backdrop of daily work.

Work presents itself as the last human relationship with the physical setting that defines the essence of place. Pragmatic un-coverings of the geographic context reinforce the human foundations of place (Million 1992). Here, the landscape has been 'fitted' to the ontic needs of the population and thus, represents another constituent of place.

The constituent work-in-place again centers the essence of the farm back towards the historical land use of the physical setting. Obviously, contemporary uses of the landscape have emerged within the context of empirical time. Modern operations and practices have been integrated with the historical context of the site. The new acknowledges the past.

However, less obvious is the participatory dimension of this constituent as a collective human need. Work-in-place reflects the active participation of the production of food. This dimension of place thus, reinforces the interdependence between the individual and the environment. As such, human interpretation presents itself as a foundation element in definition of the Dallas County Farm and Care Facility as a place. From this perspective, the farm more clearly 'fits' within the context of the care facility.

Finally, by combining the human and geographic contexts, we can now begin to visualize that the separate physical entities of the site are conceptually united by the essential interpretations of place. This conceptual understanding of the Dallas County Farm presents itself as a continuum in which, the essential qualities of the physical setting are embedded within the human context of interpretation.



Place defined as a continuum of essential qualities embedded in both the physical setting and the human context.

Analysis

The inventory of the various dimensions of place has begun to reveal that the essential qualities of the farm are deeply embedded within the lifeworld of its residents. Furthermore, the constituents work-in-place and pleasure-in-place unite the essential qualities of place along a continuum of human interpretation. As such, individual interpretations of the Dallas County Farm are inherently related to the habitual cycles of daily life and use of the landscape. More importantly, due to the embedded nature of subconscious interpretation, these essential qualities of place were revealed to the researcher only through a process of critical reflection. Therefore, within this embedded context, the majority of the residents of Dallas County do not actively perceive the essential qualities of place. Nor, could these essential elements enter individual consciousness without the critical reflection of one's own lifeworld.

Hester (1993) proposes that sacred spaces or embedded qualities of place only presented themselves to insiders after four stages of recognition. These stages include the following:

- Stage One - Threat; Essential qualities of place enter the collective awareness of the community, only after sacred spaces are threatened.
- Stage Two - Legitimization; The acceptance of local sacred spaces as worthy of preservation.
- Stage Three – Collective Awareness; The recognition of place as a collective framework for a community's social activities and cherished rituals.
- Stage Four - Consecration; a process of setting aside the most important aspects of place from the less valued ones.

Hester's recommendations suggest that internal perspectives, which do perceive a threat, may have a better understanding of the essential qualities of place. And secondly, that the community of Dallas County, comprised of both internal and external perspectives, must first begin to go through the process of recognition, if the intent is to preserve the existing geographic and human context of place.

Management Recommendations

The analysis of this research suggests that only after internal interpretations of the farm have begun to recognize the essential qualities of place, could any plan hope to maintain the existing

geographic and human context of place. Therefore, this research does not attempt to recommend a management plan *per se*, but rather suggests Hester's (1993) process of recognition as a first step in the preparation of a management plan.

This section of the report would also reinforce that, in light of future development, any change of land use implies a change in the nature of the place. Based on this finding, the question of identity begins to present itself more clearly. That is, what identity of place does the community want to preserve on the Dallas County Farm? More importantly, because spatial identity is inherently related to human conceptions of place, it is important to reiterate that external perceptions, which perceive no threat contrast internal perspectives that do. That is, as a "trust of the community," the farm may not be in any immediate political threat; however, due to the embedded nature of subconscious interpretations, the place may be.

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