

‘Everywhere is Somewhere’ – Place and Identity | Torbay | 30 September 2019

In his 1974 book, *Soft City*, the travel writer and novelist Jonathan Raban wrote:

Loyalty to and hunger for place are among the keenest of city feelings.¹

He might just as well have said ‘the keenest of human feelings’, because cities are a product of human need – social, economic and cultural. Cities, towns, parishes, villages are all forms of human community and congregation, all are capable of stirring those feelings of loyalty and hunger, and all are capable of being ‘great places.’

The factors that contribute to place-making – to making places great – can include art architecture; landscape and environment; history and heritage; food, customs and traditions; craft, design and technology; planning and infrastructure; cultural institutions, literature; parks and green spaces.... the list is extensive – and will be particular to the place in question.

And since place-making – certainly in the way in which we think of it today – is a human construct, the most significant and influential factor in – let’s call them ‘successful’ places – is people. So the main point I want to make today is to urge those of you who are engaged in place-making to start and finish with people.

I’m going to refer a lot to Common Ground. This small, but highly influential, art and environment charity was set up in 1983 by Sue Clifford, an environmental planner by training, and Angela King, a wildlife campaigner. Common Ground² has championed, and in many ways pioneered, the connection between nature and culture, and the power of communities to discover, conserve and interpret what’s become known as ‘local distinctiveness’.

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In one of their first publications, *Holding Your Ground*, Angela & Sue wrote:

The parish may not hold anything which is remarkable in regional or national terms, but its specialness to its inhabitants is that they are part of its history and future; its views are their views and its culture is a part of their very being.³

New York’s Project for Public Places describes ‘Eleven Principles for Creating Great Community Places’ and at number One they put *The Community is the Expert*. Here’s what they say:

The important starting point in developing a concept for any public space is to identify the talents and assets within the community. In any community there are people who can provide an historical perspective, valuable insights into how the area functions, and an understanding of the critical issues and what is meaningful to people.⁴

Great places are built on community and community is built on meaning – shared identity, shared values, common enterprise and experiences. And meaning is made manifest by the signifiers of a community’s culture – the art, buildings, stories and environment that exemplify that community.

Great places are characterised by community leadership – that is to say they are fundamentally democratic in design.

Great places occur and thrive because people – both residents and visitors – value and engage with their history, culture, the built and natural environment.

In great places people take pride in the locality, feel a sense of belonging and of communion with others, have a sense of curiosity about their place, and a real personal commitment to it. They are as we say 'invested in' that place.

Tim Dee, radio producer, birder and author – also a trustee of Common Ground – writes in the introduction to *Ground Work*, a selection of essays on the theme of place:

*Places are anthropogenic creations called into being by the meeting of humans and their environment ... We make what has been called patterned ground. Place-making is a signal of our species. We make good ones and bad ones, and plenty of neither-here-nor-there ones. Good bad or indifferent they operate on all their constituents.*⁵

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Place has a profound influence on how we see ourselves. It's intricately and intimately bound up in the stories we tell about ourselves and what makes us who we are. In her book *The Fields Beneath*, the writer and historian Gillian Tindall peeled away the layers of history beneath the village of Kentish Town in London:

*We are very ready today [she said in 1977] to concede to people's need for meaningful human relationships, yet we fail almost entirely to realise that other relationships, with places, objects, views – other supports for the human psyche – may be just as profoundly important, and that, if these are denied, the resulting impoverishment of the person may have deep and lasting consequences.*⁶

This chimes so clearly and resonantly with our present day preoccupation with and concern for 'wellbeing'.

People need to identify. What matters is what they choose to identify with, or relate to. What matters is what has significance for people and how that is reflected and brought to life in the common realm.

We look to the things that anchor us in a particular place, and over time we put on the habits of a place, we may assume the accent, we might even adopt the local dress, we respond to the opportunities and expectations of the places we are drawn to. So that while we talk a lot today about place-shaping, it's often the place that shapes us.

People say "I'm a proud Yorkshireman" or "I'm Glaswegian through and through". And we don't have to have been born in place to feel a deep sense of connection – we 'put down roots', we 'adopt' a place or a culture. Conversely, if we leave a place we feel 'uprooted', we will take with us reminders of that place in the form of pictures, objects, souvenirs, stories.

In forensics there is something called 'Locard's exchange principle' which holds that every contact is in effect an exchange – evidence is transferred both ways. A place leaves its mark on us, just as we leave a mark on a place.

On the train I often pass through the town where I grew up. When I see the striking white 1937 modernist building of Surbiton station I feel connected to the streets and fields and homes, the people and events that shaped the first 18 years of my life. I'm reminded that there were 96 signs on the station saying 'Surbiton'. This isn't just nostalgia – it's something more profound – I'm reminded how important the railway was to suburban development in general, to that community in particular, to my father commuting daily to London, to my childhood as a young trainspotter. And it makes me aware how much pride went into the railway architecture – just as it did in its earliest years when Brunel and others were pioneering the design of bridges, viaducts, stations and tunnels that characterise and still help us define so much of the South West.

