

City House: A Response to “Placelessness” Among Geneva College Students

National Faith-Based Service-Learning Conference

Messiah College

Wendy Van Wyhe & Bradshaw Frey

For many reasons, places matter. In a culture increasingly marked by mobility, anonymity and convenience, we often neglect to see the ways in which places, through relationships and common narratives, provide meaning, memories, and a sense of belonging. Each of these, according to place-identity theory, contributes to behavioral patterns and identity formation among community members. Throughout history, a people’s identity and sense of belonging has been intimately tied to their land and social networks. However, we have now entered a time when better jobs, desirable climates and new surroundings entice us to uproot and leave behind the places that have shaped us, creating a generation that owns much but experiences a new degree of emptiness or “homelessness”. American higher education, in particular, has contributed to this deep sense of displacement as students are too often equipped for job performance but remain ill equipped for citizenship or good inhabitance. The City House, which is the name given to a living-learning community in Beaver Falls is our response to this need for commitment to place among college students.

The term, “place” according to several contemporary authors, refers to a space that is associated with meaning or particular memories. For instance, we can imagine or remember special places from our past, which are undoubtedly filled with relationships or significant moments. These places provides us with a deep sense of belonging, rootedness, connection to both our surroundings and the people with whom we occupied that space, orientation or the starting point from which all other places are compared, and identity. Our very sense of self is shaped by our interactions, group identity, and attachments – all

formed while occupying a particular place. In fact, if we think back to the essential components of a story – characters, setting, plot, conflict, resolution – and reflect on our own pasts and identity formation, we are reminded of the importance of setting, or place, for coherence and understanding of our personal story.

Further, “place-identity”, which refers to the meaning and memory associated with a particular place, contributes to the convictions by which we live our lives, our interpretations or how we make sense of the world and significant events, as well as the ways in which we evaluate others and ourselves. Certainly, place-identity is essential for grounding us in a common narrative and shaping behavior towards a common good based on a full understanding of what it means to belong to a particular place and community. Without such rootedness, we may experience endless choice and freedom but lack the ability to commit or invest in much beyond our own self-gratification.

Unfortunately, however, place-identity can also have a negative impact on our sense of self. For instance, those who inhabit places marked by urban decay have the added challenge of overcoming the ways in which physical deterioration, poverty, crime statistics, social image, and stereotypes affect their own identity in regards to where they live. According to the research provided over the past forty years, there are several factors that contribute to a positive or beneficial place-identity.

First, the degree to which we feel attached to a particular place affects the identity we receive from that place. While the length of time people live in a place and the presence of family or social relationships within a place are the largest factors determining level of attachment, attending the local school, playing or cheering for the local sports team, working, attending church, civic organizations and other local events or celebrations and keeping up with the local news all form persons’ degree of attachment to a particular place.

A second factor is whether we can identify with the places we inhabit. Does the place reflect our own preferences or convictions? Is there common ground that we share with members from the community? And, do we fit in? The degree to which we identify with a particular place will impact the meaning we ascribe to that place and the ways it shapes our sense of place-identity.

Finally, the image of a particular place based on its industry, recreation, geography, physical environment and problems, along with the perceptions we have of that place and its people, contribute to our concept of what it means to identify with such a place, forming its place-identity. Clearly, our own willingness to invest and root ourselves in a place, along with our evaluation of that place, determines both the existence of place-identity and whether that place-identity will have positive or negative connotations for those living in that place.

This brings up two major cultural problems – the deterioration of places and what has been coined, “placelessness”. First, our society has a way of discarding places that are no longer useful, that is, no longer profitable. My own city, Beaver Falls, a once-thriving steel producer until the late 70’s, has itself experienced dramatic disinvestment, the deterioration of buildings, houses, sidewalks and streets, the social problems that often accommodate high levels of poverty and joblessness, and the overall state of stress, tension, abrasiveness, and distrust that folks feel in an environment that communicates unimportance or indignity. Surely, linking our identity to a place such as this can have negative consequences in regards to self-concept and self-efficacy. In fact, Winifred Gallagher (1993), author of a book entitled, *Power of Place*, uses the term, “slum”, not as a physical description of a particular place, but rather the psychological phenomena of despair and hopelessness felt by the inhabitants of that place.

The second problem, placelessness, is the primary issue we attempt to address at the City House, our living-learning community. Placelessness refers to the decline of social ties and rootedness to place in America due to the high value we place on mobility, privacy, efficiency and convenience.

