

Mapping Community Identity

THE POWER OF STORIES



Greg Baeker



David T. Brown

Stories have been called the “DNA of culture.” Every place has its stories; and, if the stories are not shared, the place is of diminished interest to residents and visitors alike. The Blarney Stone is just a rock without its mythologies and cultural context; the Plains of Abraham are just manicured parklands without the dramatic historical narrative. Facilitating access – intellectual and physical – to our cultural and natural heritage resources is a prerequisite to understanding their significance, as well as an engine for building appreciation, fostering stewardship, and generating considerable local economic activity.

Engaging People, Places, and Stories

Cultural mapping is a defining feature of municipal cultural planning approaches that have been written about in the pages of *Municipal World* for several years, and which is the focus of the new book *Rediscovering the Wealth of Places: A Municipal Cultural Plan-*

ning Handbook for Canadian Communities. There are two dimensions to cultural mapping:

1. *Resource mapping* – identifying and recording tangible cultural resources usually making use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) tools and platforms; and
2. *Community identity mapping* – exploring “intangible cultural resources” – the unique stories and traditions that define a community’s identity and sense of place.

Most of the discussion about cultural mapping has focused on tangible resources. In this article, we want to turn our attention to the intangibles, and to a range of ways in which community identity mapping can help expand and enrich community engagement while supporting economic development and local wealth creation.

Engaging community members in identifying and recounting stories that say something important about what makes their community unique is a powerful way to draw larger numbers of citizens into a cultural planning process. Experience demonstrates that people are more actively engaged and receptive to creating new, shared visions of the future if their collective past and present have been portrayed and validated in meaningful ways. Ex-

Dr. Greg Baeker is a regular contributor to *Municipal World*. Greg is Senior Consultant and Founder of AuthenticityCity. He is author of *Rediscovering the Wealth of Places: A Municipal Cultural Planning Handbook for Canadian Communities* (Municipal World). Greg can be reached at <greg@mappingauthenticity.com>.

Dave Brown is a founding professor of the Department of Tourism and Environment at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario. He has been mapping and promoting natural and cultural heritage destinations for over 15 years, most recently through the innovative Niagara Greenbelt Gateway website <www.niagaragreenbelt.com>. He holds a Doctorate from McGill University.

Figure 1 Story Matrix			
	Honouring the past	Celebrating the present	Envisioning the future
People	Hiram Walker: Liquor Tycoon and Civic Leader	Marc Gabbana – an award-winning local designer working in motion picture design and advertising	City of Windsor Cultural Plan
Places	The John Freeman Walls Historic Site and the Underground Railroad Museum	Point Pelee National Park	City of Windsor – future border crossing enhancements and bridge renewal
Things/ Events	Provincial Marine Amherstburg Re-enactment Unit	Windsor Red Bull Air Race	1812 Bi-Centennial Celebration plans

perience also demonstrates that local community knowledge is very uneven, and scattered amongst residents. Providing a framework for soliciting and collecting their stories is a valuable way of mapping community identity and engaging the community. The process also connects three kinds of community narratives:

- ▶ honouring the past;
- ▶ celebrating the present; and
- ▶ envisioning the future.

A recent cultural mapping project that was a partnership between the City of Windsor and Essex County, used a series of sample stories to initiate a broader community storytelling process. The stories were identified using the matrix, shown in Figure 1.

The invitation to the community was to tell their own stories in whatever format or media was familiar and comfortable. This can range from straightforward written narratives to stories told using a range of digital and social media tools.

Leveraging New Digital Tools and Technologies

We are on the verge of a profound revolution in how we find, access, explore, and share knowledge about cultural resources. Digital technology provides us with an affordable, accessible, and democratic alternative to the human storyteller. We can couple the strengths of digital multimedia and

wireless information delivery with the powerful new locational and wayfinding capabilities of GPS and digital mapping. Using these tools, written, oral, and multimedia stories can be delivered electronically, at a time and place that is convenient to the recipient.

