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Discussion on Whole-Place Sustainable Tourism



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Overview

Whole Place Development can be used as a methodology for sustainable tourism development.

Sustainable tourism development requires a thoughtful, inclusive community effort. Tourism developers, working without the benefit of the entire community's input, may not be productive to the community that is seeking to benefit from tourism.

Tourism development in the 20th century was about economic benefit at any cost. Sustainability and resiliency was not considered important.

Tourism development in the 21st century must be a part of the whole community.

Tourism cannot grow credibly and provide the benefits to a community when only the financial "bottom line" is considered.

To create a whole sustainable, resilient community, leaders must consider at least: the realms of education and knowledge, health care, ecological health, cultural understanding, history and heritage, leadership, governance, built environment and tourism.



Whole Place Development

Sustainable tourism is possible when it understands that it is a part of a sustainable community. Whole Place Development lays the foundation for community and tourism development that is efficient, resilient and sustainable.

Whole Place Development, for the purposes of this paper, is the dynamic process of creating public and private spaces using

the input of various community stakeholders to encourage a desirable, livable space in which a community can sustain itself and flourish.

Whole Place Development theory holds that if a community builds a place upon its own identity, character and community presence, visitors will be attracted and it will generate activity, in turn benefit the place.



Introduction

The Blackstone River Valley is the first industrialized landscape in North America. After years of significant economic, environmental, socio-cultural and historical degradation, a new approach to community regeneration emerged that is helping to shape the Blackstone Valley into a whole-place to live, work and visit.

The Blackstone Valley Tourism Council of Rhode Island has been a community partner in effecting this change. The Sustainable Tourism Planning and Development Laboratory is a program of Tourism Council. The Lab focuses on place-based tourism, through an educational platform that supports whole community thinking through innovative and resilient sustainable tourism development practices.

Our contention is that Whole Place Development leads to the creation of sustainable communities. As a community works together to move towards sustainability, the prospect of sustainable tourism will follow. By attempting to pursue sustainable tourism without recognizing the critical role-played by the host community and the sustainability of the destination is like building a home without a foundation.

Whole Place Development, for the purposes of this article, is the dynamic process of developing public and private spaces, using the input of community stakeholders, to create a desirable, livable place in which the community can sustain itself and flourish.

The Project for Public Spaces determined that people identified the elements of emotion, a sense of belonging and a spiritual connection as part of any successful Place Development process. The involvement of the community in creating the Place will encourage a sense of pride. Bernard Hunt states that there are two sides of the Place-making coin, physical form is one side, and the way life is lived in it, is the other. If a community builds a place with its own identity, character and community presence to achieve a sustainable community, visitors will be attracted and it will generate activity, in turn benefit the region.

Places, according to the Project for Public Spaces – Build and support the local economy; Nurture and define community identity; Foster frequent and meaningful contact; create improved accessibility; promote sense of comfort and draw a diverse population.



Why Whole Places?

According to Kip Bergstrom, of Reinventing Stamford, the seeking of tourism is not an end in itself; it is a component of the development of whole places. Whole places are diverse, unique, distinguishable and in demand. These places utilize community partnerships, both public and private, to “harness the power of design, finance, science and narrative” in developing economically and socially efficient, appealing, vibrant destinations. These places have character.

They impart a sense of authenticity. Developing Whole Places means improving the quality of the place. Bergstrom states that an increase in quality-of-place, using the strategy of Whole Place Development, has a direct linear correlation to the quality of visitor the place will attract.

While mass tourism dominated the market into the early 1990’s, the recent rapid growth in “alternative tourism” indicates a new direction for tourism development in the 21st century.

Is there a market appeal for Whole Places, or is this a type of development solely for the community’s benefit? The alternative tourist market includes various niches such as cultural tourists, which Lowell is drawing, environmental tourists, Geotourists and others. Geotourism, authored by the National Geographic Society’s Center for Sustainable Destinations speaks to sustaining a community through preserving and enhancing the Character of Place. Geotourists seek deeper experiences than their counterparts in previous decades.

