ABORIGINAL PERSPECTIVES ON PLANNING IN CANADA — DECOLONIZING THE PROCESS: A Discussion with Four Aboriginal Practitioners

by John Peters

Summary

It would be impossible to have an issue of Plan Canada focusing on heritage concerns without considering the Aboriginal perspective, which is clearly the longest and deepest element of human heritage in the country. On behalf of Plan Canada, John Peters has raised a number of important questions with four Aboriginal professionals whose work brings them into contact with planning and planners. What emerges is a short history of some old problems and a rather optimistic view of what might lie ahead if professional planners were to adopt a more respectful and open attitude.

Sommaire

Un numéro de Plan Canada consacré au patrimoine serait incomplet si l'on ne tenait pas compte de la perspective des Autochtones puisque ceux-ci forment manifestement le plus ancien et le plus profond des éléments du patrimoine humain du pays. John Peters, pour le compte de Plan Canada, a soulevé des questions importantes avec quatre professionnels autochtones dont le travail les amène à côtoyer urbanisme et urbanistes. Il ressort de ces entretiens un bref historique de certains problèmes anciens et une perspective plutôt optimiste de ce que l'avenir pourrait réserver si les urbanistes professionnels adoptent une attitude plus respectueuse et plus ouverte.

For the past 10 years, planners have been exchanging ideas with Aboriginal Canada trying to bridge the many gaps in environmental and cultural awareness, community involvement and consultation. Much of this effort by planners in Canada has taken place with little guidance from the planning literature or academic training. Many planners have begun to engage in consultation with Aboriginal leaders, convinced that it is simply “the right thing to do.” From the Aboriginal perspective, these overtures from non-Aboriginal planners are considered long overdue. Many Aboriginal scholars credit the recognition of treaty rights enshrined in the 1982 Canadian constitution with spurring government planners to recognize their obligations. Legal support has also been growing for meaningful consultation on planning matters that affect Aboriginal or treaty rights, such as the decision in the Haida Nation versus British Columbia and Weyerhauser in 2002. In spite of these changes, there remains among Aboriginal communities a suspicion about the wisdom or value of participation.
in non-Aboriginal planning processes, which is seen as potentially compromising Aboriginal rights and co-opting communities into planning decisions that may not be in their best interest.

The distrust and caution may be, in part, a function of the colonial roots of the planning process itself, imposing 19th century European order and logic on Aboriginal communities. Planning processes may be perceived as reminders that planning is being done by and for the benefit of “the visitors” using language and cultural models far removed in time and space from Canada. The challenge for Aboriginal people is to find meaning in the process from the native perspective.

What follows are dialogues with four Aboriginal professionals who are participants in Canadian planning activities. The conversations illustrate some of the successes of the past 20 years and the substantive work now in progress. Our contributors include Dr. Bill Woodworth, architect and Hotinonshon:ni traditional teacher; Dr. Deborah McGregor, Professor of Geography and Native Studies at the University of Toronto; Dean Jacobs, Executive Director, Nin.da.waab.jig Heritage Centre, Walpole Island, Ontario (in the St. Clair River between Ontario and Michigan); and Louisa Crow Shoe, Program Coordinator, Head-Smithed-In Buffalo Jump Interpretive Centre, Alberta.

The Dialogues

Dr. Bill Woodworth, a Hotinonshon:ni traditionalist who lives in Toronto, is learning and sharing the wisdom held by the Six Nations elders. (Hotinonshon:ni is what the people who were previously referred to as Iroquois call themselves). Bill, who has practised in Toronto for 20 years, holds a degree in architecture from the University of Michigan and a Doctor of Philosophy degree (Traditional Knowledge) from the California Institute of Integral Studies. He was profoundly influenced by Jacob Ezra Thomas, a traditional Cayuga Chief.

Q: Bill, given the richness of Aboriginal culture, what would you identify as the rationale for architects and planners to increase their awareness of the cultural perspectives and traditional knowledge of Aboriginal people?

A: For me, the central pressing need is to have planners, heritage professionals and architects recognize and formally acknowledge the culture from which all their work is grounded. There is a profound ignoring of the cultural traditions and patterns that are Native, that is, from this place. What I see is the imposition of European architecture and planning forms that don’t fit in this landscape, are out of step with the Native traditions. In my experience, ugly cities, bad design and plans come from confusion, imposition of foreign perspectives and ideas that have no home here, that will never become rooted in this place.

I believe in the wisdom of the “two-row wampum” [symbol of treaties in 1613 and 1763] as a model of relationship that will bring balance and beauty to the work of planners and architects. In the two-row model, two cultures paddle down the same river in two boats, sharing the experience, perhaps teaching each other and interacting but not interfering with the other’s journey. Avoid dominating or imposing European traditions on this land. Those are traditions that have a place and a culture where they were formed, not here, at least, [not] to the exclusion of Native traditions. The two-row wampum suggests a profoundly more respectful and integrated vision of the future.

I want to acknowledge briefly the responsibility I feel as a traditional Hotinonshon:ni teacher, to share and offer guidance to those seeking insights as I have described. I have been working on a project for the past five years called “the Beacon to the Ancestors.” This project, now in the final stages of execution, is designed to recreate from deep culture a traditional Aboriginal ceremonial centre on the shores of Ganadario — Lake Ontario, the beautiful waters here in Karonta — Toronto. This site will serve as a hearth from which Elders can perform the traditional Hotinonshon:ni and Algonkian ceremonies throughout the year, invoking the wisdom and guidance of the Native spirits of this place for all who seek to listen.

Q: Professor McGregor, in your lectures on Aboriginal perspectives on the planning process, how do you frame the cultural differences that have to be acknowledged and addressed?

