

Leisure Reflections



Robert A. Stebbins

Professor Robert A. Stebbins, with 40 years in leisure studies, has pioneered the ideas of 'serious leisure', 'casual leisure', 'project-based leisure' and 'optimal leisure'. He is currently Faculty Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Calgary. Author of 41 books and monographs in several areas of social science, his most recent works bearing on these ideas include: *Between Work and Leisure* (Transaction, 2004); *A Dictionary of Nonprofit Terms and Concepts* (Indiana University Press, 2006, with D.H. Smith and M. Dover); *Serious Leisure: A Perspective for Our Time* (Transaction, 2007); *Personal Decisions in the Public Square: Beyond Problem Solving into a Positive Sociology* (Transaction, 2009); *Leisure and Consumption* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); *Serious Leisure and Nature: Sustainable Consumption in the Outdoors* (Palgrave Macmillan 2011, with Lee Davidson); *The Idea of Leisure: First Principles* (Transaction, 2012); and *Work and Leisure in the Middle East* (Transaction, 2013). He was elected Fellow of the Academy of Leisure Sciences in 1996, Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 1999, and Senior Fellow of the World Leisure Academy in 2010. He has been a member of LSA since 1995. Stebbins's main leisure interests lie in amateur music, where he is a jazz and classical double bassist, and in various outdoor hobbyist pursuits, notably cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, and hiking and mountain scrambling (hiking to mountain tops). He is also an active volunteer in the Calgary French community, most recently as President of the Centre d'accueil pour les nouveaux arrivants francophones (an organization that helps French-speaking immigrants settle in Calgary). And, to be sure, casual leisure counts as well. For Stebbins it consists mainly of evening conversations with friends and family and dining out in Calgary's restaurants.

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The Spaces of the Serious Pursuits: A Typology

The word 'space' in leisure studies is shorthand for three angles from which to view free-time activity. They are leisure space as institutional, as temporal, and as geographic. That is, leisure may be defined and examined as it fits in the social organization of community and society; in the span of daily, weekly and annual time; and in the surrounding environment, whether artificial or natural (Cohen-Gewerc and Stebbins, 2013). Leisure as institutional and temporal space has been examined extensively, and a good deal of attention has also been given to the geographic basis for free-time activity.

The dominant focus from these three angles has been on leisure in general, which in the case of institutional analysis could hardly be otherwise. Temporal analysis, as seen in the time-use studies, typically examines the proportions of time spent at leisure in general compared with work in general (e.g., Cushman, Veal and Zuzanek, 2005; Robinson and Godbey, 1997). Variations in the proportion of time spent at work and away from it as observed in different countries and different segments of the population within countries are among the most intensely scrutinized subjects in leisure studies.

Still, temporal space may also be understood more particularly, as in the idea of 'discretionary time commitment' (Stebbins, 2006). This kind of commitment refers to the un-coerced, allocation of a certain number of minutes, hours, days, or other measure of time that a person devotes or would like to devote to carrying out a given activity. In other words, discretionary time commitment finds expression in leisure and in work where workers have some control over their time. In these areas of life the focus is always on particular activities and kinds of activities rather than on leisure in general.

Leisure space conceived of in geographic terms has conventionally referred to the places where leisure activities are pursued. These places may be natural or artificial or a combination of both. And nowadays they may be virtual. David Crouch summarizes the importance of understanding leisure in terms of geographic space thus conceived:

Leisure happens, is produced in spaces. These spaces may be material, and related to concrete locations. Yet the spaces, and therefore geographies, of leisure may be metaphorical, even imaginative. Imaginative spaces are not merely in the virtual space of contemporary nature but also in

the imagination of consumer and the representations of the agencies providing in producing leisure sites: visual culture and other narratives of communication.... Space, then, can be important in metaphorically 'shaping' contextualizing leisure and commercial and public policy prefiguring of the meaning of leisure sites, and the leisure experience may be transformed by the way in which individuals encounter those spaces and activities. (Crouch, 2006: p. 127)

In the language of this article, leisure activities also occur in geographic space as just described. This context helps shape those activities and give them meaning for the individual participant. As Crouch's words imply, geographic analysis usually focuses on leisure in general.

