



Research Paper

Vision, voice, and the community landscape: The Missouri Place Stories pilot project

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ABSTRACT

Authorized discourses of landscape value omit key qualities that make places valuable to the people who inhabit them. Here we present a community-based research initiative in which residents of two urban St Louis neighborhoods identified meaningful sites and sights in their locale. Using photographs and narration, they traced the contours of a “community landscape” characterized by heterogeneity, social relationships, creative practice, and a communalist model of human-nature relations. Inventoried, archived, and located on a digital mapping tool, their vision serves as a resource for neighborhood identity and collective decision-making. The insights produced by this type of project could productively inform urban planning and land management, and empower residents to decide what merits protection, reproduction, or alteration in the places where they live.

1. Introduction

Arun, a participant in the Missouri Place Stories pilot project, composed a photograph at the intersection of Klemm Street and Blaine Avenue in St Louis, Missouri. His photograph depicts Klemm, flanked by sidewalks, extending toward the horizon (see [Image 1](#)). A grassy vacant lot covers a third of the foreground, and in the background two smokestacks join the leafy branches of trees in the sky. Four homes occupy the midground, one newly built with a parked car in front, another much older, still another under construction. Behind them stretches an old multistory factory. As he snapped the photograph, Arun recorded a commentary:

I think this intersection highlights Botanical Heights for me. You can see several new construction [houses], neighboring a rehabbed original building, and in the background you can see the smokestacks of the factory as well as the main structure of the factory itself. It shows a nice juxtaposition of old and new, modern and old. The smokestacks offer a permanence, and a sort of reassuring solidness, kind of like an old oak tree. Botanical Heights is nice. It's located between Route 44 on one side, Route 64 on the other, the Central West End, the medical center, the botanical garden, the SLU [St Louis University] medical center, all within walking distance of the neighborhood. Lots of people have moved into the neighborhood, and there's been plenty of people who've seen the neighborhood through hard times. It's exciting to be part of a neighborhood that is re-finding its character and developing an identity and hopefully

contributing something to the greater St Louis fabric.

“Landscapes,” geographer Denis Cosgrove wrote, “have an unquestionably material presence, yet they come into being only at the moment of their apprehension by an external observer” (2006, p. 50). Through this “place story,” Arun imagined into being his neighborhood's landscape. Perhaps surprisingly to a preservationist or environmentalist, Arun valued a heterogeneous, changing mixture of the historic and newly built, residential and industrial, natural and cultural. Essential to this landscape's “identity” were relationships between long-term and recently-arrived neighbors, smallness of scale, integration into a bigger urban context, and two highways. Smokestacks and trees provided “a reassuring solidness” in a site characterized by eclecticism and transformation.

As Arun and the other participants in the Missouri Place Stories pilot photographed and recorded narrations about meaningful locations in their neighborhood, they articulated the landscape's value for its most important stakeholders: the people who live there. A project website inventories the places they selected, locates them on a digital map, and affords visitors the opportunity to hear participants describe the area's significance in their own words. Researchers and participants used this tool to explore potential uses of the place stories for local action. We argue that the insights emerging from this initiative, including the concept of the “community landscape” that we developed from it, could productively inform planning and land management in urban neighborhoods.

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Image 1. Arun's photograph of the landscape that represents Botanical Heights, the intersection of Klemm Street and Blaine Avenue.

Official instruments for identifying and preserving historic, cultural, or environmental value – the National Historic Preservation Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, the National Park Service guidelines for cultural landscapes, national or regional registers of historic places, etc. – recognize places that historians, archaeologists, ecologists, and other professionals can interpret (e.g., Berg, 2011; King, 2003, 2009; Morgan, Morgan, & Barrett, 2006; Walker, 2012). Such authorized discourses exclude “the commonplace and the seemingly inconsequential markers on the landscape that anchor people to what they call home and to what they identify as their heritage” (Morgan et al., 2006, p. 706). Yet understanding what makes a landscape valuable to its inhabitants is the precondition for eliciting a local commitment to its management. If we hope to create better landscapes for the future, including ones that move beyond “paradigms that pit nature and culture as universal antonyms,” we must ground those landscapes in the connections between people and place (Willow, 2011, p. 115; see also Roe and Taylor, 2014, pp. 19–20).

In the pages below we describe our idea of the community landscape, the neighborhoods where we piloted the Missouri Place Stories project, and our methods. We interpret a small selection of place stories and report on our conversations with stakeholders. We conclude by reflecting on the lessons we learned and summarizing the intellectual and practical implications of the pilot for urban planning and landscape management.

