Placebuilding for Sustainability:

Place-based Learning and Engagement for Community Wellbeing

A Literature Review

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Natural Resources

May 2017
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Abstract

This review examines relationships with *place* as fundamental drivers of community wellbeing. In Part I of this review, I explore the evolution of the concept and definition of place over the last century. I review how place is defined and interpreted among various fields at the landscape level. I then dovetail this with a discussion of the closely-related *sense of place*, and how people and communities develop relationships through cultivating sense of place.

In Part II, I review literature showing how *place* and *sense of place* has been harnessed to foster more sustainable communities. I begin by exploring some deterministic hypotheses connecting landscape character to community integrity. I show how *place* may be used as a lens to gain traction on challenging community dynamics like power and inequity.

In Part III, I explore literature concerned with the *how* of placebuilding, tracing the evolution of place-based education from its roots in environmental education and civics. Finally, I explore the expanded application of these principles to the idea of placebuilding, or whole-community place-based education and engagement.
Part I: Understanding Place

“To be at all...is to be somewhere, and to be somewhere is to be in some kind of place. Place is as requisite as the air we breathe, the ground on which we stand, and the bodies we have... How could it be otherwise?” (Casey 1997).

There is an inseparability of one’s experience and one’s place. We ask new acquaintances “where are you from?” not to learn the coordinates of their mailbox, but to infer what we can about their values, beliefs, and interests based solely on the geography in which they were last emplaced. Curious denizens of their landscapes have long understood that the significance of physical space goes beyond the value and organization of its physical features. This distinction between location and meaning is the subject of the study of place, a word that has been progressively honed by diverse scholars over nearly a century.

By several interpretations, the ultimate distinction between Euclidian space and place is the infusion and recognition of human experience. Directly responding to Casey’s (1997) question of “how could it be otherwise?” David Greenwood (formerly Gruenewald; a founding father of place scholarship) suggests that western tradition frequently considers place as little more than location and time, diminishing the depth of a place to the point where it “disappears from view” (Gruenewald 2003a). Adams and Gynnild (2013) expand on this observation by comparing these observations of western geography with those of Chinese-American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan:

“Whereas location is exemplified by Cartesian coordinates, distance, and compass bearing, place is a ‘center of felt value’ including positive and negative feelings, and more complex layers of meaning that are built up through the steady accretion of sentiment over the years” (Tuan 1977).

Tuan (1974) popularized the term Topophilia (etymologically “love of place”) to explain how places become significant through human experience, and how places reciprocally shape those who live there. Tuan (1977) explains, "What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value.” Many subsequent definitions for place derive from Tuan’s, such as Cheng et. al’s (2003) derivative, “Place is physical space imbued with meaning.”

Landscape Interpretations of Place

These definitions are the recent fruits of place scholars, yet this “value-added space” concept has been explored by other names in a range of disciplines. Exploration of place by other names helps make sense of the categories of “values” that are invoked as infused meanings within places.

Bioregionalism: Historian Dan Flores (1994), for instance, explains these concepts from the perspective of “bioregionalism.” Flores argues that local and regional landscapes impart a certain amount of determinism to community ideologies, produced by “the confluence between specific ecological realities and specific human adaptations” (Flores 1994). These qualities contribute to the unique nuance of local communities, and the set of values they
impart on the landscape. Towns in the arid west, for example, use water much differently than temperate communities. The bioregion thereby influences community values, and the community re-projects those values into the bioregion. This “particularism,” Flores explains, yields “distinctive places fashioned by human culture’s peculiar and fascinating interpenetration with all the vagaries of topography, climate, and evolving ecology that define landscapes” (Flores 1994). To reinforce this point, Flores points out that every community exhibits unique cultural nuance despite the “homogenizing forces of the modern world.” Flores’ bioregionalism approach contributes powerful context and refinement to our working definition of place as spaces with values:

“In the case of the American West, no set of generalized definitions, regardless of how inclusive, accurately explains the loose cluster of subregions comprising the huge swath of continental topography and ecology that is the Western United States. Neither aridity and its effects, nor federal land ownership, nor economic integration into the global market at a time of mature industrial development, nor the presence of Indian reservations, nor proximity to Mexico or to the Pacific Ocean, nor a legacy of conquest, captures the particularism that is the historical reality of place in the Western U.S.” (Flores 1994).

Flores offers us geographer James Parsons’ pithy definition of bioregionalism that aligns nicely with the sentiment many place scholars find difficulty articulating: “A grassroots geography with heart” (Parsons 1985).

**Historical Landscapes**: Flores’ commentary unites place and bioregionalism from the perspective of landscape history. This intersection of history, geography, and place invites other definitions from more applied contexts. Australia’s Burra Charter (Australia ICOMOS 2013) operationalizes a definition of place to justify conservation of important cultural landscapes:

“Conservation means all the processes of looking after a place so as to retain its cultural significance...”

“Cultural significance means aesthetic, historic, scientific, social, or spiritual value for past, present or future generations. Cultural significance is embodied in the place itself, its fabric, setting, use, associations, meanings, records... etc.”

“Place means a geographically defined area. It may include elements, objects, spaces and views. Place may have tangible and intangible dimensions."

These charter definitions recognize place as the sum of the cultural values associated with a site. Conserving a place therefore amounts to protecting its suite of culturally significant qualities. The European Landscape Convention (Ballester 2002) arrives at a similar framework for describing place in the context of unified conservation goals, using the word landscape instead of place:
“Landscape is a product of peoples’ perception. Landscape in other words is not simply another word for environment- it is created in the eyes, minds and hearts of beholders when the material, "real" components of our environment are seen through the filters of memory and association, understanding and interpretation” (Ballester 2002).

From the same convention yielded a unifying statement about place identity that resonates with Flores' bioregional particularisms:

“Apart from our local, regional and national identities, we have a strong sense of being Europeans, of sharing the same culture of the land and the same way of inhabiting it. We do not merely wish to live there; we wish above all to live well there” (Ballester 2002).

**Landscape Ecology:** These bioregionalist and historical landscape perspectives tacitly borrow from the Scottish landscape architect Ian McHarg's (1971) applied “layer cake” or “litany” framework. Outlined in his *Design with Nature*, this approach was developed as a method of teasing apart the complex and interrelated abiotic (topography, geology, climate, etc.), biotic (flora, fauna, etc.), and human dimensions of place. This process yields an inventory of the pieces, patterns and processes operating within a defined geography. As an ecologist, McHarg's framework gives more attention to the physical and environmental components of landscape, preferencing those cultural elements of a landscape that are tangible or readily surveyed (i.e. economics, demographics, land use history). Nevertheless, McHarg's approach introduced the exercise of “artificial disaggregation” (Poleman 2010) of a place into its constituent components which is found in other reductionist place interpretations.

