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**Place-making at work: the role of rhythm in the production of 'thick' places**

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**Introduction**

Recently, a friend and colleague from another institution came to give a talk at the University of Kent where I work. The context was our regular departmental seminar series which forms an important part of the rhythm of a term-time week for many academic staff and postgraduate students. We had a little time to spare so I decided to show him around. The School is based in a relatively new building configured so that workspaces – from individual offices to open plan suites – are interconnected via social areas and meeting rooms. Whatever the internal spatial politics, it looks good and he was duly impressed. I felt a keen sense of belonging as I introduced him to other colleagues and led the way through the building (my key card with out of hours access making itself felt in my pocket). The thing is though, I don’t actually have a permanent office on this site. There is a separate, smaller campus where my books and papers sit behind a locked door with my name on it. Perhaps this is why I notice when I feel such a territorial claim. My friend – I’ll call him Michael – is not long retired. He is experiencing some of the unease of such a transition and he too is sensitive to the connections of work, place and belonging. A colleague asks him how retirement is going in a tone that anticipates a positive response. ‘I feel disembedded!’ comes his reply (Michael is well known for his work on social, political and economic ties). It’s a powerful statement about work, time and place across the institutional, normative, regulatory, affective and material dimensions of place and it helps me figure out what I want to say here.

This chapter is concerned with place-making at work, with particular attention to the role of rhythm. First, I want to say something about *how* certain workspaces come into being as places; and second, I want to comment on *what* kinds of workplaces are produced. To do this, I make use of French philosopher, sociologist, and urban scholar, Henri Lefebvre’s (2004) ideas of rhythm and rhythmanalysis as a conceptual and methodological means for tracing how work and workplaces take shape in space and time. In addition, the discussion draws on philosopher, Edward Casey’s (2001) formulation of places as ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ to think about the character of work places brought about by the ‘ensemble of rhythms’ that permeate them (Edensor, 2010b: 69). The chapter draws on empirical material to explore processes of place-making at/through work if temporality is brought to the fore. Billingsgate fish market, where I conducted an audio-visual ethnography (Lyon 2016), is a useful setting for thinking about interconnections of work, place and rhythm and a point of departure to question and imagine their reach beyond the marketplace itself.

**Work, place and the ‘thickness’ of rhythm**

The concept of place is of course central to geography (Cresswell, 2004; Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 1994; Tuan, 1977), with a strong emphasis on the production of urban space. In sociology (the disciplinary ‘place’ I write from), if the language of place and place-making has long been present across different fields, place – and space – has largely been treated as a container for social life or a backdrop to concerns about social divisions and power relations of class, gender and race. In the sociology of work in particular, a ‘spatial turn’ has led to the recognition of interconnections in working lives at a global macro scale (Herod et al 2007, Ward 2007). At a more micro-level, ethnographies of work and communities often convey a rich sense of place and recognise the spatial (and temporal) interconnections of different spheres of life (Orr, 1996; Westwood, 1984). However, while place permeates such accounts, it doesn’t necessarily figure as an explicit analytical concept (Halford, 2004, 2008). In organisation and critical management studies, analyses of the everyday practices of place-making have been more prominent. Studies have documented architectural, interactional, sensory and affective dimensions of organisational life which analyse power, control, meaning and the everyday lived experience of organisational life (e.g. Best and Hindmarsh, 2019; Gherardi, 2018; Riach and Warren, 2015).

This chapter explores processes of place-making at work with particular attention to rhythm. Rhythm has long informed norms, practices and understandings of work (Roy, 1959). The development of clock-time as a form of work-discipline was central to the industrial revolution (Thompson 1967), as were time and motion studies as a means of regulation of workers’ bodies in the factory system in the early twentieth century. In the twenty-first century, the intensification of labour is accompanied by new (and some not-so-new) forms of ‘calibration’ (Sharma, 2014) of workers’ bodies in time and space. In the world of finance for instance, traders must align themselves to global patterns of exchange and keep watch over the operation of their deals and the algorithms that underlie them (Borch et al, 2015; Snyder, 2016). In the platform or gig economies, despite discretion over the place of work (most often the home), workers must work long hours and make themselves available at unsocial times or for irregular hours to meet the needs of clients in different time zones (Wood et al, 2019). These forms of work have implications for everyday rhythms of living as well as for any sense of embeddedness in place – material or digital - through work.

