



The Design Studio for Social Intervention

## Cultural Geography and Place Based Problem-Solving (10 New Ways to Think about Culture and Organizing)

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### **Introduction 1: Cultural Geographies and Social Justice**

For those of us who like to travel, we find ourselves attracted to the particularities and personalities of places. The ways in which people talk and walk, the kinds of foods, the styles of clothes and architecture, the landscape—these are the things that give places their specificity. Similarly, for those of us who like to stay home, it is all these familiarities that make us comfortable—even the ones we hate! We refer to all of these as a place’s cultural geography: the ways in which the physical and structural combine with narratives of place to form local desires and aversions, norms and taboos. For those of us who make the solving of social problems our vocation, these specificities are a double edged sword: they can serve to ground and feed social problems, but they can also be used as a vast resource for addressing them.

This document is meant to help social justice practitioners figure out the extent to which a social problem they face is enmeshed in the place they are trying to address it. This is not to the exclusion of our awareness of larger systems and structures of oppression that reach beyond our localities. It is our assertion that just as we have tools to address systems—such as community organizing efforts aimed at creating policy change—we also need tools that address our own habits, behaviors and traditions, especially when those are tangling us in a social problem or keeping us from seeing it at all. Our hope is that through thinking about social problems from this perspective, new insights about the problems will emerge, leading to new approaches to solving them.

### **Introduction 2: “Capital C” Culture and “small c” culture**

We make a distinction between “Capital C Culture,” which includes ethnicities, traditions, practices and all that come with them, and “small c culture,” which is less grounded in deep history and more about local popular everyday culture. Capital C Culture might explain what your family eats on holidays (not to mention what holidays they celebrate, if any), while small c culture might dictate where your neighborhood goes to eat on Friday nights. Capital C Culture has deep roots, where small c culture tends to have shallow roots but

extensive reach. To make things more fun, they can overlap in ways that support both or build one up at the expense of the other. (For example, a young person might combine pride in her Puerto Rican heritage and status in her youth culture by sporting the Nike “Coqui” sneakers.) Bringing it back to cultural geography, in any given place there may be contesting and cooperating cultural realities operating along both Capital C and small c lines of culture. That young person might have a very different story about where she lives than her white, 30-something neighbor.

### **Introduction 3: Using this Document to Build Dialogue**

This tool lays out ten different aspects of cultural geography in order to help practitioners talk with their constituencies and each other about the specificities of their place. As you use it, we recommend that you begin your conversations by focusing primarily on developing a robust description of the place you are thinking about/working in. To do this well, you must keep the social problem you are trying to address in the back of your minds rather than at the forefront of the conversation. Other tools that can help you build a more complex and vibrant understanding of a place include: drawing, making models, bringing or making maps, taking pictures, etc. Make sure you are including Capital C Cultures, small c cultures, and how they play out in local desires, aversions, norms and taboos!

As the conversation moves from focusing primarily on the description of place towards also looking at how the problem shows up in that place, continue to include a wide variety of constituencies, in order to hear multiple takes as to how that problem relates specifically to that place. And we also want you to hold as a point of insight where locally grounded or site specific *contradictions* appear that make addressing the social problem tricky, and where local *resources* appear that could help interrupt or transform the problem. We’ll say more about this after we go over the ten aspects of cultural geography.

[You may also want to add other dimensions beyond the ten we have here. Go for it!]



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## Ten Aspects of Cultural Geography

### 1. *Place Identity*

These are the narratives that a place has about itself, both within the place and beyond the place. You would want to note the density of narrative here, as some places have more narratives operating in and out of a particular place than others. (For example, neighborhoods like South Boston and East L.A. have narratives known far and wide—and internal narratives directly related to these; meanwhile a whole city like Providence, RI has very little widespread narrative about itself.) You can also think of this as how the place is personified: If your place were a person who would it be and why? Who would it be to locals and who would it be externally? Another fun way to do this is to list legends and rumors about a place, or even songs, books, poems and TV shows about that place.

