

Places as language and text

Christian Norberg-Schulz and Paul Ricoeur
inspiring a framework for ethnographic
health research

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The article focuses on the relationship between people and places from the perspective of a participant observer. We use examples of assisting living facilities in the mental health field, and demonstrate how the process of understanding a research setting as language and text, may allow for new perspectives to emerge. Mainly by introducing the Norwegian architect Christian Norberg-Schulz's *phenomenology of place*, and complementing it with the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur's theory of interpretation; we demonstrate how these understandings help us to include the physical environment. Norberg-Schulz describes places by following characteristics: a) The place's basic language, b) The place's material language and c) The history of the place. Inspired by Ricoeur, a place becomes a text which has d) emancipated itself from its origin and e) is living its own life. The discussion relates to how, by taking the material surroundings into account, the researcher becomes able to better understand the way people live. The conclusions show the importance of the role of the researchers' personal experiences and emotions when being present together with the participants in the same physical environment.

Keywords Ethnography, language/ linguistics, Norberg-Schulz, observation, participant, place, Ricoeur, text

WHEN conducting ethnographic research, we have to investigate and understand human beings, the way they act and the way they communicate in different settings. In addition, it is obvious that we have to take into consideration the places themselves, where people are present, because different places influence the way people act and talk. Thus, the living environment and the particular atmosphere of a place become important in the research of care. The setting described in this article is an assisted living facility for people suffering from mental health problems living in a Norwegian municipality. The example used was gained during ongoing fieldwork, but also was inspired by fieldwork in mental health institutions worked out by one of the authors (1–3).

The article focuses on the relationship between people and places from the perspective of a participant observer. By interpreting the buildings, rooms and things (materiality) as language and as text, the connections between people and places might be better understood and new perspectives might be added to the researchers' understandings of what is happening. In other words, when we argue for interpreting places as language and text, we imply that places may be listened to and read in one way or another. When "listening and reading" in this manner to the research area, we argue, that it is possible to get a deeper and better understanding of people's life. The research question is:

What contribution is made to ethnographic health research through the understanding of the materiality of a place as language and text?

In this article, the methodology includes to view a research setting as a place of language and text and that through this perspective a patient's condition might be understood better and with more empathy. We will first introduce the stronger part of this methodology, Christian Norberg-Schulz' *phenomenology of place*, and what he calls "the language of place" (4–8). As a contrast and a discursive counterpart we will present the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur and his work on hermeneutics and human sciences, and his particular focus on the interpretation of texts (9). The discussion will emphasis places as spoken languages and texts and will relate to well-known principles of ethnographic research, such as the non-neutral researcher, the context, degrees of participation and the insider's perspective.

Christian Norberg-Schulz: Phenomenology of places

Christian Norberg-Schulz's (1926–2000) philosophy of architecture is a part of the phenomenological tradition referred to as the phenomenology of places (10) writes:

At the same time, phenomenology appeared to me as a method well suited to penetrate the world of everyday existence, since architecture is in fact at the service of totality, which the term "world life" implies, a totality that eludes scientific procedures (p. 15).

Norberg-Schulz (10) understands architecture as the physical setting in which social life takes place. A place, however, is not only a part of a geographical space in which something is located. People live in places, and in the encounter between people and the physical structure, life takes place.

What, then, is a place? From Norberg-Schulz's point of view, place and life are strongly connected. If we know where we are, we know who we are. When we tell people where we live, we simultaneously tell them more about ourselves. If the place has long-term, historical traditions, it will thus connect us to our ancestors. We will be rooted to the place and feel at home. A real place, in the words of Norberg-Schulz, will gratify the need of dwelling (5, 10). This has to do with both a sense of security and inspiration to development. Therefore, a place is an expression of identity and meaning. One might wonder why Norberg-Schulz does not use the word "space" instead of "place". He writes nothing about his word choice, but we understand his statements as in line of lived space, where humans inscribe themselves in space by activities and by cultural and social functions.

The language of architecture, as Norberg-Schulz (5) claims, is both a "basic language" and a "material language". The first one is universal and applies to everyone; it is an embodied, strong and stable language. Despite its strength, it is difficult to describe or to depict because it is not concrete. This language is about the *genius loci*, the spirit of the place, which represent a

kind of atmosphere making us feel we are present. To be "present", has to do with identification and perhaps a state of receptivity and connectedness to the living surroundings.

