Platial Rhythm

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ABSTRACT

Scholarly works abound on the concept of place and platial representations, often disagreeing with one another. There is also an impressive corpus on matters of time, rhythm, and their interaction with space and place. Existing conceptualizations of these subjects continue to grapple with the challenge of modelling place, especially with respect to the diverse ontological framings of place in the literature. This short paper begins with the suppositions that place and temporality are embodied and enacted, followed by an introduction of "platial rhythm", a concept which operates on the intersection between place and temporality and describes their mutual unfolding. Building from existing arguments about space and place, and time and temporality, we posit that place is ontologically constructed through platial rhythm.

1. Introduction

This essay joins an already impressive corpus that forays to reframe the concept of place. The central admission of our conception of place is the predication of rhythm in the ontological construction of place. This is not the employ of rhythm as a conceptual metaphor, as some other place-based theoretical adventures with rhythm are, but an attempt to configure a concept of place that is constituted by rhythm as much as it is constituted by spatiality. To accomplish this, we construe place and temporality as embodied and enacted, which enables the construction of *platial rhythm*, a concept which operates at the intersection between place and temporality and has ontological implications for our understanding of place. This work introduces into the discussion of place ontologies and place models the theoretically and practicably productive concept of platial rhythm.

2. Place and Temporality

To move towards our discussion of platial rhythm, we must first outline the terms *place*, in contrast to space, and *temporality*, in contrast to time. Beginning with the first dyad, consider de Certeau's (1980/1984) definition of space as reducible to the inert configuration of elements, while place is "the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual program or contractual proximities" (p. 117).[1] For de Certeau, space is geometric and place is phenomenological, whose phenomenology is actualized by "vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables" (p. 117). De Certeau is indicating that place, in contrast to space, is embodied (phenomenological) and enacted (something actualized). By enacted, we mean also that place is temporally contingent (Tuan, 2004). The corollary of understanding place as embodied is understanding it also as socially produced. Analogous to de Certeau's construction, Lefebvre (1974/1991) makes the distinction between

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[1] De Certeau inverts the terms space and place as most geographers use them. To remain consistent with other works, we use space where de Certeau uses place, and vice versa.

"ideal" (i.e., geometric, Cartesian) space and "real" space, that of social practice. Cresswell (2014) simplifies this construction, identifying space as a "realm without meaning" and place as space which has been invested with anthropogenic meaning. This corpus converges on a conceptualization of place as embodied and enacted, and therefore temporally contingent and socially produced.

The second dyad of temporality and time parallels the distinction between place and space. In Stuart Elden's introduction to Lefebvre's *Rhythmanalysis* (1992/2004), he writes: "Just as Cartesian geometry is a reductive way of understanding space, so too is the measure of time, the clock, a reductive comprehension" (p. xi). The difference is between the "vulgar understanding of time" (p. 281) (Heidegger, 1927/1996) – time as something which can be captured on the hands of a clock – and temporality, which denotes a phenomenological time: a time that is similarly enacted and embodied. As Lefebvre writes, our body is a metronome, which functions as the embodiment of a subjective temporality (Lefebvre, 1992/2004). Our metronome is constantly shifting, inhabiting, as Frank (1998) offers, different "types" of time, or, in our conception, different temporalities. We are drawing here from Heidegger's construal of temporality, which clarifies that the aforementioned dissemblance is not strictly analogous to a quantitative and a qualitative time; rather, "vulgar", measured time ("a succession of nows") is derivative of the intrinsic temporal quality of Being (*Da-sein*) (Heidegger, 1927/1996). This does not invalidate time as it is commonly understood, but to recognize that "only from the temporality of Da-sein [Being] and its temporalizing does it become intelligible *why and how world time belongs to it*" (p. 390). Stated differently, from the perspective of Being (i.e., our existing), there is no time that is not framed through our own temporalizing. Time, framed by our Being, is phenomenological. Time, in any way we can experientially access the concept, is subjective; it is temporality, rather than time.

