

Exploring A Place-based Approach for Civic Engagement

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Abstract

This paper explores a place-based approach for civic engagement by identifying some of the main themes related to this approach. The development and evolution of place-based thinking has been facilitated by the contributions of a number of scholars (Bonner, 2002; Bradford, 2004, 2005; Hanna and Walton-Roberts, 2004; Healey, 1999, 2003; and Nilsen, 2005), who have disseminated place-based research findings focused on selected cities and communities in Canada and abroad. Considering a place-based approach can offer the opportunity to search for patterns from which to study civic engagement in selected urban sites. Large cities are becoming increasingly important players in Canada's political, social, and economic life. The ideas offered in this paper are to provide a possible starting point for a research project using a place-based approach as the lens from which to study civic engagement in a particular Toronto setting.

Introduction

Lewis Mumford (1989) in his seminal work, *The city in history*, noted that humankind eventually moved from roaming the plains, to settling in caves, to taking up more permanent settlement in villages, and then to cities. The village formed a new kind of settlement: a permanent association of families and neighbours based on secure food sources that reduced the need to travel extensively. Over time, social structures such as the Council of Elders evolved in villages to provide counsel and to help maintain local law and order. Thus the very act of settlement in villages helped to embed the primary association of birth and place. Furthermore, Mumford (1989) expressed that while the city continued to expand, the notion of communal identification remained primarily in neighbourhood groups and associations.

For most of human history, wealth came from a place's endowment of natural resources, such as fertile soil for farming. As we transitioned from an agrarian society to an industrial one, natural resource manufacturing became the mainstay of economic expansion. As the industrial age matured, cities became the sites for population growth and economic expansion, which helped to move many cities away from industrial dependence and toward a phase that emphasized human intelligence, knowledge, and creativity (Florida, 2002). Combining an ability to create a welcoming environment for an internationally-based economy, mobilizing financial and human capital pool, and attracting well educated professionals within highly qualified sectors are the essential ingredients for achieving global city status (Abrahamson, 2004; Saskin, 2001). However, not all cities are equipped to be the sites for this latest phase. Those that manage to combine tolerance, talent, and technology will thrive, and those cities that cannot compete will witness the "flight" of their creative talent to more welcoming cities (Florida, 2005). While some cities have the ability to become global players, within these cities are marginalized groups that are unable

dealing with severe social problems. Only cities willing to respond effectively to these social matters will be able to become places of innovation and inclusion Bradford (2004).

Cities: Back on the Agenda

In response to the recent attention that some cities have been generating, a number of scholars, and even a former Canadian prime minister, have announced that cities are back on the agenda (Andrew, Graham, & Phillips 2002; Bradford, 2004, 2005). Andrew et al. point to three factors that help account for a renewed interest in cities. First, some cities have moved beyond their domestic boundaries and now occupy a place on the international economic stage. Second, the increased emphasis on ethno-cultural diversity of some cities requires new approaches to solving major social problems. Third, the rise of new social movements has led to challenges to the status quo within many cities and recognition of different types of communities. Based on gender rights, environmental sustainability, anti-poverty, and human rights that move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach, these communities seek new social and political networks (1998).

The reason for the optimistic belief that cities are back on the agenda is that some political leaders view selected cities as “engines” that will drive the country’s economic prospects and globalization tendencies. Part of this logic stems from the notion that cities, which have attained “global” status contain the necessary ingredients to become competitive and forceful players in a host of economic and political arenas. Globalization can be described as “a complex process embodying conditions of instant communication and the rapid movement of people, goods, and ideas” (Hanna and Walton-Roberts, p.37). Is it possible for a city to be a global player, while supporting a place-based approach that recognizes the importance of incorporating local social and cultural ideas into the policy process? Does place occupy a “place” in the city?

Considering Place

One of the challenges in using a term like “place” is that it can hold a variety of meanings, depending on the context within which the word is situated. The Concise Oxford Dictionary’s definition of place is “a particular position or point in space; a location...a person’s home...” (2004, p. 1094). Place is not a word unique to one community, it is used daily to refer to a particular building (one’s home or location), it can relate to work, to recreational activities, or to social hierarchy. This makes defining place more complex because its meaning is so familiar that it is challenging to move beyond our commonsense notion of place to consider it in a more developed manner (Cresswell, 2005).

