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Up In Smoke: The Place of the Modern American Cigarette

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Up In Smoke: The Place of the Modern American Cigarette

Abstract

Since its discovery, the use of tobacco products has acted as a form of meditation, social engagement, and reprieve. In the era following the late 1950's, designated "smoking areas," whether sequestered informally by social constraints or formally by the law, have led to a culture of very "implaced" cigarette smoking. These have become places of escape, places of exile, and places of compromise. This paper explores what it means to belong, and not to belong, to these places, and the role of designated smoking areas in the formation of our culture.

Keywords

Cigarettes, philosophy, place, smoking, designated smoking areas, implacement, conflict, compromise

Disciplines

American Material Culture | American Popular Culture | Other Philosophy | Philosophy

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An Essay on the Human Condition

“I don’t know. Everything. Living. Smoking” – John Paul Sartre (answering the question “What is the most important thing in your life?”) (Frost)

There is something about hearing the crack and decrescendo of a match strike, something about seeing the way the paper peels back, revealing the secret cocktail of smoldering chemical and plant material as it flakes into ash and dust, something about the way the smoke curls up and wanders away, mixing in with the easy punctuation of conversation with friends, as it lazily scrawls new thoughts across the night air. There is something about smoking cigarettes that extends far beyond the biological and chemical pathways in the mind of the smoker. This something draws him to emerge from work, from play, from the mundane sequence of daily activities, and into the place in which he can gain a brief respite to dwell in the world. This meditative something that resonates is intrinsically tied to the capacity a cigarette break has for forcefully immersing us in the world for a moment. Since the 1950s, the places in which a person may engage in this pause have become much more structured. Designated “smoking areas,” whether sequestered informally by social constraints or formally by the law, have led to a culture of very “implaced” cigarette smoking. These have become places of escape, places of exile, and places of compromise.

Since the design and implementation of smoking bans and designated smoking areas, cigarette smoking has become an increasingly “placed” activity. The first government mandated smoking restriction occurred in 1975 in Minnesota (Minnesota Clean Indoor Air Act). Since that point, smoking has become a more and more segregated activity, isolated legally and culturally. Moving to a specific place for a particular, brief amount of time thoroughly implaces the smoker. This momentary intermission from one space-time into another serves to quickly re-ignite the smoker’s awareness of the unique power and position of each of these experienced realities.

The act of stepping out to smoke a cigarette forces awareness of implacement physically, temporally, and socially. Physically, it is a sensual experience. It stimulates taste, sight, sound, feel and smell. As we explore our external world and our place therein we do so through the experience of the extension of our physical bodies. Taking a break from whatever activities may fill the mundane hours just to experience a brief moment of intense and conscious change in environmental stimuli therefore has a way of re-equilibrating the senses and reminding us of place.

This same feeling is expressed in cultures worldwide. In Hindi, the colloquial expression for having a cigarette is directly translated as “drinking a cigarette in.” This can be understood as the deepening interconnectedness with our world that smoking breaks bring both physically and temporally. Taking a discrete amount of time in which to immerse oneself in an alternate, if similar, reality rebalances the smoker’s perception of situational time. For instance, professionals in high stress, fast-paced, and repetitive environments, such as mining, food service, and construction work, are statistically most likely to smoke (Sifferlin). This is not a matter of simple coincidence or stress-reducing

chemical reactions. These types of jobs have a tendency to blur the perceived boundaries of finite space and time, which is extremely disorienting. Dan Yount, a server at the Blue Parrot Bistro in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, says, “It’s easy for me to lose track of myself and what I’m supposed to be doing when too many tables come in at once. Even when I do find a rhythm, it’s often not in synch with that of other people or the clock. Stepping out is a way for me to gather myself in a quiet peaceful place.” Designated smoking areas really are places of gathering. There, people congregate to but are also supported by the space. They are typically small spaces with locations to sit comfortably and a roof, creating an insular feeling. Smoking allows a break from harried unstructuredness into a place of gathering up and supporting.

The people who congregate within and the people who chose to remain outside of a designated smoking area further mould the boundaries and content of the places they occupy. Given the nature of places and those that abide within them, these physical and socio-emotional divisions arise concurrently and codependently. Because of this, entering the space-time of a cigarette break in a designated smoking area provides a method of social escapism. Nearly all occupants of this odd, fleeting, mini-culture are strangers when they first enter, but will share the intimate ephemeral experience of rebalancing their spatio-temporal perception. It is rare for smokers to remain strangers by the end of a cigarette. As Austin Ellefson, a student and smoker, claims, “you can, even without knowing anyone, go into a smoking area and strangers become acquaintances, if not friends. Anywhere in the world, I can get to know someone, know their names, share a totally temporary and meaningful experience, then walk away.” No social obligation is felt other than brief company, allowing the smokers to share with each other as much as

they are comfortable, creating an entirely new social reality that is crystallized into beautiful isolation. This new metaphysical position informs the way in which a smoker receives and experiences the physical world around herself.

