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Walking the Streets of Suzhou

Approaching Urban Spaces through Embodied Experiences and Visual Interpretations

By Tiina-Riitta Lappi

The Perception of Place from the Outside

I have rarely had such a strange feeling as I did when I travelled for the first time to the city of Suzhou. That feeling was caused by the fact that I was not able to create an image of any kind in my mind about the city I was heading for. So right from the start after arriving in Suzhou I realized that I was somehow more alert about where I was going and what was around me than when I usually travelled to a new place for the first time. As an ethnologist interested in urban and spatial studies, this experience led me to think about how people going to new places start to become acquainted and familiar with their surroundings. Can a place carry meanings only for those who possess insider knowledge, or is it possible to analyse urban spaces and places on the basis of other kinds of cultural competence and understanding? What kind of knowledge can be obtained without having access to the meanings of places available to insiders? Places and spaces are usually analysed from the local inhabitants' point of view, but how do outsiders or newcomers approach unfamiliar sites? What kind of meanings do places carry for someone coming from another place and culture? These questions call for consideration and further analysis in a globalized world where people, by moving around, are creating and shaping culturally varying spatial practices and multicultural urban landscapes. At the same time, more general remarks and ways of theorizing space can be obtained from ideas about foreign and local, space and place and the aspect of temporality in relation to places.

This article¹ has as its empirical starting

point the fieldwork I carried out in Suzhou, China, in December 2009 and November 2010. The city of Suzhou is situated about 80 kilometres north-east of Shanghai. It is one of the oldest cities in China, dating back over 2,500 years. Today there are approximately 10 million people living in the greater Suzhou area and about 5–6 million of them in the urban area. My first impression was the resemblance of Suzhou to any European city. This was because I arrived from a direction that led to a part of the city called Suzhou Industrial Park, which had sprung up quite recently and was still under construction. In this area, there were high-rise apartment buildings along wide city streets, shopping malls, glass-covered office buildings, high-quality hotels and a large waterfront area beside Lake Jin Ji dedicated to leisure and entertainment activities. Surprisingly, this part of the city did not seem very crowded as might have been expected in a city of millions.

The main target for my fieldtrip was to observe urban public spaces and spatial practices in Suzhou and to approach the city's spatialities, that is juxtapositions of social and material environments, through personal embodied experiences and visual interpretations. The problem in this site was that, although the material environment gave me recognizable hints and clues to be followed, when taking possession of the place, I found the local culture and language unfamiliar. At first sight, the city of Suzhou looked in many ways like any other modern city, but quite soon that impression faded, and there appeared to be something that made it totally different. When heading for the centre of the older Suzhou area, I realized that I had entered

another kind of urban environment. The streets were totally congested with cars, motorbikes and bicycles as well as pedestrians walking on the pavements – if that was even possible since a lot of activities, such as selling food in street kitchens, tending a shoe-repair stand or just gathering with friends to play cards, took place on the pavements, thus forcing people to walk on the carriageway. The traffic looked and felt quite chaotic, with the incessant honking of the horns making me jumpy until I came to realize why they were used. In comparison with my first impression of Suzhou, this part of the city was quite different in scale and very much alive, with a wide range of activities and various spatial practices going on everywhere in the public spaces.

The city felt both familiar and very strange at the same time, giving a sense that the current uses and practices of the city's urban spaces were formed and produced by influences that are at once contemporary and very ancient, both local and global. My fieldwork in Suzhou led me to consider the researcher's role as "another", someone who did not belong to a place but still tried to make some sense of it on the basis of his or her personal experiences² and a cultural knowledge related to a different context and background. I wanted to find a way to grasp this feeling of outsidership and ended up by focusing on the experiences I "embodied" and by taking photographs. By examining the embodied experiences and interpreting the visual images of the urban spaces I visited, I strove to assume a stranger's perspective on the juxtaposition of the material and social environments. In today's world, people move around, ap-

proaching new places and moulding spatial practices with culturally and socially varying understandings of urban spaces and their uses. Sensing and looking at a place as a stranger opens up different perspectives on the relations of the social and material environments in more familiar surroundings as well.

