Proximity as a Prerequisite of Being Human

Introduction

In 1966, US anthropologist Edward T. Hall published *The Hidden Dimension*, in which he delivered his version of the theory of *Proxemics*, the study of the human use of space within the context of culture. Hall argues that, although all people perceive space through sensory devices – sensory devices perhaps in a McLuhanian fashion – cultural frameworks mold and pattern it.

The culture one lives in, grew up in, understands and (to a certain extend) adapts to – say one's cultural imprint – is of great relevance to the perception of space, as we will discuss. Hall details of Arabs who have no concept of boundaries; to them there are no strict home- city or state borders. This could explain their grand hospitality and also their physicality (Hall, p. 154). As a private observation of the author of this paper, quite to the opposite of the Arab example there are e.g. the Finns who make great effort in not hinder their fellow "place users" what so ever; for them it is simply not done to impede the other and in the extraordinary exception if hindering might be the (unforeseen and surely not intended) case, Finns tirade extensively with apologies; in that culture physical intrusion in one's "space" publicly is simply not done.

Does perception of place equal the perception of proximity: the perceived distance – nearness – to the other (actors) in an amorphous network? The "feeling" of nearness – the relative distances between human beings and their surroundings – is called proximity. And to my believe, proximity is a prerequisite of being human (*Dasein, Conditio Humana*).

Place, Space and Sphere

One may observe that writers tend to mix up the words space and place. But there are relevant and significant differences between place and space. The difference is that we are at a certain place, this may be interpreted as a location, a geographical site, yet space is always around us: we have space around our bodies. This space seems (is referred to as) physical – actual – space (we may also call it personal space) as it is always nearby and, to distinct our nearby space from other connotations such as the use of the word for the universe, far away or even more abstract, the sense of freedom to move. Let us, for the moment, refer to it as actual space because we are in this space; it is around us (compare it with the water a fish swims in); it is always there.

Proximity: 1 An Augénian 'non-place', airport terminal somewhere in the world.

If there is a personal space, then is there also a personal distance? '"Personal distance" is a conception originally used by [Hediger[1]] to designate the distance consistently separating the members of non-contact species. It might be thought of as a small protective *sphere* or bubble that an organism maintains between itself and others' (Hall p. 119). This type of space is regarded as the first level of space or *the micro-level*. Actual space is actually quite intimate as we shall see further on.

Let us first deepen the conception of place. *Place* however is circumstantial. It may be day or night, the sun may shine, objects may be close to a person, there may be people close by nor far away. Therefore, place is locative; a person is always somewhere and that person is always somewhere in relation to his surrounding 'objects', either other people or things. In contrast to a writer like Marc Augé who speaks of "non-place", in the actual place, the locative surroundings one finds himself in, there is no non-place. Non-place is about feelings, locations one does not want to be, perhaps has to be to transit to a place one is heading towards. An example Augé uses is the airport terminal. To many people it feels like a non-place; one would most probably not choose that particular place to be voluntarily. On the other hand, it was Brian Eno who chose such a non-place as an ambient surrounding for the premiere performance of his "Music for Airports", which was recorded in 1978. Eno conceived the idea for this music piece while waiting for a plane in a terminal at Cologne Airport in the mid seventies. Apparently he was rather annoyed that he had to wait so long for his plane home and his surroundings were empty apart from being filled with "wrong" music although the architecture of the building as such was well designed. The combination of the spacious terminal and bad music then inspired Eno to conceive his musical piece.

Circumstantiality of place is essential to the perception of that place. A place is a physical environment, a surrounding; it is there but it is there as seen through one's personal eyes. That is why people differ in ways of seeing their surroundings. One person may like the place he or she is in, another may, at the same time, dislike it and appreciation would depend on personal issues, taste and interests. Those factors are rather interlocked with one's cultural heritage but are in fact based on very personal interpretation.