Corcoran (2002) asserts, “place is a slippery term which is difficult to define. Embedded within the concept of place are layers of sedimented meanings derived from memory, sentiment, tradition, and identification with a spatial location” (p.49). In considering place, it is necessary to focus on the meanings imputed by people to their cultural and physical surroundings, and how a threat to an individual’s sense of place is also perceived as a threat to one’s self-identity (Corcoran, 2002).

As globalization has swirled around us, there has been reconsideration that society and economy are no longer organized around local relations only. As capitalism extends globally into the public space of the city, citizens may become less attached to their shared sense of local history. When gentrification takes hold of an older neighbourhood, the character changes and long-time residents are often powerless to challenge and resist these major alterations to the local landscape (Corcoran, 2002). This does not mean that local attachments based on familiarity with place and personal social relations cannot happen. However, as Putnam (2001) points out, the disappearance of civic togetherness-based on citizen participation in local organizations and meetings and voting-has been

weakened, leading to less emphasis on social capital and community. Relph (1976) views that an authentic sense of place is above all that of being inside and belonging to your place, both as an individual and as a member of a community, and to know this without being overly reflective.

We usually consider community as both a geographical area and communities of interest that gather together. This can be extended to include intangible factors that relate to “community spirit” that imbue neighbourhood feelings. These factors may increase attachment to a particular place, and provide insight into the social relations underpinning a particular place. Generally, when we do think about place in geographical terms, it is usually related to neighbourhoods, villages, towns, and cities. The scale may vary depending on how we conceptualize our notion of place. Often we may think about it using possessive phrases such as “our” or “my” place. In this way, we narrow down our notion of place even more to be determined based on what we designate as place (Cresswell, 2004)

The discipline of geography, and to a lesser degree sociology, has provided insight into the evolution of place from a variety of perspectives. Early work by British and French geographers, at the turn of the century, focused on region to describe culture in relation to history and ecology in terms of human settlement and anthropological studies. More recently, geographers such as Relph (1976) began to view place in practical terms of living in one place, working in another. Nilsen’s study of rethinking place in planning in relation to Northern and Aboriginal planning policies in Nunavut, Canada, recognizes the need to focus on place to ensure context sensitivities of citizens are addressed appropriately. Historically, politicians and planners have not reflected the interests of Northern inhabitants because the aim has been on resource exploration and exploitation. There needs to be attention directed toward networks of social relations focused on collaboratively-based, grassroots organizations that help to conceptualize and define place (Nilsen, 2005).

There is a growing body of literature that suggests places are social constructs and that individuals help to give meaning to particular locations. As noted earlier, place is not a straightforward and objectively defined term (Nilsen, 2005), and it may not be defined solely through geography or territory because place also is derived through social processes. Place is something that can be nurtured and reshaped through individual or collective effort. A place-based approach aims to help address and coordinate the activities of different stakeholders related to initiatives that promote social betterment (Nilsen, 2005).

For many, home is the most significant example of place, where people feel a sense of attachment and rootedness. Home is viewed as the centre, where one can withdraw, to a degree, and exercise control over a limited space (Cresswell, 2004). Yet, this romantic notion of home is not shared by all, as noted by bell hooks (1990), many see home as a stifling place and not always nurturing. Home can also be a political place. Mumford's discussion of early village life entailed the necessity of entering into political negotiations with "protectors" who would ward off preying animals or humans. In return, villagers seeking this safety would offer their protectors a portion of foodstuff as payment (Cresswell, 2004).

Currently, some cities and neighbourhoods are experiencing significant threats from the restructuring of economic systems at the global level, to the deliberate need to differentiate between places in order to compete for new clients, residents, or tourists. Place has become more complex due to capital mobility, mass communication, and rapid transportation. Political struggles have emerged over place, specifically in relation to social movements that have organized protests to stem the tide of capital expansion.

Michael Smith in his book, *Transnational urbanism: Locating globalization* (2001), asks the question "...what makes a place a place like no other place?" (p.115). Bonner (2002) considers this question but asks more directly "what kind of research could make the uniqueness of a place observable?" (p.2). Both these

questions give us pause to think about the different voices in the discourse of place-making (the resident, the neighbourhood, the municipal politician, the corporate strategist, the architect, etc) (Bonner, 2002). As noted earlier, the growth of some cities, the increasing emphasis on ethno-cultural diversity, and the rise of new social movements have led to demands for new decision making structures that reflect these changes and incorporate more and varied voices around the table. Struggles related to gender, class, sexuality, and ethnicity continue to take place at the local and global levels, with varying levels of success. Bradford, 2004, 2005; Gillen, 2004; Hanna and Walton-Roberts, 2004; Healey, 1999, 2003; Maxwell, 2005; and Nilsen emphasize the importance of situating a place-based approach within a governance framework.