This visitor market is seeking authentic experiences in places where they can participate in activities and interact with local communities. Increasingly, the Alternative Tourist is environmentally aware and expresses a concern for the environmental and social integrity of the places they visit. Tourism developers, in partnership with community developers, must keep this in mind as they strive to create sustainable places for residents, businesses and visitors to enjoy.

Place Making Genres.

A myriad of individuals and organizations have used the term place-making in many genres. In the 1970’s, place-making began to be used by architects and urban planners to describe the method of developing public spaces such as parks, squares and plazas that invite and attract people.

In tourism, the ideas behind it have been expressed through various terms such as place-making, sense of place, community tourism and, more recently, civic tourism. These holistic tourism development methodologies seek to include many more than purely economic assessments.

Geotourism, for example, includes sustainability, preservation of the built and natural environment, as well as notions of community involvement, and even capping tourist levels based on capacity.

Civic tourism goes beyond goals for economic growth and incorporates environmen-



tal and social factors as well. By investing in the place, engaging the community and developing the “story” or narrative of the place, a destination can achieve sustainable tourism development. Dr. Dan Shilling of Arizona State University, the originator of the Civic Tourism concept, argues communities should appreciate tourism as a public good, valuing it as a public responsibility, and practicing it as a public art.

This notion of creating a “story” with buy-in from community stakeholders, who assist in helping to define their community story, is becoming better understood in the field of tourism. Building a place of which residents can be proud is an integral part of the development of the “story.” Author David Weaver points to many factors that influence that development, not all of which are positive. For example, the narrative can become a reflection of what a small minority wants the “story” to be, leaving out the narrative of ethnic minorities or the economically disadvantaged and, ironically, encouraging gentrification.

McKercher and du Cros however, point out that many potential negative changes to intangible assets and local narratives can be mitigated if community members and other relevant stakeholders are able to work together.

Whole Place Development requires compromise, care, and community action in order to be successful. Defining the narrative of a place is critical, and must satisfy residents. Place identity contributes to self-identity.

Thus, while whole places give a community or place a “sense of place” they are also giving residents a sense of identity.

Sense of place is a primary developmental influence across the human lifespan. As residents identify closely with their place, it becomes imperative that the narrative of the place reflects the needs and desires of the community members.

The narrative of a place is a dialectic that is influenced by many factors and is continuously reinterpreted over time. Visitors can be attracted to a place because of its narrative.

Tourism

The visitor destination includes the built and natural environment and the ethereal “sense of place” that, while it cannot be photographed, tagged, or sold, it becomes a critical part of the place or in the case of the visitor – the destination.

Visitors, especially the rapidly growing sector that includes alternative, cultural and niche tourists, seek experiences that reach beyond the traditional mass tourism, tourist that seek sun, sand, and sea.

Mass tourism can minimize visitor interaction with locals. While the element of the “other” is crucial to the tourist experience, Whole Place Development is about developing an environment in which visitors and locals interact.



Whole Place Development creates welcoming spaces that reduce barriers and open up spaces for increased cultural and social exchange. This, of course, requires careful planning as increased interaction can have negative impacts.

Whole Place theory argues that by creating meaningful spaces, the positive interactions, not only amongst community members, but also between the community and its visitors, will be maximized.

These types of interactions are the authentic experiences that the modern alternative visitor is seeking. Whole places, therefore, are better equipped to attract and retain higher quality alternative and niche tourists according to Bergstrom. In fact tourism development and residential development go hand in hand, resulting in positive migration in addition to visitor levels.

Visitor Economic and Nuisance Values

Alternative visitors typically spend more money in more locally owned and operated facilities over a greater region. Thus the wealth generated by tourism expenditures is not as likely to be concentrated in small urban centers, but rather spread throughout the destination. Careful planning and co-operation with heritage managers, tourism developers and the local community can further direct visitor traffic to desired areas and in desired numbers, helping to ensure that visitors receive the experience they seek and the destination retains its sense of authenticity, receives the income it desires,

while maintaining resident satisfaction with visitor levels.

