

Excerpt of Convocation Address by Dr. Susan MacFarlane Burke

Folktales and legends from many cultures remind us of the importance of leaving footprints and markers to document the path we have followed. Perhaps the most familiar image we can borrow to illustrate this point is from the folklore of one of our ethnic German founding cultures – the well-known tale of *Hansel und Gretel*. Conjure up for a moment an image of the two children, abandoned in the dark forest, dislocated, disoriented, confused - their way-out unclear, their footprints obscured, their breadcrumbs consumed by hungry birds, their markers gone. Though the sub-text of this and other similar folktales is actually child abandonment, a very real social ill in the mediaeval period, the folk wisdom embedded in such oral tradition remains relevant even in contemporary society.

Footprints. In today's world, footprints have taken on new significance, one with ecological and global implications. Currently it is the footprints we leave on the environment which are of greatest concern, as we all strive to build a culture of sustainability for the future that will lessen our impact on the natural landscape. This initiative is of great relevance to Canadians since we as a nation feel a strong connection to the natural environment; our geography and climate determine our lifestyles, influence our moods and challenge our adaptability. They fascinate our writers and inspire our artists. Clearly, then, the natural environment is an essential element in defining our national sense of place.

Professionals working in the field of natural landscape preservation in Canada understand that a gentler footprint is critical to the survival of this, our most valued, most envied of non-renewable resources. Working every day in historic landscapes and places of natural beauty, we recognize the risks we take in making our national treasures accessible to the public through cultural tourism and recreation. We understand the importance of this burgeoning industry yet fear the consequences if economic development is allowed to advance unchecked. Daily we are confronted by this cultural balancing act, attempting to accommodate the unrelenting demand, while at the same time, mitigating in the landscape, the impact of ever-increasing footprints – our visitors, and our own.

Footprints have yet another meaning for cultural landscape historians, urban geographers, anthropologists, folklorists and among many others, museum professionals like myself who are committed to the preservation of built heritage and material culture. The footprints of *our* studies are the human patterns impressed through time, upon the contours of the natural environment. They include the path systems that followed the features of the land, worn bare by those first moccasined feet, but also the roadways that superseded them frequently preserving the course of the very tracks they replaced. Our footprints include highways and railways, bridges and monuments, skyscrapers and shopping malls, indeed all the constructions that man has contributed to his natural milieu. Buildings do have footprints as those of you who have studied architecture will certainly know.

The combination of natural and man-made features in the landscape define, at any given time, the essential character of a place. It is the depth and richness of this cultural landscape, however, which foster the authentic human engagement – the personal attachment - that gives a place special meaning and resonance.

The notion of place and the strong “sense of place” some landscapes are said to embody is an elusive phenomenon. My most recent exposure to it involved curating an exhibition for which quilt artists were challenged to interpret the theme “Constructions” in their work. We were expecting depictions of buildings, streetscapes, landmarks but all, to a person, attempted to capture something much less concrete – imprints, impressions, perceptions.

Their attempts have allowed me to examine more closely personal responses to place and to attempt to define it. For some artists, special places brought back remembrances of things past, nostalgia for a simpler time. Some felt places were repositories of collective memory and family stories. Some valued them for the linkages and connections they provided, bringing people together who otherwise led separate lives and could feel disconnected and adrift. Places that offered safety and contentment pervaded the quilters’ work frequently juxtaposed with the anxiety and dislocation - the mental gridlock- one experiences in impersonal, urban landscapes... Quilters frequently included landmarks in their work, structures that dominated and defined their communities but more importantly, marked their personal place – their comfort zone – their “home place”. These places whether weathered family farmhouses, or humble out-port shanties were markers that oriented them – rooted them - spoke to them of comfort, warmth, constancy, belonging. Clearly social relationships shared the built and natural environments in these quilters’ perception of place.

Asked about your personal “home place” I am sure each one of you would arrive at a different response. My place, at least for the past 27 years has been Waterloo Region, a place located in the watershed of the Grand River, culturally unique in all Ontario. Interestingly, the Grand contributes to the cityscape in Cambridge, though it is conspicuously absent in Kitchener and Waterloo. Its absence, however, dominates the history of urban development here, since lack of water prompted the early introduction of steam technology, making possible the growth of family-run industries and heralding the unprecedented prosperity Berliners ... that is Kitchenerites ... enjoyed at the turn of the last century. Today it is reflected in the wonderful legacy of industrial buildings that punctuate our neighborhoods and distinguish our urban landscapes, serving also as prominent markers and points of reference as we travel from place to place in our twin cities.

And speaking of travel, I am sure that some of you have come from outside the Region today so I know you can relate to the navigational challenges that are posed by our interesting road system here. In describing my “home place”, then, I would have to include the unique footprint impressed on our natural environment by the surveyors of the German Land Company formed by the first Pennsylvania-German Mennonite settlers. These German surveyors, informed by their own cultural traditions, respected the natural contours of the land, and hence eschewed the British grid system. This particularly distinctive imprint on our County has left us forever directionally challenged, proscripting that we travel east and west on King Street in Kitchener and north and south in Waterloo...and that we continue to get lost on our rural routes since in Waterloo County everyone knows that you can’t take three right turns and end up back where you started.

When many think of special places they first consider built heritage and historic landmarks such as the Schneider Haus and the wee Scottish cottage we also operate in Cambridge. Fortunately, the private sector and institutions that now include our universities have taken up the challenge of preserving historic buildings, the

memories and values they embody, and the special places they occupy, rejuvenating industrial and civic buildings in our inner cities, for example, and reinventing them for condos and classrooms.

But for me, it is the ethnicity of our community's roots that has kept me intellectually challenged and literally kept me here in this place. And it is not so much in the architecture that the culture finds expression since the Germans built largely in the English style. Instead, it is manifested in their vernacular arts - their folk arts - and most robustly, in their folkways: their language – that curious *verdeutschte* English we hear at the markets ... their food customs – the schmeckable food which Edna Staebler taught us to love and which is becoming increasingly difficult to find in our local restaurants ... and it is expressed through their religious and social institutions and in their pervasive *Geistlichkeit* – their *spirituality*. These intangible footprints are perhaps the most illusive and vulnerable of all.

Should we care about place? Jane Jacobs the well-respected urban planner thinks so. She warns in her most recent book that there may be a Dark Age Ahead. As the cultural landscape becomes more densely inhabited, the economic and social forces that shape it are more complex, change is more rapid, layers proliferate and abrupt spatial discontinuities can result. Humans become disorientated and their stabilizing experience of place is often lost ... shades of the predicament of Hansel and Gretel ... Jacobs predicts that if trends continue, North Americans will soon live in a placeless commercial world of shopping malls and theme parks – anonymous, suburban “edge-cities”. It is the culture of the automobile that is causing American communities to die, she asserts. An invasive human footprint indeed!

Should you care about place? Well ... a healthy sense of place is clearly critical to the well-being of individuals, of neighborhoods and of whole communities; it is associated with history, identity, collective memory, safety, stability, belonging, comfort. Place can and should encourage social interaction and foster social relations. A strong sense of place can center young adventurers such as you, inspiring in you the confidence, courage and heart to extend the boundaries of knowledge, exploit opportunity, and to fully maximize your personal potentials ... to make a few meaningful, generational footprints of your own.

So make tracks but remember! Respect the authentic places we have fought to preserve for your emotional well-being and quality of life. And remember to leave behind footprints and markers of your own to remind you of where you have come ... and... to make your own unique contribution to our rich, layered legacy of place for those who follow behind. *Machs Gut!*