If place amounts to “physical space imbued with meaning” (Tuan 1977), then McHarg’s framework provides a starting point for describing that physical space. Though McHarg stops short of using the approach to synthesize meaning or values, the PLACE Program (see uvm.edu/place) has co-opted this approach as an analysis and interpretation technique for disentangling landscape complexity to resolve meanings. After separating a place into discrete layers, re-integration often exposes buried inter-layer relationships and processes. These emergent linkages often resemble what Tuan (1977) might call the human values “endowed” in space, or the “particularisms” that Flores (1994) describes. As an example, the juxtaposition of Burlington’s geological and historical inventories reveals an emergent story: Burlington’s modern housing inequities can be partially mapped on differences in the underlying surficial geology. This disarticulation/reintegration approach is a tool for uncovering the landscape-level physical, environmental, and cultural place-shaping processes.

**Landscape Processes:** This process-level investigation was honed by Daniel Marcucci (2000) in a framework for landscape interpretation that also informs how we conceptualize place. Marcucci discusses “keystone processes” as the targets of landscape interpretation and planning. These are phenomena of climate, geomorphology, colonization, disturbance, and culture operating at different spatial and temporal scales that together yield the present landscape. Identification of these keystone processes also
informs possible futures based on the continuation or cessation of various processes. For instance, one place’s idiosyncrasies may be the result of fire regime, colonialism, and industry. A change in any of these three processes will yield different futures. Marcucci packages this as a “landscape history,” which he describes as “virtually synonymous” with Flores’ bioregional histories, and indeed, both approaches imply a level of landscape determinism.

Palang et al. (2011) introduce the dual utility of “landscape biography” and “path dependency” to understand the determinism implicit in Marcucci’s and Flores’ approach. The landscape biography is essentially a breakdown of place into three domains: A) “Matterscape,” represents empirical, positivist aspects such as trees, mountains, and buildings. B) “Socioscape” refers to the “values, meanings, and attitudes which surround the physical landscape” at a community-level. C) “Mindscape” includes the intrapersonal dimension of place influenced by experience, nature and nurture, as represented through expressions of story, art, literature, etc.

This tripartite framework, unlike Flores and Marcucci’s models, removes the locus of place from squarely within the physical landscape, and into a more integrated interpretation of landscape. From here, Palang et al. (2011) suggest a “path dependency” approach, which describes a landscape’s “development in accordance with the continuing traditions of previous generations, inherited meaning and the creation of a similar social geographical space” (Zarina 2010). Path dependence analysis allows us to ask from whence came our place: “By using path dependence theory it is possible to understand processes, where landscape is created by a complex interplay of necessity and chance and by social practices” (Zarina in Palang et al. 2011).

**Cultural Landscapes:** The frameworks discussed thus far all demonstrate understandings of place at a landscape scale, emphasizing the connections between community behavior and the idiosyncrasies of the landscape that community is nested within. This perspective is shared by Italian landscape ecologist Almo Farina, who describes this human-landscape inseparability as a cultural landscape.

“Cultural landscapes are geographic areas in which the relationships between human activity and the environment have created ecological, socioeconomic, and cultural patterns and feedback mechanisms that govern the presence, distribution, and abundance of species assemblages” (Farina 2000).

Farina’s “species assemblages” ostensibly extend to humans and their agricultural products. This ecological approach contributes a more systematic framework that at once help identify and categorize Flores’ (1994) “particularisms” and Tuan’s (1977) definition of place as the “steady accretion of sentiments.” Farina describes these relationships between spaces and their infused human experiences as a system of feedbacks between natural, cultural, and economic capital. Farina argues that in modern western systems, a community’s economic capital is fueled by its natural capital. Traditionally, and in an ideal place-conscious society, cultural capital is the filter through which economic and natural capital is regulated.
Farina offers a definition for his cultural landscapes that would also serve as an ideal alternate definition for *place*: “A storehouse of the earth's natural and cultural capital” (Farina 2000). That is, places are the containers of both our tangible and non-tangible values—conserving them is therefore imperative.

**Scales and Mobility of Place**

These definitions of *place* operate across entire bioregions and within specific sites and objects, highlighting the importance of a conceptualization of place that considers multiple scales. Mitchell Thomashow (1995) comments, “A place is like a fractal. The more we explore it, the more we realize how the place expands beyond our limited perceptual sphere.” This perspective is critical to make sense of a location-specific concept like place against the realities of globalization and mobility. Witt et al. (2016) ask, “Must highly mobile people inevitably have weaker sense of place?” The authors invoke Bauman (2014), who aim for “a nomadic polyamory of place” that “calls for the love of many places as part of a larger, planetary community.” In other words, place is to be simultaneously found and appreciated within one’s home, town, region, and planet.

Adams and Gynnild (2013) further challenge working definitions of place by arguing that place may not require a physical space at all. Their study examines the signatures of place in online communities, concluding from a constructivist, sociological perspective that place emerges from three qualities of human interaction, (1) a common dimension or locus around which an audience is interacting, (2) shared figurative ideas and messages, (3) a common text or language.

Traditionally, this “locus” has been a physical location, yet communities with deep sense of place may be found in Facebook groups, forums, and even Twitter hashtags. Adams and Gynnild (2013) argue that many roadways have become places unto themselves, not just avenues between places. Likewise, the internet can become more than an empty conduit to communicate between physical locations.

Doreen Massey offers an interpretation of place that attempts to reconcile the uncomfortable expansion of the term *place* while addressing the local-to-global scale of modern communities. Massey suggests that place, instead of defined by bounded areas,

> “...can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings such that a person’s sense of place includes a consciousness of [the place’s] links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local” (Massey in Adams and Gynnild 2013).

This commentary around online places suggest that communication and discourse may be more of a prerequisite to place than the space itself. Carbaugh and Cerulli (2013) agree:

> “Our communication is playing a formative, constitutive role in creating our sense of place. Our communication builds inevitably...our mutually intelligible sense, our shared, common, and public meanings about places...the communicability of place is couched, at least partly, in this linguistic web we weave.”
Blofson’s (2014) study of place through the lens of storytelling demonstrates a “thick” place narrative of Burlington’s Winooski River that is mapped ethnographically much more than geographically.

**Non-Place:** Whether space is a prerequisite of place is an ongoing discussion. The conversation has been recently informed by the useful concept of “non-place.” In *Displaced in Nature: The Cultural Production of Non-Place*, Dickinson (2011) cites hotel rooms, superhighways, airports, and even “field-trip forests” as examples of localities which have been designed (sometimes purposely) in a way that is “intended to be in-between...void of intimacy.” Dickinson explains that non-places as: “Physically enclosed sites where humans go, quickly locate and compartmentalize themselves...within, and focus on movement and time.” These places are produced through “displacing” rhetoric and language, such as “to go,” “to be in,” and “to move through,” rather than emplaced language like being “of,” “from,” and “with.” Whether sites like highways are non-places (Dickinson 2011) or “places unto themselves (Adams and Gynnild 2013),” is largely unresolved, the common denominator of place production seems to be the language we use to communicate it.

