



You can't get there from here

***An essay on the concept of place in
policy***

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We are an award-winning
social enterprise that helps
people and places to thrive.



About *Renaishi*

We're an award-winning social enterprise with a simple goal: **to spark change in place.**

We believe that the best way to do this is, to begin with a question: **what does it take to improve a place?**

What makes us unique is the fact that we combine two things within one organisation:

- we work directly with those who are most excluded from the lives they want by providing employment support, access to services and social connection, and
- we help social organisations, charities and institutions to deliver greater impact through our consultancy services.

We then generate new insights, learning and approaches from across our work with a range of people and organisations to think differently about how to support places well.

This essay

This essay is part of our twentieth-anniversary celebrations.

It is purposefully conceptual, trying to engage with what causes some of the challenges of thinking about place.

But it is also practically motivated and looks towards what Renaishi will be doing next.



You can't get there from here

*I had my existence. I was there.
Me in place and the place in me.*

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*Where can it be found again,
An elsewhere world, beyond
Maps and atlases,
Where all is woven into
And of itself, like a nest
Of crosshatched grass blades?*

Seamus Heaney, A Herbal (2010).

Renaishi was set up in 1998 to work in, with and for deprived neighbourhoods. It had a definition of deprivation and a scale of work that was very much of its time – one of significant government investment, and a focus on neighbourhoods. Whilst much has changed in the intervening twenty years, not least how we talk about those communities, there remain significant economic and social challenges in many places across the UK.

We believe that thinking about and intervening in those challenges can still benefit from a geographic lens, but much has been learnt in the previous two decades about approaches to place. This essay is an exploration of change, of geography and of perspective, and tries to unpick how place as a concept can be useful in the future. To me, place in policy is only useful if the boundary is doing something more than merely grouping activity.

It starts with a challenge in thinking about place in policy making and then explores three problems of place. It concludes with an exploration of how to understand the idea of change and where, despite the challenges, to go with the concept.

You can't get there from here

The simple challenge of place as a useful concept in policy is that it is always invented. We are never talking about real terrains, but boundaries of different scales around them. There are lives and activities going on regardless of whether that boundary is there. Place, as a concept, is created, which means it is contested.

There are three fundamentally different types of perspectives of place, and these cannot be reconciled (there are also, obviously, a plurality of views within each type):

1. **Community:** There is place as seen by the people who live there and experience what happens there.
2. **Services:** There is place as seen by the people who are delivering a structured service there – whether a business, the public sector or the voluntary sector.
3. **Finance:** There is place as seen by those with money, who want to change things, whether government or a philanthropist.



Each of these perspectives on place is fundamentally distinct and are drawn from different experiences and realities. Part of that distinction is one of perspective, but also that they have different conceptions of problem-solving, and different conceptions of causes – are they, for example, sociological in nature or psychological? They all operate in a geography, and they share physical, emotional and structural landmarks, but they are different. They need to explore how to work with each other, but they are not one big interconnected system. They are in the same geography, but they are different places: you can't get there from here.

The great truth of so much community-led work is to appreciate this, and the realities of power that it exposes. But focussing only on community-led work does not embrace the opportunities for it of other perspectives and it does not resolve the challenges of place that exist across these perspectives. The next three sections will explore those challenges.

Beginning with feelings

It is typical to start, when looking at place in policy, to define the parameters: how big, where's the boundary, what's the point of describing it?

These are important questions, but instead, I want to start at the other end of the spectrum. This means stripping away the interesting and knotty questions of place, connection, local identity and looking squarely at a person.

The point of intervening, whether through government policy, for philanthropic reasons, or through community effort is to correct something or (more rarely) to build on an opportunity. To respond, and typically, to try and solve something. That problem is **felt** by people in their lives and in their experience. That feeling could be as significant and immediate to their experience as drug dependency and violence, it could be a life-stage experience of loneliness after childbirth or of losing a job, or it could be a slower, developing experience of disconnection as the world changes around them.

Feelings do not explain everything nor are they the simple objective of any intervention, but we know from developing research that they are the mental expressions of our physical emotions, which are the outermost parts of our bodies' regulatory systems.¹ Feelings are how we deal with being alive, and as a result must be central to our understanding of self. But that selfhood is not a simple expression of 'lived experiences', rather it is developed through a combination of our biology, our internal and ever developing personal narrative and our communication techniques with each other.² That self is then bumped and influenced by the world around us. We are both innate and evolving.³

¹ Damasio, A., *Looking for Spinoza*, (London, 2004).

² Eisenberg, E, 'Building a Mystery: Towards a New Theory of Communication and Identity', *Journal of Communication*, 50:3, pp. 534-552 (2006).

