

## **Rethinking Place in Planning: Opportunities in Northern and Aboriginal Planning in Nunavut, Canada**

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### *Résumé*

Dans les dernières années, on a observé dans le Nord du Canada un intérêt accru en faveur de multiples projets de planifications sur le modèle collaboratif des communautés de base. Ce type de projets a souvent visé à valoriser la pertinence d'une politique sociale, particulièrement dans le contexte d'une autodétermination perçue dans le Nord et chez les Aborigènes. Cet article met en relief le potentiel d'un début de directives gouvernementales orientées vers l'autonomie du Nord de la région. Cependant, il soutient que ces directives requièrent une concentration plus précise à l'endroit de sa conceptualisation afin de s'assurer que les caractères délicats du concept puissent être abordés avec pertinence. Instruit par les expériences de praticiens de la région du Nord, l'article suggère que le Nunavut figure en bonne place pour adopter un mandat de planification démocratique axé sur la conceptualisation locale. Ceci, dans la mesure où les cultures des lointaines communautés du Nord rencontrent, au moment des prises de décisions, les conditions que requièrent les processus de la construction interprétative du lieu envisagé.

**Mots clés:** Planification du Nord, Nunavut, Aborigène, Gouvernance, Conceptualisation locale

### *Abstract*

In recent years, there has been a movement towards more grassroots-modelled collaborative planning approaches in Northern Canada. These approaches have frequently been directed at heightening the relevance of social policy, particularly within the context of Northern and

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Aboriginal self-determination. This paper acknowledges the potential of fledgling governance directives aimed at Northern empowerment. However, it argues that these directives require a more precise focus on place conceptualisation to ensure context sensitivities are appropriately addressed. Informed by the experiences of Northern practitioners, the paper suggests that Nunavut is well-situated to embrace a democratic planning mandate centred on place conceptualisation. This is to the extent that the decision-making cultures of remote Northern communities meet the conditions required for processes of interpretive place construction.

**Key words:** Northern Planning, Nunavut, Aboriginal, Governance, Placemaking

### **Introduction**

There is increasing discourse in the planning discipline with regards to the democratic deficit, a term used to describe the conceptual cleft existing between the state (or other regulatory decision making bodies) and civil society. Interest in the democratic deficit has heightened as governance structures have not managed to ensure widespread social equity. The planning discipline, as a governance form, is presumably geared to supporting the interests of people and places. Therefore, there is mounting conjecture that policy construction must be malleable, meaning it must be made more responsive to the citizens for whom, and places for which, it is intended to serve. This necessarily implies that planning systems require restructuring.

The viewpoint that planning systems should be restructured to ensure more socially responsive policy can be achieved has been particularly pronounced in the field of Northern and Aboriginal planning. This is, in part, owing to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Canada, 1996), which set a benchmark in conveying that Northern social and economic policy requires greater consideration of context and cultural sensitivities. The viewpoint is also owing to the recent progression of Northern political institutions, and to the increasing organisational capacity of Aboriginal stakeholder groups. These developments have been instrumental in facilitating the creation of the Territory of Nunavut itself, a political entity whose formalisation marks the beginnings of a legitimate movement towards Northern and Aboriginal self-governance and self-determination. As part of this movement, a certain devolution of decision-making authority in policy arenas has occurred. Agencies have

increasingly begun to experiment with more grassroots-modelled collaborative planning approaches.

This paper is grounded on the premise that Northern policy development should proceed in view of the right of First Nations self-determination, especially given the predominant Aboriginal population in Canada's North.<sup>1</sup> The paper acknowledges the potential of fledgling governance directives aimed at Northern empowerment, but suggests that collaborative planning practices require a more precise point of focus to ensure those directives adequately address context and cultural sensitivities. Specifically, the paper argues for an explicit focus on place conceptualisation in planning discourses. This is because the manner in which places are perceived factors importantly in the range of choices made possible for contextually appropriate policy development.

### **Place conceptualisations: perspectives and planning implications**

There is an emergent body of literature suggesting that places are social constructs (Hillier, 2001; Madanipour, 2001; Graham and Healey, 1999; Vigar et al., 2000; Healey, 1998; Byrne, 1996). That is to say that place entities are perceptual phenomena. It follows that individuals give meaning to particular locations, each within their own social context, and in relation to the experiences of *being* in those social contexts (Healey, 1998). Massey (1993, 66) submits that places are "articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings." From this standpoint, the notion of place is largely detached from a physical or object oriented viewpoint of space. As Hillier (2001, 97) elaborates, place is a "surface of inscription and identity, offering different meanings to different people."

