

A Few Good Words for Generic Places: Especially Those Here Today, Gone Tomorrow¹

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Abstract

Names of generic places are reliable indicators of the functions of those places even though they may be ephemeral and may be vaguely defined. These places have a variety of functions and bear such names as *Pioneer Settlement*, *Disaster Site*, *Auction Yard*, *Boom Town*, *Borrow Pit*, and *Annexation Area*. Certain ephemeral placenames are exemplary of the process of generic naming, such as *Abandoned Area* and *Black Neighborhood Auto Repair Street*.

It has become fashionable to complain about a world "gone generic," meaning too many cookie-cut, look-alike McDonald's, interstate highways, and talk-show hostesses on TV. Hearing of my non-judgmental interest in generic places, Marsh McCall, a journalist in Redwood City, California, approached me for an interview, somewhat gingerly. It turned out that he expected me to lambaste his hometown for being "too generic," i.e. monotonous, cut-and-dried, repetitious, undifferentiated, mass-produced, non-specific, a poor imitation of Los Angeles.

But I was in no mood to castigate his very complex waterfront city for sharing generic attributes with its huge neighbor San Francisco; nor would I consider the use of generic names as necessarily down-putting. Rather, I look upon them as essential vocabulary, part of the grammar by which one could negotiate changing worlds, his and ours.

After visiting that generic place-by-the-side-of-the-road called *Neighborhood Shopping Center* and viewing shelves loaded with generic products such as oatmeal, detergents, and canned soups, I was well prepared to scan, on the way home, a panoramic range of typically generic places: *Commercial Strip*, *Street Intersection*, *Historic Limestone Quarry*, *Railroad Crossing*, *Churchyard*, *Old Railroad Commuting Suburb*, *Nineteenth-Century Country Estate*, *Infill Housing Neighborhood*, *Working Class Block*, and *Catholic Orphanage* — all of these being candidates

for my gazetteer of generic man-made places, now in preparation. None of them exhibit signs bearing those generic names. All *have* features, but do not themselves constitute features. Rather, they are generic places which can be readily identified by the generic name. Each generic place—or place-type, if you prefer—can be found in many places. But each specific example had its own unique location, and its own specific name: *St. Joseph's Children's Home*, *Brownsboro Plaza*, *Domino's Pizza*, etc.

All such generic places, in common with general ideas and generalizations, are formed in our mind from specific examples. Sometimes they arise from that generic place called *Out Of Nowhere*. We use them to explain what we see by qualities we attribute to classes of things seen, to bring together things once viewed as far apart, and often geographically distant from one another.

Here I am following the usage established by Carolus Linnaeus in separating genera (the generic) from species (the specific), when he observed that “The generic name is, as it were, the official currency of our botanic republic” (Foucault 141; see also Boorstin 436-46); and as more recently recognized by Frederic G. Cassidy: “a place-name normally has a generic part, which serves to classify it, and a specific part, which individualizes it” (403). In these comments I use what Cassidy calls the “generic part” to distinguish the larger place itself. Here I use *generic placenames*, where some readers might use *appellation* (“a designation, name, or title given”—*OED*), to designate a man-made place by its generic qualities and functions, whereby it fits into a category or class.

So here we are dealing with classes—sorts of things which do not exist “out there” but are products of the human mind and its ability to sort out, to classify, to generalize.

My kind of man-made generic place, our kind of place-in-common, has no latitude (no matter how much one might take in describing it). It has no longitude. And if it is a generic place of the genus *ephemera* which we consider here, it's not got much longevity, in its present shape and form. Also, it is a place, an ensemble, not a structure: *Flight Path*, not *Airplane Hangar*; *Hobo Jungle*, not *Salvation Army Building*.

Closer examination revealed that other generic places along my route had begun to specialize in ephemerality, in being “here today, gone tomorrow.” My route led through a *Changing Neighborhood*; it passed

a *Gentrifying Block*, a new *Fashionable Watering Hole*, *Summer Picnic Grounds*, and *Abandoned Commuter Stop*—ephemera, all of them.

Ephemeral Places, as widespread genera, deserve more than casual study, for here is where the future lies in wait to show itself to watchful eyes. Being universal, ephemeral places do not fall or fit easily into the grip of a single academic discipline, or an industry, ethnic group, or government agency. Names and meanings evolve, become social currency, or drop out of the race. The rate of exchange goes up or down. Such man-made inventions and conventions called *genera* are constructed out of thin air—hits, runs, errors, seemingly insubstantial stuff of the mind, tested in the pickup bars and market place of language.

