

Map My Culture: Community and Space in Small Cities

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Editor's Introduction

The Community-Universities Research Alliance (CURA)-funded Mapping Quality of Life in Small Cities project is a multi-year, federally-funded collaboration that brings together research in Prince George, Kamloops, Port Moody, Nanaimo, and the Comox Valley. The premise is that small cities occupy a “third space,” connected to large urban centres but also intimately linked to rural, resource-extraction frontier traditions. They fall into the phylum of ‘cities’ (not ‘village’ or ‘town’) while simultaneously falling outside of the dominant paradigm of urbanity. Neither Smallville nor Metropolis, the Small City maps out its own compromises and inventions. What does that add to (or subtract from) ‘quality of life’? How can it be measured?

In the bright spring of 2009, the CURA Project enterprise shifted its attention to the Comox Valley. The cluster of communities on the east coast of Vancouver Island – including Comox, Courtenay, Cumberland, and nearby Campbell River – were identified early on in the CURA project development process as a partner “small city” precisely because of its curious and distinctive web of villages and towns, and its dynamic visual arts accomplishments. Map My Culture was, however, the first tangible manifestation of that engagement and it opened up a new vista of questions and observations.

The Comox Valley, with a population of about 60,000 – nearly 100,000 when Campbell River is added into the equation – is one of the province’s best-kept secrets. Located up-Island from the province’s capital city, Victoria, and from another, more centrally-located small city, Nanaimo, it is a growing conurbation fed principally by immigration from Alberta. The economy is a diverse one, based on value-added agriculture (like award-winning fromageries, wineries, micro-breweries, bison ranches, bespoke meat cutters, and oyster farms), small enterprise, and cultural industries. The communities’ roots, however, are firmly planted in resource extraction. The estuary framed by Courtenay and Comox bristles with the stumps of thousands upon thousands of fishing weir pegs, some carbon-dated back 1200 years. The Pentlatch-K’omox societies were joined in the mid-nineteenth century by Euro-Canadian farmers, whalers, fishers, and coalminers. The village of Cumberland was once the site of the largest Chinatown in Canada and the jewel of a thrumming colliery empire owned by the legendary Dunsmuir clan. Mining yielded to forest industries and, ultimately, services. The outlier community of Campbell River experienced a similar trajectory over its first century, building a reputation on the salmon fisheries, forestry, and mining, but one

that is increasingly challenged by an exploding leisure sector and a rapidly shrinking resource industry. Despite these similarities, the four principal villages/towns/cities in this chain sheltering beneath the Beaufort Range reflect, in their persistent and mutual autonomy, elements of those distinctive economic histories.

What is also immediately apparent is the communities' efforts to wrestle with issues around 'culture.' The Comox Valley in particular – which includes the artist colony islets of Hornby and Denman – is a vital centre of cultural production. Painters, ceramicists, and sculptors thrive in this environment, as do musicians. There is, too, an archipelago of sites of cultural management, including the dominant Comox Valley Art Gallery and the Museum At Campbell River, but also a robust civic museum in Cumberland, a celebrated paleontology museum in Courtenay, the Canadian Airforce Museum at 19 Wing-Comox, the Campbell River Public Art Gallery, many private galleries in town and country, the Sid Williams Theatre in Courtenay, several small-but-perfectly-formed music venues and at least two major annual outdoor concerts (the Vancouver Island Music Festival in Courtenay and the Big Time Out in Cumberland). First Nations communities, too, are distinguished in this region by the quality of their artistic production and cultural venues. This is especially true of the abundant public art on Kwakwaka'wakw land in Campbell River and on Quadra Island, as well as on the K'omox Reserve, where the Band's own gallery competes with at least three private aboriginal operations. The conference's host institution, North Island College (NIC), is a hothouse of education and training in the areas of liberal arts and sciences but, as well, the Comox Valley Campus offers the NIC diploma in Fine Arts and partners with Emily Carr University of Art & Design to offer a Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts (the only BFA offered north of Victoria). Vancouver Island's north-east coast, in terms of cultural activity, punches well above its weight.