I understand "urban space" as a concept originating from the field of urban planning and referring in the first place to the division of a larger urban area into smaller sections named according to their functional purpose. Edward Relph (1976:23) argues that a space in planning does not involve direct or imaginative experience but an order on maps and efficiency of land use. For Tim Ingold (2000:216) "space" is the most abstract term to describe the world in which we live and the furthest removed from actual human experience. Nevertheless, even in everyday language we tend to speak of urban spaces and not of urban places, even though urban spaces or some parts of them become meaningful for people and are understood as specific places. It seems that the concept of urban space is often used in quite a generalized way in referring to the urban environment as a whole without any emotional qualities attached to it. When talking about places, people usually have some kind of knowledge of, or connection with, them because in order to talk about a certain place it has to be somehow acknowledged as a place. Places are intimately related to space, and this relationship has been defined in various ways, for example in multidisciplinary spatial studies. According to Robert David Sack (2004: 244), a place is carved out of space, it is in space and has location, and it is also in-

volved in generating flows through space and creating surfaces and appearances of varying scales and extent.

Urban places today are in many cases planned and built quite similarly from one city to the next, which may lead us to think that the urban experiences of the people who encounter and use those spaces would also be the same all over. The waterfront area in Suzhou's Industrial Park, for example, resembles similar sites in many European and American cities, where former industrial areas, especially ones located on waterfronts, have been turned into sophisticated business and entertainment areas. There is even such a waterfront area in my hometown of Jyväskylä (in central Finland). The concept of the development of these areas is closely related to the idea of creating a new image for the city in order to be able to compete with other urban locations for the attention of enterprises, investors, tourists and new industries (Short 1996:428; Lappi 2007:123). In this process of image-building, the social, cultural and historical characteristics of the area do not play any relevant role. Moreover, we often talk about and refer to urban culture as something universal and not particularly connected to certain actual places, specific sites or locations. The application of phenomenological and visual approaches to cities and urban spaces opens up new and complementary perspectives for research in the field of urban ethnology, where narrative methods and a focus on single sites employing a holistic approach have long appeared to be the prevailing practices. Multi-sited ethnography emphasizes places as characteristically unbounded, diverse, polyphonic, transparent, and al-

ways having connections with other places. In this article, I will discuss these ideas in relation to the ethnography of spatiality and urban ethnology.

Embodied Experiences and Visual Interpretations

“On a Saturday afternoon in the city centre of Suzhou, I find myself in the middle of a fast-moving crowd. I'd like to slow down but the crowd around me won't let me. I walk on for a little while and turn into a narrow side street where the sounds from the crowded street fade away. I'm not hurrying anymore. I realize that I have adapted my rhythm to fit these people's leisurely pace. Just a few blocks away from the busy commercial main streets and I have come into another world, filled with a feeling of calmness and a kind of timelessness. I'm looking for a hint about where I might be. The street I'm walking on seems somehow familiar from earlier days, but that feeling is gone in a moment, and I feel totally lost again.”

When one arrives in an unknown city, one first experiences it through every part of one's body – through one's senses of smell and taste, and through one's legs and feet. One's hearing picks up the noises and the quality of the voices; one's eyes are assailed by new impressions. Henri Lefebvre (1991:160–162) argues for the essential nature of bodily experience in the production of space since, in his view, semantic approaches concentrating on readability and visibility can only be applied to spaces already produced. Kjell Hansen (2003:149–167) has carried out a methodological experiment in ethnological fieldwork, testing what might come

from a situation in which the fieldworker relies on other sensory impulses than those resulting from talking to people. Hansen writes about how the existence of a strange language forced him to navigate the atmosphere with a greater sensitivity. It was his body rather than his mind that linked him to the world he was experiencing, but even so his intention was to understand something about the social and cultural meanings of the event he was taking part in, albeit as an outsider.