2. Conceptualizing the community landscape

For most of the 20th century, US government officials and heritage professionals regarded as landscapes such sites as stately gardens, parks, rural cemeteries, plantations, and lakeshores (Keller & Keller, 2003, pp. 187–194). These places were valued for their connections to famous people, particular histories, and aesthetic merits. As interest in landscape preservation grew from the mid-1970s through the 1990s, the National Park Service created the category of “cultural landscape”: “a geographic area, including both cultural and natural resources and the wildlife or domestic animals therein, associated with a historic event, activity, or person or exhibiting other cultural or aesthetic values” (Birnbau, 1994, p. 1). In the city of St. Louis, heritage organizations such as The Cultural Landscapes Foundation recognize large parks, gardens, and cemeteries as cultural landscapes (The Cultural Landscapes Foundation, 2001–2016).

Urban neighborhoods like Shaw and Botanical Heights, where we piloted Missouri Place Stories, are usually thought of as places. They have no built or geological forms that encourage the observer to perceive them as scenic vistas, and cannot be read as expressions of a

distinctive culture shared by people with longstanding ties. These neighborhoods were largely unplanned and have changed dramatically over a short period. They have heterogeneous populations, eclectic built structures, and variable wildlife.

Despite this, landscape is an apt framework for this project. In the academy, cultural geographers, anthropologists, and others describe landscape as a relationship between human experience, action, and sensibilities, on the one hand, and the non-human environment on the other (e.g., Alanen and Melnick, 2000; Cosgrove, 2006; Descola, 2016; Jackson, 1984; Olwig, 2015; Rose and Wylie, 2006). Landscape combines nature and culture, material and ideal, process and form. The human work of seeing, and related processes of remembering, imagining, and longing, are essential for producing a landscape. Although “place,” like landscape, concerns processes through which humans make spaces meaningful, analyses of place need not attend to non-human processes or the act of seeing (e.g., Hayden 1998).

We propose a special category of landscape for urban settings: the community landscape. The community landscape is an act of apprehension, grounded in locals’ experiences of where, with whom, and how they live, which defines the contours of a good neighborhood. In some respects, the community landscape resembles Jackson’s concept of the “vernacular landscape”: it is small, irregular, and rapidly changing, an organization of time and space made by locals for their own use (1984, pp. 147–157). Unlike Jackson’s vernacular landscape, however, locals actively shape the community landscape, including by creating monuments and “future history.” Furthermore, the community landscape is characterized by a reciprocal, participatory, and dialogic paradigm of human-nature relations, or “communalism” (Palsson 1996, pp. 63–81). Nature, in specific forms and as processes, is an essential part of community.

3. The pilot neighborhoods

From June 2015 to June 2016, Gillette and Hurley launched Missouri Place Stories in two St. Louis neighborhoods that were once a single urban district named after Henry Shaw, a nineteenth-century entrepreneur and philanthropist who bought large swathes of the area. Like many late nineteenth-century urban locales in the United States, Shaw had a dense, mixed-use character. Officials built an interstate highway (I-44) through Shaw in the 1960s, splitting the area in two. The part north of I-44, today’s Botanical Heights, became known as McRee Town. It experienced rapid white flight, the arrival of poorer African American families displaced from public housing projects, and an explosion of drugs, crime, and gang activity. The part south of I-44 retained the name of Shaw. It also saw white families make the suburban exodus, but proximity to the Missouri Botanical Garden, more single-family housing, and greater retail activity sustained a more racially-diversified and middle-income population there.

To stanch the outpouring of investment and people, both neighborhoods pursued revitalization through historic preservation, taking the architecture and period of original building construction (1860s–1920s) as the benchmark for urban planning. Typical of the United States model, officials leveraged market forces to rehabilitate underused buildings for economically-productive functions while relying on a transformed neighborhood identity to attract architecturally-consistent infill on vacant parcels. The strategy stabilized Shaw but failed in McRee Town (Botanical Heights). In the late 1990s, McRee Town abandoned historic preservation for slum clearance, replacing nearly 200 condemned and vacant properties with market-rate, suburban-style single-family homes. The makeover was completed by rebranding the neighborhood as Botanical Heights (Webber and Swanstrom, 2014).

Alongside the historic preservation regeneration agenda emerged urban greening initiatives. In 1983, the City of St. Louis created Gateway Greening to provide technical assistance, equipment, and supplies to neighborhood organizations interested in planting small

gardens on vacant lots (Lawson and Miller, 2013, pp. 32–36; Gateway Greening, 2015). Shaw and Botanical Heights took advantage of these resources, with local schools and non-profit organizations supplementing the city-sponsored projects. The resulting pockets of managed nature did not hinder the redevelopment agenda as long as they were interim land uses. Conflicts arose, however, over the long-term disposition of abandoned parcels, with pro-development groups favoring revenue-producing, replica-oriented infill and environmental factions defending permanent green space (Abbott, 2015; see also Lawson and Miller 2013).