While designated smoking areas breeds the opportunity for novel, strongly activity-bound, socially cohesive placement, tying smoking to a restricted area also diminishes the range of the individual smoker's feeling of "their own place." The modern American cigarette smoker has become a citizen in part-time exile. As of this year, 27 states hold bans on smoking in enclosed public spaces (American Non-Smoker's Rights Foundation). Ten states have no legislation banning smoking in any non-government owned spaces, but only one (Oklahoma) restricts local governments from enacting their own smoking laws (American Non-Smoker's Rights Foundation). Additionally, many municipalities and privately owned businesses have enacted more stringent smoking bans. For instance, Warren Wilson College, a private institution in North Carolina, confines smoking to designated gazebos on campus. The severity and extent of smoking bans varies by location, but they typically result in an allocation of designated smoking areas, whether formally or informally. This sequestration is entirely reasonable and preferable. Second-hand smoke is a documented cause of a host of illnesses and pre-existing condition aggravations. The decision to smoke is a personal one that should not be inflicted upon those who do not chose it for themselves.

However, the reallocation and diminishment of space in which it is acceptable to smoke into designated confined and isolated places can lead smokers to a state of temporary placement in the face of societally forced displacement. Smoking bans forcibly cost the mass of individuals the "dynamic indwelling agent" of the place in

which they felt most able to escape the strains of emotional and mundane life and remind themselves of their active implacement in the world (Casey 355). By removing her ability to engage with and dwell in that place in the same way in which she had imbued it, the place in which she used to smoke is effectively obliterated, leaving the smoker without the place in which she feels most herself, but also lost the portion of herself that *was* that place.

The dwelling and experiencing of the new places that are offered, as “smoker’s stations,” can mitigate this. The social context of smoking and camaraderie bred in sequestered smoking areas leads to a colonization of and feeling of belonging to the new places. Additionally, the abbreviated and ever-changing nature of interactions and thought flow with which a smoker instills a smoking area lend themselves to a shifting social context of brief moments of brilliance that are more easily mutable to a new environment (as opposed to, say, a childhood spent in one home). Additionally, the shared experience of losing implacement and finding a new place can be one of deep bonding, which breeds a strong sense of solidarity. Unification is also especially easy when there is a readily identifiable “other” against which the group can see themselves in contrast.

Smokers and non-smokers often eagerly identify with “their” category, giving themselves a metaphorical place in which to squarely dwell. Often, quitting can be stigmatized as much as beginning to smoke. Aside from the chemically addictive qualities of cigarettes, smokers often find it impossible to quit until they have decided for themselves to do so, regardless of the persuasions of others. If attempts are made under the sway of the two camps before the smoker is “ready,” they will most likely be

unsuccessful due to the thin line dividing the abandoning of a dwelling place and being displaced from it. Instead of searching for the displacement of a journey, the non-voluntary non-smoker is caught in an unfriendly “place-alienation” and a “double sided otherness,” unable to know themselves in the context of either movement or pause (Casey 308). If the smoker is not fully committed to creating a new place in the infinitely undefined space of “not smoking,” he can become lost without familiar landmarks, at which point it is all too easy to return to the familiar homeland of a cigarette smoking habit.

This is further complicated by the interplay of place and occupant. The place becomes an identifier for the one who dwells within it, just as the individual becomes indelibly associated with the place she cultivates. This is true for the metaphysical place of “being a smoker” as well as the physical reality of designated smoking areas. The interdependent and evolving construction of subjective reality of container and contained is witnessed both internally and externally as the “single complex unit [of] *persons-in-place*” (Casey 304). At once, the smoker self-identifies with being one who smokes and one who dwells in the smoking area, while the non-smoker self-identifies conversely. This way of *being-with* the place of the smoker (physical and metaphysical) follows the one who smokes, “occupying interior psychological (and doubtless neurological) places [that are] the determinative loci of [his] life” (Casey 129). At the same time, the two individuals identify each other based on these two factors. The simultaneous self- and other-categorization, however, is further multi-faceted when the two interact, whether it is indirectly or directly. The categories in which the identifier has placed the identified inform her actions toward the subject and the self-elected category of the identifier

fashions the way in which she reacts to the identified. If these are the only clearly recognized features, any perceived categorical biases can quickly lead to misunderstandings and continued resentment.

