

BEN NORQUIST AND  
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# EVERY SOMEWHERE SACRED



RESCUING A THEOLOGY OF PLACE IN  
THE AMERICAN IMAGINATION



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# SPATIAL TEXTS

## *Tools for Reading Places*

*And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.*

**T. S. ELIOT, *LITTLE GIDDING***

I (BEN) WAS TEN YEARS OLD when the Mall of America opened just a few miles from where I lived. The buzz swept through my neighborhood. The neighborhood kids swapped rumors about how massive it would be. One such rumor suggested it would cover twenty-five square miles (I will not say whether I believed it)! The MOA, as we called it for short, is actually less than a quarter of a square mile, but that is still a behemoth. There is an indoor theme park in the atrium complete with roller coaster, log chute, and Ferris wheel. Yankee Stadium would fit inside the Mall of America nine times. Of course my family was excited to visit when it opened.

On that first visit a shop was selling posters with a chaotic jumble of bits of color. I was confused. What was it? Why would you buy a picture like that?

It was the first time I had seen a *Magic Eye* picture. They contain hidden images if you look at them a certain way. I suppose it was the kind of

novelty that was appropriate for the inaugural year at the biggest mall in the country (the first *Magic Eye* pictures had been published in Japan a year prior). The technical term for a *Magic Eye* picture is a *stereogram*, because you need both eyes to make the magic work. Stereograms look like a riot of random colors at first glance, but when you relax your eyes and allow them to drift crosswise, a hidden image appears. The first time it worked for me, the Statue of Liberty magically emerged from the chaos.

What I didn't have eyes for at the time was the ways in which the mall and the neighborhoods, suburbs, and cities that surrounded it—indeed, those across the whole country—were a kind of stereogram. They might appear to be a random assortment of bits and pieces, flung across the landscape, but if you have eyes for it, hidden patterns emerge.<sup>1</sup>

To illustrate what we mean, consider suburban shopping malls more broadly. These centers opened in earnest in the decades after World War II. They are not randomly distributed across metropolitan landscapes (nor are Starbucks locations or dollar stores or payday loan stores, for that matter). The malls promoted a particular experience; influential mall architect Victor Gruen wanted to help create a suburban gathering space.<sup>2</sup> Developers saw opportunities to make money—one shopping mall not far from us in the western suburbs of Chicago is located on one side of a busy state road because the suburb on that side offered a better development deal. Shopping malls were symbols of suburban wealth and affluence; visitors needed cars to access plentiful parking and shopping opportunities in gleaming new buildings away from dense urban shopping blocks. The suburban shopping mall was so successful that they were imported back into numerous downtowns. The mall became a staple of the teenage suburban experience and was depicted in numerous movies and television shows.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>David Leong, in his excellent book *Race and Place: How Urban Geography Shapes the Journey to Reconciliation* (InterVarsity Press, 2017), tells a very similar story about working in his family shop in a mall in Vancouver, about the stereograms he saw at that mall, and about how cities are like stereograms. Although we arrived at these stories independently (and his was published before ours), it is a truly uncanny similarity! Perhaps it's evidence of another pattern.

<sup>2</sup>M. Jeffrey Hardwick, *Mall Maker: Victor Gruen, Architect of an American Dream* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup>Alexandra Lange, *Meet Me by the Fountain: An Inside History of the Mall* (Bloomsbury, 2022).

Even as shopping malls struggle today due to online shopping, big-box stores, and declining brick-and-mortar establishments, the ones that will thrive or disappear depend on these patterns. Are they located near wealthy communities? Are they owned by the major shopping-mall property owners and developers who need to generate profits? If they become vacant, how much interest will there be in the land, what will they be replaced with, and how will local communities change with a change in tax revenues and local amenities? The demise of the shopping mall will be governed by some of the same hidden forces that shaped their rise.

As with shopping malls, there are stories behind all the places we work, worship, play, and rest. Reading these places is a way of uncovering and understanding these stories, and, consequently, a deeper way of understanding the places themselves. It is about gaining a deeper insight into the physical world by learning to see patterns hidden in plain sight.



People “read” places continually. We are generally so used to reading places for basic spatial navigation that we do not have to think about it.<sup>4</sup> We do not think about our thinking. When we commute, hike in the woods, or just walk across the room, we read space in order to get to work, appreciate nature, or get a cup of coffee. Yet, the spatial reading we are so good at is for certain narrowly practical functions, such as our commute. If our goal is to get safely and efficiently to work, we see what is relevant to that goal. We see our route, the road in front of us, and only the signs we need. Over time we will learn the skill of hardly looking at all because we will have developed a routinized muscle memory of sorts. With repetition, what had required some degree of attention becomes automatic.

