BEYOND THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

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The fabric of our towns and cities is a mesh of built and natural objects. The valuation of that fabric is a complex mix of symbols, preferences, and biases. Too often we plan for the physical qualities of a space without regard for the abstractions and values which turn a town into a community. A town is easy to understand; a community is far more complex. Yet, those settings that have integrated subjective place with objective space are valued by both resident and visitor. The key to this integration is active public involvement in area planning and community development.

Community participation in place planning is essential in order to integrate elements of meaning and temporal continuity into aesthetic valuation. The landscapes with which we develop familiarity through work and play have aesthetic compositional components and cultural meaning. Relph (1985:36) says that "whether we know places with a deep affection or merely as stopping points in our passages through the world, they are set apart in time and space because they have distinctive meanings for us...they are geographical modes of existence." It may be possible to provide a detached evaluation of scale, texture, color, and form to arrive at an aesthetic sense of space. However, without inputs of valuation, collective experience, and function, the importance of that space to maintaining a sense of community remain invisible. As Garnham (1985:7) argues, all places, not only famous ones worldwide, have locally special attributes, which produce a uniqueness, a spirit of place, a genius locus. Identifying what it is that makes a place a "separate entity" (Lynch 1960:6) ought to precede plans for preservation or change, if a place is to have meaning and not be "a placeless geography, a labyrinth of endless similarities" (Relph 1976:141).

We believe that these visual characteristics of a community can be very effectively captured through resident employed photography. Photographs can express so many subtleties that a survey questionnaire can never reveal.

A project in Western South Carolina explored the efficacy of using resident employed photography (REP) as a community development and citizen participation tool. Building upon the research activities of Thompson (1980), Kaplan and Kaplan (1989), Cheram (1976), Binder (1992), and others, a class of 16 graduate students at Clemson University identified four communities in Oconee and Pickens County, South Carolina, in which to conduct photographic research.

Four variations of citizen groups were engaged for the analysis: in-migrant retirees and long-time area residents; transient students and permanent residents; socioeconomic variants; and life-cycle variants, with children, adults, and aged photographers. Residents within these groups were given disposable 24 exposure Kodak cameras and photographic logs. One purpose of the log was to provide researchers with the photographers' clear intentions regarding the object photographed. As well, the log ordered the photographs in case the photographic negatives were mishandled or damaged. The log also proved a good collection tool for comments and interpretive elements for the associated photos. Participants were asked to photograph those elements in the community which they "liked or disliked" and found "attractive or unattractive." With such open instructions, if a majority of residents photographed the same subject as either "liked or disliked," then an automatic consensus could be considered to have been reached, as if by secret ballot, on the element's significance. We believe that elements,

which are "liked" or "disliked", are equally important, as they are evidence of strong feelings. We believe that these strong feelings can be reversed, and thus disliked elements are potential "likes."

Analyses were conducted to determine differences and similarities within groups. Photographic sites were mapped, using a Trimble Pathfinder global positioning system (GPS) along with Clemson's geographic information system (GIS) capability to determine spatial distribution of positive and negative elements in the community as well as the spatial relationships between the photographer's area of residence and points photographed.

Content analysis was done on both the photographs and the logs. Three major themes which all four towns had in common were the importance of their downtown areas, the importance of churches, and a strong liking toward historic homes - "likes" when they were restored, "dislikes" when they seen as harboring potential but currently in a deteriorated state. There was a desire expressed to maintain small-town ambience via restored traditional buildings and homes, and convenient access to community buildings. In the study, students and newcomers judged some older community buildings as "dislikes" based on appearance, whereas long-term permanent residents liked the same buildings for reasons associated with their function and history. For residents, the places were "time-deepened and memory qualified" (Relph 1985:27). As Clamp (1981) and Dearden (1984) have found, people prefer the familiar; they gravitate toward environments that they find non-threatening. Mapping both the sites where residents live and where they visited enabled the researchers to note that most residents visit only certain areas of town and not the entire community.

