

Place-making and Sustainability

A discussion series hosted by the Place Studies program
of the Center for Sustainability and the Environment

Sustainability for Whom? Place-makers of Detroit, Dominica, Ecuador, and Mexico



Reflections by Prof.
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Drawing from more than a decade of work with farmers in rural and urban areas across the Americas, Professor Gaalaas Mullaney highlights some key findings about how small-scale farmers have a big influence on the conservation of cultural and ecological richness in their region. In each of these diverse places, innovative farmers work at the margins of dominant political and economic institutions with only occasional recognition of the value that they produce. What can these farmers teach us about how to cultivate place-based sustainability? How is sustainability related to social and economic justice?

How does your work relate to the concept of place-making?

In my work with small-scale farmers across the Americas, we can see dramatic (and delicious) examples of place-making as an interspecies process. The meanings and intimate connections we have to a given place are profoundly social, but these social relations are not exclusively human. Farming is always an act that makes a place, though not necessarily in ways that are emancipatory or healthy, either for those who farm or those who eat. Where I work, both peasant farmers and peasant maize varieties have been targeted for exploitation and eradication for generations. I hope that the concept of place-making enables us to better appreciate farming as a struggle for self-determination, and to explore the social and ecological dimensions of self.

What are potential benefits and/or shortcomings you see for place-making in sustainability?

As sustainability has become an increasingly lucrative brand - for commodities and even research agendas -- it has been redefined to mean preserving, while making ourselves feel better about, an economic system that feeds on and produces extreme inequality. Though I am wary of the term, I would hope that a focus on place-making could potentially help us in three important pursuits: 1) demanding central recognition of non-white, non-Western knowledge and priorities for how to manage ecological systems; 2) looking beyond technical solutions to consider how we organize access to and control over environmental resources; and 3) staying alert to the importance of our intimate social and ecological relationships. These relationships cannot be improved ex-situ, but must be negotiated within their historical, political, and economic context. If place-making can help hold us accountable to this vital, messy interdependence between stakeholders, then it will serve us well.



What aspects of your work can we apply to a place-making approach to sustainability at Bucknell and in our local region?

The struggles, innovations, and accomplishments of peasant maize farmers in Central Mexico remind us of the violence that we take for granted in our everyday interactions with our global food system. They also offer exciting lessons in the alternatives that are possible if we are willing to reimagine how we organize labor relations and agriculture here at home.

The Place-making and Sustainability discussion series invites the campus community to explore how we can apply a place-making approach to creating sustainable communities. As Andres Edwards (2010) argues in his book, *Thriving Beyond Sustainability*, place-making “involves nourishing our connection to the cultural and ecological fabric of our community” which then “encourages us to take responsibility for our neighbors and our resources.”

The BCSE Place Studies program supports teaching, research, and outreach on how we imagine, sustain, and understand, and engage with place.