

(RE)IMAGINING OUR COMMUNITY

Changing the Planner and Planning with First Nations Youth

BY SHELAGH MCCARTNEY D.DES. OAA, MRAIC, ELIZABETH ATLOOKAN, LOUIE SUGARHEAD, JEFFREY HERSKOVITS, KATHRYN TRNAVSKY

SUMMARY *Many of Canada's Indigenous communities are young and rapidly growing. The long-term planning decisions being made in these communities will have the most significant impact on this youthful population. (Re)Imagining Our Community is a partnership based in Eabametoong First Nation which centres these young community members in the development process. Working at the theoretical intersection of Indigenous Planning and youth engagement, a strategy is developed to identify the preferences, priorities and visions of youth. Breaking down the textual nature of existing processes, this model relies on storytelling, drawing, mapping and other media to engage participants.*

RÉSUMÉ *Bon nombre de collectivités des Premières Nations du Canada sont jeunes et en pleine croissance. Les décisions à long terme en matière d'aménagement prises par ces collectivités auront un impact significatif sur cette jeune population. Le projet (Re)Imagining Our Community (Réinventons notre collectivité) est un partenariat établi au sein d'Eabametoong First Nation (Première Nation d'Eabametoong) dont l'objectif est d'impliquer les jeunes membres de la communauté dans le processus d'élaboration. Une stratégie destinée à identifier les préférences, les priorités et la vision des jeunes est élaborée à la croisée des chemins théorique entre l'aménagement des peuples autochtones et la mobilisation de la jeunesse. Rejetant la nature théorique des processus existants, ce modèle s'appuie davantage sur la narration, le dessin, la cartographie et sur d'autres médias pour encourager la participation des jeunes.*

INTRODUCTION

Eabametoong First Nation, situated 300km northeast of Thunder Bay, is a community on the brink of change. The Ring of Fire Regional Framework Agreement and accompanying secretariat, the Growth Plan for Northern Ontario and the *Far North Act* have ushered in a new era of provincial planning regimes to accompany ongoing on-reserve federal jurisdiction. Eabametoong has become a site of many interwoven local and regional planning initiatives. Policies are developed in recognition of “long-standing socio-economic gaps,”¹ and a need for “culturally sensitive, inclusive and meaningful opportunities for the individual First Nation communities to participate”² but exist within a climate of political expediency, focused on creating clarity in the resource extraction process.

Community leadership in Eabametoong recognized that consequences of community development and resource extraction will be felt predominantly in the long-term. Yet, community youth remained largely unaccounted for in the formal planning processes. Building on former partnerships with Ryerson University, (Re)Imagining our Community centred youth in the planning process, building a platform through which they could share their visions for the future.

INDIGENOUS YOUTH

Like many Indigenous communities, Eabametoong's population is young and growing rapidly. These youth receive disproportionately low funding and programming in education and health³ while also disproportionately being made wards of the state through the

“inequitable and discriminatory provision of child welfare services.”⁴ Numerous inquests, court cases and other policy documents recognize the link between persistent housing shortages, unsafe drinking water and other infrastructure shortcomings and the dramatic health outcome gaps that youth face.⁵ They are already paying the price for ineffective government policy.

THEORETICAL INTERSECTIONS

Practicing at the intersection of Indigenous Planning and youth-focused planning theories, this work is participatory, interactive and uses mixed media. Indigenous Planning exposes the ways existing planning structures marginalize Indigenous voices through a reliance on textual mediation and technical superiority, which undermine alternative worldviews



Youth recording of important community locations and travel patterns.

and perspectives. Asymmetrical relations, characteristic of the colonial state, are exploitative,⁶ requiring an ever-increasing consumption of land, pushing borders to grow empire.⁷ Indigenous Planning theory uncovers mechanisms for altering this dynamic, focusing on the emancipatory potential of planning⁸ and planning's ability to be an instrument of hope.⁹ Such a transformation requires a recognition of the processes creating the existing marginalization of Indigenous people, those Hayden King describes as being, "clear that their design, structure and implementation are so steeped in technical language and procedure and bureaucracy that Indigenous peoples have immense difficulty accessing or participating in them in earnest."¹⁰ Breaking this system and replacing it with local control also relies on ongoing reflexivity on the part of the outside planner.

A community-driven, user-focused model becomes even more important when working with youth. Excluding youth from decision-making processes creates a disenfranchisement and marginality which stays with them through adulthood, a process "greatly magnified for children who are already distant from the mainstream due to poverty, race, or ethnicity."¹¹ Existing marginality in the Canadian planning process with Indigenous Peoples is exacerbated with children and youth as they witness their communities being controlled by



Youth brainstorming future community uses and programmes.



Youth identifying preferences in development with facilitator.

INDIGENOUS PLANNING EXPOSES THE WAYS EXISTING PLANNING STRUCTURES MARGINALIZE INDIGENOUS VOICES THROUGH A RELIANCE ON TEXTUAL MEDIATION AND TECHNICAL SUPERIORITY, WHICH UNDERMINE ALTERNATIVE WORLDVIEWS AND PERSPECTIVES.

external forces. (Re)Imagining Our Community re-inverts control, rejecting manipulation and allowing the process and its focus issues to be determined by youth.¹²

PRACTICING DIFFERENTLY

Working together with Eabametoong youth is an ongoing process. Below, we offer some principles the partnership has developed, and outline some challenges and risks for an outside planner. We understand the role of external planners to be facilitation and synthesis of community stories and visions, to encourage discussions where they may not have previously existed, and to bring the community visioning process to individuals, in this case youth, who it would not otherwise reach.

