PLACE

an introduction

SECOND EDITION

Tim Cresswell

WILEY Blackwell

Table of Contents

- Title page
- Copyright page
- Dedication
- Figures
- Acknowledgments
- Foreword
- 1: Introduction: Defining Place
  - Space and Place
  - Place and Landscape
  - Place as a Way of Understanding
  - The Remainder of the Book
  - References
- 2: The Genealogy of Place
  - The Emergence of Place in Western Thought
  - Describing Places in Regional Geography
  - Discovering Place: Humanistic Geography
  - Place as Home?
  - Radical Human Geography and the Politics of Place
  - Place as “Being-in-the-World” versus Place as Social Construct
  - Assembling Place
  - Conclusions: Versions of Place
  - References
- 3: Place in a Mobile World
  - Place, Practice, and Process
  - Place, Openness, and Change

- The End of Place?
- Place, Identity, and Mobility
- Conclusion
- References

4: Reading “A Global Sense of Place”
- Historical Context
- Harvey on Place
- “A Global Sense of Place”
- Beyond Reactionary and Progressive Senses of Place
- Conclusions
- References

5: Working with Place – Creating Places
- Creating Place in a Mobile World
- Place and Memory
- Place and Architecture
- A Nice Place to Live
- Regions and Nations as Places
- Digital Place
- Place and Art
- Conclusions
- References

6: Working with Place – Anachorism
- Sexuality Out-of-Place
- The Homeless – People without Place
- Animals Out-of-Place
- Conclusions
- References

7: Place Resources

Key Books on Place
Introductory Texts on Place
Key Papers on Place
Other Books and Papers on Place
Key Journals
Web Resources
Student Projects and Essays
Index
End User License Agreement

List of Illustrations

Figure 1.1 Demonstrations in Tahrir Square, Cairo, Egypt demanding the removal of President Mubarak and his regime in 2011. Source: photo by Jonathan Rashad (Flickr) [CC-BY-2.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0)], via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 1.2 A Manhattan community garden. These were built on vacant lots by local residents when the land had been abandoned by the government. When land became valuable the city government demolished many of these in the East Village in order to build apartments and parking lots. Source: the photo was taken by participant/team Corn Fed Chicks as part of the Commons:Wikis Take Manhattan project on October 4, 2008. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license. http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0 CC-BY-SA-3.0 Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 truetrue (Contributed by author) [CC-BY-SA-3.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)], via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 1.3 Tompkins Square Park, New York City. Here sunbathers relax on the central knoll but this place has been the site of numerous protests and struggles. Source: photo by David Shankbone [CC-BY-SA-3.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0) or GFDL (http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html)], via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 1.4 St. Mark's Place in Manhattan's East Village. A busy shopping street full of boutiques, coffee shops, and other signs of a gentrified place. Source: photo by Beyond My Ken (own work) [GFDL (http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html) or CC-BY-SA-3.0-2.5-2.0-1.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)], via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 1.5 Graffiti on the Lower East Side, Manhattan. Some forms of place-making are less formal but are, nonetheless, important components in creating a sense of place. Source: photo by Summ (own work) [GFDL (http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html), CC-BY-SA-3.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/) or CC-BY-SA-2.5-2.0-1.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.5-2.0-1.0)], via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 2.1 Gay liberation monument, Christopher Park, NewYork City. A positive form of identity construction through place. Source: photo by Dennis (DennisInAmsterdam on flickr.com) (http://flickr.com/photos/rith/298094205/) [CC-BY-SA-2.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0)], via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 2.2 The Millennium Gate at Chinatown, Vancouver, Canada. A generic symbol of Chinese identity? Source: photo by MRDXII (Own work) [CC-BY-

