



Cake's Candles, Bamboo Groves, and Earthen Walls: A Geographical Analysis of the Power of Place

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Abstract

In this essay, I respond to the question: what creates powerful places? The essay analyzes the powers of place in an increasingly globalized world that is characterized by increasing connections between locales. I weave the groundbreaking work of Christopher Alexander (1979) with contemporary geographical scholars – including Michael Watts (2000), Doreen Massey (1999), Cindi Katz (2001), and Noel Castree (2004) – to look at the role of place, space, and relationship in creating powerful, alive places. I then apply this theoretical framework to four distinct places, including: a dorm room at Macalester College in Saint Paul, US; Kumanonyakuōji Jinja in Kyoto, Japan; the GreenHouse Project in Johannesburg, South Africa; and The Berkana Exchange’s inaugural Art of Learning Centering at Windhorse Farm in Nova Scotia. I use these case studies to explore the idea that places can be powerful at different scales – for a particular individual alone, for any encountering a specific place, or for those part of a group convened in place. Combining a rigorous theoretical framework with powerful individual experience allows me to redefine conceptualizations of the powers of place in a globalized world, while remaining firmly grounded in empirical wisdom. I ultimately submit that authenticity to the complex array of glocal relationships present in a given place leads to the creation of powerful spaces – for individuals, for those encountering a specific place, and for those a part of a translocal network.

Introduction

There is a central quality which is the root criterion of life and spirit in a man, a town, a building, or a wilderness. This quality is objective and precise, but it cannot be named. ... Yet each of us knows from experience the feeling which this quality creates in us. (Alexander 1979, pp. 19, 53)

The quality exists in a blur of memories ensconced within a huge dorm room known as Dupre 500. Three lives shared in space - glow in the dark stars; a cake's candles lit at midnight; laughter as bodies pile atop one another; an enormous oak shaken by thunderstorms outside floor to ceiling windows; blankets that grant safe haven, enveloping numbed limbs; private, broken moments exposed and held; sorrows cut with joys; human connections so powerful that they anchor life itself.

The quality can be found climbing an obscure trail from the back of a temple in Kyoto. Winding up out of sight as bamboo shoots press in as far as the eye can see; unadulterated silence, save the sound of footfalls and a trickling stream; turning a corner – slightly out of breath – to stumble upon a purely, simply beautiful shrine; rock hewn figures within tori gates, slightly dampened by the fall of water from a bamboo plank far above. The sight is heartbreakingly beautiful, at once yours and utterly ancient, a breath of fresh air through the generations.

It exists in inner-city Johannesburg, within the gates of the grassroots GreenHouse Project in an earth room built by many hands, shaped to hold and nourish. The smell of food prepared, fresh from urban gardens a few steps away; a warm smile covered by a shy hand; an embrace of unhesitating welcome from yesterday's stranger; divergent lives woven together through shared work, food. Hospitality radiates from the space as acceptance becomes tangible enough to taste.

This sense of aliveness, as Christopher Alexander (1979) aptly tells us, cannot be named.¹ Language cannot capture it. It is not concrete but rather a continually changing flow of life itself through people, places, and interactions. Yet, this quality is that which undoubtedly confers what we refer to as the “power of place” and although we cannot name it, we all fundamentally understand what this quality is and where we have felt it. Places imbued with this quality have the potential to profoundly influence our lives, whether as individuals, as members of a group, or as communities engaging together to create social change. Thus, if we can begin to understand where, why and how the elusive power of place emerges, we have the potential to both identify and create powerful places in multiples spheres of our lives. Before asking these questions, however, let me return to the most fundamental question: What is this sense of aliveness, authenticity, and power in place?

The quality which resides in places of power, as Alexander helps us to see, is simply the same as that which exists in the moments that we feel most alive. It comes from the simple act of letting go, of being our true selves at an exact moment in time, perfectly at home in the world. Alexander (1979) says, “This wild freedom, this passion, comes into our lives in the instant we be[come] ourselves . . . that one person unique in all the world” (p. 50). Because every person is different – and changes subtly from moment to moment – the sense of aliveness will never be the same from person to person, place to place, time to time. For one it may be a friendship embodied in time, a

roommate plopping down next to them on a big green overstuffed couch, legs inversely splayed across the same diagonal; for another it may be a moment in place with self, watching water fall, drop by drop onto moss engulfing a shrine below; it may be a shared feminine comradery, pounding glass bottles to recyclable shards in inner-city Johannesburg.