To Hall there is a second level, the *macro-level of sensibilities.* This level of perception of place is placed in a larger, non-individual, surrounding. It is about macro-perception of people and for Hall the importance lies in the attempt to raise the quality of living of a group through the "makability" of the environment (streets, neighborhoods, cities). Again, as both Hall and Augé suggest, the acceptance – or rather appreciation – of the perceived

surroundings (place) is a matter of individual likings based on cultural "coding". Augé calls this the 'representation of private otherness, in systems studied by ethnology, place the need for it at the very heart of individuality, at a stroke making it impossible to dissociate the question of collective identity from that of individual identity' (Augé, p. 19).

In line with the argumentations of both Hall and Augé one may conclude that place is an individually perceived (physical) *surrounding*. This surrounding has a purpose and because human beings perceive it, humans at least mentally but often also physically shape it. *Place therefore is always tangible*.

Space however, may not necessarily be tangible; formal connotation in esteemed dictionaries suggests certain intangibility. Merriam Webster speaks of *space* as:

1. a period of time; also: its duration
2. a: a limited extent in one, two, or three dimensions: distance, area, volume b: an extent set apart or available <parking space> <floor space> c: the distance from other people or things that a person needs in order to remain comfortable <invading my personal space>
3. One of the degrees between or above or below the lines of a musical staff — compare line
4. a: a boundless three-dimensional extent in which objects and events occur and have relative position and direction <infinite space and time>, b: physical space independent of what occupies it —called also absolute space
5. The region beyond the earth's atmosphere or beyond the solar system
6. a: a blank area separating words or lines, b: material used to produce such blank area; especially: a piece of type less than one en in width
7. a set of mathematical elements and especially of abstractions of all the points on a line, in a plane, or in physical space; especially: a set of mathematical entities with a set of axioms of geometric character — compare metric space, topological space, vector space
8. a: linage, b: broadcast time available especially to advertisers
9. Accommodations on a public vehicle
10. a: the opportunity to assert or experience one's identity or needs freely, b: an opportunity for privacy or time to oneself[2]

Is space place? Certainly not in all connotations. There is, for instance, a significant difference between definitions 1 and 10, the first being about time or netter duration of space as in 'a spacy break in say a theatre play and the latter about the level (space) of privacy one for instance experiences in a certain situation (I feel free, I have space, I can breathe, etc.). And in between those connotations, the dictionary suggests at least eight other ways to use the word 'Space', ranging from 'personal; space' as in our 'comfort zone' via regions beyond earth's atmosphere to broadcasting time for advertisers or a seat in the public transport bus.

At first glance, certain equations of *place* also seem to will do for *space*: connotations such as 'dimension', 'area', 'physical space', 'region' and even 'accommodation on a public vehicle' (as in heaving a seat in a bus, train or airplane) do suggest physical, tangible place. But more concept-like connotations – connotations that surpass the actuality and move, as slightly as

it may seems, towards the more intangibility of the virtuality: 'duration', 'infinite space', 'the region beyond the earth's atmosphere', abstractions of point on a line', 'broadcast time' 'assertion of freedom' and last but not least, 'freedom'.

Obviously, the conception of the word space is different from the word place as is virtuality different from actuality; they are not their opponents nor is there any polarity in the words. I suggest that the two must be seen as twins: place cannot do without space and vice versa as the two are inseparably connected and interdependent, at least from a human perception perspective.

Place to live: Suburbia

According to Hall Proxemics is 'the term I have coined for the interrelated observations and theories of man's use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture' (Hall p. 1). The "coined" conception of which Hall says that he is not the originator (there is in fact quite an academic tradition that dates back to the late nineteen's, early twentieth century with researcher such as Franz Boas, Edward Spair and Leonard Bloomfield (all anthropologists) and earlier mentioned H. Hediger, a bio-zoologist. Yet, it was Hall who coined the conception on modern life, mainly in up rising suburbia's throughout the United States of America.