Just as the idea of discretionary time commitment in leisure has opened up a discussion of the particular uses of time *vis-à-vis* its general use, so it is for geographic space. There are also particular ways in which this space is used and these ways vary according to the kind of activity engaged in. The remainder of this article is devoted to identifying these ways for the serious pursuits.¹

Space and the Serious Pursuits

Sam Elkington (in press) moves beyond general leisure to look more particularly at the spaces of serious leisure. He explores how and in what ways space is experienced by participants when pursuing an amateur, hobbyist or career volunteer activity. The serious leisure perspective (SLP), he notes, has failed in the past to address the issue of space on the phenomenological level. In this respect we must note that space is not synonymous with place. Rather the first has an 'aesthetic' meaning. Any given space 'reveals a perceptual environment that joins a distinctive physical identity and coherence, a resonance, with a memorable character with which an individual actively engages through action'.

Furthermore, Elkington says it is evident that 'place possesses a certain resonance and form as a repository of social, cultural or personal significance in the form of knowledge and memories'. Knowledge and memories are, in turn, part of a culture. They depend in various ways on the physical setting for how people remember events experienced there in the past.

Serious leisure participants also develop a strong attachment to and identification with the space in which they pursue their core activities. Elkington states that the strength of attachment is substantially determined by the capacity of that space to facilitate expressions of skill and knowledge and to generate desired experiences,

among them, that of flow. He applies his ideas about the spatial meanings of serious leisure to all the core activities pursued there.

I wish to add here that they may also be applied to devotee work and therefore to all the serious pursuits. Furthermore, it is possible to show how and where these meanings vary by category of core activity. The next section contains a typology of the spatial meaning of the core activities that animate the serious pursuits.

The Spatial Meaning of Core Activities

All leisure activities revolve around one or more core activities. The latter are defined as: 'the distinctive set of interrelated actions or steps that must be followed to achieve the outcome or product the participant finds attractive (e.g., enjoyable, satisfying, fulfilling)' (Stebbins, 2009, pp. 5–7). In common with other leisure participants, those engaged in the serious pursuits interpret in light of the related core activities the space in which they are pursuing them. I have so far identified seven types of space for this kind of work and leisure.

1. Conquered space A wide variety of serious activities have as part of their core the conquering of some sort of space. That is, the special meaning of that space is constructed according to how it bears on the core activity being undertaken. Here we find the sports, board games, nature challenge activities, participation activities and possibly others.² For example, football players know at any time during a match that, if they are to win, so many yards or metres must be covered. In the 'nature challenge activities' (Davidson and Stebbins, 2011), climbers for instance are aware of the height and other physical features of the mountain face they aim to ascend. Then there are the routes to be followed or spaces to be occupied in the various board games and in games like chess, checkers and cribbage.

As an example of the role of space in the participation activities, consider how it is conquered when fishing. First, there is the space in which fish are caught: open sea, trout stream, backwater bayou or local pond. Second, there is the question of the depth of water in, or on, which to fish: close to the bottom, just below the surface, on the surface (e.g., dry-fly fishing). The meaning of space is both complex and distinctive in such participant activities as caving, hunting, canoeing and SCUBA diving.

2. Showcase space Showcasing creative works is the realm of the fine arts and entertainment fields. The theater, concert hall and comedy club exemplify one genre of space for displaying these efforts. Another is the variety of exhibition venues for presenting paintings, sculptures and ceramic pieces, which include, depending on the art,

shops, streets, offices, pedestrian corridors, and these days even some transportation terminals. Nonetheless, they do share some of their space with busking street performers, who may also present their acts in pedestrian corridors as well as along certain streets. Additionally, subways stations are a main space for some of these artists. Showcase space is different for writers. For them (and the liberal arts hobbyists who read their works), the book shop and the book fair are central.

3. Resource space This is space needed by amateurs, hobbyists and occupational devotees to produce something or perform a service, a type that includes all the necessary equipment and supplies found within it. The scientist's laboratory is arguably the archetypical example. Although often less clearly defined, scientific field stations constitute another space for scientific core activity. Here observations of birds or insects are conducted or, looking upward, astronomical phenomena are viewed. Then there is the atelier for making and tinkering. Included here are the kitchen and woodworking shop as well as the miscellaneous locations in which the skilled trades operate, among them, the garage and back garden (for gardening, work on old cars, etc.). In devotee work, construction sites and locations where repairs and maintenance are conducted (as in plumbing, heating and roofing) exemplify resource space.

The study is the prized space for writers (when not showcasing their works). It is likewise for 'committed readers', or those hobbyists who read extensively to acquire literary knowledge, a passion that necessarily takes time and requires concentration (Stebbins, 2013). And paralleling this use of space for core activities are the places where musicians, dancers, athletes, and others go to maintain and perfect their skills.

