Ground Is Someone's Land: Speculations on Community Engagement

ELIZABETH SWANSON
University of Kentucky

Landscapes are a reflection of cultural values. Over time, patterns of development may be read like a text, written within the building and unbuilding of physical form. As we travel the globe, we place ourselves according to the signs we see and understand the traditions and customs of those who live there by this specific inscription of space. Rome is a reflection of Italian urbanity; Havana, a reflection of Cuban independence. The rolling countryside of Kentucky is a reflection of rural traditions rooted in horses, bluegrass, and tobacco, while the unrelenting grid of Chicago and the sprawl of its surrounding suburbs reveal its history as an industrial hub. Whether urban or rural, highly manicured or seemingly natural, the landscape itself carries the mark of its author, the society that lives within its fold.

There is a type of landscape, however, where this traditional way of reading the land is more complicated, due to both their global significance and local position. 'Biodiversity hotspots' are the richest and most threatened landscapes of plant and animal life on Earth, containing nearly half of all terrestrial species, yet covering less the 2% of planet's land area. Their ecological significance is worldwide and the rapid pace of their destruction should concern all of us. Biodiversity hotspots are also areas of high cultural diversity and often, rapid population growth. In addition, many of the human communities in hotspots are poor and disenfranchised from the processes of modern development. While plans for conservation may be imagined globally, they have an immediate impact locally upon the people who call the hotspot home. As landscapes, biodiversity hotspots are more than a text of local tradition: they represent an active and unfolding lesson of globalization that reveals the intricacy of issues facing the field of development.

Since May, I have been working with The Healthy Communities Initiative (HCI) at Conservation International, an organization that focuses on the complexity of these issues. Comprised of a multi-disciplinary team, the Healthy Communities Initiative works under the central hypotheses that:

•• environmental quality and quality of life are linked; and

•• effective community engagement is a central task of conservation and development.

HCI has been is involved in 18 community-based conservation projects across Latin America, Africa, and Asia[1] and over the past 1-1/2 years has evaluated its five-year portfolio of programs. By doing so, it stands as a unique example of contemporary conservation, particularly the complexity at the interface of conservation and development: theory which has been planned, implemented, and evaluated in the field. While the goal of conservation differs greatly from that of architecture-the former seeking to preserve relatively 'empty' space and the latter designing habitable space – the lessons of community engagement, specifically, the need to address social issues such as participation and power dynamics, remain the same. HCI believes that in order to reach goals of conservation in areas that are inhabited, people must be taken into consideration and engaged correctly.

While the majority of my work with HCI centers on the making of one specific publication that describes the cross-portfolio of their program, I've been equally influenced by the context within which the work is situated. My goal for sharing my experience with HCI is two-fold: that we may learn to engage communities in a more effective and meaningful way; and that our profession may become more involved within the process of development, both at home and abroad.

Over the last thirty years, conservation strategies have shifted to become intimately linked to development. Increasingly, international non-profit organizations search for ways to improve quality of life as a means to protect the Earth's most fragile and biologically threatened landscapes.

These approaches represent a major theoretical shift away from the earlier, top-down strategies that dominated 20th century conservation. Following the Yellowstone model of the national

park.[2] the previous work of conservation organizations, in partnership with national governments, revolved around the designation and enforcement of boundaries: the establishment of protected areas preceded the concern of what to do about local communities affected by the declaration. These strategies, however, have often fallen short, as they fail to consider the complexity of political and social contexts that affect those living within the domain. Project efforts in Guatemala,[3] show why:

Until the mid-1980's, military administrations governed Guatemala, resulting in the annihilation of over 440 villages and massive internal displacement, with 150,000 fleeing to neighboring Mexico and an equal number dead. Not long after civilian rule was reestablished in 1986, the Guatemalan government and other international agencies enlisted Conservation International to implement the Maya Biosphere Reserve within the Peten region recognized internationally for its biological and ecological significance. In the following years, a number of accords were instituted in order to facilitate the peace process; among these, a stipulation that unused national lands and social funds be distributed back to the landless peasants. As indigenous people and rural families made their way toward a claim within the Peten, many settled within the protected area, thus unwittingly affecting the biodiversity objectives set forth by effort of international conservationists.

Because of the sensitive political history, eviction via 'boundary enforcement' was anathema. As the government sought to overcome the memory of previous 'enforcements,' working *with* newly settled communities living within the park's boundary was essential. Instead, CI designed a series of points of entry based on assessments of community need, specifically with regard to quality of life. After demonstrating good will and assistance in the form of health and education support, the project was eventually able to incorporate into its effort the development of land management plans for sustainable growth.