Breaking the Stakeholder Dichotomy

Interactions between all stakeholders in this partnership follow the same cycle: listen, learn and share. Countering the linear nature of dividing stakeholders into contributors and beneficiaries, dichotomy is replaced with mutuality. We found Indigenous communities are too frequently understood as beneficiaries to whom services must be provided. Instead, we formalize the concept that all participants can, and must, learn from one another. Valuing the opportunity to listen and then share our learning builds relationships and networks that can last beyond the community meeting, design workshop or classroom session.

Sharing grows the project's influence beyond the limited bounds of direct participants. Youth are encouraged to take their visions into their homes, friend groups and the broader community, while the planner's responsibility extends outside the community, sharing their

learning and amplifying youth voices to policy makers and other professionals.

Rejecting Perpetual Capacity Development

Breaking the stakeholder dichotomy and producing equity in the planner-community member relationship, the planner relinquishes the position of sole-expert within the partnership. In doing so, capacity development as an outcome is negated, and is instead understood as something mutually occurring. The desire to "teach" planning continues a colonial legacy, essentializing technical knowledge and erasing local understandings of the land and community planning. Teaching is replaced by listening, shifting the burden towards the planner. Removing the technical and textual-barriers of the planning process allows the planner to learn directly from the community member, a process John Friedmann describes saying, "face-to-face interaction in real time is the new model of planning"¹³; no longer requiring knowledge be translated through an epistemological system it does not belong to.

Creating equity is equally about process and deliverables. Technical and textual barriers not only limit how Indigenous youth participate but also serve to delegitimize their creations. (Re)Imagining Our Community looks to place equal value on hand-drawn maps, stories, pictures and photographs as digital, scientific documentation. Validity should not be derived from the mode of presentation but rather the value to the community member. Professionalization of community visioning serves only to disenfranchise those already most ignored.

Value Based Community Development

In discussing the future of their community with youth, they must

be the agenda setters. Listening, learning and sharing are useless if the issues being addressed are not those they are concerned about. Reactive planning – limiting input to specific timely issues with which youth were not previously engaged – amounts only to tokenism, not meaningful consultation. Instead, we look to identify with each group the series of values that they hold, or core areas of interest, which inform any project. The two groups partnered with in this project identified five inter-connected core values:

- Family
- Land
- Belonging
- Safety
- Fun

Identified values act as an entry point into discussions about a specific issue, creating a lexicon, determined by the youth, through which to analyze community development. It also allows for creative solutions to emerge, targeting a specific core value: listen, learn and sharing sessions can be held about how particular places can be created to maximize, for example, a sense of belonging. Youth then use planning as the future-focused, hope-giving tool it is theorized as, while allowing creativity and design to be solutions to existing problems.

Sessions were held focusing on the implementation of core values into two areas of need: a multi-use community centre and housing. Youth described a desire for specifically designated spaces within future developments: for example, designated youth-rooms within a multi-use facility. Youth desired a sense of belonging as they designed the facility, specified rooms and specified programming and contents through visioning. The documented youth vision was then given to

community leadership to embody these desires.

Similarly, the role of bedrooms in providing safety and security demonstrates an area of control in housing currently utilized by youth not being fully conceptualized in the housing discussion. Youth demonstrated through drawings and stories the small-scale design decisions they were making which provided this security and belonging, an example of small scale interventions already being undertaken by youth which can be replicated in new spaces.

LIMITATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Defining Success: Local needs, Time and Relationships

Essential to the process described above, both in theory and our partnership, is time. The disenfranchisement experienced by Indigenous youth is a direct result of an ongoing colonial planning policy regime. Countering this system with a planning process focused on their knowledge and values requires a period of deconstruction. Apathy towards the planning process does not disappear when an outside planner arrives or new partnership begins in the community. As with issue identification, success cannot be measured by targets set by an outside planner or agency. Success must be defined within the community, and defined by what the youth would like to achieve. Planners must champion these measures, looking to facilitate the listen-learn-share cycle to maximize benefits.

Recognizing Limitations

(Re)Imagining Our Community is a small-scale intervention engaging youth in one Indigenous community currently going through a period of change. The project's resources limited the discussion to only two main groups of youth over an eight-month period. Given the long history and weight of planning's colonial legacy, this intervention's

ability to create change is very small. Sharing – the third pillar our process – seeks to mitigate this limitation by creating an ongoing conversation amongst community members, service providers and government actors, building momentum towards a decolonized process, where community-driven decisions and designs can widely be recognized as solutions.

CONCLUSION

Eabametoong First Nation is progressively addressing the potential changes to its environment, land and community. Leadership has involved youth in these important decisions, and using the theoretical tools of Indigenous planning and youth-focused consultation, this partnership creates a model for this type of engagement. The pattern of listening, learning and sharing ensures that equity is created in planning with youth. Rejecting the planner as sole-expert and instead building their role as a mutual participant empowers the planner, to share their learning and the creative visions of youth as solutions to problems. (Re)Imagining Our Community provided a base for an ongoing relationship with community youth, modelling how their values can be injected into the community development process.

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DR. SHELAGH MCCARTNEY received her Doctor of Design in Urban Planning and Design from Harvard University Graduate School of Design. She currently lives in Toronto where she is director of the +city lab and an assistant professor at the School of Urban and Regional Planning at Ryerson

University. She can be reached at shelagh.mccartney@ryerson.ca

ELIZABETH ATLOOKAN has served as Chief of Eabametoong First Nation since first elected to this role in 2013.

LOUIE SUGARHEAD is a councilmember for Eabametoong First Nation with a special focus on the youth portfolio.

JEFFREY HERSKOVITS and **KATHRYN TRNAVSKY** are graduates of Ryerson University's school of Urban and Regional Planning. Both currently work as associates at +city lab and can be reached at jeffrey@pluscitylab.com and kathryn@pluscitylab.com

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