The second language is the material one. The appearance tells us what kind of building it is: Is it a private house or an assisting living facility? The material language of a place consists not only of buildings. The location, the interior, the furniture and other things are all "speaking" as well. When we enter these kinds of buildings, the spaces within confirm our expectations. This second language can be more easily reflected verbally and with photos because it is concrete. Obviously, the material language can change if one tears down walls or constructs new ones, buys new furniture or paintings. Therefore, places are not an ever-present, stable entity. In the words of Norberg-Schulz (5): "Constancy and change are characteristics of a place." (p. 79).

When one feels "at home", both these languages are in harmony with the verbal language the residents speak. Relations between these languages mean a good atmosphere and health (*genius loci*). When one enters an assisted living facility where these languages come together in harmony, it is the resulting atmosphere that will make resident and staff to feel at home. Some of the materiality will talk to the resident; he will know where he is and who he is. The same applies to the staff: other kinds of materiality will speak to them. Now let us complement this view with Paul Ricoeur's position.

Paul Ricoeur: What is a text?

Paul Ricoeur (1939–2005) was rooted in the French phenomenological tradition and called his position hermeneutic phenomenology. He claims that “a text is any discourse fixed by writing” (9, p. 145), which means “whether it is graphics or recording, is inscription of speech – an inscription which, thanks to the subsisting character of the engraving, guarantees the persistence of speech.” (9, p. 145). Fixation in written text replaces the speech in the same way as reading is related to text. One of Ricoeur’s important points is the impossibility to claim that to read is to be in dialogue with the author through her work. When the text replaces the speech, he claims there is no longer a sender. Thus, the text replaces the language and emancipates itself. The text preserves thinking, which becomes available to the individual and collective memory. A change from oral language to graphic signs takes place. This radically transforms the relation between language and the world, and between language and different subjective understandings.

Ricoeur’s referential functions about addressing oneself to another speaker are about saying something about something else. It is about the referent of the speech. The sentences ought to speak the truth. Every utterance is connected to the world. What happens when the text replaces speech? First, it disconnects the movement of the reference from the presentation. Thus, we might say that the dialogue is separated from the text. Lastly, the task of the

reading is to fulfill the reference. As the reader has no reference; the text will have no context. It will be ‘in the air’ and outside the world. The specific text is free to enter into relations with other texts.

Contrary to Norberg-Schulz, Ricoeur asserts that the concept of text claims a renewal of the concept of explanation and interpretation. Text interpretation brings objectification, and this is important to Ricoeur. He calls it the ‘*productivity of distance*’ or ‘*critical distance*’ which leads to various nuances. While reading, we might, on the one hand, be in the tension of the text; the text is outside the world and emancipated from the author. Thus, the text has an inner life, and we explain it on the basis of structure and internal relations. This explanatory model is the semiotic one. On the other hand, we can lift the suspense from the text and fulfill the text in speech. The written text demands a reader. Reading is possible because the text is not closed in itself but open toward something else. To read is to link a new discourse together with the discourse in the text. In this manner, we interpret the text. The interpretation is fulfilled in the self-interpretation of a subject who will achieve a better self-understanding. Ricoeur (9) calls this “to struggle against cultural distance”, which implies a fusion of textual interpretation with self-interpretation.

The text is emancipated from the speech itself, but the main act to which the text refers is preserved. The text seeks to place us in its meaning. The

meaning of the action occurs in the dialogue between the reader and the text.

In Ricoeur's hermeneutical arch, explanation and understanding are integrated as a total understanding from reading, as a recapturing of meaning. Thus, to explain is to reveal the structure of the text; to interpret is to place oneself in the meaning of the text.

We have to claim that Norberg-Schulz does not deal with written texts and Ricoeur does not handle places. At the same time, when bringing them together, they draw different insight and bring something new into the understanding of ethnographic research.

Places, language, text and being a participant researcher

Will the participant researcher better understand the situation of people living in assisted living facilities when including the material surroundings? To understand places as language and text is in many ways out of touch with real, everyday experience. Apparently this has nothing to do with ethnographic research. Most of us think of language as something one understands or does not understand, whether you have learned it from birth or later on in school or by experience. Additionally, verbal language has sounds, tone and pitch. Written text is about letters and signs, words and sentences. Places are something totally different, comprising things such as trees and flowers, buildings, rooms and objects. Seemingly the latter have nothing to do with language and text. Language is some-

thing that is understood because one can listen but also because you know the code. The text is something you can grasp because you have cultural knowledge and you can read. Additionally, the text is printer's ink on paper or a digital display on a screen— it is unidimensional. The material place and the surroundings have colors, sounds, smells and shapes – it has depth.

