Leveraging Cultural Heritage for Community Identity and Economic Development

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Introduction
Heritage-based planning and design is an approach to community development that establishes a unique and authentic community identity and contributes to a sustainable economic base. Heritage-based planning & design builds on an understanding that history and culture are cherished resources - a lens through which we view the world. It requires working with communities to plan and manage special places and resources to ensure sustainable development and design. The interpretation of these resources should inform the design of old and new places, buildings, and other infrastructure. When incorporated into the development and design process, heritage-based planning results in distinct places that attract people because of the unique and authentic experiences these places provide.

Mission and Context
Context is critical to understanding any place, organization, or project. The context in which any project is developed should never be in isolation from the surrounding community. The results of any planning effort should be a clear vision and mission which complements the mission and vision of the surrounding community, site, or organization. A clear vision and mission are critical components that drive the entire heritage-based planning process and should aim to:

- Nurture authenticity: Nurture respect and appreciation for multiple agendas among all participants in the planning process with authenticity at the heart of decision making.
- Promote identity: Promote cultural and community identity through a broad and deep understanding of place in time and space; based on interdisciplinary perspectives.
- Develop partnerships: Cultural and economic development comes through effective community partnerships – we can achieve more together than separately.
Create a community strategy: Businesses and infrastructure should be developed with
sensitivity to the resources, to ensure authenticity of a place are preserved.
Implement the vision: Careful design and treatment of historic buildings and places, new
public art, and wayside interpretation all contribute to meaningful implementation of a
community vision.

It is important that these elements are formulated within the context of the specific project,
place, or community in order to respond to the current and evolving needs, development
pressures, and ensure the long-term health of a place.

Nurture Authenticity
Long-term health of a place depends on its potential to thrive, true to its spirit and character.
Authenticity is the root of such potential. A fundamental goal of the heritage planning process
is to retain authenticity as an essential element of cultural identity as expressed in the physical
material, collected memory, and intangible traditions that continue through to the present.
These elements communicate a sense of place and an aesthetic. Historic and cultural resources
are irreplaceable and, if they are not authentically maintained, the loss is not only structural,
but also significant to cultural identity.

There are six key components to safeguarding authenticity while providing market
opportunities within community and economic development:

- Establish a neutral authority to serve as a review agency, to ensure that all cultural
  resources are protected or treated in an appropriate manner.
- Promote and incorporate zoning regulations that align with the goals and values of the
  heritage-based development plan.
- Establish a Main Street program to oversee the integrity and design of the community
devlopment within the context of the heritage-based plan.
- Establish a storefront community visioning center to serve as a meeting place, education
  center, and clearinghouse for community redevelopment and business needs.
- Establish a small business network to educate, coordinate, and subsidize the marketing
  messages of local community and tourism-specific businesses.
Review all new tourism-related businesses within the context of the missions, principles, and goals.

**Promote Identity through Interdisciplinary Planning**

The understanding and preservation of an identity that relies on a diversity of resources requires a planning process that includes a variety of materials and talented people. Community elders and qualified practitioners know or study the past, engage in cultural practices, and hold traditional knowledge, all of which contribute to the identity of a place.

Interdisciplinary planning can be achieved through interdisciplinary teams with appropriate skill sets to assist with planning, development, and implementation. They cannot work in isolation from each other, as is often the case with multi-disciplinary teams, but must be entwined in their research questions and decision-making processes to be truly interdisciplinary. Teams may include architectural historians, preservation planners, historic architects, historians, interpretive planners, archaeologists, natural resource specialists, planners, landscape architects, and community curators.

**Develop Partnerships**

The importance of fostering meaningful partnerships among the many local, regional, and national stakeholders, including other regional agencies and organizations, cannot be overemphasized. Partners need a shared vision and strategy to preserve, manage, and interpret the site. Interpretation can and should be developed by many organizations and agencies, depending on compatible missions and availability of resources. The key will be that anyone who develops and implements an interpretive plan, program, or exhibit project within the project area does so within the framework of other planning initiatives.