This automated reading of space is well adapted to our need for routines. It means we become adept at the things we do regularly. But we will need additional reading skills if we hope to renew our Christian imagination

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<sup>4</sup>Barbara Tversky, *Mind in Motion: How Action Shapes Thought* (Basic Books, 2019); Michael Bond, *Wayfinding: The Art and Science of How We Find and Lose Our Way* (Picador, 2010).

for how to live in places. When it comes to reading landscapes to understand how the world works, why the built world is constructed in its particular form, how it affects other people, and the movements of the divine in our midst, we are, at least in part, spatially illiterate.

In this chapter we explore how our reading can be broader, more searching, more open-ended, more empathic, and more studious. *We want to read in these ways so we can gain insights into how God has acted, is acting, and will act and how we can participate as members of God's kingdom in the physical world.* By learning how to read places, we will be sensitized to God's work in the world, discover opportunities for ministry and gratitude, and ground ourselves more deeply in the places where we live. God placed us somewhere. *Reading our somewhere is part of listening to God about why we are here.*

What skills do we need for this kind of reading?

Think about what it takes to read a story. You are in your favorite chair with a book in your lap. Although you are sitting still, you are still quite active. You are holding yourself in a posture to be able to see the book. Your eyes are open and moving. You are comprehending words and sentences. Your mind is making meaning from them and incorporating them into the stream of the story. Your imagination is constructing the world you perceive in the narrative. Reading places takes some of the same skills of active attention and thought.

Researchers have developed multiple paradigms in different academic disciplines to understand places. These paradigms are developed, tested, and refined as they are applied to dynamic places. One influential lens is an *ecological approach*. What if we approached a place like an organism? In the United States, the Chicago school of sociology at the University of Chicago developed this approach by the late 1920s. It viewed the growing city of Chicago as an organism. People and groups competed for land and resources within the city and region. People find niches within places just as other living things do within ecosystems.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Robert Park, Ernest W. Burgess, and Roderick D. McKenzie, *The City* (University of Chicago Press, 1925).

With these assumptions, the Chicago school developed a famous graphic of Chicago: the downtown of the city, the Loop, surrounded by concentric rings containing different zones of activity and land use. Because land was cheaper farther out from the Loop, these neighborhoods were open to different groups of people or allowed space for different commercial and industrial activity. Those with more power had more options to find resources within a continuously competitive landscape.

In contrast to emphasizing competition, *critical approaches* to places focus on power, inequalities, and access to resources. Even within the Chicago school image of a Chicago ordered by rings, certain features did not easily fit—for example, the Black Belt on the city's South Side, where the increasing population of Black residents continued to be confined by laws, restrictions, and violence to an area that spanned multiple zones. These residents were not allowed to compete for land, homes, and opportunities.<sup>6</sup>

These critical approaches developed in force in the 1960s as activists and scholars focused on power dynamics and inequities. Who has a right to the city? Who is the city for?<sup>7</sup> Such approaches do not have a simple overlay to explain growth. Instead, development can be uneven or jump over locations as actors seek profit and influence. Within the growth-machine model, developed in sociology in the 1970s, researchers paid attention to those with power, particularly the elite and those who would benefit financially and politically from growth and development. This included political leaders, business leaders, the local media, and utility companies.<sup>8</sup>

When studying places, there are a couple of methodological approaches available. The first gets at whether someone should know all the particulars of a certain place and build theories from that place. This might involve examining the history, context, current realities, and various lived experiences within a place. There is a deep reality in any lived place that requires time and experience to understand. The technical term for this

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<sup>6</sup>St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (Harcourt, Brace, 1945).

<sup>7</sup>Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Blackwell, 1991).

<sup>8</sup>John R. Logan and Harvey L. Molotch, *Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place* (University of California Press, 1987).

approach is *idiographic*, involving all the details of a single case. When researchers pursue a case study, this is often the approach they are following, with efforts to uncover many details about places.

However, someone living in or working in a different location might ask: How does all that particular knowledge about that one place or small set of places relate to a different location elsewhere? The second methodological lens instead chooses a particular feature of places—such as political systems or development patterns—and examines those patterns across places. The advantage of this lens is the ability to compare multiple locations. At the same time, the emphasis on a smaller set of factors means this lens can obscure or ignore other influential factors that were not the focus of the study. The term for this approach is *nomothetic*, focusing on broad patterns across cases.

In practice, these two lenses or methods can play out like so: An observer or set of observers may note all that is unique about Los Angeles. It has a particular history based on Spanish colonialism and estates, American settlers, and sprawling expansion in the twentieth century. It is a fragmented metropolitan area with numerous business and population centers. Driving is essential, and a big system of highways and roads connects places. Los Angeles has a unique position within a globalized system. Building off this, how might other cities emulate Los Angeles?<sup>9</sup>

Other observers following a similar method instead argue that New York City or Chicago is its own unique place. Do big cities in the United States look more like New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles? Or, to highlight the unique importance of New York along with two other cities, an unattributed quote suggests, “There are only three great cities in the U.S.: New York, San Francisco, and Washington. All the rest are Cleveland.”<sup>10</sup>

Instead of focusing on the uniqueness of particular places, studying features of numerous places can be illuminating. Sociologists Michael

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<sup>9</sup>Michael J. Dear, *The Postmodern Urban Condition* (Blackwell, 2000).

