

Commentary

Geography Adds Value to All Scholarship: Construing the Obvious in Geographical Space

Andy Kusi-Appiah¹

1. Independent researcher

This article debunks the reduction of geography as the study of trivia about locations and instead considers geography to be a comprehensive discipline that examines spatial relationships and the interplay between physical and human environments. The author relies on secondary data sources, drawing on the works of prominent geographic scholars like Doreen Massey, David Harvey, and Peter Gould to underscore the importance of spatial analysis in understanding and shaping human experiences. In essence, geography can be regarded as ‘the mother of all disciplines.’ The author discusses ‘voluminous void’ as a metaphorical and existential concept, symbolizing the human drive to understand the unknown. For example, geography informs the architect about site-specific factors like topography, climate, and ecosystems. It fosters an understanding of cultural, social, and economic contexts, leading to contextually responsive designs, and enhances critical thinking about spatial and environmental relationships, which is essential for tackling complex design challenges.

Correspondence: papers@team.qeios.com — Qeios will forward to the authors

“...Without geography, you’re nowhere.” Association of American Geographers

*“...But in examining the modernization process in Africa, we feel almost helpless in trying to reply to such a call—a call that essentially requires us to link **space** and time and humans in such a way that a general system is created to postdict the course of a modernizing society.”* Peter Gould, 1970

Introduction

An architecture student came to my office the other day, confused and visibly distraught. She was worried that she was being ‘forced’ to take a course that had no bearing on her architecture training. She said, *‘people are forcing me to take geography courses, but I do not need them, this is so dumb, and it is causing me a lot of stress in this place, what should I do, professor?’*

And so, I asked her, *‘What do you think geography is? Does geography have anything to do with the built environment you intend to work in?’* She responded confidently thus: *“..well, isn’t geography about names of countries and their capital cities, and rivers and lakes and mountains and where they are located?”* And my jaw dropped!

Misconstruing for Fun

That, indeed, is a common misconception! Geography is way more than that! Geography is not about knowing names by rote; geography is an interdisciplinary field that explores the **relationships** between **people**, **places**, and **environments**^{[1][2][3][4][5][6][7][8][9][10]}. Geography involves *analyzing and understanding the physical and human characteristics of the Earth’s surface*, as well as the complex interactions between them. Geography encompasses a wide range of topics, including physical geography, human geography, geographic information systems (GIS), sustainability and **environmental studies**, geopolitics, and global issues. We analyze and make sense of the **complex** relationships between spatial phenomenon, politics, economics, and culture in the context of global challenges.

Spatial Relationships and Location

The one thing that separates geography from all other subjects is the concept of **space**. Before you jump, I am not referring to outer space; I am referring to the **voluminous void** that is our universe (more on this later). In other words, geography is the only discipline that explicitly considers the **spatial** context and relationships between **people, places, and environments** (human geography/environment 101).

The **spatial** perspective allows researchers to analyze and understand the **complex** interactions between human systems, including **architecture**, engineering, medicine, healthcare, and other seemingly unrelated disciplines, and to identify patterns, relationships, and processes that shape our world^{[3][4][6][7][9]}.

Spatial Imagination

But I must get back to basics – **What is space, and how can one define it?** As I mentioned earlier (above), the one thing that separates geography from all other subjects is *space*, a concept that I have come to refer to as a *voluminous void*. Space is the lens that allows researchers to analyze and understand the *complex* interactions between human systems, and to identify patterns, relationships, and processes that shape our world^{[1][3][6][4][9]}.

At first glance, the catchy phrase *voluminous void* sounds like an oxymoron, contradictory. The English word ‘*voluminous*’ typically implies something that is large, expansive, and perhaps even overwhelming in its scope or scale, and ‘*void*’ suggests emptiness. Put together, ***voluminous void*** may be interpreted in a few ways. First, it can be seen as a dialectic (*apologise to Hegel*), describing a physical or metaphorical space that feels vast and expansive, yet simultaneously empty and devoid of substance. Second, the term can evoke a sense of emotional or psychological hollowness, where one feels a deep sense of emptiness or disconnection, despite being surrounded by people, things, or experiences.

However, none of the above explains the conceptual thinking behind it. A third interpretation may suffice. I envision ***voluminous void*** as a philosophical or existential concept, which represents the human experience of grappling with the unknown, the unknowable, or the existential void that lies at the heart of our existence. There is no gainsaying that humans are curious; we want to understand the world around us; we desire to make sense of our Earth, and this quest happens in the *voluminous void*, which becomes a *place* when a phenomenon is defined within it. That phenomenon could be a mountain range, a river, or a human settlement. That phenomenon could also be home with memories, or a road network being constructed to link place A and place B. These *places* may also be used to describe *locations* that have distinct identities and unique *landscapes* with meaning^{[11][5]}. **A place can also refer to where a physical feature is situated. A place is a defined point in space.**

According to Gritzner, geography is “...the study of the Earth’s physical and human environments, and the ways in which people interact with these environments.”^[7] Gritzner also believes that all geographic studies must begin with the following questions: “What is where, why there, and why care?”^[7] Furthermore, Doreen Massey’s concept of relational space emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependencies between unusual places, rather than viewing them as isolated entities^{[12][8]}. Massey emphasises the importance of understanding space as a dynamic, relational, and always-in-the-making entity^{[6][12][8]}.

Additionally, David Harvey has explored the current spatial arrangements and geographic processes in situ, and he is convinced that these can perpetuate social injustices, and that researchers and other professional practitioners must strive to promote spatial justice through their research and practice^[4]. Other prominent human geographers have acknowledged the importance of **space** in scholarship. For example, Nigel Thrift views space as the fundamental stuff of human geography, emphasizing that *space* is not just a passive backdrop for human action, but rather an active part that shapes **people's** experiences^[3].

In the same vein, Peter Gould^{[13][9]}, along with Ulf Strohmayer^[14], has highlighted the importance of space and spatiality in geography, arguing that these concepts are essential for understanding the complex relationships between people, places, and environments^{[14][9]}. Again, Torsten Hägerstrand's work on time geography and spatial analysis has been influential in shaping our understanding of geographic space^[2]. Hägerstrand's ideas on the constraints of nature on human activity and localization theories have also contributed to the development of geographic thought^[2]. These researchers, among others, have advanced our understanding of geographic space and its role in shaping human experiences.

Geographic Space and Architecture

For a person who is studying to become an architect, understanding the geographical context of a building **site** is crucial for them. Geography will help them analyze the *site's topography, climate, hydrology, & ecosystems, which inform design decisions*.

Second, **spatial** knowledge provides architects with a deeper understanding of the **cultural, social, & economic** contexts in which buildings are **situated**. In addition, this **contextual understanding** enables architects to design buildings that are responsive to their surroundings.

Third, geographic knowledge helps architects understand the **environmental** implications of their designs. By studying geographical concepts like **ecosystems, climate change, and natural hazards**, architects can design buildings that minimize environmental impacts.

Fourth, our discipline is essential for understanding the complexities of **urban environments**. Architects can apply geographical concepts to design more livable, sustainable, and resilient cities.

Fifth, studying geography encourages architects to think critically about the complex relationships between people, places, and environments. This critical thinking skill is invaluable for architects as they navigate complex design challenges.

Conclusion

If one learns about people, places, and environments, one is enriching one's understanding of the built environment and informing one's design decisions, and that is geography. My friend, this is worth learning!

I rest.

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