

Losing Your Place

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The main players fall silent, the filming is over, the recording is finished, but the sound technician has hushed everyone to get some 'atmos'. Coughs, car noise echoing off the warehouses, birdsong, boards creaking, trees breathing in the wind, these are the sounds of the everyday, so particular to this place, that to cut the film and add studio voiceovers needs an underlay of this local atmosphere in order to ensure continuity and authenticity.

That elusive particularity, so often undervalued as 'background noise', is as important as the stars. It is the richness we take for granted.

How do we know where we are in time and space? How do we understand ourselves in the world?

Common Ground has been exploring and developing a new concept, that of local distinctiveness. It is characterised by elusiveness, it is instantly recognizable yet difficult to describe; It is simple yet may have profound meaning to us. It demands a poetic quest and points up the shortcomings in all those attempts to understand the things around us by compartmentalising them, fragmenting, quantifying, reducing.

Local distinctiveness is essentially about places and our relationship with them. It is as much about the commonplace as about the rare, about the everyday as much as the endangered, and about the ordinary as much as the spectacular. In other cultures it might be about people's deep relationship with the land. Here discontinuities have left us with vestiges of appreciation but few ways of expressing the power which places can have over us. But many of us have strong allegiances to places, complex and compound appreciation of them, and we recognize that nature, identity and place have strong bonds.

We sometimes forget that ours is a cultural landscape. It is our great creation: underpinned by nature, it is a physical thing and an invisible web. It is held together by stonewalls and subsidies, ragas and Northumbrian pipes, Wensleydale sheep and halal butchers, whiskies of Islay and Fenland skies, bungalows and synagogues, pubs and the Padstow Obby' Oss, round barrows and rapping, high streets and Ham stone, laver bread and Devon lanes, door details and dialect. Places are process and story as well as artefact, layer upon layer of our continuing history and nature's history intertwined. Places offer an exposition of their evolution, given sensitive development and barefoot education, everyplace is its own living museum, dynamic and filled with sensibilities to its own small riches. These are places we know when we are in them. Meaning is entrapped in the experience of change, symbolisms and significance cling to seemingly ordinary buildings, trees, artefacts. Particularity based in nature on the foundations of geology and climate, has diverged with the alchemy of life, the articulation of the social and economic demands of successive societies, the narratives of myth and legend, and the ethical and cultural variations over the time. Places are different from each other.

We have long recognized the importance of diversity. Most travel guides, geology books, volumes on architecture and language begin by asserting how varied our land and people are. Yet we have been party to a massive burst of homogenisation, some of it in the name of conservation, which is bleaching the richness from our lives.

The variegation which we and nature have created in sharing our development seems to appeal to our eye for richness. We may scientise our interest in biodiversity, offer critical appraisal of stark geometric buildings, intellectualise arguments about differentiation being 'a good thing', but the truth is that we revel in detail. Subtlety and complication, flavours which are not immediately apparent please our palate/palette.

We are able to pick out a face in football crowd, see a tiny yellow bird high up in a tree of a hundred thousand leaves, we can place a wine by its taste and sneeze at things we cannot even smell, we have acute faculties which enjoy the challenges of complexity. We often know and feel things for which words cannot be found, despite having one of the richest languages in the world. We are emotional, subjective beings, with memories and with interests in the future, as well as the here and now. We are provoked to reverie by the smallest of things.

How then has it happened that we can stand in many high streets, factories, fields or forests and feel we could be anywhere? Why does MacDonald's force upon our high streets an idea born in corporate strategy meetings thousands of miles away? Why do we have huge brown signs from motorways telling us where to find Robin Hood Country and the White Cliffs Experience? Why are we planting the same trees everywhere? Why are only mountains 'beautiful' landscapes, and big and old buildings worthy of care and attention? Why does the pursuit of standards now result in standardisation. Apples, bricks, sheep and gates, all of which have had generations of careful guided evolution creating qualities related to conditions of locality and need, no longer show the differentiation which whispers rather than shouts where you are.

