Placemaking through deep cultural mapping:

The *Where is Here?* project

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Chapter Summary

One of the most visible avenues used by small cities to retain competitiveness can be seen in the attempts to revitalize their downtown areas to create places and spaces enjoyed and valued by residents and visitors. Formerly recognized as the heart or Centre of small cities, many downtown areas have suffered due to urban sprawl and a loss of connectedness or familiarity among new residents. While efforts to address downtown revitalization are evident such as the creation of public spaces, events and support for small businesses, there remains a need to understand if, and how, residents in small cities value their downtown areas. Small cities are increasingly turning to cultural mapping as a way to identify the assets and values associated to the places and spaces within their boundaries. This case study highlights the *Where is Here?* project, an innovative initiative to develop cultural maps in three small cities on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, namely in the cities of Nanaimo, Port Alberni and Courtenay. The cultural mapping process included the active participation of local citizens, business owners, municipal development leaders, arts and culture associations, and Aboriginal groups. Three public engagement events or “walkabouts” were coordinated where 85 videos were captured of residents speaking to the places that they felt most connected to in their downtown core. The videos were shared widely in digital form on the project website and collectively, uncovered deep layers of meaning associated to a variety of downtown places. Leisure emerged as a central and embedded theme in the connect spots shared both in terms of the venues profiled and the experiences of residents. Leisure researchers may play a critical role in supporting small city place making initiatives by uncovering and mapping how residents engage with places and spaces within their leisure. Cultural mapping may provide a tool to leisure researchers to aid in these investigations.

Learning Objectives:

1. To communicate the value of community and cultural identity in connection with small city sustainability.
2. To position cultural mapping as an approach to engage citizens in small city place making and to mobilize local knowledge;
3. To illustrate the importance of leisure venues and activities in place attachment;
4. To highlight an innovative example of deep cultural mapping practice in three small cities on Vancouver Island, Canada.

The Issue, Opportunity or Trend

Increasingly it is being acknowledged that the wicked problems, such as human equality and sustainability, faced by those living in the 21st century will be solved only through the intersection, and integration, of multiple fields of knowledge and ways of knowing (Kolko, 2012, n.p.) Wicked problems involve a multitude of perspectives and social complexities and are creating forces of fragmentation that have no easy solutions. The rise of the knowledge economy, and of global capital, has enacted power and wealth concentrations in large urban centres (Sassen, 2013), and has left small cities and rural populations struggling to compete and survive in a new and substantially altered economic landscape. Small cities are particularly in need of synergistic forms of knowledge mobilization and collective intelligence in order to address the complex challenges experienced in their transformation.

One of the most visible avenues used by small cities to retain competitiveness can be seen in the attempts to revitalize their downtown areas to create places and spaces enjoyed by residents and visitors. Formerly recognized as the heart or Centre of small cities, many downtown areas have suffered due to urban sprawl and a loss of connectedness or familiarity among new residents. While efforts to address downtown revitalization are evident such as the creation of public spaces, events and support for small businesses, there remains a need to understand if and how residents in small cities value their downtown areas. Armed with this knowledge, the proponents of downtown revitalization may be able to situate their efforts within the context of place and guide decision making based on a deeper understanding of resident values.

Literature

Small cities are increasingly turning to cultural mapping as a way to identify the assets and values associated to the places and spaces within their boundaries. The link between cultural mapping and local identity is particularly relevant here – with the cultural questions ‘who are we?’ and ‘what might we become?’ becoming increasingly valued within small city contexts as a starting-point for development. By exploring these fundamental questions, development proponents attempt to approach development from a position of core values and beliefs, rather than enacting conformance with exogenously imposed agendas.

The emergence of ‘deep’ cultural mapping has enabled developers to tap into these questions in new and potentially revolutionary ways. Deep mapping is described by Kathleen Scherf (2015) as: “an inherently interdisciplinary [mapping] practice, [facilitated by] digital technology [that enables mapping to] get beyond the brochure and provide rich content across disciplines, cultures and time” (p.341). In practice, deep mapping presents “as a geographical map” but utilizes “rich content to ‘volatize’ and convey spirit of place” (ibid). In the process of moving ‘beyond’ traditional cartographic representation, deep mapping creates a kind of digital public sphere in which thinking takes place with others (Arendt, 1982) which holds a kind of liberating potential - allowing us “to tell much more than any map traced by a cartographer ever could” (p.343). Within small city cultural mapping processes, the drive towards public participation has instigated various deep mapping experiments that have pushed cultural mapping beyond standardized representations of place. The integration of ‘deep maps’ into municipally-led cultural mapping processes has only just started to occur.

