Cultural Asset Mapping

by Robert Voigt

In recent years, urban planning, arts and culture, economic development, and city administration have found common ground in a raised awareness of the importance of culture to a community's livability and prosperity. In fact, cultural vitality is increasingly referred to as one of the four pillars of sustainability, along with social equity, economic health, and environmental responsibility.[1]

Numerous cities across North America have begun to leverage cultural assets for attracting business, investment, and people. Smaller municipalities often have serious challenges in competing with their larger urban cousins to achieve these kinds of successes. Cultural asset mapping (CAM) is used to understand and interpret the complex interrelationships of cultural elements for use in strategic planning and economic development and is scaleable for use in smaller municipalities.

CAM has been defined as: "a process of collecting, recording, analyzing, and synthesizing information in order to describe the cultural resources, networks, links, and patterns of usage of a given community or group."[2]

Maps are most often understood as the indispensable tools that help us navigate our physical world. Cultural asset maps, by representing the spatial relationships between such things as artists, markets, fairgrounds, heritage sites, and buildings, help tell us about who we are, based on our unique identity, history, and cherished stories – in other words, our culture.

There are two categories for these maps: (1) *resource maps,* identifying and recording tangible cultural resources, such as buildings or locations; and, (2) *community identity maps*, identifying intangible cultural resources, such as the stories and traditions that define community identity.

> CULTURAL ASSET MAPPING BROUGHT TOGETHER FOUR COMMUNITIES … LINKING PLANNING, CULTURE, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT.

Cultural resource information that is spatially-based allows it to be integrated into municipal projects and land use planning in a number of ways:

• Awareness and marketing – promoting culture with residents and tourists.

• Economic development – targeting or facilitating entrepreneurial investment in creative cultural industries.

• Planning and policy – informing municipal decision-making relating to land use, social planning, heritage planning, urban design, and place making.

• Networks and collaboration – facilitating partnerships with cultural groups and identifying opportunities to maximize assets.

FROM AN IDEA TO A STRATEGY

The cultural asset management project that I'll be describing has brought together four communities in a broad-ranging undertaking linking planning, culture, and economic development.

The towns of Collingwood, Wasaga Beach, Clearview, and Blue Mountains, are located in what's called the "Georgian Triangle," a geographic area that includes the UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve of the Niagara Escarpment; Wasaga Beach, the world's longest freshwater beach (8.6 miles in length); and the waters of Georgian Bay. We are also within a 2-1/2 hours' drive from the metropolitan Toronto area.

In many ways, our four towns share commonalities with hundreds of others across North America. Our manufacturing jobs have largely relocated with a significant shift to tourism and service based employment; and the recent years of drastic economic upheaval have had their impacts as well.

Although each town has its own unique cultural assets and sense of identity, we recognized the importance of shared relationships, and saw benefits to collaborating in cultural asset mapping.

Our multi-town CAM project also reflects priorities set out in our region's Economic Development Strategy, which identifies the "Arts and Entertainment" sector as one of the region's existing economic strengths, and the "Information and Culture" sector as an emerging strength. Many assets in both sectors were mapped in the project.

DATA & FINDINGS

Dr. Greg Baeker is one of Canada's leading experts in the field of cultural resource planning.[3] As he explains: "The myth is that municipalities lack information on cultural resources. The reverse is true. The problem is that information is collected by different people, for different reasons, and exists in different locations. Cultural asset mapping begins by consolidating existing information in a consistent way."[4]

We discovered a wealth of resources and data sets from familiar sources that

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1 See, e.g., "Towards a Sustainable and Authentic Canadian Urbanism," by Dan Leeming, Robert Freedman and Alex Taranu (founders of the Council for Canadian Urbanism); Jon Hawkes, *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture's Essential Role in Public Planning* (Common Ground Publishing, 2001).

2 See the Cultural Mapping Toolkit, available at: www.creativecity.ca

3 Dr. Baeker is a Senior Consultant and Founder of AuthentiCity, the firm contracted to work on our cultural asset mapping project.

4 From *Putting Culture on the Map* Final Report (AuthentiCity, July 2010).

Broad community participation was important in identifying and mapping some 700 cultural assets in the four towns, including the historic Creemore Jail.

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we had a high level of confidence in, for example: InfoCanada (which aggregates data from Statistics Canada [equivalent to the U.S. Census Bureau] and the Yellow Pages); tourism events; arts and culture data bases; and heritage registers.

We also included municipal and regional GIS mapping for trails and parks; heritage districts and sites; and archaeological sites; as well as cultural heritage landscape assessment maps.

Our project has included the identification of over 700 cultural assets. Each has been translated into data that can be manipulated in the regional and local geographic information systems. What is remarkable is that this only represents resource mapping and does not yet include "identity mapping" stories.

Identity mapping stories generally include three types of narratives: those that honor the past, celebrate the present, or envision the future.[5]

We decided that each community would independently capture these kind of stories later. Why wait? We wanted to avoid spending time collecting things like video recordings of personal community recollections, without first hav-

ing a strategy in place for how this information would be used. However, when the communities do undertake identity mapping, the results will be linked and highlighted on the project's "Putting Culture On the Map" web site.[6]

The project's findings also describe ways that CAM information can support the growth of our creative/cultural economies, an important regional economic development priority. These include: coordination of stakeholders to pursue a shared cultural and economic agenda; building networks of innovation across disciplines; and developing connections between producers and consumers.

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5 A well-designed web site that features these kinds of stories is City of Memory: A Story Map of New York (www.cityofmemory.org).

MAPPING IN UNCHARTED TERRITORY

Based on how our project has evolved, I encourage those organizing a cultural asset mapping project to take an approach that allows for exploration and creative freedom within a setting that encourages collaboration. While this may increase levels of uncertainty, new and fruitful ideas will likely emerge. For us, the benefits of having an open process where outcomes were not pre-defined have included:

• new municipal partnerships.
• increasing capacity to influence our cultural economy.
• better integrating the activities of various organizations.
• developing a more comprehensive understanding of the communities' assets.
• increasing diversity of stakeholders engaged with the partner municipalities.

There are two more aspects of the project worth highlighting:

First, the project was funded and incorporated into a broader regional economic development strategy. We came together out of a recognition of shared needs and opportunities, finding that the most effective way of doing the CAM work was on a multi-town basis. The partner municipalities shared costs, data, and human resources, which resulted in each town benefiting far more then if it had undertaken the work on its own.

Second, the project creatively made use of GIS. As Dr. Baeker noted, "the ability to manipulate cultural data is a huge leap in integrating cultural assets and information with other critical areas including land use, economic development, and social planning."[7] ◆

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6 www.georgianbaymappingculture.com/

7 "Culture an economic driver, says expert," by Shawn Giilck in *The Collingwood Enterprise-Bulletin* (June 16, 2010).