This diverse body of literature demonstrates that place is a complex pursuit to understand the meaning of our surroundings using wide-ranging disciplines, scales, languages, and goals. A common thread woven through all these various interpretations of *place*, or their disciplinary equivalents, is this reciprocal influence between one’s values and one’s surroundings. As both individuals and communities, our values are shaped by the places we reside, and those values are embedded back into those places. To drill into a deeper understanding of place, we must investigate the types of values that emerge out of this reciprocity. I therefore turn our attention away from this macroscopic review of place writ-large, and toward a focus on the individual: an examination the concept of *sense of place*, what it entails, and how it develops.

**Sense of Place**

*“If you don’t know where you are, you don’t know who you are”* (Berry 2010).

Investigating place is ultimately an interrogation of one’s own values, perspectives, and identity. In highlighting various leading definitions of *sense of place*, authors hone in on a common thread that *sense of place* is an individual or community acknowledgement of the relationship between Berry’s *where* and *who*, and an intentional stoking of that relationship. Greenwood contends that if “human beings are responsible for place making, it follows that the cultural constructs implicated in shaping places are themselves shaped by place” (Gruenewald 2003b). Understanding this reciprocity between people and their surroundings is the pursuit of this section.

Adams and Gynnild’s (2013) definition of *place* implies this very relationship: “Place is far more than location. It is an accumulation of experience and an epistemology. Both evolve and deepen over time becoming part of one’s self-image and identity.”

Before *sense of place* was coined, ecologist and educator David Orr based his concept of *ecoliteracy* upon these relationships between people and places. “Knowledge of a place—
where you are and where you come from—is intertwined with knowledge of who you are. Landscape in other words, shapes mindscape” (Orr 1992). This perspective is referenced in bioregionalism as: “...a kind of spiritual identification with a particular kind of country and its wild nature [is] the basis for the kind of land care the world so definitely needs” (Flores 1994).

In these statements, Orr and Flores invoke a quasi-evolutionary argument to explain the strength of this place-derived value system that humans develop. Such an argument is presented completely in the Biophilia hypothesis (Wilson 1984): that people have an evolved, deep attraction to nature, especially those natural settings which benefited our hominid ancestors. Biophilia argues that our core values are evolutionarily derived. Aesthetics, for instance, is a fundamental pleasure or displeasure when viewing landscapes or artwork that is based on our evolutionary perceptions of safety. The hypothesis contends that the separation between human and nature is a false dichotomy. Sense of place is therefore a quality tugging on us from our hominid evolution to encourage us to pay attention to the landscape in which we reside.

In Thomashow’s Ecological Identity (1995), he identifies this intrinsic human motivation to connect with place, citing a common quality driving environmental and community-oriented disciplines.

“It occurred to me that sense of place was literally the roots of ecological identity- ideas such as bioregionalism, sustainability, material simplicity, community, citizenship, decentralization, environmental psychology, and others were integrated in this one expression. All of my students and colleagues were cognitively, affectively, and spiritually motivated to understand and articulate their sense of place.”

Thomashow continues to build on this trajectory with a working definition of sense of place that attaches structure and examples to these biological/ecological underpinnings.

“Sense of place is a search for ecological roots. This is the best accomplished when we have a relationship to the land on which we live, when we can place ourselves securely in a tangible place. It is through the place where we live that we construct our personal identities, relate to the landscape, and determine what is important in our lives. Sense of place concerns our home and region, feelings about land and community, kindred species, community niches, and sacred places. To have a sense of place is to merge our personal geography with the ecological landscape, incorporate maps of memory with how we dwell in a bioregion.”

Thomashow’s description of this journey from personal geography through to the whole bioregion reveals the scaled nature of understanding sense of place. As with place itself, sense of place resides both within and outside of oneself, and different interpretations situate the concept at different places on that spectrum.

Ethnographer Katharan Blofson (2014) takes a fine-grained examination of the values we endow in places. Blofson looks deeply into sense of place as explained by storytellers and
folklorists who communicate place-meaning through objects or stories rooted in the local landscape. In her ethnographic study of Burlington’s Winooski River intervale, Blofson seeks an answer to the sentence, “This place is...” using McHarg’s (1971) hypothetical extension, “This place is because...” Blofson uses this technique to demonstrate how sense of place develops from the stories and perspectives that we attach to a place.

Blofson highlights Ryden’s (1993) observation about the relationship between our surroundings, place names, and value.

“The sensually descriptive folk names which people attach to the flora, fauna, and topographical features of a place provide a similar view of the local knowledge and interpretation of the physical components of that place, as do a few types of place-based narrative—like local legends and tall tales—which rely for much of their meaning on the nature of their physical setting. Such lore goes beyond cartographic symbols to get its hands dirty among the things that the symbols represent” (Ryden 1993).

Relph (2009) similarly suggests “…sense of place lies primarily inside us, but is aroused by the landscapes we encounter...a synaesthetic faculty that combines sight, hearing, smell, movement, touch, imagination, purpose, and anticipation...” By this interpretation, sense of place resides internally, shaped by external inputs received by the individual.

On the other side of the spectrum, Keith Basso articulates an interpretation of Western Apache sense of place that is manifested decidedly outside the body. Place is an emergent quality of a landscape steeped in values and story. Inhabitants immerse themselves in the landscape to collect a sense of place from it:

“For Indian men and women, the past lies embedded in features of the earth—in canyons and lakes, mountains and arroyos, rocks and vacant fields—which together endow their lands with multiple forms of significance that reach into their lives and shape the way they think. Knowledge of places is therefore closely linked to knowledge of the self, to grasping one’s position in the larger scheme of things, including one’s own community, and to securing a confident sense of who one is as a person” (Basso 1996).

To unite these sides of the spectrum, we can also interpret sense of place as “a view of nested interdependence” (Swimme and Tucker 2010). In other words, sense of place attends to “widening circles of identification” (Thomashow 1995). The act of toasting a bagel, for instance, connects the individual to the rest of the world. Acknowledging the origins of its ingredients, the electricity cooking it, and our biological caloric requirements reminds us of interdependency at an organismal-to-global level. As an exercise in exploring and acknowledging sense of place, “…breakfast becomes part of my life story” (Thomashow 1995).

In a world increasingly challenged by events and concerns at scales larger than what humans are capable of approaching, there is some satisfying traction in the simultaneous bigness and smallness, intrapersonal and interpersonal nature of sense of place. “Affection for [place] tends to focus on smaller and more personal scales than the large political
boundaries of the modern world, and human sense of place has everything to do with a shared sense of history” (Flores 1994).

Blofson’s interpretation of Davenport and Anderson’s (2005) study provides an applied example of how community-level sense of place (in this case, connections to the Niobrara River) gives rise to a collective set of values ranging in scale from individual-to-bioregional, and political to spiritual to aesthetic. Their “Web of River Meanings” concept map revealed:

“A wide range of values are associated with places and sense of place, among them productivity, conservation and stewardship, wilderness and open space, aesthetics, spiritual sustenance, individual and community identity, economic security, natural resources, and personal satisfaction and fulfillment. These values are linked to how people perceive and interpret their environment, and form the foundation of people’s relationships with place.”

