

## Module 2: Place and Space

### Introducing Place and Space

As with worldview and mindset, place and space are best explained and understood as closely related, yet distinct terms. The difference emphasized here is somewhat arbitrary, but it is made in order to provide a shared vocabulary. Place refers to an actual physical location. Your research site is a place--it may have a name, it most probably has an address, and it can be understood as a part of a larger geographical locale. In the descriptions of your physical location, the details about where you are and what is contained/constructed in that location (geography, design, furniture, color, lighting, people, positioning) all provide clues about the place.

Space, on the other hand, still implies physical place, but rather than emphasizing the physicality of the location--the setting, the address, the layout, space describes the less tangible elements of the place, the interaction and the feel. Another way to begin to explain space is through terms like atmosphere, vibe and scene. Space is about the overall effect that the details in your place description create. How are people interacting? Why are they there? How is a feeling created? Why does it feel that way? In your description, you might have noted how you felt or how other seem to feel (e.g. These dirty white walls and dull incandescent lights make me sleepy), this is part of getting at space.

It may be difficult at this point to sort out the difference between a description of a place and its space, but this sort of distinction--between physical location and emotional vibe--may make more sense when you consider some of the kinds of statements people make when using these words. When we use the word place, very often it appears a part of a question: What's the name of that place again? The fact that the word appears in a question makes clear that there is some sort of answer, and the answer that is implied here is that of a physical location--an address or recognition of a specifically identifiable location.

On the other hand, the term space it is often used in the form of a statement: Man, I like what you've done with your space! Certainly, this statement refers to the layout of an actual room, perhaps an apartment or house, or maybe even an office, but rather than focusing on where it is, the statement calls attention to the intangible feeling created by the color, furniture and decoration of the place.

Even more, while the interior design may create a certain "type of space," it is the presence of people and human interaction that often goes to highlight the presence of space in a particular place. For example, we often hear students talking about parties and nights at the bar. Often these parties and nights out occur in the same physical places from week to week. However, each party may differ with respect to the actual space that is created--maybe by weather, but most usually through human behavior and interaction. This is the "space" of the party and the crucial factor in determining whether the party was good or whether it "sucked."

## Mapping a Space

Mapping a place allows you to consider the space available for human interaction. When you map your research site, it's important to remember that as you select what to include, or not to include, your own perspective and your own interpretation of what is important and meaningful at the research site will determine what and how you map.

The process of mapping your research site from different perspectives or at different times can help you get an overall feel for how the space or "vibe" is created there. Before, during, or after taking your jottings and fieldnotes on place and space, actively map your space. Whether you create one master map, or several maps, consider including the following things:

- Objects, furniture, walls, doors, windows, etc.
- Presence and absence of people; the flow of movement
- Purpose of spaces
- Types and shades of colors and light
- Specific items or people that create "space" and what surrounds it or them
- Any other possible perspective (can you ask someone else at the site to map it and then compare?)

After you map your research site, ask yourself questions about what is there (and not there) as a means of enhancing the description and analysis in your fieldnotes.

## Rhetorical Considerations for Writing about Place and Space

As you write about place and space in your expanded fieldnotes, you may want to focus on two specific elements of writing from the "ethnographic top ten" list:

- #3 explores all senses
- #8 grabs the reader with attention getting prose

These two elements may help you move beyond a very clinical description of what is in the space: there is a large bar; there are 7 tables; there are 12 computers; the carpet is gray; the walls are white; the lights are dim...blah, blah, blah. While this kind of description may be initially useful, this basic information is also easily acquired by looking at your map. However, that doesn't mean that the map is a sufficient means of documenting place. In addition to the map, you can, and should, develop your writing so that by using all five senses to create a visual picture, you also make your writing more interesting. In your description, focus and consciously pay close attention to what your place smells like, what it feels like, what it sounds like and, what it tastes like. As you use descriptive terms to cover these senses, use simile and metaphor to make the description vivid. Don't just say the carpet is gray. What kind of gray is it? "It is the gray of salt mixed with pepper..." or "battleship gray," or "the gray of an overcast day in the Midwest." Get the idea?

