

Making it local - Introducing working with your Sense of Place



Sensing Place Caribbean Project

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The stories of any area are based upon a number of themes that help define it and the people and activities that have made it what it is today. However, for every story, there are probably another twenty waiting to be told and each community will have its own tales that will define its unique sense of place. This is a short guide of how to work with the themes in the stories and adapt and enrich them with local knowledge to help both visitors and locals alike, gain a better understanding and more ways to connect with an area of significance to them helping you connect with and interpret your sense of place.

Who could undertake this in each community?

This could be done by a tourism group, if one exists in the area or it could be done by groups such as local history societies, school groups or faith groups. Many stories will rest with older residents and taking time to listen whilst it is still possible can be very rewarding. This approach offers potential for a great oral history project possibly between young people and older residents in a community. Local history archives can be an excellent resource that lends itself to interrogation in a different way.

The key thing is to remember whom and for what purpose the outputs are for and therefore what format they will be presented in. It is important to ensure that whilst accurate, the stories remain interesting and not get too bogged down in the detailed historical facts that can be hard to comprehend.

References for further reading can always be provided for those who want to find out more.

Whilst it is always interesting to hear the stories of an area, it is even more interesting if locals and visitors can then go on to experience the places and people that the stories are about – so do remember to relate the stories to experiences that others can enjoy. These can be as diverse as a walk, an historic building, a burial site, a religious building or a place in the landscape. Modern technology can be a great aid in relating past to present and help people pinpoint locations of relevance.

How can we go about pinning down a Sense of Place?

The components of a sense of place can be a myriad of different things. It could be a first impression, a feeling you get on going to a new place, the atmosphere, the people, distinctive sights, smells and noises that resonate with locals and visitors. Being close to a place can mean that it is easy to forget that our ordinary can be somebody else's adventure. Take a moment to visualise yourself visiting a place you have never been before. It could be a different part of this country or a completely new cultural experience. Imagine yourself being there and think about what you might anticipate experiencing. If you can get a sense of how that might translate into how your place impacts on others you are beginning to get onto the right track.

A good place to start is to get together a group and start having informal discussions about what you feel makes your place special. This doesn't just have to be the big obvious things, such as landmark buildings, but also the smaller things that you may not take for granted in your daily life. For example; the sound of the sea in the morning if you live near the coast, or the smell of a bakery, if you live in an area where bread is made. We have five senses and all are important in creating that overall feeling we have about a place.

Themes

There are any number of themes that can be used to help define a sense of place. Every place will have a different combination of them and themes will have differing amounts of significance in each area. For example built heritage is likely to be more important in a village, town or city than wildlife. A good starting point for working with your sense of place is to decide which ones are of relevance to you and then rank them in order of importance. Some of the main areas you may consider include:

- People – past and present
- Modern culture – what is available to experience today?
- Buildings – interiors and exteriors
- Faith
- Industry
- Language
- Food and drink
- Creativity and the arts

- Landscape and wildlife – urban and rural

Approaches to establishing how important each theme is can include questionnaires that can be carried out by any number of methods including; face to face, group sessions, post and electronically. It is good to record who the results are coming from to see if there is a significant difference of opinion between different groups. You can categorise people according to what it is you want to learn. For example, you may wish to understand if there is a difference of opinion according to age, faith or ethnicity. If you are carrying out the survey for economic development purposes, you may wish to learn if there is a difference of opinion between visitors and locals.

It is easier to rank data that has ‘tick box’ type answers, but if you are then looking for a richness of thought you may also need to allow space to record opinion. Sense of place however, is as much about an emotional sense of identity as it is a rational verbal one. Creative ways of exploring this are often very useful. Techniques could include a project to create a soundscape to define an area or even something as subtle as a colour palette. Ultimately the route chosen needs to relate to the purpose of the research you want to undertake.

You need to bear in mind possible Governmental regulations when holding data and ensuring that personal identifiers are removed from data is advisable.

Working with different themes

Before you start work with any theme, it is key to understand what it is you want to find out and what you will do with the information. This will help you to consider what to ask and how to ask it. It will also help you plan how many people you need to speak to in the course of your research.

For example, providing people with a list of features that they rank in terms of importance to them is relatively quick and will provide you with statistics. It is very different from asking people to volunteer what they feel to be important to them and why. This takes much longer and may give you a really good feel of the range of responses, but will be more difficult to quantify.

Both methods are equally valid and one can be followed up with the other, so are not mutually exclusive. You could start by asking people to tell you the things they feel to be of importance, and when you have a good feel of what these items are, you could then use these responses to create a questionnaire to confirm these ideas with a wider audience.

Below is a start list of the types of things you might like to explore under each theme heading.

People – past and present

Are there local figures from your area that deserve recognition? Alternatively are there nationally famous figures that have had an impact on your area? In the current climate of celebrity culture – stories of the great and good are

always going to be appealing, better still if they can be tied in with real places that can be related to the people.

- Who are your local figures – what did they do and where did they do it?
- Are they individuals or a group – such as a different ethnic or religious group that settled and made an impact?
- Have national figures made an impact locally?
- Are there film locations nearby that can be visited? What films were they used in? This may not always be universally applicable in the Caribbean but you could also think about plays, books and TV programmes
- How and where are local figures commemorated?
- Are there any products/places named after them or activities visitors can enjoy associated with their stories?

Modern Culture - what can be experienced today?

What is it like in your local area? Can you create a good picture of what life is like in your community, what the people value and enjoy and the positive and negative aspects of living there. Many visitors may come from different backgrounds and will have extremely different norms – so use this as an opportunity to identify the essence of what living in your area is like.

- Who lives here and where are they from?
- What languages can be heard?