This effort reflects the shifting attitudes since the mid-1980's toward more inclusive, "bottom-up" strategies that include local communities in decision-making processes. In his book, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*, published in 1983, Robert Chambers celebrated the value of 'local knowledge' and argued that 'researchers, scientists, administrators and fieldworkers rarely appreciate the richness and validity of rural people's knowledge, or the hidden nature of rural poverty."[4] Chambers continued by calling for a series of dualistic 'reversals' that could effectively equalize the gap between rich and poor, urban and rural, modern and traditional. Seen as a more democratic and therefore a more culturally-sensitive approach to dealing with the rural poverty, Chambers' call for community participation in development was seconded by conservation publications with similar themes, leading to the eventual linkage of conservation to development.

While critiques of Chambers' reversals and the meaning of 'community participation' have subsequently arisen, the recognition that *people matter* remains. For those involved in conservation and development (C&D), the question has become how? How do we best incorporate local knowledge and community participation to create long-term goals for conservation? How do we arrive at a method of project design and implementation that is both participatory and effective?

The answer to these questions proves more difficult than one might think. As the focus of conservation programs shifts toward participatory approaches aligned with development, those involved are still faced with a number of vexing questions on a variety of levels. In his article, "The Irrelevance of Development Studies," Michael Edwards states that the most troubling aspect of contemporary, so-called participatory approaches lies in their tendency to treat people as objects of study rather than subjects of their own domain.[5] Because many development programs focus on the transmission of technical knowledge (from the outside organization to the community members), there exists a basic inequality between the participants of the partnership. The power-dynamic is always shifted toward the knowledgeable "expert."

While proponents of participation concede this reality, the problem with many approaches is their prescription that those in charge relinquish control. Daniel and Carl Taylor represent this view in their recent book, *Just and Lasting Change*. They state, "Those in authority must relinquish control, gently and more quickly than they may think comfortable – just as a parent must learn to trust increasing capabilities in a child as he or she grows up.[6]" Aside from going into the obvious paternalism of the statement, it hints at the unlikelihood of such a scenario: success relies on the good will or moral inclination of the outside organization. It also indicates a kind of distillation of the community dynamic itself: the comparison to children is suggestive of many popular images that portray local or indigenous populations via an idealized simplicity. We'll return to the issue of these images a bit later.

Reliance on such methods do not guarantee long-term success, as they tend to rely on assumptions of value with regard to power rather than seek an understanding of existing positions of strength. Rather than strive for *equality* within a power dynamic, HCI's approach is one that recognizes *difference*. The scales of power are not, and should not, be the same, if only because the position of any outside organization – whether involved in conservation, development, or architecture – will always be different than that of a local population. Leveling authority into a so-called equality is not the point. Rather, the goal is to understand who's in charge in what sphere, with the awareness that most powerful leader in any given situation may shift. Likewise, the leadership within any one community may not be simply the official "chief," as illustrated by one community member from Makira: "The women are the ones

that actually know...because it all started from before...Women actually tell the chief to come."

By overlooking internal differences and oversimplifying existing power structures, however complex, external agencies effectively work against the grain of established social fabric, making their mission all the more difficult. The consequence of these assumptions is the missed opportunity of easier, more effective solutions to the problems of conservation and development.

One example, referred by Edwards: in order to survive in the face of a hostile environment, local communities within the Northern Province of Zambia worked within highly sophisticated, localized, and informal networks of exchange, developed over generations and designed to remain fluid within an ever-challenging physical and political climate. Yet due to the limitations of their lens, external agencies working with government agencies attempted to impose industrialized model of large-scale, formal commercialization with deadening and destructive results.[7]

On the other hand, another example, taken from HCI's integrated conservation & development project located in the province of Makira, Solomon Islands: In an effort to help establish a local land management plan that could effectively withstand the outside pressure of logging industries, field staff conducted numerous genealogy workshops in order to unravel the complexity of the Makira community's existing land tenure system. Working with community members to record oral histories, field staff were understand the matrilineal system of land rights by identifying both those who held rights and the system of norms and regulation by which these rights were governed. According to the HCI evaluation:

> The idea behind the genealogy process was that people would understand their genealogy and customary land tenure...Genealogies were viewed, by the project, as a basis for knowing who the decision-making stakeholders are, while simultaneously acknowledging that everyone owns the land.