As a culture, we are no longer bound physically or psychologically to the places we live. Addicted to mobility and the continual quest for the new and improved, Americans rarely live in a place long enough to acquire a love for it. In his text, *Country of Exiles*, author William Leach (1999) addressed the “bulldozers of modernization” that invade neighborhoods and the lure of upward mobility that often remove us from familiar places. He states, “In America today, nobody is at home” (p. 14).

Having learned to use space efficiently in an attempt to maximize return, Americans have adopted a whole array of careless practices such as poor planning, destructive farming techniques and sprawl, just to name a few. In his book, Leach (1999) describes recent advances and trends that damage or reduce Americans’ sense of place including our nation’s system of highways and mass transportation of goods, corporate consolidations and transnational companies, worldwide communication systems, temp agencies, mobile or temporary homes, and even furniture designed to be collapsible and lightweight for those on the move. While each of these has provided a greater degree of independence, modern convenience and globalization have contributed to an economy that marginalizes local places. Our neglect, as a culture, to nurture and protect the unique places we live has produced, according to Leach (1999), a “feast of nonplaces,” designed to make people feel secure but lacking any sort of integrity, permanence, meaning or identity (p. 56).

This cultural phenomenon takes a toll on our sense of place-identity and the meaning we associate with the places we live. Leach (1999) also described our very personal longing for continuity and stability. He states: “We live longer but emptier,

without those nurturing habitats or places which remind us where we came from and, therefore, who we are” (p. 8). Edward Relph (1992) and Gillian Rose (1995), geographers who have each studied the significance of persons’ environment on human development, further acknowledge our need to be placed. Relph (1992) states, “having and identifying with place [is] integral to what and who we are as human beings” (p. 88). According to Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian Walsh, in their text, *Beyond Homelessness* (2008), to be “placed” is to have a sense of connection, loyalty, affection and identity within a particular context. The places we live, according to the authors, root us and offer a sense of orientation from which we see the world and understand our position within it. It is, perhaps, the most important and least recognized need of the human soul (Bouma-Prediger, et al, 2008).

Further, Gallagher (1993) links place to the actions, thoughts, and feelings that are shaped by our surroundings. She suggests that our environments have much to do with the expectations, norms, and accountability that determine individual and collective attitudes and behaviors. In other words, our surroundings communicate to us how we ought to behave. When we care about the places we live, we behave as if they matter and we hold ourselves to a higher standard. Leach (1999) further proposes that we can expect more prisons and police as a result of our culture’s failure to remember and protect local places.

However, while caring deeply for the places we live is so important for both our own wellness and the health of our communities, we live in a culture that destroys places in the name of progress and profit margin. Since places, composed of both physical structures and social networks, sustain us and provide a sense of identity and dignity, we would be wise to nurture rather than destroy the places we live. Unfortunately, higher education in America does not do this very well. Rather than fostering a responsible care of place, cultivating a detailed knowledge of place, and developing students towards a deep sense of care for the

places they inhabit, colleges and universities (including Christian colleges) too often focus on education for jobs and upward mobility while students remain ill-equipped for good inhabitation or place-making. This sort of instruction, which necessarily requires rootedness, investment, and love for the places we live, is not only necessary for the preservation of places, but for our own health, stability, deep satisfaction, and basic humanness.

In response to this lost sense of place, many colleges and universities are designing new programs to educate towards the care and protection of local places. At Geneva College, the City House provides a living-learning experience designed to nurture students' understanding and commitment to place and community. It is an opportunity for students to live in Christian community as a household while they engage the life of their neighborhood. Nine Geneva College students live at the City House, which is located in downtown Beaver Falls, roughly one and a half miles from Geneva's campus.

While living at the City House, students gain a deeper understanding of community and neighborhood in two 4-credit courses, which are integrated into the house experience. "Civic Engagement: Beaver Falls" has been designed to utilize Geneva College faculty from a variety of disciplines along with guest speakers from the community, field trips, retreats and projects to help students better understand how our faith and the scriptures can inform where and how we live as community members, consumers, neighbors, and citizens. Our course covers topics like spiritual formation, Christian community, food (what we eat, where it comes from, and why this matters), local economies, commitment to place, the history, environmental issues, needs, and social environment of Beaver Falls, and strategies for community development.