It might be walking back from a campfire in Nova Scotia, filled with song; gazing upon a sky filled with shooting stars, arm in arm with friends; laughing as words are found between languages; held comfortable, liberated within a group finding common ground between India, Mexico, Brazil, Canada, Zimbabwe, the United States, South Africa; as easy as slicing through ghee, as washing your face with fresh water; alive, free.

Alexander (1979) tells us that places that have this quality are not composite, but rather a “fabric of relationships . . . that repeats itself and gives the structure to” the place (p. 89). A shrine in the forest in Kyoto is not just bamboo shoots, dead leaves, a stream, rocks shaped into figures, and *tori* gates. Rather, it is the subtle relationships between the tightly packed bamboo shoots at offset angles, the meandering path positioned parallel to the stream, the way the rock figures stand just inside the *tori* gate and to the side of the waterfall, the subtle connection to both traditional Japanese culture and the surrounding natural world. The jumbled congruence of objects and patterns of relationships give a place its particular character. Furthermore, as Alexander contends, these inherent relationships between components of a place have the potential to enhance one another, forming a system that is at once self-generative, sustainable, and alive.

It makes intrinsic sense that “[p]laces which have this quality [of feeling alive], invite this quality to come to life in us. And when we have this quality in us, we tend to make it come to life in the towns and buildings which we help to build,” or the places we inhabit, or the events we facilitate (Alexander 1979, p. 53). The question thus becomes: How do fundamentally “alive” patterns of relationships create powerful places? How do they differ from “dead” patterns of relationship that lead to powerless places?

While Alexander (1979) has elsewhere responded to these questions by analyzing what physical elements of design can evoke and induce these patterns in place, I ask: In an increasingly globalized – interconnected, interrelated – world, how do multiple scales of interaction affect what we view as powerful places, places that are alive? I use the term “multiple scales of interaction,” or *multi-scalar* interactions, to denote relationships and exchanges that bridge geographical regions which vary in size and scope. These connections are made increasingly feasible with globalization and the spread of information technology. They refer not only to *local* face-to-face relationships, *regional* bureaucratic interactions, or *global* commercial connections, but the unique mixture of all

these interactions. One person could have deep friendships with others in their neighborhood, be connected to those across their geographical region by the food they consume, support communities across the world through volunteer work and collaboration, and be affected by the current global economic climate. This is just one unique example of how multiple scales of interaction effect a single individual. They also effect places, organizations, and communities in myriad combinations and forms.

I propose that in a world now characterized by global exchange, multi-scalar relationships define the very core identity and aliveness of a place. Each place can no longer be seen as self-contained or isolated, but rather as a product of intricate global and local, or *glocal*, connections. The term *glocal* is commonly used by geographical scholars to refer to the particular confluence of multi-scalar interactions in a particular place. Simply, it represents the idea that each place is continually influenced by both global and local relationships. Likewise, each locale can effect and connect to others at a global scale. In a globalized world, global and local are no longer distinct geographical scales, but deeply interconnected and mutually interdependent. In this essay, I explore how these interactions shape us as individuals, shape particular places, and shape translocalⁱⁱ networks. I suggest that authenticity to the complex array of *glocal* relationships present in a given place leads to the creation of powerful spaces – for individuals, for those encountering a specific place, and for those a part of a translocal network. To develop this thesis, I turn to the work of several geographical theorists – including Michael Watts (2000), Doreen Massey (1999), Cindi Katz (2001), and Noel Castree (2004).

The power of relationship in place

Michael Watts (2000) provides an interesting genesis, looking at the importance of identity in constructing places of power. Before we move on to his ideas, a brief recapitulation of Alexander's ideas on the subject may provide a useful foundation. As Alexander has previously argued, our identity fundamentally influences our sense of meaning and, consequently, our sense of being alive. He submits that it is only when we are authentic to all forces acting upon us in place and time that we become alive. Our identities are thus inextricably tied to the *places* in which we feel alive. The power of place, then, lies not solely in the place itself but in the product of our interaction with the place. So the question becomes: How does our identity – and therefore our interaction with place – change in a globalized world?

