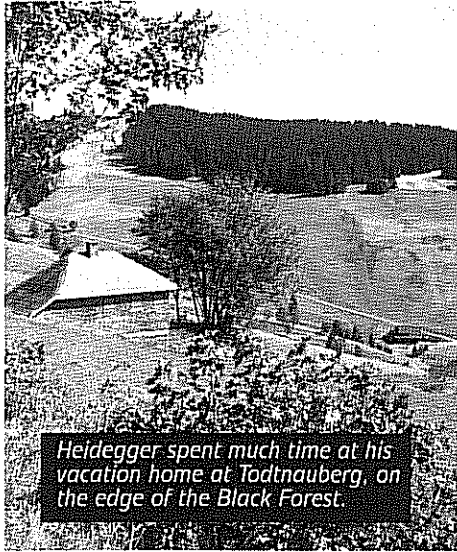


**W**HEN WAS the last time you happened to notice a place? Apart from unique events or moments when we remember an occurrence in relation to a location, we tend merely to pass through places, as if they were intermediary positions towards a destination or locations too plain and familiar to be worthy of thought. Should we be more attentive to place? And if so, how might this attention take shape?



*Heidegger spent much time at his vacation home at Todtnauberg, on the edge of the Black Forest.*

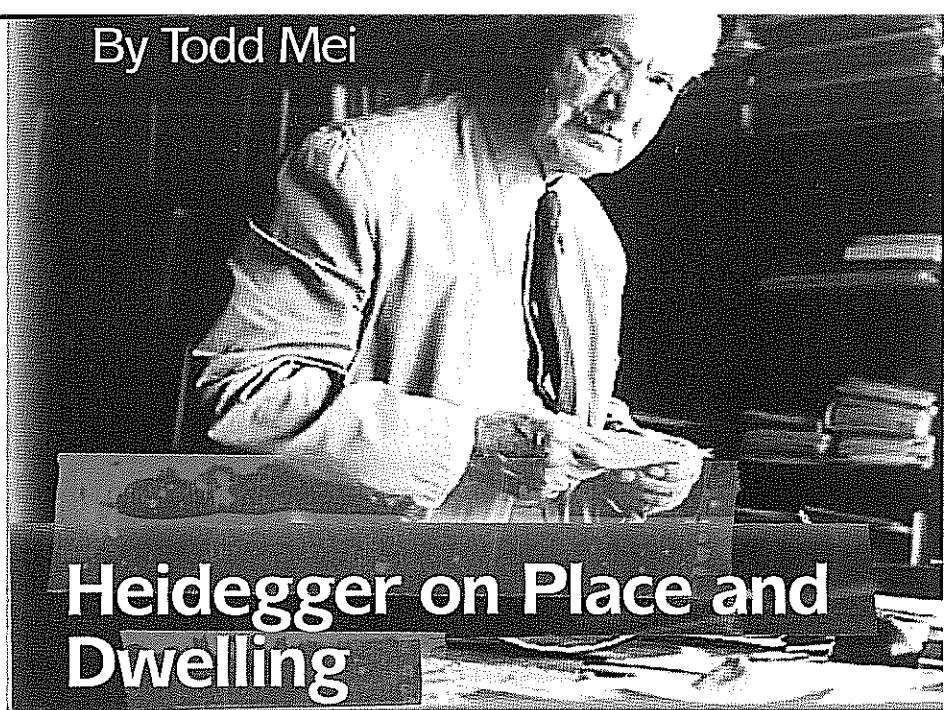
For the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), place is an essential part of human dwelling. Yet the task of understanding place is neither easy nor straightforward, and Heidegger identifies two obstacles.

The first concerns the way our conceptions of place have been influenced by the Galilean mathematization of nature (c. 1600) and the advent of Cartesian physics (c. 1630). The second is based on an insight original to Heidegger's own philosophy when he argues that our practical relations inevitably involve a tendency to forget about the very things that allow us to perform actions and realize projects.

