Burlington Geographic 2.0:

Five Design Considerations of Successful Whole-Community Placebuilding

An Academic Reflection

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Introduction

Inhabitants who are deeply connected and thoroughly engaged with their place are more thoughtful citizens and stewards of their socioecological surroundings (Thoreau 1854; Orr 1992; Friere 1995; Thomashow 1995; Gruenewald 2003, Sobel 2004, Chawla and Cushing 2007). Building relationships between people and place has therefore emerged as a popular strategy for fostering sustainable communities.

The natural idiosyncrasies of each locale resist a single universal framework for designing place-based sustainability initiatives, but a wealth of literature and examples point to common lessons deemed essential for effective programming. These lessons represent an approach I call Whole-Community Placebuilding (WCP), a new practice in sustainable community development that connects residents with their neighbors and landscape using ideas from place-based education, environmental advocacy, and critical justice. The following is a design framework for WCP arrived at by distilling major concepts drawn from diverse disciplinary foundations into a unified set of five fundamental considerations.

I examine these considerations by applying them to a recent WCP initiative in Vermont called Burlington Geographic (BG). This 2016 initiative culminated in a two-month Community Engagement Series (CES) aimed at connecting Burlington residents to one another through exploration and celebration of the city’s natural and cultural heritage. Burlington Geographic is a recent iteration of an adapting WCP model that may inform similar program designs elsewhere.

This is a transdisciplinary guide for leveraging place to build healthier communities via WCP design. Effective WCP program designs will consider 1) what sense of place entails, and how it will be cultivated, 2) how to intentionally and authentically engage diverse and underrepresented communities, 3) how to cultivate collaborations that allow for emergent goals and outcomes, 4) the appropriate role of local schools, and 5) how the initiative will motivate change toward more sustainable behaviors. Though these considerations are not necessarily exhaustive, they are a useful starting point for designing place-based initiatives across a range of communities and landscapes.

1. Transform Space

Place can be understood as a geographic space wrapped in its human values, stories, and significance (Tuan 1977). To transform space into place means to cultivate a community’s sense of this understanding between our landscape and ourselves—a sense of place. This is about embracing Wendell Berry’s saying, “If you don’t know where you are, you don’t know who you are.” Our identity is entwined in our local landscape, so celebrating or scrutinizing the nuance in our places becomes an act of understanding ourselves, and our community.

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1 Burlington Geographic is a recent installation of the PLACE Program (Place-based Landscape Analysis and Community Engagement Program), a WCP collaborative that has worked in 16 Vermont communities to build relationships between people and place by celebrating the natural and cultural landscapes contributing to local identity (see place.uvm.edu). Burlington Geographic was a culmination of 15 years of PLACE Program work in other communities, and its first initiative in an urban setting.

2 This paper is a response to a conversation with Dean Nancy Mathews of the Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources, who asked how a second iteration of BG would be designed to improve upon the first, and what design elements would be useful for parallel initiatives elsewhere.
Placebuilding work is rooted in the notion that residents who are connected to place are more invested in and conscious of actions which influence the local landscape (Witt et al. 2016, Sobel 2004, Gruenewald 2003b, Thomashow 1995, Orr 1992).

WCP is about creating opportunities for community members to develop a sense of place. This involves intentionally cultivating feelings of place attachment and place meaning among participants (Kudryavtsev 2012). Place attachment is akin to a level of pride, identification with, or dependence on a place, whereas place meaning is about understanding the reasons for one’s connection to a place. For example, Jane is a proud Burlingtonian (place attachment) because of the city’s excellent cuisine, beautiful parks, and diverse ethnic heritage (place meaning). George feels a strong connection with Ethan Allen Park (place attachment) because his father took him there to pick flowers as a child (place meaning).

Effective WCP programs are designed to develop these feelings. The BG 2016 CES featured six evening presentations that celebrated Burlington by showcasing aspects of the local landscape contributing to Burlington’s unique character: its parks, ethnic neighborhoods, local geology, historic transportation corridors, energy systems, and waterworks. Each evening transformed Burlington geographies from spaces to places through place-based art, ethnographies, and histories. These elements fostered place attachment and place meaning by highlighting different areas of audience interest and points of connection.