This is where Watts' (2000) ideas in particular become pertinent to a discussion of the powers of place. Watts adds complexity to Alexander's claim, contending that identities are not given, static entities defined in isolation. Rather, they continually evolve as each person encounters places, forms relationships, and is influenced by various cultural subjectivities. In an increasingly interconnected world, Watts (2000) argues that: "Local is never purely local but . . . created in part by extralocalⁱⁱⁱ linkages and practices over time" (p. 32). No place can be seen as a self-contained entity; rather each place is positioned within its own unique network of multi-scalar relationships. These global-local, or glocal, influences play a predominant role shaping the identity of place – as well as the identity of the individual in place.

According to Watts, the ever-shifting web of relationships and experiences that make up our lives – both significant and insignificant – determines our identity.^{iv} In a globalized world, the objects, people, and relationships we interact with daily extend beyond a purely local scale. These glocal influences can be as ubiquitous as opening an internet browser, as easy as buying a perfectly ripe avocado in the supermarket in December, as convoluted as the glocal power structure which results in the proliferation of Somali immigrants in Minneapolis, as obscure as the origin of the tread on our tennis shoes. The choices we make and the relationships we cultivate in the face of such glocal diversity define us as individuals; our different patterns of connections set us apart from one another. In this way, any individual's identity can be seen as a means of drawing boundaries and articulating relationships within an increasingly interconnected world (Castree 2004). Thus the moments which we feel most alive – and the places which facilitate these moments – inherently allow us to be authentic to the myriad yet specific local and global relationships that shape us.

This means that, for each individual, there will be particular places that are ours alone; that we create through our relationships. They will not be powerful for those not part of the same constellation of relationships. Dupre 500, described in the opening of this essay, is such a place for me (p. 1). Bereft of my two roommates and I, it is a boxy dorm room built in the 1950s, filled with generic blonde wood furniture, housed inside a building known as the ugliest on the Macalester College campus. Yet to me, Dupre 500 is a powerful place. It evokes memories of moving massive wardrobes and desks into place amidst the stifling heat of August in Minnesota, clothes shed down to sports bras and athletic shorts; curling lifelessly on the floor and sobbing, devastated, as life fell apart; celebrating birthdays at midnight in a circle of three; drunkenly devouring 2 a.m. thin crust pizzas; studying for finals surrounded by hundreds of papers, short on sleep and sanity; surgeries, celebrations, failed papers, break-ups,

hookups, fights, food, parties; life. The year I lived in Dupre 500 was a hard year for me, but that pales in comparison to memories of being there with my two roommates. We know each other down to beneath it all, beneath those faces we put on for the rest of the world, beneath who we try to be – there is something fundamental about that. In the end, Dupre 500 is not a powerful *place* per se, it is a place that holds a powerful pattern of relationships for me. The interplay of the relationships held within this room provided me with the support to be authentic to myself – to all the different influences on my life – and therefore to be alive.

Here again we come back to Alexander's statement that to be alive, we must be true to ourselves – a process aided by being in a powerful place. Dupre 500 in itself is not what Watts would call a glocal place; the room devoid of people holds no power. However, it is a place where I lived the relationships important to me. It created a base that allowed me to step with presence into the rest of the world, navigating the unique local and global influences I encountered daily with authenticity. In a globalized, postmodern world, places that provide grounding allow us to define ourselves within a sea of glocal relationships. At times, these places will be specific to an individual – such as Dupre 500 – at others, they will offer power and authenticity to many. For this analysis, I turn to a second geographical theorist, Doreen Massey, for support.

The power of authenticity in place

Massey (1999) picks up where Watts' theories leave off, asking how glocal relationships influence place itself. Like Alexander, Massey submits that places are defined by a vibrant pattern of relationships; similar to Watts, she emphasizes the simultaneously local and global character of these relationships. Thus her work can be used both to qualify Alexander's claim that alive places contain patterns of relationships authentic to their context and to illustrate the multi-scalar character of these connections in an increasingly globalized world. Because how we understand place profoundly influences how we interact, transform, and create it, Massey's analysis gives us a language to understand both powerful and powerless places. She provides a useful critique of two existing theories of place before advancing a third conceptualization that reveals the complex glocal relationships that must be acknowledged to create places that are alive.

