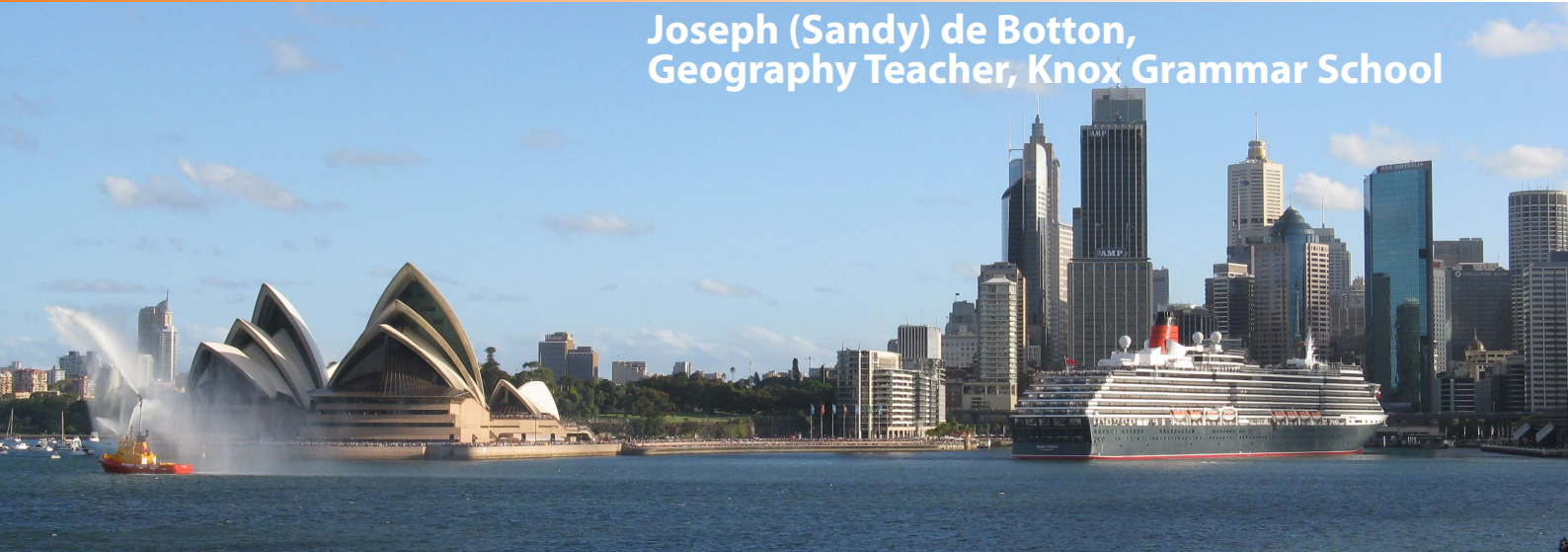


CULTURE OF PLACE

Joseph (Sandy) de Botton,
Geography Teacher, Knox Grammar School



This article focuses on examining the dimensions associated with the phrase **culture of place** as indicated on page 38 of the NSW DET Stage 6 Geography, Urban Places unit of work and more specifically, its context in relation to a case study of a large city in the developed world. This article is intended for Year 12 teachers and their students.

The Charles Sturt University NSW HSC online website provided the construct around which this article was developed.

The context - explanation of key terms

Culture refers to the traditions handed down from one generation to another. It includes things such as; food, religious beliefs, music, art, language, history and architecture (building design).

Human characteristics are the ideas and actions of people, including Government, that change the physical environment over time.

Within Geography the term **place**, refers to the physical (biotic and abiotic) and human characteristics of a location. Examples of the physical characteristics of an area include topography (the hills and valleys); drainage systems (rivers, wetlands and creeks); different ecosystems such as beaches, rainforests, alpine areas, grasslands and woodlands and the plants and animals that occupy these areas, as examples.

Culture of Place – static and dynamic components

I would suggest that, given this context, **culture of place** refers to the physical or spatial location and extent of an area and how this area has been changed over time by a combination of on-going natural forces and human activities. In other words, the culture of place (of an area) is the continuing interplay between political, physical,

economic, social forces that includes technological developments that occur over time.

While the physical environment may initially constrain the development of certain areas, the technological means exist, when combined with the political and economic will, to alter the shape of the environment, in which people live. For example, land clearing for the development of port facilities, industry, farming, the development of transport infrastructure, the provision of public (open) space, an urban water supply and sanitation system.