Governance

The term “govern” originates from the Greek root “to steer” (Concise, 2004, p. 616). Pierre and Peters (2000) underscore that the concept of “governance” has emerged to take a central place in the social sciences in relation to involving a range of institutions and relationships in the process of governing. Yet, while the concept is used frequently its meaning and implications vary. The rapid pace of technological, economic, and political change at the local, provincial, federal, and international levels, means that the notion of steering becomes challenging for both citizens and governments to consider. Andrew and Goldsmith (1998) indicate that both elected and non-elected officials are becoming more aware of the growing diversity of some urban areas. For this reason, citizenship can be used as a means for relating to governance issues that may include: promoting equity in work environments, encouraging policies that promote cross-cultural understanding, and improving programs and services that relate to the needs of recent immigrant and ethno-cultural groups. Therefore, accessibility and equality issues that relate to local government service provisions and policy making may be enhanced, if diverse groups are engaged in the process.

According to McCarney, Halfani, and Rodriguez (1995), governance can allow space in our consideration for the inclusion of groups and individuals in civil society. Accordingly "...governance, as distinct from government, refers to the relationship between civil society and the state, between rulers and the ruled, the government and the governed" (p. 95). Furthermore, the path to enhanced credibility and legitimacy of government is determined by responsiveness, accountability, transparency, real participation, empowerment of groups in civil society and public consultations, which will contribute to an open and legitimate relationship between civil society and the state (McCarney et al., 1995).

Governance is about the collective capacity to set policy directions, implement them, and adjust as circumstances warrant (Bradford, 2004). Government should not view governance as a device for downloading the programs and services along with their related costs onto a lower level of government. Local governance may be viewed as a mechanism for achieving broader cooperation and coordination at the local level (Andrews, 2002; Bradford, 2005). Decision making processes are more flexible when they embrace a wide variety of relationships. Governance refers to the relationships between the formal institutions of government and civil society (Tindal & Tindal, 2004).

When considering governance and place-based thinking at the local level, these terms become challenging because municipalities are subordinate to their provincial masters. Cities often take on a series of different and sometimes conflicting roles that may run counter to the interest of certain citizen groups. In addition, increasing demands posed by globalization have called into question traditional political approaches to decision making (Gillen, 2004). Bonner (2002) views the interplay of transportation, economics, and politics as largely determining the shape of our cities and places. Given the pace of change, "places" may be less solid than ever before. For these reasons, a place-based approach is a complex, contested, and ambiguous, especially in Canada's federal system.

The Canadian Context for a Place-Based Approach

One of the challenges in thinking about the notion of a place-based approach in Canada is the fact that “local governments are creatures of the province” (Tindal and Tindal, 2004, p.10), and this totalitarian control over local political institutions is odds with ‘the principle of a free and democratic society’ (Magnusson 2005, p.6). Generally, local governments have been concerned with functional responsibilities related to inputs (planners/engineers) and outputs (roads and sewers) primarily. Recently, greater demands have been placed on cities to think beyond the functional areas and focus on new arrangements that promote sustainable outcomes. This involves greater coordinate based on horizontal relations among municipal departments and less emphasis on silos (Gillen, 2004).

The scholarly literature on place-based research has been generated primarily from Britain, the United State, and the European Union (Kjaer, 2004, and Pierre and Peters, 2002). Bradford (2004, 2005) builds significantly on this base by illuminating a cross-national discussion of place-based research informs Canada’s national urban policy debate. Some place-based approaches have met with varying levels of success depending on a host of political, economic, and social factors. As Bradford (2005) summarizes, by tapping into local knowledge, mobilizing community organizations, engaging municipalities, and forging multi-level collaborations, these countries have moved toward developing place-based approaches. One size-fits-all policy is not conducive to integrated place-sensitive solutions and effective governance arrangements (Bradford, 2005).