The first, classic conceptualization of place Massey (1999) critiques is a "Newtonian, billiard-ball view," in which places are conceived, maintained, and represented as discrete units that can only be disturbed by external intrusions (p. 36). Those who subscribe to this theory of place believe that the local does not share any relationship

with the global; that each locality is wholly self-contained. The places created by this outlook reflect the application of rational Newtonian thought to creating space. Such a conceptualization leads us to mutate places in a manner which stifles the rich array of relationships connecting them both to their immediate environment and to the rest of the world. Thus the tenets of Newtonian place lead us to create dead places, or to endorse what Castree (2004) labels “geographical apartheid,” by falsely isolating places from one another (p. 145).

The second dominant geographical conceptualization Massey (1999) critiques is one purely relational, reflecting the idea of a world comprised of “immense, unstructured, free, unbounded space” (p. 17). Such a conception of space devalues the specificity of places, instead preferring to regard them as uniform nodes within the unifying, equalizing force of globalization – leading to the creation of monotonous, identical spaces that are powerless and dead. In tandem, the two faulty views critiqued by Massey reveal the importance of conceptualizing and creating places that are grounded in their locality but open to the multi-scalar relationships that shape their reality.

Massey provides us with just such a lens by combining the two dominant geographical imaginations. She suggests that all places are simultaneously grounded and relational, defining place as:

the sphere of juxtaposition, or co-existence, of distinct narratives This is place as open, porous hybrid . . . where specificity (local uniqueness, a sense of place) derives not from some mythical inner roots nor from a history of relative isolation . . . [but from] the absolute particularity of the mixture of influences found together there. (Massey 1999, pp. 21-22)

Massey eloquently transcends the dichotomy of global and local, bringing to light the idea that while global is *in* the local, place still matters immensely. Massey’s conceptualization of place allows us to see each place as deeply relational, continually evolving, and self-generative. Simply, she shows us what it means for places to be alive in an increasingly globalized world.

Using Massey’s language, we can increasingly identify, create, and transform places of power in our lives. Such places possess an inherent quality – not just the result of each individual’s interaction in place, but rather an aliveness that results when a place is true to the rich amalgamation of local and global relationships that comprise it. This power of authenticity can be felt by all, regardless of whether they have spent many years in the place or are encountering it for the first time. Whereas Watts’ work helped us to identify our ability to create powerful places that hold meaning for an individual, Massey’s scholarship provides a framework to understand places that possess an inherent power, enabling any number of individuals to feel alive within their bounds.

The tiny shrine in the Higashiyama foothills of Kyoto and the GreenHouse Project in South Africa described earlier both illustrate this pervasive power of place (p. 1). The power of these spaces does not reside in our particular relationship to them but rather in their inherent authenticity and aliveness as glocal places. Let me begin in Kyoto, where the Shinto^v shrine deep within the Higashiyama foothills exudes a powerful sense of grounding. Just as any place, Kumanonyakuōji Jinja^{vi} holds within it a constellation of relationships unique unto itself. In order to be alive, as Alexander reminds us, it must be authentic to these relationships; equally important in a globalized world, as Massey tells us, is that it be grounded in the glocality of its physical locale. The separation of the shrine from urban Kyoto plays a role in both these considerations, exerting a huge influence on its immediate physical environment and on the patterns of relationships present in its surroundings.

The journey to Kumanonyakuōji Jinja requires a quiet patience and persistence as one climbs a small winding path into the mountains. The walk negotiates the passage from the Eastern-most temples of Kyoto through cedar, *momiji*,^{vii} and bamboo forests, creating a transition away from the crowds and modernity of the city. The transformation assaults all senses: trees tower above, etching their outline upon the retina; silence settles like the finest of earmuffs; soft dirt and rough bark cradle footsteps; the fresh scent of moss and plants thickens the air until it acquires an exotic taste. The seamless transition distances one from the modern world and, stumbling up the last few steps to the shrine, the most pervasive influences on person and place become an amalgam of the natural environment and the shadows of traditional Japanese culture. The sparse lines of the shrine complement the natural beauty of the place; its Shinto character and elegantly simple design reflect its Japanese heritage. A string of Tibetan prayer flags, hung in the trees above the waterfall, fluently introduces a global element into the primarily Japanese composition.