All of which raises questions about where one locates 'culture' in small cities. Where does culture – defined broadly but including values and sensibilities and ways of living in addition to the arts – reside? Is it in the official (typically civic-run) venues? In the muddy concert-ground field? Is it in the remnants of an ancient estuarial fishing industry or at the sealed-up pithead at Bevan Mines? Do cultural industries like museums and galleries stimulate or compartmentalize creative understandings of identity and place? How are the experiences of the Comox Valley alike and/or different when compared with other small BC cities?

These were questions that opened the Map My Culture project. Although the conference title provoked a syncopated raising of eyebrows, its meaning was immediately clear to runners and cyclists in the research group who, familiar with the highly popular Map My Run and Map My Ride online software, got the allusion to the play between space and activity. Is culture something we go to see? Where does one, as an individual, go to engage with it? Is it something that we carry with us along the way? Do we take it away? What is its imprint beneath our feet? And, ultimately, to what extent is it a personal (and personalize-able) phenomenon?

The proceedings of this three-day gathering reflect all of these concerns. Nearly fifty people participated in sessions that included a workshop on Web 2.0, more than a dozen scholarly papers, two roundtables, a reception, incidents of guerrilla art, and kayaking. The CURA project team,

based at Thompson Rivers University (TRU), was heavily represented by faculty and students. Others came from UBC (Vancouver and Okanagan), the University of Victoria, Simon Fraser University, the University of Regina, and the City of Nanaimo. Three countries were represented at the sessions, making this North Island College's first truly international conference.

The participants presented and addressed questions of cultural ownership and cultural production, as well as the role of cultural institutions in the creation of community. Richard Mackie, an independent scholar with a long record of research in the Comox Valley, set the tone by problematizing the colonial legacies of Euro-Canadian cultures on Vancouver Island. His paper underlines the ineluctable fact of cultural agendas in the Valley and conscious efforts to imprint Imperial aesthetics and ways of being onto Indigenous space. These themes were explored further and in novel ways by the first roundtable, which assessed the ways in which the newest of newcomers identify and accommodate themselves to the dominant culture and its spaces. Julie Drolet and Jeanette Robertson (both from TRU) and Carlos Teixeira of UBC-Okanagan tackled this topic from the perspective of specialists working with immigrants, while NIC's Sue de Bruin-Eiselen, a Psychology instructor from South Africa, layered the personal over the theoretical. These were themes explored as well by TRU's Jim Hoffman and Ron Smith in papers that target the intersections between venue, practice, and identity in terms of, respectively, live and film theatre.

Norm Friesen, Canada Research Chair at TRU, took the conversation into the wired age. His discussion and workshop, ably assisted by NIC's Brent McIntosh, illustrates how a virtual space can nevertheless become a high street of cultural exchange and rhetoric. Whether one is fabricating crafts for sale or blogging on trends in film production, the Web 2.0 environment empowers the artist and arts observer in ways that speak to a self-tailored environment of commerce and citizenship. Technological opportunity lay at the heart, too, of Dave Whiting's presentation on ways to manage and exploit digital cultural assets.

In a conference on 'maps' it was inevitable that representations of space and the web of relations between the mind and the chart, would loom large. Bill McConnell, a Psychology instructor from NIC, shared the outcomes of a complex study of community fear of criminal activity. This was a project that engaged, also, a Sociologist (Roger Albert) and an Anthropologist/Cartographer (Jim Anderson), both of NIC. It also entailed a huge amount of student work in the field. Amanda Crabbe of TRU made a comparable foray into the cartography of culture by mapping poverty and deprivation across the Thompson Valleys. In this she was clearly influenced by her co-panellist and mentor, Gilles Viaud. Barb Meneley of the University of Regina takes a very different approach to mapping: as an artist concerned with representations of space she experiments with participatory and inclusive ways to put culture 'on the map.' Her attempt to map her cultural space as she moves through it is probably the most literal and serendipitous application of the conference's title.

Most of the remaining papers address aspects of 'making' culture. This was a theme introduced by NIC English instructor Joseph Dunn, whose enterprise examined public spaces in which active 'fathering' can be conducted and observed. Arguing that 'motherhood' activities enjoy a wider array of hospitable sites of engagement, Dunn participated in an action research project in which

fathers were encouraged to visibly and publicly practice fatherhood, note the practices of other fathers, and provide casual mentoring to one another. This conception of 'culture' that locates in the everyday was also explored by the Museum At Campbell River's Ken Blackburn, who provided a metaphorically cosmological mandate for engagement with the cultural 'dark matter' which binds social relations.