Example:



#### “The Flats” in Holyoke, MA

The Flats have a reputation for being where all the action is—arrests, parties, drugs, etc. In this poor, mostly Puerto Rican part of town, many of the grown ups are trying to move up and out so their kids are safer, but many of the kids want to stay cuz of the action. Kids who move out often come back to chill with friends, especially during the summer when reggaeton and salsa are blaring and “everybody’s outside”. If the Flats were a person, he’d be a teenager on a minibike without a helmet—having a great time, making a lot of noise, making his parents nervous and being chased by the cops!

### 2. *Domestic Culture*

What is the role of the home, or the domestic sphere, in your place? Are homes bridges to the public, with well-used stoops or porches full of residents and neighbors? Are they closed off, with locked doors guarding against bad smells in apartment hallways, or locked gates guarding against intruders? What meaning is added to who goes and comes from a home? How does what happens inside leak out?

### 3. *Public Culture*

How do people come out in public in this place? What is the place's take on being in the public? Are there multiple perspectives operating in the place? Who is the public really for? Under what conditions? Are some populations pushed to the edges of public spaces? What kind of populations use the commons in the place? (Open spaces, parks, libraries...) How much does the place activate its commons?

#### Boston, MA

Boston has “appropriate” public spaces, like Copley Square, and “appropriate” public people, like white suburbanites who come in for a concert there or Red Sox fans partying after a win. “Inappropriate” people there include the homeless folks in the library and the queer youth at the fountain. Boston does not feel comfortable with its residents activating other spaces, like hanging out at Dudley Square or Downtown Crossing.



### 4. *Relationship to the sacred*

What role does spirituality play in the way that inhabitants know and use that particular place? How do spirituality and various religions impact the physical structures of your place? Does it impact the social structures—who knows who, and how they treat each other? Are certain spaces sacred to only some of your place's residents? Are any places profane?

### 5. *Transportation culture*

How do people get around? Are some ways to get around more popular and possible than others? What do people say about the streets and highways there? What do people think about them externally? What gets said about people who travel one way or another?



## Atlanta, GA

Atlanta is a car city! Folks love to live in the suburbs and zip in and out. If you live inside ATL, you better have a car, too. Walking makes you a bum and biking makes you a yuppie. (And there are very few bike lanes.) The subway system is considered unsafe by most white residents. Historically, the Downtown Connector tore through Sweet Auburn, disrupting the center of Black business and culture.

### 6. Consumer culture

How do people shop and consume in this particular place? Where do they go? What particular reasons do people go to consume here that aren't directly about purchasing items? Are there items that this place is "known for"? Are there different shopping areas for different types of shoppers (locals vs. tourists, poor vs. wealthy, etc.)? Are there choice items for conspicuous consumption and display (cars, sneakers, pools, strollers, etc.)?

### 7. Play culture

Who plays in your place? What is considered appropriate play—for kids? For adults? Is play mostly done in private or public? Are there recreation events that bring people together, like professional (or amateur) sporting events or concerts? Are there illegal play options? Is physical fitness a widespread aspect of play?

## Seattle, WA

The huge Seattle Marathon fits this city's play culture and sense of itself as a city full of active, health-conscious citizens. Adults are definitely allowed to make time to play, if it's physical activity. The marathon also amplifies a common (mis?)perception of Seattle as quite white.



### 8. Motion tempo

From the airport to the highways to the streets, how much are people visibly (or not so visibly) circulating through the place? And when people are

circulating, is it a harried circulation? Is it calm? What is the experience of circulating through the place for its inhabitants and for visitors? Do different populations circulate at different speeds?

### 9. *Food culture*

Cheese steaks? Philly. Smoky BBQ ribs? Kansas City. Chowder? New England. The list goes on and on, of course, but doesn't begin to describe the nuances of food culture in any given place. What food(s) is your place known for? What restaurants? Who eats in and who eats out? Who eats outside? (Yes, tailgating counts.) Is there a community farmers market? Are there still family dinners? (And who cooks? As you can see, some of these categories overlap, because here we're deep into the domestic sphere.)



