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Social Ethics of Landscape Change

Toward Community-Based Land-Use Planning

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Understanding stakeholder values is crucial to the development of a community-based model of landscape change. Be that as it may, engagement techniques are still in their infancies, and land-use planners are struggling for tools to facilitate discourse on public values related to landscape change. Accordingly, this article responds to urgent needs to define planning processes that represent the values of stakeholders, empower communities, and lead to landscape changes that maintain and enhance a community's sense of place. It does so by exploring the combination of photo elicitation and narrative as a form of civic science aimed at engaging citizens in the planning process. Findings from a study incorporating these techniques are used to show the merits of this participatory form of inquiry. The authors argue the use of stories, unlike traditional public engagement techniques, allows the landscape-change process to be situated within the social meanings relevant to a community.

Keywords: *democratic methodologies; social learning; civic discovery; social responsibility*

The purpose of this study is to advance a community-based model of land-use planning with the explicit intent to democratize the planning

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process and potentially mitigate conflict over landscape change. The participatory techniques at the crux of this article situate the landscape change process within the social meanings relevant to a community. Accordingly, we argue in favor of a social ethics of landscape change whereby researchers and planners view themselves as facilitators who aim to help citizens "activate their own capacities for self-observation, critique, and advocacy" (Schwandt, 2001, p. 74) with respect to land use. Our explicit value orientation is that citizens are not just "carriers of ideological meanings" or "commodities" (Denzin, 1997, p. 247) in the planning process, but rather the knowers of their own lived experiences with capabilities and entitlements to forward their own visions of landscape change. What follows is a brief overview of the contemporary 'landscape' of land-use planning, followed by a call for a more community-based model of landscape change, before exhibiting text and images produced by participants in such an endeavor.

The "Landscape" of Land-Use Planning

The growth of communities across North America is conventionally viewed as both inevitable and largely uncontrollable. The boundaries of urban and suburban areas continue to move outward because of growth of retail districts, residential developments, and other built environments. Communities that were once rural face expanding economies, changing traffic patterns, infrastructure development, increasing demands on schools, and other issues befitting the process of suburbanization (e.g., Wilkinson, 1991). Meanwhile, inner-city residents find their immediate environments changing as urban cores decline and intensification efforts are initiated. Regardless of the context—rural, urban, or even suburban— citizens often believe landscape change is beyond their control and feel disempowered by its pace and scope. Although the inevitability of growth is not an issue in this article, the ability of communities to influence the nature of growth, the quality of their environments, and their relationship to their environments are of primary concern.

By and large, land-use planning processes remain expert driven with decisions reflecting a top-down approach that favors the preferences of professional planners, policy makers, and economic interests. In most processes, roles for citizens are minimal and sometimes socially controlled or engineered (e.g., tell and sell). For the purposes of this article, the ethics of land-use planning focused on relationships between institutionalized planning

processes and the people and community affected by them. We believe the social responsibility of planners to involve citizens in governing themselves ought to be prioritized and visible as a public policy issue. However, as it is currently practiced, planning tends to frame land-use decisions as efforts by professionals to address deficiencies *in* community, as opposed to problems that can and should be addressed *by* community. The paternalism that underpins the expert-driven model not surprisingly has failed to truly engage the public in matters related to landscape change. To be sure, many planners have concerns about citizen involvement in planning decisions and struggle to identify strategies to do so. In addition, processes that include public involvement may breach public trust because of the failure to incorporate citizen-based comments into subsequent plans. We believe the planning professions need to develop and incorporate democratic methodologies that aim to represent the values of stakeholders, their land ethics, and senses of place. Only in doing so can planners work toward a community-based model of landscape change sensitive to the lives of citizens for whom the plans are being made.