My starting point for working with rhythm is Henri Lefebvre’s (2004) *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, published in English in 2004. Rhythmanalysis has been taken up in geography and used in particular to study mobility and place (Edensor 2010a; Stratford 2015). It shows how places are made: through mobile flows of capital, people, objects, energy or matter ‘which course through and around them’. It ‘emphasizes the dynamic and processual qualities of place’ identifying the ‘rhythms through which spatial order is sustained’. Places then, are sites in which multiple temporalities come together, in harmony or at odds with one another to produce an ‘ever changing polyrhythmic constellation’ (Edensor 2011: 190-191). Rhythmanalysis has been explicitly used to study work, including the performance of work (Simpson, 2012; Snyder 2016), the procrastinating body’s refusal of work (Potts 2010), the rhythmic ordering of organisational life and the socio-economic relations of work (Borch et al, 2015; Lyon, 2016; Nash, 2018). And there is renewed interest in Lefebvre’s thinking more generally for the study of work and organisations (Chari and Gidwani, 2018; Dale et al, 2018). Since rhythmanalysis always combines a mutual attention to space and time, place – or ‘lived space’ in Lefebvre’s terms – is part of the story from the start. The conceptual repertoire of rhythmanalysis offers a rich and ‘thick’ (in Clifford Geertz’ sense) description of everyday life and a methodological ‘orientation’ (Highmore, 2002: 175) for identifying and analysing particular rhythms, their constellations and their effects (Lyon, 2018). However, where the character of place is the focus of attention – as in this chapter – the discussion might be enhanced bringing other conceptualisations into dialogue with rhythmanalysis.

Edward Casey’s (2001, 2009a, 2009b) discussions of place and characterisations of place as ‘thick’ or ‘thin’ are fruitful here. Thick place refers to places characterised by a ‘greater density of meaning, affect, relations, habits, memories’ (De Backer and Pavoni, 2018: 11). They ‘invite’ absorption and attentiveness’ and ‘a deepening and broadening of the individual’s lived experience of place’ (Casey, 2001: 684). Such resonances are absent in ‘thin’ places, a formulation which has much in common with Marc Augé’s (1995) ‘non-places’. However, this kind of binary opposition is problematic. De Becker and Pavoni (2018) argue that Casey’s distinction between thick and thin rests on the assumption that otherwise inert space is ‘heated up’ by personal experience and activities. This leads to nostalgic views of thick and warm community space contrasted with thinner and colder public spaces. De Backer and Pavoni nevertheless contend that using a notion of thickness with a more phenomenological understanding of the fundamentally embodied character of space is more promising.

Whilst I recognise the dangers of an oversimplified opposition between thick and thin, I am drawn to Casey’s ideas for the scope they offer for thinking about the effects – and affects – of rhythm in the production of place in processual terms. My focus on Billingsgate Market, with its vibrant atmosphere and lively interactions, makes it easy to hold onto a dynamic sense of the ‘unfolding’ and layering of the place and allows me to attend to overlapping processes of the ‘thickening’ and ‘thinning’ of place in accordance with different constellations of rhythm. ‘Thickening’ refers to the affective charge that arises through combinations of materials, bodies, things (not least the fish), interactions and practices – as well as through the application of the regulations, inspections and surveillance in the market place. Conversely, the dilution of these intensities corresponds to a ‘thinning’ of place. Both processes may gather or lose momentum over time or come about suddenly, triggered by the presence of key figures, fish or interactions.

Thick places – following Casey (2001) - are dense places, the result of encounters between bodies and things in time. The character of place can also be discussed in terms of atmosphere (Bohme, 1993; Sumartojo, this volume), and Edensor (2012) has made explicit connections between Casey’s thinking on place and the production of atmopshere. In this chapter, I give prominence instead to the relaitonship between place and rhythm and processes of thickening and thinning in time. At the start of the night before the market gets going, an observer familiar with the rhythms of Billingsgate might have a sense that the place is poised for activity. But at midnight or 1am, the market hall is more or less empty and still, a far cry from the mood that will later take hold here. So what moves it? How does it take shape and become the lively site and workplace that it is widely known for?