The shrine as a place is disarmingly simple and incredibly powerful. Its power arises from its completeness; its honest manifestation of all the intricate relationships in its surrounding environment. In the secluded eastern foothills of Kyoto, the natural world plays the most influential role shaping place – there are no global political power struggles, no power lines connecting to the rest of the world, no contests to determine ownership of the land. The shrine's composition, blending smoothly into its natural surroundings, reflects the influence of nature's relationships here. The pattern of connections to Japanese culture manifest in the shrine's design; the few linkages to the outer world are provided by visitors to the shrine bringing prayer flags, or other global offerings. In this way, the shrine allows for interplay between the human condition and the natural world and

at the same time is able to maintain what Alexander (1979) identifies as a “subtle and complex freedom from inner contradictions” (p. 28). A place such as this is made powerful by its honest reflection of its own pattern of connections – this power can be felt by almost any individual who comes upon it. Simply, such places are whole and alive and therefore allow us to be present in the same way.

The GreenHouse Project, a grassroots community demonstration center in inner-city Johannesburg, likewise radiates a tangible sense of power. Clearly, the rich array of global and local relationships present within these gates contrast greatly with those held within the foothills of Eastern Kyoto – thus, according to Massey and Alexander, the GreenHouse Project must be constructed upon these differences to hold a sense of aliveness. In order to understand the power of GreenHouse Project as a place, we therefore must understand what various glocal relationships exert influence and how the Greenhouse Project remains at once authentic to them and grounded in place. Whereas the physical separation of Kumanonyakuōji Jinja from downtown Kyoto strongly influenced its development as a place, the GreenHouse Project’s position in the center of Johannesburg physically and emotionally defines the space. The organization plays a continual balancing act, at once a self-sustaining oasis and deeply connected to urbanity which surrounds it.

Beyond the GreenHouse Project’s gates, Johannesburg holds within its streets the divisive legacy of Apartheid, a plague manifest in the different worlds inhabited by the black inner-city poor and the predominantly white suburbanites. Central Johannesburg is a place of poverty, where families struggle for housing, food, warmth; it is a place of strong connection and compassion, where women work together to secure their survival; it is a place of danger, characterized by frequent muggings, rapes, murders; it is a place of resilience, where individuals spring back from continual disappointments to fight to make their world better. This is the ground the GreenHouse Project is built on.

Ten years ago Joubert Park was one of the most dangerous parts of Johannesburg, frequented by peddlers and drug lords, prostitutes and pimps, common thieves, rapists, murderers. Gradually, a small group of people who came to be the GreenHouse Project began to clear away the darkness. They worked with the police to decrease crime, they connected with their local community to build relationships, they learned from the complex multi-scalar character of the South African landscape deeply penetrated by international aid initiatives, multinational corporate conglomerates, and post-Apartheid politics. In this way, the GreenHouse Project built on the elements present in its surroundings – both strengths and vulnerabilities – to create an incredibly powerful place. The city’s trash became

the fuel for a recycling and upcycling program run by local mothers; its soil and stones became the walls of GreenHouse's office and community center; fathers and grandmothers became enspirited leaders^{viii} of the organization. Whereas the shrine in Kyoto drew from its relationship to the natural world, the GreenHouse Project built on the human connections inevitably present in its high density surroundings to create an equally vibrant place. The GreenHouse Project's power as a place thus arises from its spontaneous emergence amid the complex glocal dynamics of inner-city Johannesburg. Likewise, its ability to develop projects that reflect these patterns of multi-scalar relationships leads to a sense of authentic, grounded possibility. This authenticity is a tangible quality that impacts each person who steps through its gate and, as Alexander would argue, makes it possible for both place and people to come alive.

Both Kumanonyakuōji Jinja in Kyoto and the GreenHouse Project radiate a powerful sense of place, despite highly contrastive contexts and patterns of relationships. In Kyoto, a journey to the shrine is defined by complete physical emersion in the natural world. Johannesburg, in contrast, is shaped by a rich array of human relationships packed within a high density urban setting. They are different places, yet convey the same underlying power to those who step within their bounds. We can see through these cases that in a globalized world, it is not only a physical location that is important but also authenticity to local context and global relationships. Here, yet again, Alexander and Massey's scholarship has helped us to understand this phenomenon of the powers of place.