³ There is a considerable body of literature about the self and identity that this essay will not attempt to engage with. It has used Eisenberg's theory, but there is much more to explore here.



The movement from the feelings to intentions to behaviours, what we then do because of those feelings, highlights the role that poverty and disadvantage can have. Do we have the resource and ability to get what we want from our lives? What is shaping our developing narrative and our abilities to communicate? For many people, this capability might be to even have space and capacity to consider what they want from their life.

It is my view that there are three issues that matter for the individual when thinking about interventions. Do they have the resources (financial, emotional and social) to consider and make the choices that they want about their lives, do they have the capabilities to access public, voluntary and private services, and do they have the network of support and friendships to give them a sense of developing self, of connection and of fulfilment?

Place matters to employment, to access and to inclusion, and that is because they are so often experienced in place – where are the jobs, what are the local services, who are my neighbours? This is because place can be both the problem and a lens to explore an individual's connection to all of them. It can be a realm for individuals to build approaches to achieving their objectives in cooperation with others. But the place is not the objective. The objective of thinking about place is to help more people understand what they want from their lives and to achieve it.

The first problem of place, therefore, is that it risks minimising people and their inner lives to mere geography. Geography is necessary, but not sufficient, to support what matters most to us and our selves.

Migration, gentrification, deracination

For most people, places are a temporary experience. It might be somewhere you live for a sixth-month rental period, or you might be there for 40 years as you grow old with family and friends. Very rarely do people spend their whole lives in one place, but even when they do, others are constantly moving.

Renaishi grew up delivering place-based regeneration programmes, with large government investments. There was always a concern that many of the people who had benefitted from those place-based programmes then left that very place – you get a job, that gives you more options, and you get out.

Towards the end of the twenty-year period of government investment in deprived neighbourhoods through dedicated programmes, a research study was produced on the functional roles of deprived neighbourhoods.⁴ It showed that places can be understood in terms of where people are moving from before living here and moving to after living here. If they are moving from a less deprived place and on to a more deprived place, then the place is gentrifying (the people who are moving are doing the opposite). If they

⁴ Robson, B. Lympelopoulou, K. and Rae, A., 'A typology of the functional roles of deprived neighbourhoods', (2009).
<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120920021229/http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/1152966.pdf>



are going from more deprived to less deprived, then the place is an escalator out of disadvantage for those people.

That report gave a strong empirical rigour to understanding a neighbourhood – one defined by movement – and I fear both its methodology and its focus on movement has been underused in the years since. This has happened because people who live in those neighbourhoods do not always experience it in such a functional and dynamic way, and much policy has focussed on the experience of the moment: today, *I am here*.

A way to bring in movement is to develop better approaches to communicating our self. Everybody's story is of movement, of change, and of loss. Local places can be a challenging and rewarding way to bring the stories of different people together. Those stories would happen whether we thought about policy and intervention in a place-based way or not. The value of place, therefore, is that it can be a trusting, responsive and salient way to bring together experiences of movement, change and loss, and of identity. It can help us develop our self and change our place with others. Done badly, it can be a way to jam different values together and be a location for conflict and division.

Again, what matters is not the place, but whether the place can be one that enables understanding, acceptance and trust between people who are inhabiting it, and whether it enables them to move. I believe that we should focus on the function of a place, the stories that people bring, and the techniques of cooperation that they develop through those stories.⁵ Place can give a structure in the process of working on our changing sense of self, and how that relates to others, accepting that our dialogue with ourselves and others needs to be continually worked on. Unfortunately, it is all too often a way to highlight fixed but different values rather than inclusion.

Places are a receptacle for people, but the second problem of place can be that it encourages us to forget that it is a highly porous and uncertain receptacle. People and places are shaped by movement and are successful when they are good at moving well and re-working relationships.

Geography, overlaps and edges

Is place our street, our neighbourhood, our city or our region? Does it matter?

Once you draw a boundary, you both leave something out, and you create a new space with its own dimensions – it has a centre and it has a periphery. We always see ourselves at the centre of our worlds, and so place can create a connection – there is a boundary around me and the people I know – but also a disconnection – I am a long way from the middle of that place, or I feel like I'm caught in between two places.

Traditionally, in urban planning, there is a lot of interest in the creativity of edges and left-over places – not being the focus can have its benefits – and whilst these boundaries are all invented, the implications can be harshly felt.

⁵ Sennett, R. *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation*. (London, 2012).



In a discussion about the boundary that was drawn for a neighbourhood renewal programme in the 2000s, and how a strange kink in the boundary left out a part of an estate, it was said that was done by the local authority to ensure that a particularly difficult individual couldn't be inside the boundary. There was no evidence of this being true or not, but there was an ongoing battle about why the boundary was drawn where it was, and why a specific building was not included in this newly defined place.