Partial comprehension of loss has begun to force meaningless, token choices upon us. We are offered a Chiltern or a Mayfair or a Wensleydale house on the same housing estate or in Devon, Nottinghamshire or Cleveland. Difference for difference sake with no reflection, no interest in craftsmanship, appropriateness or locality, debases all that has gone before, and pays no homage to the extraordinary potential latent in the achievements of our time. Anyway they are all made out of red brick (from the same brick company) with hardwood windows (from the same rainforest) with the same front doors and the streets have the same paving and kerb stones, the curves and cul de sacs mirror each other, the gardens have the same cypresses and whatever the garden centres are selling this year.

While homogenising forces have been at work so have enriching ones. Our culture, or cultures have hardly ever been static. In our context a dynamic culture has been a permeable culture, an open work. The many peoples who have settled in Britain over the ages, and in the last few decades, have brought ideas, foods, music, festivals, languages, cultural differentiation which far from diluting the already rich mix has added new dynamism, and new layers of particularity to different places.

Dilution has come through closed minds, aggressive assertion of national and corporate identity, blind searching for the single perfect barley strain, the imposition of ideas exported or imported without reflection (in the architectural context, the exchange of ideas need never have resulted in a single style of buildings across the world, lacking any referential humility to place, climate and culture).

The suppression of the Gaelic and Welsh languages must be a loss to us all. In Welsh there are at least 40 words for rain, one example of the differentiation of the common place, which comes from generations of close dialogue with nature.

BBC English has a lot to answer for. Bill Bryson has said about the language 'if we should be worrying about anything to do with the future of English, it should be not that the various strands will drift apart, but that they will grow indistinguishable'. He reminds us that 'English... has been... immeasurably enriched by the successive linguistic waves that washed over the British Isles. But it is closer to the truth to say that the language we speak today is rich and expressive not so much because new words were imposed upon it as because they were welcomed'.

This latter sentiment offers a way forward.

Welcoming rather than imposition demands working together. Recognizing there is a need to reinforce the qualitative aspects of our everyday lives, Common Ground has been working to offer people ideas, information and inspiration to affect change for the better in their own localities. The work on local distinctiveness aspires to arousing diverse community based actions, as well as creative and responsive policy making and practice in voluntary organisations, local and national institutions and local authorities and the corporate sector too.

To offer formulae would be to deny the basic philosophy that we are expressing. Provocations, examples and questions are helpful, we assert that local formulation is always necessary, and that much is to be learnt from exploration with local people. There are many ways in. The creation of an ABC of your own locality is an exercise which brings together all manner of things ordered only by their name, strange juxtapositions jolt complacency. Everything begins with equal status in the gathering, out of which discussion can emerge over what is important to whom, why, when and where.

Local distinctiveness can encompass so many things and affects everyone. In exploring the idea Common Ground has found it useful to work around key words, which allow reinterpretation for every different circumstance: detail, particularity, patina, authenticity. We are talking of quality in the everyday. Because these things are not straightforward or easy to pigeonhole, often involve emotional attachment and are hard to communicate they are treated as 'soft' by the media. Because they are impossible to put a money value on or to explain through equations, these unquantifiable 'intangibles' are likely to be marginalised by the professionals. Debate rages, and decisions are taken which often leave out the very things that make life worth living.

Brody in describing the decision making culture of the Athapaskan hunter captures the spirit of what we are trying to say: 'To disconnect the variables, to compartmentalise the thinking, is to fail to acknowledge its sophistication and completeness. To make a good, wise, sensible... choice is to accept the interconnection of all possible factors, and avoids the mistake of seeking rationally to focus on any one consideration that is held as primary. What is more, the decision is taken in the doing : there is no step or pause between theory and practice.'

Closer to our world, scientists of many disciplines engaged in the fascinating unveiling of ideas around Chaos theory are moving away from reductionism towards looking at the whole and are acknowledging that the objective and subjective are less clear cut. Ideas of scaling form an important part of their revelations.

Local

Scale is important, as is the question of who defines it. We are talking of a fineness of grain - the neighbourhood, the locality, the parish, the housing estate, the high street, the village, the

suburb, perhaps even the street as defined by those who live and work and play there. The area to which people feel they belong, and which belongs to them through familiarity, or which they have chosen and are claiming anew.

It is not regional diversity but *local distinctiveness*. The bigger the scale the more reduced the sensitivity and the easier it becomes to steamroller strategies for the 'greater good' which prescribe the same solutions to subtly different circumstances encouraging convergence and homogeneity... thereby missing the whole point.

