Research Paper

# Vision, voice, and the community landscape: The Missouri Place Stories pilot project

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## A B S T R A C T

Authorized discourses of landscape value omit key qualities that make places valuable to the people who inhabit them. Here we present a community-based research initiative in which residents of two urban St Louis neighborhoods identified meaningful sites and sights in their locale. Using photographs and narration, they traced the contours of a "community landscape" characterized by heterogeneity, social relationships, creative practice, and a communalist model of human-nature relations. Inventoried, archived, and located on a digital mapping tool, their vision serves as a resource for neighborhood identity and collective decision-making. The insights produced by this type of project could productively inform urban planning and land management, and empower residents to decide what merits protection, reproduction, or alteration in the places where they live.

## 1. Introduction

Arun, a participant in the Missouri Place Stories pilot project, composed a photograph at the intersection of Klemm Street and Blaine Avenue in St Louis, Missouri. His photograph depicts Klemm, flanked by sidewalks, extending toward the horizon (see Image 1). A grassy vacant lot covers a third of the foreground, and in the background two smokestacks join the leafy branches of trees in the sky. Four homes occupy the midground, one newly built with a parked car in front, another much older, still another under construction. Behind them stretches an old multistory factory. As he snapped the photograph, Arun recorded a commentary:

*I think this intersection highlights Botanical Heights for me. You can see several new construction [houses], neighboring a rehabbed original building, and in the background you can see the smokestacks of the factory as well as the main structure of the factory itself. It shows a nice juxtaposition of old and new, modern and old. The smokestacks offer a permanence, and a sort of reassuring solidity, kind of like an old oak tree. Botanical Heights is nice. It's located between Route 44 on one side, Route 64 on the other, the Central West End, the medical center, the botanical garden, the SLU [St Louis University] medical center, all within walking distance of the neighborhood. Lots of people have moved into the neighborhood, and there's been plenty of people who've seen the neighborhood through hard times. It's exciting to be part of a neighborhood that is re-finding its character and developing an identity and hopefully*

*contributing something to the greater St Louis fabric.*

"Landscapes," geographer Denis Cosgrove wrote, "have an unquestionably material presence, yet they come into being only at the moment of their apprehension by an external observer" (2006, p. 50). Through this "place story," Arun imagined into being his neighborhood's landscape. Perhaps surprisingly to a preservationist or environmentalist, Arun valued a heterogeneous, changing mixture of the historic and newly built, residential and industrial, natural and cultural. Essential to this landscape's "identity" were relationships between long-term and recently-arrived neighbors, smallness of scale, integration into a bigger urban context, and two highways. Smokestacks and trees provided "a reassuring solidness" in a site characterized by eclecticism and transformation.

As Arun and the other participants in the Missouri Place Stories pilot photographed and recorded narrations about meaningful locations in their neighborhood, they articulated the landscape's value for its most important stakeholders: the people who live there. A project website inventories the places they selected, locates them on a digital map, and affords visitors the opportunity to hear participants describe the area's significance in their own words. Researchers and participants used this tool to explore potential uses of the place stories for local action. We argue that the insights emerging from this initiative, including the concept of the "community landscape" that we developed from it, could productively inform planning and land management in urban neighborhoods.

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**Image 1.** Arun's photograph of the landscape that represents Botanical Heights, the intersection of Klemm Street and Blaine Avenue.

Official instruments for identifying and preserving historic, cultural, or environmental value – the National Historic Preservation Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, the National Park Service guidelines for cultural landscapes, national or regional registers of historic places, etc. – recognize places that historians, archaeologists, ecologists, and other professionals can interpret (e.g., Berg, 2011; King, 2003, 2009; Morgan, Morgan, & Barrett, 2006; Walker, 2012). Such authorized discourses exclude "the commonplace and the seemingly inconsequential markers on the landscape that anchor people to what they call home and to what they identify as their heritage" (Morgan et al., 2006, p. 706). Yet understanding what makes a landscape valuable to its inhabitants is the precondition for eliciting a local commitment to its management. If we hope to create better landscapes for the future, including ones that move beyond "paradigms that pit nature and culture as universal antonyms," we must ground those landscapes in the connections between people and place (Willow, 2011, p. 115; see also Roe and Taylor, 2014, pp. 19-20).

In the pages below we describe our idea of the community landscape, the neighborhoods where we piloted the Missouri Place Stories project, and our methods. We interpret a small selection of place stories and report on our conversations with stakeholders. We conclude by reflecting on the lessons we learned and summarizing the intellectual and practical implications of the pilot for urban planning and landscape management.

