

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF PLACE MAKING

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Sustainable Tourism Conference

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What is Sustainable Tourism?

From a public policy perspective, tourism is not an end in itself. By this I mean that the point of a city or state promoting tourism is not primarily to grow the tourism industry, with its overwhelmingly seasonal and largely lower-wage jobs. Rather, tourism is a means to an end, and that end is creating a set of high quality place amenities that are beyond those which local residents can support by themselves, and which are enjoyed by both residents and tourists.

For tourism to do that: the volume of tourists, as well as local users of the same amenities, has to be managed so as not to overwhelm the place; the tourism experience has to be positive; and a significant portion of tourism spending has to go to the creation and maintenance of high quality place amenities.

Managing Volume

Tourists can't be allowed to crowd out locals. But locals can't be allowed to crowd out tourists either. For example, we know from research conducted this summer that the majority of the dreaded day visitors in Newport are in fact us...Rhode Islanders, not out-of-state visitors.

A Positive Tourist Experience

If we want to use tourism dollars to create better amenities for ourselves, the tourists can't be hosed from a price/value trade-off. They need to feel that their experience here met or exceeded their expectations and that the cost was in proportion to the value compared to other alternatives. Otherwise, they will not come back, and overtime, we will run out of one-time visitors to hose.

Investing in Place Amenities

And all of the tourism taxes can't be skimmed to balance state and local budgets. Done in a sustainable way, tourism creates a vital cycle of tourism spending, amenity enhancement, more tourism spending and more amenity enhancement. I think we are currently milking tourism in an unsustainable way to support other activities without investing sufficiently in place amenities. This would be true whether or not we recycled more of the incidental materials consumed in the tourism experience. In other words, tourism could be a model of recycling and not be sustainable either as a business or as a means of creating high quality place amenities.

“High quality place amenities”...now there's a policy wonk mouthful if there ever was one! What do I mean by that? Let me put it in your own words. I read through the notes from the

spring meeting of this group and was struck by some of your nuggets. “We are branding a lifestyle,” you said. “Maybe the word tourism isn’t the right word. It’s a lifestyle. Does it need a name? Rather think of it is a philosophy.” Another café table suggested “Residents as tourists” which they called “backyard tourism” and posited “pride in local lifestyle community as an exchange.” Another café table focused on the most obvious place amenity of all: “Local, good food” including “Agriculture...Food – what’s caught or collected. Cooking demonstrations...ethnic neighborhoods and local communities’ cuisine and everything...wines, vineyards, organic wine? Seafood, produce, local farms, Rhody fresh, salt/fresh water...Local/sustainable, organic?”

The lynchpin of this idea is a local, one-of-a-kind restaurant that has the freedom to source locally and thereby create a market for our farmers and fishermen. This restaurant is in turn supported by a combination of the purchases of locals and tourists. One of the things I mean by using tourism to create a set of “high quality place amenities” is that we get a larger number of one-of-kind restaurants that serve good, local food and support high quality local food producers.

Good, local food is of course just one part of the place experience for tourists and locals. Another one of your spring café tables noted that: “Place making looks at a destination in a holistic way. All the resources, e.g., cultural, heritage, environment and commercial are put into consideration. Maintaining a sense of place not just for tourists, but also for residents. Appeal to your own community before you reach out. Social responsibility is pride in authenticity, preservation. Rhode Island is cool; excite people about what we have.”

To me, this captures it all. Sustainable tourism is about place making. And to push forward this conversation in the café tables today, Bob asked me to share some thoughts on the art and science of place making...to sketch out the larger effort of place making of which sustainable tourism is a vital part. I will focus on two key questions:

How can we energize a network of public and private capabilities, harnessing the power of design, finance, science and narrative, to create places that are not cookie-cutter subdivisions, strip malls and office parks—the generic, default development pattern of most of the suburban American landscape—but rather places that are “whole” ...that is, places that are: full of life; diverse and distinctive in their built form, natural environment and social networks; empowering of their people; transit and digitally connected; water and energy efficient; and disaster resilient?

How can we deliberately sustain and expand diversity—of people, buildings, uses, businesses, habitats and species—in the face of prevailing economic forces that tend to diminish diversity...in other words, how can a community be economically successful without losing its soul?