Throughout the semester, students reflect on their experience and learning while writing a series of journal entries. As the instructor, it was interesting to observe students

as they tried to better understand our context of Beaver Falls and come to a deeper sense of care for this community. In her assigned journal, one of our students lamented the deterioration of place as she reflected on her surroundings. She wrote:

just the other day, after learning that Kelly's hardware just closed, the Salvation Army Thrift Store was closing, the local bank was closing and also possibly the Hotdog shop, I was walking to school-get this- in the rain and passed a back hoe tearing down not one but two houses. I cried. The one house, even though sorely falling apart with broken windows and peeling siding I liked to image that I would buy and remodel. It was snug in between its neighbors but somehow the odd one, sort of like the house in Pixar's UP. I really liked its porch and roof but now it is torn down.

In the same assignment, another student wrote:

Beaver Falls is decaying, slowly and with measured confidence in the entropy its elements are subjected to. To live in Beaver Falls is to live in a place that is falling apart: cracked sidewalk, shattered buildings, crumbling houses, aged stones, rusted railings, and sickly vegetation inhabit this world. There are numerous towns like this throughout the Rust Belt; ghastly villages that have helped form the *mis-en-scenes* of Hollywood horror movies.... There is an abandoned building sandwiched between the CVS pharmacy and the corner shops that is striking: it has nearly been swallowed by crawling ivy. It is as though the earth itself is trying to eat Beaver Falls.... To live in Beaver Falls is also to live in a place of great grace. Grace is the most inexhaustible of the human emotions: anger, sorrow, joy, fear, and even charity eventually run their course, but grace constantly replenishes itself. It comes from the very character of a God whose grace outweighs His wrath. My own time living in City House has been one of remarkable grace: I see grace in the relationships I have formed, in the places I have volunteered.

As part of the course, during the first semester of this past year, each student also did a research project related to one of these topics and several of these projects were

useful to relevant organizations in Beaver Falls. For example, one student surveyed folks at a nearby soup kitchen in order to better understand their interests and specific needs. The results of her survey were used to design a series of workshops and activities that are now offered immediately following the weekly soup kitchen. The workshops include a cooking class, an exercise class, art projects, a Bible study and a personal finance class. So far, they have been well attended. One volunteer recently stated, “The people that come aren’t going to become experts in just four weeks but they may have a lot of fun, get to know some new people, and leave feeling very encouraged. For me, it’s been such a great way to connect with people and build relationships through our shared experience”.

Another student researched local farmer’s markets, looking specifically at markets in distressed communities in order to uncover ways in which our own market in Beaver Falls could generate greater vibrancy. Sharing the student’s work with vendors at the market has opened up new opportunities for us to attend meetings and assist the local farmers as they planned this year’s market. In addition to the guest speakers and field trips, these projects seemed to help students gain a deeper appreciation for the Beaver Falls community.

A second major component of our living-learning community is the volunteer requirement. Students are asked to volunteer at a Beaver Fall’s organization or ministry of their choice. Several students volunteer at the nearby soup kitchen, the nursing home or art center. Along with supporting the work of these organizations, it seems these volunteer experiences provide a context for gaining an awareness of the needs within our community, regular interaction with community members, and building relationships. One year, students enjoyed a couple guys from the soup kitchen so much that they were often invited to dinner with us at the house. Also, for the past two years, we have had a couple women volunteer together at Providence Care Center, which is a government subsidized senior care

facility. Each year, they really enjoyed their experience painting the nails of elderly women and helping during activity time. Volunteering together was significant for them and made it really fun.

In addition to volunteering in the community, another major focus for us at the City House is our relationships to the neighbors. When we bought the house six years ago, we had no idea what we were in for. Since the very beginning, the students and I have been welcomed and embraced by our neighbors. They are excited to meet the new students each year and have always cared for us and watched out for us. Our neighborhood makes it easy for us to enter into the life of our street. Along with playing football or climbing the tree with kids on our street, the students are eager to build relationships and spend time with folks around the fire pit or on the front porch. With each new group of students, we have hosted a block party in late August where we have had up to a hundred people come out for burgers, wings and s'mores. Over the years, our neighbors have taken on more and more of the planning and food preparation for the block party, really making it a community effort. We also coordinate an urban garden, which was planted in a vacant lot near the house. This year, we have nine households that will contribute money or labor in exchange for a portion of the vegetables we (hopefully) will grow. One neighbor recently commented,

“some of us remember what it was like to live in a healthy neighborhood where everyone knew each other and when street parties were pretty common, that’s not really the case anymore...what the City House is doing by trying to provide that experience is really remarkable for this neighborhood and the students, I’m sure they catch on to something they wouldn’t otherwise get if they stayed on campus.”