We again look to Tuan (1974) for an explanation that unites sense of place and identity. “We as human beings become very accustomed to [cultural landscapes], and they in turn become meaningful to us, to such a degree that we begin to identify with them.” Vaske and Kobrin (2001) develop Tuan’s reference to identity: “Place identity is not a direct result of any one particular experience but rather a psychological investment with a setting that has developed over time.”

While each scholar arrives at a slightly different interpretation of sense-of-place, most agree that sense-of-place comprises two concepts: place attachment and place meaning. Place attachment “reflects a bond between people and places” (Adams 2013), or the strength of one’s attachment to a place (Kudryavtsev et al. 2012). Place attachment includes feelings of place identity in phrases like “I am proud to be a Vermonter,” and place dependence, “Burlington made me who I am.” Whereas, place meaning “reflects symbolic meanings people ascribe to places” (Krasny and Russ 2017), or the reasons for one’s connection with a place. These reasons may be elicited from questions like, “What kind of place is this?” or “What does this place mean to you?” (Kudryavtsev et al. 2012). Together, place attachment and place meaning form “the lens through which people experience and make meaning of their experiences in and with place” (Adams 2013).

Returning to Wendell Berry, we find a masterful distillation that captures the transdisciplinary, scaled, and deeply intertwined nature of place and sense of place. In this vignette, a bucket represents the relationships between physical landscapes and their human-endowed values, which shapes the identity of a whole community and its individual residents.

“However small a landmark the old bucket is, it is not trivial. It is one of the signs by which I know my country and myself. And to me it is irresistibly suggestive in the way it collects leaves and other woodland sheddings as they fall through time. It collects stories, too, as they fall through time. It is irresistibly metaphorical. It is doing in an active way what a human community must do actively and thoughtfully. A human community, too,
must collect leaves and stories, and turn them to account. It must build soil, and build that memory of itself—in lore and story and song—that will be its culture. These two kinds of accumulation, of local soil and local culture, are intimately related” (Berry 2010 in Blofson 2014).

From the collection of literature surrounding place, sense-of-place, and their disciplinary precursors, emerges a broad commentary around what it means to be a human in-context with our surroundings: humans are place-makers as much as place shapes what we believe and value. Yet the concepts of place and sense of place are enmeshed, fluid, and evolving. Aaron Morehouse (2011) sums this up beautifully:

“Anyone that ever tried to stuff [place] into a theoretical suitcase would quickly find it overflowing. It is the activity of trying to restrain it that causes the problem. I would rather understand place as a concept that is not meant to be so constrained, but rather is to be flexible and permeable.”

I would agree that the expanding study of place, by this or any other name, is a testament to the utility of the ideas it germinates.
Part II: Place, Sustainability and Wellbeing

In this section, I apply this multifaceted review of the relationships between people and place to the task of fostering more sustainable communities. I first explore the growing literature explaining the environmental and societal upshot of individual- and community-level placebuilding. In the second part, I explore the development of place-based education and community engagement, the fields moving this conversation from theory to application.

The Link Between Place and Community-Building

“Places teach us who, what, and where we are, as well as how we might live our lives” (Gruenewald 2003b).

As Greenwood explains above, place is a worthwhile starting point for understanding ourselves and our surroundings. This then raises the question of whether cultivating a sense of place ultimately improves communities. Thoreau, one of the early place thinkers, attempts to validate this assumption by arguing that sense of place is perhaps the only starting point for community building:

"Let us settle ourselves, and work our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance...through church and state, poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality, and say, This is, and no mistake" (Thoreau 1845).

Thoreau argues that human experience can be fundamentally reduced to the quality of the stage upon which that experience happens. Therefore, Thoreau argues, understanding and managing society is first a task of being literally grounded in place. This sentiment continues to find traction 150 years later as a fulcrum for managing nearly all social human discourse.

"While the history of politics and diplomacy and (sometimes) ideas may be extracted from the natural stage and studied profitably, the kinds of subjects that attract contemporary historical study—legal, social, gender, ethnic, science, technology, and environmental issues—literally cannot be done without sophisticated reference to place" (Flores 1994).

This deterministic, “emplaced” perspective on society’s progression is known as possibilism, a concept suggesting that whatever emerges in human culture is partially fixed by the resources and possibilities afforded a bioregion. “Economic and lifestyle choices are guided by the landscape, ultimately, and are also shaped by the culture’s ideology for what is a ‘good life’” (Malin in Flores 1994). This interpretation is echoed in Zarina (2010) and Marcucci (2000) as well.

Greenwood then helps bridge place-making with community improvement by arguing that understanding a community is itself a first step in improving it:
“If human beings are responsible for place making, then we must become conscious of ourselves as place makers and participants in the sociopolitical process of place making... This means developing the connections with places that allow us to invest them with particular kinds of meaning (Gruenewald 2003b).”

In other words, if humans shape place, and the unfolding of our society is to some extent deterministic, then investing in place relationships is a way of gaining a more active agency in how a community unfolds. Thomashow argues a similarly inherent relationship between understanding and improving place, asking:

“As you widen the circles of identification and realize that your sense of self includes the regional watershed, and you internalize threats to water quality as you never have before, do you become more involved in politics or talk about your concerns with family and friends?” (Thomashow 1995).

Developing a sense of place (or ecological identity, according to Thomashow) is an exercise in using critical reflection to expand our awareness in concentric rings beyond ourselves, and therefore, almost by definition, one becomes a better informed, more discerning, improved steward of one’s surroundings. David Orr also makes this argument that the act of building sense of place, at an individual level, is itself an act of community betterment:

“Inhabitants bear the mark of their places... Uprooted, they get homesick. Historically, inhabitants are less likely to vandalize theirs or others’ places. They also tend to make good neighbors and honest citizens. They are, in short, the bedrock of the stable community and neighborhood that Mumford, Dewey, and Jefferson regarded as the essential ingredient of democracy” (Orr 1992).

Orr continues by offering sense of place as a strategy for community activism. He casts his vote for this approach to change-making, calling for a “postmodern paradigm shift” towards ground-up solutions to sustainability problems. Orr criticizes humanity’s overuse of technological solutions to major problems, arguing that these “all promise immediate returns at the expense of long-term destructive outcomes.” Instead, he envisions a “role of the citizen in the creation of a sustainable future...from the bottom up, seeking an active, competent citizenry as the foundation for a world appropriately linked.”

Orr (1992) even proposes a recipe for this new place-based sustainability tradition:

“Democratic participation, the extension of ethical obligations to the land community, careful ecological design, simplicity, widespread competence with natural systems, the sense of place, holism, decentralization of whatever can best be decentralized, and human-scaled technologies and communities.”

Taken together, the study of place is about “reeducating people in the art of living well where they are” (Orr 1992).
Thomashow paints a very similar vision for a sustainable community composed of “ecologically aware citizens” steeped in place, who:

“Take responsibility for the place where he or she lives, understands the importance of making collective decisions regarding the commons, seeks to contribute to the common good, ...considers the wider impact of his or her actions, is committed to mutual and collaborative community building, observes the flow of power in controversial issues, attends to the quality of interpersonal relationships in political discourse, and acts according to his or her convictions” (Thomashow 1995).

