People & Place: Communicating Values in Community Development

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I. THE CONTEMPORARY CONDITION

Planning and architecture are rooted in society. The built environment affects our everyday actions and our understanding of cultural values, social relations, institutions, and the distribution of power (Dutton and Mann 1996). The stories we tell about our everyday lives incorporate these concepts, yet few people in our culture are aware of the continual impact of architecture and planning. Fewer still could articulate general principles that govern decisions regarding the design of our built environment. This lack of design literacy, coupled with the inability of architects and planners to "hear" information in peoples' stories and to link effectively to community values in their work, is at the core of many urban dysfunctions we observe.

The public's design illiteracy is comprehensible. The average American understands architecture and planning as having little role in his/her life and as being financially out of reach and intellectually irrelevant. The value systems steeped in the history of the architectural profession have tended to serve the elite (Sutton 2001). Despite the altruism behind the public health strains in its pedigree, planning, too, suffers from a similar patriarchal past. The continued use of theories and language that reinforce the role of both professions as privileged "clubs" make them even less accessible and understandable to the general public (Wheaton and Wheaton 1972).

The failure of architects and planners to learn from the stories that are part of people's everyday lives also is comprehensible. For the most part, professional schools are the training grounds for planners and architects, and story-telling and -listening are rarely part of the theory- and practice-based academic curriculum. Paraphrasing Neustadt and May (1986), Forester (1999) asserts "planning and policy analysts [or 'planners and architects'] should not ask 'what's the problem?' but 'what's the story?' and thereby find out the problem" (Forester 1999, 19).

The failure of the planning and architecture professions to understand and incorporate community values has led to the creation of built environments that neglect to serve those values. Extreme examples of this disconnection, such as the Pruitt-Igoe public housing fiasco, have given rise to a series of minimum standards for public participation in governmental decision-making (Bossleman 1972) that have now become commonplace. However, apart from a few noteworthy exceptions (Lockwood 1973), the increase in participation has not led to an appreciable improvement in connecting planning and architecture to community values. Common failings include (1) the use of technocratic and adversarial approaches to persuade the public about the legitimacy of a proposed governmental action; (2) the engagement of the public after a decision has already been made; and (3) the failure to effectively incorporate public comment into decision-making processes in ways that might impact outcomes (Depoe and Delicath 2004).

Over time, the lack of connection to community values has eroded the public's general confidence in governmental decision-making, leading to a sense of skepticism, futility, and apathy (Eckstein 2003). Because of the professions' central role in these decision-making processes, the public's antipathy easily translates into an aversion toward the professions as a whole. With this level of public disenfranchisement, it is not surprising that few see planning and architecture as relevant.

These disconnections are sobering for academicians charged, as we are, with introducing the principles of architecture and planning to students. Because architects and planners utilize knowledge from a broad range of disciplines, we believe they are well positioned to provide leadership for the creation of a sustainable built environment for everyone. Building on a foundation of work done by Fischer, Forester, Sandercock, Shellenberger and Nordhaus, Throgmorton, and others, we believe that identifying, understanding, acting upon, and communicating the values embedded in the stories we and others tell is the key to re-creating relevancy of the professions to the public.

II. A MATTER OF VALUES: WHAT VALUES MATTER?

What are the values to which planning and architecture aspire, both in professional and academic spheres? Although planning's diversity has made the clear definition of a set of values problematic, general themes that have been articulated include: (1) making the conditions for human settlements better meet inhabitants' needs; (2) identifying and engaging linkages between large- and small-scale physical, economic, environmental, and social systems; (3) anticipating future challenges and opportunities; (4) concern for public well-being and the equitable distribution of resources; (5) a desire for effective public participation; and (6) the interactive transmission of information between academy, profession, and community (Strategic Marketing Committee 1997). The standard curriculum in most university planning programs is not at odds with these themes. Using the University of Utah as an example, we see concentration on understanding the history and operation of urban systems, the environmental and societal impacts of policy, the provision of basic human and community services, and the information and decision processes necessary to achieve results that optimally respond to anticipated future conditions (CAP 2008b).

Along the same line, the American Institute of Architects' list of value-based themes important to the profession include: (1) sustainable, healthy, livable communities; (2) incentives for affordable housing, green buildings, historic preservation, and brownfield renewal; (3) energy and water conservation; and (4) better, safer schools and civic spaces (AIA n.d.). Again using the University of Utah's curriculum as an example, we can infer that most university architecture curricula incorporate these themes, offering courses that deal with architecture's connections to environmental/resource conservation and sustainability; cultural, environmental, and urban issues; the social and cultural constructs of the built environment; and design and the communication of design ideas (CAP 2008a).