Further, as a Christ-centered community, students at the City House share the necessary responsibilities for the good-functioning of the house which include cooking meals, grocery shopping and house chores, along with arranging rides with their

housemates, talking through assignments, editing papers for one another, and supporting each other in the midst of crisis. Each year, early on, students come to acknowledge the significance of eating together as a community and how dinnertime serves as the central activity and meeting point for the household. There is something about preparing meals for one another, sitting around the table, passing food, talking, laughing, or even venting that unites the group in a shared experience. Even though community life in the house often feels very ordinary or routine, our hope is that students, as they reflect on their experience, will recognize the spirit of Christ among us as we do life together throughout the year.

This idea of Christian community is a central theme for the City House. In addition to discussing Christian community and trying to live into their understanding, our students took a trip into Pittsburgh, this past year, to explore other models of Christian community among young people in the city. Our students had a great time connecting with folks at the Ministry House over a shared meal and time set aside for stories and conversation. The Ministry House is located in one of the most distressed communities in Pittsburgh (Homewood) and is facilitated by a former Geneva student who has worked with Pitt and CMU students and a local pastor to begin a similar project. They have been a great encourager and connection for us.

While we remain convinced that our living-learning community provides a rich context for students as they engage and reflect upon the ways in which the scriptures can inform where and how we live as people of faith, our project is not without significant challenges. Besides ongoing maintenance issues, safety concerns and roommate conflicts, integrating students' academic and residence life experience has been difficult. It seems we have learned to separate course work from dorm or community life and the process of integrating the two, in a living-learning community has been both confusing and uncomfortable for students. While watching TV or eating dinner, I have had students ask,

“Am I being graded for this?” Or, perhaps even more challenging is creating time and space for good discussion and learning. Living with your classmates and instructor, along with using the living room as a classroom, provides a very comfortable environment but often students get too comfortable or informal that it can be distracting. For some students, the course feels more like an extra-curricular activity and is treated that way. Most confusing, according to the students, is my role as the director. One student stated: “It’s hard to know which person you are; one second you’re the professor and then five minutes later you joke with us and then you remind us to do our chores. It’s hard that you’re both our friend or mentor as well as the person that grades our papers.” Clearly, our traditional categories no longer apply and adapting to a new model can be hard, and often frustrating, for both the students and the director.

In addition, the City House has continually been challenged by a lack of resources. For the past six years, we have maintained our program year-to-year with the hope that we would remain viable. However, with the recent addition of Geneva course credit, coupled with new support from the college and a grant from the Lily Endowment, we are able to begin envisioning future possibilities. Three immediate things we hope will emerge include a formal evaluation of student learning, the development of a summer program for students who’s circumstances preclude involvement during the year or students from other institutions (like any of your institutions) and an ongoing attempt to connect to the deep narratives of the community.

While we will continually be confronted by difficult challenges, it seems our task at hand is well worth the effort. It our belief that a deep sense of commitment to the places we live is necessary for the health of our local communities as well as our own need for stability, orientation, and meaning. As our culture continually lures us towards hyper-consumerism, modern-day conveniences and greater mobility, it seems an alternative

approach is necessary. Our hope is that while students engage our community of Beaver Falls, they will recognize the significance of this, or any, particular place and learn the value of investing in and caring for the places they will live. Maybe the students at the City House will catch a glimpse of this alternative as they live and study together.

References

- Bouma-Prediger, S. & Walsh, B.J. (2008). *Beyond Homelessness*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Gallasher, W. (1993). *The Power of Place*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Leach, W. (1990). *Country of Exiles*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Relph, E. (1992). "Modernity and the reclamation of place," in D. Seaman (ed.) *Dwelling, Seeing, and Designing: Towards a Phenomenological Ecology*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Rose, G. (1995). "Place and identity: a sense of place." In D. Massey and P. Jess (eds.) *A Place in the World? Places, Cultures and Globalization*. Oxford University Press/Open University Press.
- Van Wyhe, W. R. (2011). *Place-Identity in Beaver Falls* (Master's thesis).