Deconstructing place identity? Impacts of a "Racino" on Elora, Ontario, Canada

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ABSTRACT

The heritage-scape is a socially constructed place that provides locally crafted products, cuisine, and experiences to satisfy consumers' desire for authenticity. In this paper we question if the introduction of a functionally non-conforming structure causes an existing heritage-based place identity to dismantle (i.e. deconstruct). In 2003, a pari-mutuel racetrack and gaming parlour (a "racino") was introduced to the historic village of Elora, Ontario, Canada. Through content analysis we unravel (i.e. deconstruct) the social processes that lay behind this development. We find that this profit-oriented venue was widely contested by preservation-minded residents, who expressed concern that this structure would compromise Elora's heritage image. Our survey finds, however, that the majority of visitors believe that the Grand River Raceway and Slots has not impacted Elora's existing place-based identity. Key informants further reveal that image management, spatial placement and visual coherence are largely responsible for its maintenance. We conclude that a heritage-based place identity may be retained, and even enhanced, in the presence of a hegemonic discourse that is underlain by a long-standing preservationist ideology.

1. Introduction

Since the mid-20th century, rural spaces have established new place-based identities (Halseth et al., 2010) to counter forces of economic decline (Nelson, 2002). In some cases, local heritage has been used as the base from which this new identity is constructed. The commodification of authentic place-based attributes has both counteracted economic malaise (McMorran, 2008), and facilitated preservation of local cultural markers (Ray, 1998). In doing so, it has contributed to a restructuring of the countryside (Marsden, 1998; Cloke, 2006) from a landscape of food and fibre production (Wilson and Wilson, 1997; Wilson, 2008), to one of rural heritage consumption (Mitchell and Vanderwerf, 2010).

Within the last decade, however, a new type of economic activity has been introduced to select heritage landscapes of rural North America. The "racino" is a facility that combines a pari-mutuel racetrack with gaming devices (e.g. slot machines) (Thalheimer and Ali, 2008). The economic benefits and social costs of gaming facilities are well documented (Eadington, 2002; Ham et al., 2004; Chhabra and Gursoy, 2007; Light, 2008; Wenz, 2008; Chhabra, 2009). We question here if their presence in rural regions causes the dismantling (i.e. deconstruction) of an existing heritage-based place identity. Elora, Ontario, Canada, provides the setting for this exploration.

Elora is an historic village situated in south-western Ontario, approximately 100 km from the Greater Toronto Area, Canada's largest urban region (Figure 1). Previous research has established that Elora is a "heritage-scape" whose identity originally stemmed from its natural amenities (Mitchell and Coghill, 2000). The village is located in a productive agricultural region, perched at the junction of the Grand and Irvine Rivers. At this site, one finds a spectacular gorge offering "rare natural beauty amid the mainly flat terrain of southern Ontario" (Westhues and Sinclair, 1974, p. 16). This riverside location afforded both power and inspiration to early residents. The former facilitated establishment of stone-clad manufacturing plants (Allan, 1982), which would later house the production and/or sale of unique hand-crafted products (e.g. pottery, stained glass, paintings), dining and accommodation venues (e.g. the Elora Mill; Fig. 2), and performing arts experiences (e.g. The Elora Festival). The latter facilitated the creation of a vibrant artistic community which, when combined with the actions of various civic groups, would prove an irresistible lure to the heritage-seeking consumer (Mitchell and Coghill, 2000).[1]

At the turn of the millennium, Elora was a well-established destination whose success stemmed from its heritage-based place identity (Mitchell and Coghill, 2000). In that year, a proposal was

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[1] In 2000 we documented the actions of five community organizations that were instrumental in promoting Elora's heritage place-based identity: the Local Architectural Conservation Advisory Committee, the Chamber of Commerce, the Business Improvement Area, the Marketing Committee, and the Grand River Country Group (Mitchell and Coghill, 2000).
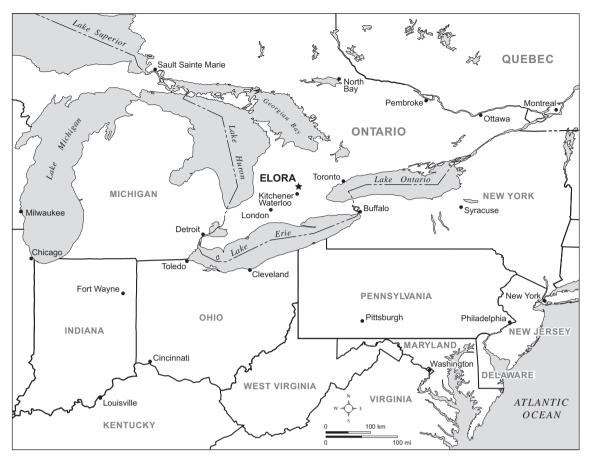
Fig. 1. Location of Elora, Ontario, Canada.

Fig. 2. The Elora Mill Inn.