What are the values that are important to the broader community, and do they connect with the values of the planning and architecture professions and the academy? Although the answers to these questions will vary widely depending on environmental, social, and political conditions, researchers preparing for a regional planning process in the Salt Lake City region determined that the values most important to Utahns were self-esteem, family love, peace of mind, personal security, freedom, personal enjoyment, self-satisfaction, and accomplishment (Wirthland Worldwide 1997). Citizens of central Florida expressed essentially the same values as part of a similar regional planning effort (Harris Interactive 2005). Though these values were connected to a series of community attributes, they indicate a significant disconnect in the way citizens talk about values in the community and the ways in which professionals talk about values in architecture and planning.

III. OBJECTIVES AND METHODS OF PEOPLE & PLACE

We created a course, titled People & Place, to begin the process of understanding the professional and academic values of architecture and planning, the values important to broader communities, and possible methods of connecting these two "value fields." Targeted at introductory level students, the year-long course facilitates exploration of these issues early in professional education with the hope

that the lessons learned can frame subsequent explorations in theory and method.

The course revolves around a series of community development projects that the students work collaboratively in small groups to complete over a 16-week period. Each group is mentored by a local professional architect, planner, or designer, and each has a community organization as a client. In 2006-07 and 2007-08, the students focused on a series of issues on the redeveloping west side of Salt Lake City's downtown, including affordable housing, civic space, economic development, historic preservation, neighbor-hood planning, small business development, social services, "greenfrastructure" (open space), and transportation. Although each group is tasked with finding a specific solution to a problem discovered within their particular study topic, the overall objective linking the projects is the students' understanding and utilization of various means of communication to elicit and express societal values.

Through the use of narrative and laddering interview techniques, as well as recording observations and ideas by sketching and writing, the students explore how personal values can be translated and incorporated into planning and architectural designs, and how to communicate the values inherent in those designs back to a broad range of community audiences. Experience from the first two years of using these techniques suggests that the approaches may be effective in closing some of the divides between the professions and the communities they are intended to serve.

IV. YEAR ONE RESULTS: FOCUS GROUPS & SURVEYS

In the first year of People & Place, students participated in focus groups and completed pre- and post-project surveys. We surveyed the students' mentors and clients as well. The responses to the surveys and focus group discussions indicated that having core values reflected in the structures and civic spaces of our communities is important, but that the current built environment only moderately succeeds in this objective. Moreover, gaps exist between the values articulated by the architecture and planning professions (e.g., "engaging linkages between physical, economic, environmental, and social systems," listed above), by members of

the broader community (e.g., "self-esteem," "family love"), and by the People & Place clients (e.g., "sense of history," "feeling of community"). Interestingly, the People & Place students used neither the quasi-scientific terms of the professions nor the emotion-based values of citizens, focusing instead on physical attributes (e.g., "cracks in sidewalks," "poor signage").

While these three language positions—professional, community, student-seem disconnected, they are not necessarily incongruent. It is plausible to have a planning initiative constructed to "engage system linkages," focusing on "sidewalks and signage," and resulting in an increased "sense of community." The gaps, it seems, are not necessarily sourced in conflicting values but in communication and language. Only after the profession, academy, and community begin utilizing rhetoric that is understood and validated across boundaries, can those boundaries be bridged and issues of value congruity be intelligibly engaged. In the second year of People & Place, we sought to take this step by incorporating storytelling as both a strategy for communication and a method of analysis.

V. YEAR TWO RESULTS: TELLING STORIES

A. Narrative

Most public decisions are motivated or informed by a storyline (Stone 2002). Because of their influence in defining the physical form of communities, the processes and products of planning and design are particularly underlain and influenced by stories. Narratives provide structure for understanding how the world operates. In the case of planning and architecture, the narratives are enacted and future-oriented. Their validity is determined by their coherence—whether the story deals with the issues presented—and their fidelity—whether the story conforms to the audience's sense of truthfulness and reliability (Throgmorton 1996). The persuasiveness of a story, however, is framed, in part, by the degree to which the story resonates with the audience's values (Sandercock 2003).

