

Sense of Place in Sustainable Tourism Development

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Abstract: Human response to natural and built surroundings, geography, history and population seeds sense of place. Over time, that response is woven into a shared consciousness by memory, story and experience ultimately imprinting community with an indelible and phenomenal spirit, unique to itself. Tourism is an attractive engine of growth and development; however, when tourism pressures compete with community interests, sense of place is imperiled. That vulnerability is made acute by sense of place's intangibility.

To counter the vulnerability that intangibility creates, we developed a methodology to recognize, analyze, and present sense of place as essential to the sustainability of host communities, cultural sites and tourist destinations. By articulating what is felt, sensed and perceived, we reveal a vital set of assets for consideration in sustainable tourism development policy and planning.

The paper describes our methodology and provides case studies of how we successfully use it with communities and cultural sites to create sustainable development.

What is sense of place?

Human response to natural and built surroundings, geography, history and population seeds sense of place. Over time, that response is woven into a shared consciousness by memory, story and experience ultimately imprinting community with an indelible and phenomenal spirit, unique to itself.

Distinct from written history and quantifiable civic data, sense of place captures authentic identity which is sensed more than measured. To the inhabitants of its neighborhoods and streets, its green space and natural environs, this sense of place expresses the collective conviction of undeniable truth by which a community recognizes itself.

As with a person, sense of place consists of both quantitative and qualitative features. A person may be six feet tall with blue eyes, a receding hairline, and a slight hitch in one leg when he walks up a flight of stairs. A place may have a population of three thousand, six miles of coastline, a Town Meeting form of government, and an aging pier in need of renovation. These features give us a physical description of a person or place but not the identity.

Just as people are shaped by experiences and memories, so is place. Layered onto and absorbed into the physical fabric of place are intangibles, emotional and impressionistic elements generated by human interaction over time. These intangibles, hidden in plain sight, manifest as substantially in the community as do its physical attributes. Always particular and distinct, they define the authentic identity, they define sense of place. Human consciousness responds as powerfully to the identity of a place as it does to the identity of a person.

Why Is Sense of Place Important?

All around the world places are under threat, struggling with the survival and sustainability of their sense of place, their authenticity, and most of all their community. This threat comes from a lack of recognition of sense of place

and results in an imbalance between tourism interests and the community needs.

As a preservationist living in an historic fishing village and working around the world, I have studied and worked with the built form, with building codes and regulations, and with materials analysis as the quantifiable and tangible means by which preservation may be realized. These factors define the traditional approach to preservation and must be honored as such. However, preservation should also honor intangible values, those which could not be studied or evaluated with traditional tools. Our work extends traditional preservation beyond the built form to its contextual significance. We believe that preservation of sense of place is critical to the management of change that inevitably results from the external pressures placed on communities by the micro and macro economic demands inherent in tourism.

For long term viability of tourism destinations, sense of place and development must be mutually enhancing. To promote true sustainability, community preservation needs to balance tangible with intangible values: history with heritage, cellular memory with collective memory, and action with intention. Our planning work allows development to be integrated with community values encouraging sustainability and aligning public and private interests.

Following our analysis, we work with clients to create consistency between our sense of place findings and their proposed development. This consistency mitigates potential negative impacts of development on community, encourages community participation and enhances conservation efforts through local involvement.

Sense of Place Analysis: Methodology

We start by researching geography to see what monumental, physical and natural features have shaped place. From our research into history we find the events and milestones that had an equally shaping impact. In order to understand values and concerns, we research regulatory documents

wherein core intentions and perceptions are expressed in both tone and content. Not only do we review current regulations and planning documents, but we also research the changes to these over time. These changes allow us to understand how civic concerns and issues have evolved. We then do extensive research into the creative and inspirational aspects of place by exploring its writing, art, and music: this body of work is not only embedded in place, but it also portrays character in story, mood and feeling.

During onsite research, we gather insight into the impact of place on people and the impact of people on place. To achieve this, we connect with local residents and visitors in order to find out what drew them. We follow clues and test theories we developed from primary and secondary source material. We explore lifestyle and the deep emotional and impressionistic character of the place. We visit local establishments to overhear the personality of place as described in the daily-ness of the lives of residents and visitors.

Following primary and secondary research, we analyze the quantitative data and the qualitative information gathered in order to define and articulate sense of place. We start by relating our findings to the heart mind and soul: **Mind** (rational, facts): The mind needs a rational, quantitative, factual understanding of what can be seen and measured.

Heart (experiential, stories): The heart needs a qualitative experiential appreciation of what can be sensed and felt.