I seek to address these questions in several ways. First, I consider the role of memory and rhythm in the consolidation of ‘thick’ space. Second, I discuss the performance of place through the different trajectories of fish, customer, merchants and porters moving in rhythm and their everyday working practices as they do. This allows me to think literally about how work ‘takes place’ andcontributes to place-making in the market. The material presented here is taken from the original ethnographic research I conducted at Billingsgate, primarily in autumn 2012. I visited the market several times a week, arriving between 1 and 4am, and carried out informal and formal interviews and observations with fish merchants, inspectors, salespeople, porters/fish handlers and customers. I spent hours each day wandering around the market hall, sensing the polyrhythmic complexity of the place, interspersed with time trying to trying to make sense of the life of the market and disentangle its elements and configurations, usually from a spot in one of the cafes. In addition, I made a short film of the market with Kevin Reynolds from set-up to close as a means of documenting, perceiving and analysing the rhythms of the market. (See Lyon 2016 for a full discussion of the project and the film.)

**Memory and rhythm in the making of ‘thick’ space**

Billingsgate is the UK’s largest inland fish market and has been located in East London since 1982. It moved there from its former site in the City of London where it had operated for several hundred years. Fresh and some frozen fish and seafood is sold to catering firms, hoteliers, processors and fishmongers as well as to the public (mostly on a Saturday); supermarkets in contrast have no presence at the market, operating through separate supply chains. Billingsgate’s traders are mostly older (over fifty), white, working-class men alongside more recently established south Asian and Indian sellers. It’s a self-contained site of exchange and distribution, tightly defined in time and space in ‘a flow of dispersion-concentration-dispersion’ (Harvey et al, 2002: 205). Fish are legally permitted to leave the market from four o’clock in the morning although trade continues until at least eight.

Many of the vendors are long-serving fish merchants or employees. In our conversations, they often lament the character of the present-day market and the closure and loss of the original site in the City. Talk of the differences between the old market and the new one suggest that the latter is a paler, ‘thinner’ version of the so-called original even though the broad rhythms of market work persist (and despite my direct experience of the current market’s vibrancy and humour which is at odds with claims that the market is not lively). But the story is more complicated. I am told that the new market opens earlier than the old one by a couple of hours, which deepens the temporal dissonance some market workers experience in relation to friends and family, although the old market used to operate six days a week instead of the current five. The new market is no longer strictly wholesale which means it is a less bounded, more porous place leading to an erosion of the insider community that had an exclusive claim to be there. In addition, the old market was reportedly ‘friendlier’ with more scope to enjoy socialising (with the presence of a higher volume of pubs and tea shops). Then again, the new market is described as a ‘light-hearted place’ based on close ties. There are also differences in the material environment. The porters (becoming fish-handlers in an explicit instance of deskilling and loss of status in 2012) use trolleys in the market hall rather than carrying their loads (mostly atop their ‘bobbin’ hats) and casual workers no longer wait ‘under the clock’ each day for work. This changes the rhythms and atmosphere of the market as bodies, wheels, feet and fish negotiate their own paths through the space. Finally, in the new market, the volume of fish is significantly less. It now takes two weeks to move the amount of fish that passed through the market in a single day, reports Jerry who tells me that he started out at Billingsgate in 1952.

These tales weave connections and continuities between places and generations. Despite the felt experience of rupture – or perhaps because of it - the longevity of the market and the rhythms and relationships of former ways of working are transmitted and brought into the new space through these reckonings. In effect, memory ‘thickens’ the sense of place of the new market, contributing to the attachment that current merchants and workers feel. Casey talks about this in terms of ‘place memory’ (2009a). In Tim Cresswell’s words, this refers to ‘the ability of place to make the past come to life in the present and thus contribute to the production and reproduction of social memory’ (2004: 87). So even if the present site is ‘lacking’ in relation to the former market and carries little in the way of objects or sites of memorialisation, its very existence stimulates memory and narration about place, and the everyday work of the market replicates and sustains long-established rhythms.

Enhanced by the living presence of figures in the market with experience of both sites, a sense of place is swiftly transmitted to newcomers through the inculcation of the rhythms of work and belonging. Furthermore, according to workers, Billingsgate is an institution that ‘gets under your skin’ so much so that a number claim to have tried to leave, even experimented with different lines of work, but find themselves drawn back to the market. Place affects them and ‘insinuate[s] itself into the very heart of personal identity’ (Casey, 2001: 684).