When we change scale we think and behave differently : nations are abstractions, regions are generally defined from the outside in, they are about form and function, they are academic, institutional or political creations.

Locality needs to be defined from the inside, with a cultural and natural base, less abstraction, more detail.

Attempts should not be made to reduce local distinctiveness to an essence. It is a compound thing and a messy one as well as being dynamic hence its elusiveness. It cannot be summarised. It may be variegated within, but have a unity and integrity in the mingling of its parts. Smallness should not be confused with simplicity.

Returning to the Chaos theorists, Mandelbrot asked 'How long is the coast of Britain?' (following LF Richardson). It seems so simple, but he recognized and asserted that any answer would be dependent upon the distance from which one was taking the measurement. Someone measuring a satellite map would give a much smaller figure than someone walking every inlet, and for a snail every pebble would add to the length. It is dependent upon the scale at which one sets the dividers/ruler to work. In other words it all depends.

While we have made the world smaller with aeroplanes and trains and cars, travellers and elevators, we still have to pace most of our activities to our size and to our own walking. It is at this scale and speed that we see and savour most. At the greater scales we can understand patterns in a different way, but to act at this level risks inattention to people and the quotidian. Substitution of abstract words begins to desensitise - the public for people, sites for streets or fields, environment for places, natural resources for woods and clear streams: abstractions which disengage us from reality, and give professionals a mandate to act without care for the detail.

Distinctiveness

Distinctiveness is not the same as diversity, for it involves much more than variety, it degrades them to be used interchangeably. It is not about difference for its own sake, but recognizes that heterogeneity suggests richness: historical, cultural and ecological. Diversity is but one dimension. Current ecological preoccupations about biodiversity brings it to the fore. But biodiversity has a restricted range of usefulness, offering little help in argument for the tundra and so often the cultural is left out. The proliferation of varieties within species which have resulted from hundreds, possibly thousands of years of selection in horticulture and agriculture are often not considered.

Local distinctiveness links meaning, identity, patina and authenticity. Meaning implies many associations, deep significance and is sensed in the power of the place. Identity is bound up with affection for everyday activities and the symbolism of features and festivals.

Rarely do strict edges exist, as at the coast or because the army is using the land, or the green belt actually works or through dramatic quality of changing geology or geomorphology. Gradation is the common way in which one place ends and another begins.

Where two habitats meet the ecotone exhibits a richness of intermingling of species, often richer than the pure habitats it buffers. Just as in town some streets are dominated by small Indian shops and others by big chain stores, the area of greatest fascination may well be where they overlap.

Just as geologists are excited by unconformity, so archaeologists tell the time by reading the overlaps - a line of a Roman road cutting across field systems implies they are older, planners work with zones and designations. But we must not get diverted in looking for and drawing boundaries. Our preoccupation must be with the idea of local distinctiveness as experienced by people.

We should not from the outside be drawing contours of similarity and somewhere away from the epicentre saying this is a different place. The definitions should be from the inside out and admit of variegation: it is possible for things to be compatible and very different and yet part of the same place... the buildings there may be a 'confliction' of styles and materials but together they make the place special.

Detail

In Australia vast areas seem to us to look the same, but the seasoned eye and the cultured brain sees and describes minute detail, water can be found from the smallest /subtlest constellation of clues, stories cling to small marks on rocks and the slightest rise can be a landmark for miles.

We seem to have a much greater capacity to see than we have to describe. Hence people sense when something has gone from their local scene, but can't articulate it... it could be a change in paving stones or the loss of a tree, it could be changes in the air quality resulting in the loss of moss growth and iridescence at certain times of year, it could be the displacement of a family firm by a chain store in its universal livery. And we tend to see things altogether, the fruit salad seems less good if someone has picked out all the banana.

Detail is important in our lives. Whatever our work or pleasure, our attention and affections are held by small complications, intricacies and provocations. We thrive on gossip, TV soaps, brick not concrete, things which repeat with endless variations at different scales, we were influenced by fractals long before someone gave them a name.

Just as Thomas Hardy talks of divining a mountain in the dark by the absence of stars, we recognize where we are through many different kinds of 'cues', and often we sense what is there through something else.

