Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Here and There: a Brief Situational Interlude

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, February 19th, 2014

Introduction

What did Gertrude Stein mean when she said:

“The trouble with Oakland is that when you get there, there isn’t any there there.”?

What Gertrude Stein meant, I think, was that the city of Oakland as a whole had no features to make it feel, globally, like a distinct place; she could also have meant that the city of Oakland had, within it, few or no areas at all that possessed the features necessary to being sensed as distinct places … in either case Oakland **was** no, **had** no, “there”.

(The feature image is of a “grey” urban zone from another city, a zone caught between past and future developments that have squeezed the “there” out of it.)

In the current language, the use of the terms: “here” V.S. “there”, implies that their spatial referents have enough features to make them distinguishable each from the other, and each from their respective context.

Since one will never find a place **named** “here”, nor “there” for that matter, I wish to elaborate on the basic meaning of here and of there, whereby **“here” is the spatial position referent of where I am in a given situation, and “there” is the spatial position referent of where I am not in that given situation, but where I may contemplate going to.**

A **situation** being that **set of social and spatial circumstances which requires one to determine, for oneself and/or for others, one’s spatial position as “here” as opposed to a possible “there”.**

What follows, then, are examples of **situations** whereby one is called for to define, describe and localise one’s, or a, spatial **position**: at the scale of the city, the building and the room.

Situation: “I am here…”

– Hello, this is Joe!

= Hi Joe, where are you?

*– I am **Here** …*

*= Here … **where** here, Joe?*

*– I am in **front** of the Palais des Congrès, **by** the moving sculpture in the fountain*

*= Ok Joe, I **see**!*

By stating that he was at an unspecified **“here”,** Joe probably means that he has arrived **where he was expected to arrive by the person he was calling.** Outside of **that situation**, a person will need to provide a specific spatial feature making it possible for another person to identify the “here” in the city … as that seems to be Joe’s **real situation**.

By stating that he is next to the Palais des Congrés, Joe is identifying the geographically determined **place in the city where he may be found.** An address would be necessary should the other person not know where Palais des Congrés is located in the city.

By adding that he is by the moving sculpture in the fountain, Joe is giving the qualitative GPS-like coordinates of his location in front of Palais des Congrés, next to **a particular well known street level landmark**.

Involved in this situation are: the expectation of each of the interlocutors as to what was agreed, or not, as a meeting place, the image each one has of the city, and the eventual confirmation of all of the above in the phone conversation as a micro scene of urban sociability.

Situation: “You are here”

You are in front of an elevator but don’t know if it is the right one to get to your destination, because you don’t know exactly where you are in this major Montreal hospital building.

*Fortunately there is a building directory placed next to the elevator, and a floor plan around the corner, with a red marker placed by the elevator and a legend stating: “You are **here**” … if you can remember passing by the floor plan on the way to the elevator.*

What is subsumed in the floor plan, is that both the plan and yourself are **“here”, at the same point in space** … and, after consulting the plan and the building directory, you may conclude that you should not be taking this elevator **“here”** but the one that is **“there”** at the other end of the corridor, where, presumably, another floor plan and building directory will indicate that you may be in the right **“here”** from which to get to the **there** where you intend to go. (Please pardon the long sentence)

We sense now that any **“there”** needs a reference to a **situated “here”** in order for either to make sense as position indicators. As this case shows, “**there”** and **“here”** are only the relative position indicators of a person **in a given situation, and at a given place called “here”, as related to another one called “there”…** with, of course, a needed **pathway** to get from here to there!

Involved in this particular situation are: a variety of medical conditions and individual approaches to spatial orientation requiring a redundant system of landmarks, signs, guide plans, directories and information counters to ease the stress of way finding, and not to add it onto the stress of being in a hospital in the first place, in a gesture of serviceable sociability.

Situation: “It goes there”

*You have just acquired a rocking chair and you are discussing **where** to place it.*

If you are discussing the matter at the store where you bought it you may refer, by name, to the room where the piece would be placed.

In **that situation** you might also specify where in the room it may be placed in relationship to architectural features such as doors and windows, or in relationship to other furniture already in the room.

Once at home, you may end up using mainly the term **“there”** to indicate a preference as in **“not there** but in the other corner” or a choice to be made as in “**there** … **or there**?” by pointing to possible places to put the new piece of furniture.

You might also use both “**here”** and “**there”** as placement possibilities **if you are standing, with or without the piece, in the “here” position and you are pointing to the “there” one**. It is important to note the subtle association of “here” with the position of the speaker!

*Involved in **the illustrated situation** was the desire for the rocking chair to be reserved for my use, hence its final place near my work space, therefore defining its **spatial position** in terms of its **social situation**: “**My** rocking chair”… with the subtle message to guests to use the other seats…first!*

Discussion

These considerations bring one to a deeper level of understanding of the notions of **Here** and **There** in the social- spatial dynamic of urban sociability; a level involving their situational context, that is: **the relative meaning, need or desirability of being Here V.S. There.**

This is a social-spatial dynamic that makes the city and its citizens mutually, and intensely, present to each other … what better definition of urban sociability?

***PS.** By the way, why would the lack of a “there” character in Oakland be a source of “trouble” in the eyes of Gertrude Stein?*

I suppose we can begin by seeing Oakland in her own eyes, as a Europeanized American living in Paris, not exactly a characterless and placeless city, being shocked by its contrast with the

undifferentiated urban development of the east side of San Francisco Bay.

Still, what could be the nature of the trouble? It may be the difficulty incurred in finding one's way, it may be an aesthetic displeasure, it may also be a subtle culture shock caused by a laissez faire attitude to urban development without a global vision for the city as a particularly sociable environment.

Photograph of the elevator lobby credit François Lagacé, consultant in spatial orientation, Montreal

All other photographs credit Maurice Amiel

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