SA-3.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)], via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 3.1 Desire lines on the Australian National University campus. Source: photo by User:Nick-D (own work) [CC-BY-SA-1.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/1.0)], via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 3.2 Cinderella's Castle at Walt Disney World, Orlando, Florida. Authors have argued that tourist places such as Disney World are not real places but "placeless" places or "pseudo-places" with no real history and no sense of belonging. Source: photo by SteamFan (own work (Nikon D80)) [GFDL (http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html), CC-BY-SA-3.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/) or CC-BY-2.5 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5)], via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 3.3 Widecombe-in-the-Moor, a village on Dartmoor, England. When people think and write about place they often fix on old small places that seem "authentic" such as this village on Dartmoor. Think, for instance, of the way Heidegger wrote about a cabin in the Black Forest to make his argument about "being-in-the-world." Source: photo by Manfred Heyde (Own work) [GFDL (http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html) or CC-BY-SA-3.0-2.5-2.0-1.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)], via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 3.4 Chhatrapari Shivaji Airport, Mumbai. Airports, by contrast, are frequently described as non-places or placeless. They do not appear to have histories and are marked by transience and mobility. Source: photo by Alex Graves from Lugano, Switzerland (Mumbai Airport) [CC-BY-SA-2.0

(http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0)], via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 5.1 "Out of rear window tenement dwelling of Mr and Mrs Jacob Solomon, 133 Avenue D, New York City." Photo by Dorothea Lange. Source: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection [LC-USF34-009114-C DLC].

Figure 5.2 Christian cross at Auschwitz. Source: photo by Signalhead at en.wikipedia [CC-BY-SA-3.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0) or GFDL (http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html)], from Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 5.3 The Statue of Liberty, New York City. The Statue of Liberty is a world-recognized symbol of the United States which celebrates and memorializes a particular story of American nationhood as a nation of more or less welcome immigrants. It is an official place of memory. Source: photo by William Warby (originally posted to Flickr as Statue of Liberty) [CC-BY-2.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0)], via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 5.4 Ellis Island Immigration Museum hall. This room was used to process immigrants when Ellis Island was used as an immigration station. Now it is part of a museum built to commemorate the immigrant experience and its role in American life. Source: photo by Jean-Christophe BENOIST (Own work) [CC-BY-3.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0)], via Wikimedia Commons.

Figures 5.5 and 5.6 Ellis Island (above) and Angel Island (below). Unlike Ellis Island, Angel Island, in San Francisco Bay, has not become a nationally celebrated place of memory. While Ellis Island processed mainly

European immigrants who have become part of the "melting pot" ideology of the nation, Angel Island was used to house Chinese would-be immigrants prevented from entering the nation. Source: Ellis Island photo by A. Coeffler, 24 February 1905, Library of Congress, via Wikimedia Commons. Angel Island photo by Hart Hyatt North *c.* 1943, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Figure 5.7 The inside of Nant-y-Cwm Steiner School in West Wales, designed by Christopher Day. Day believes in the necessity of building a holistic place that encourages well-being. Rounded corners are preferred to right angles, calming colors are used. Source: photo by Humphrey Bolton, http://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/603950. Creative CommonsAttribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic (CC BY-SA 2.0).

Figure 5.8 Parc de la Villette, Paris, designed by Bernard Tschumi. Tschumi believed in radically departing from the historical context of the local area in designing this park. It is marked by modern abstract forms, straight lines, and right angles. Source: photo by Jean-Marie Hullot from France (Parc de la Villette Uploaded by paris 17) [CC-BY-SA-2.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0)], via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 5.9 The Angel of the North. Source: photo by The Halo (taken by The Halo) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.

Figures 5.10 and 5.11 "Nowhereisland" by Alex Hartley. As the island sculpture travelled around the southwest coast of England it was accompanied by a land-based converted horse van which acted as both a

museum for the new nation and an embassy where citizens could sign up. Source: photos by author.

Figure 6.1 Illustration from *Harper's* magazine (1876). Here the domestic space of the home, complete with woman, child, and dinner on the table, is threatened by the tramp who comes to the door.

Figure 6.2 A ringnecked parakeet on a bird feeder in Bromley, London, UK. Source: photo by tiny_packages (originally posted to Flickr as Garden Parakeet) [CC-BY-2.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0)], via Wikimedia Commons.