An example of how developing interdisciplinary teams are crucial to a project is the Great River Park, the 17-mile Mississippi River riverfront park in St. Paul, Minnesota. The St. Paul riverfront is a remarkable regional and national natural, scenic, and cultural resource. Through sound management and protection, an enhanced park corridor will expand opportunities for St. Paul residents to enjoy open space, participate in recreational activities, and learn about the role the river has played in the development of Minnesota’s capital city. In addition to providing greater
access to the waterfront, the Great River Park master plan identified where new sustainable development and re-development areas for businesses and residential housing can be integrated into the existing urban fabric.

The vision for Great River Park is based on three principles—to be more natural, more urban, and more connected. The master plan sets the stage for sustainable parks and open space, ecological restoration and economic development, and connecting the city, its neighborhoods and people, to St. Paul’s unique Mississippi River resources. An interpretive and exhibit concept plan is currently in development and will provide a holistic approach to realizing the master plan’s vision along the Great River Park corridor.

An interpretive planning process designs meaningful experiences that support a community’s vision and mission. The planning process considers the place-specific historical, cultural, and natural resources to be interpreted and the demographics of the people who use the site in order to develop relevant messages and media that support an organization’s mission. There are many organizations and agencies with interest in, and jurisdiction over, the Great River Park.

The overarching theme or message that reflects St. Paul’s relationship to the river is: The Mississippi has influenced the development and sustained cultures of St. Paul throughout time. Building on this theme, subthemes that connect people to places were developed. One such example is: Food - The Mississippi has nourished people throughout history. There are many places with associated partners to tell the story, such as:

- St. Paul Farmers’ Market in Lowertown
- Restored Native American wild rice beds near historic Kaposia Dakota village
- St. Paul Municipal Grain Terminal
- Crosby Farm
- Sources of drinking water
- Various fishing piers
- Local areas where plants are harvested for food and medicine
Therefore, the focus of the interpretive work will be to develop a process for building strong partnerships through inter-connected themes and stories among individuals, groups, agencies, and organizations with shared interests. These entities will then collaborate to implement interpretive strategies and distribute the costs of implementation.

**Create a Community Strategy**

Heritage-based interpretation can take many forms, but how does it overlap with economic development? The 106 Group worked closely with the Cherokee Nation to develop a cultural tourism program for their 14-county jurisdictional area. Oklahoma was the terminal point of the Trail of Tears and the setting for reestablishing the nation both physically and in spirit. The strategic plan for cultural tourism developed a program based on Cherokee culture and history; emphasizing the synergistic balance of economic development, community outreach, interpretation, resource management, site planning, and marketing.

To ensure that the necessary services would be developed to support the needs of the visitor, it is important to understand how tourism businesses and infrastructure are developed, how they impact cultural resources, and how they are conceived and integrated into the local economy. If associated businesses are not developed and marketed with sensitivity to the resource, the authenticity of a place could be minimized and weaken the cultural pride and identity that should be one of the key goals of any cultural tourism program.

The first, and most common, method of market development is an organic, or bottom up, approach. In this approach, the primary funding and focus is on developing individual historic resources, but the participation of the surrounding community is loosely promoted through a series of community meetings where people are informed of the plan, encouraged to embrace the spirit of the resources, and to integrate the interpretive themes and messages into their various services. However, there is no formal structure to control the entrepreneurial growth that then occurs. Those who defined the original message of authenticity can only hope for the best as local entrepreneurs, national chains, and other attractions take advantage of a developing market. Imagine the haunting landscape of the disbandment camp at the end of the Trail of Tears (Illinois Campground), only now with an enormous billboard just outside the limits of the property, advertising the world’s largest water park.
The second method of development is a top down approach as exemplified with Disney and other types of large purpose-built attractions. In this model, virtually all services and facilities are designed and controlled first from the drawing board and then from the boardroom. This method ensures a cohesive message, experience, and appropriate facilities, but usually lacks reality and, therefore, authenticity. More importantly, in order to have the control needed to maintain a consistent message and development, one needs to retain ownership, and ownership ultimately retains profits. The programs that have the most cohesive message and integrated facilities most often seem to lack authenticity and view the local population as a workforce to manage rather than a community of partners.