There seems to be an ongoing territory war in which the rules are unclear, other than a demand by the group of its members to remain loyal and a demand by the individuals of the opposing group not to infringe on their “rights.” Just as much as smokers may resent the group they see as having displaced them, non-smokers can appear to enforce a rhetoric of disdain. The physical isolation of smoking is contingent with a cultural segregation, where smoking is often viewed disdainfully, as a stigmatized and, at times, offensive act. On one hand, the removal of smokers from widely used public resting places and enclosed areas alleviates social tensions by limiting the exposure of non-smokers to cigarette fumes, thereby decreasing possible hostile or resentful interactions stemming from non-voluntary secondhand smoke.

However, the location and structure of many of these designated smoking areas also adds to anti-smoking social pressure, as they are typically placed in high traffic or very visible areas. For instance, the “smoking gazebos” of Warren Wilson occupy a central mound at the heart of each quad, surrounded by sidewalks. “I felt like I was being put on show when I smoked in the gazebo, being judged by strangers for actions that were entirely personal and had no influence on them,” said Brooke Elmi, a visitor to the campus. This has an interesting effect in that it further divides the society of Warren Wilson as a whole while simultaneously creating a more closely-knit community within the smoking students that gather in these places. This is fairly typical of the greater society falling under smoking bans and restrictions. Many non-smokers will be familiar

with the reluctance of huddled smokers to make eye contact with passers-by. Due to continued social isolation or open condemnation, smokers may feel as though even their newly personal places may be under threat of further segregation and spatial limitation.

This feeling of displacement cannot ultimately be rectified and can leave even the most accommodating and understanding smoker with some feeling of resentment.

Dwelling in and claiming new places certainly aids in keeping the smoker from experiencing a total lack of “a place to go,” but even so, the original place of escape for which the displaced yearns can never be rediscovered. The particularity and power of the container is altered, and therefore destroyed when the contained is removed from therein. At the same time, the scars of this forcible removal will always disfigure the contained, so that it will never properly fit into the container it left behind. We see the manifestation of this phenomenon when smokers revisit their old haunts in an act of defiance. Not only is smoking itself a violation of the social norm, but wandering outside the proscribed boundaries is an additional act of disobedient audacity. When, after being banned, the smoker ventures into a place in which he used to dwell, he is making a purposeful protest against his confinement, not attempting to reclaim the same area he once had. This defiance further invigorates socially informed stereotypes of smokers by non-smokers and often only breeds more resentment and annoyance due to perceived inconsideration by both parties.

Therefore, we arrive at designated smoking areas as places of compromise. The inability of a smoker to have a cigarette in *his* place causes re-placement and an individual perceptual change in the original site. Conversely, the presence of the smoker inarguably forces an involuntary change in the environment of the non-smoker. This is its

own displacement, but one that in addition to the psychosocial implications of a lost place carries dire health risks. A restaurant certainly becomes a different place when someone lights a cigarette. The food has a different taste, the air feels different in the lungs, it appears cloudy, and the non-smoking diner's relationship to this compulsorily new habitat may range from neutrality to a violent asthma attack. Therefore, isolated smoking areas create a compromise, acknowledging each group and protecting each of their spatio-temporal situations as much as possible without alienating the other.

Designated smoking areas are also typically areas of compromise architecturally. They occupy places that are typically transitional, such as gazebos, porches, doorways, and stairs. These compromises between boundary and movement aid in the creation of designated smoking areas as brief escapist suspensions in the spatio-temporal flow of life. The "in-between" places of the world mediate the conflict between public and private actions, echoing the limbo-like state of the isolated reality of smoking. It's like pressing "pause" on the rapid-fire movement of life for just a moment in which to "drink it in" and come to intimately understand the spaces in between the places of our everyday world. It is thoughtfully taking the time to know and love every "next step" as a unique and independently beautiful place of its own on the path through our places. Stephan Setman, a Gettysburg student and smoker, describes the porch on which he smokes with his roommate with deep fondness; "You know, otherwise it would just be an ugly concrete slab I skip over on my way in the door. Now it's *ours*. The memories make it ours, but we've also changed the physical place." Once these transitional places become colonized by human experience and memory, not only do they become less invisible to

us, but we become more apparent in the places' physical reflection, even if it's only in simple things like the cigarette ash smiley faces Stephen and his roommate construct.

The places on which we chose to compromise define the act of smoking. However, this is compounded by a three-part cycle of mutual influence between the place, the act, and the people. It is nigh impossible to separate out the sequence of influence. Even if not by *causation*, we can safely say by *association*, cigarette smoking in modern American culture has become a place-ful act in that the actors become fully aware of the place they occupy, the place from which they emerge for a break, and the place to which they return. They are place-ful because they define the need for the places they occupy, filling and changing it with each briefly constructed social reality of a shared cigarette, or the equally voluminous thoughts of a lone smoker. And they are place-ful because the metaphysical place of being a smoker, of having places to go, of having to go places is always *being with* them.

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