The very category “Ephemera” for Ephemeral places was suggested to me by a specialist in succession, a distinguished ecologist at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, the late Robert S. Dorney, who did pioneering work on the subtly shifting—which is to say ephemeral—aspect of urban fringes, *The Edge of Town*, *Abandoned Subdivisions*, and *Vacant Lots*.²

Of course it is true that all man-made places are here today and gone in the long tomorrows of geological time and that all of them are poised between the events which give them life and the continuity which gives them form. Nothing succeeds like succession. Ephemeral places compress time’s passage; they allow us to watch change going on right before our eyes.

One can, if so minded, dismiss all this as “stereotyping the environment.” But placenaming is essential in coping with a changing environment, deserving our most searching gaze. Sorting out the changes, choosing or inventing the right names is not “just” semantics, but survival.

Granted there is risk here. Language enables us to handle generic names of places as if they themselves were concrete objects rather than our own artifices. If we go overboard in genericizing for its own sake, we risk becoming estranged from the crunchy evidence of specific places where generalizations begin.

As Rudolf Arnheim, the art historian, once said, “I’ve found that as soon as you have a concept for something, you start to exclude it from the check-up of continued experience. If you don’t continually expose

your concepts to experience, they rapidly become rigid and paralyzed” (Peterson 56).

What ephemeral places suggest, then, is that they represent life in the raw, still aborning, forever re-forming, in constant dialogue with their surroundings. Every man-made ephemeral place—no matter how fugitive, risky, unmanageable, or evasive it may appear—has within it the seeds of stability, repeatability, and perhaps permanence.

Ephemeral places never just stand there; they are constantly becoming—stage settings for the continuous. The French historian Fernand Braudel has a fine phrase for the next stage: the “triumph of the continuous” (*Afterthoughts* 26).³

Ephemeral places are testing grounds for survival not found on most maps. The Trip Tik maps of the American Automobile Association do carry warnings about ephemeral *Detours*. But how does one find, much less “make” that ephemera called *The Scene*? How does one spot *High-Crime District* without consulting local sources? Or tell when *The Good Address* is disappearing into the species *Transitional Neighborhood*?

Ephemeral places may be sorted according to time, i.e., the timing of events which distinguish particular generic places from each other. Time tests their lasting qualities. Time is the medium in which they evolve in the landscape and cohere into generic form.

Some make it into permanent status, others flit into *The Limelight* (an ephemeral place, indeed), do their thing, and are gone. I view their parts and parcels as enriching rather than monotonizing our vocabulary; as process rather than objects. These are process-ful places.

Since time is of the essence to ephemeral places, let us array them according to their attachment to time’s flow, beginning off-stage in the past, and moving forward with an orientation toward the future. Thus sorted, ephemeral places can be described as:

1. Historic

Places where past events of special importance have fixed the present location, nature and value of the place. These include *Battlegrounds*, *Landing Places*, *Pioneer Settlements*, *Pioneer Trail*, *Sacred Paths*.

2. Scheduled/Recurring

Places associated with episodes or events that are scheduled, recurring, programmed, predictable, and usually mappable. These include *Auction Yard*, *Coronation* or *Inauguration Route*, *Drawdown* (that part of a flood-control reservoir exposed during low-water), *Finish Line*, *Flight Path*, *Floodway*, *Parade Route*. (Even if one does not consider a flood a “recurring event,” it is recommended that one not invest alongside most major American rivers, where it will be apparent that the so-called “hundred-year flood” comes more often nowadays.)

3. Eventful

Places where temporary, momentary, one-time-only conditions or events established the nature of the place. These include *Blasting Site*, *The Burn* (as in parts of Yellowstone National Park, 1988), *Construction Site*, *Disaster Area*, *The End of the Rainbow*, *Hurricane Belt*, *New Town*, *Rendezvous*, and *Wreck Site* (also known as *Scene of the Crash*).

Eventually, *New Towns* contradict themselves: they cannot stay new forever, although we still talk about the *New Deal New Towns* of the 1930s and the British speak of their *New Towns* of post-World War II, now housing third-generation citizens. Some old cities still bear the mark of long-gone newness: New Haven; New York; New Wilmington, Pennsylvania; New Harmony, Indiana; etc.

