

Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory and Identity

Philip Sheldrake. 2001.

The John Hopkins University Press. Baltimore, Maryland, 214 pages

Reviewed by Erin Tapley

"The hermeneutics of place progressively reveals new meanings in a kind of conversation between topography, memory and the presence of particular people at any given moment." (p. 17)

I seldom read books from the non-fiction religious section for pleasure, but as an installation artist, I am drawn to books flagging the concept of space and sacredness in their titles. The contents of, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory and Identity*, are mentally invigorating, and although the author is a theological lecturer, the focal topic is worthwhile to artists and educators. The ways in which we revere or change sacred, secular, human-made or natural spaces may be called art.

Author Philip Sheldrake is a long-time inquisitor of religion and its hold on spatiality. He combined spiritually related experience in India with that of his upbringing on the monastery-laden shores of Great Britain to create lectures for the Cambridge University Divinity School, the place where he compiled writings for this book. Appropriate spaces for art and creativity can be inferred from his reader-friendly prose.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this book is the beginning and ending with millennial angst and the author's attempt to configure futuristic and urban space. Sheldrake, in fact, lives near the infamous, Greenwich-based Millennium Dome, which was built as a type of collective and perhaps semi-sacred space created to welcome the new millennium. Although the Dome remains the largest on earth, its public attraction and interior exhibits failed miserably in the commercial sense. Within months after 2001 became a reality, the Dome folded its initial tourist-based functions, and its future remains unclear. Although the Millennium Dome might be considered a huge artistic installation, Sheldrake cites it as an attempt to make a collective space meaningful. Says Sheldrake, "... (the Dome) highlights the vital connection between three things: place, memory and human identity. The concept of place refers not simply to geographical location but to a dialectical relationship between environment and human narrative" (p.1).

Like strangers, few of the thousands of places the average person encounters on a daily basis will be remembered. I found myself compelled throughout the book to ask these questions: How does an encounter in a space become significant? Are people and their productions the fundamental factors that differentiate space and place? How can this be manipulated for

mass effect? How does art define space, or even inversely, how might space or place define art? All of the examples presented in this book, while they are based primarily in Sheldrake's Christian scholarship, can be viewed through a Dissanayake-type (1988) lens. Spaces become memorable places that can be "made special" through human manipulation or artistic enhancement.

Sheldrake recognizes other philosophers, especially Ricoeur. According to Sheldrake, Ricoeur espoused allowing history to be seen through individual narrative, which implied the denial of any universal truth. Place enters this paradigm because one's perception of his or her own life story inevitably takes place in a setting determined by his or her own distinct perception. Chapter one is particularly rich with philosophically grounded discussions of all that determines "place" perception. One of Sheldrake's persistent theses is the curious tension between "making comfortable or making memorable." In analogical terms, this is also the paradox of earthly and heavenly realms, as the Christian church and many other religions throughout time have understood it.

The author is fascinated with the early Christians as a nebulous group of disciples meeting anywhere they could. Then, in the three hundred years following the death of Christ, the transformation of the belief system into church-based ritual was solidified through the establishment of significant places. The Age of Cathedrals moved this phenomenon into a larger, urban context. Cathedrals inhabited cities, and citizens decorated their cathedrals to provide their cities and themselves with distinct senses of place and character.

Anyone educated in art is also privy to the primary intent of Cathedrals as reliquaries and places for ritualistic heavenly transport via stained glass, sculpture or other lavish art forms. Although many Protestants would desire to cast away this extravagance, conservative ecclesiasts believed in it as spiritual vehicle. Sheldrake includes Abbot Suger's description of the doors of the Abbey of St. Denis:

*Whoever you are, if you seek to extol the glory of these doors
Do not marvel at the gold and the expense but at the craftsmanship
of the work*

*Bright is the noble work; but, being nobly bright, the work
Should brighten the minds so that they may travel through to the
true lights... (p. 54)*

Artistic flourishes uplift, educate and ultimately define us as people of a certain age, culture and geography.

Sheldrake's discussion of the church's esthetic dwellers is also fascinating. Monastic living is about stasis, peripheral location and a type of austere, regulated group experience, which can promote spiritual and artistic enlightenment. Ironically, while this lifestyle emphasizes non-materialism

and non-embellishment of dwelling place, monasteries have often supported themselves by producing small-scale art to decorate the cathedrals and palaces in the societies from which they removed themselves. Sheldrake did not compare monastic living to secular art colonies, but I think the similarities are uncanny. "Getting away from it all" to focus on the meaning and direction of one's artistry defines the art colony. Art colonists are attracted by this productivity through isolation and distance from the distractions of "home."

But what about the concept of "home" today for people around the world? This question could define the gist of the book's last and most thought-provoking chapter, *Re-Placing the City*. Its premise seems simple, but it spurs tangential thought about what are usually considered centers of art worlds, urban spaces. No one really knows what cities or the art within them will be like in the future, but their persistent and growing attraction to people begs analysis. According to Sheldrake, seventy-five percent of us will call a city home in 2025. He suggests that there is something sacred and comforting about cities. He discusses the desirable anonymity, diversity and activity of city living, and what he feels to be a great attraction of urbanity; its "communion with some things that lie much deeper than simply the need for regularity and order in shared public life" (p. 154). At the same time he fears that many urban environments (perhaps because they are no longer filled with industry) are forfeiting a type of collective space to one divided by private quests and properties. Again, Sheldrake suggests that this vacuum merits prompt and thoughtful design. If mega trends have accurately detailed the transition of our society to one of more "home-bound" informational-based livelihoods, there will always remain a human need to exceed home and define its larger radius as "community." These places become attractive and unique because of the visual culture within them.

Spaces for the Sacred effectively uses the paradoxes of Christianity and the urban conundrum to philosophically wrestle between space and place or the real versus the ideal. After reading Sheldrake's epistle, I wasn't revved to go paint the town, but I was intellectually charged to consider that art (in my teaching and professional life) should not only bejewel a given space but should become it.

References

Dissanayake, E. (1988). *What is art for?* Seattle: University of Washington Press.

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