

# You can't get there from here

An essay on the concept of place in policy

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I had my existence. I was there.  
Me in place and the place in me.

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Where can it be found again,  
An elsewhere world, beyond  
Maps and atlases,  
Where all is woven into  
And of itself, like a nest  
Of crosshatched grass blades?

– Seamus Heaney,  
*A Herbal (2010)*

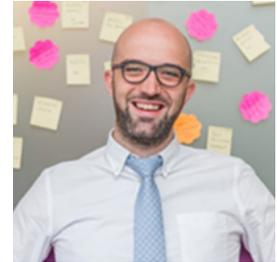
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# Introduction

Renaisi was set up in 1998 to work in, with and for deprived neighbourhoods. Our definition of deprivation and scale of work was very much of its time – an era of significant government investment – and a focus on neighbourhoods drove our work.



While much has changed in the intervening twenty years, not least how we talk about those communities, there remain significant economic and social challenges in many places across the UK. Renaisi's position is that thinking about and intervening in those challenges can still benefit from a geographic lens, but much has been learnt in the past two decades about approaches to place, so we need to consider what it means today.

This essay is an exploration of place, perspective, geography and change. It starts by highlighting the fundamental challenge of thinking about place in policy making and goes on to explore three linked challenges. It considers how the concept of place could be useful in the future and concludes with a discussion of how to understand the idea of change and where, despite the challenges, we can take the concept in the future.

It is an intentionally conceptual piece of writing, intended to set out the terrain. I hope it will encourage others to want to work with Renaisi on furthering how we use the concept of place to build tools, approaches and forms of practice, which benefit the individuals and communities that most need a different approach to tackling social challenges.

***Throughout, the essay poses questions that will influence Renaisi's work in the coming months and years. I invite you to get in touch if you would like to explore any of these lines of enquiry with us.***

**John Hitchin,  
CEO Renaisi**



***This essay is an exploration of change, of geography and of perspective, and considers how the concept of place can be useful in the future.***



# Perspectives of place: you can't get there from here



The inherent challenge of place in policy is that it is always invented. We are never talking about real terrains, but about boundaries of different scales. Lives and activities unfold regardless of whether a boundary exists. Place is created, which means it can be contested.

There are, broadly, three fundamentally different perspectives of place, which cannot be reconciled (as well as a plurality of views within each type):

## 1. Community

There is place as seen by the people who live within it and experience what happens there.

## 2. Services

There is place as seen by the people who are delivering a structured service there – whether a business, the public sector, or the voluntary sector.

## 3. Investors

There is place as seen by those with money and who want to change things, such as government or philanthropists.

Each of these perspectives on place is distinct and based on different experiences and realities. They draw on different conceptions of problem-solving and of the causes of our current social and community situation – are they, for example, sociological in nature, or psychological?

These perspectives all exist within a geography, and they share physical, emotional and structural landmarks, but the ideas are different. These ideas can work with each other but are not one interconnected system. They are within the same geography, but they are different places that you cannot move neatly between: you can't get there from here.

The great truth of so much community-led and place-based work is to appreciate the importance of competing perspectives in communities, and the realities of power that it exposes – this power is often stacked against the community perspective. But focussing only on the place-based, community view does not embrace the opportunities of other perspectives and does not resolve the challenges of place that exist across these perspectives. It is important to think about place-informed policy just as much as place-based policy, supporting actors like national charities to work well with the concept of place, and in partnership with community-led work, whether they see themselves as based within it or not.



**Question 1:** How can non-geographically bounded service providers work in a place-informed way to deliver quality work for the people they serve?

# The challenges of place



## Challenge one: feelings and identity

When looking at place in policy, it is typical to start by defining the parameters: how big? Where's the boundary? What's the point of describing it?

These are important questions, but instead, let's start by stripping away the interesting and knotty questions of place, connection, and local identity, and look squarely at a person.