<sup>10</sup>“Quote Origin: There Are Only Three Great Cities in the U.S.: New York, San Francisco, and Washington. All the Rest Are Cleveland,” Quote Investigator, June 18, 2015, <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2015/06/18/cleveland/>.

Emerson and Kevin Smiley look at whether major cities in the United States and around the world lean more toward being “market cities” or “people cities.” In other words, do they emphasize economic growth and profits, which will then benefit people, or do they put people first and assume economic success will follow? Looking at cities in multiple settings, they find American cities are market cities, while some global cities, such as Copenhagen, Denmark, focus on people first.<sup>11</sup>

What all these lenses can do is illuminate an aspect of place or places that we might miss if we do not recognize our lens or apply only one lens. We might be observing or living in the same place but focusing our gaze on different aspects. By naming our paradigms and comparing what is visible through different lenses, we can see and understand more about places.

### ANALYTIC METAPHORS

Places and spaces come in a dizzying array of forms. It would be difficult to attempt an account of all the diversity of places. Metaphors can serve as a helpful shorthand for simplifying some of the complexity.

You do not have to be a writer to use metaphors. People use them all the time in everyday life: blanket of snow, beating a dead horse, emotional roller coaster, slippery slope. We use metaphors because they are helpful for conveying meaning, especially about complex or nontangible realities. In this case, they can help us describe aspects of places such as the history of places, the ways they work, the ways they connect to other places, the ways they are influenced from afar, and so on.

We share some of the metaphors we find most helpful for the widest range of places.<sup>12</sup>

**Networks.** When we look at Google Maps zoomed out far enough, the most pronounced features are the roads—they run east–west, north–south,

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<sup>11</sup>Michael Oluf Emerson and Kevin T. Smiley, *Market Cities, People Cities: The Shape of Our Urban Future* (New York University Press, 2018).

<sup>12</sup>We first started thinking about using metaphors for describing different kinds of space after reading Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (Verso Books, 2024), and Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (Verso Books, 2014).

and diagonally—and cities and communities, represented by dots. The roads link the dots to each other, creating the overall impression of a web. This is a network. Hiking trails, electrical grids, fiber-optic cables, global flight patterns, supply chains—networks are everywhere. Social networks are abstract representations of relations between people in which people can focus on internal connections (bonding capital) or connections across groups or clusters (bridging capital).<sup>13</sup> Regarding bonding capital, social scientists have documented a trend in which people who are alike tend to live in geographical clusters.<sup>14</sup> These networks are also spatial in that the groups they represent are located in and move across the landscape. Larger social collectives, such as a metropolitan region or a nation, often require social connections and interactions across network clusters.

**Time traveling.** The built world comes to us from the past. The buildings, infrastructure, and other elements, along with the ways nature has been modified to support this built world: These are all accumulations from the past. In this sense, what we see around us doesn't extend only laterally and vertically but also temporally. The past is made present to us today in the imprint of the past on the space we inhabit.

There is a block in downtown Chicago where some of the earliest skyscrapers in the world still stand. Before any buildings arose, the land was surveyed, platted, and sold. The Manhattan Building was started in 1889 (designed by Jenney & Mundie). At the north end of the block, the Old Colony Building was built in 1894 (designed by Holabird & Roche). Holabird & Roche also designed the Caxton Building, just one block down, built in 1889, but it was demolished in 1947. The L tracks, running along the northern edge of the block, were erected around the same time. Across the street, the modern black-box building was built in 1971. The main street along the southern border of the block was Congress Parkway until it was renamed Ida B. Wells Drive in 2019. Were you to visit the block

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<sup>13</sup>Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon & Schuster, 2000).

<sup>14</sup>Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart* (Mariner Books, 2009).

today, you wouldn't see any of this development take place—it would present itself to you as a unified, contemporaneous reality. Reading this place includes analytically separating what time has accumulated. Historical perception can be practiced. Remaining sensitive to this dynamic developmental aspect of space can be an important part of reading places.

**Overwriting.** It can be important to remember that sometimes spatial developments overwrite previous configurations, sometimes completely erasing the old, sometimes only partially, leaving behind dangling fragments, sometimes creating something entirely new from parts that may or may not have cohered in the past.

For example, there is a small cemetery in the parking lot of my local mall. It's not there because it was part of the plan for the mall—it's there because a church used to be there, and when the mall was built, the church was taken down, but the cemetery was left behind, a fragment of a story about that place that used to be.

