



Creative destruction or creative enhancement? Understanding the transformation of rural spaces



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A B S T R A C T

Keywords:

Rural
Landscapes
Tourism
Creative destruction
Creative enhancement
Multi-functionality

For more than fifty years, rural scholars have demonstrated the increasing fluidity and dynamism of rural spaces. In select locales, quotidian activity has given way to hedonic ventures as stakeholders have introduced innovative functions to attract the pleasure-seeking consumer. I have described this scenario as a type of 'creative destruction'. This process, however, does not apply to all rural communities undergoing functional change. To address this issue, I present an alternative neologism, 'creative enhancement,' to account for the varied evolutionary trajectories that non-metropolitan spaces are taking. I re-examine three Canadian villages (Elora, St. Jacobs and Ferryland) to illustrate how these twin processes unfold in amenity-rich locales. My findings enrich our understanding of how rural landscapes change as they transition from a productivist-based to potentially multi-functional state.

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1. Introduction

Rural spaces are fluid entities whose functional structure responds to both endogenous and exogenous stimuli. In some amenity-rich locations, local and external stakeholders (Overbeek, 2009) have transformed what were once support centers for primary sector activity, into places of 'hedonic consumption' (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982, p. 92). These post-modern landscapes provide a temporary reprieve from urban living and an opportunity for consumers to enhance their subjective well-being (Qin et al., 2012). Their presence has fueled the emergence of a multi-functional rural space that is attracting considerable academic attention (e.g. Argent, 2011; Panelli et al., 2008).

Since 1998, I have used the concept, 'creative destruction' (Schumpeter, 1942), to describe the evolution of these spaces as they transition to this consumptive state (Mitchell, 1998). It is becoming increasingly evident, however, that not all places are evolving as I once predicted (McMorran, 2008; Sullivan and Mitchell, 2012). This begs the question then, what processes are underway in amenity landscapes undergoing functional change? This paper provides one possible answer and, in doing so, enriches our understanding of how rural landscapes change as they transition from a productivist-based to potentially multi-functional state.

I have organized this discussion into four sections. I begin by revisiting the concept of creative destruction and clarifying its role in our understanding of the evolution of rural landscapes. The concept, 'creative enhancement,' is then offered as an alternative way of describing change. Supporting evidence is then provided from three Canadian communities (Elora, St. Jacobs and Ferryland) that I have studied in detail elsewhere. In the final section, I offer an explanation for these varied development trajectories; reasoning that potentially can be extended to other types of locales on a similar evolutionary path.

2. The creative destruction of rural spaces

The phrase 'creative destruction' was coined by Joseph Schumpeter in 1942. Building on the polemical work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1848), he introduced this concept to explain the behavior of capitalist economies. According to Schumpeter, the desire for profit is the driving force in this economic state. This quest encourages entrepreneurs to produce innovation whose adoption generates profit, which then contributes to the accumulation of capital. While the creation of innovation promotes growth, it also destroys existing economic activity whose viability depends on innovations from an earlier economic regime. Having lost the ability to compete, displaced firms are driven to produce other innovations, thus perpetuating this cycle of 'creative destruction' (Schumpeter, 1942).

In a series of papers spanning nearly two decades, David Harvey spatializes this ongoing process (e.g. 1985, 2010). Harvey observes

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Table 1
Stages of creative destruction.

Stage	Landscape identity
Pre-commodification	Traditional rural task-scape
Early commodification	
Advanced commodification	
Early destruction	Heritage-scape
Advanced destruction	
Post-destruction	Leisure-scape

Source: Modified from Mitchell and Vanderwerf (2010).

that capitalism is geographic; it represents itself ‘in the form of a physical landscape created in its own image’ (1985, p. 3). He argues that these ‘rational’ landscapes allow for the accumulation of capital, but their duration is short-lived (Harvey, 1985). Hence, as innovations come and go, so too do landscapes of accumulation (Harvey, 1985). It is this fluidity of both innovation and space that epitomizes the capitalistic state.

In earlier work, I applied this concept to facilitate an understanding of the evolution of places with heritage assets and potential touristic appeal (Mitchell, 1998). I predicted, over time, that three types of rational landscapes would be created, and subsequently destroyed, as capitalists imposed new representations on the space (Mitchell and de Waal, 2009). First is the traditional task-scape,¹ whose economic base is intimately tied to adjacent extractive capitalistic ventures (e.g. farms, mines, fisheries), and whose function reflects the provision of a variety of related secondary production facilities (e.g. food processing) and essential consumptive venues (e.g. grocery stores). Over time, many of these settings have been plagued by ‘economic sequelae’ (Manthorpe et al., 2008, p. 463) in response to depletion of, or reduced demand for, primary sector products (Markey et al., 2008). Some, however, have attracted the attention of investors seeking new means of capital accumulation.