Gu and Ryan argue that residents' "altruistic attitudes towards tourism, based upon the desire to see others economically benefit, can be eroded if nuisance values grow". At the same time they found that one of the main reasons businesses cite for not using sustainable practices is that they would be inconvenient for tourists. It becomes a balancing act. Residents are more likely to create a welcoming, wholesome environment, if visitor traffic is kept to a reasonable limit and does not burden the day-to-day functioning of the resident.

Businesses naturally want to provide an environment that caters to visitors. Some fear that sustainable practices will inhibit that process. Whole Place Development strives to satisfy all players by bringing all of these social contributors to the table to seek economically, environmentally and socially viable solutions.

Quality of Life

Working to improve the community's whole place qualities such as the aesthetics, functionality and overall reputation benefits residents and visitors. Sustainable tourism development must plan for the needs of the visitors and the resident simultaneously. Residents should always be the primary beneficiaries of all visitor amenities in a community.

A clean and abundant water supply, proper waste management, safety and reliable trans-



portation are needed to ensure satisfaction of visitor and resident. Whole Places provide for these needs. Place Development requires cooperation by a variety of stakeholders throughout the community. A thoughtful dialog should exist in the community and all of its actors to insure they are invested in the planning and implementation of any development initiative. Encouraging cooperation between parties ensures that more voices are incorporated in the discourse. This expanded dialogue helps planners foresee problems and adapt quickly to the changing needs of residents and visitors building a resilient community.

Greater cooperation means greater harmony. Some of the essential ingredients for a high quality of life include residents' safety, low pollution, social tolerance and harmony, and good shopping facilities.

In community and tourism development, the goal is to improve or enhance the quality experiences of residents and visitors. This needs to be distinguished from gentrification, which is the replacement of poorer, often neglected neighborhoods with renovated neighborhoods, higher property values and newer, wealthier residents.

Gentrification is not the improvement of quality of life, but rather the replacement of residents with a particular quality-of-life with new residents already at a higher standard-of-living.

Whole Place Development does not displace local residents, but rather seeks to improve the support structure (physical as well as

social) of the place in order to benefit residents of every socio-economic class. In the Blackstone Valley, community planners and the Tourism Council are working to return rail traffic to the community. The community seeks to have railroad access to other markets and the Tourism Council sees railroad access as a more sustainable way to bring visitors to the Valley. Place Development may focus on improving transportation by creating more public transportation options.

Visitor's benefit by the increased accessibility, and shop owners may see more foot traffic. However, public transport is a resource used by all members of society and reduced traffic congestion in downtown areas benefits all residents. These are the types of enhancements that show how Whole Place Development can improve quality-of-life for residents and visitors alike.

Old, dilapidated buildings and low-cost housing units are necessary to maintain diversity. This diversity is critical to the success of a place, giving it character and maintaining dynamic cultural richness not found in "gentrified" neighborhoods. This diversity of people, architecture, land-use, cuisine and level of restoration/disrepair underscores the sense of authenticity of the place. Visitor satisfaction requires that they have an authentic experience.

According to Pine and Gilmore in *The Experience Economy* they explore how successful companies use goods as props and services as the stage creating experiences that engage customers in an inherently



personal way. For example - why does a cup of coffee cost more at a trendy café than it does at the corner diner or when brewed at home? Pine and Gilmore argue that the world is now shifting to the Experience Economy. Tourism is an experience. Well prepared communities should do well if they can build upon their unique experiential features.

Quality-of-Life has as much to do with perception as anything else. How residents perceive their lives informs their choices, civic participation and levels of satisfaction. Sustaining that quality of life, then, requires that a positive perception be maintained. Visitors play an important role in the interpretation of a destination. Culture is dynamic. It is constantly reinterpreted. The narrative of a place will include a distilled interpretation of the culture of that place.

