



Research Paper

Uncovering landscape values and micro-geographies of meanings with the go-along method

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H I G H L I G H T S

- Diverse opinions toward the built environment, natural areas valued by all.
- Loop and cul-de-sac movements as gradual progressions leading to climaxes.
- Interrupted movement revealed physical and psychological limits between places.
- Access to implicit and sensitive aspects of landscape experience with go-along.
- Go-along as an effective tool to elicit a wide array of perceptions about places.

A R T I C L E I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

Benefiting from recent developments in landscape anthropology, the objective of this research is to explore the landscape experiences and values of residents of a small city in the Greater Montreal area (Quebec, Canada). Given the lack of local knowledge, there is an urgent need for developing innovative and productive methods for revealing the implicit meanings attached to places and for facilitating community input and participation. Drawn from the mobile methodologies paradigm, the so-called go-along method, which consists of conducting on-site and mobile interviews, was chosen for its potential to generate place-bound narratives and reveal landscape values. While showing room for improvement, the go-along method proved to be original and productive for reaching the objectives of our research as it allows for revealing micro-geographies of meanings. In the analysis stage, we combined all the data produced into one single comprehensive interface so as to create a nexus of narrative, geographic and visual data. The results show that the residents' knowledge is undeniably rich and relevant for understanding the diverse values which people have of landscapes. The exercise of bringing locals to express their perceptions and preoccupations in regards to their living environment thus constitutes a valuable complement to the traditional expert perspective. As such, the go-along method merits becoming an integral part of land management practices and offers great potential for further studies in landscape and urban planning.

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1. Introduction

Recently, a renewed interest in the theory of landscape and place has brought attention to everyday experiences and local knowledge (Arefi & Triantafillou, 2005; Council of Europe, 2000; Gustafson, 2001; Manzo & Perkins, 2006; Smaldone, Harris, & Sanyal, 2005). However, the majority of landscape research still focuses on

the types of landscapes that most people have no immediate contact with, such as those studied in resource and environmental management. There thus remains a need for research specifically on ordinary landscapes, such as urban or suburban landscapes (Conrad, Christie, & Fazey, 2011a) and how these figure in peoples' everyday lives (Lupi & Musterd, 2006). Currently, small cities of metropolitan areas are under great pressure by real estate development due to an increasing demand for housing. This generates a competitive climate in which cities engage in promotion activities to emphasize their attractiveness and quality of life. Yet, despite these cities' efforts to stand out as unique, new developments are planned according to standardized practices, resulting in repetitive landscapes from one city to the next. Perkins (1989) has attributed this phenomenon to an overarching narrative that, shared by real

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estate planners across the board, essentially determines the identities of these small cities. In that context, growth management trends often remain impervious to place-bound qualitative aspects of landscapes, such as their physical, social and cultural characteristics.

However, planners are increasingly forced to meet growing social concerns and to foster opportunities for community development (Healey, 2007; Sutton & Kemp, 2006). This has given rise to a new stream of research and to actions that call for the rethinking of a wide range of concepts and issues, such as the management of brownfields and vacant land and the creation of housing diversity, new urban cores and environmental quality (EUROPAN7, 2003; Krevling, 2005; Philadelphia LandVisions, 2005; Scott, Carter, Brown, & White, 2009). Urban planners are also faced with shifting values in land management, forcing them to critically engage with emerging discourses and practices with regard to public participation, environmental justice and social concerns. However, these efforts remain isolated and their systematic integration within land management practices leaves room for improvement (Stewart, Liebert, & Larkin, 2004). In this regard, there is an urgent need to develop a comprehensive vision that integrates the collective landscape values of the citizens (Stephenson, 2008) and to gather views on the desired future of small growing cities.

In this paper, we discuss the results of a research project which we conducted in 2009 in the city of Saint-Bruno-de-Montarville, on the south shore of Montreal (Quebec, Canada). The project was part of a broader research program that fosters dialog between various stakeholders around the future of landscapes of the cities of Greater Montreal. Benefitting from recent advances in landscape anthropology, the objective of this paper is to explore locals' discourses of the city. Be they everyday living environments or more emblematic surroundings, landscapes are shaped by the appreciations which people, either as a collectivity or as individuals, have of a specific territory (Paquette, Poullaouec-Gonidec, & Doman, 2005). Understanding the experiences and perspectives of residents is key to revealing the diversity of meanings attached to landscapes. Nevertheless, a lack of knowledge exists about these experiences and perspectives. To fill this gap, research is called on to develop and apply innovative methods that allow facilitating community input and participation (Conrad, Christie, & Fazey, 2011b). In our research, we chose the go-along method, which, drawn from the mobile methodologies paradigm, has the potential to generate place-based narratives and to reveal landscape values and local knowledge (Evans & Jones, 2011; Kusenbach, 2003).

