Community values in cultural landscape decision making: developing recommendations for ensuring planning processes include differing expectations of communities of interest

Subjective, qualitative data on community place values and meanings are difficult to incorporate into actual planning decisions. There are several factors which contribute to this problem. I propose that one of the principal contributing factors is the multiplicity of community values which results in differing expectations not only within and among resident communities, but also among other communities of interest including planners, heritage practitioners, developers and landowners.

I became aware of this problem while working with a heritage committee on a local town council in Ontario. Community values were increasingly referred to in official plans and documents, and a variety of methodologies were used to identify and assess them. However, it became apparent that these efforts did not usually result in planning decisions which actually took community values into account. The resulting gap which exists between information gathered about community values and actual planning decisions is the problem being investigated in this research.

The study

The aim of the research is to critically examine the role which community values play in planning decisions made about cultural landscapes. In achieving this aim, there are several purposes:

- To better understand community values.
- To determine how communities values can be incorporated into the planning process, particularly in areas of decision making.
- To understand the relationships between different values and expectations of various communities of interest.

The study has been divided into three phases over a three year period including:

1. Background research including an analysis of the field of cultural landscape conservation and planning practice.

2. Focused research including examination of literature, documents, case studies, and interviews with planners, heritage practitioners, developers, landowners and local communities.

3. Analysis of the cultural landscape decision-making process and development of recommendations.

Much of the literature on place meanings and values is multi-disciplinary. Thus a wide range of literature is being examined in areas of geography, planning, landscape architecture, architecture, heritage studies, sociology, and environmental psychology. This diverse body of literature points to several possible explanations about why community value information is not being used in planning decisions made about cultural landscapes.
Three possible explanations arise:

1. **The nature of community values**
   Values are slippery, subjective and difficult to identify and define. As much as we would like them to, they don't fit neatly into categories set out in heritage or planning practice and legislation.

2. **Multiplicity of values**
   There are multiple meanings and values within and among communities which make cultural values extremely transient and complex.

3. **Traditional planning structure**
   Traditional planning structure is rigid, inflexible and heavily influenced by the objective scientific approach, making it difficult to incorporate values which are subjective, fluid and difficult to quantify.

These explanations will be investigated in detail through further focused research of the literature, a review of current planning practice, and the examination of a number of case studies. Case study data will be collected through interviewing various communities of interest including local communities, planners, landowners and developers. This information will be used to set out a clear picture of what is happening in cultural landscape conservation.

Case studies which meet several specific criteria will be selected. As the research is concerned with the process of identification and assessment of community values as well as the results of these processes, cases must have previously been through a planning process in which community values were identified, and a decision made concerning future changes to the local cultural landscape. These criteria will make it possible to determine whether community values were in fact taken into account and whether the decisions were successful and to whom.

Additional criteria for selecting case studies are their urban and suburban locations. These areas are of particular interest as they consist of the everyday ordinary landscape which tends to be overlooked in studies about cultural landscapes. Urban sprawl and recent moves towards urban consolidation through infill development in older suburbs are also cause for further research in this area.

**Meanings, values and the planning process**

Two streams of thought have evolved around the study of cultural landscapes. One is the humanistic approach focusing on the concept of human meaning and value in the landscape. The other is the environmental positivist approach which views the natural environment alone as shaping the human environment.

The humanistic approach is the theoretical basis used in this research. This approach views the landscape as a cultural construct, with culture and nature
each playing a role in its formation. Most of the writing about this concept emerged from cultural geographers in the 1970s and 1980s, including D. Lowenthal, D. W. Meinig, J. B. Jackson, Yi-Fu Tuan and E. Relph. However, more recently landscape architects, architects, historians and environmental psychologists have joined the discussion, building on the theoretical basis of the concept of place meanings and values drawn from geography, as well as sociology, anthropology and psychology.

The humanistic approach has played a large part in directing the heritage assessment process to look more at symbolism and meaning, and to rely less on traditional assessment of the tangible elements of place. Nevertheless, there is a history of continued reliance on physical assessment in landscape planning. Pearson and Sullivan for example, argue that money spent on the conservation of tangible elements of heritage compared with amounts spent on identifying and conserving places of social value demonstrate this ongoing assumption that physical fabric is the most important element in heritage conservation.

Contributing to the focus on physical fabric of place is a general lack of understanding about what social values are and how they can be used. Sociological and social psychological theories concerning the relationships between groups of people and their physical environment can provide further explanations about community values and meaning. For example, 'social identity theory' focuses on defining the structure and processes behind the identity of social groups. In his study of place identity, Uzzell cites a model of 'social identity theory' derived from the work of Breakwell and Tajfel, which treats identity as a dynamic product of the interaction between the individual and social context. He uses this model to suggest that people can have a strong sense of belonging to and identity with a place, very much like individuals can belong to a social group and have an identity of themselves and that group.

Another model which may aid our understanding of place meanings and values is 'shared, collective or social memory'. These terms refer to memory which goes beyond the individual to include a larger group or community. Shared memory has been examined by sociologists such as Emile Durkheim and Maurice Halbwachs, human geographers such as Lynch, Relph, and Lowenthal; and cultural and social anthropologists such as Evans-Pritchard. In addition, the field of psychology is also gradually moving into this area with work being undertaken to broaden the concept of ‘memory’. These explanations, however, are highly diverse and complex as places have multiple meanings and values for both individuals and groups.