Unfortunately, professionals have largely failed to incorporate into their stories values that reflect the broader community, and this is at the heart of the professions' disconnection to society. Professional storytelling is usually like academic storytelling:

dry and emotionless (Finnegan 1998). "Emotion has been rigorously purged, as if there were no such things as joy, tranquility, anger, resentment, fear, hope, memory and forgetting at stake in these analyses" (Sandercock 2003, 197). This lack of emotion bolsters the myth of professional objectivity and technical expertise, both of which increase the divide with the community.

To close that gap and make the professions more relevant, planners and architects need to become better storytellers and better story-listeners. In addition to coherence and reliability, professionals need to tell stories that have: (1) an esthetically satisfying arch of conflict, crisis, and resolution; (2) interesting and believable characters; (3) a carefully delineated context; (4) an appropriate and easily identifiable point of view; and (5) imagery and a rhythm of language expressing a preferred attitude toward the situation and the characters (Mandelbaum 2003; Throgmorton 1996).

Making intelligent choices about these elements requires knowledge of values important to community based audiences. This is why story-listening is just as important as storytelling. Architects and planners must learn to elicit, listen to, and properly evaluate individuals' and communities' stories, as these stories "reflect their tellers' ongoing search for value, for what matters, for what is relevant, significant" (Forester 1999, 57). One method that seems particularly well-suited to identifying the values nested within stories is laddering.

B. Laddering

Laddering is an interview method based on meansend theory, an approach first developed and applied in marketing and advertising contexts. Rooted in personal construct theory (Miles and Rowe 2004), the means-end approach is founded on an understanding that consumers do not make purchase decisions based just on the observable attributes of a product but on the higher-order values consumers associate with that product (Olsen and Reynolds 2001). This is true, in part, because consumers are not selecting a product, per se, when they make a purchase decision but are choosing a set of behaviors associated with the use of the product (Peter and Olsen 1999). Therefore, what consumers are really purchasing is a set of consequences that the attributes of the product help to effect. The attributes, which in isolation are irrelevant, become meaningful when they are associated with consequences through behaviors pursued by the consumer to achieve some goal or desired outcome. These goals or outcomes are themselves frequently associated with higher-order values (Olsen and Reynolds 2001). The meansend approach is, hence, structured on a tri-level framework of attributes, consequences, and values, with each level delineating an increasing degree of cognitive abstraction (Gutman and Reynolds 1979). The approach seeks to understand the associations between the three levels, allowing the researcher to connect attributes to consequences to values. Ultimately, means-end provides insight into the deeper motivations behind choices consumers make (Wansink 2003).

Laddering is an interview method designed to tease out these higher-order values (Neimeyer, Anderson, and Stockton 2001). Through a process of recursive questioning, interviewers probe why it is that a respondent feels the way she does about a particular characteristic. The process begins with one of several methods designed to draw out some distinction or preference between alternative choices within the context of the research topic (Reynolds and Norvell 2001). Once identified, the respondent is asked to articulate why she sees the distinction the way she does. Using her answer as the basis for the next question, the interviewer repeats the same line of questioning until, ideally, the respondent identifies superordinate constructs that reflect basic existential themes relating to, for example, meaning, morality, and identity (Russell, Busson, Flight, Bryan, Pabst, and Cox 2003). In this way, the interviewer leads the respondent from an opinion about an everyday attribute, through a series of functional and psychosocial consequences derived from that attribute, to a basic value.

The respondent has thus articulated an attributes-consequences-values chain. When researchers have collected a sufficient number of these chains from a group of consumers, the data is processed in a multi-step method that facilitates comparisons across respondents. This ultimately results in the construction of a hierarchical values map that shows overlapping and recurring connections between attributes, consequences, and values (Miles and Rowe 2004). As the number of common connections between elements increases, researchers are able to

assess the associative strength between attributes, consequences, and values within the demographic group represented by the sample of respondents (Reynolds and Gutman 1988).

Although laddering and means-end approach originated in marketing, there have been several reported applications of the technique in planning and architectural contexts. In both Salt Lake City and central Florida, laddering was used in advance of major regional planning initiatives to help direct the content of those efforts and to increase the likelihood of public acceptance of the projects' results. In the Salt Lake example, researchers interviewed 83 individuals in 1997 to elicit opinions about community attributes and tie those attributes to physical and emotional consequences and, ultimately, to basic values (Wirthlin Worldwide 1997). Following the typical laddering questioning

sequence, the first questions asked respondents their opinions on attributes related to community economic and social health and the challenges and opportunities related to growth and the future. Respondents then were asked to specify functional and emotional consequences connected to those attributes. Finally, they were asked to articulate the basic values associated with those consequences.