The description of my stroll on a Saturday afternoon in Suzhou, despite its brevity, embodies many essential features and experiences of being there. First of all I did quite a lot of walking, just going from one street to another with almost no preplanned schedules or ideas of where I should definitely go or what sites or places I should visit. I am a huge fan of maps, and usually when I arrive in a new place I try to find a map right away in order to somehow figure out the urban layout and locate myself in it. I had planned to do the same thing on my first visit to Suzhou, but it proved to be quite difficult. I found some maps but actually could not find the information I was looking for. For example, no scale was indicated on the maps, and many of the streets were not marked. So I certainly did a lot of walking since I got lost all the time and could not figure out distances, which caused me many time-consuming setbacks. There were a few tall buildings in the central area that I could see and recognize from far away, so I tried to orientate myself by them. When I was thinking about the maps, I realized that I had taken it as somehow self-evident that maps were the same everywhere. My

walking distances in Suzhou also grew because almost all residential areas were fenced, in with just a few streets leading out of them. More than once I thought of going through such an area only to realize that it was impossible, and I had to return the way I had come.

Having no access to street signs and being not able to ask for help if I got lost in the streets of Suzhou sharpened my senses in a way that surprised me. Being unable to rely on spoken or written language, other senses involved in engaging with urban spatiality became more alert, creating a more profound sensitivity towards the material surroundings, landscape, settings and places. This experience led me to think about people's reactions to unfamiliar places. How do we start getting acquainted with new places? Even though we may not pay much attention to walking, it is a very common way of getting to know new material and social environments. When I have interviewed migrants who have settled in my hometown of Jyväskylä in Finland, they often mention that in the beginning they just walked around; first in the surroundings of their dwelling places and then extending their walks further in order to get a grip on their new hometown. Walking is not just about getting to know one's physical environment and the routes to different places; it is also a means of starting to learn about a new social environment. Ethnographers carry out lot of their work on foot, but it is rare to find any ethnography that reflects the walking itself. Tim Ingold and Jo Lee Vergunst (2008:1–3) argue that walking is a profoundly social activity. In their timings, rhythms and inflections, the feet respond as much as the voice to the presence

and activity of others. Social relations are not acted *in situ* but are paced out along the ground.

In the walk described above, another experience had to do with the rhythms of the city and changes in them and in my own, in a way unconscious, adaptation to those differing rhythms. This demonstrates the point of Ingold and Vergunst about walking as a social activity. I realized that I was adjusting my own pace to that of the people around me, and in that way I also became aware of the multitemporality and multispatiality of the city. Different rhythms imply varying urban lifestyles and are related to connections of time and place in various ways. According to Henri Lefebvre, concrete times have rhythms, or rather, *are* rhythms – and every rhythm implies the relation of a time to a space, a localized time or, if you will, a temporalized place. Rhythm is always linked to a certain place, to its particular place, whether it be the beating of the heart, the fluttering of the eyelids, the movement on a street, or the tempo of a waltz. Time is an aspect of a movement and a becoming (Lefebvre 1996:230). Motion, as a concept related to Lefebvre's rhythm, is something that creates spaces in the first place. Orvar Löfgren (1997: 64–65) talks about how we often think of space and landscape as something that we step into, walk through and then leave behind. But instead it is the motion that organizes space and at the same time our understanding of spaces.