Place

An Introduction

Second Edition

Tim Cresswell

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For Yi-Fu Tuan

Figures

1.1 Demonstrations in Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt, 2011

1.2 A Manhattan community garden

1.3 Tompkins Square Park, New York City

1.4 St. Mark's Place in Manhattan's East Village

1.5 Graffiti on the Lower East Side, Manhattan

2.1 Gay liberation monument, Christopher Park, NewYork City

2.2 The Millennium Gate at Chinatown, Vancouver, Canada

3.1 Desire lines on the Australian National University campus

3.2 Cinderella's Castle at Walt Disney World, Orlando, Florida

3.3 Widecombe-in-the-Moor, Dartmoor, England

3.4 Chhatrapari Shivaji Airport, Mumbai

5.1 “Out of rear window tenement dwelling of Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Solomon, 133 Avenue D, New York City”

5.2 Christian cross at Auschwitz

5.3 The Statue of Liberty, New York City

5.4 Ellis Island Immigration Museum hall

5.5 and 5.6 Ellis Island and Angel Island

5.7 The inside of Nant-y-Cwm Steiner School in West Wales

5.8 Parc de la Villette, Paris

5.9 The Angel of the North

5.10 and 5.11 “Nowhereisland” by Alex Hartley

6.1 Illustration from *Harper's* magazine (1876)

6.2 A ringnecked parakeet on a bird feeder in Bromley, London, UK

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Extracts from *Space, Place, and Gender* (1994) by Doreen Massey are used by permission of Polity Press, University of Minnesota Press, and the author.

Foreword

The first edition of *Place: A Short Introduction* was published in 2004 as part of a series of short introductions in geography. The idea was to focus on a concept rather than a traditional subfield. I had some doubt as to whether such a book would have a market as a teaching tool. While a concept such as place is clearly central to the discipline of geography – the discipline I was writing for and from – it is rarely the case that there is a course with place as its singular focus. I have been delighted, therefore, at the way the first edition has been used so widely both in geography and beyond. It was much more successful that I ever imagined. It certainly has been widely used as a text book in geography courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. What is more encouraging is the way it has been used across disciplines it was not explicitly aimed at. These include creative writing, English literature, American studies, religious studies, architecture, and interdisciplinary liberal arts. There are even courses with the title “place studies” that use it.

In addition to the obvious importance of place across a range of disciplines in the academy, there has been a resurgence of place issues in the wider world beyond. The events of the Arab Spring and Occupy were frequently framed around place issues. There have been lively discussions about the effects of multinationals and chain stores on the downtowns of cities. The idea of the local (a derivative of place) has been powerful in the rise of new-old forms of food culture and economic systems. Writing about place in the form of creative non-fiction has seen a renaissance in the United Kingdom (the place I know best) with place-based books appearing in national newspapers

and in the bestseller lists. Art, too, has continued to ask questions of place and belonging.

Researching and writing about place, then, is clearly both an interdisciplinary endeavor and a practice that extends beyond the academy. For this reason the second edition of *Place: A Short Introduction* is a more interdisciplinary and outward-looking book, less focused on the discipline of geography. Geography has a lot to offer, thanks to its history of focusing on place, but it is not the sole owner of the concept. This is an offering, from the place of geography, to the wider world. This edition is about 50 percent longer than the first edition and, therefore, not so "short." I hope, nevertheless, to have maintained the accessibility of the first edition. In addition to a more generally interdisciplinary sense to the book, there are added sections which reflect the engagement with place across disciplines. These include sections on philosophy, architecture, art and place, information technologies, assemblage theory, and animal geographies amongst others. Otherwise encouraging notes from a few readers noted a number of errors in the first edition and I am grateful to them. I have kept a list and have hopefully rectified these issues.

1
Introduction: Defining Place

Place is one of the two or three most important terms for my discipline – geography. If pushed, I would argue that it is the most important of them all. Geography is about place and places. But place is not the property of geography – it is a concept that travels quite freely between disciplines and the study of place benefits from an interdisciplinary approach. Indeed, the philosopher JEFF MALPAS (2010) has argued that “place is perhaps the key term for interdisciplinary research in the arts, humanities and social sciences in the twenty-first century.”

This book is, therefore, both a disciplinary account of a key geographical concept and an interdisciplinary introduction to an issue that transcends geography, philosophy, or any other discipline. Regardless of the discipline we are rooted in, and despite this general enthusiasm for the study of places, there has been very little considered understanding of what the word “place” means. This is as true in theory and philosophy as it is among the new students signing up for university geography courses. Place is a word that seems to speak for itself.

