Learning from First Nations

By David D. Brown

Many of the social problems in Aboriginal communities originated externally, with the impacts of colonization and residential schools. Peter Elias describes the resulting collapse of cultural traditions, a collapse which has had severe economic and social consequences: "Aboriginal skills and knowledge are being lost [and] they are not being replaced at the same rate with skills and knowledge of superior or even equal utility... traditions are being overwhelmed by wholly undependable social pathologies... substance abuse, child abuse, wife abuse, elder abuse, violence, family breakdown, corruption, suicide, and dependencies."

During this period, the physical shape of Aboriginal communities has been influenced more by government intervention than by collective community input. Applying the principles of urban, non-Aboriginal physical planning and housing — including service grids and small lots — may have created efficient infrastructure, but it often overlooked the social, cultural and environmental criteria specific to each community. The use of these non-Aboriginal models was based on a faith in the professional deployment of expertise and technology to address social problems and manage Aboriginal environments rationally — a faith which illustrates the deeply rooted differences in values and ways of thinking that exist between Aboriginals and professional planners.

Aboriginal peoples are now poised however, to take advantage of development opportunities in their natural and social environments. Land-claim settlements are producing greater native control over land bases and resources, and a transfer of powers is allowing Aboriginal communities to take greater responsibility for community planning and housing. Planning clearly has a role to play in guiding communities and their new institutions as they face complex issues, many of which interface with mainstream society. These issues include self-government, self-management, and self-reliance, and involve matters of budgets, housing, education, health, and cultural survival.

Enabling planning practitioners to work with Aboriginal communities offers opportunities for mutual learning that might also be brought to other planning spheres. Wolfe suggests that Aboriginal communities have strengths that are sometimes lacking in mainstream society: strong family and kinship ties and strong cultural connections to the environment. Traditional Aboriginal societies, much like those of the pre-modern West, were characterized by social stability and by a weaving together of human life, the land and its resources. The holistic Aboriginal world-view was traditionally expressed through spiritualities and cultures based on the relationships that people had with their environment, and on a cooperative, equity-based way of life in which kinship connected members to the community. Wolfe suggests that some of these qualities remain: "Many First Nations' members enjoy true social security — the psychic security of belonging to a community that extends beyond one's nuclear family". He calls for planners to look at First Nations as sources of insight, rather than as mere clients, and suggests that "First Nations are in a position to help others formulate community health ideals and to analyze the roots of social malaise."

But any potential for mutual learning can be realized only if planners continue to move beyond thinking in an expert-client mode.

Wolfe-Keddie outlines an inclusive model for community planning in the Aboriginal context: "The more successful community planning projects in Canadian Indian communities incorporated a wide community consultation process, including meeting with the elected councillors, community staff and employees and directors and leaders of community organizations, and discussing goals and objectives with people at community meetings and in and around their homes as they went about their daily activities." Boothroyd reports on some of the qualities of such processes: "Planners who have worked with First Nations are aware that in First Nations the ability to listen patiently is prized and that, in the healthiest of them, participation in planning is widespread (virtually total in band meetings on important issues), knowledge is shared, and experts (including those with the wisdom of age and local experience) are respected." An inclusive planning approach legitimizes an alternative to rationality, and improves planning decisions by including the Aboriginal people previously excluded from the expert-based, modernist model. It anticipates the emergent planning paradigm of "communicative action," which, as Turner points out, is based on "local community users [as] partners, and not dependent beneficiaries."

Planning guided by the new paradigm is likely to be more compatible with intuitive Aboriginal thinking, since it aims at short-term incremental progress rather than at the idealistic end-state visions produced by rational planning processes. Turner suggests that we are experiencing a paradigm shift in which "relations" are valued above "things," and which "converts so-called insoluble problems into encouragingly practical tasks." Placing this concept in the context of native communities removes the assumption that external agencies will provide, say, housing, and focuses attention on the relationships between people, organizations and institutions. This shift requires new professional postures and attitudes, as well as a willingness and ability to make the necessary commitments of time, resources and energy. In 1994, Wolfe questioned the appropriateness of planning consultants "whose experience was derived largely from urban planning and non-Indian communities" and who did not have "the range of planning, community development, facilitation and adult education skills, or empathetic understanding and knowledge of Indian society, that was required by small remote communities." Current planning education is addressing many of these issues, but the challenge of working in another cultural context remains formidable.