4. The methods

Initial funding for Missouri Place Stories came from Creating Whole Communities, a University of Missouri-St Louis program that promoted urban neighborhoods with diverse housing stock, multiple transit options, vibrant public spaces, sustainable practices, and shared decision-making (Creating Whole Communities, 2014). A National Science Foundation, Missouri EPSCoR award supporting research related to climate change impacts supplemented this grant. Collaboration with community organizations was important to both funders. We secured the cooperation of the Shaw Neighborhood Improvement Association, the Botanical Heights Neighborhood Association, a grass-roots environmental organization called Sustainable in St. Louis, and the Compton Heights Christian Church, all of which helped recruit photo-narrators. Members of all four groups also discussed findings with us.

Prior to creating place stories, participants were encouraged to reflect on the natural and human processes that shaped their neighborhoods. We provided ten-page information packets that included aerial images, photographs, demographic profiles, weather data, and a concise timeline (see Missouri Place Stories, 2016). Our visual and demographic information corresponded to neighborhood boundaries, and we indicated the local impact of events that affected larger geographies. Readers learned that the local prairie encountered by European settlers in the late eighteenth century had been created purposefully by Native American inhabitants through deliberate burning. An 1875 aerial-perspective drawing of the area showed a linear arrangement of trees along freshly-platted subdivision streets, suggesting human design. A map revealed ponds, streams, prairies, and trees that were subsequently erased by urban expansion, while more recent aerial photographs captured the proliferation of weedy lots on vacant property. Our packet also provided long-term climate data, emphasizing the localized characteristics of weather patterns (a trend toward hotter and soggy weather) in the hopes that participants might see climate change as part of the neighborhood's history.

At local art fairs, National Night Out, neighborhood association meetings, a special dinner hosted by the Compton Heights Christian Church, and through random solicitations on neighborhood streets, we invited the residents of Shaw and Botanical Heights to use an application for smart phones and tablets (Pixtorsi) to create photo-narrations. Many people told us that they didn't have time to take part, but 26 residents of Botanical Heights and Shaw participated. Based on appearances, recruits ranged in age from late teens to late sixties, and about half were black and half white (12 black, 14 white). Most told us how long they had been living in the neighborhood: the shortest length of residency was three months and the longest was 37 years.

We reviewed the packets with participants, showed them how to use the application, and asked each person to create five photo-narrations about meaningful places in their neighborhood. We offered nine prompts to help them pick sites. Some prompts used language that would enable us to compare local sensibilities with authorized discourses, such as "a place that reflects the neighborhood's heritage" and "a place that provides environmental benefits." Others were included because we thought that participants would find them easy to identify, such as "a scary place," or "a beautiful place." A few prompts – "a place to eliminate," "a place that needs protection" – signaled our interest in

aspirations for the future. Participants could assign more than one prompt to a place story, or ignore them and make selections based on their own criteria. Altogether, our 26 participants created 136 photo-narrations between August 2015 and April 2016, photographing 78 distinct places (44 in Botanical Heights and 34 in Shaw). Most used at least one of our prompts.

After we had collected about 100 place stories, we pinpointed their locations on a digital map and put them on a publicly accessible website (Missouri Place Stories, 2016). By clicking on a pin, a viewer could see and listen to all the place stories for that location. Users could view the map with all of the pins, or filter the photo-narrations by frequently-chosen prompts or neighborhood. The website remapped the neighborhood and became an archive of the community landscape. We discussed how the place stories could guide neighborhood management through an open forum and several conversations with our community partners between December 2015 and July 2016. At these meetings we watched and responded to several place stories, though we also asked our conversationalists to use the map on their own. Participants shared their reflections and brainstormed about possible actions in light of the community's vision.

5. The place stories

Authorized discourses about history, the environment, and heritage influenced many participants' place stories, but did not determine them. When a resident of Shaw or Botanical Heights photographed a spot with designated landscape value, official rhetoric was usually only part of her description of the site's significance. Participants also chose sites that did not meet, or pertain to, criteria for historic preservation, environmental conservation, or cultural landscapes. In addition, whereas authorized discourses tend to privilege purity, for example in the form of period architecture or undisturbed nature, many residents appreciated heterogeneous places.

Residents drew on their imaginations, lived experiences, and ideals to characterize the value of sites and sights in their neighborhood. Relationships between people, and between people and nature, figured prominently. Heterogeneous places often symbolized multifaceted bonds, suggesting that heterogeneity may have a particular capacity to facilitate diverse relationships. Taken together, the place stories allowed us to theorize the community landscape and showed what made Shaw and Botanical Heights good neighborhoods.