In both dyads, we circle the notion that both place and temporality, as we define them, are not reducible to their elements. Place is not reducible to the Cartesian configuration of spatial elements, and temporality is not reducible to the measure of seconds. By identifying the shared element of non-reducibility, we can borrow from complexity thinking, wherein a definitional criteria of a complex system is that it is not reducible to the sum of its parts. Whether place and temporality are formalistically complex is not important for the purposes of our discussion: we only need borrow the advancement from complexity theory that non-reducibility is partly explained by the interaction between systems and their environments (Juarrero, 1999). Just as place is temporally contingent, interacting with its temporal environment, temporality is spatially contingent, interacting with its spatial environment. While we can turn to Heidegger for more theory here – he posits that "time is not something which is found outside somewhere" (1985) – it is simple enough to reflect on our experiential account of the contingency of time's passing on our environs: how different is a minute on a crowded metro car versus a park bench? With this, we can claim that place and temporality are inversely contextual.

3. Platial Rhythm

We have now the elements which will allow us to build our theory of rhythm. While much of the extant work on rhythm, this essay included, owes enormously to Lefebvre's rhythmanalytical project, the great part of that project is concerned with a characterization of places by their rhythms, and not an ontic reconfiguration of the place concept. Many scholars, before and since Lefebvre, have incorporated rhythm in a discussion of place (Edensor, 2010; Mels, 2004). Their use of this concept similarly does not often broach the ontology of place. We want to suggest that place is ontologically constructed by rhythm. To distinguish this foray from other theorizations of rhythm and place, without invalidating them, we refer to this conceptualization as *platial rhythm*. To move towards an operative definition, let us consider the constitution of place and temporality, as we have discussed them: they are embodied and enacted, and thereby subjective and contextual. Further, in being enacted, they are also always unfolding, and therefore unstable and indefinite. Yet, as Massey (1994) argues, the tendency to strictly divide the concepts of time and space fails to recognize that the two are inextricable. Hägerstrand's seminal time-geography concept operates on this premise and holds time and space in the same models. Just as time and space do not operate independently of one another, nor too do temporality and place.

Lefebvre finds rhythm "everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy" (p. 15) (1992/2004). Repetition is a starting point from whence difference, and therefore rhythm, emerges: "Differences induced or produced by repetitions constitute the thread of time" (p. 8). Another way of framing this observation is with the more general term *patterning*. Anything which has multiples, in other words, which has *duration*, has patterning. When we refer to the "unfolding" of something which has duration, we are then discussing the production of a pattern. Both time and temporality, and any *thing* touched by them, has a pattern. Our conceptualization of temporality holds it as subject to the context of place, and recall that we also hold it as constitutive of, and inextricable from, place. *Platial rhythm* is the pattern of the temporality of place, and the place of temporality, mutually unfolding. Place is itself always unfolding; it is not a stable ontological commitment, but a process of becoming itself through its constituents – its materiality, its subjectivities, its temporalities, and this process of place becoming itself – always becoming itself, re-constituting itself – is rhythm. Then, when we assay to identify the rhythm of a place, as the rhythmanalytical project does, what we are identifying is the patterns of the production of that place. Hence the consignment of the platial modifier to rhythm in this conceptualization. This is what is meant by the ontic participation of rhythm in place: there is no "place" without a rhythm to constitute it. A place does not *have* a rhythm, as it might have other properties or features; a place, properly speaking, is *of* rhythms.

A recent review of platial information research notes that there is a gap between theoretical construals of place and the "formal means to represent" them (Mocnik, 2022). The problematic we soon encounter when we begin with a concept of place that is inherently subjective and attempt to operationalize it is the inoperability of a non-objective construal. In claiming that place and temporality are embodied and enacted, we indeed must accept that they are subjective in deference to that *being* which experiences (therefore also embodies, also enacts) them. Yet, when one refers to a place, whether linguistically, artistically, or otherwise, there is a mutual intelligibility which allows the other to understand the reference, even if the holistic meaning of that place varies. We might frame these overlapping semantics as inter-subjective. When we wish to arrive at shared meanings of place, we frequently turn to "objective components'" – frequently, spatial elements or widely-agreed upon thematic associations with those elements. These objective components, often, are the *materiality* of place. Materiality provides the constraints or affordances for the production of place, in addition to, as Lefebvre (1992/2004) notes, social

constraints, which are inscribed by social order, but, as we have seen, do not themselves constitute place. When we model place in academic scholarship, we often rely on materiality, which, by nature of its object-ivity, lends itself to inter-subjective representation. Indeed, one approach in geo-ontology (here, ontology in the computational sense) to modelling place is to conceptualize places in terms of their affordances (Jordan et al., 1998; Scheider & Janowicz, 2010). While this approach is certainly valuable, particularly in modelling places in GIS, by doing so, we are still consigned to making spatial models of place.

