

# 01

## **Get Outta Town!**

### **Deaf Geography**

#### **Introduction**

Deaf Americans share the same spaces with the hearing culture, but the ways that Deaf people interact physically and visually in the environment is different. Though the features of our towns and cities may appear to be the same for both sets of people, the geography is experienced in very different ways. Each of us interacts with the world in slightly different ways, but traveling while Deaf provides even more interesting encounters with physical space. Let's take a look at Deaf geography and how this subject is adding interesting perspectives to the larger field of geography.



How would your travel experiences be different if you weren't able to hear sounds around you?

## Geography of People

When we think of geography, we think about the physical aspects of the land masses here on planet Earth. We think of mountains, plains, deserts, rivers, and other purely natural aspects of the landscape. Perhaps we also think about the positioning of borders, marking off one country from another, one state or province from another, and the man-made features that exist, like cities, farming, roads, and so on. Humans have changed the landscape in large and small ways, in almost every corner of the globe *okay, a globe is a sphere, so it doesn't have any corners, of course! But you get* . So, **geography** is actually the science of the physical aspects of the earth and its atmosphere, along with the relationship of people to places.

The word geography comes from the ancient Greeks, who took *geo*, meaning

earth, and *graphein*, putting them together to be “earth description” or “earth writing.” The modern study of geography is a combination of natural sciences and social sciences—studying how humans interact with their environments and vice versa. In more recent decades, geography has turned even further towards a relational understanding of place and space. All people have a set of spaces that they create and live in: home, work, or school, leisure spaces, transportation space, religious places, and more. Everyone exists in these spaces, but Deaf people also need to create additional spaces to communicate visually—signing spaces so they can interact with others freely.

**Deaf geography** is a subfield of geography and Deaf Studies, concerned with the manners in which Deaf people interact with space and place in unique ways due to the visual nature of sign language communication. The field of geography has been expanding in recent decades to include the idea that individual actors can produce spaces and that geography includes the performers acting on physical space with their bodies. Geography can include inhabiting space and defining it in terms of lived experience of people and cultures. Deaf geography contributes unique insights into notions of place from the perspective of a linguistic minority, including performing in space *asyoudowhenyoucommunicateinsignlanguage*, embodying space *expressingspacethroughthebody*, and sensations of the landscape.

Deaf people have a unique relationship to space because of the signing space required for communication. A single Deaf person walking around in the world cannot create a space for visual communication alone but needs at least one other person to sign with to begin creating space for communication. Using sign language defines and creates new spaces, so every signed interaction makes a new and singular space. By gathering together in larger groups, Deaf people create **Deaf space**—spaces inhabited by people using sign language which is arranged favorably for such communication.



It's important to consider the space people need when communicating in ASL

This is where Deaf geography intersects with politics and the framing of disability by mainstream society. Deaf people created Deaf spaces within the larger space of American culture by interacting within Deaf schools, Deaf clubs, and at Deaf events. Any gathering of Deaf individuals creates a unique and different space, a space that is by and for the Deaf *and hearing people who identify with the community*. Hearing people who are not part of this interaction are not included in this space. The creation of space for communication is a central feature of Deaf life. The oralism movement in Deaf education attempted to remove Deaf people from these spaces and to obliterate these spaces, trying to force Deaf people to integrate into the space of the hearing world when, for many, the hearing world is not a comfortable space.

Another feature of space is the way we think about it: Good memories of that great barbecue at the park may give you fond feelings about the park, while the corner where you fell off your bike and broke your arm may have negative associations. How we conceptualize space affects how we feel about it and how we will use it in the future. When we conceive of places in relation to ourselves, we can understand how one space can feel welcoming, while another may feel foreign and uncomfortable. Being in a room of people speaking a language you don't understand can be uncomfortable, but it may be a good challenge to experience another culture. At the same time, if you never had a comfortable place to return to, where you felt you could communicate and were understood, that would be very difficult. This is what it might feel like for Deaf people if Deaf spaces were eliminated and sign language was banned. So Deaf history is intricately intertwined with the creation of Deaf spaces, and the vulnerability of these spaces to pressure from the dominant culture in the United States.

### **Ideal Space for Signing**

We often don't think about how spaces may be more or less accommodating for people who use sign language, but the architecture and arrangement of furniture can make a great deal of difference in how functional space is for the Deaf. Gallaudet University has even released a set of **DeafSpace Guidelines**—a set of over 150 architectural details that address the needs of Deaf people in the built environment. The needs of the Deaf include allowing spatial orientation and a wide range of sight, larger spaces for conversation because signing space is bigger than talking space, clear spaces to walk and sign at the same time without hazards, lighting that is adequate but not glaring, and acoustics that do not create distracting noise environments for Deaf people with different levels and types of hearing.



With some extra thought and sensible design, spaces can be better for deaf and hearing people

The trend, called **universal design**, is a set of ideas about making spaces and products that are universally accessible and comfortable to the elderly, people with disabilities, and people without disabilities. Part of the concept is that the adaptations that need to be made to accommodate all types of disabilities inherently make spaces and products better for everyone, disabled or not.

Here are some specific features that help make a space Deaf-friendly:

- Windows that provide diffuse, rather than glaring, light
- Curved walls instead of right angles to increase range of sight
- Partial-height walls so that people can see longer distances
- Wider hallways to facilitate walking and signing
- Wooden floors so that banging from other rooms can be felt

- Open kitchens for visual accessibility to surrounding rooms

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