Based on these critiques, a growing area of scholarship is now aimed at understanding local forces that shape sense of place and improving a community's ability to make intelligent choices in land use development (Brandenburg & Carroll, 1995; Bridger, 1996; Kruger & Shannon, 2000; Williams & Stewart, 1998). At present, even where shared decision-making frameworks, consensus building, and increased public participation are ostensibly in use, land-use planning outcomes are still dominated by economic and political interests (Cashore, Hoberg, Howlett, Rayner, & Wilson, 2001). Regrettably, the means of engagement fail to reach everyone. Public engagement techniques are still in their infancies, and planners are struggling for tools to facilitate discourse on public values related to growth management (cf. Taylor, 2003).

Techniques designed to engage the public must recognize at the outset that the process of landscape change naturally elicits divergent reactions from a wide variety of citizens—referred to as stakeholders—because they hold distinct values that reflect their relationships with their communities and their environment. By values, we mean "cultural ideas about what are desirable goals and what are appropriate standards for judging actions. . . . They are emotionally charged beliefs about what is desirable, right, and appropriate" (Tindall, 2003, p. 693). Understanding stakeholder values and developing strategies that allow for their representation is central to the development of a community-based model of landscape change.

Toward a Community-Based Model of Landscape Change

Our research frames community-based values related to landscape change as more than preferences or statements of opinions; landscape values are conceived as narratives that inextricably link people to place. Before land use planners can integrate diverse values about growth management and landscape change, they must first identify them (Brandenburg & Carroll, 1995; Schroeder, 1996; Zube et al., 1989). Casting stakeholders' values as narratives allows land-use planners to access socio-cultural meanings not of landscape, but of landscape change. Moreover, the use of stories in land-use planning allows the landscape change process to be situated within the social meanings relevant to a community (cf. Daitch, Kweon, Larsen, Tyler, & Vining, 1996; Linde, 1993; Marcucci, 2000; Yankelovich, 1991). In this sense, conflict is conceived as having both a process *and* content.

Unfortunately, traditional public forums that allow for the representation of environmental meanings (e.g., public hearings, comment periods, town hall meetings) are usually ineffective at portraying local values (Gottlieb, 1993; Taylor, 2003). In many such forums, place meanings and landscape values become defined in contrast to the "other" (e.g., the development alternative). Dominant cultural values centered on economic and political interests tend to frame the debate rather than the diverse community-based values that exist within a locality (Cronon, 1992, 1995; Glover, 2003; Rappaport, 2000; White, 1995). If local values are not voiced within land-use planning processes, the resultant plans will not fully represent the diversity of local heritage. Methods tied to collecting narratives that reflect sense of place—the socio-cultural meanings and emotional attachments held by an individual or group for a spatial setting—are thus potentially useful to planners in reconciling opposing viewpoints over growth management objectives.

Thus, understanding sense of place is fundamental to this process. Sense of place recognizes that places are social constructions insofar as their meanings are "created and reproduced through interpersonal interaction, formalized in social behavior, and ultimately persist in collective memory" (Stokowski, 2002, p. 372). The accumulation of experiences with a place personalizes and gives it meaning (Stedman, 2003; Tuan, 1977). Moreover, by attributing meaning to a landscape, individuals become attached to the meanings themselves (Stedman, 2003). Consequently, the connections people have with landscapes "extend far beyond use; they are layered with very passionate and deep-seated personal elements" (Cheng, Kruger, &

Daniels, 2003, p. 93). Places, values, and stories converge to provide useful insights into the development of community-based growth strategies. Focusing on narratives about sense of place "puts the human bond with environment in the foreground, rather than treating it as an interesting but insignificant feature of the background for resource planning" (Williams & Stewart, 1998, p. 21).