### When walking shoes 'disappear'

For example, in the activity of walking we may at first notice the importance of the proper type of shoes to wear (given the kind of walking—e.g., vigorous hike, stroll, trudging through snow). However, during the walk, our initial way of

By Todd Mei



## Heidegger on Place and Dwelling

bearing in mind our shoes disappears. We simply focus on the walk and perhaps the scenery and destination; or perhaps we allow ourselves to be carried away by other thoughts. Heidegger summarizes this phenomenon in terms of disappearance: As soon as we use things in a practical way, they "disappear" in usage. Our relation to place, because it involves spaces of use (or what a famous anthropologist refers to as "task-scapes"), is of the same nature. Places for the most part tend to disappear as we rely on them to perform activities.

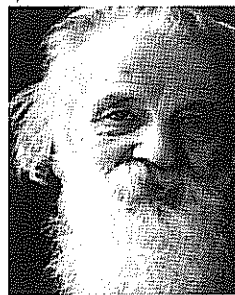
### When seated halls 'disappear'

Consider, for example, how a concert hall is at first marked out by its unique design and location and how these features make an impression upon us as we wait to be seated for a performance; and furthermore, how these features that cause us to regard the place of the concert hall disappear from our attention once the performance has started. All those features that were at first prominent to us are, in effect, in the background; yet they allow for or enable the performance to occur.

From this example, one can get a sense of how Heidegger regards the role and significance of place. The way in which places are designed and constructed, not only make possible a certain range of activities, but more importantly, are determinate of the quality and meaningfulness of these activities. And yet because places disappear in our usage of them,

we can dwell in places not knowing how they affect us. This last consequence is decisive for Heidegger.

In what follows, I will provide a brief account of Heidegger's philosophical criticism of the Galilean-Cartesian legacy. This will allow us to see how he understands the way in which place plays a fundamental role in shaping human dwelling. From Heidegger's perspective, human activity is predominantly defined by seeing reality in terms of future possibilities of being. He refers to this as the "as-structure" of seeing. Place plays an essential role in concretely manifesting what we see "as" our future possibilities of being.

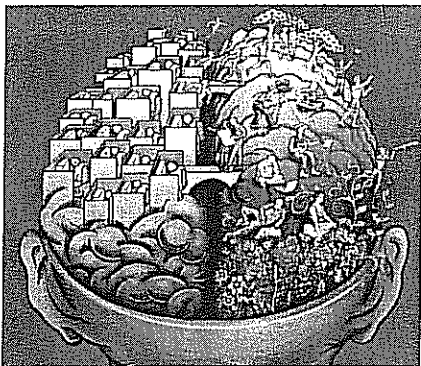


As the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard once said, our way of seeing place "augments the values of reality." A house is not simply a shelter but a form that imaginatively and practically synthesizes the values of function and beauty. The form, function and beauty are not simply extant properties; rather they actively allow us to exist in specific ways; we exist through these properties. Yet it is Heidegger's contention that apart from the occasional moment of astonishment, we dwell in a manner that is oblivious to the significance of place. And if this is the case, then it follows that we are also oblivious of our future possibilities of being.

## Nature and Cartesian physics?

So what is it about the mathematisation of nature and Cartesian physics that should be of philosophical concern? In short, their respective move to formalise reality in such a way that processes (whether natural, artificial or human) can be represented by simplified relations, such as cause and effect. In doing so, those concerns or questions that do not fit into the simplified relations are deemed “externalities” and are expunged. Most often, such externalities involve meanings uniquely wed to human values and beliefs.

The variety, and in some cases incommensurability, of human values is a mire



that formalism seeks to remove since its method cannot treat its plurality in any consistent and uniform way. A formal representation of human agency according to the rational choice theory recently used by economists, for example, assumes that decision-making is based on an almost perfect knowledge of information relevant to a decision. Rational choice is thus based on an ideal type: Given perfect knowledge, a rational agent would choose in favour of X. But as we know, real humans do not have perfect knowledge, and of course, there are a variety of other factors that someone might deem to be more important that rational choice theory does not take into account.

