In this time of year, when we gather with loved ones, often returning to, or remembering, the places we hold dear, the reflections of Orton Family Foundation Trustee Ed McMahon on the importance of place seem especially apropos. Ed is senior resident fellow at Urban Land Institute in Washington, D.C.

We live in a world of rapid change: immigration, new technologies, global trade, instantaneous communication, changing consumer tastes, rapid movement of people, ideas, and goods, etc. However, if you have learned anything over 25 years in the community planning arena, it is this: change is inevitable, but the destruction of community character and identity is not. Progress does not demand degraded surroundings. Communities can grow without destroying the things people love.

Place is more than just a location or a spot on a map. A sense of place is a unique collection of qualities and characteristics—visual, cultural, social and environmental—that provides meaning to a location. Sense of place is what makes one location (e.g. your hometown) different from another location (e.g. my hometown), but sense of place is also that which makes our physical surroundings valuable and worth caring about.

Land use planners spend too much time focusing on numbers—the number of units per acre, the number of cars per hour, the number of floors per building—and not enough time on the values, customs, characteristics, and quirks that make a place worth caring about. Unfortunately, many American communities are suffering the social, economic, and environmental consequences of being places that simply aren’t worth caring about. The more one place (one location) comes to be just like every other place, the less reason there is to visit or invest. Just take tourism, for example: the more a community comes to look like every other community, the less reason there is to visit. On the other hand, the more a community does to enhance its distinctive identity, whether that is natural, cultural, or architectural, the more reasons there are to visit. Why? Because tourism is about visiting places that are different, unusual, or unique; if one place was just like everywhere else, there would be no reason to go anywhere.

Similarly, when it comes to 21st century economic development, a key concept is “community differentiation.” If you can’t differentiate your community from any other community, you have no competitive advantage. Capital is footloose in a global economy. Natural resources, highway access, locations along a river or rail line have all become less important. Richard Florida, a leading economic development authority and author of The Creative Class, has said, “How people think of a place is less tangible, but more important than just about anything else.”

Today, however, the subtle differences between places are fading and larger regional differences hardly exist. Now, if you were dropped along a road outside of most American cities or towns, you would not have the slightest idea where you were, because it all looks exactly the same: the building materials, the architectural styles, the chain stores, the outdoor advertising. Now building materials can be imported from anywhere. Hills can be flattened and streams put in culverts. We can transform the landscape with great speed and build anything that fits our budget or strikes our fancy. Technological innovation and a global economy make it easy for building plans drawn up at a corporate headquarters in New Jersey to be applied over and over again in Phoenix, Philadelphia, Portland or a thousand other communities. Over the past 40 years America’s commercial landscape has progressed from unique to uniform, from the stylized to the standardized.
Author Wallace Stegner once said, "If you don't know where you are, you don't know who you are." We all need points of reference and orientation. A community's unique identity provides that orientation, while also adding economic and social value to a place. To foster a sense of place, communities must plan for built environments and settlement patterns that are uplifting and memorable and that create a special feeling of belonging and stewardship by residents. A community also nurtures sense of place by understanding and respecting its natural context, such as rivers and streams, hills and forests, native flora and fauna, but also its community landmarks whether historic or unique.

This is what Community Heart & Soul™ is all about. It is about helping communities adapt to change while maintaining or enhancing the things they value most. It is both a process and a philosophy. The process seeks to engage as many citizens as possible in community decision making. The philosophy recognizes that special places, characteristics, and customs have value. As Orton Family Foundation Founder Lyman Orton likes to say, "When a community takes the time to get to know itself, it gains a sense of identity and purpose that informs decisions about the future."

Similarly, for me, heart and soul planning is about helping communities ask the question: "Do you want the character of your community to shape the new development or do you want the new development to shape the character of your community?"

Given the opportunity, I think I know how most communities will answer this question.

Making Public Participation Legal
PUBLISHED BY SANDY HEIERBACHER ON OCTOBER 30, 2013 | ADD COMMENT

This was originally published by Sandy Heierbacher, Director of NCDD. The Foundation is proud to re-post Sandy's recent announcement of a national initiative to make more meaningful, broad citizen engagement the law, rather than the exception. NCDD and the Deliberative Democracy Consortium (DDC), two members of CommunityMatters Partners, are part of the working group that conceived and developed the initiative.

Most laws that govern public participation in the U.S. are over thirty years old. They do not match the expectations and capacities of citizens today, they pre-date the Internet, and they do not reflect the lessons learned in the last two decades about how citizens and governments can work together. Increasingly, public administrators and public engagement practitioners are hindered by the fact that it's unclear if many of the best practices in participation are even allowed by the law.