Thus, a focus on place shifts public consultation from a reductionist view of the landscape whereby stakeholders are asked to respond to the preconceived categories determined by planners, public officials, and/or scientists to allowing stakeholders to express their beliefs and values about an entire setting (Brandenburg & Carroll, 1995). The potential of this shift in focus is significant because it centers on building a working relationship with citizens that reflects the complex web of lifestyles, meanings, and social relations common to a place (Williams & Stewart, 1998). In so doing, it offers planners a way to anticipate, identify, and respond to the bonds people form with places. Moreover, "the interactions occurring in place-based collaborations tend to centre on problem solving, emphasize trust building, and focus on achieving on-the-ground actions supported by a broad spectrum of publics" (Cheng et al., 2003, p. 88). Although appreciation for sense of place will not end conflicts, it does move policy closer toward ways of discovering common values and meanings among ostensibly opposing stakeholder groups and transforms the decision-making process itself by redistributing power by emphasizing voices and meanings that may not otherwise be expressed (Cheng et al., 2003). Despite its growing appeal, Cheng et al. (2003) noted exploration of the people-place connection in the context that growth management "is still in its infancy" (p. 88). As such, there is an increasing call for more placed-based research.

Landscapes of Everyday Life

An important part of our research is its value orientation that moves beyond the "use versus preservation" dichotomy that has dominated conservation literature and paralyzed various environmental decision-making processes during the last century (Yaffee, 1994). Instead, our research is founded on a decolonized appreciation for landscapes other than ones pristine, untrammeled, and far from home. It is focused on the landscapes of everyday life.

The study area for this project was comprised of the landscapes in and around Urbana, Illinois. During the past decade, there have been several

trends occurring in land-use change and in societal forces that affect land-use change within the region of Champaign-Urbana in which Urbana is located. Residential growth has enlarged the boundaries of several towns, including the largest metropolitan area of the study site Champaign-Urbana. The increased growth is largely carved out of agricultural lands, converting once-fertile cropland into housing subdivisions. In addition, growing concerns for restoration of native ecosystem, predominantly the tallgrass prairie, have fuelled increasing pressure for park agencies to acquire land and conservation easements. As an example, Meadowbrook Park in southeast Urbana is a 100-acre ecological restoration project and its long-term plan envisions expansion and "corridors" to other restored prairies in the area. In addition, a recent statewide survey (MacDonald, Miller, & Stewart, 2002) indicated that citizens in the Champaign-Urbana area were substantially more likely to report the need for further development of parks, open space, and natural areas compared to other regions of the state. For these reasons, Urbana was selected as an area with significant potential for landscape change and concomitant conflicts over land-use in the near future.

The study began with the use of *photo elicitation* (see Chenowith, 1984; Markwell, 1997; Stewart, Liebert, & Larkin, 2004; Westphal, 1999) whereby participants were given single-use disposable cameras and asked to photograph places that were "important within their everyday life." After the pictures were developed, the second stage proceeded with participants involved in one-on-one, face-to-face *interviews* during which the photographs were used as a catalyst for discussion. The third and final stage of the research invited research participants to take part in a *civic discovery forum*. At the forum, photographs and narratives were presented by the participants themselves to each other, thereby facilitating a public discourse about landscape change. This public discourse was intended to encourage social learning. Although social learning is forwarded as an important part of planning efforts, forums for such learning are often excluded in land-use planning processes (see also Brandenburg & Carroll, 1995; Lee, 1993; for an exception see Gobster & Barro, 2000). The inclusion of this third stage was meant to address this problem.

In our view, a standing citizen advisory committee already organized as part of regional or city planning is a good match for our research objectives because of a self-identified commitment to community land-use decisions and penchant for being aware of environmental and growth issues within the community. We found such a group with the Urbana Park District Advisory Committee that holds monthly meetings open to the public to discuss issues related to park development, land acquisition, urban growth, and city planning.

Each year, half of the members of this committee rotate on and off for a 2-year service. Members are appointed by the park district as representatives of the various neighborhoods of Urbana. The study began just prior to rotation of members, and recruitment of participants occurred across two different sets of the advisory committee. A total of 20 people accepted the invitation to participate across a 4-month time period from September to December 2004. Half of participants were male, and half were female. Of the 20, one participant was African American and the others were Caucasian. During the 2 years of this study, we attended monthly meetings of this committee to keep in touch with participants by arranging face-to-face meetings to learn about community and park planning from their perspectives.