As expected, long-term residents demonstrated greater commitment than short-term residents by taking more positive photos and completing their questionnaires and photo logs in greater detail. When long-term residents took negative photos, they tended to offer more constructive criticism and recommendations. They were more critical than newcomers of elements that had shown recent change, such as the deterioration of their downtown in favor of highway corridor development, and increases in traffic. Hiss (1990:xi) says, "As places change around us ...we all undergo changes inside... experience in a place is both a serious environmental issue and a deeply personal one."   Long-term residents have generally been shown to hold a greater attachment to their communities (Goudy 1990; Stinner et al. 1990; Blum and Kingston 1984). Fernandez and Dillman (1979) say "...the longer people stay in a given place the less likely they are to move." Length of residency, or the linear model, is not the only source of community commitment, however. Integration and commitment are also explained through systematic models such as smaller community size (Christenson 1979); social position in the community (Fernandez and Dillman 1979; Goudy 1990); home ownership (Blum and Kingston 1984; Crenshaw and St. John 1989; Stinner et al. 1990); attributes of the community such as positive physical environment and quality neighbors (St. John et al. 1986) and personal characteristics of education, age and family structure (Fernandez and Dillman 1979). Community commitment can be seen as the resident's sense of being "at home."

The experience of community as home may, however, be a dialectical one, balancing a need to stay with a desire to escape (Durrell 1976). A 69 year old retired farmer and civil servant, and graduate of the Clemson "Class of '44" photographed his farm house and commented, "I was born on the hill where I now live and this is home!!" At the opposite end of the attachment spectrum, a 22 year old male high school graduate and textile worker with 68 family members living in the community area, offers this reason for living in the community: "Moved here when I was a small child. Waiting for my ship to come in so I can cruise on out."

Short-term residents, in addition to showing a greater preference for appearance, may sometimes recognize assets that long-term residents ignore. For example, in one community, a local college was photographed several times solely by newcomers who are students not at that college, but at nearby Clemson University. Even the college president did not single out his college.

We believe REP to be an effective technique for participatory planning. Most everyone is a potential photographer since "for most people, some degree of competence at observation is a sine qua non of membership of society" (Ball & Smith 1992:1). Visual data is clear and simple. It offers unlimited selection of community elements. It does not require the laborious linguistic translations of interviews, for example.

The camera permits selective and focussed observation. Metaphorically
speaking, the camera has a better 'memory' than the human eye.
        To the old adage that 'the camera never lies,' we urge a cautious
approach. It may not lie, but researchers can surely misinterpret its
images. We emphasize the importance of collecting photo diaries and other
background data on the photographer and his environment, which will enable
a more accurate interpretation. Supplementary data collections can also
point out what residents do not photograph. On questionnaires, for example,
residents listed their "top ten most frequented places," as various
grocery, drug, and fast food stores. Yet these places were rarely
photographed. Our explanation is that these shops are neither
exceptionally beautiful nor exceptionally ugly; they might be termed
"placeless." They are places of everyday utility, not objects of
attractiveness.
        Supplementary verbal or written data is essential, too, because the
visual data, the photographs themselves, form a permanent record and the
"sense that viewers make of them depends upon cultural assumptions,
personal knowledge, and the context in which the picture is presented"
(Ball & Smith 1992:18). On the written supplementary data collected, it
was found that some residents were unable to answer some questions, and
where residents were free to choose what numbers of liked or disliked
scenes they photographed, some were hesitant to identify anything as
disliked.
        Follow-up interviews may have been helpful for data clarification.
Interestingly, it was found that overall, liked and disliked scenes were
photographed about equally though no specific directions suggested equal
numbers of like and dislike photos.
        A further limitation was sample size, owing to the cost of the
cameras. This, however, may not be a serious flaw, as the degree of
agreement as to the photographs taken would indicate homogeneity
sufficiently represented by the number of cameras distributed in the four
small towns. As the size and complexity of the communities increase we
suspect a corresponding increase in number of camera would be required.
Variance estimates and sample size calculations are presently underway.
Another consideration in some locales might be season of the year chosen
for study, as appearance assessments may change, for example, with
snowfall.

CONCLUSIONS
        Strength of the REP process is the open agenda offered by the
technique. The views visually expressed are those of the residents not the
researchers and therefore the projects meet with enthusiasm rather than
skepticism. Further, independent of the content of the photographs, the
process was highly inclusive. People from all sectors of the communities
felt their visual opinions had standing. As one mayor told us this
was a rare occasion when a large number of residents turned out for a
positive meeting. The comment was telling, in that many negative elements
of the community were shown and discussed, yet, he and the audience still
held a positive feeling about the process. In the coming years we will be
testing the procedure on larger towns and incorporating the technique into
community assessment processes associated with Main Street and Downtown
Development programs. This testing will be part of a cooperative venture
with the South Carolina Downtown Development Association, Inc.

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