If one attentively observes a crowd during peak times, and especially if one listens to its noise, one discerns flows in the apparent disorder and an order that is signalled by rhythms: chance or predeter-

mined encounters, the hurried carryings-on or nonchalant meanderings of people going home to withdraw from the outside, or leaving their homes to make contact with the outside, business people and unoccupied people – so many elements which make up polyrhythm. The analyst of rhythm knows how to listen to a place, a market, an avenue (Lefebvre 1996:230). Another aspect of temporal difference for someone like me who comes from Finland – where, as in most places in Europe, weeks are generally divided into five working days with Saturday and Sunday free of work – was manifested in my wonder at the fact that in Suzhou all the days of the week resembled each other. There were no clearly noticeable differences between weekdays and weekends with regard to the uses of urban spaces or obtaining services and doing shopping, for instance. Maybe the main shopping area with pedestrian streets was more crowded at weekends, but otherwise this division between weekdays and weekends was not as sharp as it often is in European cities.

The experience of the local tends to have a special kind of sensual character. People are in a local setting bodily, with all their senses, ready not only to look and listen but to touch, smell and taste, without having their fields of attention restricted or prestructured for them. There is a feeling of immediacy, even of immersion, of being surrounded. What is experienced is also extensively contextualized. This is surely at least part of what the “real” is about. If there is now a growing celebration in social and cultural theory of the body as a symbolic site of the self and continuity and of the senses, a greater concern

with the body and the senses in their contexts might help us understand something of what place is about. Taking these factors together – the everyday, the face-to-face, the early and the formative, the sensual and bodily experience – it would appear that a fairly strong case exists for the continued importance of the local. And this could be true with regard to experienced reality even when much of what is in a place is shaped from the outside. We are only now relinquishing the idea that the local is autonomous, that it has integrity of its own. Rather we see it as having its significance as an arena in which a variety of influences come together, acted out perhaps in a unique combination, under the special conditions pertaining to it (Hannerz 1996:27).

The term “sense of place” refers to the subjective and emotional attachment people have for places (e.g. Cresswell 2004:7). Usually a sense of place is defined as something that calls for a longer temporal involvement with a certain place in order for that relationship to evolve into an emotional attachment. It leaves little room for the fact that a certain place can change, and at least implicitly it is linked to an understanding of places as rather stable and closed entities. Sometimes the feeling of belonging to a place can develop instantly and hit one like love at first sight, but a sense of place continues to imply a deeper emotional attachment (Tuan 2006:19). In a lot of ethnological research, the relationship between a place and people has been understood as something unchanging; in other words, the idea has been that “certain people” belong to “a certain place”. But can a sense of place be understood differently, not as a fixed con-

cept but as literally referring to the sensing of a place?

While I was walking in the newer parts of Suzhou, my attention often seemed to be focused on a larger view of the urban landscape. Since the streets were wide and there were not that many people around, somehow I could only catch a rather insignificant sense of that environment. I tried to capture my surroundings visually, but I failed to get any real feeling of it. There was no sense of place that caught my attention in any way. In the more crowded sites of the older parts of the city, the atmosphere was totally different. There the urban spaces were not large and open in all directions, and this gave a more intimate feeling to places in the old centre. In addition to doing their shopping and running errands, people in many places lived their daily lives in close connection to what was happening on the streets. In a way, their everyday lives were flowing into the public spaces, thus making the borderline between public and private spaces quite blurred. The feeling of a kind of intimacy and the idea that these places were tightly connected to people’s everyday lives and their personal histories were almost palpable. In a way, I felt as if I was surrounded by these sites so that I could feel them with all my senses in a way I had not experienced before. So, in using another interpretation of the sense of place, I’m suggesting that meaningful and important relations to places or spaces do not necessarily have to be of long duration and maybe not even experienced in relation to concrete places. In revealing and analysing these kinds of spatial relations (as well as long-lasting and fundamental bondings with places), this phenomenon

must also be approached as something sensed and embodied. It must, of course, be understood that not all embodied practices or sensory experiences can be expressed narratively or verbally.