Combining Design, Finance, Science *and* Narrative to Create Whole Places

The typical government approach to place-making would be through regulation. But whole place making requires a much closer partnership between the state and localities, and between the public and private sectors that goes well beyond regulation. It is less a process of rule-making and more of a process of market-making. Rule-making is critically important, and there is a significant evolution underway in the rule-making around land-use. The use-based and dimensional zoning which we have labored under for the past 50 years, and which in effect prohibits whole places, is slowly giving way to the form-based zoning promoted by Andreas Duony and the New Urbanists, which allows whole places, but which I think focuses too much on aesthetics. A better idea is the “formative” zoning pioneered by Christopher Alexander and his disciples, which enables organic layering of development over time and focuses on the sequence of development that most contributes to wholeness.

But better zoning regulation is not the exclusive or even primary answer to the creation of whole places. We need a new financial formula, or *pro forma* in the jargon of the development world, to replace the formula inherent in cookie-cutter development. Working with developers who get whole places, we need to show developers who don't that it is possible to make as much or more money building whole places as they can by building cookie-cutter places. We also need to recognize that economic development is different than real estate development. Economic development has a broader set of objectives and captures a broader set of public benefits than does development of a specific site or set of sites. One of the reasons why it is critical to forge a state and local partnership in whole place making is that state government gets most of the tax benefits of economic development; while localities get tax benefits primarily from real estate development.

Whole place development can be much more complicated than cookie-cutter development, often requiring a lead role by the public sector before private developers will come in. In Rhode Island, the capacity to plan and foster mixed-use development in a whole place-sensitive manner is very limited among the planning professionals in our cities and towns, and we certainly do not have the resources to build it in 39 towns. The Rhode Island Division of Planning needs to help build that capacity at the regional level, working with other state agencies and institutional partners like the Rhode Island School of Design, and share it out to the towns in a region.

This capacity is not just about architecture, landscape architecture, and urban and regional design. Design thinking in all its forms *is* critical to the development of whole places because it helps to create good buildings, to plan sites well, to layout districts, to manage watersheds and to visualize the patterns of the larger economic geographies in which a place is nested.

Whole places are not about nostalgia for a certain building style. There is clearly an aesthetic dimension to whole places—they are beautiful, distinctive and authentic—but modern architecture can sit well side-by-side with historic architecture and give whole places a rich texture. So we need to think about the aesthetic dimension in a broader way, but we also need to think beyond the aesthetic. Whole places have many other dimensions. For example,

whole places are efficient, sustainable and resilient as a land use pattern, because they are dense, mixed-use and walkable. This land use pattern responds to some of the key emerging conditions of our time: the rising cost of oil, a growing scarcity of water, the prospect of more extreme weather and a rise in sea level due to global warming, and the probability of high carbon taxes to mitigate it. In the face of these emerging conditions, it is foolish to continue to build low density, auto-dependent, water and energy-consumptive, and storm-vulnerable places.

Even if global warming is slowed, it now appears that there will be a significant rise in sea level and more extreme weather as a consequence of the warming that has already taken place. As a state where population and development is concentrated along our 400 miles of coastline, a rise in sea level and more frequent and more dangerous storms will affect us disproportionately. We need to move quickly to make our waterfronts less vulnerable and more resilient. This has to be a central focus of place-making.

At the same time, there is economic opportunity for us in rising oil prices and the probability of high carbon taxes to mitigate global warming, as both conditions will advantage transit-oriented development. Much of the current built fabric of Rhode Island was developed initially around earlier forms of public transit: ships, stagecoaches, trains and streetcars. It will be much easier for us to reinvent a public transit system here, than it will be for areas with lower density than ours, which grew up almost entirely around the automobile, to invent a public transit system for the first time. Thus, transit could be a source of competitive advantage for Rhode Island. Today Rhode Island has the most energy efficient state economy in the United States (Gross State Product / BTU) mostly because of our compact urban form, but in the last twenty years we developed in ways that eroded this advantage.

Given these opportunities and challenges, design is not sufficient to the development of whole places, or even primary. We need a team that includes people who understand real estate markets, particularly the needs of the various flavors of innovative firms who value whole places. We need public transit experts, specifically place-sensitive transit experts who understand that a good transit system begins and ends with lively sidewalks. We need hydrologists, biologists, meteorologists, and geologists to help us address the challenges of rising sea levels and more violent storms. We need civil engineers, especially those who understand new approaches to energy efficiency, water recycling, waste treatment, and flood avoidance. We need folks who understand social networks, including the networks that create innovation, the networks that enable upward mobility, and especially, the networks and stories that give meaning and life to a place.