We may interpret the two philosophers differently when it comes to emphasizing text; Norberg-Schulz seeks to understand the relations between people and materiality as language; Ricoeur seeks to understand people's way of acting as text. Several researchers have made use of Ricoeur's hermeneutics in the context of health science (11–16). Moreover, when places are allocated language, we will sense the contours of a relationship between places and texts. As shown, Norberg-Schulz verbalizes places; he attributes to them basic and material language. Martinsen (17) writes about rooms which are singing and rooms which are screaming, while Andersson (18) addresses how people are able to be attentive to the language of objects and consequently are able to enter into a dialogue with the objects. If we continue to think of language and text as having something in common, then Ricoeur has important advice for the field worker when she is present in the field e.g. together with people in assisted living facilities. Norberg-Schulz emphasizes the importance of listening to the language of the place.

The non-neutral researcher

Let us imagine that ethnographic researchers are investigating how people with mental health problems live their daily lives in society. The area is an assisted living facility. As a participant observer we meet different people in different homes. Some of the houses have a welcoming atmosphere; one likes the residents and the interior, and one feels relaxed. In other houses, one might have a very different experience. Will the researcher's own experience of being in the houses teach us something about the daily life of people with mental health problems?

Agar (19) and Hammersley and Atkinson (20) describe the researcher as a non-neutral person who has to be conscious of her social norms and values. Thus, a researcher is not objective, but uses her personal experiences when interpreting a place. As a subject, the researcher is present, and the place might easily be described from the researcher's subjective point of view. To avoid this, the researcher has to put her own personal values and opinions aside and aim to meet the research area openly and without bias (20). With an unbiased approach, one allows the place to speak to you.

Norberg-Schulz (5) states that places are subjected to emotional identification. Thus, as a researcher, one should *not* put aside personal experiences but rather use one's feelings to better understand the life in the assisted living facility. Norberg-Schulz claims that places are something permanent—something given – and in this respect,

he is referring to the way in which basic language constitutes a kind of universal atmosphere. If the researcher feels at home in assisted living, one might consequently interpret the informants to feel the same. The almost physical emotions experienced when visiting a place become a kind of emphatic identification of oneself with the person living in the house. You cannot photograph the atmosphere; consequently, you have to listen to the language of the place. The basic language is understandable if the researchers opens up and use all senses. The next step will be to write down as precisely as possible your emotional state, your thoughts and impressions. Such descriptions might be subjective and poetic and help one to understand the daily life in the assisted living facility.

Norberg-Schulz's other language is the material one. It is easier to describe because it is concrete. One can write down how many rooms the informant has at his disposal, the size of the rooms, what colors they have etc. Obviously, this description will be more neutral than the first. It will be precise and one can supplement and expand the description with photos. At the same time the material surroundings also represent a changing life. The researcher might observe traces from an earlier wall, a photo of an older relative or a brand new television. Something has disappeared and something new has happened. Being inside the assisted living facility, the researcher, by her very presence, also contributes to change for the person living there. She is in the

room looking at pictures, commenting on the colors and chatting with the resident. Thus, the researcher's earlier experiences from different historical, cultural and human contexts influence the relationship between the informant and the participant-observer. What one might call a non-neutral and personal attitude occurs in the relationship between the researcher, the person living in the house and the material surroundings. There is an ongoing, continual dialogue between the language of a place and the people present, Norberg-Schulz claims. In addition to the more neutral descriptions of the material language, the researcher has to describe the situations and dialogues and how she relates to the different rooms, to what occurs in the dialogue, and to whether she personally is comfortable with the interior decoration or not. We can see that Norberg-Schulz treats places as unchangeable and changeable at the same time, but he emphasises the basic language as the stronger one. Consequently, researchers have to be aware of their influence on the atmosphere and the person living in the house and carefully write field notes where she becomes a part of the observations.

With the help of Ricoeur's (9) theory, we might say that the interpretation of the person living in an assisted living facility involves the researcher as a "reader of life". The daily life lived within a place is seen as a kind of text that the researcher has to read. A text consists of words becoming sentences, sentences becoming stories, like a place consisting of a picture, a scent or a flower pot as

part of a decorated room becoming a home that may also tell us a story. When reading the room, the researcher will read it related to her own personal experiences, from her own life's perspective. If she has a close relative in an equivalent assisted living facility, the researcher's subjective and personal understanding will influence the research. This is what Ricoeur calls the fusion of text, interpretation and self-interpretation and maybe also of prejudice. The lives of the people in the assisted living facility move throughout its structure and become transformed into a "text" that the researcher can learn to understand, from her personal perspective. There are potentially as many different perspectives of understanding and descriptions of the setting as there are researchers. When the researcher reads life, she makes the text a part of herself. The text as subject implies that other researchers would arrive at different understandings. The researcher's presence is marked in the house by who she is, where she is and her personal knowledge, in the same way as Norberg-Schulz claims that material language changes depending on the researcher's different experiences. To ensure valid results, the researcher has to openly describe the research process, thereby enabling other researchers to reconceptualize what occurred.