Community planners need to keep the visitor in mind when developing a place that also ensures a certain level of appeal. Visitors are looking for interesting, aesthetically appealing places.

Whole Place Development is about creating inviting public spaces. These spaces are multi-purpose and must cater to the needs of all members of the community. New and old structures should live together to create community continuity. This provides a natural symmetry that appeals to both residents and visitors. By maintaining an aesthetically appealing sense-of-place, a community further reinforces local identity. This in turn provides a constant reminder to residents that they are a part of a whole, giv-

ing them a sense of belonging, encouraging further involvement within the community and developing stronger pride of place.

According to the Project for Public Spaces the process of Place Development isn't always easy: consensus can be hard to reach, and establishing a framework for change that involves as many stakeholders as possible takes time. Places constantly evolve as a community changes, and in order for residents or other stakeholders to receive immediate benefits from Place Development, small changes, even temporary or experimental ones, must be implemented as soon as possible

Useful Examples

The Broad Street Regeneration Initiative for Pawtucket, Central Falls and Cumberland, Rhode Island is a three-community mission to develop a plan for the preservation and appreciation of the cultural, social, historical and environmental resources along the three-mile long Broad Street, common to all communities.

These communities in collaboration with the Sustainable Tourism Planning and Development Laboratory program of the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council are creating a plan that will guide local businesses, residents, community agencies and preservationist in developing the area with resilient sustainable development principles.

Broad Street contains historic properties and sites that define the character of the Black-



stone Valley. A regenerated Broad Street will attract more residents and visitors. Broad Street is a significant part of America's story of Industrialization; the journey from farm to factory and the outcome of that journey. Whole Place Development, education and reuse will draw visitors back to Broad Street.

The Broad Street Regeneration Initiative identifies, inventories the resources and conditions of the street. The Broad Street Plan integrates preservation, regeneration and economic development for the area. The Plan makes investors aware of the advantage of preserving the historic character of the area.

The communities have many cultural assets that have helped build the area and new populations have settled there and continue to contribute economically. The effort will result in the redevelopment of historic buildings, streetscape and transit improvements within the corridor in a way that is sensitive to the historic and current cultural context of the communities and its residents. The process involves civic engagement and collective actions of identified

actors designed to recognize and address issues of public concern. Focus groups composed of residents and local business owners have been surveyed to determine the core needs, challenges and opportunities to address in the Plan.

Keep Space - Pawtucket and Central Falls, a program developed by Rhode Island Housing in collaboration with the Pawtucket Citizens Development Corporation have created a sustainable community effort using the Place-making principles.

Woonsocket's Neighborworks has just completed a sustainable community plan for the city of Woonsocket supported by the Local Initiatives Support Corporation.

The Tourism Council originated, and is working with a host of Blackstone Valley organizations on the development of an application for a sustainable cities grant being offered by the USHUD, the USEPA and the USDOT. The effort, if successful, will bring up to \$5 million to help the Blackstone Valley implement a watershed-wide sustainable communities program. The application is being drafted by Urgent VC of Massachusetts.



Conclusion

Whole Place Development theory advances community appeal. It makes a community a great place to live. The work of Whole Place Development is not just about making a great park, resort or street but to also establish and grow appropriate businesses.

They are destinations that attract visitors. Whole Place Development is for communities that want to develop tourism and generate visitor revenue without detracting from their local character. Whole Place Development is about preserving the soul of a place,

while enhancing its narrative and serving its residents as well as its visitors. This process requires the cooperation of various community stakeholders, extensive research, careful planning and thoughtful implementation. The results, however, can be affirming for all.

The Blackstone River Valley has already seen increased pride of place among residents. Whole places, and the inviting atmosphere they engender, become sustainable places where residents flourish and visitors are eager to return.



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