6. Historic places

A number of participants selected historic sites and buildings for place stories, and many used authorized frameworks to express their sense of these locations' significance. Two historic places given by Henry Shaw to the City of St Louis in 1859 appeared in several photo-narrations. Both the Missouri Botanical Garden and Tower Grove Park were recognized by the Cultural Landscapes Foundation and central to the area's official history. Locals regarded history and heritage as part of these sites' value, but even more significant were the relationships that they enabled. These included imaginative relationships with Henry Shaw, the area's founding father; social relationships with family, friends, and neighbors; and communalist relations between people and nature.

Tami chose the Missouri Botanical Garden's entrance gate for one of her place stories. She stated,

The Botanical Garden is a place that reflects the neighborhood's heritage. There's a lot of history there, because of Henry Shaw, and we know a lot of information about Henry Shaw, the Botanical Garden, Flora Place and the homes that were built there to reflect his neighborhood home. So we found that to be very interesting, and we live in a home that's considered historical as well. It's over 100 and some years old so we love that...One of the reasons we love this neighborhood is because the



Image 2. Robin's photograph of Tower Grove Park, an officially recognized cultural landscape in the neighborhood that is rich in personal meaning for residents.

Botanical Garden attracted people from all over, so you were able to see new faces, and know that the community was building.

Heritage and history gave the Missouri Botanical Garden, and the nearby area that Henry Shaw developed, value for Tami, but relationships were what elicited her heartfelt appreciation. In Tami's view, Henry Shaw stamped the area with his personal impress by crafting it "to reflect his neighborhood home." Living in the neighborhood gave her a relationship with the founding father. This sense of connection was strengthened by dwelling in a house "that's considered historical as well," an experience that she and her family "loved." Tami went on to explain that they also "loved" the neighborhood because the Missouri Botanical Garden "attracted people from all over" with whom they could form a community. The Missouri Botanical Garden had "a lot of history," but that history was emotionally meaningful because of the relationships it made possible with Henry Shaw and the "new faces" who moved to the area.

Robin selected Tower Grove Park for a place story, composing a photograph that showed a lawn with a mixture of green grass and bare spots in the foreground (see [Image 2](#)). Trees and a rhododendron were slightly farther back, and in the distance stood a pavilion and fountain with a jet of water shooting up. Like Tami, Robin referred to the site's history to explain her choice, but revealed that relationships were central to the park's value. She mused,

Long before I moved to the neighborhood, I started frequenting Tower Grove farmer's market the year it opened, when my daughter was a toddler. And in the ten years since we are still regulars at the market, and she has spent so much of her childhood playing in the wading pool at the pavilion. That's where she went swimming for the first time as a baby, and even though she's five feet tall and almost an adult now, she still has to go run through the fountains every time we're there. It's just a great place, for a hot day of course, but, we've made friends there, we've met friends there – again, another great community place, a place that needs to be saved, a very historical place that is still growing and still thriving.

Robin thought Tower Grove Park should be preserved for the relationships it facilitated between family, friends, and neighbors, and between people and nature. Relationships made the park "grow and thrive" like a healthy plant. The fountain drew people to relax, play, and cool off in the water. This relationship between people and water offered opportunities for other relationships between people. For Robin, relationships and lived experience were fundamental to Tower Grove Park's value.

In addition to recognized cultural landscapes, participants chose historic buildings for place stories, and employed authorized discourses to characterize their selections. For example, one speaker identified a factory as "on the National Historic Register." Another pointed to a

house's presence on one of the oldest historic maps of the area. Several people described buildings as "historic," and some mentioned specific time periods. For example, Aberha and Patrick independently snapped photos of a pair of adjacent houses built in a Queen Anne style on Folsom Avenue in Botanical Heights. Aberha explained that the houses were "the original two buildings that were built in 1935 and are still here and I hope we can preserve them for future generations." Patrick pointed out that they "used to be part of the whole streetscape here... You hate to see these things get all lost, because photographs – taking a photograph of what it used to be is not quite the same as having an actual building there."

Cbabi was another participant who picked a historic building for a place story, but to him architecture was not what made the site worth preserving. He photographed a brick multi-family residence dating from the period of Shaw's development, and commented:

And for my vulnerable space I decided to choose, not necessarily a place, but the lower income community in the Shaw neighborhood. Not to pick on anybody, but [I want to stress] the necessity that it is not just one kind of folk in this neighborhood. Because I think if that happens the dynamic of what this place is and can be will change. I think it is very important that we have a good balance of incomes in the neighborhood, because it just keeps the air cleaner. It is a better environment for people to live. And not stuffy, and not entitled, and this is the inner city and it needs to look like the inner city. That's just my own opinion, but I think that the incomes in the neighborhood need to remain very diverse.

