An Examination of the Place Notion for Housing Imagination Study Based on Systems Thinking

JOSEPH KIM-KEUNG HO
Independent Trainer
Hong Kong, China

Abstract:

As an intellectual concept in Housing Imagination (HI) study, the notion of place is conceptually rich and pivotal to HI. This paper takes a close look at the place notion and comes up with a place notion diagram as an analysis tool for HI study. It is then employed to study a few HI artifacts, including one newspaper article and three Youtube videos, as illustrative real-life examples. Subsequently, the various conceptual elements of the place notion is mapped into two systems-based models, i.e., the Processes for Meanings model (Housing Imagination) and the System Complexity model. The aim is to clarify and enrich all these three models by doing so. Having achieved this aim, this paper contributes to the theoretical development of HI as well as creates additional pedagogical value for HI teaching.

Key words: the place notion; the System Complexity model; the Processes for Meanings model (Housing Imagination); Housing Imagination

Introduction

In Housing Imagination (HI)[1] study (Ho, 2014a; 2014b; 2014c), the notion of place and its associated concepts, e.g. places'

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[1] *Housing Imagination* has been defined as "an intellectual field of study in Social Sciences that makes use of the Geographical Imagination lenses to examine topics in Housing Studies" (Ho, 2014a). It studies all kinds of ways of

uniqueness and place-based identities, have always been prominent, albeit highly contested (Wordpress.com, 2012). This is indicated in certain discussion themes in HI, such as:

Discussion theme 1: Can home be understood as "an open place, maintained and developed through the social relations that stretch beyond it"? (Easthope, 2004)

Discussion theme 2: Is the place notion capable of providing "a basis for understanding the dynamics of conflicts surrounding home-places"? (Easthope, 2004)

Discussion theme 3: To what extent do people make economic decisions based on "their ideas of the nature of different 'places'", which in turn affects "house prices, home ownership rates, or the success or failure of neighbourhood regeneration projects"? (Easthope, 2004)

To study these HI discussion themes and related HI viewpoints is nevertheless difficult for many HI students as they are quite abstract by themselves (Ho, 2014c). Thus, it is important to employ and study real-life examples in the process of critically examining and learning these discussion themes and related viewpoints (Ho, 2014c). Moreover, for HI research to have practical values, HI learning and research efforts should be problem-focused, real-life phenomena-focused and housing policy-focused. Focusing on them again demands studying real-life issues and examples on Housing Imagination. Thus, this paper is going to develop a place notion diagram that captures the main conceptual elements of the notion. It then makes use of the place notion to examine some HI artifacts, in the form one newspaper article and three Youtube videos, as illustrative real-life examples. [The subject of HI favors study of HI-related artifacts, which are considered as physical representations of HI-related images and socially produced discourses (Ho, 2014a).] The paper also makes an attempt to clarify the conceptual essence of the place notion by means of
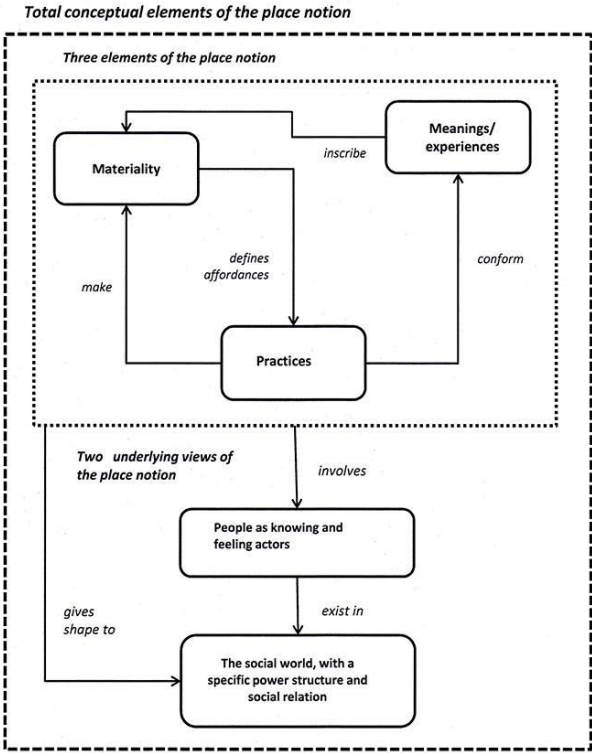
thinking on housing to inform housing research and housing policy formulation (Ho, 2014a).