The key values respondents indicated—self-esteem, family love, peace of mind, personal security, freedom, personal enjoyment, self-satisfaction, and accomplishment—were connected to community attributes that included cost of living, crime, population growth, education, outdoor recreation and beauty, climate, air quality, and traffic (figure 1). A follow-up study done ten years later showed the same basic attributes-consequences-values associations, but a growing concern about the

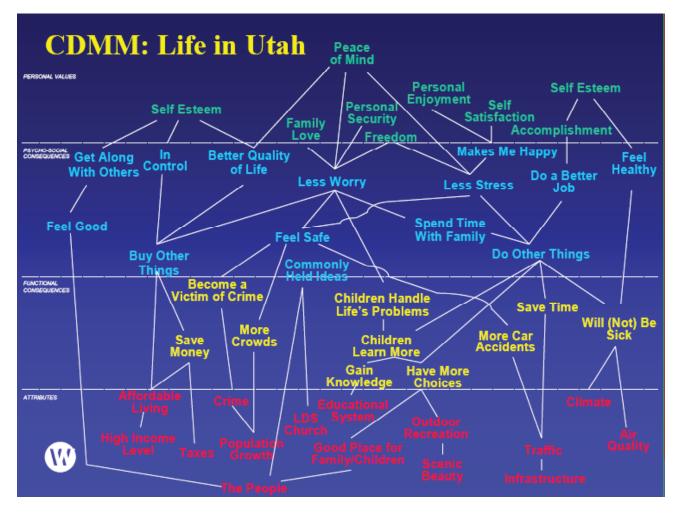


Figure 1. Hierarchical values map from Salt Lake City, Utah. Source: Wirthlin Worldwide 1997.

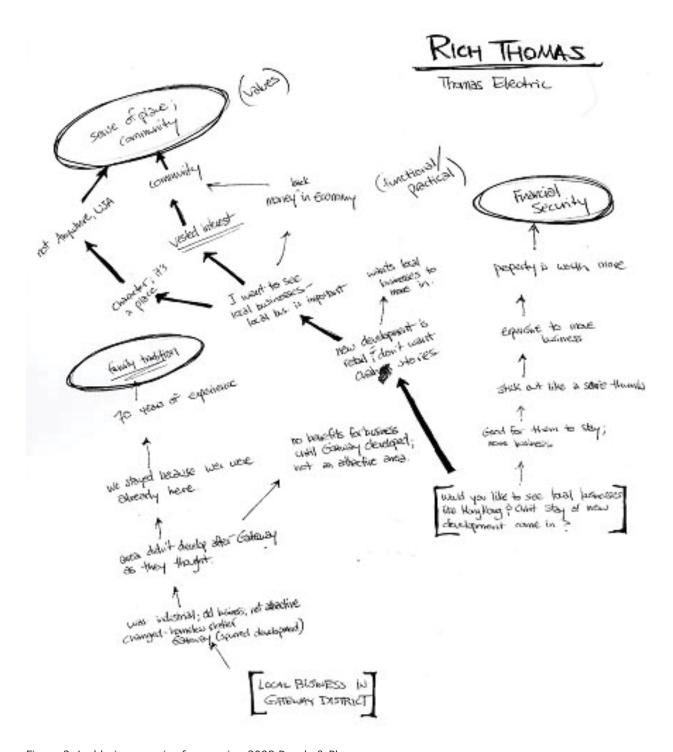


Figure 2. Laddering exercise from spring 2008 People & Place course.

possible impacts of growth on quality of life (Harris Interactive 2007). This study essentially mirrors the central Florida example, where similar basic values and growth concerns were identified (Harris Interactive 2005). In both examples, planners used

the output of the laddering analysis to build regional planning processes that have had reasonable success in connecting planning outcomes to community based values.

Given these successes, we endeavored to use laddering processes in the People & Place course to help the students better identify and incorporate community based values into their community development projects. After introducing means-end theory and laddering method to the students, we sent them out to conduct three laddering interviews. They started by interviewing a friend or family member. This gave them a practice run with the technique so that they could become more at ease with the process and understand the types of questions that elicit effective responses. For their second exercise, students interviewed their project group mentors. This provided the chance for deeper exploration into substantive themes, while still in a comfortable setting. For their final exercise, students interviewed an individual associated with the organizational client for that student's community development project. After completing the laddering interviews, the students were asked to combine the results of the client interviews from all members of their group and create a rudimentary hierarchical values map. Given that these maps would be drawn from just a handful of interviews, there was no expectation that they would be representative of broader community values or even necessarily the values of the client organization. Nevertheless, it was hoped that the exercise would heighten the students' awareness of how values connect to some of the community attributes being addressed in their projects.