Bradford (2005); Gillen, (2004); and Hanna and Walton-Roberts (2005); provide insightful studies related to place-based approaches in Canada. These authors note that a new approach focused on placed-based thinking would benefit from political leadership that was less directive and more collaborative and inclusive.

They also note that tasks only get completed when players trust one another and this takes time to develop, therefore, opportunities for developing trust may be based on social learning opportunities that stress collaboration toward understanding collective concerns. Hanna and Walton-Roberts (2004) argue that in the race for Toronto to become a global city, planners and policy makers have weakened the governing opportunities for the emergence of locally enriched social and cultural environments to engage in place-based approaches.

Engaging local communities in ways that are responsive to decision-making processes, require that these communities be equipped to revitalize themselves in accordance with their needs (Bradford, 2005). Providing opportunities for groups to recognize what is needed in a perplexing problem, especially at a time when some cities have become home to clusters of industries, open to diverse ideas and people, while pockets within these same cities are experiencing significant poverty-related social problems and growing income polarization. By identifying and coordinating efforts within cities that are based on a 'ground or street up' approach, and focused on local knowledge delivered through governance networks relations, opportunities may be offered that target marginalized groups and neighbourhoods within cities (Bradford, 2004,2005).

According to recent national statistics, 80 percent of Canadians reside in urban centres (pop. 1000 or more) and approximately 64 percent reside in one of Canada's 27 census metropolitan areas (CMAs), (cities with populations over 100,000) (Tindal & Tindal, 2004). Can a place-based approach assist us in dealing with current urban problems such as ageing infrastructure, insufficient affordable housing, rising poverty, traffic congestion, poor air quality lack of public space, and urban sprawl? Federal and provincial politicians still view cities based on jurisdictional divisions. Often on the front line of providing basic services, municipal leaders are sidelined in policy and financial decisions (Fowler & Siegel, 2002). Yet, cities are where today's major public policy challenges are being played out. The complexity of some urban problems cannot be resolved in

traditional top-down method. For example, health issues often are often connected to low-income, access to education, housing, health, and transit (Hancock, 2002). Unfortunately, we often lack the fine-grained knowledge of the influence of public policies on diverse localities and populations (Bonner, 2002)

We require solutions that “fit” with what is happening in that particular neighbourhood. Canada’s current urban policy-making environment is little influenced by place-sensitive perspectives. By 2017, visible minorities in both Toronto and Vancouver will be the visible majority. Urban governance should encompass governments, public, private, and voluntary bodies that focus on community needs. We need to consider dynamic relationships between public, private, and voluntary sectors that drive policy. In response to gendered perspectives, cultural diversity, urban citizenship, and citizen engagement, governments (especially local), may benefit in adopting new approaches to respond to these changes.

Bradford (2005) highlights four key points related to a place-based approach, which include: Drawing upon local knowledge; accessing local talent individually or within community organizations; finding the right policy blend; and focusing on general policies mixed with targeted programs informed by local residents. Depending on the situation, all three levels of government may be involved in organizing a place-based approach, however, if the policy matter is primarily local, then municipal knowledge and expertise would definitely assist in the effective implementation and evaluation of place-based strategies.

Conclusions

This paper has attempted to draw together a number of perspectives related to an exploration of a place-based approach for civic engagement. To assume that all commentators are in agreement about the merits of a place-based approach would be unwise (Gillen, 2004). Improved exploration of place-based approach

would benefit from the involvement of active and interested stakeholders in a variety of formal and informal, academic, practice-based and professional and community agencies. This would generate a fine grain diversity of situations, from which to consider governance frameworks, to develop social and institutional capacity building. Gillen (2004) notes that there are conditions that need to be considered for an idea to be capable of moving from fad to institutionalized form, including:

The idea or approach needs to have attained the status of an established fact and be capable of evincing at least a modest presumption of legitimacy.

People who work within this framework-that is, in this case, in a place management framework-should feel that it has legitimacy as a valid rule or norm and not be simply an arbitrarily adopted convention.

It has a name or label that is generally known or recognized, which in turn reflects the fact that it has at least some measure of internal consistency and coherence.