Keep in mind the fact that description is not just the passive retelling of details, but rather the story of your encounter with the scene, the people, the place and the space. As you get your vivid description going, pull it together to begin tell the story or the feel of the space and place. Work to draw creative, helpful comparisons between the emotions created in your space with those you have experienced in other situations. Consider the "crush" of the side bar in Newton's nightclub. Do you think it was an irritating crush, like in a line at an airport, or, do you imagine it more in the realm of an elevator--calm and temporary? Or is it something different all together? This kind of writing about place and space can appear as analysis in your fieldnotes since, in an iteration of space, you are coming to synthesize information and draw conclusions regarding WHY the space feels the way.

Additionally, use active, not passive voice in your writing and describe the people in your site as characters, fleshing out the details, so that it's not just "the guy on the corner" that your readers see, but the "grizzled, stooped, newspaper clerk, with mismatched shoes" that they are introduced to. Overall, as you write, consider the impact your description or story will have on the reader. Using five senses and simile and metaphor is intrinsically connected to creating your own "attention-getting" style. A laundry list of objects or people won't get anyone excited, but if you focus on bringing the life of the space, the vibe, to the page, people will connect. Here, it's all in the selection of details. What can you choose to tell or describe that will make what you write an experience, rather than a description. Remember that story, even in academic writing is what captures people's imaginations.

### Writing about Place and Space

This module has been designed in order to help provide a focus for writing first set of expanded fieldnotes. Whether your fieldnotes are required as a formal assignment, or they are for you only as you work toward a final ethnographic essay, recall that Chapter 4 explains that you ought to include three different kinds of writing in your fieldnotes: observations, thoughts/feelings, analysis. Writing first about place and space will literally ground your research and provide a way for you to understand the context in which the human behavior occurs.

In order to write a thorough, useful set of expanded fieldnotes focusing on place and space, we recommend that you:

- Plan to stay at your site observing and taking jottings for at least one or two hours.
- Sketch a detailed map of your site. (See the section on Mapping Your Site). Make multiple sketches and remember, it's not artistic quality that counts, but how well the map generates deeper thoughts on your part. Include physical details and an explanation of how people use the space.
- Write a first draft of expanded fieldnotes, translating your jottings and headnotes into full sentences. Either separate your fieldnotes into three sections or write the draft and then use a different font modes (i.e., plain, italics, bold) to indicate the three kinds of writing: observations, thoughts/feelings, analysis. However you choose to organize your expanded fieldnotes, find a way to highlight these different thought processes because when you use this primary data source to create the final paper, it will be easier to see patterns in your notes.

- Review your map and read through your fieldnotes and jottings and begin to write a very detailed description of the place. Try to take every descriptive sentence/phrase you have in your notes about the site and turn each one into at least two or three sentences of written description. Push yourself here to add descriptors using all five senses and to show your readers the site, not simply tell them about it. Consider the connections between how you describe your research site and what that description does for your reader. By translating the data you collect with your five senses into attention-getting description, you can transport your reader so that they can more fully experience the research site.
- Write about the emotions generated by the sensory description and how and why you think the site develops those emotions. Write about the sense of expectation created by the space. What are people's hopes when they go there? What creates that particular sense of hope? How do you feel in that space? Why?
- Review your fieldnotes (yes...again!) and write about your thoughts and feelings at the site. In addition to noting any thoughts and feelings you had (i.e. you were comfortable, uncomfortable, enjoying the experience, hating the experience, etc.), write several sentences about WHY you think you were thinking and feeling those things. This is also the area to ask questions. What are you curious about now? Why? What are possible future areas of investigation about the site? Why?

And one last time, read through your fieldnotes and the text that you've expanded, and add any analysis that you are developing. What are you able to know about place and space that give you insight into how and why the community you are observing comes together. (What does this mean to you and to people at the site? What understand do you have now that you did not before? What created that insight?). Often after the first visit, there are more questions than analysis, but if you have some insights...write them down!