These boundaries are often about power. Saying you're interested in a place, means that you're not interested in another one. If you're interested in using place in policy or funding, then why spend your money in one place and not the neighbouring place instead? It can be a way to target resource, to pilot an intervention, or to best create the solution that a community needs – but it is always a choice. Whilst this is most evidently true of top-down approaches, it applies to community-led change too – where is the boundary or your neighbourhood, and who is working on change?

Place can also be about power when we're talking to each other. There are different places in mind, depending on the question we're asking and how it is asked. The answer is driven by the quality of the question, but also the assumptions on both sides – in certain circumstances, for example, "where are you from" can be an incredibly loaded question, with prejudices and a whole variety of places being evoked.

We live within so many invented places, each overlapping, nesting and contradicting. Are we able to communicate them well, and hold them lightly so that they extend opportunity for those in them?

The third problem of place is that it is only one way to understand geography and that a place, whatever the scale, is never an island, is never neutral, and is always imagined. Once programmes, interventions and governance are created, it can be easy to forget that the map is not the terrain.

Understanding and knowing place, systems and change

These challenges are based on the experience of working in and across places – typically deprived neighbourhoods, but other scales too. They are challenges that drive misconceptions about what place-based policy or working should and could be and what it can achieve. They go to the heart of why interventions don't always work.

That has implications for how to think about *knowing* place, and how to understand or value change.

The above arguments lead quite neatly to a view that there is a huge potential benefit in thinking about places in a more ecological and systemic way, as the advantage of place in policy and delivery is that it can unearth ideas, perspectives and ways of working that you only see in a system, that would be missed in linear structures. This is true, but we also shouldn't fetishize a whole system approach, or over-egg how complex everything is. It can lead to too great a focus on understanding the whole, and not enough on action or the agency of the individual. Ecologically derived knowledge can sit well with learning from controlled evaluation and systematic learning.



In other words, there is no simple binary of good and bad knowledge in understanding change in places, with particular knowledge being prioritised. There is surely a bounded rationality of what we do know and working with a framework that is intentional.⁶ Yes, frameworks are imperfect, and the map is never the terrain. But that doesn't mean we don't need maps.

If we can't get there from here, because our there is always different, and so is our here, and if everybody who wants to 'improve' places is coming from their own place, which has within it a different idea of what improve even means, then it is tempting to ignore place as a helpful concept in policy. I propose that this would be a mistake.

Primacy

The British Academy defined place-based policy as, "*aligning the design and resourcing of policy at the most appropriate scale of place, in order to develop meaningful solutions, which improve people's lives.*"⁷

I would argue that this is clear and helpful, but that a focus on the *based* part of these definitions can minimise our appreciation of the role of place. Some things should be place-based, but some should be place-informed because being always place-based suggests a primacy of the importance of place over the individual and a rigidity to the concept of place that just doesn't exist. They are, instead, far more fluid and dependent on each other.

The beauty of place is that it is an imagined and contested thing. It can capture, hold and develop our understanding of our self, of cooperation, of relationships, of movement, of change and of the world we want to argue for. Place can be a powerful receptacle for our shared and imagined endeavours, as well as our lives and our energies. It can free us from structures that can all too often stifle debates of change and become focussed on essentialising people and place. We must not lose the poetry and politics of place-informed change in our attempt to know them.

⁶ Gigerenzer, G. and Selten, R. (eds.), *Bounded Rationality: The Adaptive Toolbox* (Boston, 2012).

⁷ British Academy, *Where We Live Now*, (2015) <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/where-we-live-now>



A programme of enquiry

The above opens-up a range of questions that Renaishi wants to keep engaging with, but these questions cannot be answered neatly, and most certainly not by a single organisation.

The below are the some initial lines of enquiry that we want to pursue, in partnership with others, as part of our strategy of understanding what it takes to improve a place. There are many others that are being explored already, and there is much to build from.

1. **What does good place-informed policy look like, and what can it learn from place-based work?**
2. **How do service providers work well in a place-informed way, to deliver quality work for the people they serve?**
3. **How do organisations and funders make decisions that are informed by a rich understanding of place, and support outcomes greater than just their own?**
4. **How do concepts of power and trust connect across different concepts of place in the same geography, and how can these be navigated and understood?**
5. **How can concepts of self and identity be used to build practical approaches for living together in places, expanding on the challenges of this paper?**

If you would be interested in exploring these lines of enquiry with us, please get in touch: j.hitchin@renaisi.com