Paulo Friere (1995) makes an elegant, almost Cartesian claim to connect these perspectives together while attempting to settle this assumed causality between sense of place and community wellbeing: "Human beings are because they are in a situation. And they will be more the more they not only critically reflect upon their existence but critically act upon it." Greenwood therefore stresses that “people must be challenged to reflect on their own concrete situationality in a way that explores the complex interrelationships between cultural and ecological environments” (Gruenewald 2003b). Human nature is to try and understand ourselves, and we gain bearing on that through the situations we encounter. Reflecting and acting upon our situation is therefore fundamentally human. Friere expresses that critical thinking around one’s situation yields a natural agency to improve it.

Orr, Thomashow, Greenwood, and other leaders together claim that developing an ecologically-sensitive sense of place is a first step in bettering one’s community, and they offer many logical connections to validate this assumption. While taken as nearly axiomatic by these authors, I return to this topic later from a pedagogical perspective to show why this connection between knowledge (relationships with a place) and action (doing something to improve it) is not so straightforward.

**Place and Power**

By most interpretations, fostering sustainable communities boils down to identifying and resolving issues of environmental, social, and economic health and injustice. Place offers important glimpses into these problematic aspects of our communities that are difficult to resolve from other starting points.

For instance, place concepts “let us look into the corners” to bring attention to disenfranchised perspectives (Witt et al. 2016). Because “places are expressive of ideologies and relationships of power,” Greenwood explains, “power depends on, is facilitated by, and is reflected in the development and control of geographical space” (Gruenewald 2003b). He continues by encouraging the exploration of the margins of a place to reveal “oppression, possibility, and transition of [political] domination.” Val Plumwood provides indigenous lands as example of such power/privilege struggles writ in place. “Is the ability to maintain access (unproblematically) to a special homeplace and to protect it not at least partly a function of one’s privilege/power in the world?” (Plumwood 2008).
Spatial interpretations of power and justice dynamics is the topic of critical geography, from which place scholars have borrowed ideas to yield a critical pedagogy of place (the term critical not implying a critique of the scholarship, but instead a commitment to think critically about power and justice issues inherent in our assumptions of geography and place). Critical scholarship explores the reality that different people or communities construct very different, sometimes incompatible places from a single locality. Russ et al. (2016) explain that this critical approach to place “demonstrates how cities are social constructions imbued with contested race, class, and gender social relationships that make possible vastly different senses of place among their residents.”

Exposing and layering these different interpretations of place reveal incompatibilities rooted in power issues of race, class, gender, etc. This link between place and justice is summarized elegantly by Woodhouse and Knapp (2000):

> “Human communities, or places, are politicized, social constructions that often marginalize individuals, groups, as well as ecosystems. If place-based educators seek to connect place with self and community, they must identify and confront the ways that power works through places to limit the possibilities for human and non-human others.”

Pratt (1997) and Somerville (2007) introduce the concept of “contact zones” to understand these issues emerging from a critical look at the nexus of justice and place. Contact zones are described as “where multiple cultural perspectives come together...where the chapters of broadly and deeply reaching forms of oppression, privilege, and power reside” (Morehouse 2011). Contact zones can also be understood as, simply, the site of “contested place stories” (Somerville 2007).

Examining these contact zones grapples with “agency and meaning-making in the context of the ‘messy fault lines’ of intersecting solidarities and oppressions” (Morehouse 2011). Recognizing this messiness, the concepts of decolonization and reinhabitation have been employed to respectfully and effectively manage place-power relationships (Pratt 1999). These terms have been called the dual objectives of critical place scholarship.

Decolonization “involves learning to recognize disruption and injury and to address their causes” (Gruenewald 2003b). Specifically, it is about identifying the sources of dominant identities (often read: white, wealthy, European-American, male) overrepresented in a place to make space for other perspectives.

This is coupled with reinhabitation, which Orr explains by differentiating the act of residing versus inhabiting a place. A resident is one who engages in his surroundings at the level of spatial coordinates, whereas the inhabitant, “in contrast, ‘dwells’...in an intimate, organic, and mutually nurturing relationship with a place. Good inhabitance is an art requiring detailed knowledge of a place, the capacity for observation, and a sense of care and rootedness” (Orr 1992).

A major upshot of placebuilding is this shift toward a critical understanding of one’s surroundings as place rather than space. This teaches the welcoming and examination of multiple perspectives (decolonization) as well as stewardship (reinhabitation). Scully
(2012) sums up the importance of using this critical placebuilding lens as a tool to grow richer communities.

“Places are the literal common ground. Exposing the ways that a different experience of a place and the signifiers that make meaning out of place can create rich dialogue and understanding across perspectives. A complex and rich understanding of place can change the view from where one is standing. The very best thing that a learner can say to me is: “I never saw it that way before.” Sharing perspectives on literal common ground means shared points of reference seen in a whole new way—a whole new set of relations to people and to place” (Scully 2012).

Mobility

As I’ve addressed elsewhere, place cannot be understood without acknowledging dimensions of mobility and globalization. Place becomes a tool for gaining traction on many societal problems that are perpetuated largely because they are conceptualized at beyond-human scales. Thomashow explains that place can bring these intractable issues back down to earth: “The more closely you look at any ecological or political controversy, no matter how tightly it seems to be bounded, the more you realize the extent to which the issue is informed and influenced by global patterns and processes. There is no such thing as a local environmental problem” (Thomashow 2002). The Urban Environmental Education Review (Russ and Krasny 2017) similarly offers that to build sense of place locally, one must acknowledge that 21st century mobility infuses global identities into local places.

“A lens of mobility—the globalized and networked flow of ideas, materials, and people—[builds] awareness of the relationship between the local and global in the construction of place in urban centers... Given rural-urban migration, sense of place today includes where a person came from as much as where she now finds herself” (Russ and Krasny 2017).

Critiques of Modern Place Scholarship

The evolution of place scholarship towards this critical approach has been met with some criticism. Some warn that weak or surficial critical thinking may reinforce power inequities in a community (Bowers 2008). Asselin (2016) suggests this is because individuals’ experience in the environment (i.e. place) is “informed by prior knowledge rather than directed by it.” In other words, because we project our values into place meanings, our interpretation of our places is inherently cyclical and therefore potentially reinforcing. A person’s understanding of, and agency in a place, is informed by his networks of knowledge and power to which he belongs. Thus, “as individuals move within a landscape and exercise agency, [they] also reproduce patterns in which each has been habituated, in part through their accumulated learning as members of these groups” (Asselin 2016). This problematic reinforcement can be dismantled through thoughtful, authentic critical analysis, where places instead become a tool for self-reflection, a canvas on which inequities are writ large and made apparent.
Other critics remind scholars that this discourse essentially began as outgrowths of ecology and environmental education. As this field has over time been appended with more and more layers of social complexity, critics argue that the ecological underpinnings of place are eroding. Critical pedagogy of place, for instance, has been critiqued as a highly anthropocentric framing that reduces place to a lens through which we mainly expose cultural conflicts. Bowers (2008) calls for an addendum to the *decolonization* and *rehabilitation* objectives of critical pedagogy of place that explicitly reorients attention to social-ecological systems and environmental injustice. Hutson (2011) similarly suggests that even Tuan’s views of place “have not necessarily been true to the places themselves but were instead locked too much in the realm of human feelings and expression.” Bowers, Hutson, and others point out, somewhat ironically, that place scholarship ought to remember its roots, and where else would this be than in the environment?