two Systems Thinking models, namely the Processes for Meanings model (Housing Imagination) and the System Complexity model.

The conceptual elements of the place notion

In the literature of Housing Imagination, the notion of place occupies a pivotal position as an analytical concept (Ho, 2014a). It is at the same time conceptually a rich concept. Different conceptual elements of place are affiliated with different strands of systems thinking (Ho, 2014a). For Easthope (2004), the literature on place prompts us to adopt a "more integrated approach to housing research that looks beyond the scale of individual households to the regional, national and international scale" (Easthope, 2004). In Ho (2014b), the relationship between the concepts of place, home and house have been explored briefly. All told, the place notion is vital to HI study. Here, based on Creswell (2009) and Easthope (2004), a number of conceptual elements of the place notion are presented in a diagrammatic form in Figure 1.

Figure 1:   The conceptual elements embraced by the place notion for Housing Studies

Total conceptual elements of the place notion

Three elements of the place notion

Materiality

Meanings/experiences

inscribe

defines affordances

conform

make

Practices

Two underlying views of the place notion

involves

People as knowing and feeling actors

gives shape to

exist in

The social world, with a specific power structure and social relation

Referring to Figure 1, the three elements of the place notion, i.e., materiality, meanings/experiences and practices, are direct inter-related objects of study (Creswell, 2009). To begin with, as Creswell (2009) stresses, "space becomes a place when it is used and lived. Experience is at the heart of what place means". Meanings and experiences, e.g. psychological attachment, topophilia[2] and sense of identity, are "inscribed into the material landscape (i.e., the materiality element) (Creswell, 2009). As "place is situated in physical space" (Easthope, 2004), the vitality of the materiality element of place is clear.

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[2] *Topophilia*, a concept from Yi-Fu Tuan, refers to "the human love for a place, and affective bond between people and place" (Wordpress.com, 2012).

Practices, e.g. housing-related purposeful actions and habitual activities, are "limited by the affordances particular material structures offer" (Creswell, 2009). And practices often do conform to what is appropriate in a particular place (i.e., the shared meanings element) (Creswell, 2009). By identifying these three elements, this place notion recognizes "various social and affective strategies by which place is made meaningful in everyday ways of habiting space" (Raffaetà and Duff, 2013). The three elements of the place notion are underlined by the views of (a) people as knowing and feeling actors (which is upheld in humanistic geography) and (b) the social world with a specific power structure (which is above all emphasized in feminism, Marxism, and post-structuralism) and social relation[3]. In addition, place "gives shape and boundary to conflict over race, class, gender, religion, power, and economic development" (Rushing, 2004). Compatible with these views, a place is considered as the location with a specific set of "intersecting social relations" (Massey, 1995) and place analysis can be class-based (Robertson, 2013). These two views of place, together with the three conceptual elements of place, have been illustrated to a certain extent in Kumara and Weerakoon (2014)'s study of port cities, in which they state that a port city is a place that "facilitates a rich environment for movement of people and goods around the world" as well as serves as a nodal centre for "reception and transmission of culture, knowledge and information". The two views are adopted naturally when examining the broader context of study of Housing-related object via the lens of place. All together, the three elements and the two underlying views make up the total conceptual elements of the place notion.