4. Sales space For the occupational devotees in small business, the shop from which they vend their product or service is a special space. Along similar lines we find the public outlets for hobbyist makers of, say, quilts, knit goods and ceramic objects. They sporadically --- and for some even regularly --- set up stands at craft fairs, shopping centres and flea markets, among other places.

5. Helping space This is the space within which help is provided. The help may be that of either volunteers or professionals, with the latter being classified here as devotee workers. Among the second the offices of counselors and consultants serve as a main space within which they pursue their core activities. Other spaces for some of this group's core activities may include a home office, a public or institutional library and a specialized book store.

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Career volunteers also have their distinctive spaces. These are evident to some extent by where they serve, as in a zoo or museum, on a board of directors (board room or equivalent), at a primary school, or at a hospital. This core activity space for volunteers who work to preserve or maintain the natural environment is a river, forest or the town's park as well as the air we breathe, the water we drink and the earth we live on. Recreational volunteers serve in spaces like camps, sport centres, municipal recreational facilities and sites for sporting competitions (e.g., gymnasia, swimming pools, ski hills, running courses).

6. Virtual space This is what Elkington has labeled 'virtual space' (Elkington, S., personal communication, 31 October 2012). It is the home of, among other activities, the Internet-based serious pursuits. A main use of such space occurs during leisure-based surfing of the Web, the serious leisure expression of which is seen in the reading undertaken in pursuit of a liberal arts hobby. Another facet of this space is evident in skilled, knowledgeable gaming done in interaction with other people in cyberspace. In these examples --- and there are no doubt others --- the space in question is our vague sense of what cyberspace actually is. It is impalpable, difficult to fathom and, yet, real enough to give its users a unique spatial sense. Above all it is vast. So much so that John Perry Barlow, an American poet and essayist, once joked that 'in Cyberspace, the 1st Amendment [in the American Constitution] is a local ordinance'.

7. Tourist Space Much of modern tourism is centred on space of some kind, including scenic vistas, architectural wonders and urban streetscapes. For most tourists, seeing such attractions is a type of casual leisure, namely, sensory stimulation. More rarely, however, some tourists make a hobby of viewing and studying a particular type of space: such enthusiasts might tour around the world to

contemplate its tallest buildings, different old towns (where a city began), or ancient ruins. As an example Bauckham (2013) has studied 'groundhoppers' or people passionate about getting to know in detail through direct observation the many different (association) football grounds on which the world game is routinely played.

Conclusions

These seven types of spaces are perceivable by way of some or all of the following properties: visual, olfactory, tactile, and auditory (including little or no sound). That is, they are available to us through our senses. Moreover, some serious pursuits have core activities that are spatially anchored in more than one of the seven types. Thus, athletes have space to be conquered and another space to use as a resource; the painter has an atelier (resource) and one or more exhibition venues (showcase).

This foregoing is not necessarily an exhaustive list of the types of spaces in which the core activities constituting serious leisure and devotee work are pursued. As with all early conceptual work on the SLP, the *modus operandi* here is exploration. In other words, I want with this article to put on the table some ideas about space and its effects while participating in the serious pursuits. These ideas can serve as sensitizers for recognizing the spatial properties of the serious leisure/devotee work experience in the activity under study.

What about casual and project-based leisure? Are there not spaces within which the core activities comprising these two forms are carried out? Of course there are. And those spaces should likewise influence the meanings that the projects and casual activities have for participants. How often have we endured an evening in a restaurant which is too noisy or too hot? (That the food is good or bad is not a spatial issue.) Or consider giving a public talk as a one-off project where acoustics, sight lines and lighting might be problematic. A typology of the spaces of the core casual activities is possible, but probably not yet possible for the core activities of project-based leisure. We presently lack sufficient data on the latter with which to construct a valid spatial typology, however preliminary. As for the former constructing such a typology will be a big undertaking, for casual leisure is a much larger, and probably more diverse, field of interests than that of the serious pursuits.

So, we have some ground to cover. Our ethnographic understanding of leisure of all kinds will be the richer for having paid closer attention to this heretofore ignored dimension of the geography of leisure.

Notes

- 1 The serious pursuits are comprised of those known as serious leisure and those referred to as devotee occupations. The justification for blending these two lines of leisure and work is set out in Stebbins (2012).
- 2 In activity participation the hobbyist steadfastly does a kind of leisure that requires systematic physical movement, has inherent appeal, and is pursued within a set of rules. Often the activity poses a challenge, though always a non-competitive one.

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