**Copy-paste.** Some features and materials are recognizable as replicated forms. Attached garages, roundabouts, freeway interchanges, waiting rooms, office cubicles, fast-food restaurants, suburban homes (“little boxes all the same” in Malvina Reynolds’s 1962 song “Little Boxes”). Frequently these replications are created by the contours of regulations or what is recognized as best practices. They are like pieces of code that have been recognized as desirable, legal, or well-adapted to produce an outcome in an environment and so are copied and pasted across space. When a feature is copied and pasted over and over again, even small features or characteristics can make a big difference at scale. Take the single-family home in the United States. It is a bit of code developed over time with its emphasis on a nuclear family, privacy, and interior space.<sup>15</sup> Replicated over and over again across our suburban landscapes, it has tremendous effects on social life, making it more difficult to maintain the thick relations typical in other environments with kin and community.

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<sup>15</sup>John Archer, *Architecture and Suburbia: From English Villa to American Dream House* (University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

**Plate tectonics.** Plates sit next to each other, but they are always moving. When two plates collide, a convergent plate boundary forms. As tension builds along the boundary, one of the plates may dive beneath the other. Geologists call this subduction. Plates are so large and slow moving that the ground appears to be static. Likewise, space can sometimes feel static, but space is undergoing constant change. Spatial arrangements should not be taken for granted, no matter how slowly they are changing. Places, like plates, are rarely frozen in time even if the pace of change may seem very slow or is not perceptible until something significant has changed. Momentous ruptures can occur, such as those stemming from major changes in political power or from mass migration of peoples.

**Façades.** The façade of a building presents the building to be perceived in a certain way. The façade may be like or unlike the rest of the building. Likewise, sometimes places are contrived to present an appearance that is unlike the reality behind it. Sometimes a logging company leaves an “aesthetic strip” of trees in a zone along major roads while clear-cutting the rest of the forest. Drivers on the road may see very little evidence that the forest is gone. Sometimes whole buildings or zones can function like a façade to shield other districts from view, such as industry, dilapidated housing, or landfills. Cities can have buildings that have exteriors like their neighboring structures but that conceal telecommunications equipment or mass transit behind the façade. Cities clean up before hosting the Olympics, the World Cup, the Super Bowl, or other such events. These cities will often displace or hide the parts of their city they do not want visitors to see.<sup>16</sup>

**Black boxes.** A black box is a metaphor for a central control unit that is shielded from view and unavailable to scrutiny. It is a system in which the only things available for review are the inputs and outputs. This is like the electrical substation I pass on my way to the grocery store, underground infrastructures such as water and sewage lines, the kitchen at your

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<sup>16</sup>Naomi C. Hanakata, Filippo Bignami, and Niccolò Cuppini, eds., *Mega Events, Urban Transformations and Social Citizenship: A Multi-Disciplinary Analysis for an Epistemological Foresight* (Routledge, 2022).

favorite restaurant (unless there is a window or open floor plan). These are all black boxes. While some aspects of places are more transparent or open to scrutiny, some processes in places are not visible or easily deciphered from just seeing what goes in and what comes out.

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These metaphors unfold a world of questions that can be asked of places. What spaces and histories have been overwritten by successive encroachments? What can be discerned about overwritten spaces by the fragments that remain? Which communities do networks connect to more fully? Where are the black boxes located, and who controls them? What façades have been erected, what are they presenting to whom, and why? What spaces are colliding with each other, and what is diving below the surface as a result?

### DIAGNOSTIC QUESTIONS

My (Ben's) hands were wrapped tightly around the steering wheel. I couldn't see more than twenty feet ahead of me on this county road after dark in a blizzard among corn fields near Janesville, Wisconsin. My wife and kids were in the car. Then, appearing out of the dark, the road took a sharp ninety-degree turn to the right. It wasn't an intersection, just a corner bend in the road. I had to pump the brakes to slow down enough and make the turn without sliding off the road.

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Of the journalistic questions *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, and *how*, *where* would appear to be the question about place. Where is Argentina? Where are you? Where is the bathroom? But we think *where* is actually one of the less interesting questions to ask about places. *Who*, *what*, *when*, *why*, and *how* are equally illuminating, if not more so. Who lives here? Who flourishes here? Who doesn't, and who is not present? What is the important infrastructure here, and when was it built? What does this

place mean to local residents? Why was the freeway routed through this neighborhood? How did the community make this zoning decision?

Returning to the road near Janesville, we could ask, Where is that turn? This would yield a potentially valuable piece of information (so I can avoid the ditch), but look what happens when we apply these other questions as well: Why is the turn there? Why is there even a road there at all? Why is it not a safe, gradual curve instead of a sharp right angle? Who was involved in putting the turn there? When was the road laid?

In asking these questions and considering the answers, we gain a richer understanding of the place. Following are some of the insights these questions elicit.

