

## **A Community of Heroes**

*Regina Binder*

Contact: [rbinder@hughesbinder.com](mailto:rbinder@hughesbinder.com)

### **Abstract**

Sense of place is the human response to natural and built surroundings, geography, history and population. Over time, that response evolves into a shared consciousness, woven by memory, story and experience. Distinct from written history, the process stamps the soul of a community with an indelible and miraculous sense of place different from others and unique to itself. Analyzing this sense of place reveals the experiential and impressionistic qualities that give each destination its authentic identity.

Preserving sense of place is critical to sustainability and to the management of change that inevitably results from the external pressures placed on communities by the micro and macro economic demands inherent to resorts and second home destinations. In locations where development pressures and community interests compete, sense of place is most threatened because there are few tools of valuation, recognition, or management of this critical, if intangible component.

### **Philosophy**

Any place in this world, be it constructed or natural, expresses its own identity. Human consciousness responds as powerfully to the identity of a place as it does to the identity of a person.

When we speak of a *sense of place* we mean this human response to a location's natural and built surroundings, to its geography and history, and to its population. Over time, this response evolves into a local consciousness, a social awareness, woven by the shared memories, the recurring stories and the collective experiences of that community. Distinct from written history and quantifiable civic data, *sense of place* ultimately stamps the soul of a community with its individual and indelible personality – its authentic identity that is sensed more than measured. To the citizens of its neighborhoods and streets, its green space and natural environs this sense of identity expresses the conviction of absolute truth by which a community recognizes itself.

An outsider must navigate carefully through this identity in order to contribute favorably to its evolution. No matter how well-intentioned, proposed change is often perceived as a community

threat. New development must find a way to understand and honor community identity, just as it must adhere to the legal codes and regulations.

### **Intention**

The objective of this work is to provide the client with a rich and thorough understanding of place. With this understanding, the client is able to navigate through community identity with the knowledge of a local. Such understanding can help the client establish the positive working partnerships with local leaders and regulatory boards that are necessary for a successful project. The benefits of this work include reducing regulatory hurdles, facilitating permit processes and mitigating negative impacts of the development thereby bringing private and public interests into consensus. In addition to these benefits of time savings and local support, development infused with authenticity speaks to the heart of both the community and the potential consumer giving a distinct advantage to branding, sales and marketing efforts.

### **Process**

As with a person, community identity consists of both quantitative and qualitative features. A person is six feet tall with blue eyes, a receding hairline, and a slight hitch in his left leg when he walks up a flight of stairs. A place has a population of three thousand, six miles of coastline, a town meeting form of government, and an aging pier in need of renovation. These features give us a physical description of a person or place but not the identity. Just as a person is shaped by his experiences and memories, so is place. Layered onto and absorbed into the physical fabric of place, are intangible, emotional and impressionistic elements generated by human interaction over time. These intangibles manifest as substantially in the community as its physical attributes. Always particular and distinct, they define the authentic identity of the community. The process of discovering and articulating this identity for the client is broken down into 2 phases: research and analysis.

### **Research**

We start by researching geography to see what physical and natural features have shaped the community. From our research into history we find the events and milestones that had an equally shaping impact. In order to understand community values and concerns, we research regulatory documents wherein core perceptions are expressed in both tone and content. Not only do we review current regulations and planning documents, but we also research the changes to these over time. These changes allow us to understand how civic concerns and issues have evolved.

We then do extensive research into the creative and inspirational aspects of the community by exploring its writing, art, and music. This body of work is not only imbedded in the soul of place, but it also portrays community character in story, mood and feeling.

During on site research, we gather insight into the impact of place on people and the impact of people on place. To achieve this, we connect with local residents and visitors in order to find out what attracts them to this place in their heart. We follow clues and test theories we developed from primary and secondary source material. We explore lifestyle and the deep emotional and impressionistic character of the place. We visit local establishments to overhear the personality of place as described in the daily-ness of the lives of residents and visitors.

### **Analysis**

We analyze the quantitative data and the qualitative information gathered during our research in order to define and articulate community identity. To express this identity for the client, we distill findings into descriptive themes and anecdotes. We realize and communicate what is intangible in order to give the client group a thorough understanding of the authenticity of the community to use in the development process and beyond.

### **Presentation of the Work**

The presentation to the client is a clear and powerful portrait of community identity, of sense of place. The presentation evokes the authentic impressions and experiences unique to that location. Our description locates place in the psyche through iconic impressions, in the mind through history and geography, in the heart through population and lifestyle, and in the soul through the intangible assets, themes and clues.

### **Profile**

Binder Boland began in 1994 as a preservation, planning and development consultancy for resort, second home and tourism destinations. Living and practicing in an historic fishing and summer tourist village that is now a coastal resort, we have worked with the built form, with building codes and regulations and with materials analysis as the quantifiable and tangible means by which preservation may be realized. These factors define the traditional approach to preservation and must be honored as such. In addition, we take a non-traditional approach to preservation by honoring intangibles into existence. By analyzing these intangibles, we discover “sense of place”.