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Uncovering and Mapping Place Attachment in Small Cities

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the connections that visitors and residents have to places is critically important for tourism development. Aided with this knowledge, authentic experiences can be developed, stories can be uncovered and told, and resident perspectives can be identified. This paper describes a case study to uncover and map place attachment in three small cities in Western Canada. The project was conducted in the cities of Courtenay, Port Alberni and Nanaimo, BC. A one day "walk about" in each community was used to record 1.5 minute videos (n=85) of residents speaking about a place in their downtown core where they felt connected to. These videos were then uploaded to Arc GIS resulting in the first layer of a dynamic map for each community. Findings were analyzed using content analysis and data visualization techniques. The findings suggest cultural mapping practices can aid in the design and promotion of tourism experiences.

INTRODUCTION:

Small cities are increasingly turning to cultural mapping as a way to aid them in place-making. Mapping the intangible elements of place in a way that retains depth of meaning requires researchers to use innovative data collection and visualization techniques. This practice enables development proponents to tap into the "lifeblood of the community and the mainstream of the creative economy" (Mercer quoted in Jeannotte, 2015, p.99) and to approach development from a position of core values and beliefs. For tourism professionals, advances in deep cultural mapping practices present opportunities to more fully understand what residents and visitors value about places and to design experiences accordingly. This paper will describe a case study to uncover and map place attachment in three small cities in Western Canada.

LITERATURE

Deep mapping is described by Kathleen Scherf (2015) as: "an inherently interdisciplinary [mapping] practice, [facilitated by] digital technology [that enables mapping to] get beyond the brochure and provide rich content across disciplines, cultures and time" (p.341). In practice, deep mapping presents "as a geographical map" but utilizes "rich content to 'volatize' and convey spirit of place" (ibid). In the process of moving 'beyond' traditional cartographic representation, deep mapping holds a kind of liberating potential - allowing us "to tell much more than any map traced by a cartographer ever could" (p.343). The integration of 'deep maps' into municipally-led cultural mapping processes has only just started to occur (Stevenson, 2013; Stewart, 2007).

Canadian cities generally (and small cities in particular) have played a leadership role in the evolution of cultural mapping processes (Jeanotte, 2015, p.109; Garrett-Petts, W.F. & Dubinsky, L., 2005). This is due, in-part, to a federal incentive enacted in 2005, in which the Government allocated gas-tax revenue to municipalities compliant in the creation of an Integrated Community Sustainability Plan (ICSP). As culture was positioned within the ICSP process as a key dimension of sustainability, the development of these plans in-turn generated a focus on cultural planning, and on cultural mapping in particular (ibid). Within small city cultural mapping processes, the drive towards participation (spawned, perhaps by the 'participation revolution') has instigated various deep mapping experiments that have pushed cultural mapping beyond standardized representations of place (Evans, 2015; Nelson, R.; Duxbury, N. & Murray, C., 2012).

METHODS

This project was designed to respond to the need expressed by planners and municipal developers for the innovation of more dynamic cultural mapping processes in small cities. In initial stages, a six-month media-mapping project was conducted using research "pods" of faculty and students in the cities of Courtenay, Port Alberni and Nanaimo, BC. The pods held a one day "walk about" in each community to record 1.5 minute videos of residents speaking about a place in their downtown

core where they felt connected to. The team mapped approximately 20 videos in each community (n=85) using consumer grade equipment.

These videos were then uploaded to Arc GIS resulting in the first layer of a dynamic map for each community. These maps were then uploaded on the project website and shared with all participants and partners, with a simultaneous call for additional videos from residents. These were then added to the initial base layer and shared publicly via the project website and through municipal planning department sites. Additional layers to the map were added including recreation facilities, public spaces and tourism attractions.

FINDINGS

Findings were analyzed using content analysis and data visualization techniques to a) observe where the 'connect-spots' were located in relation to each other; b) identify major themes and/or ideas emerging from the 'connect-spot stories'; c) compare/contrast narratives – looking at the ways in which the values and places identified in one community were similar to/different from those in another; and d) to extract discipline specific inquiries from the research team. Findings were shared with delegates at a 3 day cultural mapping symposium where 25 invited specialists were brought together to reflect on and produce innovations in the cultural mapping field – focusing on the potential application of these innovations within small Canadian cities.

This project produced numerous insights about the practice and potential use of cultural mapping as it relates to place-making and tourism development:

- The engagement of local residents identified unique geo-spatial and intangible elements of the downtown areas. The majority of "connect spots" were related to leisure venues or experiences and to the formation or maintenance of social bonds;
- The promotion and use of community events such as "walk-abouts" was a highly effective data gathering/resident engagement strategy;
- The public sharing of the videos on the web and Youtube results in a unique place promotion tool for communities to aid in tourism or resident relocation decisions.

CONCLUSION

As a whole, this project reveals the potential to spur innovative thought/action/policy to advance the field of cultural mapping in new ways and to opening to new forms of interactivity and engagement, creating and strengthening networks around shared practice and research, exploring new technological possibilities and bringing to bear new and often underplayed voices, perspectives and insights within municipally-led dialogues about place. The methods used in the collection and mapping of the videos and the visualization of data may be useful for tourism researchers to incorporate in future studies. Some of the opportunities emerging from this project for tourism researchers include: a) engaging visitors in sharing the places they feel connected to in the communities they travel to, b) creating more dynamic maps of destinations with layers that reveal deeper, more authentic meaning of place, and c) using this new knowledge to position tourism as a critical component in municipal planning and to embed highly valued places within tourism development planning.

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