With respect to place, one of the consequences of this formalisation is a representation of the immediate environment around us as neutral, as if no prior and significant relations existed. Rather for [unclear], and recalling my com-

ments above on use and equipment, things are already in a relation such that our dwelling is ordered and made possible by them. So when furnishing a room, we find the “place” of the room is already ordered in such a way that makes possible what we might deem to be an appropriate arrangement. And this is a unique feature of the world that cannot be accurately represented by formal means. A colleague of mine puts this case well. He notes, the Galilean-Cartesian legacy allows us to represent place mathematically (as a set of coordinates) and abstractly (as neutral and empty). The coordinates “40.7116° N, 74.0123° W” refer to an exact place which are useful for many purposes, such as mapping. Both this usefulness and the simplified numerical form of the coordinates seem quite innocuous. But tell someone these coordinates are “Ground Zero” in New York City, and suddenly the abstract area is “filled” with meaningful—that is, “lived”—content. And yet, we see that any place can be represented by coordinates, and furthermore, that as coordinates, place really loses its sense of locality. As one German philosopher noted, with this type of mathematisation, places are targets devoid of life and history; with the push of a button all life and history can be wiped out, and yet the coordinates will remain.

Heidegger would, of course, not deny that this formal representation presents us with new developments for practical life, at best making tasks more feasible and less burdensome; however and at the same time, he is uneasy with the way in which this representation removes a level of meaning more original to human existence than subsequent advances in scientific and technological reasoning



40.7116° N, 74.0123° W - Ground Zero Memorial site

can provide (in fact, Heidegger says they cannot provide such meaning). Consider, for instance, how the Galilean application of mathematics has allowed for the development of different types of instruments. Heidegger would argue, though he was not alive at the time, that the emergence of mobile phones is a specific form of the instantiation of mathematised reality wherein we are dislocated from physical place. One need only recall how common it is for a conversation in which both interlocutors are physically present to one another to be interrupted by a call on a mobile phone. In fact, the incoming call often has precedence over the conversation. Everyday, physical existence is in this way broken such that the virtual space of mobile communication can manifest. I place what is physically nearest to me at the most distant reach when speaking on a mobile phone.

## Human beings marginal utility

Or, let us make a bolder claim: The calculus developed by Newton and Leibniz allowed for the marginalist methods of economic analysis and prediction which represents human beings in terms of marginal utility. (Even Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill acknowledge the limitations of the role of human self-interest in economic method.) To quote the economists Stanley Jevons who compares the calculus of physics to economic agency,

*Utility only exists when there is on the one side the person wanting, and on the other the thing wanted . . . Just as the gravitating force of a material body depends not alone on the mass of that body, but upon the masses and relative positions and distances of the surrounding material bodies, so utility is an attraction between a wanting being and what is wanted.*

## Homes now only equity

Whilst we may make a distinction between a purely economic conception of human agency, there is nonetheless the subsequent eff

## The CALCULUS WARS

Newton, Leibniz



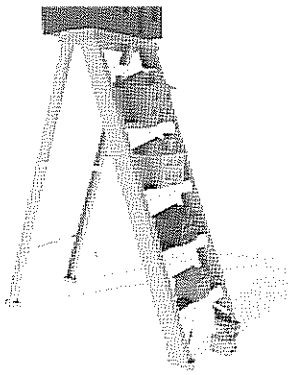
and the



Greatest

Mathematical Clash of All Time

DAVID FORBES



how such representations become imbedded in human practice. To begin, one can conjecture that if place really is ordered in such a way that it affects and relates to our dwelling so fundamentally, then to go about reconstructing or describing place in another way can have significant consequences. Today, places are no longer viewed in relation to dwelling but as ends that express marginal utility. We do not have homes but houses, where the former is for dwelling and the latter for equity (i.e., “the property ladder”).

