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The Betweenness of Place

Towards a Geography of Modernity

J. Nicholas Entrikin

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**For my mother and father
Mona and Jack Entrikin**

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Preface

As I write this preface, helicopters drone overhead and sirens blare as firefighters work on a nearby hillside to contain a brushfire. They labor to protect my neighborhood and community, and I continue to work at my computer. Fire is not an uncommon occurrence in this natural environment. Except for the individuals fighting the fire and those whose homes are endangered by it, life goes on as usual in the local community, interrupted occasionally by a glance toward the hills.

It is a modern community, a new town planned to approximate the ideal of the “Garden City.” The community has a manageably small population and a highly specialized land-use plan that creates separate industrial, retail and residential districts. The relatively homogeneous housing market works in conjunction with the metropolitan housing market to sort the regional population areally according to class, family status, etc. People tend to move here from suburban communities in other large metropolitan areas.

The distinctive and quite attractive natural environment is a positive factor in choosing such a location, but not a necessary condition. A less “suburban-looking” place in the same natural setting would most likely not have attracted the same type of population. The residents tend to be remarkably transient for a self-described “stable” community. The sense of stability is a function of its homogeneity rather than the duration of stay of its residents. If communities may be defined in terms of the interweaving of life histories, one would conclude that such interweaving seems less complex and more contingent in this community than in more traditional forms of community.

The fires burn in the mountains. The vegetation of the region has adapted to the natural cycle of fires. Fire actually stimulates seed production in certain types of native plants. It is not the plant community that is being protected by the firefighters, but rather my community.

I have said that my community is being protected, but this is somewhat misleading. The threat of fire is more individual than communal. Brush fires may destroy my house or the houses of neighbors, and the personal loss would be great. The community would seemingly be little affected by such a loss, however. Generally, such fires give sufficient warning to allow for evacuation, but the potential loss of personal possessions is significant. The houses could be rebuilt, but many of the personal artifacts could not be replaced. These artifacts contribute to an individual's sense of identity and help form a sense of place. My sense of identity is tied only slightly to the community. It is the place where my home is and where my children go to school.

As a quasi-functioning whole, the community is made up of seemingly quite replaceable parts. I say "quasi" because, although it has all the parts of a functioning urban unit (e.g. houses, factories, government and business offices, etc.), they are not related in the same way as one would necessarily anticipate. Their functioning can only be understood in the context of the larger metropolitan, national and international markets. Adaptability is built into the landscape. The industrial and commercial buildings are generally constructed with no specific use in mind. The houses are similar to other houses of suburban Los Angeles. Architectural commentators note the movement northward of the "Orange County style" home, but such subtle distinctions are evident only to the trained eye. The natural setting is quite distinctive and aesthetically pleasing, and actually enhanced by several private, human-made lakes.

It is a modern place that once a year celebrates its "past." Local business people put on cowboy hats, and amusement equipment operators bring their equipment from a local heritage celebration in another town and set up their rides. The question of the authenticity of these celebrations seems only marginally appropriate in that no one appears to believe that the town's past is important to its present or that such festivities are somehow important for a sense of collective identity. Rather, the celebration simply draws together the interests of local merchants to demonstrate their wares and those of residents in raising children.

No significant "traditional" community remains that could either give meaning to or challenge the prevailing conceptions of local history. The indigenous cultures and populations are extinct, and the extensive use of the land associated with ranching left little in the

way of artifacts or extended families to provide the materials for the "reconstruction" of a traditional community. Indeed, a significant portion of the ranchland was owned and continues to be owned by "Hollywood" ranchers.

It is a place with an identity that is defined by its residential character. Its economic activities do not give it a specific character. Its largest employers are in telecommunications, insurance, and defense-related industries. Some of their employees live in the community, but not in sufficient numbers to give the community a distinctive, industry-related identity. Most local residents work elsewhere. The companies themselves look to international and national markets and are affected by metropolitan-wide linkages with related industries. "Local" business people tend to be involved in aspects of the real-estate industry, a business that self-consciously creates place images, but not images that refer to the actual role of that industry in the community. The community name would bring greater recognition outside of California, especially in Texas, since it is the place where the Dallas Cowboys football team, "America's Team," had for so many years prepared for its season.

The community's relation to the natural landscape is best described in the words of Yi-Fu Tuan as that of "dominance and affection," a relation in which the environment is viewed as a pet to be cared for and protected.¹ Groups fight valiantly to prevent the seemingly inevitable encroachment of new housing tracts into the surrounding hills. The city hires a biologist as its "urban forester," whose job is to care for its native oak trees. The natural hazard of brushfire is most often attributed to human activity. Fires that occur near settlements are typically the work of arsonists using the stored natural fuels of this Mediterranean environment to their advantage. People live quite comfortably in the natural spillways of several dams, despite the presence of nearby faults and frequent tectonic activity. To speak of the natural world is usually to make reference to the aesthetics associated with viewing nature.

It is a modern community, which is to say that it is simply a place where moderns live. Contingent rather than necessary ties connect the people and the place. A fire merely interrupts the flow of activity. The place has no essence that can be threatened.

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J. N. E.