Given geography's long history of grappling with the issue of place, the relatively recent resurgence in interest in place across disciplines and in the wider world presents an opportunity for geography to situate itself at the center of a lively interdisciplinary debate. Discussions of place are popping up everywhere. Creative writers and literary scholars have been busy rediscovering and “re-enchanting” place. In the English-speaking world there has been a resurgence in creative non-fiction which puts place at the

heart of things. Writing on both “wild” and urban places has become more visible with the popularity of forms of “psychogeography” and nature-writing (Sinclair 2009, Macfarlane 2007). A recent collection of essays and poems about places across Britain was titled *Towards Re-Enchantment: Place and Its Meanings* (Evans and Robson 2010). The text on the cover reads “Here are paths, offered like an open hand, towards a new way of being in the world, At a time when multiple alienations of modern society threaten our sense of belonging, the importance of ‘place’ to creative possibility in life and art cannot be underestimated.” Artists, too, are grappling with place. Gstaad, in Switzerland, is a small alpine town visited regularly by the richest people in the world. It is a place for the 1 percent. Recently it was also the site of an array of artistic interventions by some of the world's leading conceptual artists. One of the installations, by the British artist Christian Marclay, is a video screen installed in a cable car which shows extracts from Bollywood movies which are set in the immediate vicinity. Gstaad, it turns out, is frequently used as a setting for escapist dream and dance sequences in Bollywood movies. The idea for the exhibition was Neville Wakefield's. Wakefield is a curator for the British art fair Frieze. His rationale for the project is outlined in an article in the *New York Times*.

But the show…is also a response to their frustration with seeing so much art “set in these jewel box architectural spaces, and you really can't tell whether you are in Singapore, Shanghai, Berlin, London or whatever,” Mr. Wakefield said, adding, “What's happened in terms of making art accessible is that it's homogenized.”

Their exhibition, he said, is meant to be an antidote to the “art-fair, urban, white-cube gallery experience.”

“It is difficult to get to,” Mr. Wakefield added, “but because of that, it also demands a different kind of attention. You discover the art through the place and the place through the art” (Donadio 2014, C2).

The exhibition at Gstaad reflects a wider interest in how art and place interact on the part of both artists and art theorists (Doherty 2009, Hawkins 2010, Kwon 2002).

It is not just the creative world of writers and artists that are engaging place. At the other end of subjective–objective spectrum, place has also entered the lexicon of businesses and scholars who use geographic information systems (GIS). GIS are sophisticated computational software systems that can represent data spatially in the form of maps. Since their origin they have largely been centered on the manipulation and representation of quantifiable things in a spatial form. To many writers on the theme of place (as we shall see later), this has been the opposite of an interest in place. Recently, however, the fusion of mapping software with social media software has led to a new level of what we might think of as “augmented” place. Our phones (at least the smart phones that many of us, usually living in the Global North now have) know where we are. They are linked to data that knows where other people or things are too. They provide a level of information about place. Apps such as Foursquare are premised on an interest in place. They ask what we think of a place (public square, restaurant, etc.) and tell us what other people think of it. They even allow us to become “Mayor” of our favorite hangout, if we go there and log in frequently enough. This merging of GIS and social media apps has not gone unnoticed by GIS scholars who have started to engage more fully with place as a concept. Consider just one example:

Formalizing place in the GIS context will be both interesting and challenging; until recently, place has been off the intellectual radar screen of GIScientists, many of whom appear to use the two terms *place* and *space* somewhat interchangeably. Preliminary work has begun in the digital gazetteer literature…In a broader sense, the emerging GIS literature of the past 15 years has caused a subtle shift of focus from space to place, with its rich cultural dimensions; yet in GIScience, we still do not have an overarching theory of place or how to work with the concept. (Sui and Goodchild 2011, 1744)

The interest of GIS scholars in place reflects the profound way in which software developers in the corporate world have been engaging in place in sometimes sinister ways. Politicians want to know about place to finely target their funds at swing voters. Supermarkets want to know about our shopping habits so they can encourage us to buy more. Police forces and security services want to know about the links between crime and place so that they can more effectively discipline and survey. Google Maps purports to tell us about the places around us in objective ways but, in fact, is filtering place for us – directing us towards businesses that have engineered their appearance on the first page of a Google search. Software is *producing* DigiPlace (Zook and Graham 2007).