Soul (emotional, memories): The soul needs an emotional connection to the memories created and the legacy left.

Our description locates place in the psyche through iconic impressions, in the mind through history and geography, in the heart through population and lifestyle, and in the soul through anecdotes and vignettes that illustrate the values, beliefs and characteristics of place.

Case Study: The Dune Shacks of Peaked Hill Bars, Provincetown USA

The dune shacks are located at the tip of Cape Cod, a narrow peninsula jutting into the Atlantic Ocean in southeastern Massachusetts. The fierceness of the tides, the nor'easter storms, the shoals and shallows made this remote shoreline treacherous for ships navigating between Boston and New York; wrecks were common.

Responding to the danger, The Massachusetts Humane Society built the first dune shacks for shipwrecked sailors along the coast of outer Cape Cod. By 1802 the Society was providing a list of these dune shack locations to sailors in case they got into distress.

The station at Provincetown was one of nine federal life saving stations built on Cape Cod in 1872. Local residents were hired to staff these facilities. The work was tiring and dangerous; the residents had a long and difficult journey over sand from Provincetown center just to reach their stations. The unpredictable weather further complicated coming and going from town. As a result, the patrolmen built or adapted the dune shacks originally built by the Massachusetts Humane Society for themselves and their families.

Improvements in navigation technology and the decline of the whaling industry rendered the life-savers redundant by the early Twentieth century and this use of the dune shacks was largely abandoned at that time.

While some shack residents were happy to retreat to the conveniences of the town, by then one of the largest whaling ports in Massachusetts, others continued using their dune shacks, drawn by the tranquility, the harsh landscape, and camaraderie that developed among shack dwellers.

At the same time, Provincetown began to attract artists and writers drawn by the renegade and independent spirit of the town, its natural beauty and Mediterranean light. To this group, the dune shacks provided a remote but safe oasis to explore radical politics and new artistic concepts. The adventure of leaving the urban confines of New York City to find expansiveness, freedom and acceptance made

Provincetown into America's first artist colony. Writers and artists inhabited many of the dune shacks from the turn of the century onward

In 1959 the federal government acquired the land on which the shacks were built and created the Cape Cod National Seashore. Occupants of the shacks were given life tenancy or a 25-year lease. Between 1961 and 1987 more than two dozen of 42 shacks were demolished or condemned. All leases expired in 1984.

Sense of Place: The Dune Shacks

The human story of Provincetown, the dunes and their habitation is one of determination and resilience. Despite the federal boundary line that exists today, the dunes and the dune shacks within them are imprinted on the soul of the community reflecting the spirit of independence and self-reliance that have defined the outer Cape for over three hundred years.

The dune shacks are individual, built of wood and other salvaged materials, generally without plumbing or electricity. Their rugged fragility reminds us of our own impermanence. It is easy to contemplate how quickly, if ignored, the sands would overtake these structures. At the same time, there is a feeling of invincibility about the dune shacks, a refusal to submit to nature entirely, as they re-emerge with creative assistance from their owners each year.

This invincible adaptability, the bond and battle between man and nature is central to the sense of place of the dune shacks.

Threat to Sense of Place

Legislation written specifically for the Cape Cod National Seashore had assured the property owners that their dune shacks would not be condemned. However, after the leases expired in 1984, a lack of maintenance and care by the Park led to demolition by neglect of more than half of dune

shacks under federal jurisdiction. Naturally, the community felt that the promises were being broken.

A difference of opinion about significance existed and local groups mobilized in opposition to the Park's continuing action. They filed for designation of the landscape where the shacks are located as a National Register District to stop further demolition. The shacks may not have fit the Federal criteria but in the collective memory of the community, they held an incredibly significant place.

How Sense of Place Analysis Resolved the Conflict

Reconciling the mission of the Park service with the significance of this landscape to the community required appealing to the enlightened self interest of both parties. Sense of place became critical to bringing them together. By locating the dune shacks in the mind, heart and soul, we were able to describe the tangible and intangible assets that the shacks possessed and define the significance of both. We were able to demonstrate how essential community involvement is to the preservation of the resources. The sense of place methodology confirmed the need for continued community use in order to retain both the collective memory and the cultural significance of the shacks.

Our C-Scape artist-in-residency program is located in one of the shacks closest to the Provincelands Visitor Center. Started in 1995, the program maintains traditional use and local access patterns while conserving and interpreting the underlying cultural resource. Not only does the program allow the dune shack to be conserved at no cost to the Park Service, but it also allows for the dune shack to be interpreted for the public in order to enhance awareness and appreciation of this unique cultural landscape. Further, the dune shack remains a treasured community resource. . Based on our success with the C-Scape Program, the Park Service awarded us a second shack in 2007.