The point of intervening in a place, whether through government policy, for philanthropic reasons, or through community effort, is broadly to shape or correct something; on occasion it is to try and benefit from an opportunity. This means most interventions are seeking to prevent or respond to some kind of problem. That problem is experienced by people, and that experience triggers a feeling in those people, as individuals, small or even large groups.

For an individual that feeling could be as significant and immediate as their experience of drug dependency or violence; it could be a life-stage experience such as loneliness after childbirth or losing a job; or it could be a slower, developing feeling of disconnection as the world changes around them. For groups of people the feelings might be in response to anti-social behaviour, a local company closing down and causing job losses, or a proposed regeneration scheme with potential for local opportunities.

Of course, feelings are not the whole story, and nor should they be the direct target of any intervention but they cannot be ignored. Feelings are a key part of how we function and how we deal with being alive: they are central to our understanding of self.

That selfhood is not a simple expression of lived experiences. The interplay of our biology, reasoning and personal narrative is always developing and changing. That sense of self plays a part in interactions with other people and the world around us; more experience, more reaction, more response. We are both innate and evolving.

The movement from feelings to interacting with the world around us highlights the role that external factors, such as poverty and disadvantage, can play. This begs questions like do we have the resource and ability to respond, manage and get what we want from our lives? And what is shaping our developing narrative? For many, those factors might be preventing them from having the space and capacity to consider what they want from their life. Renaisi's view is that there are three issues that matter for the individual when thinking about interventions:

1. Do they have the resources (financial, emotional, and social) to consider and make the choices that they want to in their lives?
2. Do they have the capabilities (personal and structural) to access public, voluntary and private services?
3. And do they have a network of support and friendship to give them a sense of developing self, of connection, and of fulfilment?

Place matters to accessing things we need or desire, such as employment, services, fun, and to relationships, because they are so often experienced in a named place. 'Where are the jobs around here? Are the local services any good? Can I get on with my neighbours?' This is because place

can be a lens to explore an individual's connections to almost anything beyond their self, it is often the manifestation of problems or opportunities. It can be where individuals work towards and achieve their aspirations, in cooperation with others. But the place itself is not the objective. The objective of thinking about place is to help more people understand what they

want from their lives, and to enable them to achieve it.

The first problem of place, therefore, is that it risks defining people and their inner lives by the features of a geographic area. Geography is necessary, but not sufficient, to support what matters most to us.



**Question 2:** *In what ways does the concept of place help (or hinder) people to clarify, understand and access the life that they want?*

## Challenge two: migration, gentrification, deracination

For most people, a place is a temporary experience. It might be somewhere you live for a six-month rental period; or, you might be there for 40 years as you grow old with family and friends. Very rarely do people spend their whole lives in one place. Even when they do, others are constantly moving around them, re-defining the place.

Renaissi grew up delivering place-based regeneration programmes, with large government investments. We often raised the concern that many of the people who had benefitted from those place-based programmes went on to leave that place – you get a job, you have more options, and you get out.

Towards the end of the twenty-year period of government investment in deprived neighbourhoods through dedicated programmes, a research study was produced on the functional roles of these neighbourhoods.<sup>1</sup> It showed that places can be understood in terms of where people are moving from before living there, and moving to after living there. If they are

moving from a less deprived place and on to a more deprived place, then the place is gentrifying (the people who are moving are experiencing the opposite). If they are moving from more deprived, and on to less deprived, then the place is an escalator out of disadvantage for those people.

That report provided an empirical basis for understanding neighbourhoods – one defined by movement – and I fear both its methodology and its focus on movement have been underused in the years since. This has been the case because the people who live in such neighbourhoods do not always experience them in such a functional and dynamic way, and much policy has focussed on the experiences that arise in response to movement.

Considering movement in a different way requires us to develop better approaches to communicating our 'self'. Everybody's story is one of movement, of change, and of loss. Viewed through a lens of movement, local places can be a challenging and rewarding way to bring the stories of

<sup>1</sup> Robson, B. Lymperopoulou, K. and Rae, A., 'A typology of the functional roles of deprived neighbourhoods', (2009). <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120920021229/> <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/1152966.pdf>

different people together. Those stories exist whether we think about policy and intervention in reference to place, or not. The value of place, therefore, is that it can be a trusting, responsive and salient way to bring together experiences of change and of identity. It can help us develop our self and change our place in cooperation with others. Done badly, it can be a way to jam different values together and create a site for conflict and division.

