A Place in Mind is the result of Avi Friedman's worldwide quest for successful environments where people congregate and feel comfortable. Whether he writes of the conviviality of a teahouse in Istanbul; the public art of Nunavut's capital, Iqaluit; the serenity of Assisi; or the architectural harmony of neighborhoods in London and Amsterdam, Avi Friedman conveys his excitement at discovering people-friendly places—antidotes to social isolation.

Searching for good places—authentic places—and wondering about the disappearance of others, are at the heart of A Place in Mind. The author reflects on the design of markets, the evolution of building methods, the need for historic preservation, the relationship between cities and suburbs and the unraveling of human relations in North America.

"Good places know how to engage and keep one coming back. We may stumble across them by accident or be directed by others. Such places need to be experienced firsthand, appreciated, and kept among our treasured artefacts."
(From the Introduction.)

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Urban Studies

$19.95

Véhicule Press
I was aching from head to toe when I woke up, feeling feverish and drowsy. I realized that I had the flu. I returned to the comfort of my bed. Peering through the window, I saw snow drifting across the yard. On the radio, the weatherman promised a bitterly cold day. I wanted to stay home. I tried to figure out how I could avoid an afternoon meeting that I was supposed to chair at work, but I had no choice; people were coming from out of town, so I would wait a while, load myself up with tea and medicine, and venture out.

It was lunchtime when Montreal’s underground Métro line brought me to my regular stop. As I made my way to the exit, I caught a glimpse of a food court in an adjacent mall and was lured by a poster featuring a steaming bowl of soup. “I should have a bowl before I head to the office,” I thought, recalling the medicinal wonders attributed to chicken soup.

I approached one of the eateries, grabbed a plastic tray, and placed it on a metal counter. Oversized illuminated images showing combination dinners and their prices were featured on a back wall. I gave my order to a young man wearing a hairnet. He went to the counter, removed a lid from a large pot, and poured the contents of a ladle into a Styrofoam cup. I paid, moved to a nearby stand from which I got a plastic spoon, a packet of salt, and a few napkins, and walked to the seating area.

A row of cafeteria-like tables with seats affixed to the floor lined a wall. I noticed an empty table, removed my heavy winter gear,
and squeezed myself into the gap between the table and the seat. The place started to fill up. Lunchtime patrons lined up in front of counters, got their food, and scouted for empty seats. I looked at the high ceiling. Painted black, it was daunting with exposed ducts and conduits. The sparse light fixtures cast a soft yellow shade that draped a monochrome veil over the place. It was a surreal scene—a crowd of well-dressed people, many sitting alone under dim light in the dead of winter, eating food whose culinary roots were in places half a world away.

I wondered why I disliked that place and moment. My illness was probably the root cause, I decided. My body ached, my state of mind was weak, I did not relate to the people who shared the food court, and my spirits were down. Did the locale, the built environment, have something to do with it? It had. It offered no comfort. It did nothing to soothe and improve my state. It failed to welcome, and lacked the touches needed to turn a passerby into a guest or resident. Designed for short-term use, it did not evoke trust and was devoid of sense of place. It did not offer the nurturing experience I was craving.

What do I mean by “place”? Places give the people who inhabit, visit, and use them an identity. Those with an authentic atmosphere inspire people and draw them into some kind of relationship. They are characterized by signs and symbols unique to each.

How do we assess a place? Our senses give us clues, but few places reveal their identity all at once, although we may like or dislike them in an instant. In others, we may take our time. We tend to erase the recollection of banal, unimportant spots from our thoughts and to savor the memory of others for a long time.

Places can be engaging. They can turn a passive visitor into an active participant in a life scene. A walk, or a climb, to a site with a breathtaking view can work wonders on the body. A visit to a museum can provoke ideas that inspire us. Places can evoke spiritual experiences. The red glow of a desert sunset can spark deep emotions of submission to nature’s powers. Some quality in a place may put us in a mood to help foster new relationships or strengthen old
ones. A chance encounter with a stranger in a small corner café may turn into a lifelong courtship.

“Good” places engage us and keep us coming back. We may stumble across them by accident or be directed there by others, but they must be experienced firsthand to be appreciated, and kept among our treasured artefacts. Special spots can be found anywhere: in a posh quarter of town or a rundown district. They can be the size of a small room or on the scale of a civic square. They can be adorned or bare, and of any shape. What makes them unique is our notice of them and their effect on us.

The search for evocative places, and wonder at the disappearance of many of them, are at the heart of this book. It is a reflection on places that touch life and affect people in positive ways. I have pondered the characteristics of such sites and have searched for the subtle and overt qualities that make us appreciate, or become disconnected from, a location.

My quest took me to spiritual places, marketplaces, walking places, very cold and warm ones, some close to home, others remote. Some made themselves known unexpectedly, and stirred questions and ideas. I went on to look into their histories. I studied their effect on civilizations and their inhabitants. I reflected on their uniqueness.

I explored the roots and the evolution of the places I discuss—stumbling onto a public market at the crack of dawn in Dalian, China triggered reflections on the value of such places in our cities. I thought about the disappearance of folk art from neighborhoods when I accidentally walked into a collection of life-sized soapstone sculptures in a Canadian Arctic town. I considered the environmental relationship between cities and their surroundings when visiting Fargo, North Dakota, on a frigid day. I reminisced about the unraveling of human relations in North America when I was taken by the warmth and camaraderie among spectators at the horse race of Casole d’Elsa in Tuscany. When I strolled through an Israeli neighborhood I was struck by the relationship between the poor state of fitness among many of the young and the disappearance of
pathways from community planning.

After sipping mint tea in an age-old teahouse in Istanbul, I thought about the evolution of building methods and reflected on the disappearance of craftsmanship. While in densely-populated Hong Kong, I wondered why we resist neighborhoods with higher densities, and I studied urban sprawl and the effect that this will have on the planet. When I dined in the kitchen of Pina and Felice in Volterra, Italy, and admired the cultivated landscape and the centuries-old buildings, I pondered the notion of, and need for, historic preservation.

What, then, is the nature of places? Why do some locations resonate more deeply within us than others? Why do we experience some places as nurturing? What is it in certain areas that fosters community—and in others that mitigates against it? What are the characteristics of a “positive” or “good” place? What lessons can they teach us that we can apply when planning future urban communities? The spots and ideas assembled here are meant to offer a looking-glass into what places are, how they came to be, and the lessons they can teach.
Contents

DEPARTURE  9

ONE
Teatime in Istanbul  13

Two
Fiore Di Zucchini in Montepulciano  24

Three
Crowding in Hong Kong  35

Four
Turnips in Dalian  47

Five
Hugging in Casole D' Elsa  59

Six
Swings in Petach Tikva  67

Seven
Wandering in Tijuana  79

Eight
E-mails from Broughton Hall  91

Nine
The Winds of Fargo  104
Ten
The Heart of York  113

Eleven
The Kitchen of Pina and Felice  125

Twelve
Pathways in Kfar Sava  134

Thirteen
London’s Humility  144

Fourteen
The Soapstones of Iqaluit  152

Fifteen
Tall Thinking in Amsterdam  161

Sixteen
The Spirit of Assisi  172

Sources 181
Acknowledgements 196
Illustrations 197