An attempt is now made to make use of a newspaper article to illustrate the various conceptual elements of the place notion. The newspaper article extract is provided in Exhibit 1,

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[3] Litchtenwaldt (2014) is a brief but useful Youtube video that lectures on social relations.

which is followed by an explicit mapping of the specific examples from the newspaper article into the various conceptual elements of the place notion in Table 1.

Exhibit 1: An extract of a newspaper article related to the place notion in Housing Studies (South China Morning Post, 2014)

(1). "The beginnings of the end came for the world's tallest slum this week as officials began evicting thousands of squatters from a half-built skyscraper in the Venezuelan capital Caracas…"

(2). "Ernesto Villegas, the government ministers overseeing Caracas' redevelopment, said residents could not be allowed to stay because the 45-storey building was unsafe…"

(3). "Meant to be the crown jewel of a glittering downtown, the building was abandoned amid a 1990s banking crisis…."

(4). "The squatter's invasion was part of a larger appropriation of vacant buildings encouraged by the late president Hugo Chavez…."

(5). "A former street vendor, Sevilla said the 50 neighbors on her floor had become like family to her and her teenage children."

(6). "For outsiders, the tower symbolized the height of anarchic dysfunction.."

(7). "The surreal-looking high-rise was widely believed to harbor criminals as well as working families…"

(8). "Residents [inside the tower] complained they did not want to move so far way. They worry about losing the million-dollar views and their easy access to supermarkets, public transportation and possibly, employment…"

The main extracted newspaper article contents (re: *Exhibit 1*), labeled with numbers, are now mapped into the conceptual

elements of the place notion as identified in Figure 1. It is shown in Table 1 as follows:

Table 1: Using the example from Exhibit 1 to illustrate the conceptual elements of the place notion

Conceptual elements of the place notion(re: Figure 1)	Illustrative points from the Exhibit 1 newspaper article extract
Materiality	(1). "a half-built skyscraper in the Venezuelan Capital..".
Meanings/ experiences	(5). "A former street vendor, Sevilla said the 50 neighbors on her floor had become like family to her and her teenage children.". (6). "For outsiders, the tower symbolized the height of anarchic dysfunction.." . (7). "The surreal-looking high-rise was widely believed to harbor criminals as well as working families…".
Practices	(8). "Residents [inside the tower] complained they did not want to move so far way. They worry about losing the million-dollar views and their easy access to supermarkets, public transportation and possibly, employment…".
People as knowing and feeling actors	• Residents • Outsiders • The government ministers overseeing Caracas's redevelopment • The late president Hugo Chavez
The social world, with social relation and power structure	(1). "The beginnings of the end came for the world's tallest slum this week as officials began evicting thousands of squatters from a half-built skyscraper in the Venezuelan capital Caracas…". (2). "Ernesto Villegas, the government ministers overseeing Caracas' redevelopment, said residents could not be allowed to stay because the 45-storey building was unsafe…" (3). "Meant to be the crown jewel of a glittering downtown, the building was abandoned amid a 1990s banking crisis….". (4). "The squatter's invasion was part of a larger appropriation of vacant buildings encouraged by the late president Hugo Chavez….".

The place notion can also be applied to review videos on housing-related topics. The following are three examples:

Review of video 1: a topic on urban sprawl (Zaffer, 2011)

Brief description: This video describes the harmful impacts on both the urban environment (and its periphery) and the residents who migrate to the periphery of a city. One could consider the urban, its peripheral environment/ infrastructure as well as the related physical geographical landscape as belonging to the **materiality** element of place, the spatial practice of relocating residence to the outskirt of a city as the **practice** element of place. Finally, the meanings and experience of living in the outskirt of a city belongs to the **meanings/ experiences** element of the place notion.