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Connecting with place can mean connecting with culture, landscape, memory, a notion of what it means to be Cornish or Cockney, Caribbean or Cumbrian. And the triggers for this connection lie often in local detail – the signs on the station, the type of stone, the shape of a fingerpost, an ancient tree; the style of a loaf, the name of a cheese; an accent, a dialect, a landscape, a streetscape, a festival, custom or tradition.

It may have to do with what has been fundamental to creating or defining a particular place – the geology, the industry, the climate – things that are now barely visible yet we recognise their influence, and if we peel away the layers – like Gillian Tindall did with Kentish Town – we begin to appreciate their significance.

I live now in the Blackmore Vale in North Dorset. Hardy Country. In fact Hardy referred to it as ‘the Vale of the Little Dairies’ and though the dairy farming industry has drastically declined – and there’s no longer a livestock market anywhere in Dorset – you cannot help being conscious of how the flat vale of lush grassland suited dairy farming and how that process shaped the landscape with its hedgerows enclosing small fields, its hamlets and farmsteads, its cowsheds and cart tracks.

Barbara Bender, a professor of anthropology, from Branscombe in East Devon has a particular interest in the influence of landscape and has also worked for 25 years on an oral archive of Branscombe. She says:

For me love of place comes with the detail, and in trying to understand the stories and histories that go to make a living landscape; comes, too, with a sense of belonging.⁷

For me the book that best illuminates the phenomenon of place and its importance to our culture and our sense of self, is *England in Particular : ‘a celebration of the commonplace, the local, the vernacular and the distinctive’*. Written by Sue Clifford and Angela King of Common Ground, it’s a detailed compendium of local distinctiveness, referencing everything from ammonites to zig-zag paths, from straw bears to gas holders, blue vinney cheese to chapels and mosques, in all their variety, difference and diversity. What this rich catalogue does is to invite curiosity, to say ‘look around’, ‘dig where you stand’, because what matters is in the fields and the streets and the walls and the voices around you.

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Today every place is struggling to distinguish itself from its neighbours, to stand out among the morass of corporate logos and high street brands. We have a desperate crisis in our towns when every corporate-style shopping centre or out of town business park, is indistinguishable from the next.

And when we could be anywhere we could be anyone, we become faceless, deracinated, we suffer from what the existentialists called ‘metaphysical weightlessness’. Because meaning and identity derive from difference as much as from commonality, and difference is in the detail, the local, the distinctive. Here’s Common Ground again:

The forces of homogenisation rob us of both tangible and invisible things that have meaning to us; they erase the fragments from which we piece together stories of nature and history; they stunt our sensibilities and starve our imaginations.⁸

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So what can we do. How do we identify or create a vernacular for the 21st century? Well, firstly proceed with caution. As Tim Dee says in the introduction to *Ground Work*:

Calculated attempts to make places often show the dead hand of management. New public spaces can often suffer in this regard; public art, too.⁵

Sue Clifford & Angela King put it this way:

*When things are looked at on a larger scale, sensitivity is lost. People become 'the public'; streets and fields become 'sites'; woods and streams become 'natural resources'. These abstractions render professionals forgetful of lives, livelihoods and places. ...Locality needs to be defined from the inside.*⁸

Or as Ian Sansom puts it:

*The bigger the picture, the broader the perspective: the more you see, but the less you care.*⁹

So start local and start with people. Empower your community, ask people what they care about, what's important to them about the place where they live. Enable them to develop curiosity about its history, geology, industry, nature, its personalities. Give them the tools to develop an understanding of their locality by introducing them to archives and records, to artefacts and art, and giving them access to the voices and stories with which the locality is woven together.

This is not about a chocolate box version of the past, or nostalgia packaged up for tourists. It's about history living through the present, rediscovered, reinterpreted and remade in all its richness, variety and robust particularity. As Common Ground have said local distinctiveness may not be about beauty, but it must be about truth.

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Some of you may be thinking local distinctiveness is all very well for small communities, villages and parishes, but what about towns and cities. Well, in my view one of the great things about local distinctiveness is that it's 'scaleable'. After all, cities and towns are to some extent aggregations of villages, communities or localities. The key is to find the human scale.

Back in the early 2000s the then Heritage Lottery Fund had a highly successful grant scheme – influenced in part by Common Ground. You may remember the Local Heritage Initiative (LHI). Its success lay in the fact that it encouraged enquiry and research, a ground up approach in which people could investigate and discover for themselves the significance that lay just below the surface, then interpret and celebrate it through exhibitions, films, books, artwork, plays. It actively encouraged creative expression and its archive is full of fascinating publications, recordings and images highlighting what makes places special – and why they have meaning and enduring significance for their communities.

The scheme eventually morphed into other grant programmes, most notably it influenced the development of the Landscape Partnership Scheme, operating with greater strategic scope but essentially fostering the same approach to community involvement and participation.

