

## Have Your Latte and Drink It, Too:



## Maintaining a Sense of Place within a Global Age

RECN 631: Parks, Recreation & Tourism Theoretical Context

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*We shape our public spaces, thereafter our public spaces shape us.*

-Winston Churchill

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## **Introduction**

While traveling internationally, I choose to stay in my hotel room rather than experience the local night-life in hopes to get over a cold. The American based program I am traveling with has us staying in a Comfort Inn hotel and I have Pizza Hutt for dinner because it is the only delivery provider available. In the hotel room, the only channel on the television airs an *Everybody Loves Raymond* marathon. Even though I am on the other side of the world from the United States, in Australia, it seems impossible to escape a global culture!

From my traveling experience in developed countries, I have found certain companies, brands, services and an overall lifestyle to be disturbingly similar regardless of location. Beatley (2004) says this mind-numbing sameness is an alarming trend. As the march of globalisation continues, it manifests in places that look and feel alike. "In shopping malls that carry the same stores, and in commercial strips that have the same fast-food franchises, there is a stifling sense of sameness to the new suburban and exurban landscapes we inhabit" (Beatley, 2004, p.2). Around the world, shopping malls are replacing Main Streets and Starbucks are replacing the corner coffee shops. This transfer of the local to the global, referred to in this paper as globalisation (which will later be defined further), reduces sense of place. In the face of globalisation, a growing number of cities are making an effort to have a sense of place because it provides increased social and

economical benefits. The method undertaken for this paper to support my argument includes a literature review of books, academic journal articles and creditable websites combined with case studies based on my personal experience and observations. The context of this paper stems from my academic education and personal interest in, and related to, leisure studies and urban planning. Additionally, the influence of my travel experiences between the United States, Australia and New Zealand cannot be ignored. The aim of this paper is to recognize how, due to globalisation, it is in the best interest of cities to establish and maintain distinctive senses of place. To illustrate this, I will use the example of the Project for Public Space's Great Cities Initiative.

The structure of this paper first defines terminology such as globalisation, sense of place and describes the Project for Public Spaces' Great Cities Initiative. It then discusses the negative affect globalisation has on a city's sense of place followed by the benefits for a city having a sense of place using examples from the Great Cities Initiative. The paper concludes by discussing future implications of globalisation on a city's sense of place and potential social outcomes. At the heart of this paper is the belief that creating a sense of place for people at the local level will result in better, more enjoyable, healthier, and more fulfilling lives. Meaningful lives require unique and particular places (Beatley, 2004).

## **Discussion**

Globalisation is difficult to define. It points to something not understood and hard to understand yet at the same time familiar, which is changing everyday life with considerable force and compelling everyone to adapt and respond in various ways (Giddens, 1990). Globalisation can refer to economy, markets, job competition,

production, goods and services, financial flows, information and lifestyles (Giddens, 1990).

For the purposes of this paper, globalisation is discussed mainly within the context of social interactions and lifestyle. Anthony Giddens (1990) describes globalisation as "the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa" (p.64). This involves a change in the way we understand geography and experience localness.

First, in order to understand the local effects of globalisation; it is necessary to recognize the macro level processes that have created territorial differentiation between continents through out the world. For example, many European and North American cities have lost their ability to compete in manufacturing. In the context of global economic restructuring there has been a global shift in manufacturing (Dicken, 1992). This shift has resulted in an urban crisis regarding social issues. Macro level processes of globalisation have implications at the local level. Due to this shift, the quality of life has reduced in cities as residents cope with a falling tax base, a poor environment and high rates of poverty and unemployment. In response, European and North American cities have reoriented themselves towards different functions, the most notable being consumption (Young, 1996). Unlike before, western cities must now compete against each other in order to attract capital. To do this, they identify unique features which make them more livable than other cities. Unfortunately, due to macro level process of globalisation, these unique precious features are increasingly becoming more difficult to see, feel and experience. Over all, globalisation makes it difficult for people to experience a strong sense of place. Maintaining a sense of place is critical for localities because place

attachment contributes to social and economical impacts which overall increase quality of life.