Seeing Green: The Intersection of the Economy, Ecology and Character
PUBLISHED BY EVAN JOHNSON ON JULY 2, 2013 | ADD COMMENT

Vermont has just exploded into summer. The weekly farmer's markets are in full swing and summertime concerts, fairs, parades and art walks are just starting. It's an exciting time and one that brings with it the opportunity to grow and reap the harvest together.

It's a great time of year to be in Vermont; summer has arrived and it's taken its sweet time to get here so we appreciate it all the more. In a mostly rural state, many communities have pinned their abilities to grow and thrive on the constancy of the cycle of seasons. A successful harvest or a big snowfall is not only beautiful to behold—they're economic Indicators as well, and the collective identity of the people who live here depend on that.

MORE
Seven Ways to Increase Community Power in Local Decision-Making

CommunityMatters, a partnership of seven national organizations including Orton, share the belief that people have the power to solve their community’s problems and direct future growth and change.

As leaders in the fields of civic engagement and community and economic development, the partners believe that by strengthening civic infrastructure, communities can become more prosperous, vibrant places to live.

Why is civic infrastructure key? Because, like the physical infrastructure that supports a community’s built environment, civic infrastructure supports the social sphere. It consists of the opportunities, activities and arenas, both online and face-to-face, that allow people to connect with each other, solve problems, make decisions and celebrate community.

More

Slow Democracy: Citizen-Powered Communities for the 21st Century

Published by Susan Clark on January 30, 2013 | Add a comment

This is the first of a four-part series adapted from the book Slow Democracy: Rediscovering Community, Bringing Decision Making Back Home by Susan Clark and Woden Teachout (Chelsea Green, 2012).

The “slow food” movement began in the mid-1980s with protests against the opening of a McDonald’s near the Spanish Steps in Rome, but it has since inspired untold thousands of supporters across the globe.

Slow food argues that fast food symbolizes much of what’s wrong with the world today. We’ve taken the goal of “efficiency” too far, advocates argue. We need to slow down and understand where our food comes from, and recognize our connection to agriculture, to communities, and to our natural systems. We have a responsibility to do so, for human, economic, and ecological health.

I was thinking about slow food while thinning carrots in my garden one weekend, listening to Michael Pollan’s The Omnivore’s Dilemma on my ear buds. That’s when it hit me: the work I had been doing in community development was perfectly aligned with the efforts of the slow food movement. Local, human-scale, interconnected...the metaphor was inspiring, and it brought a wave of fresh, exciting ideas to mind. Slow Democracy!

I ran inside to test the idea out on my husband Mark. He seemed impressed, saying enthusiastically, “Slow Democracy? Great idea! Hey, I bet you could even get the domain name—SlowDemocracy.org!”
Relationships: The Key to the New Economy
Published by Ariana McBride on June 20, 2012 | Add Comment

Earlier this month I attended the New Economic Institute’s (NEI) Strategies for a New Economy Conference at Bard College in New York.

I listened to inspiring speakers and met thoughtful participants, all who are re-imagining a stronger economy and doing creative projects on the ground to prove it.

The common thread running through much of this work is the power of relationships—the relationships we have with each other and to the communities in which we live and work.

Clear Skies and Dry Trails
Published by Hannah Orcutt on February 29, 2012 | 1 Comment

Now that it’s almost March, and officially “late winter,” it’s becoming nearly impossible to ignore the elephant in the room. Despite the storm this weekend that dumped more than two feet in the mountains, this winter has skiers and snow-sport enthusiasts of all sorts scratching their heads. January 2012 was the 3rd least snowy in the NOAA’s national 117-year record, and the 4th warmest.

Taking advantage of this weekend’s storm, I headed to the mountains. After a long ski through the first powder of the year, I ended at a small inn and cross-country ski center where I had a chance to see firsthand how the lack of snow is affecting the state’s winter economy.

The Power of the Individual
Published by Bill Roper on February 16, 2012 | 2 Comments
Several weeks ago, Middlebury College opened the Center for Social Entrepreneurship, a new program encouraging students to take an active role in their education while accomplishing good at the same time. For its inaugural symposium, the Center brought a number of people to speak and teach.

I had the good fortune to attend two of the talks. The first was by Bill Drayton, founder of Ashoka Innovators for the Public. Bill focused on the need to develop systems that can adapt quickly and effectively, vital in our rapidly changing world. He argued that traditionally structured systems need to give way to teams and teams-of-teams as a way to unleash individual creativity and remain nimble and responsive to challenges and opportunities. He also shared a few inspiring examples of work by Ashoka Fellows.