The historic building in Cbabi's photograph was valuable because it housed lower-income residents and facilitated relationships across class and racial differences. Multi-family residences made Shaw's "inner city" landscape healthier than more homogenous areas, such as the suburbs with their suffocating class and racial uniformity. While Cbabi chose a historic structure to symbolize relationships across social cleavages, he appealed to an environmentalist discourse of "clean air" to stress their importance. Using a rhetorical strategy akin to Robin's plant metaphor, Cbabi blended preservationist and environmentalist frameworks to imagine a model of community well-being where diverse residents were connected to each other and nature.

7. Urban greening initiatives

Sites created through urban greening efforts, such as community gardens and patches of restored prairie, appeared frequently in the place stories, and participants used authorized discourses of landscape value to discuss them. Some turned to environmentalist language, describing such sites as "good for the environment," "helping a more natural habitat," "creat[ing] more oxygen for the neighborhood," and "rebuilding the soil." Others employed beautification rhetoric, describing these places as "beautiful" or "mak[ing] the area look nice." Heritage frameworks were also used: for example, Monte chose a prairie restoration project organized by Sustainable in St Louis, and said, "The Shaw neighborhood is built on the location of an ancient prairie, and all of the plants and environmental features of that prairie were eliminated during the construction of this neighborhood. So the Thurman Gateway Prairie represents the return of a tiny piece of prairie in a very different, altered landscape."

The theme of relationships occurred in many place stories about urban greening, often through the official rhetoric of "community." Participants almost always talked about community gardens as "good for the community," "a community place" where "we get to know each other, the neighbors." For example, Robert described a large community garden on Folsom Avenue in Botanical Heights as "a really unique little garden for the community, and the people that live here, they grow their own little gardens within it. A lot of the people there are very sharing so they give away a lot of their vegetables, and they show people how they make the garden up."

Rick also chose the Folsom Avenue community garden, but in his

narration, community meant communalism. Rick's photograph showed Folsom Avenue to the left of the frame, with one car driving away and another parked at the side. Brick factory buildings were at the left, and to the right was a lot with mulch and lush green vegetation. Also visible were the roofs of houses and a smokestack, and in the mid-ground was a wooden enclosure. Rick explained,

I'm here to talk about the garden community at Folsom. Among all the brick and mortar, this offers a wonderful scenery, especially during the summer. The green is such an awe-inspiring thing to see among all the concrete. During the time of the season of the blooms, and all the vegetation, it offers us – like being close to nature, being part of the environment. This is a great access to the community. The community can find a sense of being part of nature, and being part of nature helps us to take care of the environment. As we endeavor to help build a relationship with the community, I think the environment is a central part of that.

Like other residents, Rick viewed the community garden as “a wonderful scenery,” but explained that the vegetation and flowers provided spiritual uplift amidst the urban concrete and brick. The garden made people feel a “part of” nature, cultivating feelings of community between humans and non-humans. People cared for the garden, working to grow plants among the built structures, and nature in turn restored the humans, giving residents a sense of belonging to a larger whole. Rick's vision emphasized reciprocal caring relationships between people and nature.

Although several participants identified community gardens and restored areas as valued sites, these places were vulnerable. An alderman's decision to sell a city lot to a private developer or a community organization's conclusion that maintenance was too demanding caused such initiatives to disappear. Unlike other participants, Jacque was acutely conscious that urban green spaces needed legal protection. For one of her place stories, she photographed a grassy lot enclosed by a cast iron fence in the Shaw neighborhood. Her image centered on two cast iron benches under tall trees. Beyond the fence were cars driving down a street, and in the foreground, rhododendrons and a wooden post that read “PAX.” Jacque commented,

This is the lot attached to Compton Heights Christian Church, at Flora and Grand. This lot is always green space and will always be green space, because of the agreement when Compton Heights [Christian Church] built at this place. I think this is significant space for the community, as over the years it has become a place where people gather when they come to receive food and assistance at the food pantry here. It's a place where people gather and sometimes find shade under the trees on the benches in the heat of summer, when they are waiting at the bus stop down by the sidewalk. It's a place where the congregation and others in the community have held picnics and ice cream socials and game times, where Isaiah 58 ministries gathers with those who have family fun days for children in the community. So this is a significant space that will always be open and green space, and I believe it's valuable as that.

Jacque's “lot” did not meet official criteria for historic or cultural value, nor was it associated with recent beautification or environmental efforts. Even so, it was a valued place that facilitated caring relationships. Trees provided respite from the heat and grassy lawns offered places to congregate, eat together, and play. People used the lot to give one another assistance, maintaining relationships across class and racial differences. As a place that “will always be green space,” Jacque's lot secured the vision of this neighborhood as heterogeneous, inclusive, and communalist.