Others argue that community-level cultivation of sense of place, can result in oversimplification and sterilization of natural and cultural dimensions alike. Design scholars explain that the language and features used to interpret a place represent a selective narrative of the authors, at the continued expense of disenfranchised perspectives. Hence, Porter (2013) advocates that place-branding strategies “be more flexible in their interpretation of ‘identity’... After all, nature and place cannot be reduced to a singular essence. It is not the role of a single authority to prescribe the meaning of place for all, regardless of its content or expression.”

Thompson and Cantrill (2013) caution readers to judge the *representational validity* of places. That is, to examine how people represent their own places, and ask whether our interpretations of that are accurate. In Porter’s example, the identity of the Blue Ridge Mountain region of Australia has been reduced, at the national stage, to a designed color palette, a series of logos, and a “market-friendly version of place” (Porter 2013), that overlooks the place’s true complexity. The region’s “brand” differs from the way in which its inhabitants represent their place. This conversation finds local relevance as we study the “through the looking glass” effect of Vermont’s place identity. How is Vermont represented to outsiders, and how does that represent, impact or disenfranchise inhabitant communities?

Louise Chawla’s (2000) essay opens by questioning whether the entire field of place scholarship is itself a production of reinforced power dynamics. She encourages place scholars to regain perspective on their own positionality:

“Imagine that, in the beginning, you and your family slept on sidewalks, and still often went hungry, until your parents managed to find space in a new squatter camp on the edge of downtown, where more than 1,000 people settled on 1.5 acres of land. Imagine that there was one water tap for the whole camp, and no toilets, and that men often drank and fought with guns and knives... Imagine that someone from the rich peoples world came...and asked you, ‘What is your favorite place?’” (Chawla 2000).

Chawla explains a heartbreaking placebuilding project in Johannesburg, South Africa, and outlines her application of various strategies to unite a displaced and disempowered community. Ultimately, the project, and the essay, are an implicit meta-analysis of the
hegemonic underpinnings of place scholarship itself. Her essay reminds readers to question the extent to which scholarly machinations are made possible by a system wherein the authors of these ideas are highly privileged, whose capacity to disseminate community planning schemes is partly thanks to pre-existing means and leadership.
Part III: From Place to Practice: The Evolution of Place-Based Education

"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” (Dioum 1968).

This literature reviewed thus far highlights that developing sense of place, within ourselves and within our communities, exposes the nuance of our surroundings and affords a deeper understanding of the conflicts, challenges, or opportunities that we are products from and contributors to. These scholars, like Baba Dioum’s mantra, assume that a deeper understanding of place naturally increases the motivation participate in the act of caring for one’s surroundings.

While this reasoning is elegant, it perpetuates a largely discredited assumption that knowledge yields action. The link between knowledge/understanding of a place and protective action is not so straightforward. Action does not simply “happen,” and there is a rich body of scholarship directed at that gap between knowledge and action. Like the term place itself, the scholarship on this matter is prolific. Greenwood overviews some of the contributors to this conversation over the years:

“...experiential learning, contextual learning, problem-based learning, constructivism, outdoor education, indigenous education, environmental and ecological education, bioregional education, democratic education, multicultural education, community-based education, critical pedagogy itself, as well as other approaches that are concerned with context and the value of learning from and nurturing specific places communities, or regions” (Gruenewald 2003b).

Greenwood’s quote emphasizes that the locus of this scholarship is primarily within the fields of education and pedagogy. Therefore, understanding the connection between place and community building must include a synopsis of the pedagogical principles that yielded modern place-based education.

Hungerford and Volk (1990) were among the first to challenge the connection between environmental knowledge and environmental action in their classic paper, Changing Learning Behavior Through Environmental Education. They describe the goal of environmental education as the production of an environmentally responsible citizen, and demonstrate that environmental knowledge is just one of many prerequisites required for action. They propose 3 suites of variables that preface responsible behavior (action), These are (1) “entry-level” variables, such as environmental sensitivity and basic knowledge of an environmental problem, (2) "ownership variables,” such as deep knowledge of the problem and personal investment in it, and (3) “empowerment variables,” such as knowledge of action strategies that would contribute to resolving the problem, and training/proficiency in performing these action strategies. The authors explain that an educator must cultivate all three of these categories to yield a responsible, acting citizen.
Carmi et al. (2015) apply Hungerford and Volk’s (1990) framework directly to Dioum’s statement, arguing that “environmental understanding is not easily or simply translated into emotion that generates action.” They go as far as to say that substantial knowledge isn’t even necessarily a requirement of action: people who are more knowledgeable about an issue are only motivated to behave responsibly if they have strong emotional connections to it and have the tools to act upon that motivation. They say, “the solution of environmental problems depends not on what people know, understand, or feel about them, but only on what they do (or don’t do)” (Carmi et al. 2015). Based on this reasoning, Pooley and O’Connor (2000) contend that environmental educators ought to be more “interested in changing environmental attitudes, emotions and beliefs, rather than knowledge... [and] need to be targeted as sources of information on which to base their environmental programs.”

Indeed, if there were a pivot point of modern place-based education away from its antecedents, it would be at the shift in the primary objective of imparting environmental sensitivity (i.e. emotion, feelings) over environmental knowledge. Place-based education is about building socio-ecologically responsible citizens (Woodhouse and Knapp 2000), and is therefore in the business of teaching information and imparting ownership and empowerment variables: opportunities to gain environmental sensitivity, deep knowledge of issues, the knowledge of how to make change, proficiency in doing so, and experience with the barriers or catalysts affecting this pursuit (Hines et al. 1986; Hungerford and Volk 1990).

In their review of Environmental Education, Woodhouse and Knapp (2000) draw the divide between traditional education versus place-based education. “One is to prepare students to function in a high-tech, consumer-oriented society. The other is to prepare people to live/work to sustain the cultural/ecological integrity of where they live. To provide experiences and knowledge to actively participate in the democratic process of their communities.”

While this divide has come around in recent literature, the underlying suspicion of the efficacy of traditional education systems is by no means original:

“Which would have advanced the most at the end of a month, the boy who had made his own jackknife from the ore which he had dug and smelted, reading as much as would be necessary for this, or the boy who had attended the lectures on metallurgy at the Institute in the meanwhile, and had received a Rogers’ penknife from his father? Which would be most likely to cut his fingers?” (Thoreau 1845).