## 2. Conceptualizing the community landscape

For most of the 20th century, US government officials and heritage professionals regarded as landscapes such sites as stately gardens, parks, rural cemeteries, plantations, and lakeshores (Keller & Keller, 2003, pp. 187–194). These places were valued for their connections to famous people, particular histories, and aesthetic merits. As interest in landscape preservation grew from the mid-1970s through the 1990s, the National Park Service created the category of "cultural landscape": "a geographic area, including both cultural and natural resources and the wildlife or domestic animals therein, associated with a historic event, activity, or person or exhibiting other cultural or aesthetic values" (Birnbaum, 1994, p. 1). In the city of St Louis, heritage organizations such as The Cultural Landscapes Foundation recognize large parks, gardens, and cemeteries as cultural landscapes (The Cultural Landscapes Foundation, 2001–2016).

Urban neighborhoods like Shaw and Botanical Heights, where we piloted Missouri Place Stories, are usually thought of as places. They have no built or geological forms that encourage the observer to perceive them as scenic vistas, and cannot be read as expressions of a distinctive culture shared by people with longstanding ties. These neighborhoods were largely unplanned and have changed dramatically over a short period. They have heterogeneous populations, eclectic built structures, and variable wildlife.

Despite this, landscape is an apt framework for this project. In the academy, cultural geographers, anthropologists, and others describe landscape as a relationship between human experience, action, and sensibilities, on the one hand, and the non-human environment on the other (e.g., Alanen and Melnick, 2000; Cosgrove, 2006; Descola, 2016; Jackson, 1984; Olwig, 2015; Rose and Wylie, 2006). Landscape combines nature and culture, material and ideal, process and form. The human work of seeing, and related processes of remembering, imagining, and longing, are essential for producing a landscape. Although "place," like landscape, concerns processes through which humans make spaces meaningful, analyses of place need not attend to non-human processes or the act of seeing (e.g., Hayden 1998).

We propose a special category of landscape for urban settings: the community landscape. The community landscape is an act of apprehension, grounded in locals' experiences of where, with whom, and how they live, which defines the contours of a good neighborhood. In some respects, the community landscape resembles Jackson's concept of the "vernacular landscape": it is small, irregular, and rapidly changing, an organization of time and space made by locals for their own use (1984, pp. 147–157). Unlike Jackson's vernacular landscape, however, locals actively shape the community landscape, including by creating monuments and "future history." Furthermore, the community landscape is characterized by a reciprocal, participatory, and dialogic paradigm of human-nature relations, or "communalism" (Palsson 1996, pp. 63-81). Nature, in specific forms and as processes, is an essential part of community.

## 3. The pilot neighborhoods

From June 2015 to June 2016, Gillette and Hurley launched Missouri Place Stories in two St. Louis neighborhoods that were once a single urban district named after Henry Shaw, a nineteenth-century entrepreneur and philanthropist who bought large swathes of the area. Like many late nineteenth-century urban locales in the United States, Shaw had a dense, mixed-use character. Officials built an interstate highway (I-44) through Shaw in the 1960s, splitting the area in two. The part north of I-44, today's Botanical Heights, became known as McRee Town. It experienced rapid white flight, the arrival of poorer African American families displaced from public housing projects, and an explosion of drugs, crime, and gang activity. The part south of I-44 retained the name of Shaw. It also saw white families make the suburban exodus, but proximity to the Missouri Botanical Garden, more single-family housing, and greater retail activity sustained a more racially-diversified and middle-income population there.

To stanch the outpouring of investment and people, both neighborhoods pursued revitalization through historic preservation, taking the architecture and period of original building construction (1860s–1920s) as the benchmark for urban planning. Typical of the United States model, officials leveraged market forces to rehabilitate underused buildings for economically-productive functions while relying on a transformed neighborhood identity to attract architecturally-consistent infill on vacant parcels. The strategy stabilized Shaw but failed in McRee Town (Botanical Heights). In the late 1990s, McRee Town abandoned historic preservation for slum clearance, replacing nearly 200 condemned and vacant properties with market-rate, suburban-style single-family homes. The makeover was completed by rebranding the neighborhood as Botanical Heights (Webber and Swanstrom, 2014).

Alongside the historic preservation regeneration agenda emerged urban greening initiatives. In 1983, the City of St. Louis created Gateway Greening to provide technical assistance, equipment, and supplies to neighborhood organizations interested in planting small