I qualified to do something totally different and I’d got a few months to spare, and he said, well you’re not going to sit on your arse for three months, he said you get down to Billingsgate, this is all those years ago in the old market. And in that three months’ period, I was going to be a draftsman, architect and all that with Shell-Mex. The way of life so got under my skin I didn’t want to do anything else. The way of life is unique in Billingsgate Market, yeah, yeah. (Terry Daniels, fish merchant)

In some cases, there is a certain ‘readiness’ on the part of new recruits to ‘take on’ the meaning, practices and rhythms of the market so they too learn to anticipate their attunement to place (Edensor, 2012: 1114). Prior relationships act as ‘thickeners’ (Klocker 2007, in De Backer and Pavoni, 2018: 11), tying place and self together. In other words, thick places quite literally ‘hold the self in place’ (Duff, 2010: 882).

It’s mostly family handed down. Business or friends or people who worked…in that company that would take over the business… when people do pass on or leave, they hand it over or they pay some money for it and they continue the business.’ (market administrator)

Even where there are economic and social ties which underpin these transitions and a sense of belonging that has already been cultivated, starting out can be a mixed experience. Jimmy, a fish merchant’s son, recalls his first day at 15 or 16, coming to work with his Dad and being ‘scared of the live fish, lobsters, crabs and things like that’. He continues: ‘And one, the guy who was working for us at the time picked two great big lobsters up and chased me round the market with them and I was like, I was going mad, I was.’ This suggests a kind of rite of passage to initiate the younger man into the fold rather than a gesture of exclusion. It also points to the specificity of this kind of workplace which involves dealing with live seafood as well as fish securely iced and packed in polystyrene boxes. And although he found the experience ‘really hard’, ‘too much’ and said ‘I’m never going down there again’, literally in the next breath Jimmy goes on to show his affection for and attachment to market culture: ‘It’s good, it’s good, you get used to it. Straightaway you get used to it, silly things, a lot of banter and joking about. But it makes it, it makes a great atmosphere and that’s, that’s what I like’.

This section has demonstrated the importance of memory and narration in contributing to the production of thick place and how rhythm inflects place-making. Even when stories highlight differences in the rhythms of the old and ‘new’ markets, there is a sense is which connections are made between them in the telling as well as in the enactment of similar working practices across time. The next section focusses on how place is performed and produced in everyday embodied practices of work on the move.

**Moving in rhythm: The everyday practice of work and the performance of place**

The market hall at Billingsgate is the central site of display, interaction, movement, negotiation and exchange of the fish market and it is where trade can be seen and heard. Its architecture is important for the production of a sense of place and with more than one hundred shops or stands back to back in three ‘corridors’ with sev­eral cross-cutting paths. The central aisle structures and organises mobility and stimulates encounters as customers walk the routes made for them (Harvey et al, 2002: 206 on Covent Garden), the verges lined with fish. This physical layout of the market also contributes to everyday sociality as people ‘rub along’ across class and cultural differences (Watson, 2006).

In this section, I discuss the performance of place through the multiple overlapping trajectories and rhythms of people and things moving in the market. Lefebvre advocated rhythmanalysis primarily as a immersive phenomenological practice: ‘The rhythmanalyst calls on all his [*sic*] senses. […] He thinks with his body, not in the abstract, but in lived temporality’ (2004: 21). Indeed, ‘to grasp a rhythm, it is necessary to have been ***grasped*** by it; one must let oneself go, give oneself over, abandon oneself to its duration’ (27, emphasis in original). I started my own immersion in the market by wandering around trying to take it in. My movements were staccato at first as I quite literally did not know where to place myself. There is no discrete position from which to stand and observe as the market is constantly on the move (the cafes do offer some respite– as does the first floor gallery). I was out of step and out of place, lacking the ‘spatial confidence’ (Nash, 2018: 10) of the insider.