It can survive a challenge from alternative institutions or means of arranging resources and activities to achieve specific outcomes. In other words, it has to demonstrate a robust vitality. (p. 211)

As Gillen (2004) emphasizes, despite its positive qualities, a place-based approach has yet to achieve an institutionalized status. However, the breadth and depth of scholarship provided by Bradford (2004, 2005) and others in this field, in relation to place-based research, is moving us closer toward an institutionalized form. Greater exploration, discussion, and application are needed, if the approach is to achieve an institutional form and greater policy commitment. A place-based approach demands knowledge creation and dissemination to involve diverse communities, to enable them to respond through

an accumulation of knowledge, and a process for shaping and sustaining local environments (Gillen, 2004).

This paper has observed that in exploring the literature related to a place-based approach, each level of government has a role to play that is influenced by a host of political, economic, and political factors. Our challenge is to develop new forms of political authority to cope with twenty-first century problems (Magnusson, 2005). While there are many challenges that may prevent cities and communities from moving toward a place-based approach, Hanna and Walton-Roberts identify four components that may help to focus attention on realizing a place-based focus:

Physical Growth. Cities must have true authority over land-use planning and the power to pursue progressive growth policies and manage density, form, and design...especially for water, waste, green space, and transportation systems. Urban regions must be able to obtain sufficient funds to enhance and expand public transit and to ...link with other urban regions....

Social Quality. Cities must have the power to deliver social programs tailored to the needs of the urban region. The realities of urban needs are highly variable and each must have the capacity to respond to its realities. Social quality is a key element in overall quality of place... Social quality also requires that cities understand the advantages and strengths that diversity brings and the support that diversity gives to improving the quality of place.

Environmental Quality. Cities must have the authority to conserve landscapes and the environment by maintaining green spaces, controlling sprawl...and other natural amenities. Environmental quality also poses

questions of access and equity, in terms of who benefits from environmental quality and who has access to open space....

Governance. The ability and capacity to implement and guide the above elements are essential aspect of governance. There must be clear knowledge of who is in charge, who is responsible, and to whom taxes are paid and for what. Revenues must be stable, varied, and accountable to the local level. These are elements not only of accountability, but also the ...inclusion and legitimacy that define cities as collectives of citizens and not simply as corporate entities responsible primarily to senior governments. (pp. 44-45, 2004)

Hanna and Walton-Roberts (2004) contend that these four elements offer a workable approach for building equitable cities. At first glance, the notion of place appears obvious; however, it is clearly a complicated concept when one attempts to unpack the many different viewpoints that exist. Place-making is shaped by conflict, difference, and social negotiations among different situations, involving, at times, antagonistically related social actors (Bonner, 2002).

Place is a complex concept which has a variety of approaches ranging from geographic, humanistic, anthropological, economic, social to political perspectives. Hanna and Walton Roberts (2004) contend that quality of place is imperative for building a 'competitive' city. A place-based approach promotes a framework that allows stakeholders to both develop shared meanings on place, and establish priorities for action that can help guide public policy (Nilsen, 2005). To engage local stakeholders and encourage nurturing interactive place-focused dialogues, Healey (1996, 1999) supports the call for participatory democracy that fosters collaborative and communicative dimensions.

While we should endeavor to embrace and work toward improving cities, it is important to recognize that the world is becoming more global and citizens may

be less concerned with territorial matters only. While this does not discount the place of territory, it does recognize that urban social movements can include territorial concerns as well as those based on identities, genders, and ethnicities. These issues like the cities within which these topics are debated are not static. The urban setting offers an appropriate setting from which to study how state and society relations are being recast by examining the roles and responsibilities of citizens, government actors, and influential organized interests (both public and private), in relation to a place-based approach. While Mumford (1989) acknowledges that cities will continue to be sites for future technological and electronic changes, he recognizes that:

...[S]ignificant improvements will come only through applying art and thought to the city's central human concerns, with a fresh dedication to the cosmic and ecological processes that enfold all being. We must restore to the city the maternal, life-nurturing functions, the autonomous activities, the symbiotic associations that have long been neglected or suppressed. For the city should be an organ of love; and the best economy of cities, is the care and culture of [its citizens]. (p.575)

By entering into a place-based approach discourse, we can begin to consider the policy and institutional structures operating at the local, provincial, and federal levels in relation to this approach (Gillen, 2004). Discourse offers consideration of social relations, situating meaning, power, and possible consequences and alternative viewpoints that will assist in us exploring more fully a place-based approach for civic engagement in our cities.

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