8. Trees

Trees figured in many place stories as monuments, memorials, and manifestations of local identity, revealing intimate connections between people and nature and locals' imaginative capacity to shape the landscape. While St. Louis participates in a program of “champion”



Image 3. Dave's photograph of Mary's tree. Everyone who listened to his place story found it moving. It and the other photo-narrations about trees inspired a conversation about what neighborhood organizations could do to care for local trees.

trees, which honors the largest individual specimen of a native Missouri species, this authorized discourse appeared to have little influence on the place stories, other than, perhaps, an appreciation for size. Rather, participants valued individual trees as partners in long-term relationships across past generations and into the future.

One particularly poignant narration about a tree was related by Dave, who photographed a large pin oak crammed into a thin planting strip in Shaw (see [Image 3](#)). To its right was a street packed with parked cars, and to its left, a sidewalk. Beyond the sidewalk was a row of houses, and in the foreground, a Black Lives Matter sign. Dave said,

This amazing tree is at 3665 Russell. Mary Schumacher still lives there. She and her brother planted this tree well over 60 years ago, and it still remains as the biggest tree on the block, and just a locator for the whole surrounding neighborhood. Her original intention with her brother was that they would each pick up half the leaves, the leaves that fell on their side of the tree, and their father would get mad at them when they would argue over whose leaves were which ones, and wouldn't be picking them all up. But Mary has lived at 3665 essentially all her life, and has seen the entire neighborhood come and go, and she's an incredible resource, just for the history of what has happened here.

Mary's tree exemplifies the communalist model of human-nature relations, and illustrates how residents actively organized time and space to create the landscape. Special for its size, intimate relationship to the Schumachers, and role as a monument to a neighborhood that had “come and gone,” the tree was also a metonym for Mary, the “incredible resource” whose knowledge and experiences made her precious.

Monte's photo-narration about the Shaw Memorial Grove revealed a more recent intervention through which trees became the focal point of a collective mourning ritual. A site with no official existence, the Shaw Memorial Grove was one of Sustainable in St Louis' initiatives in the neighborhood: a cluster of native trees planted by residents on I-44's southern berm. Residents cut an entry point through a chain link boundary fence erected by the Missouri Department of Transportation

to plant the area. For his place story, Monte photographed young trees growing on the berm with interstate signs visible in the background. He said,

This planted area has only been in existence for about three years, but it continues to grow as more of our neighbors come and plant a tree to memorialize someone they love, either living or deceased. As we gather and plant our trees, we meet one another and exchange stories of the people we love, and we come back from time to time to tend the trees and to clean the area, and renew these new bonds that we're creating across our community.

Monte described a community linked through and by caring, between living and dead, neighbors and nature. As they cared for trees, participants strengthened relationships with one another. In turn, the trees nurtured and kept alive the deceased, providing a focal point for human mourning and memory. A deliberate grass-roots transformation of the landscape that city officials and the Missouri Department of Transportation built, the grove was a monument to the past and the future, symbolizing personal, social, and natural resilience.

9. Heterogeneity

Like Arun in this article's introduction, participants often valued heterogeneous locations that did not resemble sites recognized by authorized discourses of historic preservation, environmentalism, or heritage. For some residents, these places had a special capacity to symbolize what made the neighborhood good. Often, heterogeneous sites facilitated the manifold relationships that defined the community landscape.

Cheryl picked a site she called "open space" for a place story, and focused on its capacity to promote diversity, reciprocity, and enjoyment of nature. She composed a photograph that showed rose bushes, boxwoods, a weeping hazel, and ornamental grasses, with a grassy space just visible behind them, flanked by a row of recently-constructed single-family homes. She commented,

I think this is a beautiful place that encourages community as well. This is an open space and you can see the houses in the background. This community really represents a diverse population of people and I think they are very open-minded and caring people and there's an open space that encourages kids to come out and play and we have neighborhood events like night out for neighborhoods and it's just a beautiful place in the middle of the neighborhood.

Cheryl's "beautiful place" was comprised of plants, residential structures, and vacant land. Located in "the middle of the neighborhood," the site gave Botanical Heights' racially and socioeconomically diverse population access to nature and each other. Community relationships made this eclectic "open space" valuable in the neighborhood landscape, despite its insignificance in authorized land management discourses and ephemerality in official practice.

