

ABSTRACTS

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IMAGINING PARKS, DISCOVERING COMMUNITY: LANDSCAPE CHANGE IN URBAN-AGRICULTURAL CONTEXTS

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The process of park development in places where urban land uses meet agricultural communities elicits divergent reactions from stakeholders (Wilkinson 1991). Developing forums for stakeholders to share public values for local landscapes, and to learn other values is an important step in building community and advancing park planning.

Need for Social Learning

Park planning in contexts of an urban-agricultural fringe is about the re-development of land. Parks are made from land that already is (or at one time had been) put to some beneficial human use. To transform land from a past use—or worked landscape—to park land requires reframing the land's identity and the community's relationship to it. Such a context is complex in that there is rarely one agency or administrative unit considered a *decision-maker*. One organization may lead a dialogue amongst stakeholders with interests connected to a broad swath of issues including agricultural, construction, economic development, municipal public works, and protection of both urban and rural quality of life.

An urban-agricultural fringe is distinct from a related, but more visible context, an urban-wildland interface. The former is about a mixture of land-uses and development types with agriculture interspersed and becoming less dominant along fringes of roadways leading to town. There is not already-existing land suitable for a park in urban-agricultural contexts, and park development necessarily entails an envisioning of *what could be* (cf., Mowen & Confer 2003). On the other hand urban-wildland interface generally refers to residential development within close proximity to public land, has its origins in public land-use planning in the western US, and known for its management problems linked to recreational conflict, community safety, and wildfire hazard (e.g., Thapa, Graefe, & Absher 2002; Blahna 1990; Wilkinson 1992). The wildland is typically taken-for-granted as being suitable for park designation, and planning is ostensibly about protecting or managing *what is*. Whereas many kinds of park planning—including contexts of urban-wildland—have a tangible vision of a park and start from there, urban-agricultural park planning starts without a park. The urban-agricultural context requires a community to collectively imagine a landscape different than its current agricultural use, and reframe it to some idealized state suitable for a park.

A community-based dialogue to plan for growth, including parkland, is being characterized by this study as requiring stakeholder groups to imagine a park and its related landscape for development. Part of this collective imagining process would be to share ideas with one another and work through potential tensions. This paper frames community-based values related to park development as more than preferences or statements of opinions. Place meanings and values of landscapes are represented through narratives that inextricably link people to their community and their natural environment (Cronon 1992). Story telling, or narratives, are natural ways for people to organize their lived experiences into meaningful wholes (Polkinghorne 1988; Fine 2002; Linde 1993; Rappaport 2000). The stories we tell about our lives and communities are embedded with meanings of place that characterize our values. In their argument for a civic

science, Kruger and Shannon (2000) championed approaches to inquiry that allow people to tell stories of their lived experiences to others, referred to as social learning. In telling stories of a collective “we,” community members construct their place meanings (Richardson 1990; Helford 2000; Brandenburg & Carroll 1995).

Park planning processes are challenged to identify place meanings and stakeholder values within the multicultural contexts of communities on the urban-agricultural fringe. There are needs to develop strategies to identify public values of local landscapes and in doing so allow stakeholders to discover their collective selves.

Methods

To encourage participants to tell their lived experiences of places, photo-elicitation techniques were employed. The use of participants’ photographs was instrumental in facilitating conversations that elicited place meanings and landscape values through the telling of lived experiences. This method is particularly suited for research that requires a telling of deep-seated personal experience due to its capacity to equalize power between researcher and participant (Clark 1999; Fine & Sandstrom 1988). Participants chose places to photograph, and they developed meanings for these places during conversations with researchers (Heisley & Levy 1991; Clark-Ibanez 2004). During the telling of their lived experiences, participants came to some understanding of the place meanings of their everyday life (Collier 1967; Denzin 2001; Harper 2000; Harrison 2002). These place meanings reflect personal and community-based values for landscapes, and by extension, serve as visions for park development within contexts of urban growth encroaching on agricultural landscapes.

Citizen-stakeholders were recruited from a city advisory committee in Urbana, IL—a Midwestern community experiencing moderate growth and encroachment on adjacent agricultural lands. The advisory committee is diverse to the extent that it is comprised of community residents representing the various neighbourhoods of Urbana. The first phase began with the distribution of disposable cameras to participants who were asked to take pictures of important places. When the cameras were returned, they were processed into prints, and conversations were conducted with participants.

The second phase is the focus of this paper and directed at the sharing of place meanings among research participants in the context of learning circles. This phase was comprised of two separate meetings, or learning circles. Both learning circles were formatted such that each participant chose, and discussed with the group their lived experiences connected to two or three of their photographs (projected on a screen for everyone to view). People were seated in a semicircular configuration and the presentations were informal and conversational; hence the term *learning circle*. The results presented are focused on the capacity of learning circles to allow for a public dialogue that imagines park landscapes and creates value for places. The findings presented herein focus on characteristics of the learning circles conducive for participants to learn about themselves and each other as an act of civic discovery.

Findings from the Learning Circles

The results of the learning circles illustrate the potential of a public sharing of place meanings to foster social learning, provide contexts to build a sense of community, and potential to act as visions for park development. The findings are organized around identified characteristics of the stakeholder dialogue, rather than on the content of the place meanings and visions for parks. The presentation will contain content of place meanings (both text and visual images) to illustrate the following characteristics:

Looking at places. The learning circles focused attention on the landscape not on people. Participants looked at each other's pictures and thought about place meanings, rather than thought critically about people. As an indicator of this focus of attention, participants often introduced themselves in reference to their place meanings. By directing attention to places, it was easy for participants to represent themselves. It did not appear they were talking about themselves, but describing the places they have come to know.

Building social contexts for place meaning. Describing special places was often told as a history of its becoming. Participants were asked to tell others about their important places, and their meanings were developed through a telling of place history that focused on the participant's relationship with the place. There were several community-based contexts to understand participants' values about places in Urbana. These values were easy to express and understand due to their portrayal as part of participants' lived experiences and everyday life.

Teaching place history. The learning circles allowed a teaching of place history in order to appreciate reasons for current conditions and to enhance the ability of others to interpret the landscape. Several participants' discussion of place meanings addressed questions about "Why has a place become the way that it is?" In essence, they were telling others about their way to read the landscape. Whether the history being told is accurate is not the point. The public sharing of place histories, was often framed as teaching about place and meant to enlighten others about reading, and possibly appreciating, the local landscape.

Understanding difference. Differences between place meanings were non-threatening and not personalized. Dialogue about commonalities and differences among participants progressed without the anxiety one might expect at traditional forums of public involvement—such as public hearings or planning workshops. For some people, the learning circles enhanced their own sense of self through comparison with place meanings of others. By comparing their place meanings to others, they assessed similarities and differences with others, and to various extents the conversation allowed participants to discover both themselves and their community.

Discussion and Conclusions

Park planning processes have changed over the past few decades regarding the involvement of stakeholders. This study was inspired by needs to democratize park development processes. The hope of the learning circles is their capacity to shift dialogue from a stakeholder-planner relationship, to a stakeholder-stakeholder relationship, where the planning organization is but one of several stakeholders. The extent to which such meanings were validated and ultimately capable of reaching a wider community-based audience is a meaningful direction for research. This study was directed at a strategy to construct value and develop public sentiment for transforming land from agricultural uses to parks.

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