

Places and Spaces: Adjacency Effects

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The word "place" is curiously wide in its application, going beyond strict spatiality. A traditional town is a place, the right half of that field is a place, the vacuum cleaner has its place in the closet, the children's place is upstairs, the woman's place was in the home, the third line on the form is the place for this year's income, and as we grow up we try to find our place within the mesh of social roles, culture, and world views.

In this discussion, I will distinguish between an spatial area and a place, then apply that distinction to hypertext, in order to highlight adjacency effects in spatial hypertext.

We might use the word "area" to designate an extent of (physical or virtual) space. This background is an array of given qualities and features -- textured or regioned space, the physical expanse around us -- and it can also be treated as a collection of points and geometric relations. The space that subtends a spatial hypertext can be something like a pure geometric extension, or it can be an expanse equipped with pre-given directionalities, landmarks, and textures. Typically it moves from the former to the latter as the hypertext develops.

Within a spatial expanse, areas can be designated very precisely by measurements, or by reference to landmarks, or more casually as "over there." We can have many purposes in designating areas, but doing so does not automatically make them "places" in the sense I want to emphasize. In a spatial hypertext too not every designatable area becomes a meaningful place.

What I want to call "places" are those locations (they do not have to be spatially continuous) where we define significant regions, relations, and transitions. Places, in this sense, permeate areas and locations with a social net that defines possibilities of meaning and action. In architectural places, a social net of meanings prescribe what divisions and relations within the area will be significant. This is most obvious in highly ritualized places such courthouses, churches, parliaments. There is a directionality to movement in these places; there are crossings where one moves into a new sub-place; there are norms about what parts are in the same sub-place; there are norms about what kinds of changes are important and what is not significant -- whether or not a man wears a tie is important in some areas, unimportant in others -- some actions are to be done here, others there, and some done by transitions from here to there; there are items that should or should not be present; there are possible changes that make or don't make sense in the place. Highly ritualized places are more exacting than less formal locations, but "less formal" is itself a normative category, not an absence of normative categories. A house, a street, a park a family room, each has its own map and choreography.

Meaning connections do not have to connect adjacent locations. They can create an action space of linked areas that are "next to" one another in the sense that trajectories of action do one phase here and another phase there. For instance in an auditorium the stage and the audience area are "next to" one another in terms of action definitions even though they may be physically separated by the orchestra pit.

My point is that a place, in my sense, is not just a spatial co-location; it is a spatial area in which certain meaningful relations have been distinguished and accepted in social practice. This is true in a spatial hypertext as well.

Places are not stable. Spread out in time, social nets of meaning are kept in being through their reproduction and reinterpretation. Many changes in architectural place have become very self-conscious lately. However, I want to examine unintentional changes of significance in architectural places and in hypertexts. We are familiar with the way in which hypertext meaning connections jump over discontinuities. But we may pay less attention to the reverse phenomenon, which becomes especially important in spatial hypertext.

In physical space not all connections are intentional. If a pet store opens next to a McDonalds restaurant that I own. Neither I nor the owner of the pet store intend any significant adjacency relation between the two. However, the association and contrast of the two will still be meaningful, and may, for instance, cut down my business by recalling urban legends about cat or dog meat going into my burgers.

In an office building the suite just next door may be "miles away" in terms of its function, so that trajectories of action that pass through my office never go through the one next door, yet because the two offices are physically adjacent, other kinds of interaction will develop. Even if the employees never eat lunch together, or never speak to one another, the contrast between the two offices will still function as an overtone of meaning on their official meanings.

Philosophers from Hobbes to Derrida have pointed out that there is no stopping the generation of meaning by contiguity, and spatial adjacency allows uncontrollable contiguities. The effects may not have been intended, and when they happen they may not be taken as rhetorically or normatively important. But the effects will occur nonetheless, and they can qualify or even overshadow intended meanings.

Physical space allows for unintended adjacencies. However, in a standard node-and-link hypertext, nothing is officially next to anything else until a link is created. In such hypertexts all connections are supposed to be intentional. There should be no unavoidable and uncontrollable adjacencies such as occur in physical space.