That the manufacture of culture has both political and economic ramifications was the focus of the Community Roundtable, the records of which could not be added into the Proceedings. What the ensuing discussion highlighted was developed by papers presented by Sharon Karsten of SFU and Denman Island and Comox Valley resident and academic Pauline Thompson (Eberle Consultants and UVic) who cracked open "The Comox Valley Cultural Development Plan." This session was rounded out by Ross Nelson's dissection of practices in Sweden, which include the intentional development of 'Cultural Clusters,' many of which erupt in small cities.

The kayaking event on the Conference's last day was a combination of paddling and mapping, an opportunity to demonstrate how a small group of individuals participating in the same event in the same space, will conceive of it in myriad ways. The results – photographs and maps – were later displayed in the George Sawchuk Gallery of the Comox Valley Art Gallery.

The Mapping Culture project, with its focus on quality of life measurements, definitions, and outcomes, offers an important opportunity to small cities. It provides – as was the case at Map My Culture – a platform on which to debate and redefine 'culture.' If one theme emerged more forcefully than others at the Comox Valley sessions, it was the contention that culture is a force of complex dimensions, one that permeates and at the same time propels. This takes the dialogue outside the walls of institutions and onto the real and virtual streets.

Overall, there was a consistency of message embedded in the papers, discussions, roundtables, panels, workshops, and productions (led by TRU Canada Research Chair Ashok Mathur's cell of student guerrilla artists who documented and reinterpreted in a variety of mediums the ongoing experience of the conference). This was also true of the kayaking event on the final day. These key themes might be distilled into three principle observations.

First, it is possible and perhaps necessary to conceive of culture in small cities as spatially sensitive and precise. Fewer people means that, apart from large and overarching cultural themes (some of which are as divisive as they are unifying), the experience and understanding of cultural production and social cultures involves small numbers of participants in very particular circumstances. They haven't the weight of numbers one finds in a large city. Agendas must, perforce, be more pointed. Whether it is the revelatory experience of observing a goodly number of fathers engaging in the practices of fatherhood, the (simultaneously comforting and chilling) realization that one's fear of crime in a neighbourhood is not unique, or the enormous difficulty of getting cultural agendas onto the civic agenda, one senses the sharpness of cultural practice – a sharpness essential and key to its survival. In the absence of a sustaining critical mass, the few must push that much harder.

Second, small cities like the Comox Valley resist the commodification of culture. This is in part because the marketplace of culture requires more clients than are available in the small city setting. One might seek to commodify aboriginal art or a music event, but market saturation occurs so fast that it cannot become an endless promotional cycle.

Third (and following on from the second), the inability of commercial interests to utterly break the bonds of local cultures built on tribal, ethnic, and class identities creates the possibility of dwelling beyond – on the frontier of – dominant metropolitan cultures. Less able and thus less likely to attend “culture” in its places of display and worship, the small city dweller finds culture less prescribed and more opportunistic. This is not to suggest a rosy picture: that opportunism often throws up duds. A common industrial heritage means, for example, a plethora of shrines to our forestry/mining/fishing heritage. But democratization of experience makes what is available, arguably available to more in the small city, while at the same time making membership on local boards and direct participation in local planning processes involving culture a not-very-elitist proposition.

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The Courtenay Museum contributed space for a reception on the first night, which event was enriched by the liberality of Beaufort Winery and Surgenor’s Micro-Brewery. North Island College very generously contributed substantial in-kind resources, including space for the first day’s event, support for marketing and registration, a webpage, and management of the project’s accounts. In this regard, the work of Alexandra Khan and Susan Auchterlonie merits recognition and thanks. Most importantly, Telka Duxbury and Alison Sharp, two NIC work-study employees, helped pull the event together in record time. Shannon Snaden was added to the roster to help on the day and Catherine Gilbert of the Campbell River Museum thereafter assisted mightily with the Proceedings.

Emily Hope of TRU put the finishing touches on this collection, for which I am very grateful.

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