The Fowler Shack is remote and not accessible to visitors. Referring to our work on the sense of place, we

chose to create a writers' program there. Provincetown and the dune shacks in particular have a rich literary history including writers like Tennessee Williams, Eugene O'Neill, Jack Kerouac and Norman Mailer who all spent time in the dune shacks. Our program connects contemporary and aspiring writers to that legacy and perpetuates the community as an artists' colony. At the same time, the program supports the on-going maintenance and conservation of the cultural resource at no cost to the Park.

These sustainable tourism development programs, C-Scape and Fowler, are successful examples of how our sense of place methodology perpetuates collective memory through on-going use of the resources, conserves these resources at minimal cost to management, and enhances the value of the resources for both the community and visitors to the Park.

Case Study: MacMillan Pier, Provincetown USA

Enshrined in our memories is the idea of Provincetown as a bustling fishing harbor. By the mid-1990s almost all of the piers and most of the bustle were gone. The last remaining public commercial fishing pier had fallen into disrepair.

As a result of over-fishing and tight federal limits, the fishing industry has been in steady decline for decades and the town has been forced to transition from a fishing village with a tourist population to a tourism community with a fishing fleet.

Under management by the town for almost 50 years, MacMillan Pier was only minimally maintained and the fees charged for usage were insufficient to cover costs of repair and renovation. A new facility was necessary if Provincetown was going to keep the fishing industry alive.

The Sense of Place of MacMillan Pier

Fishing and whaling are the commercial foundation of this community. MacMillan Pier is our touchstone to an earlier time in the town, a connection to our industrial heritage and the bounty that built the town.

The municipal pier is the traditional gathering point of the town and the heart of its commercial vitality. For many year-round residents a drive to the end of the pier in their pick up trucks to check on the fleet and weather is as important a morning ritual as a cup of coffee with friends.

Socio-economic, demographic and cultural changes to the population could not break the strong bond that the community had with its industrial past or the lifestyle associated with it.

While the heart of the community was supportive of creating a new commercial facility, many felt given the increase in resort tourism, the new pier should be devoted to recreational boating, basically converting an industrial asset into a marina.

This division within the town combined with competing funding requirements created a conflict and provided an opportunity for the town to envision itself and define its identity through its most significant icon. We used our sense of place methodology to balance collective memory with current rules and future hopes.

How Sense of Place Resolved the Conflict

The project was bound by the many local, state and federal regulations for land use, coastal zone management, environmental protection, fisheries management, and regional inter-modal transportation.

While the community and the agencies could disagree over the facts and figures (mind) or their past experiences of MacMillan Pier and the fishing industry (heart), they could agree on the undeniable truth of collective memory (soul). In the collective memory of the community, Provincetown is a place to live and work first, a place to visit and play second. Provincetown embraced its soul rebuilding MacMillan Pier as an industrial facility.

By locating MacMillan Pier in the mind, heart and soul of the community and the funding agencies, we were able to articulate and define enduring community values essential to the sustainability of both the facility and the community itself.

Sense of place analysis provided us with the common language of community intention to direct the planning, funding and construction of the new \$18 million facility. Sense of place allowed us to balance the competing needs of commerce, and tourism, year round residents and seasonal guests, (past, present and future), with a complex matrix of funding sources and requirements.

The result of this project was a major contribution to the sustainable future of Provincetown. The new pier replaces a small outmoded and dangerous facility that limited the town's growth options with:

- A new regional hub for two fast ferries and three regional bus services connecting the town and the region to downtown Boston multiple times per day,
- A 100% increase in the sustainable small boat fish fleet accommodations,
- Accommodation for 14 tourist excursion businesses including sunset sailing and whale watching
- Deep water dockage for tall sailing ships and recreational slips when the fishing fleet is out to sea.

The new facility remains the iconic centerpiece of the downtown. It strengthens the town's historic and commercial character, continues the seafaring tradition and embodies its enduring values. While serving the needs of tourists and visitors, MacMillan Pier is a town resource engendering a pride in our industrial legacy and a vision of a bright economic future.

Conclusion

We now know that embracing sense of place is critical to our efforts as preservationists and conservators. But without a method, sense of place remained elusive, hidden in plain sight. By articulating what is sensed, perceived, and felt, our method allows sense of place to be considered and valued in the planning and policy for the conservation and preservation of monuments, sites and their host communities.