

Sunday, September 6, 2009

[BC Land Summit: Solving for Similarities – New Ways of Imagining Communities: in Conversation with Angus McAllister](#)

by hans peter meyer

Angus McAllister is the principal at [McAllister Opinion Research](#). He was a presenter, with Michael Gordon (City of [Vancouver](#)) and [Mark Holland](#) (HB Lanarc Consultants), at the [BC Land Summit](#) in Whistler, May 2009. The title of their presentation, *Urban Subcultures & Precincts: A New Theory of Urban Vitality & Authenticity*, formed the basis for our conversation later in June. My conversation with Angus McAllister continues our coverage of the 2009 BC Land Summit, a gathering of approximately 800 land use practitioners from across BC and North America. Subsequent postings will continue to explore how this event is helping to shape and inform the conversation about land use, development, and conservation in BC.

hpm: I recently interviewed Mark Holland about his impressions of the May 2009 BC Land Summit. He said that one of his highlights was your presentation at the panel on Urban Vitality & Authenticity. Would you tell me a little about yourself and the background to this presentation at Whistler in May?

AM: I have a public opinion research company, McAllister Opinion Research. I was part of that panel because of work we've been doing on what I'll call "solving for difference," and how it relates to community planning and development. But before I had my own firm, I worked as a VP with Environics International and Angus Reid. One of my research programs over the years has involved tracking Canadian attitudes and values about the environment. Our database goes back 20 years. So that's a really large data set on what most Canadians think of in terms of sustainability and the environment.

When looking at a data set of this size you get to see patterns, you see peoples' values in a broad sense. We starting realizing things about how people's sense of identity and sense of place were connected. We start to see that cultural values shape how Canadians relate to the land, to their community, to the environment.

Most market research looks for differences. Clients are trying to define differences in taste, style and consumer preference. These define market niches and allow them to match their products and services to specific consumer segments. They will define 30 types of spaghetti sauce, or 30 styles of jeans to sell to 30 types of people. Marketers will argue that the greatest common good is served by identifying and serving differences among people.

Solving for difference is great for consumer products, but solving for similarity is what we should be doing in a terms of a lived setting, a community. In looking at politics and social issues, I am more interested in commonalities, the things that cut across target markets and niches. We don't have to wear each other's jeans or eat each other's spaghetti sauce, but if we want to live in the same community and share the planet, then looking to what we have in common may be more useful.

If you build neighbourhoods based on solving for difference, for example, you end up with gated communities where everybody is – from a values viewpoint – the same: they eat the same spaghetti sauce, wear the same kinds of jeans, drink the same coffee, drives the same cars, etc.... You create gated communities, ghettos if you will, with young people here, old people there, working people here, and so on.

I started talking to people like Mark Holland and Michael Gordon. I wanted to "solve for similarity" not difference. Out of our conversations we realized that activity was really what mediates sense of place. It's not just that we like water; it's what we do with it – fishing or boating or drinking or whatever it is. The values around activity often bridge cultural and demographical differences.

h: So give me an example.

A: Here's one: Listening to music, [Johnny Cash](#) for example. You'll find urban progressives who like Johnny Cash, and rural conservatives who might like Johnny Cash. Politically and geographically different people, but you'll find them coming together to listen to Johnny Cash, or to go the movie about his life. Fishing is another example. Many different types of people like fishing. They might have completely different values and background from each other. My favourite teacher and the smartest guy I ever worked for – Dale Blackburn – loved fishing, and as far as I know, he still does. He was a man of faith and pretty conservative. I cannot see him ever voting NDP. He is quite different from my brother, with his so-called Western European "liberal" values – and social democratic ways. Aside from his wedding day, I am not sure if my brother has ever been in a church. Yet, they both are fanatics about fishing. They both know what a good fishing rod is. They both know where the good steelhead fishing holes are. So they would connect through common a knowledge and activity.