We want to claim here, definitively, that it is impossible to achieve a model of place that is both singular and accurate. To construct a truly *platial* model, we must incorporate those elements of place that are subjective, and therefore our model becomes multifaceted and multiple. We must make reference to the multiplicity of subjectivities. Given these claims, it would be more generative to configure our place models as multiple – instead of *a* model of place, we consider what is, in effect, a portfolio of place representations. While integrating different approaches to representing place is difficult, because they begin from varying concepts of place (Mocnik, 2022), with a portfolio approach it may not be necessary to completely integrate them. Simply put, the model must both be accurate for the persons inhabiting – and experiencing and participating in the production of – a place, and be communicable – that is, useful.

Further, if we are modelling place, and we recognize that temporality is inextricable from place, we must reflect on how temporality might be modelled. The premise of incorporating time or temporality in spatial models is not new; most centrally, Hägerstrand's time-geography, and subsequent implementations and refinements of those concepts, develop temporally-bound models of space and place (Carlstein et al., 1978; Pred, 1981). More recently, some researchers have undertaken efforts to understand places, and cities in particular, through their rhythms, understood in the Lefebvre sense of the word (Kitchin, 2019; Nevejan & Sefkatli, 2020). We are not arguing that these are not useful; however, they either fall short of including temporality, when they only incorporate time and not temporality as we have distinguished between the terms, or struggle with incorporating the multiplicity of subjectivities that must be considered when modelling place. Even a representation of place that occupies only a single moment in time must still reflect temporality. This has become increasingly imperative with the rise of the digitally-mediated or "smart" city (Kitchin, 2019; Rose, 2017). Part of the reason that it is so challenging to model place is the difficulty of representing the temporal element in our models. Though we offer no unitary solution, we suggest that the proposal of incorporating multiple representations of place ameliorates this challenge, since every representation of place is also a representation of a temporality. Consider, for example, how several photographs of a place, from a single perspective, at different times of day, manages to capture different aspects of its temporality.

We do not yet offer an operationalizable platial model building from platial rhythm, but wish to suggest that beginning with the ontology of platial rhythm may be productive in such efforts. Recall first that platial rhythm is the process through which place comes into being: by describing the platial rhythm of a locale, one is describing the place itself. Recall also that platial rhythm describes the *patterning* of the mutual unfolding of place and temporality: by describing this pattern, one is describing platial rhythm. The operative challenge, then, is of describing *patterns*, and not *things*; the latter being a common approach is existing attempts to capture place. Patterns are circumscribed by instances (whether things, occurrences, emotions, and so on) over an axis of temporality. From this premise, perhaps it is possible to build a platial model of a locale by identifying and noting the patterning in the various processes that constitute a place. The limitations of conventional geographical information science have long been noted and there have been efforts to reconceptualize the practice in response (Couclelis, 2003; Giordano & Cole, 2018; Mocnik, 2022), especially in the domain of critical GIS (O'Sullivan, 2006; Radil & Anderson,

2019; Thatcher et al., 2016), though most of these efforts are rather prosaic. We suggest that by foregrounding *place* instead of *space*, the ontology of platial rhythm may offer much towards the project of reshaping GIScience.

Conclusion

In this short essay, we introduced the concept of platial rhythm into the wider corpus on matters of place, temporality, and models thereof. We began with a construal of place and temporality as embodied, enacted, subjective, and contextual, which allowed for the introduction of the term platial rhythm, operating at the intersection between place and temporality and describing the patterning in their mutual unfolding. These theoretical arguments enabled a reflection on how we might model place and some suggestions to that end. The intention of this essay is to generate further discussion on platial information representations, and especially how the concept of platial rhythm might lend itself towards that pursuit.

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