The series also strived to present a holistic, integrated concept of place. Natural history and cultural history cannot be disentangled, especially in urban communities like Burlington. The line between past and present also dissolves in an integrated understanding of place. For instance, industry, commerce, and community are inherently connected to local topography, climate, and ecology of today and yesterday. A community’s current situation is a product of complex relationships with place through time (Flores 1994; Farina 2000; Marcucci 2000; Palang et al 2011).

2. Design Critically

Critical design is about asking, often, “if we build it, who will come?” Power, privilege, and positionality dynamics represent perhaps the largest barriers to community engagement (or participation) (Woodhouse and Knapp 2000; Gruenewald 2003b; Witt et al 2016; Russ and Krasny 2017). Program nature, location, relevance, and organizational frameworks are major determinants of audience demographics. Likewise, critical examination of program design can reveal which communities and perspectives are being overlooked.

Consider the BG 2016 CES: It was designed by a partnership of the University of Vermont, Shelburne Farms, a sustainable development company (Main Street Landing), an educational television network (RETN), and a city agency (Burlington Parks, Recreation & Waterfront). The bulk of the programs were PowerPoint-style presentations hosted at a downtown film house at the waterfront. The events took place on weekday nights. Most speakers were academics or agency heads, and all the programs were in English. The events were advertised through local newspapers, flyers, online community calendars, and email blasts to mainly UVM affiliates.
While turnout was high (averaging 100 people per evening), audience demographics were perhaps unsurprising given the program design. Participants were mainly white (93%) and well-educated (> 50% with graduate degrees; > 90% with four-year undergraduate degrees). Participants were disproportionately older (52% over 46 years old) or college-aged (20%). Notably under-represented were minorities, New Americans, young professionals (24 – 45 years old), families, low-income residents, and working-class adults, to name a few. The series did not attract its intended audience diversity.

Several barriers limited participation by these groups. Logistically, attendees must have been available on weekday evenings with a means of transportation to the event if living outside the downtown area. Learning about the events in the first place required English fluency, regular use of online event calendars, or word-of-mouth relationships with UVM affiliates. The content and style of the presentations were also significant barriers of participation. Many people have no interest in attending lecture-style events, or are not compelled by the topics highlighted in the series (geology, parks, water, food, energy, transportation). The institutionalized underpinnings of BG (ultimately a project of UVM) gathers and repels certain demographics.

This revealing, if unsurprising, turnout to the BG 2016 CES reinforces some important lessons in critical design of WCP programs. The “community” is neither a homogenous audience, nor does it have a single, unified sense of place. No one event will attract a full gamut of community members, and thus program design must explicitly identify audiences to include, and cater programs directly to those communities.

Say, for example, that BG aims to engage the local Nepali community in a placebuilding program to foster richer connections between Nepali residents and their new city. How would this well-meaning project move forward responsibly, respectfully, and authentically?

Logistically, the programs must be hosted in the neighborhoods and venues that are appropriate and comfortable for the Nepali audience, at a time, day, and season that makes sense. The event type must also be attractive to the audience—the audience who shows up to a dinner in an outdoor pavilion at the Intervale farm fields on a Saturday is very different than that of a Tuesday night lecture on food systems in a downtown theater.

The designing organization must take a hard, critical look at its own positionality. This is about intentionally defusing the implicit assumptions and perspectives that are inadvertently transmitted when one hegemonic group tries to make an event “for the benefit of” another. The above assumption that an outdoor dinner would be more attractive than a lecture hall presentation has had zero input from any Nepali resident. Perhaps neither event would be of interest, or of any good. In this case, BG has little means of validating this assumption about the Nepali perspective, and no authentic barometer of what actions would be effective or appropriate.