Other examples are cooking, or even bowling. [Robert Putnam](#) did some great work on this specifically using the example of bowling.

h: Okay, I get Robert Putman and his [Bowling Alone](#) thesis.

A: What we're doing with "solving for similarity" connects to Putnam. His thesis is basically, "In America we used do things together!" If we developed land use and development policies built around his thinking we'd create situations where Americans would find themselves all bowling together, in bowling leagues – whether they were Republicans and Democrats, whether they were runny spaghetti sauce eaters or chunky sauce eaters. And, because we're all bowling together, sharing this activity that we all appreciate, the door is opened for dialogue, getting to know each other beyond our spaghetti sauce preferences.

From a community design perspective, we need to design communities around shared activities. Shared activity use needs to be a core design consideration. Mark Holland's work on cultural precincts relates to this idea very strongly: identifying the kinds of activities that bring people together, building on that.

h: I can see an example in stewardship work. People who get involved to save an area from development or change might initially come together for very different reasons. Some might be concerned about the threat to their favourite fishing stream. Others might be concerned about water quality, or saving a streamside trail, or neighbourhood forest. Then they connect around their common interest in the stream, and their reasons for wanting to save the stream are secondary. Does that fit what you're saying?

A: Exactly. An environmental organization that I've worked with realized that hunters supported them. It was surprising to them: 75% of hunters in British Columbia are against the trophy grizzly hunt. This led some inside the organization to consider that, well, "We should connect more with these people around hunting." So they got their fire arms permits and took their hunting license training courses and they're hunting. They discovered that there's an ethic around hunting that you can connect on, make connections between environmental stewardship and conservation and people who hunt.

h: So how does this connect to issues facing small towns where the big focus on land development happens to be outside of town. In the [Comox Valley](#) or in parts of the [Okanagan](#) the proposed new developments don't seem to lend themselves to the kinds of "cultural precinct" ideas that you and Mark Holland are talking about. Most of what I'm seeing is about creating places where they all like one kind of spaghetti sauce, not places where people mix in activities.

A: It's interesting. [Intrawest](#) is one of the biggest resort developers. They've said that the moment you have a development where all the same people start moving in – it's all BMWs and sheepskin coats for example – well, it loses its vitality. You get a very comical situation. It's like what seems to happen in Whistler or Tofino: All these people in their sheepskin coats wandering around looking for some real people – "Are there any real fisherman around here?" And the answer is, "Well, no, because they can't afford to live here." But there'll be a fake fishing boat because that's what used to be real, authentic about the place.

h: At some level as a tourist I might want authenticity, but do I want to buy into a residential development that is "authentic?" What does the market want?

A: I would say the market doesn't know what it wants until it sees it. But if you create communities that are authentic – that have a real mix of interests and people – then you will sell, and you will sell like you never sold before. You'll draw in more business. You'll create a center of activity and interest. You'll create the conditions for a cultural precinct. It's like a kitchen – at any party people go to the kitchen. [Christopher Alexander](#) talks about this in his [Pattern Language](#). Do you know this book?

h: I've held it in my hands. That's as close I've gotten to "knowing" it.

A: It's good. If you open the part on kitchens, he asks, "Why do people at parties go to the kitchen? Why is the kitchen always the center of activity? Why are dining rooms always empty?"

People want to go to the kitchen. Why's that? Because real things happen there. We create. We

produce in the kitchen. It's authentic.

If we look at a neighbourhood, then the example of a "kitchen" would be a bakery. People love bakeries and they don't even know why. They just go there because real stuff happens in a bakery. There's production happening – that's one of Alexander's things, "production" – and it's a type of activity and there's a kind of ethics and knowledge, and it all makes it a "real" place, a place that feels authentic. And then, if you sell your baked goods, if you had a store which just sold baked goods and you had a bakery that baked and sold – well we'd know which would do better, which would draw more people: it would be the bakery which sold baked goods. Why? Because it feels more authentic. Something is happening; it's not just about selling. There's activity and there's a sense of a core set of values that we can all relate to – and there's the smell of the bread, and it's tied to doing and work and productivity.

h: So you said that Intrawest has got this figured out.

