Review Essay

Embracing Lococentrism: A Response to Thomas Brockelman’s Critique

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In Tom Brockelman’s opening remarks, I stand accused of “topocentrism.” In fact, I would rather admit to lococentrism, a term of my own devising. The topos lurking in “topocentrism” (or “topophilia” or “topocosm”) is too reminiscent of Aristotle’s extremely confining idea of topos as a sheer and simple container—a notion that launched 2000 years of debate on the subject. In contrast, locus, once stripped of its strictly geometric signification, carries connotations of “local” and “locale” which I happily endorse. Thus I am indeed a lococentrist and a locophiliac. (I’d also admit to chorocentrism and chorophilia, but that is another, more Platonic, tale).

1. Beyond questions of terminology, serious issues are raised by Tom Brockelman which I now wish to address. Perhaps the most challenging of these concerns the fascination with no place or placelessness which Brockelman takes to be characteristic of a certain avant-gardist strand in modern architecture and also, by extension, in modern life itself. Citing Hilberseimer’s Hochhausstadt project of 1924 (and contrasting it instructively with Le Corbusier’s scheme for “the city of three million inhabitants”), my critic discerns an impetus toward the creation of a site that in effect offers no place to be—that deconstructs the very idea of place by its alienated, empty, and desolate structure. In other words, Hilberseimer’s project is “doubly utopian:” the good place is no place.

i) My first response to this line of thought is to remark rather dogmatically that the very notion of “no-place” is incoherent in my view. Whenever it is proposed, it yields on analysis to a significant residual sense of place—as I have tried to show elsewhere in the case of supposedly ex nihilo accounts of creation, or in the case of an aboriginal chaos. But we do not need to be theological to make the point: the citation from “Paris, Texas” with which Brockelman begins does not posit a wish to be “no place” but only to be “far away,” in “a deep, vast country” that is no less...
a place for lacking a name. (I should add that when I speak of “site,” I do not mean no-place but degenerate place — place in its “deficient modes,” place as “levelled-down,” in Heidegger’s terms).

ii) I would propose that a more pertinent distinction is that between empty place and full place — where “empty” connotes (for human beings at least) desolate, vacuous, lacking history and other forms of specific content, and “full” signifies such things as resonant, fulfilling, satisfying, familiar. It is the difference, for example, between what we experience in an utterly new place where we have just moved and where there are no friends or family members or other types of familiaris and what we feel in a place we already inhabit that is full of local history and about which we have a great deal of local knowledge. Of course, this is not to deny that we can be surfeited and disillusioned with a known place, over-full with it and longing to pull out stakes and seek a new place; or that, once in that unknown place, we may be exhilarated and not depressed. Still, I think you will agree that there is an important, and often fateful, difference between these two kinds of place — and that neither is tantamount to no-place-at-all. Each is a distinctive sort of place, affording decidedly differential destinies.

iii) That being said, it appears to me that one of Brockelman’s most effective sallies against me is that I have neglected not so much no-place as empty place — to which a certain strand of twentieth century architecture points (and which is also at play in Heidegger’s notion of the Unheimlich construed as the “unhomey”). This critique is formally parallel to Derrida’s critique of (metaphysical) presence, especially as this presence appears in such quasi-architectural terms as “nearness” and proximity,” close allies of familiarity and hominess. I am also, I should admit, vulnerable to deconstruction of the very binary opposition of “empty” and “full,” an alternative that also informs Husserl’s phenomenology of perception in the Fifth and Sixth Logical Investigations. But, deconstruction aside for the moment, Brockelman’s charge can be re-formulated thus: my mistake is to overvalue not place per se but full place, place that is contentful and richly ramified — to the neglect of null place, place that is empty of significant content or connection with other places. Null or empty place (labelled by Brockelman as “no place”) that is not merely the excluded other of full place but a powerful — if often suppressed and unrecog-
nised — desire of modernity, surfaces in certain extraordinary avant-gardist movements such as Hilberseimer’s project of 1924.

2. Here the question comes down to: what does it mean to want to lose or lack place — to wish to be placeless? This is not at all the same thing as the desire to lack shelter of any kind — a self-defeating urge at best — nor is it tantamount to nomadism. (It is, however, allied with a fascination with nomadism: a topic to which I shall return.) The desire to which Brockelman points us is, in the language I here employ, the desire not to have full place: to lack its accoutrements and shapes, pleasures and promises. It is the desire to have done with the plenitude of place — the largesse of locus. It is also, I think, the desire to do without what Brockelman identifies as the “markers” of full place: centers, boundaries, means of ready orientation — i.e., all that makes a place at once familiar and identifiable. All this makes perfect sense, both psychologically (basta! is a comprehensible reaction to fullness of place) and historically (where the avant garde can be said to be precisely on guard against any self-satisfied, satiated, state-sanctioned sense of previous implanation).