The United States and Ho-Chunk nation signed an 1832 treaty in which the Ho-Chunk ceded the lands that now include Madison and a large tract of southern Wisconsin. When this area was initially surveyed by the United States soon after the treaty was signed, the survey grid was keyed to meridian lines far away. The north-south meridian ran through western Wisconsin. The east-west meridian runs along the border between Wisconsin and Illinois. Beginning at the intersection of these meridians, six-mile intervals were marked along both lines to form a grid of thirty-six-square-mile townships. Each township was subdivided into one-square-mile sections. The placement of these meridians determined where the lines were that could become property lines between different owners. When the United States General Land Office made this land available for sale, it could be purchased in full-, half-, quarter-, eighth-, and sixteenth-size units. As a result, property lines might zigzag around multiple corners to account for the different fractions of sections on either side of a property line.<sup>17</sup>

In 1918, Wisconsin became the first state or province in the world to have a numbered state highway system. A few years later, in the early 1920s, when the state's counties began establishing their own county highway systems, Rock County turned a preexisting trail that turned at

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<sup>17</sup>For an interesting narrative treatment of the surveying of the United States, see Andro Linklater, *Measuring America: How the United States Was Shaped by the Greatest Land Sale in History* (Plume, 2003).

the corner of two properties into a county road. When the original trail was laid, the fastest vehicle that would ever use it was a galloping horse, so there was no need for the turn to be gradual.

It turns out that the turn in the road is an opportunity to enter the history of space if you ask a range of questions and see what insight, information, and additional questions turn up along the way.

Aside from the general questions above, there are additional questions that are quite helpful for reading places:

- ▶ What scale am I using to understand this place?
- ▶ What is this place being used for?
- ▶ How are institutions and infrastructures shaping this place?
- ▶ What power relations are active here?
- ▶ Who gets to be at home here?

We find these questions to be particularly helpful in many contexts—though there are many others that are important—and we explain each question below.

***What scale am I using to understand this place?*** There are children's science books that zoom way in to the microscopic world or zoom way out to the cosmic world. The spatial world we are interested in exists at different scales too, from the micro worlds of an interpersonal interaction, a living room, or a small park; to the meso worlds of neighborhoods, cities, and reservations; to the macro worlds of global institutions, mass migration, shipping routes, and environmental agreements.<sup>18</sup>

***What is this place being used for?*** This question is about function: What is the official or generally accepted purpose of a place (sociologists call these *manifest functions*)?

Some functions people use spaces for:

- ▶ organizing (libraries, pantries, linen closets, archives)
- ▶ worshipping (sanctuaries, shrines, temples, synagogues)

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<sup>18</sup>Goeffrey West, *Scale: The Universal Laws of Growth, Innovation, Sustainability, and the Pace of Life in Organisms, Cities, Economies, and Companies* (Penguin, 2017).

- ▶ sleeping (bedrooms, tents, dormitories)
- ▶ socializing (porches, coffee shops, living rooms)
- ▶ driving (roads, driveways, racetracks)
- ▶ walking (sidewalks, streets, gymnasiums)
- ▶ fun (playgrounds, backyards, theme parks)
- ▶ cooking (kitchens, patios with a grill)
- ▶ prestige (historically significant property, grand hallways)

And the converse: What purposes are certain places being used for?

- ▶ kitchen (cooking, dishwashing, storing food, socializing, listening to the radio)
- ▶ porch (resting, socializing, sunbathing, eating, reading)
- ▶ park (walking, sitting, socializing, playing, birdwatching)

Although these lists are valid, they are actually incomplete. They represent official or broadly agreed-on functions (again, manifest functions), but people *improvise* how they use spaces, creating shortcuts and alternatives (sociologists call these *latent functions*). A card table is erected in the living room to set more spots for Christmas dinner; an atrium at the Mall of America is used for an unsanctioned protest; the driveway is converted into a garage sale; the church parking lot is turned into a farmers' market. Sometimes these unofficial improvisations become common enough that they become part of the broadly expected patterns—when someone turns their driveway into a sale of stuff from inside their house, it is not surprising to anyone. Creators of spaces *intend* the spaces they make to serve certain functions, but users will make up their own mind about how to navigate and use them. When you read places, do not stop at the generally agreed-on uses of the place—look beyond them to the latent functions too. The world is made by designers *and* users. Indeed, we all play both roles at different times and to different degrees.

***How are institutions shaping this place?*** Institutions are durable and larger-scale social actors that influence all areas of life. For example, local

governments make decisions about civic services and public amenities in communities. Schools shape how we learn. Congregations and religious traditions emphasize particular practices, beliefs, and aspects of community involving faith. Businesses offer goods and services.

Institutions operate within places and shape places. Local governments in the United States are often responsible for planning land uses. Should this portion of the community be used for residences, commercial activity, industrial uses, or for institutions such as schools, local government, and religious groups? Can a property owner request a variance from the existing land use? The local government consults its own planners and officials as well as considers input from developers and residents. These decisions made by the institution can have long-lasting consequences: Changes in land use do not happen frequently; changes in land use affect everyday experiences in and of a community, and who can access property matters.