2. Background

Cultural studies defines landscapes according to a social and cultural characterization of the land (Winchester, Kong, & Dunn, 2003) that involves the recognition of its specific features as experienced either individually or collectively. This recognition gives rise to a variety of perspectives (e.g., esthetic, recreational, scientific) and sensory experiences and essentially represents values expressed within a given time-space continuum (Paquette et al., 2005). Because collective identities, both local and regional, are often projected onto landscapes, they are the focus of a growing number of academics seeking to comprehend citizens' aspirations, valuations and experiences in the ordinary world (Conrad et al., 2011b; Scott et al., 2009; Sevenant & Anthop, 2010; Stewart et al., 2004). Anthropological approaches explore landscapes as conveyors of everyday life and holders of endogenous forms of senses of place. Hence, these approaches give insight into people's relationship to places (Manzo & Perkins, 2006). Some of

this research examines what makes places or communities meaningful on the basis of concepts such as place-making (Gustafson, 2001; Smaldone et al., 2005), while other studies explore the social cohesion of new neighborhoods (Lupi & Musterd, 2006) as well as place attachments and place meanings (Manzo & Perkins, 2006). The understanding thus gained then allows implementing more respectful actions, policies and planning initiatives within territorial development. Landscape management has evolved from focusing on the visual or esthetic aspect of landscape to integrating landscape values as a reflection of people's concerns about the fate of their communities and living environments (Glover, Stewart, & Gladdys, 2008). Therefore, landscapes are increasingly acknowledged as integral components and coherent vectors of growth management strategies (Paquette, Poullaouec-Gonidec, & Gagnon, 2009). In this context landscape management is faced with a new challenge, requiring new methods of inquiry, of translating various publics' perceptions and knowledge into policies that are consistent with discourses of public participation, social inclusion, environmental justice and futurity (Scott et al., 2009).

In this regard, some argue for a "mobilities turn" that would channel our comprehension of the world away from static structures and toward dynamic systems of movement of people, objects, ideas and information (Sheller & Urry, 2006). This perspective willingly eschews the classical correlation of people to places based on a sedentary conceptualization of place. Instead, it posits the people-place liaison in a complex relationship between performance and actions (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Parallel to the mobilities turn approach, non-representational theory, which goes beyond mere representations of social relationships, explores experiential performative and embodied processes behind the understanding of landscapes (Crouch, 2010; Wylie, 2006). Through representations, generated by our engagement in the world, landscapes are construed by a "geopoetics" of living: "Landscape would seem to emerge in the poetics and expressivity of engaging space in complex, uncertain and widely affected ways. [...] A poetics of space, in and as landscape, emerges performatively in the making of representations and in life more generally" (Crouch, 2010:11). The movement of individuals in space (walking around, traveling, driving, etc.), especially their more spontaneous, everyday displacements, become habitual practices that allow forming representations that are central to the human experience (Binnie, Edensor, Holloway, Millington, & Young, 2007). In other words, understanding a city is not merely about "being in" it but rather about "moving in and through" it. When the body moves through landscapes and experiments with a series of significant places, it creates a sense of the environment through micro-geographies of meanings (Büscher & Urry, 2009). In this regard, innovative methods of inquiry should be developed to bring forth the understanding of the dynamic people-place relationship (Hein, Evans, & Jones, 2008; Sheller & Urry, 2006). Mobile methodologies were explored precisely to address mobility as a major constituent of contemporary social and material realities (Büscher & Urry, 2009; Hein et al., 2008). These methodologies allow to establish a symbolic and material co-constitution of self and place and show how everyday mobility and banal movements associated with living habits contribute to shaping place-based meanings (Binnie et al., 2007). Whether the methodologies focus on the study of patterns of time-space use or on people's emotional attachment to extra-ordinary places, they share a common purpose: to inform about people's experience of mobility and to explore the more fugitive, dynamic and ephemeral understanding of the world (Büscher & Urry, 2009; Jones, Bunce, Evans, Gibbs, & Hein, 2008). Mobile methodologies thus represent an interesting framework for the dynamic interpretation of landscape meaning, especially from the perspectives of local people.

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