Thoreau observes that traditional classroom education misses the mark, and asks for the reconsideration of the ultimate goals of education. John Dewey’s (1915) in *The School and Society*, revisits Thoreau’s observation, articulating that the goals of education ought to be foster well-prepared, effective citizens. Thoreau argues that traditional education fails to do this, and he pushes for a “new education” geared to combatting larger changes in society by expanding the role of education from teacher-pupil relationships, to a larger civic practice. Dewey (1915) argues for an experiential approach to education, one rooted in
place, in which “all studies arise from aspects of the one earth and the one life lived upon it.”

With this growing dissatisfaction with the ends of traditional education came a tandem critique of its means, suggesting that the way in which students are taught is also ineffective. Place-based, experiential education is offered to rectify this, too. Whitehead builds on Dewey’s new education, stressing the importance of relevancy in what is taught:

“The pupils have got to be made to feel that they are studying something and are not merely executing intellectual minuets...The students are alive, and the purpose of education is to stimulate and guide their self-development... The whole book is a protest against dead knowledge, that is to say, against inert ideas” (Whitehead 1959).

Dewey, Whitehead, and Thoreau’s sentiments still resonate in the conclusions of modern place-based scholars. David Orr (1994), for instance, defines his vision for modern education as “instruction directed towards developing a citizenry prepared to live well in a place without destroying it.” David Sobel’s elaborates on this in his pitch for place-based education.

“Place-based education is the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point...emphasizing hands-on, real-world learning experiences, this approach to education increases academic achievement, helps students develop stronger ties to their community, enhances students’ appreciation for the natural world, and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens” (Sobel 2004).

Woodhouse and Knapp (2000) distill the essentials of place-based education into five components that together represent the ends and means of ideal learning. 1) It emerges from particular attributes of place. 2) It is inherently multidisciplinary. 3) It is inherently experiential. 4) It has a broader philosophy than the “learn to earn” system of traditional education. 5) It connects place with self and community.

Place-Based Education Beyond the School

A majority of the contributions to place-based education (i.e. the act of fostering responsible adults through building sense of place) has come from a community of scholars who see the public school system as the garden for cultivating these ends. Yet as the essentials of place-based education continue to gain traction, we find a growing uneasiness in the literature as to whether the traditional school system is the right container to accomplish this expanded task of whole-community wellbeing.

On the one hand, David Sobel plants his flag squarely in the school system as the nexus of community development. “Community vitality and environmental quality are improved through the active engagement of local citizens, community organizations, and environmental resources in the life of the school” (Sobel 2004; emphasis added). Jensen and Schnack (1997) counter that although schools can contribute to the development of responsible, emplaced citizens, the task of community development is too big to fit within
the walls of the school system: “It is not and cannot be the task of the school to solve the political problems of society... Its task is not to improve the world with the help of the pupils' activities.”

Hungerford and Volk's (1990) research suggests reasons for this discomfort. The authors suggest that “the variables associated with [environmental] sensitivity are often not associated with formal education...one of the serious impediments to the kind of instruction recommended in this document is the fact that it differs substantially from typical educational practice.” Furthermore, in a school system with ever-increasing standardization and requirements, educators ask how they can possibly shoehorn all this added substance into the constraints of the existing system.

Chawla (2001) adds a useful critical dimension to this conversation, warning of this assumed association between environmental education and traditional schooling. “For people within privileged industrialized nations, it is easy to confuse environmental education with formal education.” She adds:

“More than 260 million children at the current time fail to attend primary or secondary...more attend starkly under-resourced schools with large classes, hard-pressed teachers, and a rigid national curriculum that leaves little or no scope for environmental topics. Under these conditions, everyday places and people may be the main channels for environmental learning.”

Recognizing these limitations, some are reorienting the locus of place-based education toward a whole-community approach, rather than one that is rooted in a lockstep traditional school system. Vinke argues for this decentralization of educational onus away from the schools and into the community:

“[Environmental education is] any process, in which individuals gain awareness of their environment and acquire the knowledge, values, experiences and the determination which will enable them to act individually and collectively to solve present and future environmental problems” (Vinke 1992).

Greenwood explicitly situates place-based education within the larger community, and lists formal education as just one of several domains acting together to accomplish a well-educated citizenry. He defines place-based education as “a community-based effort to reconnect the process of education, enculturation, and human development to the well-being of community life” (Gruenewald and Smith 2008).

Place-based education has also traditionally focused on a youth audience, believing that responsible young citizens grow up to be good adults. The prevailing attitude among many scholars is that adults are something of a lost cause to place-based education. Adult engagement is cast aside in favor of a "get-them-while-they're-young attitude... Forget about those college students if you want real change” (Sobel 2004). This sentiment can be found among early place-based educators. For instance, Thoreau says, “The more slowly trees grow at first, the sounder they are at the core, and I think the same is true of human beings” (in Sobel 2004). This attitude is also equally prevalent in today's literature. “The
values of ecologically literate and politically motivated adults are shaped by significant life experiences that foster connection—in this case connection with the natural world” (Gruenewald 2003b). Orr claims that a well-adjusted adult depends on “...[connecting] the psyche with the earth in the earliest years... Without this contact with nature, maturity is spurious, resulting in ‘childish adults’ with ‘the world’s flimsiest identity structures’” (Paul Shephard in Orr. 1992).

While decades of place scholars call for an education reform that has yet to materialize, a generation of students have grown to adulthood without encountering, formal or otherwise, the variables of responsible citizenship that place scholars deem essential ingredients of a sustainable community (Hungerford and Volk 1990). Meanwhile, scholars emphasize the importance of intergenerational relationships and mentorship as a critical piece of this modern whole-community model of place-based education. For instance, Manion and Adley (2011) call for an “ongoing production of relations between adults and children within and through place-change processes.” Chawla and Cushing (2007) involve adult community members as critical “role models” who demonstrate environmental sensitivity and responsible action.

Together, these observations position modern place-based education at the cusp of a revolution, wrestling with a re-orientation of both its setting (the locus with respect to the school system), and its audience (children versus adult learners). Whole-communities are thus the becoming the stage and the audience of modern place-based education.

**Whole-Community Engagement**

Placebuilding is synonymous with this expanded pursuit of place-based education: a whole-community approach to learning and engagement, scaled up to incorporate an intergenerational audience and a learning environment de-centralized from the traditional school system. To understand how to engage this broader audience in this expanded setting, I turn to language and frameworks developed in the field of adult pedagogy (or andragogy), particularly the concepts of learning communities and action competence.