Harnessing this diverse set of capabilities and bringing them to bear on specific local projects represents a whole new kind of interaction between state and local government and the public and private sector (both for profit and not-for-profit). Rather than simply denying the kind of growth we don't want, this approach involves imagining the kind of growth we do want, then partnering with private developers to create it.

Most of all, we need leadership. Developing whole places is not primarily a design problem, or a finance problem or an engineering problem or even a networking problem. It is first and

foremost a leadership challenge, for which the critical capability is story telling.

The layering of development over time that creates whole places is not just about a textured mix of structures from different historical periods, and a harmony between this built environment and the natural environment around it. It's not just the scene that is created by artists and entrepreneurs and restaurateurs to animate the physical setting. It's also, and perhaps most importantly, about place as the vessel of meaning...as interpreted by different people in different ways over time to define themselves, where they've been, where they're going. It's about myth.

In *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling*, Stephen Denning notes that "storytelling is one of the few available ways to handle the principal--and most difficult--challenges of leadership: sparking action, getting people to work together and leading people into the future." An "origin story" is the history of the founding of a place and a people that says something powerful about what it is, who it is, why it is and where it is going. Without a sense of your past, you are locked in the present; you don't have a narrative arc that gives a clear direction of where you are going. Origin stories use the power of language, of words, of names. David Campbell in *A Land of Ghosts: The Braided Lives of People and the Forest in Far Western Amazonia* puts it this way: "Names are power. It's hard for people to love a place that is not defined in words and thus cannot be understood. And it's easy to give away something for which there are no words, something you never knew existed."

You can tell a place that is a real place where its residents find meaning in the landscape, because they will give people directions based on landmarks rather than traffic lights. Rhode Islanders take this to an extreme by giving directions based on a past use of a building or based on a building that no longer exists...as patently absurd as that is to a stranger. We find meaning in our landscape. We are not part of the United States of Generica. We are part of the real America, of real places, with real stories.

The meaning of buildings and places is conveyed by the telling and retelling of stories. It's not just the story that's important, but the story-telling, and the story-tellers. The story is told by a leader or leaders as the principal act of leadership, in so doing helping to define a place and a people, by reaching into the organic reality of a place and a people and lifting it up for common reflection and understanding. But the story achieves its power in the retelling over and over again by the people in a place. A place is abuzz with a sense of itself when its residents are constantly retelling the story of the place to each other and outsiders. Business people make good candidates for this kind of place leadership as many of them are less consumed by the present, the next two or four year election cycle, than many political "leaders". On the other hand, executives of large, multinational corporations are increasingly less connected to a local place. Leadership can come from anywhere...a local entrepreneur, a minister, a university president, a non-profit executive, etc. I believe that leadership is the single most critical factor in successful place-making.

Sustaining Diversity

It's easy to get carried away with heritage architecture and historic preservation precisely because buildings are vessels of meaning. But they are also just buildings. In fact, sometimes old buildings are more important for the fact that they are old, than that they are meaningful. When Jane Jacobs said the four key physical ingredients to great neighborhoods are density, mixed use, short blocks and old buildings, and when she said that new ideas come from old buildings, she was not talking about heritage architecture. In both instances, what she was talking about was cheap space. Both historic preservationists and New Urbanists miss this point. When you redevelop an old building, you make it into a new building from a rent perspective. This narrows the range of uses that can afford to be in the building, in particular the income/ethnic mix of people, the mix of retail (less one-of-a-kinds, more chains) and the mix of commercial (less start-ups and small firms employing local residents and more established firms employing yuppies). This is why gentrification leads so often to its own demise, making distinctively funky places into homogeneous, upscale, generic-chic places. It's important to keep a significant portion of the old buildings undeveloped in pretty crappy condition, and to build affordable housing and affordable retail and commercial space into redevelopment projects, if you want to preserve distinctiveness.

I did my college senior thesis at UC Santa Cruz in 1974 on Jane Jacobs, using data from the 1970 census to show that it was as much the mix of people in the neighborhoods she loved, as it was their physical characteristics, which made them great places. I was quite taken by statistics at the time, which I used to show that the key social common denominators among her great neighborhoods in Boston, New York and Philadelphia were a high percentage of foreign born, a high percentage of working women, and a broad range of socio-economic diversity. If you found clusters of those people elsewhere (I used neighborhoods in San Francisco to make the point) you would find great places, even if the physical environment was not ideal. In the 30-plus years since then, the New Urbanists have definitively proven the corollary to this, namely that you can give white, native-born, upper-income families with a working dad and a stay-at-home mom a perfect physical environment and they will manage to make it a boring place (e.g., Celebration, Seaside).