Essential to these examples is how we lose touch with a fundamental relation to our immediate manner of dwelling and, more generally, nature. And this is to suggest that those practices which develop in this interval are free-floating and abstracted from reality. They are, as Heidegger would say, “uncanny”—that is, because they are so abstracted, they produce a sense of homelessness in which we think we are in touch with our existence but are really divorced from its fundamental dimensions of meaningfulness.

So what might be some positive examples that Heidegger would consider to express a “right” relation? One of his well-known accounts involves how a bridge spans two banks of a river. He says the bridge “gathers” different levels of meaning in and through its construction and location. That it spans two banks means that it now makes two communities, on either side of the river, near; they are neighbours. Depending on the type of bridge, it retains unique symbolic and aesthetic qualities. Perhaps the bridge symbolises a journey and sojourn of spiritual significance—that is, of crossing from one phase of life to the next. Whatever the meaning, a bridge

designed appropriately will not represent this meaning; rather, as Heidegger indicates by the term “gather,” the bridge enables such meaning to manifest. Meaning is located in and through place.

He refers to this meaning-giving feature of place according to the ancient Greek term *stadion* (measure). Place, in other words, provides a form of measure, if measure is understood in the sense of a perspective between various meanings. It is only through a room designed with a hearth that one gets a sense of measure about family life in contrast to a home whose centre is gathered by the television. Because of this measuring capacity of place, Heidegger says that place therefore “locates” our being. It is, in this sense, localising and a kind of being-at-home in the world.

And how do we know if we are at home in our dwelling? For Heidegger, the answer lies in understanding human destiny. But he does not intend this term to mean an unalterable course of human history. Rather, he marks a sense of the unfolding of history that is imminent according to a present situation or period. This situation can, of course, change; and thus the destiny would change. So what Heidegger is attempting to show is that the current forms of our understanding of place and dwelling have consequences that are consistent with this understanding. Should this understanding change, then so would the consequences (if it is not too late). To clarify this, Heidegger provides a lengthy and difficult examination of the ancient Greek term *moira*, which is often translated into English as “dispensation.” Our practices, says Heidegger, dispense a future possibility of which we may not be aware . . . because we do not understand what is actually occurring in these practices.

### Place and human future

So let us return to place to see more clearly what Heidegger is attempting to show. Place gathers and manifests the locations through which we participate in existence and come to understand it. This understanding is, above

all, engaged with a concern for our future possibilities of being. The relation between place and human beings is in this sense circular: Place provides the conditions for our actual and possible being; as reflective beings, we create the places we need in order to dwell. It is clear in what I have said so far that for Heidegger we tend not to see this circular, mutual dependence.

We think instead that the only real pole of relation is the human subject who is not determined by anything like place in any substantial way. Rather, we can create and destroy places as we see fit. But this is only to assume place is really insignificant, and that the creative process of human making need only consider our own aims. Speaking cynically, one might say that this myopic and unbalanced view is readily noticeable in the modern places of urban sprawl and land development.

How attentive to and reflective of place are we today? And what types of conventions and practices are at play that may inhibit our relation to place? In many ways, Heidegger is not so much interested in the answers to these questions as he is in our ability to ask and receive these questions in the right manner. Whilst he does not prescribe what this right manner should be, he does nonetheless indicate an essential criterion for this reception. He speaks of a patient listening in order to hear what needs to be thought. For, like our understanding of human existence, the most significant issue is how we initially relate to that which is before us, as that which, as he would say, is most worthy of thought. How do we receive place? Do we receive it all? Or, do we find ourselves constantly ignoring the way places exist so that we can be somewhere else? Heidegger thought the ignorance of place was characteristic of the modern era; we dwell in place-less-ness, that is, we are homeless.

This may indeed be characteristic of modernity, but at the same time, it is not fated so long as we care to think.