Based on this knowledge of existing social structures, participants were able to design a management plan that was accepted – rather than rejected as "foreign – into the community's overall mode of operation. As put by a community member:

> the marking of the boundaries and the genealogy, people need to know where they come from, who have also the same rights to use the land and to mark areas for gardening and areas for conservation.

By engaging local community members, field staff were not only able to assist in the successful challenge the logging industry (and thus achieve the goal of conservation), but more importantly, community members were empowered at a global scale

to take ownership over the processes that affected their lives and their landscape.

With an understanding of power dynamics, it's equally essential to establish and maintain a kind of 'transparency of intention' regarding the purpose of a partnership. This translates into an understanding that often, the success of development depends on forming relationships of mutual gain, rather than mutual motives. As Arun Agrawal states,

> because it [some C&D efforts] views community as a unified, organic whole, this vision fails to attend to differences within communities, and ignores how these differences affect resource management outcomes, local politics, and strategic interactions within communities, as well as the possibility of layered alliances that can span multiple levels of politics.[8]

Unlike some models that seek to convince community members to share in the same value system, the framework for many of HCI's projects hinges on the intersection of differing aims. An example can be found in its with residents of Gudigwa, located along the Okavango Delta located in northern Botswana.[9] Comprised of eight formerly nomadic Basarwas clans, the village of Gudigwa was settled in 1988 at the encouragement of the national government. Promised a number of services such as potable water, education, and health services, the settlement marked a major shift in both the social structure and means of livlihood for each group: primarily, from hunter-gatherer strategies to those of a market-based, agrarian economy.

Shortly after, due to an epidemic of cattle-borne disease, the government hastily constructed series of veterinary fences throughout the region, without preliminarily assessment of their environmental or social impact. Because the fences impacted the migration patterns of wildlife, concern about their alignment quickly arose among the community who had come to rely on the wildlife for limited hunting and safari ventures.

In an effort to regain ancestral clams over the land, the community approached HCI for technical support, recognizing the cordon fences as an additional threat from a biodivesity perspective. In this way, the two became allys in the fight to relocate the fences and engaged in a project with the goal of empowering the communities to first gain land claim, and them assist in the design of effective environmental management.

As mentioned earlier, part of the problem of many approaches to community participation lies in their tendency to oversimplify the image of community itself. The very definition of what constitutes a community, particularly with regard to indigenous peoples, is often based on outdated or ill-formed assumption regarding location, size, and particularly, leadership. Common definitions define 'community' as small, homogenous units with cohesive and easily understood governance

and norms, even though some groups generally referred to as "communities" are sometimes comprised of multiple, even adversarial groups whose territories span areas larger than the state of Ohio. The Kayapo of Brazil, for example, will band together as one nation in traditional dress when faced with threats from outside, but upon return to their homelands, these alliances shift as each individual Kayapo community is organized and identified as a separate, autonomous unit. The solution, writes Arun Agrawal, is that "community-based conservation initiatives must be founded on *images of community* that recognize their internal differences and processes, their relations with external actors, and the institutions that affect both."

The representation of such images became my focus in December 2002, when I was approached by the Director of HCI with a proposition. Would I be interested in working with the team to research and design The Voices Project, a book that could describe the social complexities of some of the communities who were directly affected by conservation initiatives? Because the majority of attention is often focused on the biological value of hotspots such species counts and wildlife concentrations, the intention of The Voices Project was to highlight the often overlooked or over-generalized realities of the people who inhabit such places. While the population may seem relatively small when compared to the average American town or city, the number of residents in and around protected areas cannot be disregarded or easily generalized. Within just the nine communities of our focus, populations range from 150 in Paso Caballos, Guatemala to 3500 in El Golfo de Santa Clara, Mexico. If for no other reason, the purpose of The Voices Project was to dispel the myth that all communities are the same and that all people within any one community are alike.

It wasn't until I joined the team in May that I realized how unique the idea of such a publication was, particularly in conservation, as its origin lay in the specific description of people rather than plants. While HCI is not necessarily the only organization to concern itself with the development, it represents a relatively new position in conservation. We were immediately met with the challenge of how to present a sociological perspective within a field predominantly swayed by the scientific, "objective" reality of quantifiable fact. As Edwards writes, "any hint of 'subjectivity' is seized upon immediately as 'unscientific' and therefore not worthy of inclusion in serious studies of development. Yet it is impossible to understand real-life problems fully unless we can grasp the multitude of constraints, imperfections and emotions that shape the actions and decisions of real, living people." If our goal is to find a model of development that is both effective and empowering, we must first be willing to accept and acknowledge two challenging propositions: that the methodology needed requires a kind of qualitative specificity that challenges our predisposition to 'quantifiable fact' and that this specificity cannot be achieved without understanding the color and

construction of our own frame of perception. In other words, we must be willing to re-evaluate *our own system* of understanding other cultures.