Yet even so there may be some adjacency effects due to window location and other accidents of implementation, as well as the unavoidable effects of linguistic echoes and associations. If the node-and-link hypertext includes an overview or map, then there may be additional modes of accidental adjacency within that presentation.

Such overviews, of course, go part of the way towards spatial hypertext. Spatial hypertext lays itself wide open to adjacency effects and the creation of new meaning relations.

Spatial hypertext shares adjacency effects with physical space. It can produce be unintended connections, when new arrangements and kinds of juxtapositions suddenly take on meaning. New relations become noted and turn significant. New meaningful connections cannot be kept from springing up. How stable are spatial hypertext regions if their sets of signifiers are not stable? Or if the distinction between signifying and non-signifying elements is not stable? There is no final list of signifying elements in a spatial hypertext. Even if there is an official pre-made set of signifiers,

more can suddenly appear: colors, shapes, and containment are standard, but then there is being to the right of, being in the screen window with, being in a triangular relation with, having a blue item in between, being one of a row of five, being at the exact same screen location when the window shifts, being at 45 degrees, and so on. These do not have to be among the official tools, nor do they have to be intended; they can generate meaning nonetheless. (1)

Spatial hypertext is richer in suggesting new meanings than node-and-link hypertext, and its meanings are not restricted to the usually binary connections of node-and-link hypertexts.

It would seem that linguistically labeled typed links and paths-patterns could carry more kinds of connections than spatial arrangements, if link types could be conveniently indicated. This may be so, but spatial arrangements can accommodate n-ary relations and gradations of meaning relations that are difficult to put into link type labels.

In a standard node-and-link hypertext we can distinguish the overall structure of the set of links, from the envisioned structure and history (contour) created on the occasion of a particular encounter with the text. A link structure provides possible paths but not an actual journey.(2)

Spatial hypertexts, since they lie open to view in their entirety, are not necessarily experienced in a linear one-node-after-another fashion, so distinction between overall structure and particular itinerary seems less important. However, even a small spatial hypertext is still scanned temporally. Larger texts with regions that can only be viewed one window at a time cause that distinction to re-emerge.

Given the fertility of spatial hypertexts for suggesting new connections and signifiers, I close by suggesting a design strategy for coping with unintended meaning: take it as a resource. Let the local regions, be what they are, and let them develop new identities and connections and relations, without demanding that it all be fixed in a real or ideal totality. Creating a spatial hypertext is a matter of constantly shifting master plans.

Speaking of city planning, the architect Daniel Liebeskind remarked: "I believe that the idea of the totality, the finality of the masterplan is misguided. One should advocate a gradual transformation of public space, a metamorphic process, without relying on a hypothetical time in the future when everything will be perfect. . . . I have tried to propose an alternative to the whole notion of the masterplan with its implied idea of totality, of finality, and the misguided ambition which I think all plans have, of the eternal recurrence of the same through replication of type and through replication of order. . . . I propose instead a process which reinforces the structure of change in a heterogeneous, pluralistic and diverse architecture. . . . It is an approach which treats the city as an evolving poetic and unpredictable structure."(3)

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Notes

1. It also seems that something like the adjacencies of physical space could be built into a node-and-link hypertext by introducing a skein of built-in connectors that were independent of meaning. Such connectors could be random, or partly intentional, as in a library or bookstore where there is some order but unexpected discoveries and connections can still happen. Or, node-and-link

hypertexts could be supplemented by automatic link creation either at random or based on observation of the users' patterns. Such a system might suggest a link based on regularities in my writing or word use that I was totally unaware of and might find very helpful.

2. Some literary hypertext theorists argue that it is the unique event of a particular reading which creates "the text." I find this view unsatisfactory for the same reasons that it would be unsatisfactory to argue that a symphony or a play exists uniquely in each performance and not also in the score or script. The full reality of the work must involve both, so that each can provide ways to criticize the other. A performance of a play or a reading of a hypertext could be inadequate to what is there in the text; on the other hand a script could be unperformable, or a hypertext structure so convoluted that it was unreadable.

3. The quotation is from Daniel Liebeskind's 1995 Wallenberg lecture at the University of Michigan, p. 29.