Taken as a social construct, the concept of place is not straightforward (Healey, 1998a). Yet the planning discipline has historically perceived place in a forthright manner. This is a consequence of the discipline's allegiance to the Western scientific tradition. Rationalistic philosophies of this tradition have implicitly dictated that the discipline support the idea that unitary, unbiased interpretations of places are possible (Graham and Healey, 1999). Western epistemes have thus propagated and supported the development of objectively defined place conceptualisations, which are ultimately those underscored by a geographic or physical determinism.

### **Place Conceptualisations in Northern Canada**

Geographic determinism has been exhibited in Canada, where the planning discipline has typically perceived the North in physical or geographic terms, and in strict reference to the region's expansive natural resource base (Armstrong, 1978; Page, 1986; Young, 1995; Robertson, 1999). Inasmuch as this hinterland conception has prevailed, policy has typically been both centred on resource exploitation and focused explicitly on economic growth. Indeed, there is literature linking the Northern frontier conceptualisation to the discipline's continued fixation on extending the modern industrial system, and its supporting institutions, into the North (Young, 1995; Myers, 1996).

Critiques of the policy and planning frameworks stemming from conventional Northern place conceptualisations are extensive. Criticism has been directed from those who condemn the framework for its inherent support of assimilation (Young, 1995; Myers, 2000); those who complain the framework nurtures dependency relationships (Usher, 1982; Ross and Usher, 1986; Elias, 1995); and those who contend the framework often oversteps the essence of socio-cultural activity in the North (Berger, 1985; Lonner, 1986; Wismer, 1996).

Implicit in the foregoing critiques is the notion that planning programs have not necessarily operated in the best interests of Northern inhabitants. This contention is supported in planning literature. Schmidt (2000) for example, reasons that the discipline has defined the North in such a manner as to facilitate a policy structure that neglects the needs of Northern residents. Duerden (1992, 223) is also critical of the fact that planners have generally failed to articulate a coherent view of the appropriate interests to be served in Northern development. Similarly, Myers and Forrest (2000, 143) criticise the discipline for its "lopsided" understanding of development, implying that Northern policy has rarely been fashioned in reference to Northern inhabitants.

These contemporary critiques reflect that while emergent perspectives on place have seeped into planning theory literature, the discipline itself has remained largely committed to convention in practice. To wit, Graham and Healey (1999) argue that planning has both failed to transform conceptualisations of place, and remained unable to reflect in its praxis relational and non-linear meanings of space. Implicit here is the notion that planning continues to function in general alignment with Western scientific rationalism. It follows, if the discipline's articulation of place entities connected with emergent thinking on the social construction of space, planning would be more attuned to the

range of relations transecting places in its place conceptualisations. That is, the discipline would be more focused on the networks of social relations that operate to define places (Healey, 1999).

### **Multiplex Places and Strategic Placemaking: Connections to Collaborative Planning**

In light of the above, some theorists argue that planning must recognise place conceptualisations in accordance with the concept of *multiplex places* (Graham and Healey, 1999; Healey, 1999), where it is recognised that place cannot simply be singularly or unitarily represented. The term multiplex highlights how places are defined by the multiple perceptions of place that emanate from social experiences. A focus on multiplexity in planning is perceived to be the means by which the discipline can distance itself from geographic determinism. This is to the extent that multiplexity, with its inherent focus on the social construction of place, requires that relational networks and the articulation of place entities comprise the key concern in planning discourses.

From a multiplex perspective, places cannot be defined strictly according to geography or territoriality because they are derived through social processes. Multiplexity implies that place is effectively liberated from any exclusively physical context. Recognition of this concept has given rise to *nonplace* discourses, where place is regarded as being detached from any specific locale (Talen, 2000). This perspective runs counter to conventional thinking about place. Planning, inasmuch as it has aligned with Western scientific rationalism, has developed practice in accordance with objectively defined place conceptualisations. The multiplex perspective challenges basic, fundamental assumptions upon which conventional practice is derived. If nonplace conceptions are considered valid, it could easily be presumed that the discipline need not concern itself with place-focused or spatial planning at all. Such is not the case, however.

The discipline has an important role to play in place-focused planning, despite the emergence and growing acceptance of nonplace conceptions. This role is encapsulated through the practice of *strategic placemaking*, where it is assumed that place, as a social construct, can be shaped to create a focus for social betterment. As Healey (1999, 1998a, 1998b, 1997) indicates, planning can provide the parameters through which conceptions of place may be articulated and used to inform initiatives and responses to change.