Text and Images of the Lived Character of Community

The following exhibition of photographs and their accompanying texts serve as a platform for audiences to share in the narratives of participants' experiences with the landscapes that define their community. Too often, traditional planning processes dismiss or ignore these narratives in favor of efficiency. If planners wish to understand and respond to public concern about landscape change, they must be willing to engage citizens and understand the stories behind the reactions to change. Ethically, we believe such an approach is a more responsible way for planners to treat their citizens. To do otherwise would do violence to the memories that make these places so special to the people who contribute to their character. What follows is a public performance of the lived character of community.

Figure 1
(Re)thinking Place

Chloe: I don't particularly like the subdivision where we moved. I mean, I like our house, but I don't like the subdivision because it's just new and it's barren. Trees are little, and this seems to be more developed. The houses that were built around here are older, I think. I think it was probably maybe the first place that was built out here, and so it's the one view of the place we live now that I actually photographed, whereas I photographed a number of things that I used to use when I lived in a different neighborhood.

Figure 2
The Social Landscape of Civic Life

Marge: There's a whole population of people that come at different times of the day, and that's why I pulled the camera out. I had to take a picture of this. I never really thought about this before. It showed the community in many facets that morning that I had not been aware of. I don't go to the Farmer's Market as much as I'd like, but to me it's a great social time. You never know who you're going to run into, and to me that's a lot of fun. You never can go and spend just a few minutes there. [both laugh] So it was more of the place and the activity that's going on. It epitomizes, to me, true community.

Figure 3
Politics of Land Use

Jane: I took this picture because I wanted to, uh, to make a statement about the fact that I don't like what cows are fed in this country.

Figure 4
Cement Desert

Marge: That's all I can think of them as is a cement desert. And instead of building new shopping malls there they build them outside of town someplace and leave these things just having ruined the landscape. Oh, I know. And what's ironic is that there is this sign, there are two signs, one at each end of this certain area on Philo Road that says "Philo Road Business District." [laughs] I should have taken a picture of that to go along with these. And it's just so ironic because what business, you know? They are trying to pretend like there is some business on Philo Road, but there isn't.

Figure 5
Narrating the Long Relationship

Sue: There weren't a lot of kids my age in the neighborhood [when I was growing up], so I didn't have a lot of other kids to play with. So I would just walk my dog down to the park, and when I went there—it was before they developed it up so much—there were a lot more trees, and the little drainage ditch we would walk along or walk in. I'm not sure if it was this tree or another tree that was nearby, but there was a tree, a pretty big tree, right by the road that I would take my dog and I would climb up the tree, and then I would get stuck in the tree and try to tell my dog to pull a "Lassie" and run home, but then I would just climb down. We just would spend a lot of time there. And then, as more people moved into the neighborhood, because it was a newer development, I made some friends in the neighborhood and we'd go down there and play, and I think there were probably times in college when I'd take my new college friends there and we'd maybe have a beer or something, you know. I have a kind of a long relationship with that view there.

Figure 6
This Is About My Kids

Leslie: So this is about my kids, bringing my kids to this park. We all came to this park. My kids attended Leal School, which is very close to Carle Park. Every year in the fall we had an ice cream social. It was at the park every time, right at the beginning of the school year. And all the parents came with the kids, and you'd see all the teachers and the families. This is a family park. My kids played soccer in this park. On Saturday mornings, I would congregate with groups of kids. My kids played touch football in this park. They just wandered around this park. This is a place where as a family and where my kids alone spent a lot of time, and spent a lot of time with neighbors who were our children's classmates and then their parents. So it is a congregation point for me.

Figure 7
Existence Value

Tess: Well, it's much more significant in my past than it is now. I rarely go there now really. Yes, it's mostly historical. . . . Now that the kids are all grown up and everything, we walk other places. We walk in Meadowbrook now, and so we just don't come over here anymore like we used to.

Figure 8
Transferring Emotional Connections

Allie: What kind of made me think about this is because—I don't know if we can talk about relationships at all—but, with my husband, our first date was in an open field, and we went kite flying. With a cat, we went kite flying. [laughs] And he had all these kites, and that was nice memory for me and open space. The open space that we went to was by Parkland [College], which, again, is now all developed. And so, that was kind of special to me, all of that.