While deep cultural mapping processes have just started to emerge on the municipal level, the practice has been developed over a significantly longer period of time within a creative arts tradition (Evans and Foord, 2008; Evans, 2015). Artists from a range of disciplines have, over the past two decades, used maps as a starting-point for aesthetic and critical forms of inquiry – combining geographic representation with visual and media representation, community-based narratives, etc... – often-times pioneering, at the same time, advances in technology (Duxbury, Garrett-Petts, MacLennan, 2015, p.10-13). The creative arts, it can be argued, houses a significant level of knowledge related to deep mapping applications that is of potential value to municipalities looking to forge new pathways forward in this domain.

Despite the fact that place is a “pervasive component of leisure and tourism” (Crouch, 2000:63), there has been a call for leisure researchers to more actively pursue investigation into the spatial dimensions of leisure (Smale, 2006), particularly in urban public spaces (Johnson and Glover, 2013). As Smale (2006) noted, place is a contextual factor that can influence behavior, shape perceptions and define experiences. Leisure researchers may play a critical role in supporting small city place making initiatives by uncovering and mapping how residents engage with places and spaces within their leisure. Cultural mapping may provide a tool to leisure researchers to aid in these investigations.

The Innovation

Where is Here? is an innovative cultural mapping project designed to respond to the need expressed by planners and municipal developers for the innovation of more dynamic cultural mapping processes on the small city level. The project brought together proponents of small-city development with academics and artists to share knowledge and drive innovation within the field. The project aimed to:

- Enhance the ability of Canadian small city development proponents to understand, interpret and communicate the significance of place;
- Contribute to the strategic development of three small cities in BC (Port Alberni, Nanaimo and Courtenay) through the creation of a deep cultural map for each;
- Explore the role that new media technologies, creative practices and community participation play in uncovering and disseminating a plurality of perspectives embodied in narratives about place;
- Host a multi-faceted dialogue and exhibition Centreing on the intersections between new media, small city development and cultural connectedness.

The *Where is Here?* project took place between January and November of 2016. The project focused on small city development in three small Vancouver Island cities – Nanaimo, Port Alberni and Courtenay. All of these regions have faced significant challenges in recent years resulting from the erosion of resource-based economic prospects. The innovative process included the participation of local citizens, business owners, municipal development leaders, arts and culture associations, and Aboriginal groups.

Case Context

Canadian cities generally (and small cities in particular) have played a leadership role in the evolution of cultural mapping processes (Jeanotte, 2015, p.109). This is due, in part, to a federal incentive enacted in 2005 through the Paul Martin Government, in which the Government allocated gas-tax revenue to municipalities compliant in the creation of an Integrated Community Sustainability Plan (ICSP). As culture was positioned within the ICSP process as a key dimension of sustainability, the development of these plans in-turn generated a focus on cultural planning, and on cultural mapping in particular (ibid).

This case study highlights an initiative to develop cultural maps in three small cities on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, namely in the cities of Nanaimo, Port Alberni and Courtenay. The Vancouver Island region is largely

comprised of small cities and rural communities. The region is a popular tourist destination and is experiencing demographic shifts due to amenity migration and aging. Concurrently, many communities are experiencing a shift from a resource based economy to a service, technical and knowledge based economy. The impacts of these changes are felt at the municipal level whereby efforts to attract and retain visitors, new residents and investment are commonplace. A common strategy enacted in the small cities in the region is to focus on creating vibrant downtown areas that are animated by all sectors providing residents and visitors with attractive places to live, work and play.