And place is central to forms of struggle and resistance too. Recognizing the danger in Google mapping the world, others are producing an open source map (OpenStreetMap) project that does not allow corporations a monopoly on the production of place. An article in *The Guardian* online reported on these efforts under the subheading “Geography is big business.”

The modern daytime dilemma is geography, and everyone is looking to be the definitive source. Google spends $1bn annually maintaining their maps, and that does not include the $1.5bn Google spent buying the navigation company Waze. Google is far from the only company trying to own everywhere, as Nokia purchased Navteq and TomTom and Tele Atlas try to merge. All of these companies want to become the definitive source of what's on the ground.

That's because what's on the ground has become big business. With GPSes in every car, and a smartphone in every pocket, the market for telling you where you are and where to go has become fierce.

With all these companies, why do we need a project like OpenStreetMap? The answer is simply that as a society, no one company should have a monopoly on place, just as no one company had a monopoly on time in the 1800s. Place is a shared resource, and when you give all that power to a single entity, you are giving them the power not only to tell you about your location, but to shape it. (Wroclawski 2014, npn)

This struggle over virtual place reflects longstanding struggles over place by protest movements around the world. In 1989 protesters all over the world took over prominent places and brought about political change of historic significance. The crossing and demolition of the Berlin Wall was perhaps the most significant example. In China, up to a million student protestors and their supporters occupied Tiananmen Square in Beijing before they were brutally removed on June 3 and 4. The fact that it was Tiananmen Square (named after Tiananmen Gate, the Gate of Heavenly Peace) was significant as this was and is a prominent place in the symbolism of the Chinese nation, surrounded by important buildings, such as the Great Hall of the People, signifying the Chinese state and nation. More

recently we have seen waves of protest in Tahrir Square in Egypt as part of the so-called “Arab Spring.” First the longstanding leader of Egypt, President Mubarak, was forced to step down in 2011 and then, in June 2013, possibly the largest public protest in history occurred, leading the military to remove the elected president, Mohammed Morsi. The square became an important place for protest. During the occupations a Facebook page called “Tahrir Square” was set up to counter official news outlets' representations of the protest. In 2013 a documentary film, *The Square*, was released, tracking a number of protestors through the period 2011 to 2013. In each case it was clear that the square as a place played a significant role in the various protest movements.

Figure 1.1 Demonstrations in Tahrir Square, Cairo, Egypt demanding the removal of President Mubarak and his regime in 2011. Source: photo by Jonathan Rashad (Flickr) [CC-BY-2.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0)], via Wikimedia Commons.

The politics of place was also clear in the tactics of the Occupy movement which made the occupation of prominent places the central tactic in its practice of protest

against a range of economic and social injustices. Images of encampments in Zuccotti Park in New York City or outside St. Paul's Cathedral in the City of London spoke to the need to contest the ability of the powerful to have a “monopoly on place.” The *New York Times* journalist, Michael Kimmelman, noted the significance of place.

We tend to underestimate the political power of physical places. Then Tahrir Square comes along. Now it's Zuccotti Park, until four weeks ago an utterly obscure city-block-size downtown plaza with a few trees and concrete benches, around the corner from ground zero and two blocks north of Wall Street on Broadway. A few hundred people with ponchos and sleeping bags have put it on the map.

Kent State, Tiananmen Square, the Berlin Wall: we clearly use locales, edifices, architecture to house our memories and political energy. Politics troubles our consciences. But places haunt our imaginations. (Kimmelman 2011)

Kimmelman was struck by the way a physical being-together accentuated the efficacy of the Occupy camp in New York City. While forms of networking over a distance through social media were undeniably a key part of the protest movement it was equally clear that its physical presence – as a place – both bound the protestors together in a concrete way and sent more of a message to the watching world.

The protesters have set up a kitchen, for serving food, a legal desk and a sanitation department, a library of donated books, an area where the general assembly meets, a medical station, a media center where people can recharge their laptops using portable generators, and even a general store, called the comfort center, stocked with donated clothing, bedding, toothpaste and deodorant – like the food, all free for the taking. (Kimmelman 2011)

Place pops up everywhere. In this brief account we have already encountered creative writings, the world of conceptual art, computational mapping and forms of protest. In each case we have seen a recognition of the often mentioned “power of place.” Most of these are encountered from reading the paper (or browsing websites) over coffee. You do not have to try too hard to find examples of the ways in which place is important. We could add, for instance, the evocation of place in the production of local food, the reference to *terroir* on the back of the wine bottle at dinner, the promotion of place in the marketing of a new housing development or a holiday destination or the call to place in the efforts of environmentalists protecting watersheds.