It is hard to imagine places that are not shaped by institutions. The “pristine” wilderness many Americans visit and appreciate in national parks? It is defined and protected by institutions, including the National Park Service and the federal government. The vibrant neighborhood in the city full of activity? It is shaped by businesses, the community, local government, civic groups, and additional institutions.

Like institutions, infrastructure forms a semipermanent feature of the landscape and has its own effects. Infrastructure “behaves like spatial software. And while we also do not typically think of static objects and volumes in urban space as having agency, infrastructure space is doing something. Like an operating system, the medium of infrastructure space makes certain things possible and other things impossible.”<sup>19</sup> Freshwater pipes, water towers, fiber-optic cable, sewers, gas lines, drainage ditches, walls, gates, power lines—they all have specific, official functions. Pipes carry water. Power lines conduct electricity. Roads convey traffic. Where the infrastructure is extended “makes certain things possible and other things impossible,” depending on its placement.

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<sup>19</sup>Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructurespace* (Verso, 2014).

All infrastructural projects also have unintended consequences or tradeoffs. The creation of the interstate freeway network had enormous consequences for local towns that were bypassed by the freeways. Route 66 quickly became a nostalgic relic. Sometimes these tradeoffs are deeply political. When these same freeways were being routed through built-up areas, they were disproportionately laid over the top of neighborhoods of racial and ethnic minorities, destroying their social and economic fabric while preserving more prosperous (and typically more White) parts of cities.<sup>20</sup> When thinking about the costs and benefits of infrastructure projects (and any large-scale or public projects), it is essential to a moral process to ask who gains access to the benefits and who is most harmed.

***What power is being exercised here?*** Structuring the built world has been a privilege of powerful people and institutions throughout history. Building monuments, walls, buildings, dams, canals, roads, fortresses, schools, libraries, cathedrals, and more required power and resources. That has been the remit of kings (royals as well as kings of industry) and clergy. Of course, these elites are not doing the physical work themselves—they give their instructions to their labor corps. Even when we drop down to a smaller scale of building a single-family home or a small farm, this too has been a rare privilege, historically speaking. In the United States, it was not until after World War II that housing developers started operating at a mass scale like we are used to today.<sup>21</sup> So yes, large-scale building is usually reserved for elites, yet every person influences their environment. Even marginalized and under-resourced communities work with what is available to create and modify the places they live. Modifying the landscape is universal among humans at many different scales.

Looked at another way, building a place requires all sorts of resources. To illustrate, consider what it takes to make a home addition. Here is a rough list of some needed resources: financial resources, such as a loan or

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<sup>20</sup>Eric Avila, *The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

<sup>21</sup>Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (Oxford University Press, 1985).

financial savings; tools and equipment, such as earth movers, nail guns, extension cords, several kinds of saws; building materials, such as nails, studs, drywall, glue, Tyvek, pipes, and particle board. If we were to stop here, we would have a fine list, but the list so far only identifies resources that are tangible, so we press further. What other resources would be needed? Sometimes builders or owners have access to governmental programs and financing. Also needed is specialized tradecraft knowledge such as expertise in framing, earth moving, concrete, electrical work, plumbing, and inspecting. Cultural capital on the part of the owner or builder can be helpful in order to know whom to call, what questions to ask, and how to advocate for their interests. So you see, doing a simple addition takes a high degree of coordination among many people and groups, all pooling various kinds of resources. It is a complex social exercise of power.

The built world influences behavior. Sometimes the ways places are constructed seek to influence people to act in ways that are sanctioned or intended by the designers. Freeways are designed in such a way as to strongly influence people to drive with the flow of traffic and not against it. Walls affect behavior. Doorways affect behavior. Stairs affect behavior. Signage affects behavior. Much of the built world is designed to prompt certain behaviors on a mass scale.

Michel de Certeau wrote about the intentions of elites for the worlds they build as strategy and about the ways residents use, reject, and improvise on these given spaces as tactics.<sup>22</sup> De Certeau was highlighting the gap between these intentions and behaviors. Elites intend the spaces they build to be used in certain ways. Users encounter these spaces as both objects and subjects, as users and agents. They often behave in ways that were intended—drive on the correct side of the freeway, proceed through the exhibit with the flow of the crowd, leave through the door marked “exit.” But sometimes users improvise or reject the intentions of builders. They drive faster than the speed limit, turn right on a no-turn-on-red, or organize a spontaneous protest with no permit.

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<sup>22</sup>Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (University of California Press, 1984).

Yet tactics can go only so far—the structure of the built world pre-determines the outer limits of what improvisation can accomplish.

