

A Geographical Anatomy

BRYAN-COLLEGE STATION

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The anatomy of a place, like the anatomy of an organism, reveals the structure of the whole and the functions of its elements. An anatomy can be performed on anything divisible, including a place, which is a human creation and therefore complex. Places have three salient aspects: location, locale, and sense of place.

Bryan-College Station is a place with a specific location — a unique position on the earth's surface and consequently unique spatial relations to other places both near and far. More importantly, location connotes a set of political, economic, and social relations with other places. All of these relationships are subject to change. Spatial relations are changed by transportation improvements, such as the highway enlargement that recently made Bryan-College Station closer to Houston. Political relations also change, as when distant legislators in Washington, D. C., and Austin exercise less or more control over local life. The once vital ties that linked Bryan to the wharves of Liverpool and the mills of Manchester are now defunct, superseded in economic importance by speeding caravans of students that annually stream to and from the suburbs of Houston and Dallas. Social relations have also changed, in ways perhaps best known to those who sort mail at the local post office. The pioneers interred in the Boonville Cemetery had family back east in places like Mississippi or Tennessee — kinship networks were latitudinal and regional. Today these networks radiate in all directions, and span continents and oceans.

Relative changes in the location of Bryan-College Station have radically transformed what geographers call its locale, the second of the three salient aspects of place. Whereas location describes the external relationships of a place, locale considers the physical and social characteristics that have accumulated at that place as a result of its past and present locations. The built landscape is a part of the locale, but so are the people and their institutions. We sometimes speak of these landscapes and people using a geological metaphor that likens them to layers of sedimentary rock laid down in successive geological epochs. These metaphorical epochs are, of course, defined by fundamental shifts in location.

Most of the African-American families, and some of the white, settled here long ago, when cotton moved by train to Houston and Galveston, and the political pronouncements that issued from

Washington, D.C., were faint and easily disregarded. Descendants of these people still live in the area, where a segregated, stratified society has left a physical legacy in the landscape of mansions and tenant houses that can still be seen in old Bryan. Late-19th-century links to Hamburg introduced new groups: Germans, who settled the prairies northeast of town; Bohemians and Moravians, who settled near Smetana and Luza Street; and Jews, who in 1912 built the charming but now sadly decayed Temple Freda beside the railroad tracks.

Bryan-College Station is no longer located in the resource-producing sphere of Europe, and it has been a long time since immigrants came from Galveston by train. Fine, wide highways now radiate in every direction, and most newcomers arrive, as I did, in rented trucks. I am a Yankee, one in a great tide of refugees escaping diminished opportunities in the deindustrialized Northeast. More numerous, although less conspicuous, are the fugitives from moribund corners of Louisiana, Oklahoma, and East Texas. Most conspicuous are Mexican-Americans and other Hispanics, whose numbers doubled in the 1980s. The spectacular growth of Texas A&M in the past 30 years has created unprecedented links to centers of learning on every continent, drawing to the locale contingents of many exotic peoples. A rough but serviceable Hindu temple now stands beside Highway 6 south of College Station, an expression, as Temple Freda once was, of new social links and new local societies.

Most significantly, Bryan-College Station in the last half of the 20th century has become a place increasingly unlike neighboring towns such as Navasota and Hearne. Fifty years ago, Bryan-College Station was certainly the largest of the three places, but its landscape was not qualitatively different. The main streets in all three were strikingly similar, as were the prepossessing mansions of the planter elite, the cottages and bungalows of the middle class, and the cabins and shotgun houses of laborers and minorities. Today, this similarity has vanished. Bryan-College Station is now a small but lustrous city that far more closely resembles suburban Houston than Hearne. At night the lights along its broad boulevards wink and shine, reflecting in the glossy paint of new cars and trucks. Sophisticated students and professionals, exiled to College Station from metropolitan fleshpots (for which they forever hanker), lament its provincial limitations; to inhabitants of

what we may begin to call the outlying towns, it must appear as a glamorous and unsettling outpost of urban America. Deviation from regional patterns is further evidenced by a host of demographic statistics. The percentage of the population in Bryan-College Station with a four-year college degree is four times that of neighboring towns; the median family income is about one-third higher; and the native Texan population is about 25 percent lower.

These dramatic changes in the location and locale of Bryan-College Station have deeply altered its third aspect as a place — its sense of place. Sense of place exists in memories, conversations, magazines, books, and images. It includes the ways the people of a place imagine themselves; the ways they would like to be imagined by others; and the ways others do in fact imagine them. There are three major senses of this place that coexist uneasily, often in the mind of a single person.

Bryan-College Station's first sense of place is its image as a part of the Brazos Valley, a place that is fundamentally normal, a representative, if somewhat fortunate, Central Texas town. Strongholds of this view are the Texas Hall of Fame (a local dance hall) and the First Baptist Churches in Bryan and College Station. This image is cherished in modest housing tracts, where elephantine pickup trucks connote the discourse of a Southern rural tradition.

The second sense is of what can only be called Aggeland, a mythical place fully accessible only to college students and alumni. In this sense the place is imagined as extraordinary and unique. It is a place imbued with a "spirit," as they sing in their commencement hymn, "that can ne'er be told" — an esoteric *genius loci*. Monuments to this sense of place are Kyle Field and the Polo Field, where the annual bonfire ritual is performed. This spirit is even evident off-campus in the Aggie theme that runs through the landscape. Mailboxes, banners, businesses, and even rocks are decorated with the colors and logo of the university, connoting the discourse that is Aggeland.

The third sense is that this is a place of the future. Bryan hardly figures in this sense because it is increasingly understood as a troubled inner city with College Station as its suburb. Bryan residents buy lottery tickets at four times the rate of College Station residents, strong evidence of who views the future with hope, and who with fear. As a place of the future, College Station will be home to knowledge-based

industries. Its people will be affluent, well educated, socially tolerant, physically fit, and mentally stable. It will be linked to the world by computers, four-lane highways, and jet airliners, and it will be covered with shopping malls, soccer fields, and jogging trails. This vision is epitomized in Research Park, west of campus, where young people jog or engage in nontraditional sports such as rollerblading and Frisbee golf. Proud highways bound the park on two sides, and overhead, airplanes descend to Easterwood Airport bearing home researchers, executives, and tired survivors of expensive vacations. Visible to the south is the stern pillbox of the George Bush Library, temple of the New World Order in which this place intends to take a profitable part.

Although a highly attractive viewpoint to many, this future sense of place will not be fully realized. This is because it is, like any sense of place, biased and therefore unmindful of the many factors by which it will be frustrated, foiled, and distracted. The sense of College Station as a place of the future is therefore an unreliable guide to the place it will become. The future of Bryan-College Station will be decided by its location in the larger circuits of government spending, private investment, and human migration. These will, as in the past, transform the locale, adding new layers to the population and landscape sediment, while these new peoples and landscapes, in ways both stark and subtle, shape future senses of this place. ■