Again, what matters is not the place itself, but whether it is a place that enables understanding, acceptance and trust between the people inhabiting and using it, and whether it enables them to move. I believe that we should focus on the function of a place, the stories that people

within it bring together, and the techniques of cooperation that they develop through those stories.<sup>2</sup> Place can give structure to the process of working on our changing sense of self, and how that relates to others, accepting that our dialogue with ourselves and others must be continual. Unfortunately, it is all too often a way to highlight fixed but different values rather than inclusion.

Places are a receptacle for people, but the second problem of place is that it can encourage us to forget that it is a highly porous and uncertain receptacle. People and places are shaped by movement and are successful when they can move well and re-work relationships.



**Question 3:** How can concepts of self and identity be used to build practical approaches for living together in diverse places, expanding on the challenges of this essay?

## Challenge three: nests, overlaps and edges

Is place our street, our neighbourhood, our city, or our region? Does it matter?

Once you draw a boundary, you both leave something out and create a new space with its own dimensions – a space with a centre and a periphery. We position ourselves at the centre of our world, and so place can create a connection – “there is a boundary around me and the people I know” – but also a disconnection – “I am a long way from the middle of that place”, or, “I feel like I’m caught between two places.” In urban planning, there has traditionally been much interest in the creativity of edges and left-over places, and whilst these boundaries are all invented, the implications can be harshly felt.

In a discussion about the boundary that was drawn for a neighbourhood renewal

programme in the 2000s, and how a strange kink in the boundary left out part of an estate, it was said that the local authority had done this to ensure that a particularly difficult individual wouldn’t be inside the boundary. There was no evidence for this, but an ongoing battle ensued about why the boundary was drawn where it was, and why a specific building was not included in this newly defined place.

Boundaries can be about power. A stated interest in one place means a lack of interest in another. If you’re interested in using place in policy or funding, why do you spend your money in one place and not a neighbouring place? It can be a way to target resource, to pilot an intervention, or to create the solution a specific community needs – but it is always

<sup>2</sup> Sennett, R. Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation. (London, 2012).

a choice. Whilst this is most evident in top-down approaches, it also applies to community-led change – where is the boundary of your neighbourhood, and who is working on change?

Place can also be about power when we're talking to each other. We have different places in mind, depending on the question we're asking and how we ask it. The answer is driven by the quality of the question, but also the assumptions made on both sides. In certain circumstances, for example, "where are you from?" is a loaded question, evoking prejudices and a whole variety of differently perceived places.

Our lives play out across so many invented places, overlapping, nesting and contradicting. Are we able to communicate them well, and not hold any one too rigidly, so that they extend opportunities for those who live and work in them?

The third problem of place is that it is only one way to understand geography. A place, whatever the scale, is never isolated, is never neutral, and is always imagined. Once programmes, interventions and governance are created, it can be easy to forget that the map is not the terrain.



**Question 4:** *How do concepts of power and trust connect across different perceptions of place in the same geography and different organisations, and how can these be navigated and understood?*

# Understanding and knowing place, systems and change



The challenges highlighted in this essay are based on the experience of working in and across places – typically deprived neighbourhoods, but also other scales of place.

They are challenges that drive misconceptions about what place-based policy or working should and could be, and what it can achieve. They are at the heart of why interventions don't always work. This has implications for how to think about knowing place, and how to understand or value change.

The above arguments lead to the view that there is huge potential benefit in thinking about places in a more ecological and systemic way, as the advantage of place in policy and delivery is that it can unearth ideas, perspectives and ways of working that would be missed in linear or siloed structures. This is true, but we also shouldn't fetishise a whole-system approach or over-egg how complex social problems are. It can lead to too great a focus on understanding the whole, and not enough on action or the agency of the individual. Ecologically derived knowledge

can sit alongside systematic learning and learning from controlled evaluation.