Ganis also examines the different mental constructs of the professional or expert, and the layperson. The expert's mental construct of a locality is often based on a particular experiential background which may or may not be relevant to that of the community. The expert tends to work on the basis of general principles of planning and development which are context independent and consist of conceptual, abstract, top-down information. This knowledge is often
applied as principles across several localities and ignores the unique details of a specific place. Alternatively, the communal representation of a locality may include activities and elements which are unacceptable to the professional or expert. This local knowledge tends to be more detailed, have a place specific focus and is usually derived from direct experience in a particular locality.

As professional and local knowledge are derived from different contexts and expectations, often the two don’t necessarily arrive at the same conclusions. One example of this phenomenon is presented by Hester in his work with the town of Manteo, North Carolina. Hester found that places identified by planning consultants as significant were different from those identified by the local community. The community identified many ordinary sites such as an old diner, the local dock and a vacant lot where the town’s Christmas tree was erected every year. These sites were referred to by Hester as ‘subconscious landscapes of the heart’, and held important meanings and values for the local residents.

However, even when such local knowledge is gathered, it is not always used in decision making. One reason for this is that techniques involving communities in identifying places of significance and meaning often ignore the goals and expectations of the community. Several community-driven projects are exceptions, as they include specific techniques to increase involvement of communities in decision making. Examples of innovative community-lead projects include Common Ground, Mapping Culture, and the Bookmark Biosphere Reserve habitat and species recovery program. Charrettes, familiar in North America, are another technique used to bring together different interest groups to reconcile conflicting interests, values and philosophies. This technique is growing in Australia with one of its largest held in Coomera, July 1995.

Involvement of communities in all levels of the planning process provides a sense of control. Psychological studies have shown that individuals’ values of a place increase with their sense of control over their environment. One example of the lack of control felt by residents is evident in recent planning decisions for urban infill in older communities. Infill development is one of several measures adopted under the ‘urban consolidation policy’, by the federal government and state governments in Australia and North America. While the benefits of urban consolidation are highly debated by planners and academics, these decisions frequently result in strong opposition from local residents who want the opportunity to express their feelings about what their community means to them.

Conclusions

Much time and effort over the past 20 years has been put into developing new methods and improving existing methods for identifying and assessing social values. For example, the Australian Heritage Commission has organised workshops and produced several working papers in this area. However, if information about these values is not actually considered in planning decisions,
then efforts to identify and assess social or community values are futile. This can result in cynicism and disillusionment among citizens who quickly lose faith in the planning process when they realise their efforts are in vain and they have little or no control over changes to their environment. Therefore, time spent on developing new techniques for gathering information about community meanings and values could be better spent on developing and improving methods for integrating this information into the planning decision making structure.

The research will also contribute to the maintenance of healthy communities. Planning documents and academic literature, including the writing of Hester, Hough, Kaplan, and Lowenthal, stress the significance of legibility, sense of place and the knowledge of one’s roots to their emotional well being. Relph suggests that as residents’ geographical and social knowledge improves, and their intensity of involvement and commitment grows, their attachment to community becomes greater. It follows that residents’ increased involvement in the public participation process may help forge stronger community bonds. This relationship between people’s environment and their emotional and psychological well being has been increasingly recognised in the past decade among environmental psychologists and provides further support for including community values in decisions made about cultural landscapes.

Pearson and Sullivan also point out the need for increased dialogue and exchange of information between the academic and the heritage practitioner, in order to ensure good practice and to strengthen the link between the “intellectual cultural critique” and actual cultural landscape conservation. It is hoped that the practical application of this study to cultural landscape conservation will contribute to strengthening this link.

Many issues have been raised at this point in the research and there will certainly be many more to come. While it is unlikely that all these issues will be addressed within the scope of the study, they provide insight into the problems inherent in the field of cultural landscape conservation and community values. One of the most difficult and important questions arising from the research is: whose expectations and values are important? The multitude of expectations and values within and among communities of interest makes it doubtful whether they can all be included in decision making. Isabel McBryde addresses this plurality of cultural values held by one place for different groups within our society and questions how we can recognise and accommodate disparate values in the management of places. Taylor and Boden also raise several related questions in their examination of Old Red Hill, Canberra. ‘How extensive’, they ask ‘are residents’ values? ‘Are they shared by others who do not live there? ‘Is their significance understood by the broader community?’ And ‘how much weight should professional planners and politicians place on the views of residents’?

It is not the intent of this study simply to confirm whether community values were taken into account in the selected case studies. Rather, the crucial

endnotes

1 Heritage Halton Hills, a Local Architectural Conservation Advisory Committee (LACAC) in Ontario, Canada. Three studies over a three-year period were implemented to identify and assess cultural landscapes. A variety of public participation techniques were used including questionnaires, photographic surveys, focus group meetings and community workshops, to gather information about local community meanings and values.


4 Ibid., p. 309.


7 Uzzell, p. 222.


9 Ibid.

10 Mary Ganis, ‘The “Sense of place” in urban design: The impact of development on professional and lay conceptions of a locality’, People and physical environment research, 47, 1995, pp. 3-6.


questions are: why are community values not often taken into account and how can we improve the planning process, so that local meanings and values become an important and integral part of the decision-making process? Addressing these questions will no doubt contribute to the conservation of places which have meaning and values for individuals and communities.