Figure 9
From Self-in-Community to Community-in-Self

Chloe: I'm not from Illinois. When I moved here, it was a rude awakening. I grew up in Northeastern Ohio where you have lots of trees and lots of hills and lots of weather things, um, that are pretty dramatic, and so, when I moved here, it took me quite a few years to get used to the flatness. What I felt was bareness for a while. It really took working in the environment and being in the community for me to really begin to appreciate it. I always thought I was going to be here for a few years, and that was 15 years ago. And so, the prairie is very important to me because it shows me what Illinois was and how special it is.

Table 1
From Self-Deprecation to Collective Pride

Forum participant	I came here to college in 1968 and I thought, "Oh, my God; I'm in Podunkville, and I've got to get out of here," but I didn't. What am I doing with these morons and these townies and all the people. And I couldn't believe I was here, that they put this university here. And here I am all these years later.
Respondent	Right here with the morons.
Forum participant	Right there with the morons and the townies. My children are townies. . . . These are the kids that all those suburban kids from Chicago made fun of when they came down here. My little townie children.

Figure 10
It's Velvet Out There

Rena: When I was growing up, I hated Illinois as being flat. It was flat, it was ugly. I can't wait to get out of here. And I got out of here, and I couldn't wait to come back because it's not flat. I mean, you said, "Oh, yeah; it's flat." No, it's not. It's gentle. My experiences out there were nothing like being in the Midwest, and when I came back I really appreciated the beauty of the fields. It sounds really stupid—I mean, you will understand it, but a lot of people don't—I love April when they plow up the dirt and sow. It's just this richness and this vibrant color after all the dead stuff you see all winter long. And then they plant and everything is orderly, all in little rows. And then in May, when it starts to come up and it gets about this high, it depends on how you look at it. Sometimes you look at it and it's just perfectly organized and straight, and I like organized. But then, if you turn the corner, you look at and it looks solid. And I love to be able see that. And I love the difference between the corn and the soybeans. And as you go through the seasons, you know, as it comes up, it gets so vibrant green in the summertime, and then at the end of September it turns that sort of a golden yellow color and then it turns kind of a buff color. I feel like I'm waxing about corn, but I really do love to see that color change and when they start harvesting, it's like, it's like a clean shaven guy, you know? It's just so smooth you almost, like soybean fields, like you could just go out and touch it and it looks like it's velvet out there. (see Table 1.)

Social Ethics of Landscape Change

We envision a community-based model of land-use planning that assists participants in coming to know moral truths about themselves and the multiple truths that operate within their communities. The text and images showcased above provide insight into ways that stakeholders express values about landscape change. Even though participants were *not* asked to discuss landscape change, nor were they guided to construct stories that described the meanings of their special places, significant portions of interview texts from both individual and focus group (civic discovery forum) interviews were

developed as personal and community narratives about landscape change. Clearly, many participants expressed values for their community surroundings most easily by narrating the long relationships between themselves and their community landscapes.

Bringing stakeholders together allows for the *public* performance of stories about the landscapes that matter to citizens. In so doing, the civic discovery forums produce a dialogic text that

> attempts to keep the dialogue, the conversation, between text, performer, and audience ongoing and open-ended. This text does more than invoke empathy: It interrogates, criticizes, and empowers. This is dialogical criticism. The dialogical performance is the means for "honest intercultural understanding." (Denzin, 1997, p. 122)

These forums are "sites of political negotiation" (Denzin, 1997, p. 247) and social learning. Narrative is powerful, especially when it is shared publicly, for it explicitly connects perceptions of the past, present, and future as a basic framework for understanding and empathy (Polkinghorne, 1988, 1995). Here, "reciprocal care and understanding, rooted in emotional experience and not in formal consensus, are the basis on which moral discourse is possible" (Denzin, 1997, p. 227).