It can be argued that culture of place involves **static** or fixed as well as (more) **dynamic** elements or components. The **static** elements include the landuse patterns which incorporate the streetscape and differences in architectural styles present in the built environment, while dynamic components involve noise, energy, lifestyles, colour and vitality as evidenced by the influence of distinct cultural groups. It is also true that the streetscape can become more colourful, vibrant and energetic when streets are temporarily closed off for street stalls or markets on part of a weekend as well as through changes in landuse zoning patterns which could (arguably) be a forerunner of urban renewal.

The more **dynamic** aspects of culture of place are also affected by and reflect different waves of migration. In relation to Sydney, these waves of immigrants have individual and cumulative impacts that are evident through, as examples, their places of worship, social clubs, theatres and newspapers. Individually, the impact of specific migrant groups can be seen in terms of place names, multi-lingual signs, the sounds of music, theatre, food, dress or fashion and in literature. Cumulatively, Sydney is seen as a multicultural city as there are distinct pockets (enclaves) that illustrate different cultural practices.

In short, culture of place has a number of elements. The following is not intended to be a hierarchy to indicate a level of significance or importance.

1. Whether referring to Sydney or New York, culture of place is influenced by the physical location and characteristics of an area (site), together with the operation of the urban dynamics of change (suburbanisation, gentrification, decentralisation - as examples). It occurs or is reflected, in its initial stages, by colonisation which occurs within a particular spatial / geographical setting; on a river, a harbour, by a lake, at elevation (in a basin or valley), as examples.

Sydney Harbour was chosen in preference to Botany Bay as a 'thousand of the line may ride out a storm in perfect safety'. It also had a reliable water source and more favourable southern shore topography, when compared to the relatively more rugged northern shoreline of Sydney Harbour.

The streetscape (**a static element**) and associated landuses that occur are a response to site or location (**a static element**). For example: the convergence of transport infrastructure (road, rail, shipping) that is associated with wharf and port facilities; warehousing, storage, customs and bond stores; the location of industry near rivers so that effluent could be dumped, while cargo could be loaded and unloaded from ships; residential development (terrace housing) in close proximity to industry (think of Pyrmont), and an administrative function (Government).

2. Culture of place occurs within a particular spatial context. There may be distinctive cultural enclaves or identifiable groupings or clusters within a city. For example, the Jewish community of the Eastern suburbs; the Vietnamese at Cabramatta and Muslims around Auburn and Granville.
3. There is a **temporal setting** or context when discussing culture of place. While physical forces continue to affect the human environment, the initial appearance of the streetscape, the materials used to construct the buildings and their architectural appearance reflects the prevailing architecture of the colonising power. The streetscape, street width, block size as examples, is imported from the mother-land, as it provides a degree of familiarity and order.

The appearance of the streetscape alters over time with changes in building technology. The development of wrought and cast iron gave way to steel, due to advances in production processes. As these processes were applied to construct new buildings, the look of the streetscape changed. Steel replaced wrought iron; aluminium and glass were used, as was reinforced concrete. Walk down George Street, Sydney or Church Street, Parramatta. The appearance of streetscapes change over time; these changes may be short-lived such as a very large tree that falls down during a storm or the changes in colour associated with the change in seasons. Some of these changes occurred **incrementally**, while in other situations, change was more rapid and widespread.

A further example to illustrate the temporal setting of culture of place is seen in the process of urban renewal.

Urban Renewal

The early finger wharves of Sydney's Circular Quay and Darling Harbour reflect the initial use of sail-powered ships. These finger wharves gave way to longshore wharves from the 1950's with the advent of container shipping technology. Between 1868 and 1983 a railway goods yard operated along the southern and western foreshores of Darling Harbour.



Above: Darling Harbour Sydney in the 1880s. Source: Tyrrell Photographic Collection, Powerhouse Museum www.powerhousemuseum.com/collection/database/collection=The_Tyrrell_Photographic

However, since the mid 1980's the former railway goods yard has been re-developed and is now a tourist precinct – urban renewal. In other instances the technology developed to be able to reclaim land as has happened in Sydney's Botany Bay, New York's Battery Park or in Tokyo Bay. Change to an area occurs over time in response to the continuing operation of the urban dynamics of change as well as the influence of extreme natural events (earthquake, hurricane).