The results of the laddering and values mapping exercises show financial security/ economic stability, family tradition, physical comfort, a sense of place/community identity, a peaceful society, and environmental justice are values important to their clients (figure 2). Students were asked to reflect on the laddering interviews in a journal essay, and most remarked that they found the interview process uncomfortable but rewarding. One student noted, "By hearing other people's values, I examine my own and can then better communicate the strengths of [my group's project]."

Some student groups clearly addressed the values from the laddering exercises in the final outcomes of their community development projects. The greenfrastructure group, for example, developed a program to build a community garden at a homeless shelter in the project area. The garden will provide opportunities for residents of the shelter

to grow some of their own food, thereby increasing their sense of ownership and self-reliance. The connections between the project and these higher-order values were suggested, in part, by the group's laddering interviews, which demonstrated associations between growing one's own food (an attribute), a greater sense of community (a psychosocial consequence), and environmental justice and a more peaceful society (values) (figure 3). In the public exhibition of their project, the students included recorded conversations with residents and staff of the shelter discussing these and other ways in which they would value a garden.

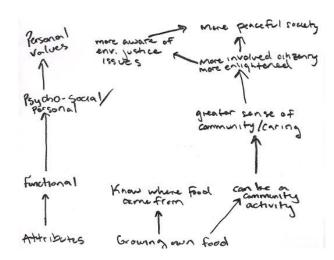


Figure 3. Values map exercise from spring 2008 People & Place course.

Laddering's role in the other projects was less obvious. There are several possible reasons for this: (1) because some students felt the laddering interviews were invasive and uncomfortable, they did not complete the interviews in time to fully incorporate the information into their projects; (2) they found it difficult to transform the abstract concepts represented by the values information from the interviews into concrete physical responses to the community development problems they were working to resolve; and (3) they were unable or did not recognize the need to find a method to communicate their value-laden responses to the community development problems back to society in a way which would be easily understood.

From this first trial of laddering in the People & Place course, we understand that it is necessary to develop one or more communications-based meth-

ods that will help the students make the leap from the conceptual to the real. One method of communicating values to society that we will employ in the 2008-9 year of the People & Place course is reverse-laddering. In this process, the values inherent in the students' architecture and planning-based projects are connected back to consequences and attributes through a series of interview questions with the objective of translating the values into attributes that are easily communicated to and recognized by laypeople.

Although our experience with laddering as a teaching tool was not a complete success, the achievements made with the greenfrastructure group are heartening, and we now have insight on how to improve our approach in coming years. Beyond the course, the experience also demonstrates for us the potential strength of using means-end and laddering approaches in broader professional contexts to help align the languages of community and profession. Employing techniques such as laddering, professionals can begin the process of identifying important community values and the links those values have to attributes more commonly associated with planning and architecture processes. This then can provide the basis for assessing value congruity between profession and community and a framework for crafting planning and design processes in ways that are responsive to core values of people living in the community. It can also create a foundation for storytelling as effective two-way communication for professional architects and planners and the communities they serve.

VI. CONCLUSION

The results of our research suggest that at least part of the reconnection of architecture/planning with the community can come about through two primary means. First, professionals and academicians need to learn more about what values are important to the members of the communities they serve. Narrative analysis and laddering are examples of two methods to elicit this information. Second, similar techniques need to be used in reverse to frame and translate the content of architectural and planning projects into attributes, consequences, and values that are comprehensible and easily conveyed to laypeople. Logically, this would increase the potential for effective communication by reducing the use of

elitist jargon, thereby increasing the potential for effective education regarding the function of design in the making of spaces and communities, while giving voice to those stakeholders who, for reasons of language and politics, traditionally have felt left out of the process.

This is our first exploration using narrative and laddering to understand values in the professions, the academy, and society. There are many limitations inherent in our work, most notably, the low number of observations. Although data derived through phenomenological approaches are always limited in the degree to which they can be analogized to other contexts (Yin, 1994), this is especially true when the number of occurrences is so low. We expect, however, over the years that the data will become richer, more varied, and more meaningful. Overall, we have found this experience proves the existence of the divide between the professions and society but also suggests that this latest generation of students is aware of the issues and interested and eager to make positive change.

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