But the question remains: is the deep wish at work here the desire to lose all sense of place, to be utterly placeless? I doubt it. On my reading, the pertinent desire (characteristically modern and postmodern) is to substitute a different sense of place for the prior engorged sense: a new sense of place that is no longer guided by established placial parameters such as centers or boundaries or particular perspectives. I have labeled this new sense “null” or “empty,” yet to be more exact we should say that it is empty of inherited conventions and practices of place and its determination. In fact, however, it is never altogether empty in these ways: no place is. It has its own parameters such as a felt endlessness, or a-centeredness, or lack of perspectival footholds. That I state these parameters in such privative terms shows the continuing potency of plenary placement in a given culture (in this case Western culture), but as built — or even as projected, as in Hilberseimer’s instance — it will be felt and experienced as a place, a place with plenipotentiary powers that are unique to it and not merely borrowed by negation from pre-established models of full places.

For this is what building places is all about: as built, places, even the most ascetic and vacuous, askew and de-structured, will bring with them an engaging set of textures and contours, directions and horizons. They will always exhibit a determinate group of dimensional predicates: special ways of being here/there, right/left, near/far, etc. And they will do so thanks to the continuing presence in their midst of one term entirely neglected by Brockelman: the body. To this, then, we shall have to return.
3. But let me turn first to something not neglected by my critic: the problematic of Unheimlichkeit. What this problematic indicates is that, in the case of the uncanny, the empty is present in, indeed perforates, the full — that to be at home is also, and by the same token, not to be at home: that at the heart of the paradigm of implacement, being-at-home (or, more reductively, being-housed), is to be found in displacement. But this is not just a matter of a chink as it were in the hearth of the house, but, more radically still, of a situation in which implacement and displacement are indissociable: there is no implacement without displacement and vice versa. As Brockelman says tellingly: Heidegger’s Unheimlichkeit “only denies the existentialist utopian impulse in the same gesture by which it acknowledges it.” The denial of the not-at-home, the displaced (or “distopian,” as Brockelman has it) is only accomplished by its recognition. Or more directly, “what calls domesticity into question exists at the heart of the ‘home’ and only there.”

I would not want to deny this “mutual imbrication” of place and dis-place (as we may call the existential contrary of place: precisely not its contradictory: i.e., not non-place). Just as Sartre had said that “there is a hole in the heart of being,” so we can say that there is a gap in the house of Being. But I also want to insist on other ways in which displacement occurs, less immanent than these models suggest. The dialectic of self-undermining immanence is entirely appropriate to architecture, which necessarily concerns itself (despite Eisenman’s animadversions) with stabilitas loci, “stability of place.” In this domain, one rightly and naturally looks for instability in the very locus of the building. I presume that this is what “deconstructivist” architecture is all about: how to build instability into stability, or how to un-build stability itself. (Similarly, in political action one destabilizes the seat of power from within if one is to be fully effective. Judith Butler has analyzed Rosa Parks’ occupation of the previously forbidden seat at the front of a bus as an instance of a performative action that was efficacious just because it took place in the very place from which blacks had been excluded, thereby creating a lasting destabilization of that place in the form of a subversive “citational legacy.”

But there is displacement and displacement. Sometimes it happens not in a given place but between places. For example, in journeys of which Bashō’s pilgrimage is one instance. These, too, are subversive of stable home-places, now not from within but precisely from outside: from an exteriority that is no longer the posit of an interiority (as is the house that is riven with the uncanny, or more generally the house of Being that creates its own outside as the “inessential,” the merely “represented,” etc.). This exteriority is a creature not of metaphysical intimacy or nearness but of motion between places: the motion of the body as it moves itself, or is vehicled, among diversely distinguishable places. The exteriority, and thus the alienation of
the displacement, is a function of the moving body, not of a fissure in the otherwise intact wall of Being — or of a house as its architectural holding-place. In relation to each other, the places between which one moves are dis-places: moving there, I am no longer here; getting here, I am not there. In getting into place, I am necessarily displaced, and vice versa.

4. I am conceding, then, that Tom Brockelman is right — trenchantly so — when it comes to comparatively stable scenes of implacement. In particular, he introduces a critical nuance that is lacking in my own assessment of site, which I link to an all too monolithic conception of modernity. The avant-garde and the postmodern in architecture — from Hilberseimer to Eisenman — manifest an internal complexity, an intertwanglement of the empty and the full, not adequately recognized in my book (not even, despite Brockelman’s generous reading, in my treatment of the desolation of wilderness or the conflicting tendencies of Versailles). There is a hole in the heart of place — a lacuna even in the most stable, perduing place, whose prototype is a building (even, and especially, a deconstructive building that makes a virtue of destabilizing its very stability — visually, if not structurally).