Of all the place stories that lauded heterogeneity, Sean's about Magnolia Street stood out as a model for neighborhood planning. His photograph showed the trees and grassy lawns of Tower Grove Park on the left, flanked by a street with two parked vehicles and a tree lot to its right. A sidewalk rolled away from the camera in the center of the image, disappearing into the distance. To its right were lawns, gardens, and brick houses with covered front porches. A red lawn chair rested on its side in the mid-ground, perhaps blown over by the wind. Sean remarked,

Magnolia Street, along the south edge of the neighborhood across the street from Tower Grove Park, is one of the most beautiful places in the neighborhood, as a place that provides a row of homes, sometimes single-family homes, sometimes larger multi-family apartment buildings, but residential spaces flanking the southern edge of the neighborhood, overlooking Tower Grove Park. And then just the whole collection of

trees within the park, activities constantly happening, whether it's teams playing baseball or soccer, and the tree canopy of mature beautiful old trees that kind of hang over the street there, driving down that in the spring with the trees just beginning to bloom, or in the fall when the colors are starting to change, provides one of the most beautiful stretches within the city.

Sean's vista, "one of the most beautiful stretches within the city," was a heterogeneous aggregate of built structures and nature, residential areas and public green space, contemplation and activity, lower and higher income families, trees and streets. The trees offered beauty and shade, and organized time in the landscape, symbolizing permanence in their maturity, and transformation in their seasonal progression. Magnolia epitomized the characteristics of the good neighborhood for participants: diverse, inclusive, a place to be active together and an oasis of spiritual sustenance, natural and cultural, grounded in a communalist model of human-nature relations.

10. Community conversations and lessons learned

From the beginning, we thought about Missouri Place Stories as community-based action research. We saw the place stories as a process of civic discovery, but also intended to catalyze planning and management initiatives among residents. As we organized community conversations about the place stories with participants, members of the four community organizations, and other local interlocutors, a gap opened between our front-end goals and back-end realities. From this space came positive and negative lessons.

Our discussions confirmed that the pilot produced discoveries for all of us. At our public forum on May 11, 2016, some partners said that the place stories introduced them to locations they had never seen. While official heritage locations like the Missouri Botanical Garden were known to all, everyday landmarks like Mary's tree were new to many. For some interlocutors, discovery came not only from new places, but from learning "other people's ideas about their places," as one community organizer put it. A surprise for neighborhood association leaders was that locations which they considered significant were not selected by many photo-narrators. For example, one asked us, "Why weren't more people touched by Dorothy Park?"

Another discovery was that each individual's place stories mapped her lived neighborhood. Although Botanical Heights and Shaw were official neighborhoods, the parameters of an individual's neighborhood of practice were not determined by city maps. Botanical Heights' residents chose places in Shaw, and Shaw's residents selected places in Botanical Heights. When a neighborhood association leader pointed out that where a narrator lived affected what s/he noticed and valued, we realized that each person's five place stories remapped the official neighborhoods into neighborhoods of experience.

Other discoveries were less palatable. Residents, including community leaders, did not devote as much time to listen to the place stories as we did. While we listened to all of the place stories multiple times, locals listened to only a few. Our partner organizations asked us to direct them to the most revealing photo-narrations and write an executive summary. Perhaps we unintentionally facilitated this "expert" role for ourselves through our project design, particularly the information packets which narrated local history to residents. Perhaps too such requests showed a high level of trust in us.

Residents connected the place stories to action in ways that met and deviated from our expectations. The pilot clearly stimulated some new land management initiatives. For example, Monte Abbott, a co-founder of Sustainable in St Louis, told us that after listening to the place stories, he realized that the Thurman Gateway Prairie was more welcoming if people could walk through it. Instead of conserving it as an untouched wilderness, protected from the city surrounding it, Sustainable in St Louis decided to manage the site as an integrated social and natural space. Another action concerned an informal memorial to VonDerritt

Myers, an African-American youth shot to death by an off-duty police officer outside a market in Shaw. Several place stories focused on the assemblage of stuffed animals, small crosses, and artificial flowers on the tree lot where Myers was shot. Although local media reported the informal memorial was a flashpoint for local disagreements about racial diversity and public safety, pilot participants valued the site's capacity for consciousness-raising. Their views encouraged the Shaw Neighborhood Improvement Association to support construction of a more permanent memorial (see [Lisenby, 2016](#)).

For us, the most surprising action was the place stories as a long-term community landscape inventory. A leader of a neighborhood association proposed continuing to collect and publicize place stories for eight years. A community activist talked about using the archive to write a local history. Others suggested making a “highlights” video and connecting a blog to the website. In short, our interlocutors grasped what we had failed to see: the place stories, map, and archive already were community action. Participants had envisioned their neighborhood's landscape, described its value, and articulated goals for its future. With our assistance, they had recorded, mapped, and made their vision publically accessible. As our community partners recognized, the pilot was a powerful resource for dialogue, neighborhood identity, and participatory land management.