The *Moor than Meets the Eye* project on Dartmoor has been one of a number of exemplars in the South West, empowering communities through art, archaeology, nature, archives, to discover and celebrate the unique landscape, history and community of Dartmoor. Although the partnership operates on a landscape scale, the majority of its projects are local.

By adopting local distinctiveness as a strategic principle, and embedding a people-centred approach, a range of independent but interlinked projects can develop into a critical mass. This in turn increases shared learning and enhances the overall impact and sustainability of place-making.

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Some of you may be thinking that Great Places should be about big capital projects – like Turner Contemporary in Margate – or major public art works like the Angel of the North. And certainly there

is a place for these landmark projects – if they are well conceived and supported by local communities. But not all places can afford such statements, and buildings in particular can be expensive and troublesome to run. They won't succeed without a clear rationale, a grounding in the needs of their community and relevance to the locality.

Successful built interventions can, though, act as real catalysts to physical and cultural regeneration – take Kresen Kernow, Cornwall's new archive centre in Redruth, a stunning conversion of a former brewery, breathing new life into the building, creating a new focus in the town and giving people a phenomenal resource through which to learn about their history. As someone put it at the opening – a place of inspiration and aspiration. The real proof of its success will be in the projects and initiatives it spawns – through public engagement.

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Some of you may be thinking, this is all about heritage, what about the contemporary? As an arts practitioner myself and someone who regularly collaborates with other artists I'm very aware that the most interesting creative outcomes often occur at the intersection of history or heritage with the contemporary arts. Writers, artists, musicians, filmmakers, often find inspiration in that liminal space, and in response to the details and peculiarities that define a place. All forms of creative practice have a vital role to play in generating new entry points to heritage, new ways of seeing, and stimulating that curiosity which is so essential for understanding place and connecting communities.

And the arts as a commodity bring to communities hugely valuable imagination, enterprise, vitality – the powerhouse of reinvention and renewal.

Great Places that do not have a sense of renewal, that do not continue to draw on the resources of history, culture, nature and the arts will eventually become grey places.

A great place is not invented once and for all, it needs to be organic, developmental, self reproducing. Charles Landry has been an influential figure for more than three decades in encouraging cities to look at the role of culture and creativity in fostering distinctiveness and quality – as a means of increasing social and economic value. In *The Creative City Index* he writes:

*Cities are living organisms. They have periods of growth, stasis and decline. The chief purpose of acting creatively in an urban policy-making setting is to encourage cities to become energetic and vital and ultimately viable and vibrant.*¹⁰

I'm reminded of something I learned recently, that the Portuguese Man o' War – what we commonly think of as a jellyfish – is in fact a colony of organisms working together. Each has a role – feeding, digesting, reproducing etc. In other words it functions rather like a city or community in which we are utterly dependent on one another. We are obliged to work in partnership – I communicate with a mobile phone but haven't a clue how to make one; I depend on the people who have that skill or knowledge. We need teachers to educate our children, doctors to cure us, train drivers and train manufacturers to get us about; some of us need to be farmers, or stonemasons, steelworkers or musicians. Our existence is predicated on inter-dependence, co-operation and partnership. And great places are built on partnership and collaboration.

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So any attempt to define what makes a place distinctive or 'great' starts with people. Glasgow's strapline used to be 'Glasgow's Miles Better' but I notice it has changed to 'People Make Glasgow'.

And people change, their attitudes and preoccupations evolve, but the core elements of distinctiveness remain pretty constant – written in the DNA of a place. As people come and go they re-discover it.

Places remain vital through absorption and reinvention. Common Ground again:

Just as nature is always experimenting, a locality, too, must be open to change, permeable to new people, ideas, buildings, plantings. But change may enrich or it may deplete, and richness is under siege....The differences that places show are just the first glimpse of richness.⁸

Every place is unique and our duty is to understand how it is unique and to preserve that – not in aspic but as a living force that shapes the present and the future.

So in summary:

- Place is about people
- People respond to detail – defined as local distinctiveness
- Galvanise people. Give them the tools to develop curiosity, to discover and decide for themselves what matters, what has meaning
- Work together and use the resources around you. This will include educators, artists, architects, designers, planners, museums, environmental groups... etc
- Engage in dialogue, undertake creative research
- Make connections and build partnerships
- Your place is special, peculiar, particular – hold on to that, go with that
- By all means look at what people are doing elsewhere, but avoid off-the-shelf solutions. What's important about Frome or Totnes or Altringham is not so much what they have done, but how they have gone about it
- Allow space to evolve and adapt, to let creative interpretation and inspiration flourish.

As Common Ground say:

Everywhere is somewhere. What makes each place unique is the conspiracy of nature and culture; the accumulation of story upon history upon natural history.⁸

And if you want a definition of a Great Place, try this from Charles Landry:

You can feel and sense the buzz, it is obvious to residents and visitors alike. It accentuates its distinctiveness in a relaxed and unthreatening way. It is at ease with itself. Its history, culture and traditions are alive, receptive to influence and change, absorbing new ideas which in turn evolve and develop its distinctiveness and culture.¹⁰

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