In other words, knowledge in understanding change in places is not binary, with 'good' knowledge being prioritised over 'bad'. There is value in thinking within a bounded rationality of what we do know, and working with an intentional framework.<sup>3</sup> Yes, frameworks are imperfect, and the map is never the terrain. But that doesn't mean we don't need maps.

If we can't get there from here, because our there and our here are always different and if everybody who wants to 'improve' places is coming from their own place, with a different idea of what improvement means, then it is tempting to ignore place as a helpful concept in policy. I believe this would be a mistake.



**Question 5:** *How do organisations and funders make decisions that are informed by a rich understanding of place, and support outcomes wider than their own?*

<sup>3</sup> Gigerenzer, G. and Selten, R., (eds.), Bounded Rationality: The Adaptive Toolbox (Boston, 2012).

# Conclusion

The British Academy defines place-based policy as, “aligning the design and resourcing of policy at the most appropriate scale of place, in order to develop meaningful solutions, which improve people’s lives.”<sup>4</sup>

This definition is clear and helpful, but a focus on the ‘based’ element could minimise our appreciation of the role of place. At Renaisi, while some of our work is place-based we aim to be place-informed, which is to understand the experiences and perspectives of all the stakeholders within a place.

Being always place-based suggests a primacy of place over the individual, and brings a rigidity to the concept of place that just doesn’t exist. Individual and place are, instead, fluid and inter-dependent.

Returning to the words of Seamus Heaney quoted at the start of this essay, I believe that the beauty of place is that it is an imagined and contested thing. It can capture, hold and develop our imagination of self, of cooperation, of relationships, of movement, of change, and of the world we want to champion.

Place can be a powerful receptacle for shared and imagined endeavours, our current lives, and our energies. It can free us from bureaucratic structures that all too often stifle debates around change and become focussed on essentialising people and place. We must not lose the poetry and politics of place-informed change in our attempt to rigidly define places, or build bureaucracy around them.

For all the challenges and risks, place is worth using. But, as is so often the case in the social sector, we need to be better at defining our terms. This essay is an attempt to define place a little more clearly, in response to the experience of working in and with them. Only by being clear about what we mean when we say, ‘place’, can we begin to use the power of the term to create more substantial and meaningful change.



**Question 6:** *What does good place-informed policy look like, and what can it learn from place-based work?*



*Place can be a powerful receptacle for shared and imagined endeavours, our current lives, and our energies.*



<sup>4</sup> British Academy, Where We Live Now, (2015) <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/where-we-live-now>

# Lines of enquiry

Place, as a concept, has significant power to improve policy interventions but it is only useful if boundaries do more than merely group activities. Those of us who want to use place must acknowledge the challenges, and the complex and different relationships between individuals and places.

This essay opens up a range of questions that Renaisi will continue to explore as part of our strategic aim to understand what it takes to improve a place.

These questions cannot be answered neatly, and most certainly not by a single organisation. We invite you to get in touch if you are interested in exploring any of these lines of enquiry.

Q

**Question 1:** *How can non-geographically bounded service providers work in a place-informed way to deliver quality work for the people they serve?*

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# About Renaisi



Renaisi is a 20-year-old social enterprise with a mission to help people and places to thrive.

Operating out of three London offices (Hackney, Haggerston and Lambeth), we do three complementary things:

1. We provide employment and inclusion programmes for people experiencing disadvantage and exclusion.
2. We work with institutions across the UK to help them understand and increase their impact on communities through research, evaluation and learning partnerships.
3. We generate insights and learning from across our work to help us explore the question: what does it take to improve a place?

By combining service delivery and consultancy, we get to work with all of the stakeholders (individuals, services and investors) that can make a place a flourishing community.

This gives Renaisi access to myriad perspectives on place and allows us to share ideas that spark change.