Whilst there are recognisable land uses within any city, there has been a relatively long-held view by town planners to re-invigorate the city centre by diversifying its land use to include residential population. This trend, evident over the last 40 or so years, is now seen by urban renewal programs of former brownfield estates and the gentrification of former industrial and working class suburbs. A multiplicity of land uses now occur. The once distinctive financial and retailing centre of cities like New York, Chicago and Sydney now has multi-storey residential complexes, green spaces and marinas (Walsh Bay) – quite a change in land use from the functionally distinctive land uses that occurred in the 1950's and 1960's.

Below: Pyrmont, Darling Harbour, Sydney – The redevelopment of the railway goods yards, with the Goldsbrough Mort (centre right) Source: Wikimedia Commons



In other instances, there has been a change in thinking about building form and function. The former Goldsbrough Mort Wool Stores of Pyrmont and Ultimo have been adaptively reused for loft-style apartments and a hotel. Some terrace houses are now used by chartered accountants or digital media firms. Former warehouses contain restaurants that overlook the water. In short, there has been a re-examination of how the space of an area can be used. This trend of urban renewal of former brownfield estates and the gentrification of former industrial and working class suburbs is more than the wholesale clearing of an area. It involves adaptive re-use, a recognition and appreciation of heritage and the creation of green space and improved transport links (connectivity). A multiplicity of land uses now occur that has given rise to a **new urbanism**.

4. **Dynamic elements** such as noise, energy, lifestyles, colour and vitality. These components can be discussed treated in terms of context. Different colour(s), (levels of) energy, vitality and noise are evident with the Saint Patrick's Day march when compared to the running of the New York Marathon or one of the various sailing events on Long Island Sound; or a bar / but Mitzvah; the celebration of Chinese New Year (firecrackers) or the fasting and feasting that is associated with Ramadan. These less static elements reflect examples of the different cultural groups / identities that have a significant presence within the city that occur at certain times of the year in relation to a specific cultural calendar.

The noise, colour, energy, vitality including touch, engage and stimulate our other senses to provide an additional dimension to that of sight alone. Seeing something in the distance is not the same as seeing something close-up, unless what is being observed requires distance as opposed to proximity. There can also be a vertical or altitudinal dimension to culture of place. The views from the top of either the Rockefeller Center or Empire State Building are different to the views of NY from a helicopter, as they occur within a different

spatial as well as a variable altitudinal setting. In contrast to these sights, sounds and colours, a Sydney Harbour Bridge climb will also provide different sights; sounds and colour when compared to a walk along the harbour bridge walkway. These experiences also vary with the changes in season.

Given that the majority of Manhattanites don't own a vehicle, accessibility in the form of effective (and affordable) public transport is a necessity and helps to reinforce the vibrancy of cities like New York as people are able to connect to the variety of activities that occur at different times of the year and in different places within this city. Along with public transport, there are the prolific and ever-present Yellow cabs. In mid-August 2008 two lanes of Broadway between 42nd Street and Herald Square were transformed into a pedestrian plaza and bike path. Furthermore, in late May 2012, four one-way pairs of cross-town bike lanes in Midtown received preliminary approval.

Conclusion

In short, when discussing culture of place, teachers may consider having the students identify or determine a continuum of land use. What are the relatively fixed or static elements associated with culture of place, the site or situation, the streetscape, the architecture? At the other end of the spectrum, what are the more dynamic or less fixed elements of culture of place, the noise,

energy, street life and colour? Having established this construct, a degree of complexity can be introduced; changes over time or a temporal component; the day, the week, the month, season and year. Students could consider whether there are changes in land use that occur with altitude, from below ground level to five or fifty storeys above? Are there differences in street colour and width? What evidence is there of architectural change and heritage, if any? Are there a number of examples of different places within a city in the Developed World, like Sydney, that can be used to illustrate culture of place?

It is my hope that this article has provided a framework around which you and your students can consider those elements that constitute culture of place in relation to their case study of a large city in the developed world.

References

http://hsc.csu.edu.au/geography/urban/urban/4370/sydney_culture.htm site accessed 23.1.13

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Joseph (Sandy) de Botton

E: debottions@knox.nsw.edu.au

*Below: New-York Marathon: Verrazano Bridge
Source: Wikimedia Commons*