This is the challenge. In order to maintain authenticity, there needs to be some level of strategic planning and control on development to ensure continuity and sensitivity in all of the individual messages and imagery of each service. However, in order to have true economic development that stays within the community, the services and infrastructure need to be owned and operated by local businesses.

To address this challenge, the 106 Group advocates for a collaborative approach to development in which the goal of the planning process is to define an implementation strategy that maintains the overarching vision, control, and cohesion of the purpose-built developments within a community-based, free-market economic framework. This approach incorporates a process of shared vision, market analysis, and collaboration.

A successful planning process begins by striving to link the vision for planning, marketing and development to a regional level. No one lives in isolation of his or her neighbors. There are several advantages to developing within a larger regional context including a broader story line, regional collaboration and vision, and shared infrastructure and costs.

One of the first steps in implementation of a heritage-based plan is to develop a decision-making organization that is embedded within the community to develop and promote the community’s heritage-based vision. It is organized as a non-profit that is aligned with local government but is funded outside of city budgets. Its role is to provide a bridge between government and those advocating a heritage-based vision. The organization is best located in a storefront in the heart of the heritage district or downtown. The storefront center would
provide a public face, an open door, and include a small staff and volunteers to provide services to the community.

- The center would promote the vision, interact with local businesses and concerned citizens, and direct potential new business to various community and economic resources.
- It would provide office and meeting space for the heritage preservation office and the main street program.
- It would provide meeting space and host ongoing community forums in which evolving market forces, shared needs, and common purposes can be discussed and integrated into the development plan, thus allowing it to remain current, viable, and community based.
- The building itself would provide a functioning, main street example of the design standards.
- The staff would identify market needs and opportunities, encourage, educate, and provide support for local businesses, and work with the community to evaluate success.
- It would offer ongoing encouragement and validation to businesses, homeowners, non-profit organizations, and community leaders through awards, certifications, and tax credits.

These mechanisms would encourage local businesses to develop in ways that are sensitive to community resources and promote the vision and purpose of the overall heritage-based planning.

**Implement the Vision**

The stories and themes associated with place should drive design and infrastructure planning. Wayside exhibits and public art are an effective interpretive strategy. They provide an excellent opportunity for place-based storytelling and are a tool to connect viewers with the significance of their surroundings. Place-based exhibits can integrate the heritage-based identity of community or place and convey them to the public through themes and stories. Public art can also complement the vision and message of the community although care must be taken that public art promotes the identity of the community not the individuality of the artist.
The key to any successful wayside exhibit is to concisely communicate information without distracting from the resource itself. Wayside exhibits don’t try to tell the whole story, they convey the key message. They should never be a book-on-a-stick. By definition they nurture authenticity because a wayside should highlight something that happened or is visible at a specific place. Waysides are often used throughout parks, trails, and byways, but they can also be effective in an urban core, so the interpretive exhibit planning process becomes an opportunity for developing community partnerships, identity, and sustainability.

Historic resources are an asset that can fuel community pride and economic development. The historic character of a community lies within the open spaces as well as the individual buildings. Community development needs to ensure that appropriate preservation goals and strategies are in place. Design and treatment of streetscapes and open spaces is as much a part of preserving a sense of place, and authentic community identity as the bricks and mortar.

Conclusion

Every place has intrinsic meaning and value, whether country, region, city, town, district, neighborhood, park, market, or square. Over time, this meaning changes and can be hidden, destroyed, or lost. Heritage-based planning and design aims to reveal and sustain that meaning, whether through a landscape’s design, a building’s rehabilitation, or a community-based development program. By embracing an interdisciplinary approach, forming viable partnerships, and learning to leverage heritage to develop a community’s sustainable economic base, we can create vibrant and authentic places that attract and retain businesses, tourists, and, most importantly, the identity of a community.