Involving community leaders from the outset is therefore an essential, if not the essential ingredient to community engagement. These leaders must be program engineers, not merely de-facto liaisons. In this case, Nepali leaders would drive the overall design of the programs, including conservations around which places and perspectives ought to be
featured and how. Nepali leaders would also spearhead advertising the event and attracting attendees. The role of BG, in this case, is to provide organizational, financial, and personal support for the event while maintaining alignment with the overarching WCP mission.

Investigations into particular geographies or places should incorporate community-based participatory research. Including multiple perspectives in the research process honors the diverse, overlapping, and often contested “contact zones” of place meanings within shared landscapes (Pratt 1999; Somerville 2007; Morehouse 2011). In this spirit, the entire project pivots into a more mutually respectful, decolonizing discourse: instead of BG saying, “help us tell you about the place you now live,” the conversation becomes, “let’s together understand how one another interprets the place we now share.”

3. Expect Collaborative Emergence

An extension of this critical design is embracing collaboration at multiple levels. At the organizational level, project outcomes or “deliverables” should emerge from collaboration. The unilateral prescription of a specific output at the project’s inception is a sure-fire path to myopia. In the above example of the BG 2016 CES, the oversight in audience demographics was largely because of a preconceived end goal of a six-part speaker series. Project planning was a reverse-engineering of themes and keynotes to fit this event style.

The challenge is that embracing emergent design is also embracing complexity, unpredictability, and non-linearity—uncomfortable factors when event planning on a fixed budget and timeline. These were certainly constraints of the BG 2016 CES. Yet healthy communities are full of messy relationships, dissonant values, and implicit assumptions about “other” people and “other” places (Morehouse 2011; Scully 2012). Authentic WCP is about recognizing this thorny and confusing arena as an inevitable starting point. It is, in fact, the raw material comprising a place’s unique character. Rich collaborations out-of-the-gate are key for designing programs that effectively encompass and examine this complexity. Returning to our earlier example, if a BG goal is to involve the Nepali community in a placebuilding initiative, the next step is to give the reigns to a network of collaborating organizations vested in the Nepali community (examples might include the Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program, the local Nepali market, St. Joseph’s Co-Cathedral, AALV, Burlington School Districts’ Parent University, etc.). From this network emerges useful traction around engaging Nepalese in the Burlington landscape. Design ideas generated in collaboration are naturally validated from multiple, intentionally-convened perspectives.

Collaborative emergence also operates at the scale of the participant. Generally speaking, WCP is an expanded application of place-based education. The endeavor is about educating inhabitants (adults and children) in “the art of living well where they are” (Orr 1992). It is therefore essential to understand and employ the means by which people convene and learn.

Adults approach learning environments with a rich background of life experience that informs their knowledgebase, values, and identities (Mocker and Spear 1982; Knowles 1985). These groups organized around a common goal are referred to as Communities of
Practice (Wegner 1998), and develop strong connections to one another and to their pursuit. In such settings, adults learn through the sharing of mutual life experiences pertaining to the shared practice. This communal problem-solving builds interpersonal relationships because the individual identities of group members are validated in sharing and comparing life experiences. The design also creates emergent learning outcomes as the group wrestles with questions or problems that are beyond any one member’s ability to solve (Theobald and Curtiss 2000; Stetsenko 2008; Aguilar and Krasny 2011; Adams and Gupta 2013).

Applied to this design principle, effective programs are “containers for emergence” (Kolan and Poleman 2009; Poleman 2010), wherein participants are united through designed collaboration, whether that be group problem-solving, landscape investigation, dining, discussion, etc. The BG 2016 CES included a series of field workshops specifically for local educators. The workshops were designed to explore place-based themes onsite around the city. The primary objectives of the workshops were to 1) connect local leaders in place-based thinking by creating a “community of practice” around shared landscape investigation, and 2) create a “container of emergence” that allowed participants to achieve major learning outcomes through collective participation and sharing. For example, participants worked together in a city forest park to collectively interpret landscape clues. Teachers of various subjects and grade levels shared content drawn from their respective experience and training to assemble an integrated story of local natural and cultural history. The exercise then yielded a participant-driven discussion of place-based curricular design ideas. The event designers created a community of practice that could be relied upon to drive emergent learning through diverse participant expertise.