Properly deployed, digital technologies for storytelling and interpretation are not complicated, sterile, or inhuman ... they are a natural extension of our very human propensities to tell stories to one another and better understand our world. Radio, cinema, and television were threatening media in their infancy, until we got used to their modes of delivery and incorporated them into our lexicon of storytelling tools.

Mobile digital technologies are the next logical development. Imagine the potential in a technology that will inform you about a point of interest in all of its ephemeral forms, safely guide you there, tell you all about it from the frame of reference that most interests you, and guide you to other destinations of interest or back home again. Or – more innovative yet – a technology that will tell you in real time what you are seeing or visiting, triggered automatically merely by your physical location. All this potential exists today, and the technology is inherent in today's smartphones, digital media players, and GPS units. Our current challenge is to get better at integrating, packaging, and

delivering the content. Some innovative web-based and mobile tourism applications with links to cultural mapping systems are being developed by the Niagara Greenbelt Gateway Initiative <www.niagaragreenbelt.com>.

For example, TripClips are interpretive audio clips of professional or community origin that can be downloaded in advance, streamed, or accessed wirelessly by a 3G browser or phone while onsite. They have the potential to be triggered automatically based upon the location of the visitor via GPS coordinates. (See <www.niagaragreenbelt.com/component/content/article/762-tripclips.html> for details.)

Sustainable Tourism Practices

These interpretive technologies have the potential to be more sustainable than their traditional counterparts. Digital delivery is more flexible, more accessible, and more modular, and is potentially less expensive, less intrusive, and less resource intensive. Digital interpretation requires no physical signposts, no printed maps or brochures, and no large investment in specialized infrastructure for delivery, since the generalized infrastructure of wireless communications is already in place (and growing daily) for other purposes. Material and energy consumption can be reduced over traditional means, making interpretive tourism more sustainable. Travelers can be urged out of their cars and onto trails, bike paths, and public transit – options which are otherwise difficult to find in a new destination. And, the modularity of digital delivery allows the content to be tailored to the interests and proclivities of the visitor or resident.

Democratizing Cultural Interpretation

Another important dimension to the technology is its openness to proprietor and community input. Through modified wiki portals, comment forms, and multimedia submissions, information sharing about cultural assets is democratized, and a voice is given to local community members speaking in their own voices. Experts and critical commentators from the community can tell

their stories, share facts and anecdotes, and contribute to the building of a rich and multifaceted knowledge base about a place, person, thing or event.

Stories as Economic Drivers

Finally, these technologies can be a significant catalyst for economic activity. Without promotion and interpretation, a monument or gallery or park or landscape may go unnoticed. Marshall McLuhan famously said: "I don't know who discovered water, but it was likely not fish." When we live in an environment every day, it is sometimes hard to notice those unique features and stories that are all around us. A cultural mapping process helps reveal these treasures and makes it possible to promote and raise awareness both in the commun-

ity and to visitors and tourists. Tell people an interesting story, give them a location, show them how to get there, and help bring the experience alive for them. Then, join together multiple destinations in a prepared or custom tour itinerary, and the functionality to make automatic online purchases of accommodations, admission tickets, goods, and services in advance, and you have the makings of a very powerful engine for local and regional economic development.

Municipal Cultural Planning

Municipal cultural mapping and planning, especially using the new digital tools, will be one of the first arenas where the local attributes of a geographically-defined community will be

rendered accessible, both intellectually and physically, to a much wider *virtual* community of locals and visitors who share an interest in what the place has to offer. This will help promote the attributes of the community to a global audience, encourage expert and vernacular input about cultural assets from a wide cross section of the population, facilitate highly personalized explorations and low-impact custom travel itineraries for visitors and locals, and generate economic activity. Finally, and most importantly of all, it will help raise awareness about what is required to create, maintain, and encourage vibrant local communities in all contexts, leading to greater public understanding of the planning and policy directions we must follow in our quest for sustainability. *MW*

as published in

Municipal World

CANADA'S MUNICIPAL MAGAZINE – SINCE 1891

1-888-368-6125

www.municipalworld.com