A: Well they haven't got it figured out, but they know that if you only have one type of person, then your project is stale. I was at meeting 2-3 years ago when UBC was trying to develop some of its lands, and this VP from Intrawest he was arguing with UBC's vision. We'd done research on this as well. The people that were moving into these developments would say the same thing, they would say, "Well, we want a bake shop. We want some sort of activity, something like a bake retail store. Like non-useful stores." They also said that "we don't want all the same. We don't only want to see professors here." These are the professors saying this. "We don't want that pompous Professor Emeritus Labcoat and his trophy grad student wife living next door. We want some normal, everyday odd ball. I want a mangy dog. I want that odd guy, we don't really know where he comes from but he'll teach piano really well and tells great stories."

h: So why do we get the developments we get?

A: Because people bought into the marketing. Basically, marketing based on difference and it becomes – it's easier to do, it's just been easier to do, and to buy.

h: I find this interesting: We buy the places that are all "smooth sauce" and we travel because we are looking for "chunky," for "authentic" real places where production and activity happens.

A: Do you travel?

h: Well... a little.

A: When we travel, we look for chunky sauce.

h: I think there's an irony here.

A: We look for chunky sauce. We choose to buy into neighbourhoods where it's all smooth sauce. We travel looking for chunky.

h: We want to live with all the smooth sauce people, and we want the chunky sauce when we

travel. We don't want to run into the smooth sauce people when we are travelling.

A: Well, we don't want them in our compartment. Let's say, we don't want the chunky people, too close to us, but we are drawn to neighborhoods with vitality, with a mix of "smooth" and "chunky," to use that metaphor. Sure, there can be a certain type of uniformity of people living there. But what draws other people in is activity. So what allows you to go to a great Italian neighborhood is that there is food there and great Italian restaurants. It's the activity, not so much the people, that draws us. In this case, the food.

h: Right and so then rubbing shoulders with the other type of people because we both like the same activity. I get to hang with someone just immigrated from Italy or India or Mexico because I like the food.

A: Yes, exactly.

h: We don't consciously want our neighborhoods to be "diverse," a mix of smooth and chunky, but we do want activity and by having that activity we will have diversity.

A: Yes. Let's put it this way: We are drawn to diversity. The most interesting cultures are mixing zones. Montreal is so fascinating because it's a huge mixing zone of anglophone and allophone and francophone cultures. Mixing zones draw us. They are very interesting.

But this doesn't mean it has to be the old fruit cake versus homogenization dichotomy. The question is, how homogenized or mixed do we want it? Our research is telling us that Canadians don't want their communities or neighbourhoods too homogenized.

h: OK. But the situation – it's almost like an after-the-fact in terms of development. What I mean is, we buy into a bunch of market ideas based on "solving for difference," that people of similar values, incomes, backgrounds, etc will find it more comfortable to live in the same neighbourhood. Then, after-the-fact, we go looking for that which is a little uncomfortable. After we buy what we "think" we want, then we go looking for ways to change it.

A: Yes.

h: But isn't a developer who tries to do the non-homogenized approach is going to have a hard time selling it? Homogeneity relates to an idea of "safety" that obsesses North Americans in particular I think. Especially since 9-11, there's a sense that, if I'm a smooth sauce person and everyone around me is smooth sauce then I am safe.

A: I think that's really true. So what you can do though, if you're a developer, is to build communities around activity. You can still have a block of smooth sauce – or it's equivalent in terms of price, style etc – or expensive anchovy sauce. You can have blocks like that, but if you design activity as sort of a central component of your development, if you organize the development around activity, that allows you to draw in the mix without having people feel threatened and like they need a gate.

h: The example I see of this is developments organized around golf. Not being a golfer, I've never seen it as an activity that mixes people – the smooth, the chunky, and the anchovy.