**Collaboration and Action:** Stetsenko (2008) contended that this expanded, whole-community stage is the natural setting for learning itself, which is “profoundly social and collaborative, not only in respect to the people engaged in social activity, but also in respect to the places that the activity happens” (Adams and Gupta 2013). Stetsenko's (2008) linkage between learning and collaboration is corroborated by Mocker and Spear’s (1982) and Knowles’ (1986) early work, which show that the effective adult learning is usually self-directed and collaborative. They explain that adult learning is often oriented around solving a real problem or completing a critical life task. Adults come to a learning environment with a goal and motivation. Furthermore, adult peers organized around a common problem are likely the richest sources of learning for one another. Adults bring a rich history of life experience to a learning community, and adult learning is often about contributing and reflecting on the experiences of group members. Knowles compares this against the top-down educational format administered in school systems. More recently, educators began to understand and advocate that this authentic, problem-driven, collaborative format of learning is also a rich and effective method for teaching older
children (Demarest 2015). Youth, like adults, “learn best when they apply their knowledge toward solving authentic problems in real contexts” (Theobald and Curtiss 2012). This collaborative, problem-centered approach to learning and engagement is called Communities of Practice by Wegner (1998) and others. Communities of Practice are groups of learners who have come together to explore an issue, solve a problem, or complete a task. These groups operate in a unique system of (1) joint enterprise through negotiated meaning, (2) mutual engagement and participation, and (3) shared repertoire of language, tools, and skills. Communities of Practice ascribe to the philosophy that learning is a social process (Aguilar and Krasny 2011).

This Community of Practice model meets placebuilding at the concept of action. The fusion of Communities of Practice with action outlets is often referred to as Participatory Action Research or Activity Theory. Krasny and Roth (2010) explain that humans “change or learn when they engage in a productive activity.” Placebuilding practice is an activity in which the environment is changed in the process of action. They provide useful examples of Communities of Practice in action that build sense of place while solving community problems:

"Learning is an outcome of participation in adaptive co-management...adaptive learning-by-doing and collaboration...stakeholders engage in concerted actions that bring about policy change...such social learning is generally situated within a natural resources "dilemma" characterized by common pool resources, multiple stakeholders, interdependence, controversy, complexity, and uncertainty” (Krasny and Roth 2010).

This focus on action builds upon the findings of Hungerford and Volk (1990) that an effective, engaged citizen or group must gain not only knowledge of an issue, but also competency in the technical and political skills required to act, so that community members are “able and willing to be qualified participants” (Jenson and Schnack 1997) in the democratic process. Adams et al. (2016) explain the desired outcomes of action competence:

“Activities that allow people to explore and interpret places together could contribute to developing a collective sense of place and corresponding place meanings. Participatory action research and other participatory approaches raise young people’s critical consciousness, influence how they see themselves in relation to places, ...such activities shift a community’s perception of place from ‘a fixed geographic place to a dynamic, socially-constructed space.’”

Though Adams et al. (2016) reference children, the same is true across generations. In the “Growing up Cities” model of community engagement (Chawla and Cushing 2007), Chawla cultivates action competence among community youth by teaching students to identify problems, parse out their solutions, and determine the levers needed to move toward the solutions. Meanwhile, adults are motivated to support their children, and the students build important intergenerational mentorship and instruction as they realize what action
tasks require partnerships with key adult leaders. The new *Urban Environmental Education Review* (Krasny and Russ 2017) synthesize this whole-community, intergenerational, and action-driven approach to learning:

“[They] engage urban community members in activities directly relevant to the environments in which they live, including the built environment. They engage people in learning about environmental issues and problems faced in daily life—from the everyday to the extraordinary. They stress skills for navigating environmental issues in local spaces.”

The joint communities of practice and action competence model is a decidedly pedagogical approach for engaging communities in placebuilding through what amounts to citizenship training. To the ends of placebuilding, this top-down approach helps create an engaged community that can learn and reflect critically on the issues within their environment and community, and effectively collaborate to enact positive community-level change. This model essentially suggests that *place* is strengthened through a community’s ability to identify and constructively react to problems.

**Building Place Meaning:** The above strategy is contrasted with a bottom-up approach that organizes around cultivating community *sense of place*. This approach focuses on celebration rather than overt education. This approach targets the drivers of sense of place—*place meaning* and *place attachment*—and designs opportunities for community members to cultivate these feelings (Adams 2013). Kudryavtsev et al. (2012) propose that “place meanings can be purposefully developed through two primary mechanisms... (1) creating place meanings through first-hand experiences in places and (2) learning place meanings from written, oral, and other sources, including communication with other people.” Wattchow and Brown (2011) employ storytelling, interpretation, community sharing, poetry, photography, and other media to reflect on “what places are and how they can be cared for.” The authors argue that place-meaning can be transmitted to an audience through participation in these types of community events, even if the event is physically removed from the place to which it refers. The authors also recognize the inherent perspective biases and critical issues inherent in choosing what/whose place meanings to incorporate in such activities, and thus emphasize the importance of allowing participants to be the source of expressed place meanings.

 Alvesson and Berg (1992) comment on why this practice is so effective at cultivating sense of place: “Shared meanings, held in common by the collective, are historically generated and tend to be durable.” While this “collective” may contain myriad, perhaps mutually exclusive place meanings, the act of gathering communities to hear and voice these perspectives is an exercise in finding common values and articulating components of personal identity that are shared because of their origins in place. Stokowski (2002) adds to this, suggesting that these sorts of events yield an emergent place-making process also: “People actively create meaningful places through conversation and interaction with others.” Taken together, such placebuilding events share existing perspectives around a community’s sense of place, and the event itself is a container where new place meanings develop.
Conclusion

Place is our surroundings infused with the values, meanings, and significance that we’ve ascribed to them as individuals and communities over generations. Developing an awareness of this—a sense of place—is about recognizing our relationship with place as a feedback loop: our natural and cultural landscape shapes our values as much as our values shape the character of our landscape. Communities that appreciate this strengthen their connective tissue. Elements in a landscape previously considered unimportant, uninteresting, or unnoticed, become opportunities for reflection and growth. The nuances in our place unveil deeper understandings of the conflicts, challenges, or opportunities that we are derived from, personally and collectively. To cultivate sense of place is to look under our rugs and into our closets, exposing perspectives and problems writ in our surroundings that are difficult to see or uncomfortable to confront through other lenses. Cultivating a sense of place is also to celebrate that each complex landscape is the collective artwork of its community; to take pride laying in the bed we’ve made.

When place is a starting point, there is no such thing as a community problem that does not impact each of its members. This inseparability between ourselves and our surroundings ought to be the intrinsic motivation to be actively engaged participants in community, and to care about and act on environmental issues or injustice that manifests locally. Yet our society rarely considers place at all—the consequences of this are manifest in a disconnected citizenship unable to deeply connect with or act upon all but the most immediate of threats.

The task of community placebuilding, by that or any other rotating name, is to reorient the pursuit of education, democracy, and personal growth squarely in place. This practice is not new, but the scales at which it operates are. After a century of treading water in an increasingly prescriptive educational system, place-based education now looks to whole communities as the stage and the target of this evolving scholarship, pedagogy, and philosophy. Place is an antidote for apathy, injustice, and environmental destruction. It is a process and a sentiment; it is teaching knowledge, exercising action, and communicating meaning. It is looking outward to understand ourselves, and looking within to explain the largest challenges. It is about showing people where they are, and helping one another live well there (Orr 1992).
Literature Cited


