

Assignment 1

Q. What is the distinction between Center and Periphery?

'Center' and 'periphery' exist in a spatial relationship that can be metaphorically applied to social relationships. In the context of urban landscapes, where social dynamics overlay spatial relationships, understanding the distinction between center and periphery requires consideration of both the literal and metaphoric. In fact, because social relationships can actually change the patterning of spatial relationships, the meaning of center and periphery relevant to this discussion must be discerned from the interlacing of the metaphoric with the literal.

Center, as an abstract spatial term, is a point defined by its relative distance from a set of related points surrounding it. It is the point that best represents the relationship and connection between all the other points. It is marked by such characteristics as balance and stability because its periphery may exist in any number of arrangements. In contrast, peripheral points are marked by their ability to fluctuate without necessarily altering the center; they may be unstable and bear little or no relation to each other besides the common connection to the center. This is not to say that the peripheral points have no power to alter the center point, but because the center is defined in relation to the entire periphery, it can only be moved if the majority of the periphery shifts to favor a different center point.

This spatial distinction on its own, however, is an incomplete and misleading guide to understanding the distinction between the spatial-social center and periphery in

urban landscapes. The center of a city need not be the geometric center within a city's boundaries (though it often is close), and social peripheries often occupy spatial centers such that those at "the margins of society" can live in "the heart" of a city that itself is considered the center of capitalism, democracy, creativity, etc.

Overlaid with its social implications, the spatial distinction between center and periphery becomes more complex. The social center locates itself spatially at social gathering points, so social centers can simultaneously occupy multiple locations. In many western cities, social power centers are located where the powerful people live (often outside the center city) and work (often within it). Social-spatial centers build on the energy of social and cultural exchanges and communication, facilitated by physical proximity.

The periphery, on the other hand, is a place of diffusion (literally in the case of suburban and rural peripheries, but also metaphoric in terms of the social distance between groups at the social periphery) and difference. The social periphery in the spatial center is created by social exclusion in the form of linguistic, economic, and institutional barriers. As with the physical periphery of urban areas, communication and exchange at the social periphery is limited because it must be mediated by the identity of the center – the identity that connects different peripheral populations. While the center is defined by a strong, unified identity that develops through a high density of social exchange, at the periphery resistance to the values and identity of the center emerges in terms of both urban form (i.e. building types, street widths, landscaping, etc.) and social behavior. Alternate, competing interpretations of the central identity emerge, many with their own sub-centers occupying territory in the spatial-social periphery.