4. Diminishing

Places distinguished by the ongoing and/or future exhaustion of basic physical and human resources and the consequent alternation in the use, value, nature, and name of the place: *Abandoned Area*, *Abandoned Farm*, *Borrow Pit*, *Coal Mine*, *Lumber Camp*, *Mining Camp*, *Pine Plantation*, *Stone Quarry*, *Sod Farm*, *Slum*, *Watershed*.

5. Impacted or Pressured

Places under constant, consistent pressure, including pressure from new, or competing, external sources of energy, such as *Boom Town*, *Declining Neighborhood*, *Edge of Town*, *Growth Area*, *Holdout*, *Industrial District*, *National Border*, and *Skyline*.

6. Emerging

Places characterized by prospective events, rather than current or past influences, such as *Annexation Area*, *Invasion Route*, *Photo Opportunity (Site)*, *Quake Zone*, *Strategic Crossing*, *Target Area*, *Tent City*, and *Vacant Lot*.

Ephemeral places perform useful functions. They are packed with clues and hints; they embody large events and conditions compressed into one generic place; they pull together hitherto or otherwise disconnected bits of evidence.

Consider the genus *Abandoned Area*. Only in part does abandonment imply emptiness, the quietude of desertion, the abandonment of hope of all ye who enter here. Abandonment is temporary; nature abhors its vacuum. Some economists see it as no more than a market response to changing land values, or to the evolving functions of the central city. But abandonment disturbs deep psychic roots. Settlement of a place is a sacred act requiring rituals which we honor with ground-breakings, the consecration of church and other sites, and roof-raising with an evergreen tree up top and drinks all 'round. But de-settlement is an unsettling act. "We have been abandoning places since 1800 and the impact of withdrawal has always been painful," observed Kevin Lynch in his last and still unpublished book.

Increasingly, in a mobile and place-conscious society, an *Abandoned Area* suggests a place left unoccupied by its original settlers, but not necessarily abandoned, and now or soon to be re-occupied or influenced by others. A so-called *Abandoned Area* could be merely a *Declining Area* or *Changing Neighborhood*: (a) a family farm foreclosed by the bank but not yet re-occupied by tenants or claimed by developers; (b) a tract of vacant lots become a neighborhood kids' jungle; (c) suburban land held by speculators; or (d) urban slums awaiting demolition. The term alone covers a variety of interim stages.

One house, empty and truly abandoned, troubles only close neighbors. Two or three, and the block residents get upset. Should abandonment pervade the area, the neighborhood association becomes alert, takes action.

City Halls, by selectively enforcing housing codes, speed up abandonment, or slow it down. Abandonment, gentrification, and displacement may occur at the same time, three sides of the same process—the poor driven out to be replaced by fixer-uppers. Both events are a response to City Hall's maneuvers to attract new investment and taxpayers, and to the fluidity of capital.

The speeds of abandonment vary. Seldom does everybody vacate at once. A threatened volcano eruption, military invasion, or City Hall

demolition sends refugees in waves beyond the scene of violence. Some residents refuse to vacate, and become “victims” – of themselves?

One man’s *Abandoned Area* becomes the next settler’s *Opportunity Site*, part of the recycling which pervades history. New England’s white Puritans would have been hard put to start farming in the 1600s without “opportunity sites”: fields abandoned by the decimated Indians and grown up in brush, easily cleared-away (Jennings 65). Thus did European epidemics spread like wildfire among Indians (Meinig 92) to clear the way for English settlers.

Few places in North America have had time to offer us the prospect of a Carthage or Troy abandoned for a thousand years. An “abandoned” Appalachian valley dotted with the lone chimneys of former homesteads will, during the next boom, attract young couples looking for a “new start.”

And some “abandonment” is just what many artists are seeking. The artist Robert Smithson created a work called “Nonsite” in the New Jersey Pine Barrens, where he was stimulated to concentrate on “the forgotten and rarely mentioned outskirts of a thriving metropolitan world, areas that never seem to be quite there, that always appear discarded and unimportant” (Hobbs 105).

Ephemerality poses formidable social questions, as I discovered when I re-examined old photographs I had taken of Eleventh Street, in Lower Manhattan, New York. If Eleventh Street had any official generic identity, it was probably *Limited-Traffic Residential Street*. When I first viewed it in 1975, jammed with jalopies undergoing repair, no traffic could get through. I had photographed it chiefly to show old houses under rehabilitation, and filed it away under my then-current interest in *Rehab Neighborhoods*.