Another way power is structured into space is the ways it delivers benefits unevenly, following patterns of power. Space gets structured to deliver benefits. A nurse in my family described the fully stocked fridge and buffet in the doctor's lounge at her hospital. It is a space she would not usually have a reason to go to, but she had an errand on that floor—and the space is a lot nicer than any lounge she has access to in the same hospital. Any time I fly, I walk past and not into the first-class lounge. Conversely, power is enacted in space in the uneven distribution of costs and penalties. When a coal mine was opening in the valley where my family and I (Ben) lived, the permitting process proceeded while the poorer residents were showing their opposition to the mine, but as soon as the wealthy residents on the bluff above showed their opposition, the process came to a halt. Or think back to minority neighborhoods that were plowed under for the freeways many of us use regularly. When the neighborhoods selected to be cleared in cities tended to have high concentrations of poorer residents, and as a result city residents developed strategies to combat these plans—this too was power shaping the world.

In many contexts, especially those where settler populations have displaced (or are currently displacing) the existing population, there are some technologies commonly used to enact that displacement. In his book, *Enclosure: Palestinian Landscapes in a Historical Mirror*, Gary Fields lists several.<sup>23</sup> Cartography is used as an instrument to reimagine and convey the meaning of a given landscape. A map can be a powerful polemic. Such instrumental maps were common across Europe in places where settlers were being recruited for the New World. After Israel conquered the West Bank (including East Jerusalem, along with Gaza, the Golan Heights, and the Sinai), Ariel Sharon was known for iconic pictures of him with a map thrown open over on the hood of his truck, which was pulled off on the side of the road, talking his colleagues through a vision

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<sup>23</sup>Gary Fields, *Enclosure: Palestinian Landscapes in a Historical Mirror* (University of California Press, 2017).

for a new Israeli settlement in the Palestinian West Bank. A map can be a tool of dispossession.

Fields goes on to describe the next tool. If imaginative cartographies shape public perceptions of the landscape, the law establishes the vision as a physical possibility, especially property law. “In pursuit of such imagined territorial visions, groups with land hunger use the law as a weapon, reassigning the ownership status of spaces on the land.” Upon remaking the legal landscape, Fields’s final tool is architecture. It is with architecture (and engineering, landscaping, etc.) that the landscape, imagined with cartographic sleight of hand and secured with legal innovation, can finally be rebuilt, “crafting material environments that convey [and consolidate, we might add] their ascendancy on the land while erasing the built forms and cultural markers of groups once dominant on the land.”<sup>24</sup>

***Who gets to be at home here?*** Whose comfort, values, and expectations are being prioritized in this place? Who has the ability to navigate and utilize the benefits of this place? Proximity and physical and economic accessibility to a place is a factor in determining who is at home there. Some places carry formal criteria for access, such as exclusive clubs or gated communities. Some have economic or cultural barriers to entry—high-end housing or fine dining establishments with dress codes, for example. If people cannot access a place, they cannot be at home there. Does the structure and symbolic language of the place accommodate different cultural backgrounds and identities? In her book *Why Public Space Matters*, Setha Low describes the ways that the cultural identity of a place can exclude certain users.<sup>25</sup> Language can also be a significant barrier to a place being a home for speakers of other languages. If you’ve ever avoided going to certain places because you’re not sure what is expected or how to act, that is a small taste of this.

One situation where this question comes to the fore is forced migration. According to the United Nations, there are more than 120 million displaced

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<sup>24</sup>Fields, *Enclosure*, 10.

<sup>25</sup>Setha Low, *Why Public Space Matters* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

people in the world.<sup>26</sup> That is a heartbreaking one in every sixty-nine people. These millions represent people who have lost their homes back home and, as refugees, are not at home in their new location either.

### APPLYING THE TOOLS

We come back to the Mall of America to apply a handful of the above tools to see how they work, to see whether they can help us see patterns in the stereogram of the mall.

What can using a couple of the lenses reveal about the Mall of America? The ecological lens highlights aspects of competition: competition among retailers for space in the mall and for the attention of shoppers, competition among shoppers for a close parking spot, for the good deals, and to beat the lines, but also competition among contractors for lucrative contracts for managing everything from the theater complex, to cleaning the bathrooms, to decorating the halls and atriums.

The critical lens points attention to architectures of power represented by the mall, especially where issues of race, class, and gender are operating. One observer studied how the youth curfew was managed at the mall (youth under sixteen must be with an adult from 3 p.m. until closing) and how public-relations messaging about safety was used to mask patterns of racially differentiated enforcement of the curfew.<sup>27</sup> A critical lens would also highlight questions of racial and gender equity in hiring, firing, salaries, and advancement for the mall's more than five hundred employees and the diversity of its management staff. Referencing these lenses increases sensitivity to important aspects of the mall that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Looking deeply at this one mall, an idiographic approach, could show that this mall has unique features and history, while comparing the experience of the Mall of America to other major shopping malls, a nomothetic approach, could reveal similarities and differences.

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<sup>26</sup>"Global Trends," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, June 12, 2025, [www.unhcr.org/global-trends](http://www.unhcr.org/global-trends).

<sup>27</sup>Maureen O'Dougherty, "Public Relations, Private Security: Managing Youth and Race at the Mall of America," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24, no. 1 (2006): 131-54, <https://doi.org/10.1068/d64j>.