While the data had been gathered for the primary purpose of reporting on HCI's grant, my colleagues and I poured over the interviews searching with an alternative lens: how did community members describe their daily lives? Who were the individuals that composed this community, and how did their stories reveal the complexity of its social relationships? Using photographs, interviews, and other documents collected during site visits, we sought to express the realities of daily life within these diverse communities and to expose the intricacies of needs, concerns, and obstacles they faced. The goal wasn't "define" each community, as this seemed impossible, if not irresponsible from our distance. Rather, we began to unravel the complex and sometimes contradictory statements embedded within the evaluation interviews to see what kinds of issues would emerge.

As we began our research for The Voices Project, we were guided by three basic principles:

- Communities are not all the same.

- People within communities are not all the same.

- We are alike; we are different.

These statements, deceptively simple, guided us toward an understanding of community rooted in the stories of individuals. As individuals, we speak openly about our hopes, our need, our disappointment, our demand. We situate ourselves within as many or few as we choose: I am a member of a village; a trust; a village, a region, a nation. We see our connection and disconnection to others and understand the simultaneity of our existence: as individuals and as members of a community. Throughout, it became increasingly clear that the narrative lie in the overlap and in-between: the relationship between individual and collective; the push and pull between speaking as "one" and speaking "as many."

Conceived of as a highly visual photonarrative accompanied by actual quotes from community members, the value of The Voices Project is not so much what it explains, as much as what it evokes: difference and similarity within and across. Even more importantly, the complexity of issues that govern a social relationships that can't be addressed as separate bubbles in isolation from one another. Rather, what emerged during our research coalesced into a series of themes that helped us to organize the many ideas voiced within the interviews. Arrival and creation stories; the existence of boundaries; the role of women and work; the value of roads; recreation; education; access to water; and problems facing youth. These were just some of the over 40 different themes, which were not mutually exclusive, but rather interwoven into a dense network of inseparable concerns. By mapping the frequency and overlap of

emergent themes. the tapestry of issues affecting each group was not only revealed, but situated within the context of the collective, as well as the evaluation. 'Story-mappings,' as they came to be called, served as a way to graphically diagram the voices of individuals as they related to others within their community.

Rather than go into all of the specific examples of inter- and intra-community difference, suffice to say, the greatest value of The Voices Project is its ability to serve as a catalyst toward specificity in the ongoing debate over 'participation.' From critics of current participatory models who assert that they require a "specific vision of society[11]" to advocates who maintain that true participation is the only way toward success: both paths require the re-alignment of a lens toward a more studied, specific image of community. For the profession of architecture, we, too may ask: What is our specific vision of society? What image of community drives the design of the places we build and to what degree is this image based on real community engagement?

I'd like to turn my attention briefly toward an element of the research that may be considered the foundation of the work, and perhaps the most potent aspect for the profession of architecture. As we all know, there exists an intimate connection between people and place at a number of scales, evidence of which can be found in simple statements across nations:

> *When we arrived here, it was pure mountain.*
> *Here there are opportunities for humble people.*
> *I am originally from here, Mayapo. I didn't come from another part, I am naturally from Mayapo.*
> *My dad and his brother founded this place and that's why they call it Herradura.*
> *It's like this old man Lino was saying…ground is someone's land.*[12]

Throughout the making of The Voices Project, every theme — indeed each voice — reiterated the importance of the landscape as a vessel of identity. For many of these communities in transition, place, in terms of specific ecology and location, remains the root of their own personal definition of self. It may be debated whether this kind of connection exists in the same way for those of us who live in the United States. Within the context of architectural education, it is becoming increasingly difficult to address the link between cultural and environmental diversity with incoming students, not because they cannot *imagine* the connection, but precisely because *imagination* is often the only point of reference. We are an American society accustomed to the convenience of supermarkets and shopping malls and as such, few of us continue to live off the land or depend on our immediate surroundings for survival. While many students are fortunate to have been raised in places that maintain a rich bond between local customs and landscape, the vast majority of us cannot relate to this kind of immediate

connection to *place in terms of earth.* As anyone who has witnesses the grading of a strip mall parking lot will testify, one may even argue that our sense of place is derived from all things but the earth itself.