Nanaimo

The City of Nanaimo is located on the east coast of Vancouver Island in British Columbia. The population of this harbour city is about 84,000, which is part of the greater Regional District of Nanaimo population of 147,000. Nanaimo is the gateway, via ferry from mainland Vancouver, to many northern communities and small coastal island destinations. The town was mainly settled by the European Hudson's Bay Company who sought to trade goods with the local Snuneymuxw First Nation people. With the discovery of coal in the area and the ease of water transportation, Nanaimo quickly grew into a bustling industry town. Chinese migrant workers also had a strong presence in the early days and are recognized as part of the local heritage. The Department of Culture and Heritage celebrates the creative arts and Nanaimo's historic charm to enhance quality of place value and sustainable community living. The Downtown Nanaimo Business Improvement Association, the Nanaimo Economic Development Corporation, and other neighbourhood associations have developed strategic partnerships to generate innovative planning to revitalize Nanaimo's downtown as the heart of the community.

Courtenay

The City of Courtenay is situated on the east coast of central Vancouver Island in British Columbia. It is approximately 110 km north of the City of Nanaimo and lies within the traditional territory of the K'ómoks First Nation. Courtenay is the gateway, via ferry from Comox, to Powell River and the south coast of mainland BC. This city of 25,000 people is the cultural hub of the surrounding Comox Valley region (population 65,000) and values cultural diversity and nature as key aspects of community sustainability. The area is home to Vancouver Island's largest alpine resort, Mt. Washington, which draws residents and visitors for various cross-seasonal leisure activities. The Comox Valley Community Arts Council activates and facilitates arts and culture in the community, supporting a range of cultural creators and a diverse workforce. Early settlers to the Comox Valley were mainly attracted to the region's prime agricultural lands, however coal was soon discovered in the area and mining and farming quickly grew as the dominant industries. The City of Courtenay's Heritage Commission works to celebrate the local history so that stories of the past can live on through future generations. Today, downtown Courtenay has a unique small town charm but seeks a vibrant city lifestyle. The Downtown Courtenay Business Improvement Association is working to engage economic activities

that will promote quality of amenities and sustainable living. The City recently released the “Downtown Courtenay Playbook: A Partnership Action Plan” as a proactive guide to revitalize downtown as a commercial, cultural, and social hub that connects more people with a wider range of experiences and opportunities.

Port Alberni

Port Alberni is a city located on the west coast of Vancouver Island in the province of British Columbia. This port city has a population of about 18,000, with a total of 26,000 living in the Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District. Port Alberni lies within the Alberni Valley and is situated at the head of the longest inlet on Vancouver Island. Port Alberni and the West Coast of Vancouver Island is the traditional territory of the Tseshaht and Hupacasath First Nations, often referred to as the Nootka. Forestry and milling, along with mining and fishing, have long been the main industries in the region. In the early 1900's Port Alberni acquired rail transportation, with the addition of the Esquimalt and Nanaimo Railway, and industry grew rapidly. Formerly named the “twin city”, Port Alberni has a unique layout with two city centres and natural creeks and ravines that bisect the main town-site. Much of Port Alberni's recent development has occurred uphill and just east of the North Port downtown area. Today, the town is a major service and supply centre for the west coast and is the gateway to communities such as Tofino, and Ucluelet. Currently, Port Alberni is in the process of redeveloping itself as a tourism destination. Outdoor enthusiasts can experience lakes, mountains, rivers and ocean as well as hiking nearby Mount Arrowsmith and water sports on Sproat Lake. The Alberni Heritage Commission works to preserve First Nation's culture and local history through galleries and commemorative rail tours. These leisure activities add tremendously to the economic diversity and quality of life in Port Alberni. The City of Port Alberni's Economic Development office is focusing on a long term rebranding initiative in order to promote new businesses, residents and visitors that are much needed to inject vibrancy and quality of life into the downtown area.

<http://www.town.lakecowichan.bc.ca/maps.shtml>

Figure 1. Map of study area locations on Vancouver Island in British Columbia, Canada.

Stakeholders Involved

The stakeholders involved in this initiative included a wide range of public, private and not for profit sector organizations including public post-secondary institutions, art galleries, municipalities, planning departments, artists, small businesses and residents. The initiative was led, in partnership by Vancouver Island University where faculty from different disciplinary backgrounds including Leisure Management, Sustainability, Geography and Digital Media Studies collaborated on the project design. Nine students from these departments worked together under the supervision of the project team. The Comox Valley Art Gallery was a principle partner in the initiative, housing the Research Coordinator for the project and coordinating the symposium. Three municipalities, including the City of Courtenay, the City of Nanaimo and the City of Port Alberni were involved in the project as sites for the cultural mapping. In particular, the planning and economic development departments actively engaged in locating and motivating residents to participate in the community “walk about” events. Where present, the downtown improvement association assisted in locating participants and in Courtenay in particular, in promoting the symposium. During the symposium, the project engaged 25 speakers including academics, artists, residents, small business owners and municipal planners, staff and leaders to share different perspectives and case studies on cultural mapping practices.

