



Story-telling about place: Engaging citizens in cultural mapping



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ABSTRACT

In the Province of Ontario, Canada, there is a well-established and detailed methodology for mapping tangible cultural assets, such as theatres, museums, and art galleries. However, methodologies for mapping intangible cultural assets, such as spiritual values, cultural identity, social cohesion, and heritage, are much less developed. Despite these procedural difficulties, many communities in Ontario have attempted to map their intangible cultural assets. Several of these efforts engaged citizens in story-telling about the community in order to uncover the intangible cultural dimensions of the community. This article describes and analyzes the efforts of communities to tell “stories of place” and to situate these stories within a cultural mapping protocol that heavily emphasizes tangible cultural assets. Building on a study of 64 cultural mapping projects in Ontario between 2009 and 2012, it examines how citizen engagement was linked with the mapping of intangible cultural assets in these communities, and highlights several of the most interesting projects. It also assesses the limitations of mainstream cultural mapping methodologies in capturing intangible cultural assets and tentatively suggests several elements of an alternative methodology that might address some of these shortcomings.

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1. Introduction

This paper is an outcome of two lines of research in which I have been engaged in for the past several years – public engagement in local planning initiatives, and narrative or story-telling as a technique for understanding and mapping intangible culture. Both these lines of research link back to a series of broader investigations on the role of culture in sustainable communities that is ongoing and evolving.

The broad framework within which this research has taken place owes much to current work by UNESCO on intangible cultural heritage and sustainable development as well as to recent United Nations pronouncements on culture and sustainability. Article 2.2 of UNESCO's *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* defines intangible cultural heritage as:

- (a) Oral traditions and expression, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage;
- (b) Performing arts;
- (c) Social practices, rituals and festive events;
- (d) Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe;

- (e) Traditional craftsmanship (UNESCO, 2003).

In this context, UNESCO has recognized that intangible culture is not only manifested as heritage and tradition, but also has a contemporary element and that “intangible cultural heritage can only be heritage when it is recognized as such by the communities, groups or individuals that create, maintain and transmit it” (UNESCO, n.d.). Intangible cultural heritage is considered “a main-spring of cultural diversity and a guarantee of sustainable development” (UNESCO, 2003: Preamble), which is being “constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history” (UNESCO, 2003: Article 2.1). Furthermore, Article 15 of the *Convention* explicitly states that “Within the framework of its safeguarding activities of the intangible cultural heritage, each State Party shall endeavour to ensure the widest possible participation of communities, groups and, where appropriate, individuals that create, maintain and transmit such heritage, and to involve them actively in its management” (UNESCO, 2003).

Culture as an enabler and driver of sustainable development and sustainable communities has been the focus of several UN resolutions, most notably Resolution 66/208 on Culture and development and Resolution 68/223 on Culture and sustainable development. The former supported “a more visible and effective integration and mainstreaming of culture into social, environmental and economic

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development policies and strategies at all levels” (United Nations General Assembly, 15 March 2012). The latter recognized “the role of culture as an enabler of sustainable development that provides peoples and communities with a strong sense of identity and social cohesion and contributes to more effective and sustainable development policies and measures at all levels” (United Nations General Assembly, 20 December 2013). While the General Assembly does not mention intangible cultural heritage in its resolutions, both include references to the need to maintain and promote local and indigenous traditional knowledge and community practices of environmental management. However, UNESCO, in *The Hangzhou Declaration – Placing Culture at the Heart of Sustainable Development Policies*, makes it clear that “the protection and promotion of ... heritage and ... inherited systems of values and cultural expressions” are “part of the shared commons” and as such play “a central role in the life of societies” (UNESCO, 2013).

It has become standard practice among municipal planners to include consultation and sometimes more proactive forms of public engagement in local development initiatives. There are many good reasons for this: to increase public understanding of proposed development, to provide an opportunity for feedback, and (in the most serious public engagement exercises) to discuss citizens’ ideas about what they value in their surroundings. Citizens are “experts” about their communities in ways that go beyond official plans and established boundaries. As Robert Evans, who has written extensively on the sociology of knowledge, has observed, local residents are ‘lay experts’, with that expertise resulting, in part, from “successful socialisation within a particular community” (Evans, 2008: 283). Moreover, this expertise is usually not institutionalized, but is embedded in the local environment where “knowledge is shared, developed and cascaded informally within social groups and communities” and where “the power of narrative [is] as important as that of print” (Petts & Brooks, 2006: 1047).