Review of video 2: a topic on urban renewal (ReasonTV, 2011)

Brief description: The social context is New York City's Manhattantown in 1951 undergoing urban renewal. It describes the destruction of six blocks on New York City's Upper West side (i.e., the **materiality** element of place) with an African-American community (covering the **practices** and **experiences** elements of place). It is reported that the city sold the land for a small sum of money to a well-connected Democratic Party politician at that time (as an example related to the conceptual element of **the social world with a specific power structure and social relation** in the place notion).

Review of video 3: a topic on American nomads (Warrior, 2012)

Brief description: American Nomads are people who "roam the South West free from the bonds and chains of normal everyday life" (Warrior, 2012). These people do not station in stable areas; some of them are affluent elderly people who move in tribes with their motor homes. In this respect, the motor homes are related to the **materiality** conceptual element of place; the movement of these people in tribes is related to their spatial **practice (**another conceptual element of the place notion). This spatial practice with their motor homes is how these elderly people **experience** their retirement lives; in this case, their **experience** is also a conceptual element of the place notion.

All these examples from newspaper articles and Youtube videos are employed to illustrate, though briefly, the analytical

value of the place notion for studying Housing Studies-related topics. It is naturally feasible to enrich Figure 1 further with other place-related concepts, such as absolute space, cognitive space, paradoxical space and relational space, etc., as summarized by Kitchin (2009). It is not done in this paper as this could also make the diagram of Figure 1 much more difficult to comprehend visually. Nonetheless, employment of additional place-related notions in Housing studies to improve analysis quality is desirable and highly recommended. Also, when the place notion diagram of Figure 1 is employed in a full-fledged Housing Studies dissertation project with other supportive primary and secondary data, the discussion, unlike the ones that only make use of one newspaper article or one Youtube video, would be more detailed than the ones provided in this paper.

The place notion as interpreted with Systems Thinking

Systems Thinking has been applied on Housing Imagination study by Ho (2014a; 2014b; 2014c) in the form of theoretical review. Examples of systems-based models include the Processes for Meanings model (Housing Imagination) (Ho, 2014b) and the System Complexity model (Ho, 2014c). Here, an intellectual attempt to enrich these systems-based models is made by mapping the various conceptual elements of the place notion to these two models. This amounts to an exercise on cross-fertilization of ideas between the fields of Systems Thinking and HI. Detailed explanation of these two systems-based models can be found in Ho (2014b; 2014c), thus not further explained here. First of all, the Processes for Meanings model (Housing Imagination) is considered, followed by a review on the System Complexity model.

The Processes for Meanings model (Housing Imagination) is derived from the 'processes for organization meanings' (POM) model of Checkland and Holwell (1998). The

model is formulated as "*a conceptual reference framework to review*" the HI subject of home study based on Soft Systems Thinking (Ho, 2014b). The various conceptual elements of the place notion can be mapped into the Processes for Meanings model (Housing Imagination) of Ho (2014b). The outcome of this mapping attempt is presented in Table 2, as follows:

Table 2: A mapping of the conceptual elements of the place notion into the Processes for Meanings model (Housing Imagination) of Ho (2014b)

Components of the Processes for Meanings model (Housing Imagination)(Ho, 2014b)	*Corresponding conceptual elements of the place notion (re: Figure 1)*
Component 1: External trends & events	The social world
Component 2: Perceived world	The social world; materiality
Component 3: Appreciative settings of individuals and groups	The social world; meanings and experiences
Component 4: Individuals & groups	People as knowing and feeling actors
Component 5: Discourses (with sense making and meanings creation)	Practices; meanings and experiences
Component 6: Created meanings	Meanings and experiences
Component 7: Assemblies of associated intentions and accommodations	Practices; meanings and experiences
Component 8: Purposeful actions	Practices
Component 9: Habitual activities	Practices