A: A non-Aboriginal person initially has difficulty appreciating the impacts of colonialism over many generations on Aboriginal communities. I like to begin by framing the problem in terms that were well presented in the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. In the report, the evolution of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada is described as having evolved through four stages: (1) separate worlds; (2) nation-to-nation relations; (3) respect that gave way to domination; and (4) renewal and renegotiation.

With this framework as background, it is possible to see many examples of how both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal governments and individuals have embraced renewal and renegotiation in the past 10 years. This recognition that the future had to be different can be attributed in part to the recognition of the need for global sustainability/Agenda 21, (United Nations Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, 1992 available at: http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/documents/agenda21/index.htm) reinforcing the need to demonstrate how Canadian Aboriginal rights and culture are being sustained as a component of planning. Within Canada, the legal rights have evolved substantially as well. The Canadian Environmental Assessment Act, Species at Risk legislation, Canadian Forest Policy, and many other federal programs require meaningful Aboriginal consultation by the federal government or a delegated agency.

Aboriginal people themselves have been the most significant drivers for the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives, challenging their exclusion and becoming strong advocates in spite of government reluctance. Aboriginal communities have taken responsibility for shaping their
own futures and making the decisions that will affect them and future generations. The change I would emphasize is Aboriginal education and the development of formal environmental expertise. The Centre for Indigenous Environmental Resources Inc., a successful Manitoba, hands-on training workshop, and the Building Environmental Aboriginal Human Resources Program, both focus on developing environmental career awareness among Aboriginal youth. The Anishinabek/Ontario Fisheries Resource Centre promotes a sustainable vision of the future: healthy fish stocks require healthy fishing communities — both Native and non-Native.

Q: Within Aboriginal Canada there are some terrific examples of world-class heritage and environmental planning. Dean Jacobs, Director of Nin.da.waab.jig Heritage Centre, Bkejwanong (where the waters divide) Territory, can you summarize the environmental vision and accomplishments of your community?

A: Walpole Island is unsurrendered Aboriginal territory. Its documented heritage goes back over 6,000 years, and it has preserved its natural heritage encompassing one of the largest collections of rare plants and animals in any single planning jurisdiction in Canada. Bkejwanong, a community of 4,000, was honored by the United Nations in 1995 when it was awarded the “We the Peoples: 50 Communities Award” for its exemplary record in environmental research and sustainable development.

A review of 25 years of Nin.da.waab.jig’s work reveals a depth of research and a commitment to planning principles.

Walpole Island people have worked together with environmental partners in the public and private sectors to keep the air, water and land healthy. We have illustrated the benefits that can accrue from a constructive working relationship including collaboration on baseline environmental studies, ecological research and monitoring, coordinated local and regional planning, access to local skilled Aboriginal companies and workers, and improved lines of communication between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal leaders and communities.

Q: Louisa Crow Shoe, your experience has been equally positive in developing a major Aboriginal heritage and cultural centre in Southern Alberta. Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump Interpretive Centre was designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1981. How does the site connect visitors with the cultural heritage of the Blackfoot tribes of the western Prairies?

A: There has been a remarkable positive transformation on many levels as a result of the Head Smashed-In Centre. I remember when the sod-turning took place, there was a lot of local people that thought this was just another make-work project. People snickered about the name. But their predictions proved to be very short sighted. Over 100,000 visitors now come here from around the world every year. That is not hard to appreciate if you stand at the edge of the cliff overlooking the Buffalo Jump, processing area and camp in the valley below. Visitors are transported to the days of the great buffalo herds and experience the Blackfoot way of life on the prairie. The place resonates with meaning that speaks across all generations and cultures about the integrated relationship between the prairie, the spirit of the buffalo and the Blackfoot culture.

Q: The interpretive focus on the Blackfoot use and relationship to the land, reflected in the archaeological remains at the site going back thousands of years, is unique and has touched many visitors. How does Head-Smashed-In honour these traditions?

A: We have all Aboriginal interpreters and guides. Working here has become a preferred occupation for our people. We teach in our traditional way and much of it in our own language to explain the complexities of Blackfoot culture as described by our Elders. We always start our day with thanksgiving and prayer to the Creator for the good life we enjoy. When we have done archaeology, we have done it with respect, with daily prayers and offerings of tobacco. The exhibition space, the events, and the site tours all reinforce the Blackfoot way of life, based in the strong belief that mother earth, rooted in the prairie landscape has taken good care of us and the spirit of the buffalo.

Q: What are the regional benefits for the wider Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community?

A: The Centre has become the flagship tourist destination for Southern Alberta. In the towns around, bed and breakfasts, motels, restaurants and gas stations have benefited equally. I would also say that many local people have come to understand the buffalo, and see the great loss that was perpetrated by the destruction of the herds. People are now seeing and valuing the harmony and integration, the sustainable relationship to the prairie the Blackfoot developed and so jealously protected for thousands of years. People want a modern equivalent of that balanced, harmonious relationship. Head-Smashed-In provides a vision of the way this land should be protected, managed and nurtured for future generations.

Conclusion

The four Aboriginal professionals who answered our questions have demonstrated how a new vision for the participation of Aboriginal people in planning in Canada is emerging in many forms of environmental, socioeconomic and heritage planning. Aboriginal practitioners continue to challenge planning processes to stop imposing the old views of “the colonists.” Planners have to focus on the cultures with direct connections to this place, to learn and respect the traditions born out of this land, and to develop sustainable futures that are appropriate for this environment. For non-Aboriginal planning professionals steeped in western Eurocentric cultural traditions, this is a challenge. However, based on the illustrations provided here, the rewards clearly warrant the effort.

John Peters has an MA in Geography and is an archaeologist working as Section Manager of Environmental Assessment for Ontario Power Generation. He has many years of experience working with and learning from First Nations people.