Approach Used and the Impact

The initiative was designed somewhat organically and unfolded through three distinct inter-related prongs – *Connect Here, Explore Here & Create Here*.

Connect Here

The *Connect Here* phase consisted of a 6 month media-mapping project that occurred between January and July of 2016. Research pods composed of 9 undergraduate students and 3 faculty members from Vancouver Island University conducted fieldwork within each of the three cities. The focus of this prong was to document and disseminate, via media and online mapping technologies, citizen responses to the following question: “Within the [city name] downtown core, where do you feel most connected to your community, and why?”. The pods were structured as interdisciplinary teams with students and faculty from the departments of Recreation and Tourism, Geography and Media Studies.

The event was initiated by issuing a call for participants through partnering organizations. Citizens and residents within each city were invited to identify a place in their downtown core where they feel most connected to their community. At this time the students were introduced to the project aims and objectives and learned basic video processes using consumer grade devices such as iPhones. Students became familiar with media and software applications and supported the development of the web platform and social media site for participant and project knowledge sharing.

A one-day community walk about was organized for each city where students were accompanied by participants on a journey to each *connect-spot*. Connect spots were identified and located on a hard copy map and then a route to visit each spot with the group (approximately 5 people) was determined. When the group arrived at each connect spot, the students filmed a short 1.5 minute video of each participant describing who they are, where they are and why they feel most connected to that particular space in their downtown area. Later, the videos were uploaded to YouTube and organized into cities. The associated embed codes for each video was entered into a “comma-separated values (CSV)” file that also included relevant geocode data and street addresses for each *connect-spot*. This CSV file was then imported into mapping software, ARC GIS, which generated web maps that identified *connect here* locations within a cartographic representation of each city. Visitors to the web map site (www.whereishereculturalmapping.com) can learn about the project, see where the *connect-spots* are located within each city, and click on a given point to activate a video narrative. After the official launch of the maps in each community, residents of each city were invited to upload their own videos.

Figure 2. Photo of students framing a resident ready to talk about her connect spot, the Nanaimo Art Gallery.

Explore Here

Prong 2 of the project consisted of a 3-day symposium bringing 25 speakers and the public together to reflect on and generate innovations in the cultural mapping field. The key focus being the potential application of these innovations within small Canadian cities. Presenters included municipal development actors, academics and artists. While many players fit into several of these professional categories, all have a devoted interest, whether represented in publications or in real-world project actualization, in the cultural mapping process. The symposium was an invited gathering of specialists, whose diverse knowledge-banks will provide a stimulating forum for discussion and interchange. All activities were open to the general public.

Create Here

The *Create Here* segment of the project provided a venue for arts-based research to occur surrounding the concept of cultural mapping. Some of these activities included: a) M.A.P. (Map Art Project) involving a month-long Artist Residency curated and hosted by the Comox Valley Art Gallery b) an opening event and exhibition, as well as live performances, and c) a visit and presentation by artists and cultural leaders from the K'ómoks Nation presenting their project to 're-claim' traditional territory through the honoring of traditional K'ómoks place-names, and the construction and strategic placement of totem poles within the Comox Valley.

Implications & Lessons learned

The “Where is Here” project helped to initiate a conversation in the cities and the broader region about cultural mapping and the stories told by residents enabled the team to create a base layer of a cultural map that can be built upon as new data is added. The team plans to add to the base layer with future student projects to incorporate additional data such as adding leisure venues, parks and trails and tourism amenities such as attractions, accommodations and access points, as well as playing with how cultural mapping enables the display of complex, multi-dimensional perspectives about place. As the map is added to, the power of cultural map to aid in decision making and the potential to use the map as an analysis tool to reveal new insights into downtown places will both be strengthened.

From an academic standpoint, the project has contributed new knowledge about cultural mapping in small cities both from the insights gained in the process used but also in the insights gained from the analysis of the videos and the sharing of interdisciplinary knowledge at the Symposium. The gathering in Courtenay was a catalyst event to identify and form a network of scholars interested in cultural mapping practices. The network plans to continue conversation and collaboration to build upon the momentum of the event.