The heritage-scape (Mitchell and de Waal, 2009) and leisure-scape (Cartier, 1998; Law, 2001) are two possible outcomes. In the former, public, private and civic sector initiatives provide a variety of ‘new rural goods and services’ (Buciega et al., 2009; Overbeek, 2009; Zasada, 2011) that appeal to the ‘authenti-seeking’ consumer (Yeoman et al., 2006, p. 1128). Locally hand-crafted wares, iconic food and drink (Sims, 2009), unique experiences and accommodation venues grace the historic streets of these consumptive sites. In the latter, one finds entertainment, recreation, and faux-authentic commodities that appeal to the post-tourist (Feifer, 1985); one who is fascinated more by ‘surfaces and signs, than authenticity’ (Sherlock, 2001, p. 282). Although embodying a different product mix, capital accumulation is significant in both locales as investors reap the financial benefits that emerge from these diverse and ‘consumable landscapes’ (Frenkel and Walton, 2001, p. 574).

Like all rational settings, I initially believed that each was ephemeral; displacing earlier landscapes only to be displaced themselves by other spatial representations. I endeavored to capture this evolutionary nature by developing a Model of Creative Destruction (Mitchell, 1998; Mitchell and de Waal, 2009). The model depicted the transformation of communities that encompassed three key characteristics: urban proximity, entrepreneurial investment, and, a rural idyll. I predicted that the presence of these attributes would set a traditional rural task-scape on a course of development (or ‘heritagization’; Berliner, 2012, p. 783) that would

see it evolve into a heritage-scape, as locally-oriented firms began offering products that commodified, or ‘valorized’ (Mather et al., 2006; Stathopoulou et al., 2004; Sun et al., 2011), the past. In time, this idealized landscape would morph into a leisure-scape of mass consumption, given sufficient investment and market demand (Mitchell and de Waal, 2009). The transformation, I predicted, would occur in six stages,² as investments, visitors, and resident attitudes shifted over time (Table 1).

The model predicted that investment levels would escalate with each stage as stakeholders recognized the economic benefits that commodification of the rural idyll could bring. Additional financial inputs would change the function of the lived space (Lefebvre, 1991), which, in turn, would lure larger numbers of visitors, enticed by the packaged experience of the countryside that awaited their arrival. Over time, their spatial practices (Lefebvre, 1991) would generate increasingly negative attitudes amongst local residents, whose representation of the rural would become increasingly compromised. The ultimate result was creation of a place that appealed to tourists seeking serialized, or faux-authentic, commodities, and destruction of what was once, in the eyes of local residents, their idyllic rural representation (Mitchell, 1998; Mitchell and de Waal, 2009).

Since its development in 1998, the model has been applied in various ways in Canada, China, Australia and Japan (Table 2). In most cases, the stage of development has been uncovered, with the majority of sites placed in the phase of ‘advanced commodification’ (Table 1). Other places, however, defy placement (Sullivan and Mitchell, 2012; Shannon and Mitchell, 2012; Qin et al., 2012). This is due to the incompatibility of resident attitudes with functional change and to the retention, rather than displacement, of the original economic base. This state of ‘multi-functionality’ (Wilson, 2001) thus leads me to believe that a process, other than creative destruction, is currently underway in these transforming spaces.

3. The creative enhancement of rural spaces

I coin the phrase ‘creative enhancement’ to describe the process that is potentially unfolding in some rural spaces that are transitioning from a production-based, to what has been termed a ‘multi-functional,’ economic state (Wilson, 2009). I define this as the addition of an innovative function (and, by default, user and representation) to a space that does not cause displacement of the existing function (and user and representation). Rather, these innovations co-exist with those that emerged during earlier rounds of accumulation (Fig. 1). This trajectory, I believe, more realistically describes the evolutionary process that many contemporary rural spaces are undergoing.

As the reader has undoubtedly realized, this definition is purely objective; it lacks the subjective interpretation that underlies both the original and modified models of creative destruction (Mitchell, 1998; Mitchell and de Waal, 2009). As previously described (Section 2), my earlier works used resident attitudes as a determinant of a community’s stage in the evolutionary sequence. This inclusion led readers to envision creative destruction as an inherently undesirable process; in Litvin’s (2010, p. 157) words, a ‘devil’s bargain.’ It implies that residents mourn the loss of their rural idyll as landscape change ensues (Mitchell, 1998). This subjective interpretation creates an incongruity with other realities, however, for not all stakeholders lament destruction (Litvin, 2010), nor celebrate enhancement. Given these disparate responses, a more objective interpretation is, therefore, necessary.

¹ I have referred to this traditional landscape in a variety of ways, but choose the phrase ‘task-scape’ (Van auken and Rye, 2011, p. 65) here to depict a setting that is viewed by its occupants as one providing employment and essential goods and services.

² The first stage was added in 2009 to reflect the functional structure of a landscape prior to commodification (Mitchell and de Waal, 2009).

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