But a recent re-study of these photos indicated that other identities were contained within that complex generic place. It was not merely part of a *Minority Residential Area*, as a cautious sociologist might call it. It also served as *Auto Repair Street*, for which there is no legal zoning category. It also fit a sub-category called *Black Auto Repair Street*, which adds socioeconomic dimension. It worked as a multi-use-district: a trading area, crankcase oil disposal site, a meeting-place, a neighborhood auto-parts-and-labor pool, an informal production line, and an outdoor vocational training school. It was a traffic-free enclave, an essential part

of that community's economic base. Should it not more properly be identified as *Black Neighborhood Auto Repair Street*?

Here was where the part-time working class could keep itself mobile, a condition essential to survival in the city. But it could—in common with thousands of other ephemeral places, and given a heavy-handed clean-up policy at City Hall—be cleaned up, laid bare, trainees and workers cleared out—all of it, all of them here today, gone tomorrow.

The unsettling thing about these places is that, as every linguist knows, they do not stand still. One attaches meanings and names to a place and its activities, and walks away happy: another placename all tied down. But the realities, the ingredients, the energies of the place itself keep changing on us. We go back and there's no THERE there;⁴ it is turning into another beast altogether.

When does *Fast-Food Drive-In* become *Yuppie Watering Hole* and what are the signs? Or does *Drive-In* down-shift to *Redneck Pick-Up Bar*? These are the real *Testing Grounds*. Do we accept the reality of *Black Neighborhood Repair Street*, or dismiss it as *Potential Redevelopment Area*? Or give up, and relegate it to that vast and amorphous catch-all, *Inner City*?

In a democratic society, it is important for image and reality to stick tight to each other. Our meaningful world is what we can describe to each other with a high promise of being understood. The word and the sight are father to the thought, not the other way around. We need to explain the visible by means of the invisible, to consider a place by its position, status, location, junctures, situation, laminations, connections, its readjustments, rhythms, relations, mutations, continuities, thresholds, evolution, emergence—all this in order to grasp its generic essence.

It's easy enough to get lost in the nomenclature of a fast-changing world, to say "It's chaos and to hell with it." But a continuing study of man-made generic places suggests that placenaming and generic descriptions of the sort explored here offer a way to get found again—back awhile in *Familiar Territory*. And that is not a bad generic place to be.

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Notes

1. This is a revision of a paper presented to the American Name Society at the Modern Language Association conference in New Orleans in December 1988.

2. See Dorney, "Ecology." Dorney shared some of these ideas with me in an interview on October 13, 1985; and he throws new light on them in his new book, especially in dealing with landscape mosaic and evolution (*Professional Practice*).

3. Braudel studied the European street fairs, those ephemeral coming-together places of European hustlers, traders and first-generation capitalists. When, in the fifteenth century, some of those roving merchants settled down and opened shops, hired clerks, extended credit, built up inventories and clientele, acquired an address—"a continuous stream replacing intermittent encounters... [it was the] triumph of the continuous"—the beginning of modern capitalism. It takes a sharp eye and speculative mind to spot those ephemera with the potential of becoming continuous. This golden phrase occurs nowhere that I could find in Braudel's great three-volume *Civilization & Capitalism, 15th-18th Century*, but must have occurred to him as a brilliant insight while writing the Johns Hopkins lectures delivered in April 1976 and published as *Afterthoughts*.

4. Perhaps we should appoint Gertrude Stein the high priestess of that generic place called "There," for it was she who said, memorably, of her home-town, Oakland, California: "When you get there, there's no THERE there." As a consequence, the City of Oakland has put into place a new \$95,000 piece of public sculpture called—what else?—*There*. On August 24, 1988, The Oakland Tribune printed a photo on its front page and a headline reading "So There?"

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ILLUSTRATED DICTIONARY OF QUÉBEC PLACENAMES

The Commission de toponymie du Québec, Canada, is preparing an illustrated dictionary of Québec placenames. The book, of about 1,000 pages, will be published in French by the end of 1991 and will contain 7,000 placenames.

For a few placenames, the Commission lacks sufficient information. For instance, some placenames in Québec derived from names of persons who lived in the United States before moving to Canada. This is the case for David and Calvin Beebe, from Waterbury, Connecticut, who founded the locality of Beebe Plain (Québec) by 1790. Likewise, the Austin and Jones families, coming from Mexico, Maine, settled in Canada around 1813 and founded the locality of New Mexico (Québec).

Anyone who may know any biographical information concerning these four pioneers is invited to write to:

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