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Sense of Place: A framework for land use planning

By **Richard C. Stedman** and **David L. Kay** (Cornell University)

What is Sense of Place?

Land use change affects people's sense of place. Sense of place is a framework that can provide insights useful to planners, researchers and a public concerned about the social and psychological effects of land use change and sustaining healthy places.

At its simplest, sense of place asks—and answers—questions about, “What kind of place is this?” and “What kind of place do I want it to be?” At its most basic it includes the individual and/or collective descriptive meanings ascribed to places (“What kind of place is this?”); and the evaluations (good/bad, important/unimportant) that rest on these meanings. For both residents and visitors, these meanings and evaluations are constructed in part through direct experience with the place in question. They are the foundation on which “attachment” to place is built.

Both the natural and built features of the place and the experiences one has there shape these meanings and evaluations, prompting behaviors that include political attempts to protect desired qualities of place and even abandonment of the place if important meanings are no longer supported. In practical terms, sense of place factors are part of what a homebuyer or renter considers when weighing the kind of neighborhood and community they want to move to or remain in. Sense of place also affects the shared ideals communities define through community planning processes like visioning and comprehensive land use planning.

Nowhere is the framework more useful than in high amenity rural landscapes in transition; for example, second home and retirement migration destinations characterized by new people and uses of land. These changes often bring important new opportunities and resources to rural areas, but can also pose challenges such as: value clashes; changing service demands; increased land values and taxes/tax base; and many other potential tensions. In policy and planning terms, sense

of place questions represent very real political struggles over the future of these landscapes: what activities are promoted and discouraged, and whose interests are served.

Implications for planning & land use management

Planning and land use management techniques engage a set of practical and flexible tools that can be used to create, preserve, and advance communities that foster a sense of place among both residents and visitors. Comprehensive planning, which is designed to “set the stage” for the rest of the community planning process, addresses at least three questions that are rooted in sense of place: (1) What kind of place is this?; (2) What kind of place do I/we want it to be?; and (3) Which tools and processes are most appropriate to manage/inhibit change in this community?



The essential premise is that land use planning should seek to enhance attachment to place while facing the multiplicity of forces that drive change everywhere, especially where rural, suburban, and urban places and people come together. Comprehensive planning prompts people to reflect on and articulate their sense of place. However, attachment has

multiple public expressions in a planning process. For some, attachment is primarily to things as they are, for others to the vitality of the past, and for still others to unrealized potential. Comprehensive planning represents a way of trying to steer towards a publicly acceptable balance between preservation of tradition and adaptation to changing realities.

Communities that commit to comprehensive planning search for agreement on a sense of place. An effective comprehensive plan will embody a shared vision and use it to create a framework for policy and decision making. The best plans emerge out of a multi-tiered series of interactions between a wide variety of citizens, politicians and experts. The vote on

plan adoption is preceded by a mix of transparent, public dialogues involving idea generation, visioning, presentation, reaction, debate, recalibration, and consensus building. Depending upon how it was developed, a comprehensive plan has the ability to both reflect and shape sense of place.

The comprehensive planning process aggregates, in effect, each participating individual's sense of place into a collective statement about a subtly different version of the questions "What kind of place is this" and "What kind of place do we want it to be". Dan Kemmis, the former mayor of Missoula Montana, draws attention to the public politics inherent in these questions. In "Community and the Politics of Place" he wrote, "But what 'we' do depends upon who 'we' are – or who we think we are. It depends in other words upon how we choose to relate to each other, to the place we inhabit, and to the issues which that inhabiting raises for us. All of those 'we' questions are about our way of being public." Kemmis is drawing on his experiences with the politics of place, with the familiar clashes in high amenity rural places in transition: seasonal v. year round resident, newcomer v. oldtimer, hunter v. animal rights advocate, blue v. red, etc. He is interested not only in the raw political question of whose "sense of place" finds voice and carries through to policy, but also who is seen as deserving to take part in the conversation.

Sense of place research in the field

An example of sense of place insights can be taken from a study conducted by the lead author in a northern Wisconsin landscape similar in many respects to the NYS Adirondack region. Both regions have a relatively pristine rural landscape within a few hours drive of millions of people; a strong regional identity; struggling rural communities with legacies of traditional resource dependence; a strong and increasing presence of second home development; and great economic and social disparities between year round residents and visitors/second home owners.

The research focused on Vilas County, Wisconsin, an area rich in lakes (1300 in the county), second homes (67% of all housing units in 2000, 10th highest in the United States), and one that has experienced rapid population growth. The study employed a mail survey focusing on the place meanings and attachment of 1000 property owners, revealing differences between second home owners and year round residents in key meanings: second home owners emphasized "escape" meanings and regional symbolic importance: e.g., "up north". Year-round residents were more likely to emphasize meanings centering on "home" and "community". Compared with year round residents, Vilas County second home owners had owned their property for the same length of time, were just as likely to have social relationships with others in the local area, were more strongly attached, and were more likely to engage in place-protective behavior such as becoming involved in quasi-political bodies such as lake associations. We interpret

these findings as evidence that Vilas County has already transitioned into being a "second home place".

Lessons for planning in NYS's high amenity places

What lessons might we draw from the Vilas County work for NYS's high amenity places and in particular the Adirondacks? How might a sense of place framework apply to the practice of land use planning in the Adirondacks? Based on the increasing presence of second homes and associated issues, the Adirondacks and northern Wisconsin appear to face some fundamentally similar issues. However, some fairly stark contrasts exist in the landscape and in the policy landscape, which seem particularly relevant for both sense of place and the practice of planning and land use controls. Most notably, dominant place meanings are explicitly present in New York's state/regional policy mechanisms (e.g., the "Forever Wild" constitutional authority over the Forest Preserve, the Adirondack Park Land Use and Development Plan) that institutionalize "what kind of place" the Adirondacks are supposed to be (an inhabited wilderness!). These meanings are layered on top of those that have emerged, as in Vilas County, in a more localized, piecemeal fashion. Further, state agencies in NY such as the Department of State and the Adirondack Park Agency, along with multiple nonstate organizations like those involved in the recently formed Common Ground Alliance, are actively involved in planning and place-making processes among diverse sets of actors. In the Adirondacks attachment has thus been concretized through a statewide planning and political process into uniquely regionalized and historically rooted institutions controlling land use. It is quite unusual that an executive branch of state government (the Adirondack Park Agency) would in effect be given regional zoning authority, especially in the context of New York as a home rule state which usually assigns great authority to local governments. In sum, a sense of place framework applied to the Adirondacks would be expected to reflect the differences as much as the similarities with Vilas County.

Conclusions

The sense of place framework represents a useful research tool for understanding what is important about transitional rural landscapes, why, and to whom, in particular as it clarifies whose place attachment is threatened by what kinds of changes. Sense of place research pertains to and can be used to improve comprehensive planning processes as well by making more explicit the "attachments" of community members involved in the process and helping them to understand how they relate to each other as a community of place. Past research in a high amenity second home landscape increased understanding of social and environmental change in northern Wisconsin. Though some of the particulars will differ, this approach can do the same for high amenity regions of NYS like the Adirondacks.

