

Place-making and Sustainability

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

Reading the History of Place-making through Maps



Reflections by
Prof. Claire Campbell,
History

Environmental History explores the relationships between people(s) and nature in the past. So “place-making” – ways in which people have transformed nature to construct habitats of their choosing – is a major theme in the field. Using historical maps and landscape art, Professor Campbell explores some of the historical processes (many of which are still at work) by which settler society has made places in North America. These include practices of colonization, property, public memory, and, potentially, reclamation. We can see the implications for sustainability, and what may need to change.

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

I confess my work has been more inspired by *my* sense of place than by an intellectual analysis of the process – I write about where I find myself (Lewisburg the notable exception, as I’m a Canadian historian) as a way of cultivating and deepening a sense of attachment. I think we care more about places the more we know about them, their ecological and human logic, and their larger context in place and time. Right now, I’m working on a new project about Canada as a coastal nation. Part of this was inspired by a place that I *am* attached to (Nova Scotia), but also out of some concern that Canada traffics in coastal jurisdictions and coastal history without much day-to-day awareness of our actual relationship with maritime environments. (I’m a Pisces. I like water).



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.

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

To the first, it gives us a closer examination of the biophysical opportunities and limits presented by the natural world in a given location, so that hopefully we’d be more sensitive to tailoring our ambition to the circumstances. It gets us thinking in terms of scale, and maybe humility, instead of growth and “sustainable development.” Second, if we take an historical view, it reminds us of our deep investment – material and imaginative – in the natural world. One might hope this would render sustainability more important in the political realm.

However, “place” can also be used to incite nostalgia, which itself becomes a camouflage for very real, very problematic effects on nature. I see this with coal towns – sepia images of hard-working communities that romanticize and relegate a fundamentally unsustainable practice. Place-making can reify myths that deny our (adverse) impact on the land. And we need to remember that “place” is not exclusively local, as such localism prevents us from making connections outward. I wonder too if a sense of place tends to align with rights of property, which isn’t a great way of understanding the environment. Finally, place-making lends itself more to some environments than others based on how familiar or appealing they may be. Regardless, a greater sensitivity to place surroundings – then and now – can only be a good thing.

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

Place-making requires confronting place inheritance. Sustainability is often too-forward thinking; as in, “What can we do to *sustain* what we have, and value, here and now, into the future?” It assumes our present state as a starting point, but it needs to take into account what has *already happened* in that place. This might include material and physical changes, or the ideological and cultural use of nature, or how environmental knowledge is tied to political power. While “place” may have positive connotations in a post-industrial climate – the suggestion of affinity, of meaningful attachment, of reconnecting to environmental realities – it’s important to remember that the power to make place hasn’t always been equally shared, but was/is often an expression of empire and capital that are still fundamentally at work. Place may be entwined with privilege. You may have a sense of connection at your grandparents’ farm, but you might ask what historical factors enabled them to occupy that land in the first place.