Metaphors too can help suggest patterns in the bits and pieces of the mall. Thinking about networks prompts thoughts about extensive supply chains that run through the mall, pulling goods from all over the world through international routes and nodes until they all intersect there in that place (the Mall of America has its own zip code, by the way) to be sorted, shelved, bought, and to diverge again into the world as purchased goods, moving outwardly, sometimes back overseas in the suitcases of international tourists, perhaps in some cases even back to the country where the product was produced. It is a little like respiration, the mall breathing in resources from around the world and breathing back out again (generating billions of dollars in sales and economic impact year after year). We could think about internal networks such as networks of employees, digital networks used by security teams, and utility passages and elevators used to invisibly move employees and resources around the mall.

Changing the metaphor leads to other insights and questions. What if we think in terms of time traveling and overwriting? These metaphors raise the question of what was here before. Is there evidence from the past? What *was* there before the mall? The Metropolitan Stadium stood on the site from 1956 to 1981. It is where the Minnesota Twins and Vikings played until the Hubert H. Humphrey Metrodome opened in 1982. For generations of fans, that piece of land is associated with memories and sentiments from the world of sports. The mall recognized that association, and now a bronze replica of home plate is embedded in the floor over the same spot where the original was located, and a seat from the outfield is bolted high up the wall to show its actual placement in the stadium. Today it is across from a Rugrats ride in the Nickelodeon theme park.

In the 1940s, when the investors were looking for a site for the Metropolitan Stadium, they selected a piece of farm land roughly equidistant from Minneapolis and St. Paul. Tracing even further back, that farmland had been part of the natural areas on the banks of the Minnesota River just upstream from its confluence with the Mississippi River. That land had come into the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. The land

is situated between multiple sites of historic significance to the Lakota and Ojibwe nations, and some of the sites are even considered sacred. And there were many Indigenous nations that used this land before the Lakota and Ojibwe for millennia.

Many of the other metaphors seem fruitful as well. Copy-paste: Features at the Mall of America are familiar from shopping malls across the country. Interestingly, the oldest fully enclosed, climate-controlled mall in the country, Southdale Shopping Center (which opened in 1956), is just down the road from the Mall of America in suburban Edina. Its designers wanted to create an indoor public commons, inspired by the idea of the European village green. Pictures of the upscale interior evoke the chic luxury of a *Mad Men* episode. Incidentally, Southdale launched the same decade Metropolitan Stadium opened. That idea, the interior commons first realized at Southdale, has been copied and pasted to thousands of malls, evolved over the course of its many iterations, and was replicated yet again in the many atriums, halls, and courts throughout the Mall of America.

But enough with the metaphors. The questions too help enrich our reading of the mall. For example, what behaviors do the designers of the Mall of America want to evoke from visitors? Purchases from stores. Repeat visits. Use of services such as the food court and the theme park. In a word: spending. The mall is constructed to encourage spending. Every detail is considered, from the decorations to the music, the lighting, the placement of points of interest, the signage, the ample public bathrooms. Even the inclusion of real flora is designed to make the experience of being there seamlessly comfortable.

It's like time stands still at the Mall of America. And yet, when people visit the Mall of America, they both are influenced by these intentions of the designers, inscribed into every physical detail, *and* improvise their own routes, behaviors, and choices. My (Ben's) mom occasionally met other women at the mall in the dead of the Minnesota winters to go for a walk in the warm halls, not buying anything, just getting their steps in. Activists frequently assemble for protests, using the prominent location as an asset for its visibility on the national stage. Skateboarders use the

parking garages. Teens use the mall (maybe less these days) to be seen by other teens. Each question could prompt pages more about the mall, but what we have looked at so far illustrates the idea.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter we introduced a toolkit for reading places, and we illustrated how to use it by applying it to a particular case, the Mall of America. These tools are useful for helping read other places. Think about the places where you live, work, play, and rest. What are they? What do you think you understand about them? Whatever it is, we suggest there is more to know.

These tools, the paradigms, metaphors, and questions, help us read places by noticing them, reasoning about what we notice, looking at the social institutions that shape and use places, and remembering that space operates at various scales simultaneously. By themselves or in conjunction with other resources, they help us better understand what is really going on beyond our often taken-for-granted perspectives. As we practice using these resources, we can read places old and new to us.

As you seek to read the places around you, remember that God is in every place and cares about every place. God already knows, understands, and loves the land, the places, and the people living, working, and passing through. Learning to see these places anew is an opportunity to move closer to *where* God is. The physical world is full of God, so reading places can be a sacred act.

We use these tools in conjunction with narratives we circulate about places. We turn to these narratives in the next chapter: American and American Christian narratives about places. Why do these narratives matter? The tools we introduced can give us data, evidence, or experiences, but humans are meaning-making creatures who want to fit information into stories.

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