Ecologists use the term indicator species. Dog's Mercury suggests there was ancient woodland here. Geologists (following aboriginal practice) recognize the presence of certain minerals by the plants growing in those parts, sand wort is known as leadwort in Derbyshire, Lancashire and Cheshire. Pollution and lichen experts read the presence of sulphur dioxide in the absence of *Lobaria pulmonaria*. We can 'see' the salt line along roadsides in the centre of England by the presence of coastal plants such as sea spurrey. A Warwickshire gate lets us know subliminally we are in that county not in Gloucestershire.

Original attempts to map climate had to rely upon patterns read from vegetation, forests and deserts echoing particular limiting factors. Only when wind and temperature could be monitored by scattered weather stations and at altitude did scientists find affirming evidence of coincidence through direct information. The invisible had been understood through the visible. The effects of Chernobyl's deadly clouds can still be traced on Cumbrian hills through sheep with blue marks.

History is often pieced together by detective work from traces and footprints. The interesting distribution of the Mazzard cherries along the Tamar valley and in one or two places in North Devon has lead people to speculate that they were brought in by the Huguenots, they add particularity and harbour secrets.

There are many latent languages which we decipher without realizing what richness we perceive. There is much non verbal communication between us and a place we know well. As well as responding to the obvious, we identify signs, hints, clues, traces, suggestions, gestures, intimations, and they gather further richness through juxtaposition. We respond to mosaic. We need the nourishment of detail, in things as ordinary as rumples in a field, detail in doors and windows, dialect, local festival days, seasonal variation in the goods on sale in the market, to subtly stimulate our senses and sensibilities.

What is there in a Cornish hedge
The broken herring bone pattern of stones,
The gorse, the ragged rick,
The way the little elms are,
Sea-bent, sea-shorn
That so affects the heart?
(**AL Rowse**, *Cornish Landscape*)

Authenticity

The real and the genuine hold a strength of meaning for us. If the advertising world is to be believed this is worth, and costs, a lot: 'It's the real thing', Levi 50ls, Champagne.

Wensleydale cheese : why is it important to makers and gourmets that this cheese continues to be made in this valley and not the next? Amongst the reasons to do with the need for jobs, comes also an understanding that cows of this place, eating grass in this valley, with expertise built here over generations combine to create a food which is particular, authentic and good. Its making brings dignity and pride to the place, since the people who make it are experts, the people who grow the grass to feed the cows are implicated in this. The relationships breed culture and identity which has meaning for the people who live and work here and for those who chance upon it or make it their destination. The landscape that is created and sustained by this activity is one in which mixed grass, wild flowers, barns have a real role and sustain a landscape plotted and pieced with interrelationships.

If the discussion was about Gevrey Chambertin, Julienas and Fleurie, the initiates would nod knowingly about the discrete charms of the different slopes, soils, sun and seasons: the French have made a profession out of the particular. Appellation controllee carries important kudos, identity, place and quality are intimately bound together. The place of origin, the knowledge of derivation is real and important. People can tell the difference. If trace elements can make the difference between life and death, they can certainly make the difference between good and better, and the educated nose can tell. Recent EC regulations are currently calling for protective registration of Geographical Indications and Designations of Origin.

SJ Gould draws a neat analysis of authenticity of object, use and place. He deliberates over the lack of interest we show in a fibreglass dinosaur as opposed to the real fossils, the San Francisco tram full of tourists at noon rather than the workers in the early morning, and the lack of inspiration to be gained from seeing London Bridge somewhere in the USA.

To see a Somerset hedge laid in a Midland pattern, to hear theatrical Yorkshire accents tracing the words of DH Lawrence, to taste a Bakewell pudding made without almonds Authenticity and integrity are related. We use words such as pastiche, facade, kitsch, ersatz, Disney to denigrate forcibly. Much criticism of the packaging of history as 'Heritage', has followed the degrading of cultural complexity to marketing one liners - Bronte Country, 1066 Country or 'Coventry: the City where legends are made'.

It should be perfectly possible to reinforce the medievalness of York, the Thomas Hardy connections in Dorset, but so often you are left with a stage set, a marketing idea of a 'tourist destination', a kind of deadness, one dimensional and unsatisfying. If we leave no room for peeling paint, time before and since, access to the life of the place now, we present a picture which is dishonest and unreal. Local distinctiveness is not necessarily about beauty, but it must be about truth.