Via the crude mapping exercise, the literature on the Systems Complexity model and that on the notion of place is explicitly bridged. [For a simple mapping exercise dealing with key terms of these two models, this paper is not going to elaborate on the concepts and terms in Table 2. The rough mapping exercise is based on meaning proximity of the concepts and terms involved in the two models.] Next, it is maintained that the notion of place is able to shed light on some of the aspects of the System Complexity model (Ho, 2014c). The System Complexity model has been considered by Ho (2014c) as an analytical tool to examine Housing Studies-related problem complexity in an HI investigation (Ho, 2014c). Furthermore, the System Complexity model has been described as a component of a Systems-based Housing Imagination evaluation framework in Ho (2014c).] The

mapping exercise follows the same logic of the previous one in Table 2. The mapping outcome of the conceptual elements of the place notion with that of the System Complexity model is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: A mapping of the conceptual elements of the place notion into the System Complexity model of Ho (2014c)

Major components of the System Complexity model (Ho, 2014c)	Corresponding conceptual elements of the place notion
Real world situation	Total elements of the notion of place.
The analyst's/ decision-maker' ability to cope with complexity	A specific individual or group of individual of people as knowing and feeling actors.
The analyst(s)/ decision-maker(s) with specific objectives and resources, as well as constraints from real world situation	A specific individual or group of individuals of people as knowing and feeling actors. Main constraints can originate from materiality and the social world with a specific power structure and social relation.
Ability to observe and intervene	A specific individual or group of individuals of people as knowing and feeling actors. Main constraints can originate from materiality and the social world with a specific power structure and social relation.
A particular system under consideration	The identification of a topic expressed in system term is informed by the application of the place notion overall.
The nature of the system under consideration	The elaboration of the topic expressed in system term is informed by the application of the place notion overall.

While using these two systems-based models to clarify the essence of the place notion (and vice versa) is useful, it is also fraught with some theoretical difficulties both because these two systems models are not purely conceptual models to focus on an analytical concept as the place notion does. The two systems-based models are formulated to serve as conceptual models with a strong problem-exploration focus. Thus, for instance, the System Complexity model explicitly identifies components such as analysts and decision-makers while the

Processes for Meanings model (Housing Imagination) also clearly identifies components such as assemblies of associated intentions/ accommodations and purposeful actions. As to the place notion, it is much less directly concerned with real-life problem-exploration, but is more attentive to the essence of the notion of place and its ingredient elements as related to Housing Imagination study. As a consequence, the intellectual exercise taken up in this paper to map the place ingredient notions into that of these two systems-based models can only take the form of a rough and impressionistic intellectual exercise. Nevertheless, these two mapping exercises should still be able to offer some clarification on the notion of place as well as the two systems-based models. The mapping exercises, in this case, have some academic and pedagogical values for HI. Furthermore, from the experience of these mapping exercises, the writer espouses that the literature on place does not only prompt us to adopt a "more integrated approach to housing research that looks beyond the scale of individual households to the regional, national and international scale" (Easthope, 2004), but offers us, when enhanced with critical systems thinking (CST), a critical, creative and holistic approach to housing research. It is because these two systems-based models can well be anchored on CST. [The idea of developing a CST-based HI has been examined in Ho (2014a); it will not be discussed further here.]

Concluding remarks

In the process of establishing the subject of Housing Imagination (HI), a number of HI models and frameworks have been put forward by Ho (2014a; 2014b; 2014c). This paper is yet another intellectual attempt in the same vein. It depicts the place notion in a diagrammatic form based on literature review. In the discussion, the writer makes an attempt to also clarify the place notion as well as two systems-based HI models

previously put forward, namely, the Processes for Meanings model (Housing Imagination) and the System Complexity model. Such an intellectual exercise is very much in line with the HI research strategy, based on cross-fertilization of ideas between the HI and Systems Thinking fields, proposed in the previous HI works by this writer. Further theoretical enhancement of all these HI models, notions and frameworks as proposed in Ho (2014a; 2014b; 2014c) should be made not just via the study of HI-related artifacts but through more serious HI-related research projects with more vigorous data gathering strategies, such as final year dissertation projects of Housing Studies Degree students.

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