4. Involve Schools Intentionally

Partnering with local schools is an excellent way to generate intergenerational sense of place and action on major community issues. Involving students is a natural strategy of engaging their parents (Mannion and Adley 2011). Cultivating stewardship ethics and engaged citizenship in youth is also a powerful means of creating responsible, participatory adults (Thoreau 1854; Dewey 1915; Orr 1994; Woodhouse and Knapp 2000; Sobel 2004). Because of this, place-based education has long hitched its wagons to the public school system.

Scaling the principles of place-based education to the task of WCP requires cautious negotiation with local schools to leverage these great opportunities while avoiding pitfalls (Vinke 1992; Chawla 2001; Jensen and Schnack 2006). After decades of struggle, the public school remains as prescriptive, stretched, and standardized as ever. The new paradigm of modern place-based education has yet to materialize. Meanwhile, a never-ending list of community organizations arm-wrestle to influence public school curriculum with the season’s hottest initiatives. Each of these projects ultimately lives or dies with the stamina of the schoolteacher who volunteers as their champions.

Place-based initiatives are no exception. Teachers have little time or resources to shoehorn a pre-packaged initiative into their already over-wrung curricula. Working with teachers from the outset, well before the start of the school year, is necessary to sculpt meaningful, place-based learning around core standards or proficiencies. Any pre-packaged lessons
must be fleshed-out and turnkey, proposed alongside a list of the specific standards and proficiencies they achieve. Even the most thorough lesson or unit plan developed without the collaboration of its intended teacher will find a quick home on a dusty shelf. Collaboration with key teachers from the beginning is essential, and this relationship should involve the same spirit of collaborative emergence as with any other project partner. Student programming also warrants the same critical design, behavioral change, and sense of place considerations as any other audience (Demarest 2008).

Recognizing the slow and arduous process of building inroads into local classrooms, Burlington Geographic’s pilot CES focused its attention instead on providing professional development for educators. Our workshops created a community of practice around place-based teaching and learning. The workshops brought novice teachers together with experienced place-based educators while exploring lesser-known places in the Burlington landscape. These workshops not only produced excellent investigations of place and critical place issues, they also fostered lasting connections between BG and a network of teachers keen to collaborate on future class projects.

Higher education institutions also warrant strategic involvement in WCP. Service-learning courses offer great opportunities to involve college students in mutually beneficial ways. In the case of the BG 2016 CES, a UVM geography class conducted participant exit surveys and drafted a comprehensive evaluation of the series. Their feedback was immensely useful to BG, and the students gained valuable action competencies while also benefitting fully from the CES content as Burlington citizens. It is important to weigh this involvement, however, against the critical design concerns surrounding University positionality. Heavy institutional involvement (University, K–12 schools, or otherwise) changes the nature, agenda, and identity of community-oriented programs. Placebuilding is ultimately about deinstitutionalization, decolonization, and developing grassroots community connections around local landscape, all of which require critical scrutiny of a program’s mixture of organizational leadership (Gruenewald 2003b; Witt et all 2016; Russ and Krasny 2017).

5. Motivate Behavior Change

The pursuit of WCP is about creating healthier, more responsible, and more sustainable landscapes through cultivating sense of place. At its core, this goal requires behavioral change at the individual level toward more sustainable action. Broadly speaking, placebuilding strives to impart active citizenship, community participation, and sustainable decision-making (Orr 1992; Sobel 2004). If this is to be achieved, program design must consider the prerequisites that motivate behavioral change and action.

Baba Dioum’s familiar phrase tells us that, “In the end we will conserve only what we love; we will love only what we understand; and we will understand only what we are taught” (Baba Dioum, 1968). Yet this mantra doesn’t work in reverse: knowledge alone does not motivate action. After much criticism for overemphasizing knowledge transmission, place-based education has recently gained traction by identifying and influencing behavioral drivers beyond knowledge and awareness.