Frozen Images of Urban Places

Going back to what I said in the beginning about how places are carved out of space makes me wonder whether it is possible for the outsider to recognize or identify particular places in the urban landscape through bodily experiences. Do places evoke different kinds of embodied experiences from those created by just any urban space, for example? Can the sense of place be somehow sensed by the outsider? What kind of assemblages, gatherings of people and things, juxtapositions, etc. make a place and distinguish it from space or landscape? While I was walking in Suzhou, I took photographs as I went along. My purpose was not to make an organized or comprehensive documentation of the city or parts of it. Instead I wanted to relate these pictures somehow to my embodied experiences and to use them more as reminders of what I had seen and experienced. I call them frozen images which halt the movement, rhythms and flows of the city for a second in order for me to be able to remove these moments to another place and look at them more carefully from a geographical and temporal distance.

The use of photographs as research material is, of course, problematic in many ways. Only a very limited view of the urban landscape is shown in each picture. I have taken the pictures myself, and in that sense they are very subjective as well as in many ways randomly selected and bound-

ed segments of the surroundings. Visual research methodologies are often used in an exploratory manner; to discover things the researcher has not initially considered (Banks 2007:17). So it has not been my aim to produce comprehensive photographic data; instead I have taken photographs and looked at them in order to reflect on what kind of information I can detect in them. Photographs can be analysed in many ways, but here I am concentrating on just a few issues of urban spatiality that I have found myself thinking about when going through the photographs.

First of all, the different scales of urban spaces constitute one interesting issue that I did not think about that much when I was in Suzhou. The scale of these spaces is hugely different in different parts of the city, and this also has an effect on how people move around and how they engage in different activities in them. The feeling of the city – how it feels even to the outsider – is different too. In some of the photos there are huge structures, buildings, bridges, squares, etc. that have been built mostly during the last ten to fifteen years. Then, on the other hand, there are almost a kind of micro-spaces in the older parts of the city where people live their everyday lives. The range of these different scales is indeed great. This led me to think about how to define a place in an urban environment. Can a square be called a place? How about a street corner? These might be places, but as an outsider I have no way of knowing it, so for me they are not places but spaces in which things are ordered in a certain way and in which people carry on their everyday lives in a certain way.

After going through the photographs several times, I have noticed that in a way

I have “created places” out of urban space by zooming in on certain features that in my view have been somehow relevant with regard to urban spatiality and especially to the consideration of just what constitutes a place. In one photo there are four small chairs on a narrow pavement in the oldest part of the city. There are no people in the picture but the arrangement of the material objects makes up a scene indicating a social gathering or interaction in urban space. In a way, these chairs materially manifest a relationship between people and that particular place and even claim ownership of that certain spot. In another photo, my attention was caught by the intermingling of private and public space (at least in the sense that we understand this) in the old city centre, where the streets are too narrow for cars. Laundry (including underwear) is dried outside on the fronts of the houses. Cleaning utensils are also stored outside. Even the smallest spaces are filled with “pottery gardens”, which can be found everywhere in the most imaginative places. In the older parts of the city everyday life flows onto the pavements in many places, occupying the space so that the pedestrians are forced to walk on the side of the traffic lane. Cars, motorbikes and bicycles fill the streets side by side honking their horns and ringing their bells constantly to warn others.

In the older part of the city the streets are full of life, with dense traffic, people going about their chores and running their small businesses. The commercial areas resemble European cities, but they also are very lively and colourful. The newest parts of the city have been built into ex-

tremely pleasant residential areas, clusters of office buildings, entertainment areas and shopping centres. In these areas, the private and public spaces have become very strictly separated. The feeling of these places is very different because of the scale and also because people are not directly connected to the urban spaces through their everyday activities as in the older parts. With regard to my personal embodied experiences, it is hard even to recall any kind of sensual experience except a sort of an emptiness and isolation. It must be remembered that there are still only a small number of people in Suzhou who can afford to shop and spend time in these areas. Another difference is that the pavements are only for walking and going from one place to another; not for spending time on or loitering in social gatherings. Buildings “happen in the sky” and do not connect to the people walking on street level.