The use of participatory techniques, like photo elicitation, is effective at equalizing some of the power relationships between researcher and participant, and facilitates the public telling of landscape values. Several scholars have been concerned about unequal power between researcher and participant. Fine (1994; Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000) discussed power issues related to informed consent, representation of others, and research agendas. By centering the conversations on the telling of stories of lived experiences in places of their community, participants are the experts on their own lives, understand that their stories are connected to landscape values, and generally draw from their memories as triggered by the photographs to tell their stories. This format to represent landscape values is comparatively easier than asking direct open-ended questions about landscape values, land ethics, or preferences for land-use change. In addition, it is more suitable to understanding community-based place meanings compared to the usual methods of citizen involvement, such as questionnaires or town hall meetings that generally (and perhaps unwittingly) categorize, dichotomize, and polarize. In addition, the use of photographs facilitates the public discussion of landscape values given that attention is focused on the visual image and deflects attention from the people doing the telling. Although the evoked place meanings are "of the

person" doing the telling, the appearance is "of the place." The authority of those telling their stories is not, and can not be, challenged. As a result, the stories being told are credible, emotionally contagious because of the sincerity of the teller, and usually effective at enlightening other participants of historical events in the places depicted. This shift in attribution and taken-for-granted nature of authority of one's place meanings allows for a more fluid discussion of landscape values during the civic discovery forum compared to town hall meetings or public hearings.

The ethics associated with the civic discovery forum are therefore consistent with a feminist, communitarian ethic (cf. Christians, 2000; Christians, Ferre, & Fackler, 1993; Denzin, 1997; Parry, 2003) insofar as they presume a dialogical view of the self. As Christians (2000) explained, a feminist communitarianism "interlocks personal autonomy with communal well-being" (p. 145). This process was illustrated in the participants shift from a *self-in-community* to a *community-in-self* orientation. By giving citizens a forum "to activate the polis mutually" (Christians, 2000, p. 145) and facilitating the sharing of narratives that "ennoble human experience while facilitating civic transformations in the public and (private) spheres" (Denzin, 1997, p. xiv), the civic discovery forum fostered a sense of community among participants. Accordingly, it offered what Denzin (2000) referred to as a "politics of hope" whereby texts "criticize how things are and imagine how they could be different" (p. 262). Instead of focusing on difference, the outcomes of the civic discovery forum focused on the ties that bind participants together, ties that serve as a point of departure for genuinely community-based planning decisions.

Even so, this research does have consequences that will take time to play out. Although we have plans to (a) develop a Web site and a traveling poster that showcases participants' photos and text and travels around to public places within the community and (b) invite others to add their own photos and text that explain their place meanings, we aim for wider impact and enhanced capacity to make a difference. Thus, we believe the engagement process outlined in this article ought to be done in conjunction and prior to an agency planning process. Within this study, the Urbana Park District initiated its strategic planning process at the tail end of the project. Although it hired a professional consulting firm to do the usual "needs assessment," the community-based planning process in this article will likely serve as a tool that is relevant to the goals of planners. Given our commitment to social justice and the empowerment of groups of interacting individuals, our hope is that "these stories will move people to action" (Denzin, 1997, p. xv).

For the reasons listed above, we believe the engagement techniques outlined in this article can be used to assist in forwarding a democratized landscape planning process that draws on the values of citizens to provide visions for decision making. As Gobster (2001) pointed out, "One of the greatest challenges to urban park planners, landscape architects, and managers is to balance the tension between providing for the diverse uses and values of park space and preserving and enhancing the unique qualities of place" (pp. 35-36). Techniques that allow for the representation of values facilitate the public sharing of personal histories with landscapes, promote sense of community effectively, and situate the social meanings relevant to a community (cf. Daitch et al., 1996; Linde, 1993; Marcucci, 2000; Yankelovich, 1991). If the mission of social science is to enable people to come to mutually held conclusions, as Christians (2000) argued, we believe research must be participatory in its execution so that it is rooted in shared governance and grounded in local community understanding. Accordingly, we believe the values of people living in the community, not planners, ought to drive the land-use planning process.

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