"After total war can come total living"

Proximity: 2 A claim for life
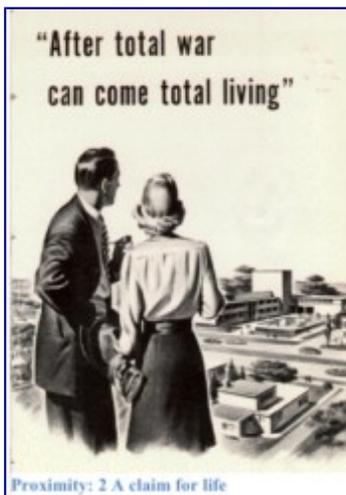
In the fifties and sixties of the twenty first century there was need for knowledge and insight in how people actually interact with their surroundings and how people in a – cultural – community perceive, conceive perhaps place and space. Modernistic Post World War II days, demanded new disposition of every day's social, cultural and economical design. The world was changing and vast numbers of citizens had to proudly be cuddled and pampered into their clean, tidy, green and peaceful suburban prefab dwellings; bourgeois neighborhoods with ditto names such as Aspen Grove, Rosebud Spring, Roscoe Village, Twin Peaks or what ever the suburbanal planners dreamt up. It was necessary to understand what the owners of those suburban dream houses regarded as acceptable models of the use of place and space. How close could houses stand next to each other without 'feeling' intruded by the neighbors? How close could the next family be without being too intimate?

Those questions were relevant sixty years ago when the people of the western world were reshaping and rebuilding their surroundings, their places and spaces, after the dreadfulness of their destructive erroneous ideas of social experiments by Nazi's and Communists. The questions are relevant today.

Proximity – nearness – is increasingly and exceedingly of interest and relevance to people. Again we live in suburbia, now shaped according to "new" insights in architecture, psychology, anthropology and issues of neighborhood accessibility. We call the neighborhoods "Vinex" in Dutch and undoubtedly, other western countries have more or less the same systems of progress.

Hall determined three main categories of distance. But he did not refer to them as places; he called them *spaces*, although his spaces dealt with physical distance from people. Hall also referred to those paces as "bubbles", a metaphor other writers had used before him and would use after him (e.g. Peter Sloterdijk to whom we shall refer later on). The three categories Hall mentions are:

- Intimate space—the closest "bubble" of space surrounding a person. Entry into this space is acceptable only for the closest friends and intimates.
- Social and consultative spaces—the spaces in which people feel comfortable conducting routine social interactions with acquaintances as well as strangers.
- Public space—the area of space beyond which people will perceive interactions as impersonal and relatively anonymous.

Space has many definitions. But when trying to break down all these possibilities to one common denominator, one may suggest that space is perhaps an attempt to capture the phenomena of understanding man in his surroundings. It is, as Sloterdijk suggests 'not what we are but where we are' (Sloterdijk, 2007). And, if that is true, then one may wonder whether space is the equivalent of place.

Hall has defined space in the context of the informal or personal space(s) that

According to Hall, perception of the levels of intimacy of space is culturally determined. People from different cultures perceive space (and place) differently. Hall stressed that differing cultural frameworks for defining and organizing space, which are internalized in all people at an unconscious level, can lead to serious failures of communication and understanding in cross-cultural settings. For instance, 'Germans sense their own space as an extension of the ego. One sees a clue to this feeling in the term "Lebensraum," which is impossible to translate because it summarizes so much' (Hall p.134). Or when the English use the telephone, Hall observes 'since it is impossible to tell how preoccupied the other party will be they hesitate to use the phone; instead, they write notes. To phone is to be "pushy" and rude. A letter or telegram may be slower, but it is much less disrupting. Phones are for actual business and emergencies' (Hall p.140)[3].

Space is a predicament, an entourage of both actual and virtual place. In that sense, space is both place and non-place as Marc Augé enlightens; a constructed area of confidence or non-confidence: space is an object to think with. Space is the foundation of proximity. The space we take – possess – determines our proximity, nearness to the other: our distance and our state of mind, our collective consciousness and our both collective and individual awareness of our *raison d'etre*, our *Conditio Humana*. Ergo, there is a reason why we crawl together to watch the national football team play or why we gather at squares to empower us in times of political or social trouble as recent history has shown during the Arab Spring.