In the older parts of the city people create and maintain their places through social and spatial practices, but in the newer parts it feels as if there is metaphorically an invisible hand leading people to behave according to certain strict rules and guidelines. This resembles Henri Lefebvre’s (1991:164–168) concept of “dominated space”, which is invariably the realization of a master design. In order to dominate space, technology introduces a new form into a pre-existing space – generally a rectilinear or rectangular form such as a grid or a chequerboard pattern. As a result of technology, the domination of space is becoming completely paramount. As an example, Lefebvre takes a motorway which brutalizes the countryside and the land, slicing through space



A narrow street in the oldest part of the city is under construction but is still the site of many everyday activities and social gatherings. Photo: Tiina-Riitta Lappi 2010.



View of a pleasant recently built commercial area beside a lake – but where is everyone? Photo: Tiina-Riitta Lappi 2010.

like a great knife. Dominated space is usually closed, sterilized, and void. In my view, dominated space can also be understood as dominating space since it starts to dominate people by determining for them a strictly governed role as consumers rather than allowing them to contribute to urban life as active agents in producing the city and its spatiality.

In order to be fully understood, the concept of dominated space must be contrasted with the opposite and inseparable concept of appropriation. Lefebvre (1991: 164–168) argues that the concept of appropriation can be elucidated only by the means of a critical study of space. According to him, it may be used of a natural space that has been appropriated by a certain group and modified in order to serve the needs and possibilities of that group. An appropriated space resembles a work of art, which does not mean that it is in any sense an imitation work of art. In Lefebvre's view, such a space is often a structure – a monument or building – but not always. Also a site, a square or a street may be described as an appropriated space. I would call many sites in the older parts of Suzhou appropriated spaces and regard the city-dwellers as active agents in producing and altering urban spatialities. Lefebvre further adds that time plays a part in the process of appropriation, which cannot be understood apart from the rhythms of time and of life.

Multilocality, Multiplicity and Polysemy

In her article on multilocality and multivocality, Margaret Rodman argues that anthropologists often assume that places are unproblematic as a result of under-

standing them simply as locations where people do things. She points out that places are socially constructed and have multiple spatially constructed meanings. Based on this multiplicity, she continues, single sites or landscapes can also be understood as multilocal in the sense that they shape and carry polysemous meanings for different users. Multilocality conveys the idea that a single place may be experienced quite differently (Rodman 2003:204–223). A narrow old street under construction in the centre of Suzhou may feel like home to one person, while another might see it as just a place that belongs to a different time than the present. Places are usually thought of as something real and concrete, but people also create them through the use of imagination, extending their reach beyond the here and now to pull from memory other people, places and things not located in the present place (Gustavson & Cytrynbaum 2003). The multiplicity of places as experienced and lived spatialities raises questions which call for a variety of methodological approaches and ways of combining them.

People, meanings, and meaningful forms that travel fit badly with the conventional units of social and cultural thought. Social theorists are now repeatedly criticizing the established tendency to treat “societies” as autonomous universes, often implicitly identified with the modern form of states. In the latter view, “cultures” (in the plural) have of course been almost the mirror image of “societies”, and although this conception perhaps places slightly more emphasis on the coexistence and diversity of the entities, at the same time it even more explicitly propounds the idea of bounded-

ness and distinctiveness (Hannerz 1996: 20). The work of Seamon, Pred, Thrift, de Certeau and others show us how place is constituted through reiterative social practice – place is made and remade on a daily basis. Place provides a template for practice – an unstable stage for performance. Thinking of place as performed and practised can help us think of it in radically open and non-essentialized ways in which it is constantly struggled over and re-imagined in practical ways. Place is the raw material for the creative production of identity rather than an *a priori* label of social practice. Place in this sense becomes an event rather than a fixed ontological entity rooted in notions of the authentic. Place as an event is marked by openness and change rather than boundedness and permanence (Cresswell 2004:39).