Strategic placemaking fits emergent conceptualisations of place inasmuch as the practice conceives place as a process and not as an end state. Viewed as process, place is something that can be nurtured and reshaped through individual or collective effort. This implies that place is not finite, nor is it necessarily structured. Place, at root, is an interpretation. It is this essential characteristic of place that strategic placemaking seeks to exploit. The practice aims to create shared meanings on place qualities – meanings that can be used to help focus and coordinate the activities of different stakeholders on initiatives of social betterment (Healey, 1998a).

Academics posit that spatial planning should be centred on accessing and articulating the broad range of place meanings held by varied stakeholders. As Healey (1999, 118) suggests, a key role for planning is to, “develop a viewpoint or system of meaning of place qualities and trajectories, in relation to the multiple conceptions of those who co-habit an area.” Developing such a system of meaning on place is important, particularly if planning is to both acknowledge and manifest in practice stakeholders’ views on what places are like, and perhaps more importantly, what they can become like.

Strategic placemaking practices invariably align with spatial policy discourses. As Healey (1999) explains, placemaking articulates a shared language capable of connecting the concrete realities of lived experiences to strategy development. Placemaking enables an organising framework that allows stakeholders to both develop shared meanings on place, and set priorities for action in view of those place conceptualisations. In short, placemaking is an exercise in spatial dialogue that implicitly informs and guides public policy.

Planning requires systemic transformations if the discipline is to appropriately connect its practices to strategic placemaking. Such is the position held by academics who surmise that planning must embrace processes that are collaborative in nature (Graham and Healey, 1999; Healey, 1998, 1998b, 1999; Hwang, 1996; Innes and Booher, 1999a; Madanipour, et al. 2001). That is, processes grounded in interactive dialogue.

Some theorists posit that planning has not adequately managed to engage stakeholders in spatial policy discourses. In other words, the discipline has not developed the infrastructures necessary for nurturing interactive, place-focused dialogues. As such, it is argued that the discipline should turn to ‘inventing democracy’ (Healey, 1996). The implication is that planning must embrace participatory processes if it is to overcome the ‘one-sided’ (Healey, 1999) policy discourses of

modernist planning machineries. There is an extensive literature conveying this theme. For Healey (1996), the call for participatory democracy is expressed as requirements for the 'communicative turn' in planning, and similarly for Fisher and Forrester (1993), the 'argumentative turn.' Participation is also frequently discussed in reference to collaborative consensus building (Innes and Booher, 1999a; Gruber 1994). Theorists further shed light on the expanding democratic possibilities of planning through role playing and bricolage (Innes and Booher, 1997) and storytelling (Hillier, 2001; Forester, 1993, 1999). Clearly, there is a common conviction that democratic principles can and should underscore planning practice. It is therefore contested that the discipline must better acknowledge the collaborative, communicative dimensions of social policy construction.

### **Opportunities in Northern and Aboriginal Planning**

Interestingly, there is evidence suggesting that the decision-making cultures of remote Northern and Aboriginal communities display some of the characteristics that critics of traditional rational planning suggest need to be injected into contemporary practice. That is to say that Canada's Northern inhabitants, and planners in particular, may be well-situated to harness the potential of communicative governance forms. Such forms, as indicated above, are those that lend themselves to processes of strategic placemaking. The following section elaborates on the concepts introduced here.

### **Empirical Research**

A study was conducted to situate the present position of planning in the North, and to determine the extent to which Northern planning practitioners are attuned to, or poised to embrace, emergent perspectives on strategic placemaking and collaborative, communicative governance. Qualitative, focused interviews were conducted with practitioners representing local (municipal) and regional (territorial) planning agencies in the Territory of Nunavut. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal respondents were recruited in order to provide a diversity of perspectives. An interview guide was used as a template for discussions, ensuring study participants covered thematically related topics based on their experiences working in the Northern planning environment. Interviews were structured to allow respondents to discuss topics using their own concepts, terminology, and cultural references.

### **Experiential Perspectives from Northern Practitioners**

According to Innes and Booher (1999b), collaborative and interactive dialogue amongst stakeholders and planning agencies culminates in the development of *deliberative space*. From a point of placemaking, deliberative space is essential. It comprises the forum from within which stakeholders may express conceptualisations of place, and establish shared understandings on them. The development of deliberative space is a necessary requisite to the practice of placemaking. It is from this basis that academics argue planning has an important role in helping to frame the interpretive processes through which collective meanings of space are negotiated and articulated (Graham and Healey, 1999; Healey, 1997).

