Spatial identity and geostrategic lifeplanning (draft version)
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Place and identity have become important topics now that social theory is no longer implicitly shaped by the taken for granted existence of a unitary society. Former specialists in urban research have become key figures in globalisation theory.

Much of the current debate on spatial identity is influenced by such theories. Modern, global institutions have brought distant influences and proximate events into close contact. Time-space contraction liberates place from necessity, yet it forces a politics of identity, a call for attention to be included in the space of flows.

It is the specific qualities of places that seem to be involved in such politics of identity, though this is far from evident when viewed from the perspective of actual experience. Due to social-economic and demographic changes, people are increasingly mobile, both in terms of everyday routines and the lifecourse. A move to a distant city, or a move to an outlying village or suburb, has become a reality for an increasing number of people. Places tend to be less and less inhabited by true locals, and it therefore harder to envisage spatial identity in terms of local experience-derived collective memories. This not only means that local character is less defined by personal experience, it also means that the places themselves lose social and indeed morphological coherence, as newcomers tend to materialise different lifestyles.

It may therefore seem that the new globalisation-induced spatial identities are fake, a selling point rather than something personally meaningful, such as place-attachment or sense of place, as places lose much of their former significance. It is tempting to conceptualise spatial identity as postmodern constructs – defined abstractly through the need of a politics of identity – as it is increasingly harder to visualise identity as emerging from everyday practices. Such contradictions may be an interesting source of epistemological reflection, but are quite unsatisfactory as ontological explanation. An ontological explanation is to be expected, as the terms ‘identity’ and ‘place’ refer fundamentally to being.

Theories of spatial identity are in need of a certain grounding, both in the everyday reality of experience and the wider context of social structure. Three case studies were selected to investigate spatial identity over the course of my PhD project: an urban area (East Amsterdam), a modern suburb (Alphen aan den Rijn) and a village (Kockengen). In each case, attention was given to the differences between the original inhabitants and newcomers. Interviews and a survey revealed the distinguishing characteristics of spatial identity, experience and social position. Spatial identity is instanced in spontaneous accounts about places. Inhabitants are viewed as active agents, reorganising space in the course of life, through experience and (geo)strategic lifeplanning. The lifecourse itself is however not an independent or autonomous set of decisions, as agents follow a track through social structure, in terms of social positions, limiting the range of possibilities, shaping schemes of perception and preference. Processes in structure reflect back on positions. Notable processes are demographic shifts resulting in a greater variation in household composition, and social-economic position in terms of the growing importance of cultural and economic capital.

The results point out that it is not so much the specific qualities of places that matter, but their qualities as a type of place. This calls to mind the formation of place-type identities, such as suburban, urban and rural identities. Two broad spatial trends can be discerned, each corresponding to lifeplanning strategies of the middle classes. A group relying on economic capital can be found in suburbia, whereas a group relying on cultural capital tends to seek out cities and villages.

The lifeplanning strategies of the economic middle class correspond to a spatial trend which I term the functionalisation of the urban field. In the urban field, urban activity is no longer
restricted to the city. Most places of work, shopping, care and leisure are conveniently located near the highway. To many, this opens up the possibility of a middle-class lifestyle, centred on mobility, centrality, value for money; a comfortable home in an uncomplicated environment, without much regard of location.

It often concerns family-oriented, one-and-a-half-earner households, rather than traditional families. Though surprisingly varied in income and education, these modern suburbanites do not possess much cultural capital. It is a lifestyle in which the aim is the maximum comfort for the minimum costs.

This functionalisation of daily life and residential choice, has its structural parallel in land use patterns. Instead of cities with a hinterland of villages, we live in an urban field dominated by non-places (or rather, mono-cultural zero-friction enclaves) in which cities and villages have become the exception.

The strategy of the cultural middle class is in part a reaction to this trend. The results are often described as gentrification. With the dispersal of urban activity and the erosion of rural activity, cities and villages have lost much of their functional *raison d’être*. However, these places represent a new opportunity to the cultural middle class, seeking a sense of authenticity in the shops and cafés of the historical core, high as well as low-brow culture, and the presence of a variety of lifestyles. Above all, it disassociates them from suburbs and the lifestyle of the economic middle class.

The city initially represents an opportunity for less family-oriented individuals seeking high education. Consequently, they tend to come from further a field than those living in the suburbs. Those that build up a longer-lasting identity as a ‘new urbanite’ or ‘new villager’, often have more cultural capital. However, this typically does not guarantee them a high status profession or a stable income. If all else fails, the city or the village still offers them a means to be different.

Paradoxically, this search for authenticity drastically changes local cultures instead of reviving them. Villages are redesigned with invented history and cities experience waves of generalised gentrified urban culture – altered identities as a result of their new position as oases in a functional urban desert.

The strategies are not merely symbolic, but relate strongly to spatio-temporal realities. The proximity or accessibility of cultural industries and nightlife is a defining feature for urban gentrification. Similarly, a move to the suburb comes with many additional comforts, in the shape of other similarly uncomplicated environments within a drives reach. It is not just a home; modern suburbia is a package deal, a formula, a whole module, allowing – or forcing – suburbanites to redefine their lifestyle.

The structural relevance of the type of place does not deprive inhabitants from having authentic, personal experiences with specific places and forming attachments with it. Still, statements about the identity of a specific place are not independent from the twin socio-spatial trends of functionalisation en gentrification. The development of a sense of place is not an autonomous individual activity, nor is it a manifestation of collective memories involving that particular place. When we arrive at a specific place it bares a label as a type of place, having a social significance beyond the means of meaning making *en situ*. Notwithstanding the ability to strategically position oneself in this structured space by selecting places and building up personal histories of attachment with it. In fact, the symbolic meaning of places is continually defined and redefined through such acts of geostrategic lifeplanning. In this way, changes in social structure are translated into spatial structure.