While the effects of this self-imposed homogenization may be more readily seen within our built environment, its wider-reaching consequence in terms of cultural and ecological diversity is often more difficult to transmit effectively, even to those who have grown up with an intimate connection to their own American landscape.

> There is a more and less conscious attempt by Western interests to impose the "perspective of global monoculture" on the rest of the world:
>
> This vision offers a universal and only lightly varying set of activities and expectations for the entire planet, a homogenized directory of standards for everything from diet and clothes to transportation and architecture. Global monoculture dictates English lawns in the desert, business suits in Indonesia, orange juice in Siberia, and hamburgers in New Delhi. It overwhelms local cultures and "develops: them regardless of the effects on cultural coherency or capacities of local ecosystems.[13]

Of course, as architects, we would counter that our profession is nothing of the sort. Yet while we may aim for an ideal process based on personal client relationships and site-specific design, but the current trend of development within our own landscape renders this all but obsolete. For students with limited experience abroad, the physical severity of such statement is difficult to grasp, as even the best descriptions and slideshows cannot overcome the abstract power of distance. As much as the best student may try, imagination can only take one so far toward an understanding of cultural and ecological diversity and the inextricable link between the two.

Like the field of conservation and development, we too face a cross-road regarding the agency of our own profession. The challenge is to come to grips with answering some of these questions, and the way to do so may lie in an effort to reassert ourselves *on the ground* within the practice of development itself. And who better? One of the great values of architecture is its primary concern for cultivating healthy, social relationships via the development of place. As we continue to grapple with the question of community, and the path to achieve more meaning built environment-perhaps we, too, may benefit from the opportunity to learn from local knowledge in the pursuit of contemporary images of community based on similar methods of investigation. Because just as thousands of speculative subdivisions continue their flattening sprawl across our own American landscape, we are reminded of the imaginary "community" for whom it is built and wonder: if the design of community is not based on engagement, then on what? There is

no reason to reinvent the wheel by going through the same struggle faced by the practice of conservation and development. By learning from their experience, indeed by joining the effort of international development more fully, we may find that we are in fact already well-suited for the job. As Nicholas Maxwell writes:

> Whereas for the philosophy of knowledge, the fundamental kind of rational learning is acquiring knowledge: for the philosophy of wisdom, the fundamental kind of rational learning is learning how to live, how to see, to experience, to participate in and to create what is value in existence.[14]

NOTES

[1] Okavango Delta, Botswana; Kayapo project, Brazil; Amazon region, Colombia; La Amistad AMISCONDE project, Costa Rica/Panama; Kanuku Mountains, Guyana; Togean Islands, Indonesia; Gulf of California, Mexico; Vlcabamba, Peru; Palawan, Philippines; Makira, Solomon Islands; and Marahoue National Park, The Ivory Coast.

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[3] The Healthy Communities Initiative at Conservation International. Internal Project Reports, 2004.

[4] Chambers, Robert. *Rural Development: Putting the Last First.* London; New York : Longman, 1983.

[5] Edwards, Michael. *The Irrelevance of Development Studies.* Third World Quarterly 111: 116-135, 1999, p. 118.

[6] Taylor, Carl and Daniel Ide. *Just and Lasting Change: When Communities Own Their Futures.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002, p. 9.

[7] Referred within *The Irrelevance of Development Studies,* M. Edwards, p. 120; Sharpe, B. 'Interim Report on Nutritional Anthropology Investigation.' (mimeographed) Mpika: ODA/IRDP, 1987.

[8] Agrawal, Arun and Clark Gibson. *Enchantment and Disenchantment: The Role of Community in Natural Resources Conservation.* World Development Vol. 27, No. 4 : 629-649, 1999, p. 663.

[9] The Healthy Communities Initiative at Conservation International, Internal Project Reports, 2004.

[10] Edwards, M. *The Irrelevance of development studies,* p. 121.

[11] Henkel, Heiko and Roderich Stirrat. *Participation as Spiritual Duty; Empowerment as Secular Subjection.* Participation: The New Tyranny? London; New York : Zed Books; New York : Distributed in the USA exclusively by Palgrave, 2001.

[12] The Healthy Communities Initiative at Conservation International, Evaluation Interviews, 2003.

[13] Berg, P. *Devolving Beyond Global Monoculture.* Coevolution Quarterly 32: 25. 1981.

[14] Maxwell, Nicholas. *From Knowledge to Wisdom.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984, p. 66.