In their writings, both Edward Hall as Peter Sloterdijk use the conception of bubbles as the metaphor to indicate the interaction of men and his environment, say an *actor network*. Another beautiful example of the metaphor of place or space is an observation made by Umberto Eco in his unparalleled *The Infinity of Lists*[4] in which he compares Roman encampments with modern American cities in the chapter *The Aristotelian telescope*, specifically Los Angelos. Roman encampments were paralleled and through perpendicular lines cross-sectioned squares, redeeming clear and extremely demarcated borders between place (and non-place) and its periphery. The army encampments all started out with an open square, an agorian type non-place surrounded by strictly, mathematically coordinated buildings.

According to Eco, we have transferred from that central place – the kernel of our bubble – to the metaphor of the American *Main Street*, slowly but steadily causing peripheries emerging in ever new peripheries culminating in *area-cities* without any singular and clearly defined center. In this sense, Los Angelos is the sensational example of an area-city. It is, as Eco calls it, a typical 'etcetera list' (a list without an ending) (Eco, 2009).

Bubbles

Bubbles as a conception for the human/environment actor network is a strong metaphor; It is as if we all live in our own private bubble that is gently glued to other bubbles around us, forming agile, ever changing constructions of togetherness – nearness even – as if it were indicating life's amorphousness in which the objective is clear: the continuity of the species, perhaps even our desire to create; create our surroundings and create ourselves: *Autopoesis*. Implicitly this suggests that Autopoesis is in fact the mechanism (instrument) with which we carry on as a species: we "self-create" us by being in our individual bubbles that "glue" to other bubbles, creating foamy constellations with the intention to collectively anticipate on what comes from the outside.

In this sense, bubbles can be seen as what Sloterdijk refers to as "immune systems". Each individual bubble acts like an individual shield through which we let just enough "hostility" in to keep us fit. If our immune system runs low, we will become affected by the outside atrocities and if we keep out immune system to tight, we will loose touch with reality and become ill as well. In his *Rules from the Human Park,* Sloterdijk mentions Autopoesis – self-creation – as the human tool to survive, continue. He also describes nine sub-categories of Autopoesis as pre-requisites of human life: Chirotop; Phonotop; Uterotop; Thermotop; Erotop; Ergotop; Alethotop; Thanatotop and Nomotop. Let us have a closer look at these pre-requisites that will help us understand their logics.

These pre-requisites are:

1. *Chirotop* refers to the performance of the human hand, the area of what can be achieved, the world of human action, the first and primary manipulations (bids, slaps, cuts) that produce specific results in the environment;
2. *Phonotop* (or Logotop) is the vocal sound that encompasses an auditory space, in which those living in the community listen to each other, talk, issue commands, and inspire each other;
3. *Uterotop* (or Hysterotop) is a conquered space that aims to expand the area of maternal protection and care. This scale produces a centripetal

force that is perceived and experienced by affected (or even larger units of people) and experienced as a feeling of belonging;

4. *Thermotop* is the integrating heat that the group experiences arising originally home fire and thanks to which the group has the sensation of coziness and "sweetness" of home life, representing the matrix of all the experiences of well-being;

5. *Erotop* the fact that different individuals form one sphere does not imply that the relationships between each other are homogenous and without dynamics. To the contrary, there is vivid interaction between these individuals in which appreciation or disapproval of individual members is constantly communicated and calibrated. These interactions contribute to the erotic climate of a sphere. In the next section, this dimension will be differentiated into erotic and thymotic components;

6. *Ergotop* (or Phalotop) refers to the size of a sensus communis caused by parental authority or a religious authority that generates a spirit of cooperation that can lead to different forms of division of labor or, in extreme cases, a willingness to participate in struggles and wars in defense of the community;

7. *Alethotop* (or Mnemotop) characterizes a situation in which a group capable of learning is constituted as a guardian of a set of common experiences (traditions);

8. *Thanatotop* (or Theotop or even Ikonotop) refers to a place of revelation of ancestors, the dead, the spirits and gods of the group, offering to this group a semiological conection, a gateway for manifestations of the "beyond";

9. *Nomotop* binds the living traditions of the group, through the division of labor and reciprocal expectations through which the mutual exchange and the hoping of cooperation make emerge a social architecture of reciprocal expectations, of opposition and resistance that lead to a political constitution. Each of these topoi is developed and extended in chapters and passages that follow, but which I will have neither time or space to develop here (Rouanet, 2011 apart form Erotop: taken from Rauschenbach, 2011).