The above analysis has provided us with a means to conceptualize – and therefore see and create – concrete, grounded, alive places in a glocalized world. Unlike places that are powerful only to individuals, these places are comprised of an ever-shifting, vibrant pattern of relationships that resonate with many, regardless of background or position. As we saw in Kyoto and South Africa, such places are comprised of connections that bring out the commonalities of both the human condition and the natural world. When viewed this way, the importance of powerful places – for grounding, for allowing us to connect to our basic humanity, for reminding us of our connection to the Earth, for catalyzing social change – becomes evident. Drawing from this base understanding of place, the proliferation of multi-scalar connections leads me to pose an additional question: In a glocalized, postmodern world can “places” of power emerge at new scales? Katz's scholarship enters the conversation here, providing an analysis of global linkages that reveals how “aliveness” can be taken to broader scales. As we pursue Katz's thought, we must be prepared to accept the emergence of a new phenomenon – *systems* of power.

The power of translocal connections in place

Katz (2001) introduces the idea of “rooted translocalism” as a means to understand the ways in which distinct, glocal places can be connected to one another (p. 724). This model both recognizes the particularity of place – which Massey has helped us to see as the unique pattern of global and local relationships inherent to each locale – and the importance of diversity-enhancing connections, which often take the form of exchange between localities. Essentially, Katz’s scholarship complements the work of many (Castree 2004; Harvey 1990; Wheatley & Frieze 2008) to conceptualize a globalization that enhances rather than diminishes the powers of place.

Let me begin by deconstructing the term a little bit to emphasize its importance to a discussion of the powers of place. *Translocal* aptly identifies a new form of connections *between* locales. These connections do not represent a new evolution of globalization, forming networks based on uniformity and interchangeability, but rather create a dynamic series of relationships between each unique locale. *Rooted* re-emphasizes the particularity of each place – the glocal environmental, social, and cultural characteristics that define each locality – and underlines the importance of forming connections based on this diversity. This means that translocality emerges as “a geographical politics that proactively weds agendas in one place to those in myriad others,” allowing for solidarity without conformity (Castree 2004, p. 135). Translocal connections thus allow for an exchange of ideas that complements rather than abolishes the particularity of place. In truly *rooted* translocal networks, global relationships allow individuals, places, and communities to become more authentic, amplifying rather than diminishing the power of each constituent place.

The translocal network deliberately creates relationships globally, allowing for exchange, support, and collaboration between localities. This, as noted above, provides the potential to deepen the power of each place within the network; it also inherently leads patterns of relationships to be created at a new scale. As Alexander notes, *place* itself is simply an amalgam of relationships; powerful places are those that evolve with authenticity to these relationships. Thus the translocal system – as a pattern of relationships between locally rooted individuals and organizations – begins to reflect the characteristics of physical place at a larger geographical scale. I suggest that this pattern of global connections has the potential to transform the power of constituent places in unpredictable ways to create a *system of power*. Just as connecting individual organs of the human body leads to the emergence of previously unimaginable qualities – consciousness, perception, coordination – the linking of disparate places has the potential to catalyze the emergence of living systems at new scales. The essential characteristic of such systems of

power, I would propose, is their ability to link constituent places in a way which enables the creation of transformative social change. As Alexander (1979) reminds us: “the *great complexity* of an organic system, which is essential to its life, cannot be created from above directly; it *can only be generated indirectly*” (emphasis added) (p. 162). This means that systems of power cannot be created at will; rather, they *emerge* as glocal, alive places authentically connect to one another through exchanges of ideas, support, and resources. The importance of rooted translocal connections is thus two-fold. First, by deepening the connection between localities, the translocal system actually enables locales to become more authentic unto themselves and therefore even more powerful as places. Second, by building a pattern of relationships in space, the translocal system begins to recreate place at new scales with the potential for catalyzing dynamic social change.

What exactly does this mean in practice? In order for powerful translocal systems to emerge, it is imperative for localities to be both grounded in place and actively exchanging feedback with other locales. Such exchange can be as simple as human relationships forged through shared values or as complex as developing a common vision for sustainability that respects the sociocultural diversity of disparate places. Often the work of maintaining such a network is as difficult as the concrete work at the grassroots, but it has incredible transformative potential as a means to create systemic change. The power of an emergent translocal network nourishes its constituent places and leads to the creation of transformative change. Because the network is so abstract, often its strength can be seen and felt most clearly in the dynamic spaces created when members connect face to face.