The context

Agar (19) claims that when describing interrelations between people, one will always find "A dash of history, something about the various environments –

physical, biological and social – and some details on the things the group does and the beliefs they hold.” (p. 1). It is necessary for the researcher to relate to the different contexts in which people are present. To capture the total overview, we have to see a situation as interconnected with something else. Agar (19) continues, saying that the researcher, in order to succeed, has to be curious about how people are living inside these contexts.

Norberg-Schulz comes to a similar conclusion. When different people are connected, they are also connected to their ancestors and to their surroundings. Thus, biological and material life forms a totality. Even after a place has changed, the history will be seen in materiality and in people’s way of acting. Thus, materiality refers to past and present. This implies that the one who was responsible for planning a building for a specific purpose – the contracting builder –, and the person who designs the building – the architect – will influence the place even long after the building is inhabited. For instance, if a place was originally built as an office building and later transformed into an assisted living facility, ideas, discussions and thought patterns from the first period might influence present life in the converted building (1). Moreover, the researchers also have to investigate and present the origin of a place, and also become familiar with the architectural drawings and old photos to get a sense of the building’s history.

Ricoeur might disagree. Contracting builders and architects can be com-

pared here with the author of a text. When thought is transformed into written text, it starts living a life of its own, meaning that the place is no longer connected to its history and is free to emerge on its own terms. Accordingly, we might say that houses, after being built and turned over to their users, will live their own lives, independent from the people who contributed to their design and construction. On the contrary, for Norberg-Schulz, this means a place disconnected from its history and where the past is no longer present in the place, and in the way people are talking and acting. It involves a movement from one context to another. Thus, the researcher has to be present here and now and concentrate on peoples’ actions in different rooms and their relationship to the interior and to each other at the time of observation. She must explain people’s actions in different rooms here and now, and not take the history of the place into account. The researcher becomes the reader who reads the present text or the place influenced by the contemporary time of which the researcher is a part.

The researcher has to be interested in people’s habits related to certain contexts, Agar (19) states, and according to Ricoeur, surroundings are a means by which to describe the way people act. In order to understand a place, in Ricoeur’s understanding of a text, one has to emancipate oneself from the history, from what might be “embedded in the walls”. We have to abandon the architect and the builder

in the same manner as Ricoeur has abandoned the author and the original context of the text. In the new context, the researcher is no longer interested in the history of the place. Both Agar and the architect Norberg-Schulz disagree on this abandonment.

Degrees of participation

Ethnographic researchers claim the need to eliminate the differences between *us* and *them*, seeking reciprocal empathy (19,20). Through participant observation, the aim is to understand ways of living which are not the researcher's own. The intention is to let the surroundings inform you, being present with all your senses; capturing the insider's perspective and then distancing oneself without losing the connection. In most ethnographic studies, there is a need to establish a balance between participation and observation.

Norberg-Schulz (21) asserts that we are only able to understand a place if we understand the distinctive character of that place; the atmosphere. If we as researchers are sensitive towards the place and listen to the atmosphere, the place will reveal "itself".

We become 'place empathizers' and the division between the people living in the place and the people visiting it, become blurred. Through participant observation the researcher becomes a part of the place and is able to better understand the way of life of people with mental health problems. Thus the differences between her and them are diminished. Through participation and dialogue with people and materiality, it

becomes possible to obtain the information upon which further knowledge depends.

In terms of basic language, we might say that, through "talking to everybody", it exceeds individual experiences. At the same time, Norberg-Schulz claims that experience is the connection between the basic language and the material language which constitute the particular atmosphere. He connects the close emotionality related to a place to the basic language, and these two together interplay with the material language. The approach of Norberg-Schulz encourages the researcher to participate as much as possible in all kinds of activities of daily life, meaning that one has to be present during daytime, evenings and nights. One also has to accompany the informants to other places they visit, e.g. day care centers, to get the full impression of the way they are living their daily life.