Some of the new insights gained from a leisure lens begin to address the gap identified by Johnson and Glover (2013) with respect to understanding the spatial perspective of leisure in urban public settings. The majority of the videos gathered reflect stories that profile leisure places and spaces as resident’s “connect spots”. Further analysis of these spots not only highlights the embedded role of leisure in place attachment, but also of the range of types of settings where attachment to community forms. In this way, the findings support the argument that a more nuanced and fluid typology of public space be used to frame leisure research and that we “continually adjust our eyes, constructs and concepts to see the contemporary moment in all its variations and formations” (Cook, 2006 as cited in Johnson and Glover, 2013; 194).

Community engagement is a beneficial way to transfer knowledge between researchers, practitioners and local citizens. The knowledge mobilized through these activities has the potential to build connections and can inspire collaborative thinking that is driven by a deeper understanding of cultural identity and sense of place values (Fernández & Langhout, 2014). This can assist in developing new capacities for economic, cultural, social, technological, environmental and intellectual well-being. Cultural mapping activities can assist a community to develop a higher level of social cohesiveness and instill a greater sense of belonging among residents – both of which catalyse change that results in sustainable community building (Herchmer, 2011).

The initial stages of the *Where is Here?* project unveiled numerous lessons on cultural mapping practices that may assist other jurisdictions seeking to uncover intangible cultural values of their residents. Some of these include:

1. There is great value in providing residents the opportunity to share their “stories of place” and what connects them to the communities they live. The richness and depth of the stories shared by residents uncover a wealth of knowledge about places that when known and mapped, create opportunities for more informed place making efforts.
2. The use of a community event such as a “walk about” to map stories of place holds great promise for future cultural mapping projects. The act of walking in the community enabled a closer, more tangible and multisensory experience that provided valuable context to the videos.
3. The practice of capturing short videos on consumer grade cameras was effective and resulted in high quality files for viewing online. This practice was chosen to enable public accessibility to the project. While the follow up call for participation from residents has not produced a significant response for the project yet, the potential for broader engagement remains. Future initiatives that combine community events, social media and word of mouth to promote videos are expected to produce a positive return similar to the number of videos received during the walk abouts.
4. The involvement of different disciplines in the design and analysis of the project was critical to its success. Deep cultural maps benefit from multiple disciplinary lens to identify layers of meaning and to visually display data in ways that highlight new insights.
5. The collaboration with numerous community stakeholder groups such as the Art Gallery, downtown business improvement groups and municipal departments resulted in ownership and buy in to the project. The ability to ignite enthusiasm about the walk abouts was dependent upon this buy in and the active solicitation of residents by those involved.
6. While this project had to determine some boundaries to launch the project – i.e. downtown areas, the practices used hold potential to identify and map intangible values associated to other places such as parks, trails and other leisure venues. Leisure researchers and managers may want to become familiar with cultural planning methods and consider how they may support leisure planning initiatives.

Conclusion

While cultural mapping is a growing field of practice, and while its interdisciplinary contours are increasingly being recognized, there exist few opportunities for those working in cultural mapping from diverse traditions to come together. This project engaged a broad array of knowledge domains and practices, and spurred innovative ideas that

may advance action/policies in dynamic and radical ways – opening up cultural mapping to new forms of interactivity and engagement, and bringing new and often underplayed voices, perspectives and insights into municipally-led dialogues about place. In this project, leisure venues and activities emerged as a central and embedded component of place attachment for residents in their downtown areas. Future opportunities exist for leisure researchers to utilize cultural mapping practices to uncover and understand not only where people engage in leisure but the deeper meaning associated to those experiences and places.

Discussion Questions

1. Go onto the www.whereishereculturalmapping.com website and watch a few of the videos that are uploaded. Note what types of places the residents highlight as their “connect spots”. How is leisure embedded in the videos? How does leisure attach people to place?
2. Discuss how cultural mapping could be used to advance our understanding of leisure. Can you identify concrete examples where knowing more about people’s perspectives on leisure places and spaces could be used to enhance planning and development?
3. What are some of the disadvantages or limitations of cultural mapping? Do the maps accurately display resident perspectives? How can these limitations be addressed in future cultural mapping experiments?

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