This is most plainly exemplified by the opening description of the group around a common campfire in Nova Scotia (p. 2). Let me first give a little background on that particular campfire. What manifested as song and laughter around charred logs had actually begun three days earlier at the Berkana Institute’s inaugural Art of Learning Centering, a gathering of young leaders from around the world working towards grassroots sustainability (The Berkana Exchange 2010). The participants who gathered in that June of 2005 were connected through a translocal network of resources, ideas, people, and support entitled The Berkana Exchange. These leaders work rooted within their local communities to develop sustainable approaches to food production, building, waste, learning, and healing. As they create this tangible change they simultaneously support other leaders in the network, weaving a web of solidarity that materializes a common vision of social change. This shared change occurs as members from Universidad de la Tierra in Oaxaca, Mexico travel to Shikshantar in Udaipur, India, to share knowledge about constructing bicycle-powered machinery; or in turn as a member from Shikshantar travels to the

GreenHouse Project in South Africa to learn about their unique approaches to space constrained urban gardening; or as members travel between Kufunda Learning Village in rural Zimbabwe and The Shire in Nova Scotia to collaborate on new permaculture techniques. The work going on in each locale becomes more tangible and powerful when connected as part of a translocal network. Put differently, the translocal network enhances the power of each constituent place. Moreover, by connecting at new scales, the learning centers are able to create transformative global change that surpasses the sum of the isolated individual initiatives.

The power of this translocal network – the power of place in new mutations and at new scales – can be felt during Berkana’s annual Art of Learning Centering where this network of individuals convenes for five days to dialogue and create new ways of working together and apart. The power of these gatherings crackles in the air. Insurmountable challenges, small victories, new ideas, and emerging plans – of both individuals and their organizations – find themselves aired in a circle of trust. People listen to one another. In a single day, I have heard discussions ranging from how to create network equality when funding originates almost exclusively in the United States, while projects exist everywhere but; to what centers throughout South Africa can do to engage together to promote local sustainable food production; to how organizations can smoothly transition between leaders. I have heard the stories of women struggling to bridge the gap between lives in the developed world and work in the developing world, the anger and fear over inexplicable delays in critical funding, and the euphoria of connecting around something as obscure as spreading composting toilets. It is important to note that this gathering could be located anywhere and it would still have this transformative effect. The power present results from the life inherent to the human connections of the network itself, not the physical venue. When members of the translocal network come together, a space is created that facilitates incredibly important dialogues and interactions; in this space, the network itself becomes a powerful place when convened for an impermanent time.

The new pathways opened by globalization *can* enable ourselves and our places to become more alive. As Katz (2001) notes, "internationalist solidarities at once specific and fluid . . . [can] reimagine and rework globalization" and enable us to produce new realities (p. 725). The place created by the convergence of a translocal network, I suggest, acts to supplement our individual sense of place and purpose in an undeniably global world. It simultaneously shows us our unique contribution as individuals in a specific place and time and makes visible the glocal ties and relationships that bind us. Ultimately, this leads us to create more powerful places in our own localities and to engage in the creation of transformative social change through the translocal network. We simply

must be aware of these connections – a task supported by the work of geographical scholars such as Watts, Massey, Katz, and Castree – and follow Alexander to work towards authenticity to these new patterns of relationships.