But there are other places, other rooms (remembering that Platonic chôra may be translated by “room”), that is to say, other ways that place (even within modernity) becomes dis-place. Just as there is complication (or should we say im-plication?) from within if we follow Brockelman-Heidegger-Derrida, there is complication (or ex-plication) from without, most notably in journeying, moving from place to place: a basic action that occurs in every known culture. My concern here — as in Getting Back into Place — is with broadening the vista of place, arguing for a metamorphic profusion of kinds of place, while trying nonetheless to find a few place-constants. It ensues that there is a multiplicity of kinds of dis-place (and identifiable traits of it).

The crucial link between this diaspora of implacing and displacing is the lived body that dwells in (more or less) perduing places while also traveling between them — or, for that matter, remembering them. (For example, nostalgically: we are as nostalgic about lost places as about elapsed times; here I accept Brockelman’s insightful assessment of the nostalgied place as a represented place, posited only from within a metaphysical domesticity. Jean Starobinski has argued that nostalgia is a peculiarly modern phenomenon: here the cultural and historical specificity is entirely apposite.)

5. As I hinted earlier, the issue is not — not even after sufficient stress has been given to motion or traveling — an issue of nomadism, fashionable as this has become in the wake of Deleuze and Guattari — and, more recently and eloquently, Alphonso Lingis. The dis-placement to which I am pointing
is reducible neither to drifting ("loose nomadism" as we can call it) nor to periodic revisitation of places (strict nomadism). What interests me is much more mundane: it is the movement across a place or between places that is accomplished by ordinary "legwork." A journey is not necessarily an elaborate progress between distant or disparate places. It can even happen in a place, including a built place — say, a house or a home. When I walk about a house from room to room, I am traveling from micro-place to micro-place. I occupy the house differentially. This is as true of moving around a deconstructive building as around a conventional home-place: I displace myself as I move, and as I do so I constitute a series of dis-places — places I am not at, yet which are still part of my purview, still present, still full even as they are receding from view. Thus I hollow out a set of concatenated dis-places by my simple action of walking. These dis-places are not the same as those to which Brockelman (and Heidegger) have pointed us, but they are not incompatible with them either: indeed, they rejoin them in a complex congeries of places and dis-places that are as empty as they are full, or as full as they are empty — thanks to the body that is their mediatrix.

6. What I am suggesting therefore is that, in addition to the deconstruction of the binaries of empty and full, natural and cultural, Hestial and Hermetic, wild and domestic, etc., there is another factor that we can consider at once annealing and disseminative — and that itself escapes these binaries (and others) by virtue of being their common premise. This is, once again, the lived-moving body. Its primacy has been argued by Merleau-Ponty and in our time by Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (most notably in her two books The Roots of Knowledge and The Roots of Power). But I would prefer to speak not of "primacy" but of a double role. One role is pre-deconstructive: this is the body's remarkable capacity to hold together otherwise disparate and seemingly incompossible terms: above all, place and dis-place, the homey and unhomy. If this role is annealing, the other role is disseminative: for the body is not a mere thing that stabilizes or underlies. It takes us out of ourselves as well as out of the binaries which it itself combines: it takes us into complicated configurations of the near and the far, horizon and boundary, which do not admit of any easy subsumption under such metaphysically complacent terms as "for-itself" or "in-itself," "proximity" or "distance," "self" and "other," etc. The body keeps us together in place and its many dis-places even as it drives us apart in these same places and dis-places. As annealing, the body is a connective tissue of lives in built places; as disseminative, it is the wild factor in the same uncanny domiciles.
7. It always takes someone else to identify one’s own metanarrative, and I am deeply grateful to Tom Brockelman for having done this so perspicuously in my own case. He has put his discerning finger on my “framing narrative” of place as the repressed term of modernity. To this extent, he has spotted in Getting Back into Place a utopianism of place as the ultimately valorized term. (In fact, the history of place is a checkered one: the repression is already at work as early as the Hellenistic period. I have traced out this history in a forthcoming book.) Coming back at me in this form from someone whose grasp of matters of place is as subtle as that of my interlocutor, I take this charge very seriously.

But even if I am an unabashed lococentrist and locophiliac, am I a topo-utopian? I think not. At least not if this means that I propose, or wish to propose, an ideal place or even a better place. Rather, my interest lies in what given places, hateful or salutary, good enough or imperfect, are like for those who inhabit or traverse them with their lithe or limping bodies. By the same token, however, I am not distopian: nothing in my descriptive work argues that particular places should not be improved for particular personal or political purposes. Am I then atopian? Certainly not. For if I do not hold with Richard Sorabji that “all there is is place,” I do hold that places matter greatly in the things that matter to us all.

Notes

3. Cf. Getting Back into Place, 280–286 for an analysis of these journeys.