This experience of ‘arrhythmia’ made me aware of the fluidity of the rhythms of the key figures in the market - the fish merchants, sales people and regular buyers who know how to move and ‘bend’ to its activity at an embodied level (Lefebvre, 2004: 39-40). Lefebvre calls this *dressage* to refer to the process of bodily entrainment and repetition through which rhythm is learnt and makes itself felt – and amenable to observation - in the body over time. I started to learn by matching my pace to the fish inspectors and porters I shadowed. The porters are busy from the moment the fish can leave the market. They must decipher items on the order sheet (hand-written by the fish merchant), identify them in the chiller, load their trolleys and take them to a waiting van. Speed matters as the buyers usually have somewhere else to be. At the other end of the spectrum, the fish inspectors operate at a different pace making regular visits to the market floor during the course of the night. They walk slowly and deliberately, a white hat bobbing in the crowd, stopping to look at produce they suspect is ‘unfit for the food of man’s body’ (according to the Fishmongers’ Company Royal Charter, 1604), ready to ‘condemn’ it with their regulatory gaze. The mood is intense, and people still and quieten at these moments. When the inspector moves on, there is often a burst of chatter and a sense of relief expressed in greetings, complaints, jokes and banter (cf Porcu, 2005).

Louise Nash’s (2018) analysis of organisation and place-making in the City of London shows how the performances and rhythms of City workers effectively ‘bring into being’ the lived space of the City itself, as they do at Billingsgate. The space of the City exceeds the offices and formal meeting places which mark the territory. People interact and engage directly in the street, making plans and doing deals in person and through mobile connections. It’s a fast-paced world and in her walking interviews, Nash takes on the (mostly frenetic) rhythms which characterise different spatial and temporal zones, remembering her own experiences of the relentless rhythms of City work and noticing ‘the way in which rhythms shape how place is performed’ (2018: 1).

Back at Billingsgate, the fish merchants and salespeople call attention to their work in different ways. Their range of movement is more restricted as they display and maintain the fish on sale, and show it off to customers. If their patch is smaller at the peak of the market, earlier in the night, they tend to walk around the site to check one another’s stock and prices. Buyers, on the other hand, continue to be mobile, forming, renewing or eschewing attachments and making judgements all the while stimulating interactions. In the meantime, the fish wait – and work their own magic as ‘thickening agents’ (De Backer and Pavoni, 2018: 14) of trade. Their colour, shape and texture draw buyers in, and combined with the right sales pitch and price, make for a fast exit from the market. That said, different fish have different rhythms. Sometimes speed is key and ‘you’ve just got to get the fish into the system’, explains Jim Dillon, a long-established salesman. However, the process can be slowed ‘if the fish is very good to begin with’ as it may have ‘another three, four, five days’ life in it’. Each species has its own rhythms of decay which the fish merchant attempts to slow down through careful attention and an icy environment. Indeed, the fish themselves are enlivened by the performance of the work of seller and buyer as well as the inspector’s gaze which keeps them all alert while the market is happening. Then the lids are closed on the remaining boxes and they are returned to the thin air of the chiller.

Casey (following Heidegger) discusses ‘the micro-practices that tie the geographical subject to his or her place-world’ and which are ‘continually *put into action*’ such that ‘place and self are intimately interlocked in the world of concrete work’ (2001: 684-7). This section has shown how the presence, movement and rhythms of bodies, materials and fish generate the thickening or thinning of the space of the market. Places do not have enduring ‘single, essential identities’ (Massey, 1994) but there is a phase in the night when the market comes together as a polyrhythmic and eurhythmic whole. This collective choreography arises from these different but interconnected work practices performed by bodies in place.

**Conclusions**

The appeal of Casey’s characterisations of place as thick or thin lies in their affective, social and material resonances. They make sense in terms of the felt sense of place and offer a vocabulary to make distinctions between different places - or within different places at different times (despite the dangers of the binary opposition on which they rest). Place encompasses affects and practices that ‘thicken’ or ‘thin’ the embodied experience and meaning of being-in-place. However, Casey does not provide a sense of how thick or thin places might be identified, or indeed how they emerge and fade (Duff, 2010). In the example discussed in this chapter, my aim has been to show how, drawing on Lefebvre’s (2004) rhythmanalysis, the thickening/thinning of place can be recognised through attention to rhythm; and accounts of thickened or thinned space effectively capture what rhythms do. Indeed, rhythmanalysis offers an opportunity to trace ‘the relationship between rhythms and the performances of place’ (Nash, 2018: 1). I have sought to show what rhythm does in place – at Billingsgate - and what kinds of places arise from different constellations of rhythm, as they make themselves felt through memory and narration, and mobility and interaction.

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