Particularity

The unusual, the special, the strange, the idiosyncratic, the rare may be important factors in giving a place its sense of itself, but the matrix exerts the binding force. The commonplace defines identity: the locally abundant plants, the specific wall building methods, the precise ingredients for recipes. In one Derbyshire town doctors apparently scribble NH on many of their patients' notes decipherable to them as Normal for Ilkeston.

Georgian houses great and small have a recognizable similarity of form, function and facade, based upon proportional rules. Their differences are in their social declaration (first rate, second rate and third rate houses of Bloomsbury), their tasks (workers houses in Barnsbury, the 10th Earl of Moray's estate in Edinburgh's New Town), their materials (yellow oolitic limestone of Bath, red brick of Nottinghamshire), their relations to the land and each other. So despite the homogenising potential, they serve as wonderful example of richness.

The point here is not to be preoccupied by difference, but by appropriateness to and expressiveness of time and place. While all leaves are doing the same basic job they have developed drip tips, hairs, etc. to accommodate to local conditions, all species produce different kinds of leaves, and every leaf on the same tree is different, the rules dictated by photosynthesis and family do not sacrifice individuation.

Patina

Age has to be recognised as having been gathered, hence the paradoxical vitality of patina.

Go to Dorset, compare a deep ploughed field of a hundred acres with an area of ten tenacre fields. Read the richness in the latter perhaps neolithic strip lynchets or medieval ridge and furrow with overlays of Enclosure hedgerows, never ploughed or strewn with herbicide or fertilizer, clear winterbournes and watercress beds : rich in history and natural history. Or go to the East End of London and compare a sixties, seventies or eighties estate with the Huguenot buildings, bagel shops, a mosque in an old synagogue and the tandoori restaurants of Brick Lane.

The crude sacrifices made by large scale and rapid change demean us. The remnants of the accumulation of activity, the layers or fragments of which can be experienced or read, can be added to without recourse to brutalism. Dynamism and vitality should be great allies for local distinctiveness. Attempts to arrest both progress and decay in a Cotswold village, or the cultural melee of Brick Lane, brings danger of reducing the richness and fermentation to leave a frozen moment, the real place and people having sunk below the waves of preciousness or poverty.

Local distinctiveness must be about history continuing through the present (not about the past) and it is about creating the future. There is a great difference in people simply dressing up in Victorian clothes and a festival such as Carnival which builds on gutsy traditions carried forth and back and changed to new circumstances.

Local distinctiveness is about not separating out the many views and many factors, but recognising their synergism. Questions should seek ever greater detail and ever ramifying connections. Yet so many decisions are made based on one dimensional argument or recognizing patterns which are then over simplified, abstracted and turned into strategies and policy statements which could be about anyplace, and will inevitably lead to the building of virtually the same village hall in a corner of Kent or Cumberland, or bypasses through fields and woods with meaning to the locality, building a stile or a scot from a national pattern book, ordering paving and railings which Carlisle, Camden or Christchurch might have, designing car parks for anywhere. It is salutary to recall that utopia means nowhere.. the philosophising which builds the ideal usually imagines nothing has been there before, and that life and culture will evolve no further.

Questing for local distinctiveness must err towards the inclusive and welcoming, it is not about designating areas more beautiful or more derelict or worthy of grants. It is about working on an idea that anyone can use to demonstrate the valuables of their place to anyone else. It is about accepting that places mean more to us than we are able to say, and beginning to talk more to each other at the local level about demanding the best of the new.

It is crucial that knowledge, new ideas and wisdom are shared. The tumbleweed expertise of the professional learnt and practised all over the place, the migrant with new cultural eyes, the indigene with generations of often undervalued place-based wisdom, all have different richnesses of perception to offer.

This implies a radical shift in the way in which we plan and prognosticate... towards more responsive, detailed, fractioned way of changing things. There never has been any need to bulldoze the whole building site, or to demand the pronunciation of your 'h's.

The forces of homogenisation rob us of visible and invisible things which have meaning to us, they devalue our longitudinal wisdom and erase the fragments from which to piece together the stories of nature and history through which our humanity is fed. They stunt our sensibilities and starve our imagination.

And as Bachelard has said 'imagination separates us from the past as well as reality, it faces the future. If we cannot imagine, we cannot foresee'. Our interest in local distinctiveness is a profound concern for our common future.

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<http://www.commonground.org.uk/publications/p-index.html>

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