Ricoeur is concerned with both connectedness and distance to the text and works with this tension between the two all the time. When he is inside the structure of the text, he is close, approaching the text from the inside and investigating the sentences and genre, just as we, as researchers in an assisted living facility, have to closely investigate life in the building, the words the residents use in the different rooms, the shape and color of the living room and so on. This connectivity is important for the researcher to maintain, while at the same time she has to keep progressing. Knowledge development has to do with critical distance. Ricoeur calls it

'productivity of distance' or *'critical distance'*. It is about unmasking and thereby making clear that we belong to the world of today. Distancing ourselves from the situation allows us to see more clearly and to better understand the world. This dual perspective reconciles the explanation and the understanding in what Ricoeur calls the hermeneutic arch.

The arch stretches between the structure of the text and the personal experiences of the reader. This interpretation surmounts the cultural distance. When the researcher shifts between connectedness and distance, the materialized place and the people present will start living their own life as new text, transformed to represent more universal knowledge about places. This transformation might suggest new ideas to policy makers on how to build better assisted living facilities.

The insider's perspective

In our example, ethnographic research made it possible to describe people's lived world from the insider's perspective. The idea is to study social life as directly as possible. In order to be able to grasp this perspective, it is essential to be open and let the field do the teaching, while allowing for hypotheses and issues to emerge from this process rather than begin with presuppositions and biases. Therefore, the research questions should rise from the place itself (19, 20).

Norberg-Schulz (4,5) shows that it is necessary to listen to the language of a place in order to become familiar with the place. As a researcher, one is inside

the building together with the residents and listening to the place. This openness makes a connection possible. Being inside the same building might help the researcher to understand the insider's perspective. We need to be present in different rooms and their interiors together with the people being observed. To gain access to the residents' own experience of their homes you have to try to be a part of their life by getting them to know, learn how they use the place, how they move around, what they talk about in different rooms etc. By so doing, we will get the opportunity to understand the totality of the place; we will be in touch with the basic language and will feel the atmosphere. Besides this, we will recognize the material language and discover the details. This totality will put us into a special kind of mood. This might have something to do with the field's own hypothesis, e.g. that assisted living isolates the people living there from the world outside. But are we sure the researcher's presence is a way to understand people living in assisted facilities as isolated? If Norberg-Schulz is right, all places have a particular atmosphere that speaks to everybody, regardless of the details. This means that what affects me, also affects others and might represent the insider's perspective. So if the researcher feels distanced from the outside world, one might presume the same thing to be true of the people living there.

Contrary to Norberg-Schulz, Ricoeur makes the text meaningful to the reader. The text is a text on its own. He calls this explaining and interpreting a

text. When connecting these concepts, we will be unable to capture the subjective message; instead, we will explain by closely watching the structure at the same time as we keep in mind the critical distance. Thus, we will notice the contradictions and the variations, and we will objectify the text. Ricoeur might say that if the researcher approaches the place as a text, the place's own hypothesis is no longer important because the place will have a life on its own for the researcher.

Using Norberg-Schulz's term "the material language" is perhaps what Ricoeur emphasizes, because we may easily compare material language with the structure of a text. At the same time Ricoeur goes further in his explanation. The structure of the text has to be fulfilled as lived and current communication.

Both philosophers emphasize the insider's perspective in different ways. Norberg-Schulz will agree with the need to become familiar with the places' own current problems, just as the theory of ethnographic research also requires. This is about the subjectivity of places. On the other hand, Ricoeur objectifies places, and the researcher is responsible for the research questions; e.g. about how people with mental health problems live their daily lives in an assisting living facility and in society.

Conclusion

In this article we have demonstrated how an understanding of the materiality of a place as language and text can provide new perspectives for ethnographic health research. In this process,

the researcher becomes aware of the research setting as a field in which people are viewed as being connected to their physical environment. Norberg-Schulz's theory helps us take on the perspective of the informants because what he characterizes as the "universal language" of a place applies to everybody. As researchers, we are like everybody else, meaning that we do not relinquish our own point of view but instead take our personal experiences into account, including our own emotions, in the transcriptions and interpretations of the text. "The basic language" of Norberg-Schulz has something in common with Ricoeur's rules for text interpretation, or understanding of peoples' actions as a text, meaning we have to include the material details of a place to be able to understand peoples' actions. Here photography might be of great importance (2). While Norberg-Schulz sees the relevance of history, Ricoeur claims a kind of contextual free place. The former tells the researcher to include history in the interpretations in order to become able to understand the daily life of today, while the latter is the spokesman for emancipation from history. We argue in favor of including the history of the place, because materiality will speak even if we try not to listen. The task of the ethnographic researcher is somewhat similar to the detective work of Sherlock Holmes. One has to feel the atmosphere in the house, and one has to search for material details in order to construct a full picture, and of course one has to be in dialogue with the participants.

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