Given the ubiquity of place, it is a problem that no one quite knows what they are talking about when they are talking about place. Place is not a specialized piece of academic terminology. It is a word we use daily in the English-speaking world. It can be evoked in so many disparate ways because it is a word wrapped in common sense. In one sense this makes it easier to grasp, as it is familiar. In another sense, however, this makes it more slippery as the subject of a book. As we already think we know what it means, it is hard to get beyond that common-sense level in order to understand it in a more developed way. Place, then, is both simple (and that is part of its appeal) and complicated. It is the purpose of this book to scrutinize the concept of place and its centrality to both interdisciplinary academic endeavor and everyday life.

Think of the ways place is used in everyday speech. “Would you like to come round to my place?” This suggests ownership or some kind of connection between a person and a particular location or building. It also suggests a notion of privacy and belonging. “My place” is not “your place” – you and I have different places. “Brisbane is a nice

place.” Here “place” is referring to a city in a common-sense kind of way and the fact that it is nice suggests something of the way it looks and what it is like to be there. “She put me in my place” refers to more of a sense of position in a social hierarchy. “A place for everything and everything in its place” is another well-known phrase that suggests that there are particular orderings of things in the world that have a socio-geographical basis. Place is everywhere. This makes it different from other terms in geography like “territory,” which announces itself as a specialized term, or “landscape” which is not a word that permeates through our everyday encounters. So what is this “place”?

Cast your mind back to the first time you moved into a particular space – a room in college accommodation is a good example. You are confronted with a particular area of floor space and a certain volume of air. In that room there may be a few rudimentary pieces of furniture such as a bed, a desk, a set of drawers and a closet. These are common to all the rooms in the complex. They are not unique and mean nothing to you beyond the provision of certain necessities of student life. Even these bare essentials have a history. A close inspection may reveal that a former owner has inscribed her name on the desk in an idle moment between classes. There on the carpet you notice a stain where someone has spilt some coffee. Some of the paint on the wall is missing. Perhaps someone had used putty to put up a poster. These are the hauntings of past inhabitation. This anonymous space has a history – it meant something to other people. Now what do you do? A common strategy is to make the space say something about you. You add your own possessions, rearrange the furniture within the limits of the space, put your own posters on the wall, arrange a few books purposefully on the desk. Thus space is turned into place. Your place.

The term 40.46°N 73.58°W does not mean much to most people. Some people with a sound knowledge of the globe may be able to tell you what this signifies but to most of us these are just numbers indicating a location – a site without meaning. These coordinates mark the location of New York City – somewhere south of Central Park in Manhattan. Immediately many images come into our heads. New York or Manhattan are place names rich with meaning. We might think of skyscrapers, of 9/11, of shopping or of any number of movie locations. Replacing a set of numbers with a name means that we begin to approach "place." If we heard that two planes had flown into 40.46°N 73.58°W it would not have quite the same impact as hearing that they had flown into New York, into Manhattan, into the Twin Towers. Cruise missiles are programmed with locations and spatial referents. If they could be programmed with "place" instead, with all the understanding that implies, they might decide to ditch in the desert.

Towards the southern tip of Manhattan and to the east of center is an area – a place – known as the Lower East Side. This is an area which has been known as a place of successive immigrant groups – Irish, Jewish, German, Italian, Eastern European, Haitian, Puerto Rican, Chinese. It is a little to the north of the infamous Five Corners – the setting for the film *The Gangs of New York* (2002). It is a place of closely knit tenement blocks south of Houston Street – buildings once crammed with large families in small rooms. A succession of moral panics over immigration has focused on this place. It has also been a place of political uprisings and police riots. In the middle of this place is Tompkins Square Park, a little piece of nature in the city built to provide a place of calm in the hurly burly of metropolitan life. It was built in the 1830s and named after the US vice-president Daniel Tompkins. Later the park became a place of demonstrations by unions and anarchists