Multi-sited ethnography defines as its objective the study of social phenomena that cannot be accounted for by focusing on a single site. Urban spaces are formed in interactions of the global and the local, as a juxtaposition of the past and the present, expressing the specificity of spatio-temporal relations. Urban spaces are simultaneously both similar to and different from other spaces. Urban everyday life in the form of social practices and cultural interpretations can be examined from a broader perspective by focusing on multiple sites and cities. The essential feature of multi-sited research is to follow people, connections, associations and relationships across space (Marcus 1995; Falzon 2009). In terms of method, multi-sited ethnography involves a spatially dispersed field through which the ethnographer moves – actually via sojourns in two or more places, or conceptually by means of

techniques employing the juxtaposition of data (Falzon 2009).

On the other hand, Tim Ingold and Jo Lee Vergunst (2008:3) point out that even multi-sited fieldwork often focuses on the sites themselves, forgetting that life is also lived between and outside fixed locales. Another question has to do with how or by whom these locales or sites to be studied are defined as meaningful and relevant entities. Doreen Massey propounds another approach to spatiality. She proposes first that we recognize space as a product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny. Her second contention is that we understand space as the sphere in which the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality is possible; as the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist; as the sphere therefore of coexisting heterogeneity. Without space, no multiplicity; without multiplicity, no space. If space is indeed the product of interrelations, then it must be predicated upon the existence of plurality. Multiplicity and space are co-constitutive. Massey's third proposition is that we recognize space as always under construction. Precisely because space on this reading is a product of relations-between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out, it is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed. Perhaps we could imagine space as simultaneity of stories-so-far (Massey 2005:9). Different kinds of urban spaces mark social, economic and even cultural differences, which we might perhaps call urban multiplicities. In my view, urban ethnology is always multi-sited or multi-

contextual in its approach owing to the multiplicity of urban environments and the spatial practices people engage in and meanings they assign to places.

From Urban Ethnology to the Ethnography of Spatiality and Back

I do not think I have come very far in making any further sense about whether to use place or space as a central concept in talking about urban environments, but that may not be so relevant in this context. What I want to stress, instead, is the problematic question of how we as ethnologists can add to understandings about humans' relations to their surroundings despite the different concepts and varying ways of defining them. Over the years, while working on urban ethnology and issues on place and space, I have been inspired by research conducted by scholars of human and cultural geography. We ask similar questions about people and localities, but our approach as ethnologists differs from that of geographers. Ethnologists, in the first place, study people and not places as such. By this I mean that we take a different stance in talking about places from that of human geographers, for example.

Geography is the study of places, while ethnology focuses on the people who occupy places and have relations to places and spatial orderings. Our perception takes a different direction from that of geographers, and for us spatiality can be understood in the first place as the human experience of being in the world. Moreover, meanings are attached to people and constructed by people since they make places meaningful through their thoughts and actions.

When talking about spatiality in the context of ethnological research, I am referring to relations between people, their surroundings and the temporality of living. Only in this way can places and spatial orderings be described if we want to see them as human constructions developed in the juxtaposition of social, cultural and historical influences.

Suzhou, with its 2,500-year-old history and its current rapid development, has a unique atmosphere of temporal, spatial and cultural multiplicity. In older parts, there are sites with a lifestyle that an outsider would call traditional Chinese. The most popular pedestrian precinct area, where especially young people spend their time shopping for labels that can be found almost everywhere in the world, is located on the grid plan in the heart of ancient Suzhou. The newest parts of the city, which feature, for example, a large shopping mall called Times Square and a luxurious waterfront area for leisure and entertainment, resemble American commercial landscapes. In between these two extremes there is a middle ground looking and feeling, at least for the outsider, rather like many European cities. All these areas differ in their physical appearance, but they are also accompanied by different kinds of urban lifestyles. Even the soundscapes are different. To give one example, traditional Chinese music is played in small shops and restaurants, while very loud rock music (usually Chinese popular music) blares out from the fashion shops along the pedestrian streets to capture the attention of passers-by. Such differences can, of course, be found in almost every city, but what makes Suzhou unique in this respect is that there are so many different feelings related to the dif-

ferent places. Multiplicity is visible, but what makes it even more explicit and interesting is that it can be felt in the atmosphere and experienced as a sense of place, even by an outsider.