Conclusion

Throughout this essay, I have suggested that the intensely interconnected climate of our globalized world fundamentally affects how we perceive space with transformative implications of individuals, places, and communities engaging for change. The convergence of the nuanced multi-scalar geographical theories of Watts, Massey, Katz, and Castree with Alexander's work on place and empirical case studies represents a unique contribution to the current body of scholarship on the powers of place. I began by analyzing the effects of globalization on individual identity and what we each view as powerful places. Drawing on Watts, I contended that global-local interactions inherently influence our identity; who we are as individuals depends on the relationships we choose to pursue and the boundaries we draw in place. Each individual embodies a kaleidoscope of relations, values, and interconnections. Likewise, each individual feels ties to specific places based on how they live the relationships important to them. Places like Dupre 500 can be powerful to a single person, or a few people alone, because they represent the relationships meaningful to them. Massey's scholarship, in turn, revealed the importance of conceptualizing each particular place based on the unique amalgamation of local and global elements from which it is comprised. In order to be alive, to radiate a sense of power to those who come across them, places must be authentic to the unique relationships that comprise them. I suggested that Kumanonyakuōji Jinja and the GreenHouse Project were examples of this type of powerful place, made alive by the authenticity of their relationships to the natural world and the legacy of Apartheid, respectively. Finally, I used Katz's work to provide a lens through which to see how relationships between grounded localities, or rooted translocalism, can provide space for meaning and connection at new scale. In a globalized world, such translocal networks have incredible power as a means to connect individuals and organization who share common values and work. The dynamic exchange and authenticity of these systems often becomes apparent when they convene in person for a short time – such as The Berkana Exchange gathering in Nova Scotia. These translocal networks, I proposed, have the ability to both amplify the aliveness of constituent places and to create an entirely new phenomenon – systems of power with the potential to transform the way we relate and work together in unpredictable and dynamic ways. In this sense, the translocal network emerges as a powerful means for affecting transformative social change. Taken as a whole, this body of

scholarship suggests that the sheer combinatorial effects of our glocalized connections lead true authenticity of place to manifest not in increasing uniformity but instead in the very opposite – exponentially increasing diversity as local and global influences combine in new conjugations.^{ix}

Clearly, there exist obstacles at every scale – individual, place, and translocal network – to creating truly alive places. However, places do exist with this awesome power. And we all know these places. Some will vary person to person based on experiences and relationship to place; some places will influence many different people through their authenticity and aliveness; and some may emerge through translocal networks. Despite differences, all these places share a common theme: they are authentic to all the forces which comprise them; they are all alive. As we have seen, diverse systems of interaction exist at all scales in an increasingly globalized world. Daunting though this seems, when we feel our way into the space of authenticity at the center of these tangled interactions, we have unbounded potential to find and create powerful places. This, as Alexander (1979) reminds us, is the crux of our existence, our search for “the most precious thing we ever have. . . . *those moments and situations when we are most alive*” (emphasis added) (pp. 47, 41).

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Endnotes

ⁱ Christopher Alexander, an architect by profession, insightfully writes about this quality – what it is that places of power share and how we can create them in building – in three books published in the late seventies. The following description derives from his work (1979).

ⁱⁱ *Translocal* is used frequently in the geographical vocabulary to discuss networks and relationships that nurture connections between localities. In contrast to global relationships, which often indicate uniformity enforced from above, translocal relationships imply direct connections between localities organized at the grassroots which enhance and support the diversity of each particular place. The idea of translocality will be further explained in the third section “The power of translocal connections in place” (p. 10).

ⁱⁱⁱ *Extralocal* refers to relationships to places outside a locale that nonetheless exert influence on the dynamics of place in a particular locale.

^{iv} For a more scientific take on the same idea – that our experiences continually influence our core identity – see Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela’s (1980) work on structural coupling in the brain, summarized eloquently by Fritjof Capra in *The Hidden Connections* (2003).

^v Shinto is the native spirituality of Japan. It is based on the celebration and worship of *kami*, or spirits, thought to inhabit all living beings and the natural world. The tradition is inherently polytheist and animist. The numerous Shinto shrines in Japan – amidst neighborhood blocks, in the center of large urban cities, along deserted roads, in dense forests, side by side streams and lakes – honor the *kami* and offer a place for purification and worship (Kuroda 1981).

^{vi} *Jinja* is the Japanese word for shrine.

^{vii} The *momiji* is a type of Japanese maple.

^{viii} Robert Stilger develops the concept of enspirited leadership to identify a certain approach to leadership present in many emerging grassroots organizations (2005). He defines it as leadership grounded by a sense of calling that draws on body, mind and spirit for direction and that follows an emergent plan. This type of leadership is prevalent in the GreenHouse Project and contributes to its ongoing development as a powerful place. For more on enspirited leadership, see Stilger (2005).

^{ix} This is not to say that this is happening in the majority of places – indeed the world of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and Wall Street institutions does look increasingly “flat” as Thomas Friedman (2005) would remind us – but rather to show what would be possible if conditions were possible for the powers of place to emerge in every locale.