Behavior change requires one to understand an issue, to care about it deeply, and to then have the proficiency to act upon this newfound sentiment. Program design must attend to
all these precursors for an event to successfully engender the more responsible, sustainable decision-making. Specifically, these precursors can be categorized as entry-level, ownership, or empowerment variables (Hungerford and Volk 1990; Carmi et al 2015). Consider a scenario where a city is considering clearing a forested park to develop an affordable housing complex. Entry-level variables to this scenario include basic knowledge (where the site is; who the developers are), and sensitivity toward a problem (experiences using the park; empathy toward local housing struggles). Ownership variables include having a deep knowledge of the problem (intimate familiarity with park ecology; experience in local housing industry), and a personal investment in the outcome of the problem (a potentially-impacted lifestyle or economic situation). Empowerment variables include knowledge of the available tools or actions that may impact the outcome of the problem (voting; public comment in city planning meetings), and a level of proficiency in performing these actions.

There are many strategies for designing programs around these variables. Designing for ownership is about “engaging people where they’re at” (Poleman 2010). In other words, programs must honor the topics and places that are important to the target audience, and root the programs in these “entry points” of engagement. People only show up when an event is relevant to their interests. Ownership (sensitivity and investment) develops, then, when a person understands one of two things: 1) that a previously unknown issue is more influential to their own interests than they realized, or 2) that they discover interest in a topic they hadn’t before experienced.

The BG 2016 CES was designed with this in mind. Each weekly event theme was chosen to be a different “entry point” into a greater conversation about Burlington landscape. We recognized that some audiences would find more relevance in Burlington’s transportation corridors or food, while others would be attracted to programs about geology or electricity. These varied entry points attracted people to the conversation, and, equally important, maintained conduits of personal relevance that were leveraged to impart new, ownership-level connections. For instance, our event on transportation attracted a large crowd of bicycling enthusiasts. Through this lens, our events explored the relationship between bicycles, road networks, and Burlington’s rich heritage as an industrial center. Participants arrived with an interest in bicycles. They left with a richer sensitivity to local commerce, as they learned that their hobby exists thanks to industry dynamics. Owning an issue means caring about it, and people care deeply about issues that are personally relevant.

Empowerment variables require design strategies that focus on outcomes. To motivate behavior change, participants must develop action competence: an awareness of and comfort with the actions required of the new behavioral paradigm. Events must highlight various issues or problems and practice potential solutions. Action projects or participatory action research are prime examples of such events: programs that engage participants in building technical proficiency navigating the political, social, or economic landscapes required of responsible stewards and active citizens (Jensen and Schnack 1997; Theobald and Curtiss 2000; Chawla and Cushing 2007; Russ and Krasny 2017).

Community visioning forums are an action competence design frequently used by the PLACE program, wherein citizens convene to envision their idealized future community,
identify barriers to that future, and propose actions to overcome those barriers. What results is a visioning document compiled by citizens (nurturing ownership), replete with clearly articulated actions to operationalize it (nurturing empowerment). Community design-build projects are another popular strategy that foster empowerment by practicing hands-on skills for the sake of community development. Habitat for Humanity is a classic example, wherein building a house becomes a concrete action in citizenship and community participation—especially when the project occurs within one’s local community.

**Conclusion**

Place can a powerful tool for building more sustainable communities, provided that practitioners carefully consider the philosophical, critical, pedagogical, and behavioral implications of program design. A successful WCP project should aim to transform undifferentiated spaces into rich places by cultivating place attachments and meanings. It should critically examine power and privilege dynamics represented in both the geography of the focal places and the nature of the events. Design should start with diverse collaboration and move toward emergent endpoints. Public schools can be powerful allies when partnering with realistic expectations and outcomes. Finally, the project must recognize that the ultimate goal of WCP is to motivate residents to act more sustainably, so placebuilding must incorporate design that intentionally fosters behavioral change. These WCP design considerations will manifest differently in each locale and community, and will be complemented by a suite of other factors unique to the character and needs of each place and project. While these considerations are necessarily incomplete, they provide a foundation to begin effective, authentic, and respectful conversations around place and its role in community wellbeing.
Literature Cited