In reflecting on his methodological experiment, Kjell Hansen (2003) states that fieldwork carried out in a situation where the researcher places (or is forced to place) him- or herself outside language, makes it difficult or impossible to understand and grasp phenomena such as intentionality, agency, social relations, local knowledge and lifeworlds. As Hansen (2003:158) recalls with reference to his experiment, material culture and the physical activities of people help us to understand the atmosphere of events, but not necessarily their meaning and intention. For that we need language. On the other hand, Hansen continues, the fieldwork he pursued provided him with a number of insights and a more profound sensitivity towards material culture, landscape, settings and place. To that, based on my fieldwork experience, I would add that the “fieldwork of perceptions”, as Hansen calls his experiment, can offer insights to spatial practices and interaction between the social and material environments, in other words, urban spatiality based on a broader perspective. By urban spatiality I mean a relationship of the social and material environments, examining urban landscapes simultaneously as built and material as well as social and lived spaces (Lappi 2007). This, of course, calls for other methodological approaches as well as access to people’s social and cultural worlds.

During my fieldwork in Suzhou, I came to think about multi-sitedness as an interpretational position. Being someone who

came from another place and another culture made me aware of differences and similarities that could be sensed and detected in the urban environment even when I had no access to language – or probably for that very reason. Not knowing the place may help one see something that the locals do not see or recognize, possibly because it is too self-evident or insignificant for them. A researcher’s knowledge of other urban landscapes can add to the possible interpretations and open up other insights than those stemming from the local situation. Similar sites to those newly built areas in Suzhou can be found almost anywhere in the Western world. In urban planning there is usually a built-in idea about what kind of social activities and practices should take place in these planned spaces. Unfortunately, social and cultural practices cannot be enforced or even defined by means of physical planning. It is the people who turn urban spaces into particular places through the activities and meanings that they assign to different places. On the other hand, if cities are planned according to very similar concepts everywhere, there may not be enough opportunities for socially and culturally diverse urbanities to flourish and develop.

We can certainly detect different kinds of spatial practices taking place in urban spaces in every city. But the differences in the practices between the newer areas of Suzhou and the older parts were so remarkable that it made me think about how urban planning can have a tremendous influence on town dwellers’ everyday lives and on public urban culture. The fieldwork I did in Suzhou is part of a larger project I am working on, in which I focus

on *the ethnography of spatiality*. With a multi-sited approach, I aim to carry out an ethnographical study of how people interact with their material surroundings in different settings and what kind of culturally varying understandings and practices go together with these interactions. This is also related to the question of what kind of effects planning practices and alterations in material environments have on people's everyday lives and on the social and cultural encounters that take place in urban settings.

In ethnological and also anthropological research, the focus has quite often been on the meanings individuals and groups assign to places, their attachment to places and their identification with places. It is a perspective that sees place or space in terms of *what it is* instead of *what it does* and how it evolves in relation to the everyday lives of the people who dwell in it. Stressing urban spatialities in a more diversified way in order to supplement the devices of narrative and ethnographic approaches could lead to new means of detecting other meanings through and in relation to spatial practices. By focusing on the interactions between the social and material environments and employing a combination of different methodological approaches, urban ethnology can add to an understanding of how varying urban cultures and spatial practices evolve in a jumble of locally specific and globally more general influences coming together in specific places.

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Notes

- 1 The writing of this article has been funded by the Finnish Academy (SA project no. 128401).
- 2 Maja Povrzanović Frykman (2003:59) uses the concept of "ethnographic experience" to refer to the researcher's personal bodily experiences.

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