

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Notes on the nature of informal places

Maurice Amiel · Saturday, December 18th, 2021

Everybody knows what a place is: from the *“just stay in your place”* to *“a place for everything and everything in its place,”* we all heard these commonly held notions of what a place may mean *in terms of expected use, and user’s behavior.*

A place “works” by providing physical indices as to its limits and access points, and to its functional spatial organization ... indices we learn to read through experience and social feedback.

Informal Place

An informal place is one whose pattern of indices is considerably reduced in terms of communicating possible uses and acceptable user’s behavior, thereby inviting users’ initiative and imagination as to the type and placement of activities to be held in it.

In the feature image, reprised below, we can gather from the randomly placed tables, seats and waste containers that the place is available for impromptu lunch breaks, or game of chess, or simply for taking the air between a main drag on one side and a service road lined with food-oriented businesses on the other.

Since the furnishing is not fixed to the ground, its arrangement may be left to the users, whether seeking quiet isolation or social gathering ... a traffic island has thus been turned into an informal outdoor resting and gathering place under mature trees, surrounded by dense landscaping that muffles the traffic noise.



A traffic island informally adopted

In the images below, I will illustrate places of various degrees of informality and environmental contexts, with notes on the spatial and social vehicles of that informality.

The summer “chat and tea” place, located by an apartment building entrance, shown below, is screened from the street with dense landscaping, but otherwise well identified as what it is: an informal place furnished with a table and two chairs, accessible to tenants thanks to a narrow walkway along the large window of the building lobby, for which it seems to provide an exterior extension.

The variety of users I observed leads me to believe that the use of table and chairs is not reserved for particular tenants.



tea and company in semi public privacy

Picnic-on-a-blanket place, under the tree, by the pond ... a classic informal place that any large tree can harbour: urban park context, no sign, no furnishing, no delimitation ... just the understood freedom to squat the area on the condition to leave it in the same condition as found.



Classic situation of picnic in the shade of tree

Picnic-on-a-blanket along the same pond but provided with a nearby picnic table, too small to sit on for the size of the group, has been used to set the serving plates while squatting and eating on a large blanket near it.

The flowery plots surrounding the immediate area provide a semi-private sense of occupancy to that area, no one being tempted to cross but only to casually skirt by walking around it.



Informal adaptation of picnic site

Last bit of conversation, at the gate of this kindergarden play yard, is about the most ephemeral informal “place” I have found, tied as it is to a particular situational context: with the prams parked near the gate, outside the yard, parents gather to share information or just kibitz before leaving.

Are they blocking the access to the gate? That possibility probably sets the duration of informal occupancy of the “gate-place”!



Punctual gathering at the gate before leaving

This hammock hanging between two trees for a break from dog walking in an urban linear park, filled me with elation ... everything is so obvious as to need no commentary ... note however the three dogs leashed to one of the two trees, patiently waiting for the master to end his siesta, dismantle the hammock and return home !

Another ephemeral one-person informal place that fits right in the spirit of the urban context.



Ephemeral informal place

Chalk art courtesy of late fall park pond drainage benefits from the pond concrete edge that usually keeps people and dogs from entering the pond, but which now defines the limit of this informal place without blocking access to it.

The large rock which usually emerges from the water now seems to stand guard by the children.

Note finally the way the children seem to stand apart while being conscious of each other's production.



Dried pond chalk-boarding artists

End words

All the cases of informal places presented here involve a degree of civility in their use; a civility issued from a sense of responsible appropriation regarding how it is used, with whom, for what purpose and for how long.

It is a dynamic situation involving some kind of negotiation with others and within oneself which characterizes the experience of informality vs the one of formal places that depend on spatially and socially ritualized directives for their occupancy and use.

Credit all images to Maurice Amiel

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