

Home and Away

A REVIEW BY SIMON SWAFFIELD

Simon Swaffield is a Professor,
Landscape Architecture Group,
PO Box 84, Lincoln University,
Lincoln 7647, Canterbury,
Aotearoa New Zealand.
Telephone: +64-3-325-3804
Fax: +64-3-325-3854
Email: swaffies@lincoln.ac.nz

Reflections upon *The Global Silicon Valley Home: Lives and Landscapes within Taiwanese American Trans-Pacific Culture* by Shenglin Chang, 2006, Stanford University Press, ISBN 0-8047-5215-X.

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME,' declared Dorothy when she returned from her adventures along the Yellow Brick Road. Whether in Kansas or Tienlou, attachment to a particular place we can call home is a sentiment that has been expressed throughout recorded human history. It structures poetic narratives, and continues to be embedded in numerous accounts of everyday life within popular culture.¹ The idea of home is also closely tied to a set of related constructs, including place, dwelling, neighbourhood and region, all of which have been assigned normative value in the theory and practice of landscape architecture.² It is thus part of the conceptual foundations of our discipline.

In traditional accounts, home is part of a duality: home and homeless; home and away; homeland and foreign land. So are its related concepts: place and placelessness,³ dwelling and alienation,⁴ neighbour and stranger. One of the most archetypal human stories involves the hero or heroine leaving home on a quest to encounter a range of new experiences and challenges. They return richer and wiser, or destitute and in need of familial love and attention. Either way, home provides the continuing point of reference. In landscape architectural practice, this normative value is frequently translated into a design goal to strengthen a sense of place and neighbourhood, and to heighten the authenticity of dwelling.

However, not everyone returns home. There is an equally compelling human story of migration, of the search for a new home in a new place, and its construction. While the narrative of migration is as old as that of home, this dimension of human experience is growing ever more significant, as pressures of population growth have combined with new technologies to enable large numbers of people to move relatively easily over immense distances. Global geopolitics are now fundamentally structured by the consequences of modern mass migration, and appear destined to remain so, as the effects of global warming intensify the resource limitations in many regions.

Much scholarship and research upon migration has been focused upon the challenges of making a new home in an unfamiliar landscape. The emphasis may be historical, exploring the way that landscapes have been reshaped by colonial cultures, bringing Old World concepts and organisms into new environments,⁵ or it may be more contemporary in focus.⁶ In most cases, there is an underlying

story about the impact of cultural relocation upon the migrants or their new home environment or both, and the challenge of re-establishing a sense of identity and belonging. Indeed, much of the landscape literature concerning place and region involves a subtext of the need for new inhabitants to relearn how to read landscape processes,⁷ and to reconstruct cities and homes in ways that acknowledge the underlying landscape character and capability.⁸

From this perspective, the current globalisation of economies, technology and communication is typically seen as a challenge to traditional landscape architectural imperatives of dwelling and placemaking, and new strategies such as bioregionalism are advocated as a form of resistance and as a reaffirmation of home.⁹

In *The Global Silicon Valley Home*, Chang investigates an alternative perspective of migration, which has hitherto received less critical attention. Based upon a PhD study of the lives of Taiwanese engineers and their families who have migrated to the US, she describes an emerging Trans-Pacific culture in which these international commuters have established and maintained two homes, one in the US and one in Taiwan. Her book focuses on how they have constructed their personal identities in new ways to enable them to make sense of living life in two places at once.

Chang opens her investigation with personal and family stories of migration and dislocation, grounding her understanding initially in the values of home expressed in traditional Chinese culture, and the way these were challenged through both enforced and voluntary migration. She moves on to report and reflect upon the experiences of a new generation of migrants, which she interprets as part of a new postmodern fluidity of identity. She traces the way their lives are structured by the ability to repeatedly move between homes, in both material and virtual ways, shifting seamlessly between identities. She also explores some of the tensions this transnational shifting of identity creates: the temptations of status seeking, the sometimes strained relationships between locals and commuters, and, in a reference to traditional Chinese folklore, the apparent need for returning migrants to display the 'beautiful clothes' that symbolise their success.

Chang draws upon postmodern concepts such as a 'third space' of liminality¹⁰ to interpret her subjects' experiences, and she places emphasis upon the necessity for these migrants to continually renegotiate their identities. She sees this as one of the opportunities of a globalising world, concluding that her case studies reveal 'the possibility of boundless and diverse ways of shaping the relationship between where we live and who we are' (p 230).

The arguments of *The Global Silicon Valley Home* are conceptually well grounded in a wider literature, richly illustrated by empirical examples and clearly written. However, it is not a classic. The book reads more as a shifting mosaic of examples, rather than a compelling narrative, and I reached the end with a sense of unnecessary repetition. At the same time there are many questions left unasked. Three points in particular are worthy of note.

The first is the question whether the experience of constructing an identity between two geographically distant homes is really a new phenomenon. Social elites in many cultures throughout history have maintained more than one home,

particularly in regions with very hot or humid summers. Indeed, much of the Pastoral tradition in Europe articulates this duality, which became fundamental to the English landscape tradition. There are similar examples around the world. So how has this annual urban–rural migration structured identities? In what ways are the identities of the new generation of Trans-Pacific migrants different? It seems they are, but how fundamental are the differences, and why?

A second set of questions arises from the links between normative values of home and conventional landscape architectural practice. Chang briefly considers the opportunities for building neighbourhood relationships for migrants in their Silicon Valley homes, but does not follow the argument through to ask the fundamental question of how a shifting set of identities might reorder or transform traditional design agendas? There is surely a potentially strong conceptual connection here with the landscape urbanism movement,¹¹ which deserved exploration.

Finally, the optimism that Chang expresses about the future potentials of multiple identities is open to question, in the context of debates over peak oil and climate change. As a global migrant myself, I am acutely conscious of the fact that the postwar generations in the Western world have been uniquely privileged in our access to relatively cheap and fast long-distance travel. It is this ability to fly with relative ease across the world that has enabled my generation of migrants to maintain physical contact with homes and families left behind, and to construct a different type of dual identity. What will happen if and when the friction of distance reasserts itself? Will we maintain dual virtual identities, or is the experience of being there irreplaceable?

The particular appeal of Chang's book, therefore, is less in the detail of her theorised accounts, but rather more in the reflections they stimulate about contemporary ideals of place and home. The questions it provokes provide a good reason to include the text in university libraries and on the bookshelves of scholars with an interest in changing cultures.

NOTES

- 1 The title of this piece, 'Home and Away', is taken from a popular Australian TV series.
- 2 See Swaffield, SR (2002) *Theory in Landscape Architecture*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, for a selection of recent theoretical writings.
- 3 Relph, E (1976) *Place and Placelessness*, London: Pion.
- 4 Heidegger, M (1975) Building Dwelling Thinking, in *Poetry Language Thought*, A Hofstadter (trans) New York: Harper & Row.
- 5 See Alfred Crosby's account in *Ecological Imperialism*, and Tim Flannery's in *The Future Eaters*.
- 6 For example, see Helen Armstrong's account of migrant communities in Australia: Armstrong, H (2004) Making the Unfamiliar Familiar: Research Journeys towards an understanding Migration and Place, *Landscape Research* 29(3), pp 237–260.
- 7 Spirn, A (1998) *The Language of Landscape*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- 8 Hough, M (1990) *Out of Place: restoring identity to the regional landscape*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

- 9 Thayer, R (2003) *Lifeforce: Bioregional thought and practice*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 10 Taken from the writings of Edward Soja.
- 11 Waldheim, C (2002) Landscape Urbanism: A genealogy, *Praxis Journal* (4), pp 10-17.