Thus, an approach is required that enables First Nations to be capable of planning for themselves. The role of planners in such an approach involves helping communities to realize their own solutions to problems, since Aboriginal planners are best positioned to span Aboriginal and mainstream cultures, and are culturally equipped to deal with Aboriginal community development by using both intuitive and analytical approaches. Indeed, the call for greater Aboriginal involvement is loud and clear within the planning profession.

Planning schools can do much to foster Aboriginal involvement in First Nations community planning by encouraging:
1 increased Aboriginal enrolment in planning programs, a task which probably requires targeted recruitment and more concerted efforts to highlight opportunities for Aboriginals in the profession;
2 more planning courses for Aboriginal community leaders, such as the course developed by UBC;
3 planning studies / workshops / collaborations that focus on "service learning" (in which meaningful community projects become educational vehicles that have reciprocal benefits for both community and students).

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Such initiatives promise to sensitize new Canadian planners to Aboriginal issues, and to educate communities about the potential of professional planning.

A 1998 planning studio, run by the University of Manitoba in collaboration with the Sandy Bay Ojibway First Nation of southern Manitoba, offers an example of "service learning." The premise for the studio work was that Sandy Bay members knew the assets and challenges of their community better than anyone else. To supplement that local knowledge and to help the community plan for the future, workshop sessions on self-government and economic, social, and physical planning issues resulted in a document and a multimedia presentation (shown at the 1999 CIP Conference) that offered ideas and identified resources.

The following three facets of this experience involve some of the social aspects of running the studio as well as the nature of the work it produced:

1. Because the students lacked familiarity with the Band's culture and history, and because the social backgrounds of the two groups were very different, staff were initially concerned that it would be difficult for the students to relate easily to Band residents. However, the students were able to establish good rapport with many residents. This success was reflected in the fact that two of the students identified the studio project as one of the highlights of the Masters' program.

2. Band members and officials attended the project presentation and participated with interest. They said that they found the report useful, and made sure that they received electronic copies of the multimedia presentation.

3. Any shortcoming in the final work is possibly a result in the gap between the products of an educational project, which are ultimately directed by University requirements, and the deliverables of a professional planning appointment, which are directed by the expectations of the "client" (in this case, the community). This challenge is presented by many "service learning" projects, and is an area that future studio projects as one of the highlights of the Masters' program.

This discussion has ranged from "planning for," embodied in the expert-based, modernist model, to "planning with," which is an interactive process undertaken in a social context. A central challenge remains, however: how to achieve "planning by" Aboriginal communities and their self-determination, on ways that planning education can contribute to that aim, and on improving future "service learning" efforts. But more public and professional policies are needed to increase and enhance Aboriginal involvement in planning the communities of First Nations.

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Summary

My presentation at this year's CIP Conference looked at how planners, and planning schools in particular, can extend their work in First Nation regions in order to support social development and equity. This follow-up article outlines the social conditions and opportunities for planning in Aboriginal communities, and offers some thoughts on the need for greater Aboriginal involvement in the planning process.

Résumé

Ma conférence au congrès de l'Institut canadien desurbanistes en 1999 portait sur les possibilités offertes aux autochtones (et en particulier aux écoles d'urbanisme) en mission dans les régions des Premières Nations de favoriser le développement de la société et la justice sociale. Cet article fait suite à cette conférence et étudie les conditions et les perspectives sociales des communautés autochtones dans le contexte de l'urbanisme. Il avance quelques idées quant à la nécessité d'une participation accrue des autochtones eux-mêmes dans l'aménagement de leurs communautés.

References

3 Brown, David D. 1995. A Planning Study of Native Community Outcomes: The Manitoba Study Group prepared a folder and a multimedia presentation for the Sandy Bay Band. Two Band members and officials attended the project presentation and participated with interest. They said that they found the report useful, and made sure that they received electronic copies of the multimedia presentation.

Using the following planning resources, the University of Manitoba study group prepared a folder and a multimedia presentation for the Sandy Bay Band.

6 See CMHC 1997.