Sloterdijk treats us to an enneagraphical unity of nine relevant dimensions of immunity, rather than a dichotomy between, as Rauschenbach states, 'community and society – or, social spheres' (Rauschenbach 2011).

Immunity as another grand prerequisite of the purpose of being human may also explain our divinely attitude towards mobility, specifically the embracement of the phenomena of mobile telephones. In her thesis *The Cell Phone And Its Technosocial Sites of Engagement*, Amber Case (2008) reasons that the phenomenology of the cell phone lies in the auditory domain. That domain is basically public; any passer by can overhear conversations. The landline cell phone though, was connected to (a) place, mobile phones are not; they are detached from place. In fact, the "always on" mobile phonies always there where the owner is. 'The question that remains', as Case asks herself 'is if the cell phone is its own place' (Case 2007).

The use of a mobile phone turns people into 'compound beings that are both social and technological', Case argues. To Case, the use of a mobile phone resembles a ritual. Case observed different situations at different places where people use the mobile phone. Her objective was to understand what has

actually happened with the conception of place now that the landlined telephone is hardly ever used. Apart from the fact that the introduction of the mobile phone has had an impact on the way we use our language, it also ahs had – and still has – an impact on our perception of place, space and sphere.

Before the introduction of the mobile phone, one would call a certain number, knowing that he would call an address and that the recipient might well not be the person the caller wanted to address. In terms us usage of language, the possibly not targeted recipient would most likely answer the telephone by asking who was wanted on the telephone. Today, this protocol remains but in certain geographical areas only marginally. Although the number of landlined telephone subscriptions In the Netherlands for instance, in terms of both professional as private telephoning is still relatively high, this situation may change in the near future. According to a study on landline versus mobile subscriptions in Europe[i], more and more people in the Netherlands will cancel their landline phone. 'For them their cell phone is not a private communication medium anymore but their own telephone. Therefore they will be more inclined to give their number to other people and businesses, or even let it be registered in a public directory' (Häder et al, 2012).

This behaviour has a certain impact, especially if we consider what the mobile phone actually is and does. Before the introduction of the mobile phone, the landline telephone was a communication object that occupied a specific space. In the more or less private sphere of a dwelling, this could be a specially designed table in the living room, hanging in the hallway (as late as the nineties of the twentieth century). Perhaps a telephone would be situated in the bedroom or would the habitant have a 'walking phone', a wireless handset that needed not to be in a docking station when in use. In less private spheres or places, the landline telephone would be situated on the desktop whilst the company operator would control a switchboard, even notifying the caller that the person wanted on the phone did not answer it. Situations like this are still ongoing and have a function. Let us deepen the spheres of privacy and public mobile phone domains now.

On the Phone

'The obvious and single most defining characteristic of mobile wireless communication technology, one that precedes and co-defines its other specific features, is that it renders space largely irrelevant as a variable in constituting mediated contact' says Imar de Vries in his most recent publication (De Vries 2012), meaning ubiquitous connectivity; connectivity being always everywhere. This is true, especially from an instrumental point of view. The hypothesis still holds in vast groups of media researchers and business developers that people want to be connected everywhere at any given moment. But is this true? The prerequisites for timeless and, in the context of this paper more relevant, *placeless* connectivity are not just of a technological or instrumental sort.

In private spheres, the mobile telephone has had a rather troublesome start. As early as the late eighties of last century, innovative communication companies like United States Motorola and Finnish Nokia introduced more portable than mobile communication devices. The giggly anecdotes are still heard occasionally: so-called mobile telephones with batteries as large an average shoebox, weighing tons and having an operating time of less than thirty

minutes. True or not, those devices were not meant as private life communication apparatus but rather for business purposes with good reason, as we will see later on. In terms of private mobile communication connectivity, a demand for usage had not been created yet in those early days.