#### St. Louis, MO

You can only get a St. Paul Sandwich in St. Louis, Missouri, and only in Chinese restaurants. Go figure. But that makes perfect sense to all the St. Louisites who make these egg-foo-yung, pickle, mayo, tomato and onion sandwiches a regular part of their food culture. Rumor has it they began as a way to convince locals to try Chinese food, but now they're definitely seen as local chow.

### 10. *Passion communities*

Passion communities, subcultures based on a strong shared interest, can stretch far beyond geographical boundaries, but are still worth looking into. What local passion communities are bubbling up, or passing on? How do they connect people across differences, or do they locate themselves within a given population? Does your place have huge public ones based on a sports team? (Red Sox Nation, say.) Does it have illicit ones, like car racing clubs? Do its passion communities come together in real spaces or online?

#### Los Angeles, CA

Thanks to the documentary RIZE, we learned that krumping, a style of dancing that has swept the nation, started and has its roots in South Central LA. It started as a home-grown alternative to gang life. Now krumping can be seen in videos and is all over the world.



## Using Cultural Geography for Place-based Problem Solving

### *Contradictions*

Contradictions typically arise when two or more elements of the same thing are inconsistent or contrary to each other. In this situation we're talking about when a collectively held opinion or belief complicates the use of fairly obvious strategies and tools for solving a problem. In terms of cultural geography these held beliefs and obvious strategies switch from place to place. For example, St. Louis has tons of streets that run from one end of the city to the other without much interference. It would make a great city for walking. On the other hand, walking is looked down upon, similarly to how it is in Atlanta. And the people who frown on walking might actually benefit in a variety of ways from walking, both as a means of getting around and as a physical activity.

We ask that you bring these kinds of glitches to the surface as you think about solutions. They don't negate a solution, but might help you think more creatively about pitching it, or shifting it towards something that has fewer contradictions for the folks you're expecting to embrace it. Solutions based on expectations that we make rational decisions fail a surprising amount of the time, especially if they don't take cultural geography into account! (You know some age-old taboo or age-appropriate aversion can cut you right down at the knees if you're not aware of it.)

### *Resources*

Just as each community has its contradictions that might get in the way of certain solutions, it also has its unique resources that can assist, improve or be the central part of any given solution. For example, "househeads" (the passion community of folks who love house music) in New York City regularly organize events across boundaries of race, class, age and sexual orientation. This might be something you are struggling to do, in that very city. So it's important to see resources around you, to find out what site specific trends, scenes, activities and subcultures could somehow be partnered with as they relate to addressing the problem. And as you think about these resources, be mindful not to simply try to make a resources do what you want it to do. Rather than trying to get a house DJ to spin at your next gathering, it's much richer to explore (*with* househeads), what is making their scene work, and how that might relate to what you are trying to solve.

The many ways in which "Capital C Culture" finds expression in particular places can serve as a resource for social problem solving as well. For example, one of the largest Native American pow wows happens in Albuquerque, NM, and its impact extends well beyond New Mexico to Native communities all over. So in these kinds of situations, Albuquerque can function as a place-based

resource for the larger Native American community's problem solving, and/or the Native American communities now in Albuquerque could become a resource to address local problems there.

### *From culture to design to policy and back again*

We believe that when you start to surface the specific cultural geography of your given place –along with its contradictions and resources–it's easier to imagine and test social interventions that could move solving the problem along. If you're in a place with good streets that no one wants to walk on, it might be a good experiment to look at physical interventions that suggest to that place to make biking part of its cultural signature going forward. If that starts to pick up, there may be connections to multiple policy levers, from local zoning to state and federal transportation policy. And as that chugs along, keep checking in on what that place tells itself—and others—about itself. What new stories are springing up about biking? What new passion community has redesigned the bike?

### **Conclusion**

We ask that even if you know your place like the back of your hand, even if you grew up there and so did all your relatives, even if you've walked every street or cared for every child, that you do the work of discovering that place all over again. Use this tool as an excuse to have ongoing conversations with new and old residents of the place, to invite them into conversations with each other, and to play with technologies that might make these conversations part of a new shared understanding of place, culture and organizing. Use it also to empower yourself and others to question your assumptions, laugh at your contradictions and make the most of your resources!