- What language are children educated in?
- What are popular social activities?
- What makes up the local arts scene?
- Community celebrations and festivals
- Nightlife
- Where do locals go to recreate?
- What are the main social challenges?
- Where do people go to work and in what type of work?
- Good places to eat with local food

Buildings – interiors and exteriors

Built heritage is often one of the key visually defining aspects of an area. Many areas across Britain have a built heritage that very clearly demonstrates that we have a long history. Buildings can therefore vary according to when they were built, the purpose they were built for and also show wide vernacular variations. For many of our cities this is compounded by both re-use and also re-development, either caused by events such as war or even differing social and industrial needs. The stories of buildings are therefore often really important in telling the story of an area and its people. Thing you may want to consider include:

- The overall impression made by your built heritage
- Differing purposes of your buildings – industrial, commercial, governance, domestic, community, faith
- Vernacular styles and materials

- Significant periods of development and the reasons for this
- Significant destructive events – and what re-construction occurred and why? Think about hurricanes, fires and erosion as these forms of transformative processes that work on your heritage
- Significant re-purposing of buildings and by whom, for what purpose
- Buildings that have a special emotional resonance in your area
- Any individual that has had a significant input to any aspect

Faith

Faith expresses itself in differing ways across human history and leaves behind both tangible and intangible traces. Faith and belief can lead to amazing stories of both the best and worst of human nature. This area of heritage is often fertile ground for learning about your area in both the past and present times. Across Britain there are rich seams of cultural practices, myths and legends and associated built heritage to explore. This might include artefacts pre-dating the colonial period through to the diversity represented by Christian and world religions. You may consider:

- Non- Christian religious sites
- Religious communities – their stories and the reasons for their presence in your area
- Religious buildings and their dedications – stories behind this
- Re-use of religious buildings by other faith groups
- Current faith groups within a community and their places of worship

- Any stories of how religious orders have impacted on the wider community
- Remains of religious buildings that can be visited
- Stories of the interaction between immigration and the establishment of the religious practices of the immigrant group in an area
- The story of any famous religious leaders
- Any famous people buried in the churchyard
- Any stories of haunting or local myths and legends

Industry

Given the hugely industrialised nature of the Caribbean islands from the 17th century onwards, this area of heritage again often provides fertile ground for communities. For areas closely associated with the Plantations right through to the current time, the built heritage and associated social impacts can provide rich areas for exploration. However consider industry in its widest sense and there is much more to explore. For rural areas this might include changing agricultural practices across the years and for city centres, the trading areas and docks associated with imported goods can tell much about the development of shipping and overseas trading. Areas to explore include:

- Built industrial heritage and its past and present uses
- Itinerant worker communities associated with particular industries
- Decline and re-use of industrial sites
- The community impact of loss of industry
- World impact of products of industry

- International connections generated through industrial practices

Language

The audible and visual presence of a range of different languages, accents or dialects is a very obvious clue to the diversity of an area. Many Caribbean islands possess their own creole languages, and there can be a lot of local variation within an island setting. Understanding how diversity defines the sense of place of an area can be an enriching and inclusive activity. Consider:

- What languages are commonly used on your island?
- The cultural origin of the people using the range of languages and the contribution these cultures make to the local community
- Language and cultural preferences of people of the first and subsequent generations
- Any hybrid language forms that are unique locally
- Language preference for communication between people with differing first languages
- Local dialects and vocabulary – history and origins
- Written language and how it is used in the community

Food and Drink

The selection of different foods, preparation methods and flavours and cultural traditions around foods are another area worthy of exploration. Certain food

substances and their presence or absence are integral to many cultural practices and exploring if there are areas that are peculiar to your area is a fascinating topic. Consideration may be given to:

- The interaction of faith and food – how this defines what can be eaten, when and how
- Celebration food or street food
- Local food and particular preparation methods or names.
- Naming of meals and times meals are taken
- How meals are eaten – are there typical food orders/courses, particular cutlery, sitting conventions, family behaviours?
- How is food shared across cultures
- Good places to eat or buy locally distinct foods

Creativity and the arts

The expression of different art forms varies across the world. Exploring art in its widest sense often gives a great insight into the unique character of an area. Consideration should be given to both formal and informal expressions. Informal settings often seem to capture the essence of an area well and are well worth seeking out. Consider:

- Local cultural traditions – i.e. pottery or basketry making; painting
- Traditional musical instruments and their use
- Fusion of cultural traditions and their resultant outputs

- Local craft, particularly any that has traditional origins
- Different forms of dance
- Annual local celebrations with elements of art (national celebrations, such as Carnival, Crossover etc)
- Culture / Faith based activities (Christmas)
- Any local visual art forms specific to the area

Landscape and Wildlife

Landscape and wildlife are often more important in rural settings than urban and they define many aspects of day to day life. For example, the fishing economy used to define life in many coastal areas, upland areas often are suitable for subsistence farming methods. That said, it also does have a relevance to urban and city dwellers, although it may compete for attention with a wider range of artificial attractions. When looking at how landscape and wildlife can define an area consider the following.

- Topography of an area and how this translates into local land management practices
- How the landscape creates a visual identity for an area
- Human occupations associated with the land or water
- Understanding how agricultural practices dictate cultural practices i.e. harvest festivals
- Particular species that might be associated with an area or iconic to an area

- How the landscape dictates the shape, size, demographics and diversity of local communities
- How visitors interact with the landscape and wildlife – what do they come to experience and what opportunities does that create?
- Where areas have seen development, what is the story of the land use – past and present?

Having looked at all these elements you should now be more aware of the factors that contribute to your sense of place and your heritage identity.

This is a community approach, not something that you are told in a text book or an encyclopaedia. You have generated this sense of place, and the next stage is to go on to study it in more depth and translate these findings to wider audiences.

