

Meditation on “Space,” Issue 1 of *SPROUT: An Eco-Urban Poetry Journal*

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Ecologists are not often asked to write meditations. But the first issue of *SPROUT* affords a stimulating opportunity for reflection. The contributors wrestle with the contrast and kinship between space and place. Space is certainly one of the fundamental concerns of ecological scientists. But is there an “ecology of space” to mirror or echo a “poetics of space?” “Space” seems to stand for an abstraction, seemingly devoid of anything but dimension and scale. In contrast, “place” is the address where meaning, memory, and action dwell.

It is true that ecologists sometimes—less now than in the past—forget that what looks like space inhabited by only soil, water, air, plants, animals, and microbes—is always the habitat of somebody’s meaning, now or in the past. That meaning can come down to us as legacies in those most ecological of things—the condition and relationships of those soils, waters, air, plants, animals, and microbes—and the transformations they enact. To seek an understanding of the entities and processes that fill diverse and harlequin ecological space without seeing those spaces also as places that have meant and do mean something to people, risks missing how ecology in space actually works.

The editors and authors in *SPROUT* Issue 1 admonish us, in so many poignant and compelling ways, not to take space for granted—but to examine how space and place, that is location and meaning, are different but intertwined. Neither can be neglected. They also show us the need to see scrubby edges, invisible flows, and places judged to be wrong. They ask us to consider whether non-places are a kind of empty abstraction, or are they places secretly robbed of their meaning? They also remind us that space, place, and time have connections that are sometimes hard to discern.

Poets and ecologists both need to look for the surprising events that bring the past of place into the present, or which reveal some hidden or forgotten process that served the meaning that people in the past imparted to a place. The present meanings can be bestowed on places by people located somewhere else, or by contesting groups overlapping in space. These are also part of the social dimensions of ecosystems. Even the potential meanings of a place in the future are relevant, as more and more, sustainability concerns turn our eye to a longer time horizon. Ecological understanding of cities, or of inhabited or managed lands, will be incomplete if it neglects the human complexities of the dialogue between space and place.

Seeing the sites where ecologists work as places beyond space may be easier than it first appears. After all, most ecologists chose that science as a vocation because of some early and abiding love of place. We ecologists often have places that evoke deep meaning for us. We just have to remember that other people, seen and unseen, past and present, love place as much as we do. Poets remind us to admit our love of place and bring it into our work.