Because our recognition of the archive's significance was belated, we felt disappointed that the conversations did not lead to more action. For example, when we listened to the place stories, we were struck by the relationships people formed with water and trees. When we pointed this out at the community forum, local response our observations about water was tepid. The discussion about trees seemed more productive: participants at the community forum brainstormed about an inventory of neighborhood trees, a walking “tree tour,” and education about elms and the imminent Emerald Ash Borer invasion. However, as of the time of this writing, no further planning or action had taken place. As Anna Willow put it, “When resources are not in peril, most communities would much prefer that they – and their resources – be left alone” (2011, p. 119).

This lesson caused Hurley to integrate the next iteration of the project within an official planning initiative where the Metropolitan Sewer District of St. Louis was planning large-scale green infrastructure installations in a St. Louis neighborhood. Hurley organized the collection of place stories there between June and December 2016, after which formal workshops and citizen advisory committee meetings facilitated collective deliberation. This time, the identification of valued sites that had not received official recognition as historic places, heritage, or environmental assets affected formal recommendations about land management. Design prototypes produced by nationally-based consultants incorporated signage for under-the-radar African American heritage within the proposed green-space corridor, and protected pedestrian access to an informal but highly-valued civic gathering space at one edge of the planning zone.

11. Conclusion

Like other community-based research on heritage landscapes (e.g., [Berg, 2011](#), [Walker, 2012](#)), the Missouri Place Stories pilot shows that ordinary people readily identify landscape resources that reflect community priorities. Many of these places are invisible to officials and heritage professionals. This finding supports the argument that official frameworks for recognizing value in the landscape better reflect the values of professionals and elites than local communities. For example, while the U.S. National Historic Preservation Act was intended to preserve “the historical and cultural foundations of the nation as a living part of our community life and development,” in practice most “vernacular resources” are missing, particularly those associated with minority groups ([Morgan et al., 2006](#), pp. 713–715). Without a doubt, the government's “Triple-I” approach to stakeholder input – “inform, seek input, and ignore” – plays a role in creating this aporia (*ibid.*, p.

711; see also [Nissley and King, 2014](#)).

For planning professionals committed to the principles of participatory design, the methodologies developed and tested in the Missouri Place Stories pilot expand the set of available tools for eliciting, sharing, and harnessing local knowledge. Nearly universal dissemination of mobile computing technology and wide access to online mapping platforms allow for easy replication of our procedures. Photo-narrations, recorded on mobile devices and stored electronically, capture places through the eyes and voices of people who inhabit them, and facilitate the active involvement of those who lack the means or inclination to attend officially-sponsored planning forums. The digital map of accumulated place stories reterritorializes urban geography and gives public representation to local values in a format that can be integrated with biophysical, demographic, and socioeconomic data. Most importantly, these methods can serve as a resource and springboard for dialogue and collective deliberation.

Empirically, the pilot yields specific advice for urban planners. For example, “historic” and “ecological” sites “grow and thrive” when they are available for lived experience, rather than preserved as pristine architectural or environmental locations. Water and trees are “good for the community,” inviting sociable sharing of space, but also serving as focal points for meaningful relationships between people and nature. Heterogeneous places that combine nature and culture, old and new, built structures and open spaces, are potent resources for community imagination and creative practice. We anticipate similar findings in other urban neighborhoods characterized by population diversity, social volatility, and tightly-intermeshed natural-cultural systems. If we are correct, contemplating cities as community landscapes may have beneficial implications for planning and design practices.

Conceptually, the community landscape reveals ideals that diverge from those characteristic of authorized land management discourses. Among these, one of the most significant is that denizens of urban neighborhoods have a reciprocal, dialogic, and participatory relationship with nature, “communalism” rather than “orientalist” exploitation or “paternalist” protection ([Palsson, 1996](#), pp. 64–65). The connections between people and place do indeed move us beyond paradigms that pit nature and culture as “universal antonyms,” even in urban neighborhoods where “a dichotomy between “cultural” and “natural” resources seems simple to draw” ([Willow, 2011](#), p. 114). By giving expression to these connections, the community landscape offers professional planners and civic activists an alternative framework for classifying, evaluating, and reimagining urban places that may find application in building asset inventories, setting neighborhood redevelopment goals and making land use decisions. It pushes urban greening initiatives beyond aesthetics and the utilitarian provision of ecosystem services toward designs that facilitate social interaction and cultural meaning. Used more comprehensively within city planning, the community landscape promises to steer land management toward key attributes of urban vitality and resilience: the intimate bonds that people forge with each other and their surroundings.

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