Importantly, discussions with Northern practitioners indicate that there is an advanced network of deliberative space existent in Nunavut (although this space is not necessarily used for the purpose of placemaking). Deliberative spaces are evidenced through the pervasive social interactions and relationships planners commonly identify as *friendships*. Northern practitioners perceive friendships as integral to conversational communication. The importance of this type of communication in policy discourses has become evident to practitioners, particularly within the context of fledgling community based planning exercises.

Northern practitioners are aware that friendships can factor in the development of policy discourses. As one study respondent conveyed:

On my past experiences throughout Nunavut, when you recognise each other, having introduced each other work-wise or personally, you really start getting friendships. And people start opening themselves. They know you, they talk to you, and then they express their concerns or ideas. A lot of good work is accomplished that way. And I've been fortunate to have gone to each region and gain these friendships.

Another practitioner commented how existing social networks contribute to strengthening communication in policy dialogues, particularly from a remote Northern community context:

It is small communities, and everyone knows each other or is related in some way. Well, there's lots of family

ties and it gets really personal. And I think that's an advantage. It's easier to discuss things that way.

Similar sentiments were echoed by another practitioner, who explained that policy discourses can be developed in informal settings with acquaintances:

When you're out visiting in the community and people raise something you get talking about it [policy]. But it doesn't feel like work when it happens like that. It just feels like you are having a conversation with friends and family.

As the preceding examples illustrate, planners in Nunavut recognise that they can use friendships to stimulate conversational communication in policy discourses. Indeed, research indicates that planners are using friendships as such, though it is difficult to determine the frequency at which they are doing so. Nonetheless, it appears that practitioners are very much cognisant of the important role that friendships play, particularly with respect to the acquisition of local knowledge or inputs. One Inuit practitioner elaborated on friendships, contextualising the response in terms of ethnicity:

I believe that people are more inclined to understand me. I am recognised as being a community member, and I think people relate more easily to me because of that. I'm living in the community. I'm part of the social life. So I get to hear things from community people that, you know, I think some of the Qablunaaq [non-Aboriginal] planners sometimes don't.

The same practitioner did not, however, go so far as to insinuate that non-Aboriginal planners are at an established disadvantage when it comes to developing acquaintances and initiating conversational communication. In fact, it was conveyed that planners themselves are responsible for fostering interpersonal connections:

How you live in the community influences how you interact, how you connect with the people. If you make an effort and are recognisable, you can become part of the community.

Practitioners are seemingly attuned to the important role that friendships play in the Northern context. When probed for inputs, all respondents were able to illustrate how relationships with stakeholders in their constituencies associated with planning practice. Further, respondents were cognisant of the fact that their work is frequently informed through interpersonal relationships. This point was perhaps best expressed by a practitioner who stated that, “Your work does not just finish at the end of the day,” implying that inputs informing practice can be received in both professional and personal situations.

The strength of Northern relationships is particularly evident at the local or community context. Practitioners who believe they are embedded in their community’s social fabric feel well-positioned to address planning issues. Such planners see friendships as portals to local knowledge. Planners accept that the accumulation of local knowledge assists them in addressing the needs or interests of their constituents. As one practitioner articulated, “My work comes from the people. When you stop and think about it, these people are my friends, my family.” A similar viewpoint was conveyed by another practitioner, when asked to elaborate on the structure of recent planning initiatives:

Nothing formal, really. More just recognition and listening to people talk. For myself, I’ve had so many conversations with friends who just come in and visit. And everyone has certain views on all the issues. So I just try to listen to what people say and respond to that.

It is not only at the local or community level where friendships associate with planning practice. Intercommunity and interregional relationships also figure importantly in Nunavut. Respondents expressed that intercommunity relationships have traditionally been derived through the strength of family relations throughout Nunavut. Further to this, recent regional initiatives by agencies such as Nunavut’s Department of Sustainable Development have contributed to intensifying relational networks. Organized planning workshops and roundtables, for example, was perceived by respondents as important in consolidating relationships in policy contexts. As one practitioner explained:

I found that my greatest motivator was going out. You know, travelling, attending different courses, workshops and conferences. I would meet people and

make friends there, sometimes friends of family. And it just gave me ideas on how to do things. It really helped me get back with a fresh mind and perspective. To do things differently and maybe better. And also, just to know who to talk to, you know, and where to start.

It is through networking opportunities at the regional level where planners are engaging and further strengthening policy dialogues. As interregional friendships are either established or reinforced, practitioners develop support networks that function to inform their work. As one respondent reflected:

When I was an Economic Development Officer, I would have conferences, and we'd communicate with each other, talk to each other, and ask questions. "Do you have a similar project that our community might be willing to do?" And if they say "Yes", then you'd exchange information. So, it really is supporting each other. If the information is there, you use it...it's no different than friends and family helping each other.