The power of narrative and story-telling has only recently been brought back into municipal planning processes, but it is an idea that was pioneered in the early 20th century by the Scottish town planner Patrick Geddes. Geddes originated such standard planning practices as the survey and the concept of *regionalism*, but he was also insistent about the need to “excavate the layers of our cities downwards ... and thence ... read them upwards, visualising them as we go” (qtd. in Mercer, 1997, 223). In addition to his attention to intangible aspects of municipal development, he was also an early advocate of public participation in planning processes, considering people’s history and culture as the main elements that should determine a city’s organic growth (Rubin, 2009: 354). However, this holistic perspective on planning fell out of fashion after the 1940s, to be replaced by the more technocratic model of the *masterplan*, dominated by architects and focused on a zoned system of urban planning (Rubin, 2009). In calling for a return to Geddes’ more inclusive, interdisciplinary approach to planning, Rubin has suggested that “realising ‘planning history’s mistakes’ demands the incorporation of actors and voices which have been so far excluded from the main narrative” (Rubin, 2009: 357).

2. Cultural mapping in Ontario, Canada

I found an opportunity to combine these twin research interests in public engagement and story-telling in a study on cultural mapping in Ontario (Jeannotte, 2015).

Cultural mapping is usually undertaken in Ontario as a precursor to cultural planning – a way of cataloguing and locating a community’s cultural assets before deciding how to support and promote them. A non-profit coalition of provincial government agencies, municipalities, cultural service organizations, post-secondary institutions and others called Municipal Cultural

Planning Incorporated (MCPI) has widely promoted the ideas of cultural planning and cultural mapping, and in 2010 published *Cultural Resource Mapping: A Guide for Municipalities* which provides extensive information on how Ontario municipalities should engage in this type of activity. The Cultural Resource Framework used by the MCPI *Guide* is comprehensive and includes both tangible and intangible assets, as illustrated in Table 1.

However, the MCPI *Guide* explicitly states that “emphasis is placed on tangible assets such as facilities, organizations, people and festivals” and that “intangible cultural assets such as values, stories, customs and traditions ... are not a focus in these guidelines” (MCPI, p. 7).

The MCPI’s guide reflects the fact that tangible resources tend to be the main focus of municipally-led cultural mapping exercises. These resources are generally physical assets that can be readily pinpointed on a map. Intangible cultural resources, sometimes referred to as “identity mapping”, tend to receive much less attention in municipal cultural mapping projects as they cannot easily be pinpointed on a conventional map and are hard to fit into municipal planning initiatives.

The heavy emphasis on tangible cultural assets is borne out in my study which looked at a sample of 64 cultural mapping projects undertaken in the province with support from Creative Communities Prosperity Fund between 2009 and 2012. As indicated in Table 2, the majority of the small communities and all of the medium-sized and large communities in the sample planned to map tangible assets. On the other hand, while two-thirds of small communities also said that they would attempt to map intangible cultural assets, only about one-third of large communities planned to do so. Medium-sized communities in the sample were even less likely than either the small or large communities to say that they would examine their stories, customs, rituals, heritage, or shared beliefs, although when I recently revisited these projects, I found that one medium-sized community that had not planned to do so had undertaken such mapping.

Why did these communities decide to map their intangible cultural assets, even in the face of methodological challenges and the heavy emphasis placed on tangible asset mapping by the provincial funder? How did they go about it? How were citizens involved? What role do community narratives play in these mapping exercises? Are there lessons that can be gleaned from these efforts? The balance of this paper will examine three case studies from the sample of 13 that undertook intangible cultural mapping and discuss the methodological challenges that emerge from these questions.

3. Case studies of intangible narratives in cultural maps

One case study has been drawn from each of the small, medium, and large-sized community categories described in Table 2. Three criteria were used in choosing them:

1. They had all engaged the community’s residents in some way in the development of the intangible cultural map.

Table 1
Types of cultural resources.

Tangible cultural resources	Intangible cultural resources
Cultural industries	Values and shared beliefs
Cultural occupations	Stories
Community cultural organizations	Customs and rituals
Cultural facilities and spaces	Traditions and heritage
Cultural and natural heritage	
Cultural events and festivals	

Source: Cultural Resource Mapping: A Guide for Municipalities.

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