However, with that said, my argument recognizes that through technological advances, in certain ways globalisation has also increased the quality of life in cities. Some benefits and advantages of living in a global era are having a wide range of products and goods available from around the world. For example, I am guilty of almost daily consuming a takeaway grande Dulche DeLeche nonfat latte from Starbucks. Thanks to globalisation, my somewhat hypocritical addiction can be satisfied in any major city around the world. Additionally, this habit is difficult to overcome due to a high level of satisfaction and familiarity provided by the service. For example, regardless of location, Starbucks provides a clean and cozy but not cramped atmosphere with soothing and enjoyable background music to listen to while you wait for your coffee. Furthermore, regardless to the number of customers, you know you will not wait for an unnecessarily long time to get your coffee. Lastly, you are always satisfied with the taste of your coffee because it is always made the same. Sadly, this level of consumer satisfaction cannot be guaranteed when supporting local 'mom and pop' establishments. Increasingly, the personal and more social experience provided by a local service operator is being replaced by impersonal chains that purely provide consumers with a sales product.

Massey (1994) believes it is not only the 'changing fortunes' of an area which must be understood by locating it within a wider context, but also the character of the place itself. The decline of industry in an area must be explained rather than by looking at the characteristics of the area itself. It is not enough to understand the forces of capital accumulation, of changing markets, or of external ownership with out understanding the

formation of the identity of a place (Massey, 1994). Places have a social structure, political character and 'local' culture. Place is a product of interactions and "the global is in the local in the very process of the formation of the local" (Massey, 1994, p. 120). Massey (1994) claims that "geographical specificity, and the meanings and symbolisms which people attach to places, and how these can - and should - be struggled over, are all important issues" (p. 118). One result of globalisation is increasing uncertainty about the meaning of 'places' and how we relate to them. The term 'sense of place' has been defined and utilized in different ways by different people (Ashworth, 2005; Beatley, 2004; Massy, 1994; Project for Public Spaces; Young, 1996). For the purposes of this paper, defining a sense of place can best be described as a characteristic that some geographic places have and some do not. Most importantly, a sense of place is a feeling or perception given to a location by people not by the place itself. It is often used in relation to characteristics that make a place special or unique, as well as features that foster a sense of authentic human attachment and belonging.

Massey (1994) asks, "how, in the face of all this movement and intermixing, can we retain any sense of a local place and its particularity?" (p. 146). This question is being answered and applied in the real world by The Project for Public Spaces, a non-government non-profit organization that makes cities more livable by creating a sense of place. The Project for Public Space's vision is to act as the central hub of the global placemaking movement, connecting people to ideas, expertise, and partners who share a passion for creating vital places. Since 1975, the organisation has worked in more than 2,000 communities in 26 countries around the world, helping people turn their public spaces into vital community places, with programs, uses, and people-friendly settings that build local

value and serve community needs. One of their programs is the Great Cities Initiative.

This program proposes a place-based approach to revitalizing cities utilizing common sense planning and design in regard to human behavior. That cities and people benefit from particular and unique places is a central principle of the Great Cities Initiative.

People need places that provide healthy living environments which nourish the soul.

Having a sense of place means having distinctive places worthy of loyalty and commitment, places where people feel at home, places that inspire and uplift and stimulate people and that provide social and environmental sustenance (Beatley, 2004).

Placemaking, and specifically maintaining a sense of community in the face of social change due to globalisation, is challenging. Beatley (2004) proclaims that “the growing uniformity and anonymity of [cities] begets an attitude that [places] are disposable and interchangeable. One [city] is just like another” (p. 3).

*Places that provide the spaces, reasons and opportunities for people to come together, to share their passions, hopes and troubles, will be healthier, stronger places and places where people trust and care about each other. And the more involved and engaged we are the more likely we are to care about our communities and to be committed to working on their behalf in the future*

(Beatley, 2004, p.7).

In cities, community has historically been characterized by interaction or association, common values, security or familiarity and common territory (VanWynsberghe, 2006).

Globalisation has weakened these elements of community. In short, competition and individualism guide our obsession with personal property, which, in turn, gives rise to the form and content of our interactions. “It is our contention that these features do not describe, but rather construct community” (VanWynsberghe, 2006, p.5).

Flint, Michigan is a prime example of a city suffering- lacking a sense of place- due to the negative effects of globalisation. Attractive and lively urban spaces do not exist in Flint because for most of the past century it served as a gritty automobile manufacturing center (Burnett, 2008). As a result of the global shift, General Motors, the city's leading industry, withdrew from Flint. Subsequently, in recent decades Flint has become synonymous with post-industrial decay such as crime, unemployment and vacant buildings (Burnett, 2008). Flint, Michigan is a familiar city to me because it is three hours south of where I live. Due to Flint's poor conditions I am most familiar with its reputation for providing people a low quality of life, as well as its exceptional airport which is small, state-of-the art and sufficient. There is a saying that the best place in Flint is the airport and you'd only want to fly in and out of Flint because there isn't anything in the city worth staying to experience. So, I was shocked to find that the Project for Public Space's Great Cities Initiative was attempting to improve Flint, the state of Michigan and the entire Country's laughing stock for a city.