A: I would say that, for example, if every new development on Vancouver Island were oriented around golf as an activity, that might not be so good. But in terms of a neighborhood, it does afford opportunities for mixing.

h: If I think about it like Robert Putnam, then it doesn't matter what the activity is, so long as people are doing it together. He was looking at studies in Italy that linked economic vibrance to community participation in choral societies. People who sang together, he says, are more trusting of each other, more willing to take risks together.

A: Yes.

h: I've experienced that. Years after reading Putnam I started singing in choirs and ended up rubbing shoulders with a people of different ages, different ways of looking at the world. Lots of them I would have not otherwise had conversations with, but all of a sudden we're singing together, helping each other out, having meaningful conversations. Most recently – in the past 3 years or so – I've been taking ballroom and latin dance classes. Now I'm part of this dance community and we do lots of things together – and often our only real initial point of contact was our love of dance. I mean, politically, we're sometimes very differently aligned. Yet some of these people are among my closest friends now.

A: Exactly.

h: We're incredibly diverse, you know.

A: So about communities: It's not values, it's activity. It's activity, it's what we do together. We focus too much on values and consumer preferences. That's solving for a difference.

If you're developing housing, a neighbourhood for example, then maybe the question is: What activities can we share? And golf is one of those activities that a lot of people are sharing, even though most of the developments around golf aren't very diverse.

h: It's true. Even years ago, when my anti-golf bias was pretty entrenched, I'd be surprised at the who was golfing. Young guys I was logging with. They were golfers. And then there's guys I was tree planting with. They were golfers. One of my sons, he's a golfer. And he doesn't fit any golfer stereotype that I had. And I realized that, wow, I had this idea of what golf is, but there are a bunch of people playing golf who really don't fit my stereotype, that the golf course is much more diverse than I thought.

A: It's true. My Uncle Gary, who is a commercial fisherman, he loves golf. He's crazy about it. And then there are the politically very conservative guys I used to work with in Toronto. They loved golf too.

h: Which emphasizes your point that we get together through activities and some kind of

"mixed" non-homogenous, more authentic social life happens.

A: It's important to point out – again – that this is not about values. Values are the difference. If you wear your values – if you had to wear a "value suit" of your values on your clothing every day, we'd never talk to each other. We just know, right off the bat, that we obviously couldn't have a conversation.

h: And we might not play golf together either.

A: Exactly, but if you wear your golf suit everywhere, people will talk to you. They'll connect with you because they see you like golf. That's a core observation.

h: This is helping me get a handle on something that goes way back to my first years of sociology. I think it was [Durkheim](#), and his ideas about organic and mechanical solidarity. Maybe it was just the words. But he described traditional or "mixed" community as "mechanical" solidarity, and modern community, where we tend to create more homogeneous social groups, as being "organic." I always thought that "mechanical" or "mixed" was how community really worked. That a "mechanical" community was where I wanted to live – it was, in fact, where I was living. In this little community on Vancouver Island. Where I still live. I just had this problem with his terminology, because for me "organic" meant better, more authentic.

A: Yes.

h: And in my experience growing up in a small town – you grew up in Nanaimo and maybe it was a little bit different – but in Black Creek, I grew up knowing so many different kinds of people. I got to deal with a lot of different people.

And it's still, even though the Comox Valley's gotten bigger, it's still pretty easy to run into the banker, the mayor, the teacher, the construction guy at the same social functions, and end up having conversations. As well as the guy planting trees and the woman baking bread.

A: Yes. And if you are involved in shared activities – golf, choir, dancing, or fishing for steelhead – then you may really connect with them. Which bring us back to solving for similarity. And using the idea of shared activity as a way to create new neighbourhoods or developments that people actually want to live in – not just sleep in. Which is what Mark is talking about when he talks about "cultural precincts." The kinds of places in a community where the smooth-sauce-people and the chunky-sauce-people – and even the anchovy-sauce-people – do stuff together. Get to know each other. Go bowling in their Hawaiian shirts and listen to Johnny Cash together...and then maybe the [Ramones](#).