I have absolutely no doubt that Rhode Island will succeed in attracting talent and jobs and tourists to our great places. My concern is that our economic success will end up eroding our advantages in authenticity and diversity over time. Which leads to the question: *Can a city be economically successful and not lose its soul?*

How do we deal with the inevitable tendency of rising rents to crowd out diversity? Prosperous places look increasingly similar to me. The Back Bay of Boston, the Upper East Side of New York, even the Left Bank of Paris and Notting Hill in London. They are upscale and chic to be sure, but generic nonetheless. In cities like New York with enough scale, there is enough diversity in the other neighborhoods to give most of its citizens an experience of diversity in spite of the chic but stifling sameness of the upscale neighborhoods. But in midsize cities like Boston, upscale generic may be the only or the dominant culture.

Which leads to the question: *Can a place be whole without economic, racial and ethnic diversity?* For example, to me Boston is a strangely unreal place because you only see white people downtown...Boston has blacks, but they are segregated in Roxbury and Dorchester...there is a sort of urban apartheid that does not exist in the same way in the South, or even in Providence for that matter...partly because in smaller cities it's hard for the races not to interact, at least superficially. If there is a need to maintain economic, racial and ethnic diversity for a place to feel real, then a whole place economic development strategy has to have an affordable housing component.

The other key element to preserving diversity is to get very good at helping low-income natives and newcomers transform themselves into innovators. Innovation cannot just be the purview of elites working in labs and corporate strategy suites. In a service economy, the worker is the product. The typical front line worker in a service business has a hundred times more customer contact than the CEO. Unless the front line worker can become a meaningful part of adding value to the customer experience, a service company cannot innovate successfully. The best service companies are starting to get this and are starting to view their front line workforce as an asset to invest in rather than a cost to be reduced. You can see this in the different business models, and different market success, of a Best Buy versus a Circuit City. Best Buy is aggressively investing in its frontline workforce and eating the lunch of Circuit City, who is busy downsizing its frontline workforce. The Mandarin Oriental Hotel is an example of this in the hospitality sector, where each of the housekeeping staff has a Blackberry on which they make notes about customer preferences which become common knowledge of the whole organization, which then uses this knowledge to improve the customer experience.

A whole place economic development strategy has to be as much about education and workforce development as about physical development. Eighty percent of total US net population growth in the 90's was from foreign immigration. By 2020 that figure is projected to be 100 percent. Rhode Island is already living in that future...all of our net population growth in the 90's was from foreign immigration. We're trying to figure out how to turn this to our advantage. Perhaps whoever figures out how to turn immigrants into innovators first wins the economic game...and we plan to be first.

Part of this is conceiving of a whole place as a platform for human development. To paraphrase Hillary Clinton, it takes a neighborhood. Successful upward mobility is the result of a mutually-reinforcing network of relationships that link individuals in a neighborhood. School reform, neighborhood revitalization, parent leadership development, home ownership programs, adult education and skill training are not separate efforts, but parts of a whole.

My organization, the Rhode Island Economic Policy Council, recently moved its offices to Rhode Island's first "green" building in the Southside neighborhood of Providence. While this neighborhood is the city's poorest, it also has unique assets—the largest health complex in New England; four of the small high schools of the Big Picture company, arguably the leading innovator nationally in secondary education reform; a top community-based housing development corporation; three of the state's best adult educators; and a branch of the

Community College of Rhode Island. We think we can help to network these assets into a holistic neighborhood approach to upward mobility.

I leave you with this, which is the proposition that a diverse group of Southside stakeholders developed as the proposition that will drive this effort:

To align, combine and network key capabilities to enable upward mobility, global connectivity, entrepreneurship and civic engagement – unleashing the creative energy of the Southside to exploit emerging conditions, preserving and enhancing its authentic sense of place and distinctiveness and replacing outdated industrial models with new ones which empower the individual and community.

The ideas in it about civic engagement and the need to free ourselves of the vestiges of rationalist, industrial-age thinking that linger on in our public bureaucracies I leave to another day to explain, but the rest of it is a fitting benediction to all of the points I have tried to make.