The Great Cities Initiative is helping Flint reinvent itself again, this time around its under-appreciated parks and public spaces. The city is well endowed with civic gathering places, although many suffer from poor design, neglect, vandalism, and not surprisingly, an absence of people (Burnett, 2008). The initiative to create a sense of place in Flint focuses on three strategic places in the city's downtown; they are a riverfront park, a downtown college campus and a long-running farmers market. The overall goal is to transform them into multi-purpose places that attract people at many times of day in all seasons. Once this occurs, Flint will have momentum for wider improvement efforts throughout the city. People have hope in this initiative for Flint, because it applies a new approach to revitalize

the city when past projects have failed. "Flint originally built itself around the car and, after General Motors left town, [the city] tried to build itself around a series of large economic development projects," said Project for Public Spaces vice president Ethan Kent. "They have tried building the city around everything but the people and places that are already there" (Burnett, 2008, par. 4).

The Project for Public Spaces got involved in June 2006 and held a series of placemaking training courses and workshops aimed at re-imagining how Flint might reinvigorate itself through its existing places (Burnett, 2008). These sessions specifically involved local foundations, neighbourhood activists, city officials, and business folks because they know Flint best. The aim was to identify places that people cared most about and then find ways to improve these places' function and connections to other places.

*"The idea was to train them in Placemaking, but more importantly to bring people together to start a conversation about what they loved about their city and what they wanted it to be like, place by place. Really helping people realize that they already have many of the assets and expertise necessary to create great places in Flint," explains Kent.'*

(Burnett, 2008, par. 5)

Could Flint one day be famous for its parks and public spaces, asks Bennett (2008)?

According to residents, the mood is certainly positive these days as opposed to in the past.

The place-making mantra has spread throughout the city. David Velez provides an example of the local passion and dedication that the Great Cities Initiative finds critical to utilize and empower in order for placemaking to occur. David says, "I just felt like this is my city, this is home. I'm proud of it. Why should I be ashamed to represent Flint or wear the tattoo so everyone can see where I'm from?" (Jessmore, 2006, par. 1) Velez has, Flint, the name of his hometown tattooed on his neck. His dream of opening a Latino

supermarket and restaurant in Flint has become a reality. "All my life growing up here there wasn't really anything here for the Latino community," Velez said' (Jessmore, 2006, par. 1). He is living representation of the Great Cities Initiative and wants people to feel welcome in Flint and to provide them with a little bit of sense of their home when they visit (Jessmore, 2006). Hence, Velez named his store La Tienda Familia De Latinos, meaning The Family Store for Latinos.



Image 1 (Jessmore, 2006). Velez in front of his store displays his strong sense of place by tattooing Flint on his neck "so everyone can see".

## Conclusion

Massey (1994) asks, "what if anything makes cities today different? Clearly, cities remain full of social tensions. But perhaps one key difference... is that many contemporary tensions are the product of a *greater* intensity of mixture resulting from the increasing exposure of cities to new global influences" (p.8). In today's global culture it may be difficult to affect or influence the broader economic and social forces of

globalisation, but commitments to and participation at the local level of place offers the possibility of real change. The Project for Public Spaces' Great Cities Initiative and the Velez's of Flint, Michigan are two examples that are making important differences in the feel and quality of life in cities through sense of place.

A social agenda for maintaining strong and vital places has a tremendous potential to build greater resilience into our communities and individual lives in many ways, from place-based systems that strengthen the economy, protect the local (and therefore global) environment, and contribute to uniqueness of place through forms of infrastructure that provide essential services while celebrating and protecting important place qualities and characteristics (Beatley, 2004). Genuine places that provide people with a sense of place have the potential to be profoundly more interesting and stimulating. Yet, "strengthening the local realm doesn't, however, mean disconnecting from the rest of the world and [sense of place] politics must acknowledge global duties" (Beatley, 2004, p.337). In many important ways the trend of globalisation creating homogenized places and the growing disconnect between people and their local and regional environments, has significant costs. Beatley (2004) notes that, "our mental health, our happiness, and our ability not just to survive but to lead richly rewarding lives require these elements of real places" (p.337). In other words, "All these issues [that this paper is] talking about are from the soul. Economics, urban planning, ecology are only the means. Happiness is the goal" (Walljasper, 2004, p.5). Cities that provide people with a sense of place help make people happy. Therefore, in today's global culture when a concerted effort is made and a distinctive sense of place is maintained by people towards a locality, it can be possible to have your (Starbucks) latte and drink it, too.

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