What led to acceptance of the new mobile communication technology was 'the strong significance of the connectivity aspect of mobile communication devices might suggest that people value this attribute the most, and, when asked, will mention it as the principal agent to eliminate communication problems arising from physical remoteness. Yet, while discourses of mobile communication devices do indeed underline how their ability to transcend space and time is profoundly transforming our perception of communication, there are suggestions that people do not necessarily experience the functioning of those devices in such bloated terms in everyday life. According to communication scholar Valerie Frissen (2000), the mobile industry's conception of information and communication technologies (ICTs) as the tools par excellence to solve communication problems is not immediately reflected in how people talk and think about those technologies' (De Vries 2012).

In fact, acceptance of (new) technology also depends on a number of success factors and key design issues, mainly 'performance expectancy', 'effort expectancy', 'social influence' and 'facilitating conditions' (Venkatesh et al. 2003).

Acceptance of Technology

Venkatesh et al. have researched why people accept or not accept new technology.

Venkatesh's TAM/UTAUT model can be regarded as an explanatory model. Venkatesh synthesized eight behavioral models into one, which he and his scholars called the Technology Acceptance Model/United Theory on the Acceptance and Usage of Technology. This model, which is basically a matrix, has four main categories of influence on the vertical axe and four on the horizontal axe, being the influential factors (gender, age, experience and voluntariness of use). The three main categories of influence are the (new) user's expectancy of performance of the new technology, effort to be out into understanding and using the new technology, the social influence (peer pressure). These categories determine not the behavior (making use of the new technology) as such but the behavioral intention. The fourth main category is that of the facilitating conditions. This category has an immediate effect on the behavior as it is an instrumental category, e.g., the technology is available, content is available, or similar. As the reader may observe in the figure, influential factors have do not effect the four main categories equally. Obviously, 'gender' has no effect on 'facilitating conditions' but 'age' does. Just think of certain content that is not supposed fit for children's eyes.

Proximity as in being Human

We have explored the prerequisites of being human, at least from a perspective of proximity. This paper is meant as "food for thought"; what is it that makes us humans the way we are. We have looked at proximity on a cultural, social and communicational level. We have seen that we develop immune systems to

guard us from whatever evil we are battered with daily in our micro and macro places, space and spheres. May we than conclude that we are "spatial"? 'It is hardly surprising that terms of [this] discourse should tend to be spatial, once it has become clear that it is the spatial arrangements that express the group's identity (its actual origins are often diverse, but the group is established, assembled and united by the identity of the place), and that the group has to defend against external and internal threats to ensure that the language of identity retains a meaning' (Augé, p 45).

Identity, meaning, threats, caught is a spatial discourse. With the establishments of groups, human beings commit to the characteristics of proximity; to my believe a very human characteristic, a prerequisite of being human.

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[1] Hediger, H. *Studies of the Psychology and Behavior of Captive Animals in Zoos and Circuses.* London: Butterworth & Company, 1955. Source used by Hall.

[2] http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/space?show=0&t=1340786066, visited 22 June 2012 at 14.00

[3] Please note, what Hall said this is 1966. Today's attitude of the British towards phones has changed significantly.

[4] The author read the book in Dutch; translation s by the author, verified

through Amazon.com (http://www.amazon.co.uk/The-Infinity-Lists-Umberto-Eco/dp/toc/1906694826)

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[i] http://books.google.nl/books?id=4XpeSHasBtcC&pg=PA19&lpg=PA19&dq=stats+netherlands+mobile+versus+landline+telephone+subscriptions&source=bl&ots=R5FY6TlF-Z&sig=srv46xpVqqJNA7CxHnVSYhP2o9E&hl=en&sa=X&ei=pAveT7XuJ8bG8gPtj-yuCw&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=stats%20netherlands%20mobile%20versus%20landline%20telephone%20subscriptions&f=false