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# Western regional identity and urban development policy: The view from professional planners

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## ABSTRACT

Boise and Calgary share many similar attributes despite their distinctive national origins and cultural heritages. They represent the “western metropolis” prototype that academics and journalists have cultivated over decades through spellbinding narratives about the isolated west, ethics of individualism, anti-federal/provincial sentiment, urban/rural divide, and contradictory environmental ethos. Yet, no one has considered how this western identity influences contemporary urban development policy. This comparative study surveys planners in Boise and Calgary to uncover their expert-driven perspectives. Research shows that these cross-border planners believe that western regional identity influences urban development policy in powerful ways. While they share some similar opinions in what matters most, they also possess significantly different insights when it comes to the importance of individualism, population homogeneity, natural resource economies, anti-tax attitudes, and western alienation. Overall, our survey results show that “place” does matter for policymaking in the thoughts and ideas of city planners in Boise and Calgary.

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## 1. Introduction

Baber and Bartlett (2009, 19) – in their critique of global democracy and sustainable jurisprudence – argue that in all matters of human endeavor, the “wisdom of place” matters. In other words, where people live makes a substantial difference not only in their daily lives but in all things governmental, including how people view their particular region of the world and how policies affecting their lives are formulated. We make that same argument with respect to comparing Calgary, Alberta and Boise, Idaho regarding urban development policy, with a focus on the unique aspects of the region within which these

communities reside as well as the possibility of cross border influences. These two communities lie within a clearly defined North American region, a special place—the Mountain West, a region Garreau (1981, 302–303) characterizes as being blessed with a “spirit-lifting physical environment,” and as a repository for the “values, ideas, memories, and vistas that date back to the frontier”<sup>1</sup>. We contend

<sup>1</sup> There are many definitions or conceptions of the “West” based on distinct features whether geographic, economic or cultural. Garreau’s (1981) conceptualization builds on a historical experiment. In another example, the Brookings Institution, a prominent research think tank, out of Washington DC, started an initiative with UNLV called the Brookings Mountain West, to report on regional economic indicators of western cities (UNLV, 2014). The U.S Census takes a blunter approach and breaks the nation into four geographic quadrants, including North, South, East and West (U.S. Department of Commerce 2014). Our definition starts with a geographic foundation and brings in other cultural, social and environmental factors to the mix to act as a bridge between physical space and cultural place.

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that despite the differences that characterize Calgary and Boise, be they at the Canada–United States level or the Alberta–Idaho level, the fact that these two communities reside in a clearly defined geographical, political, economic, social, and cultural region directly affects how urban development proceeds.

In a general context, regionalism is considered to be a “pervasive feature of Canadian society and politics” (Bickerton, 1999, 209) and a “part and parcel of American political life” (Elazar, 1998, xix). In a specific context, the regionalism that defines the North American West (NAW) is undauntedly clear and contradictory<sup>2</sup>. On the one hand, there is the majestic beauty of the mountains, deserts, and wilderness areas (Levin, 2013). On the other hand, there is the spirited and often fierce battle over the rights to scarce natural resources, with the never-ending search for usable water and the renewed effort to find energy sources in a quest for energy stability and independence (Kruesi, 2012; De Vogue, 2014). The North American West also presents a sharply defined contrast between the vast open spaces that define the rural countryside with a booming growth in urban population centers where most of its citizens reside, although there is also a clear distinction in the battle between downtown centralization and suburban sprawl. A “western tilt” emerges as more population and economic growth is attributed to metropolitan cores as Abbott (2008, 9) reflects in his seminal book, *How Cities Won the West*. To top it all off, the frontier ethos of rugged individualism characterized by intense anti-government attitudes comes into direct conflict with the influence of and reliance on the federal government. Competing narratives emerge about whether public efforts catalyze or interfere with growth.

According to those who live in/or work in the North American West, these special or innate characteristics create a different attitude or approach toward urban development that is unique – or set apart – from other regions. It manifests in palpable tensions over how to transform place or whether to remake urban space at all. Hence, to study urban policymaking in Canada and the United States is one thing. But, to study urban policymaking in the North American West is distinctive in important and interesting ways. It is the purpose of our research to delineate urban policymaking in the context of such a “place”—the North American West. Thus, we ask urban planners to describe the extent to which the North American West cultural ethos influences and shapes urban development policy? Drawing on a comparative study between Boise, Idaho and Calgary, Alberta, our research explores this topic by surveying urban planners who have expert insight regarding this topic. We believe that the similarities and differences between the two cases will shed light on how mega regionalism transcends national borders to create a more nuanced view of planning cultures and the policy that is a reflection of it<sup>3</sup>.

See Markusen (1987) who defines regions and regionalism from distinct political, economic and cultural frameworks.

<sup>2</sup> In this article, we are focusing on the geographic region of the Intermountain West. We use several terms to describe this region, including “North American West,” “Mountain West,” and “West”

<sup>3</sup> There are many definitions for mega regions, see Lyons (1994) Ross (2009) Florida (2014); and Regional Plan Association (2014). For the

It should be emphasized that we are not looking at urban development policy directly. We have centered our research and analysis on the perceptions of urban planners. These planners – as trained experts in how communities should pursue urban policy development – are in a strategic position to view both the public and private dimensions that make the West a distinctive cultural region. By exploring the perceptions of urban planners, it puts us in a position to understand and comment on the importance of “place” as it relates to contemporary urban development policy. Hence, as you read further, keep in mind that you are experiencing the West as viewed from the perspective of these professional experts in urban planning.

## 2. Framework of study

As described above, our study is set within a comparative framework across countries but within a distinctly defined region of North America. We provide a detailed analysis centered on the Calgary–Boise comparison with a focus on urban planners’ perceptions regarding urban development policy. We follow Gerring’s (2007) view that case study is “solidly ensconced, perhaps even, thriving” where “a movement in the social sciences [is moving] away from a variable-centered approach to causality and toward a case-based approach” (3). However, to make that comparison more meaningful we set our study within a broader setting that encompasses the Canada–United States divide within the North American West.

### 2.1. Canada and the United States: Distinct similarities and differences

Often, there appears to be general acceptance that Canada and the United States share commonalities that dominate any discussion of cross-border comparisons and make these countries natural allies. As recently expressed by Munroe Eagles and Sharon Manna: “Both countries are advanced liberal democracies that strive to give political voice to citizens in pluralistic societies through institutionalized systems of political representation” (2013, 66). To this end, much is made of the five thousand miles of peacefully shared border, the relatively large number of common institutional linkages, the shared language and culture, the open and free exchange of information, and the fact that each country is the number one trading partner of the other (Boucher, 2005; Kasoff & Storer, 2013; Moens, 2011). Yet, Canada and the United States are sovereign, independent nations, different in many ways.

While Canada and the United States are certainly linked by commonalities, it should be remembered that these two countries followed separate political and historical paths defined by distinct forms of democratic political systems with differing founding values, historical experiences, and political institutions (Adams, 2003; Hillmer, 2005; Kumar & Altschud, 2004), with these differences leading to divergent

purposes of our research, we identify mega regions as regions that cross borders as in this case where the North American West encapsulates portions of Canada and the United States.

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