Practitioners interviewed for this study conveyed a recognition that friendships are integral to building and strengthening conversational communication, a sort of stylistic dialogue found useful for engaging stakeholders in planning discourses. Furthermore, respondents acknowledged that friendships have factored importantly in nurturing the development of planning discourses, both locally and regionally. It is not clear how practitioners explicitly characterise or perceive friendships. However, all respondents described friendships as including developed interpersonal relationships or connections with community members, regional constituents, work colleagues, and also family or extended family members.

Inasmuch as practitioners are using friendships to instigate and strengthen planning dialogues, they are both enabling and further structuring existing deliberative spaces. This is to the extent that stakeholders are being provided forums to express their perspectives and develop shared understandings on policy matters. Such forums are characteristically similar to the definition of deliberative space offered by Innes and Booher (1999b). Furthermore, it is apparent that some planning agencies are intentionally endeavouring to create opportunities

for planners and/or their constituents to purposefully interact. This is most clearly evidenced through the organisation of planning workshops and roundtables previously discussed by interview respondents.

It is difficult to state with certainty, however, that Northern planners or planning agencies are always consciously aware of the fact that they are engaging or constructing deliberative spaces. Inuit respondents, in particular, did not indicate outright that their communicative and interactive approaches to initiating planning dialogues are premeditated. That is to say that the development of conversational communication in governance contexts in Nunavut may be an extension of a distinctively Inuit cultural ethic of cooperative action, termed *aajiiqatigiingniq*. According to Arnakak (2001,18), *aajiiqatigiingniq* is “the Inuktitut way of decision making – through conference, one might say.” As *aajiiqatigiingniq* is premised upon consensus building in network contexts, Nunavut, with its predominantly Inuit population, may be naturally situated to embrace collaborative placemaking processes.

### **Interpretive Discussion**

This paper began with the argument that planning has a role in framing the communicative processes through which collective meanings of place can be articulated. Further, it was suggested that planning processes should be democratised to ensure that stakeholders of common jurisdictions can engage in such interpretive discourses on place. These points necessarily imply that the movement towards more socially responsive policy requires a greater focus on strategic placemaking practices. These practices are invariably grounded in the development of deliberative space.

Discussions with Northern practitioners reveal that there is an advanced network of deliberative space existent in Nunavut. This deliberative space is reflected and engaged through the strength and pervasiveness of both intra- and intercommunity friendships in Nunavut. Practitioners interviewed for this study acknowledged that friendships can factor in facilitating the development of policy discourses. However, they did not present sufficient evidence to suggest that Northern planners are using deliberative spaces specifically for the purpose of placemaking. This point, though important, should not detract from the fact that Nunavut is well-situated to capitalise upon the opportunities presented by strategic placemaking. This is to the extent that the decision-making

cultures exhibited in the Northern planning context are grounded in interactive dialogue, which strategic placemaking practices are dependent upon. What research suggests, ultimately, is that there is incredible potential in Nunavut with respect to the development of more place responsive and culturally sensitive policy. This potential may be realised if planners use the existing range of deliberative spaces more explicitly for the purpose of placemaking.

### **The planner revisited**

There are practical implications of the concepts explored throughout this paper. Namely, the discussion inevitably points to the role that practitioners have in activating place-focused dialogues. Innes and Booher (1999a) argue that planners must overcome the conviction they can control spatial change, and accept the reality that they are better positioned to shape the flow of processes of change. This implies that planners should function less as technical specialists, and more as agents of social organisation. It follows, if the discipline is to assist in structuring more contextually responsive governance forms, practitioners must exact a key role in facilitating the transition to such forms. It is here where the practical implications of strategic placemaking figure importantly. A multiplex viewpoint on planning praxis suggests that practitioners carry a social organisational function. Planners can contribute to moulding the social processes that allow common stakeholders to collectively articulate place constructs, and to develop policy responses in view of those constructs.

Inasmuch as planners carry a social organisational function, practice is necessarily an exercise in the development of institutional capacity. That is, planning or policy construction can be seen as an explicit attempt to build, manage, and maintain inter-personal and inter-organisational networks (Imperial, 1999). As this paper has demonstrated, such networks are reflected in the deliberative spaces and decision-making cultures of remote Northern communities. Through managing friendships in policy contexts, Northern planners are effectively exemplifying the processes that many academics suggest should be injected into contemporary practice.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For example, 85 percent of Nunavut's population classifies themselves as Aboriginal (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2003).

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