

## **Indigenous Planning Cross Cultural Exchange: Chiapas, Mexico**

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Indigenous planning is an emerging field of study and highlights the importance of exploring social issues in the indigenous planning context. The learning interface between indigenous and non-indigenous people is increasingly important for design and planning professionals to develop more appropriate solutions to current situations in social services, infrastructure, housing and employment among others (University of Manitoba, Project Description). Reciprocal learning opportunities with indigenous people related to culture and tradition and long-term comprehensive, holistic planning that integrates social, environmental, economic, and political factors will benefit us all.

With the support of the AWB International Scholarship I was fortunate to participate in the Chiapas Intensive School on Models of Indigenous Development in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico in February 2011. The two week course and 3 day international conference was a partnership between planning departments in universities in Canada, the United States and Mexico focusing on the application of Indigenous planning theory. I experienced cross-cultural peer learning, intergenerational, and interdisciplinary collaboration and processes in community planning that directly supports AWB's mandate.

The IPEX field school initiated the process of decolonizing a generation of planners. The struggle to understand multiple truths and new ways of knowing our diversity will help to acknowledge and respect our human and environmental interdependence.

Chiapas has a rich indigenous and colonial history and is mediating between those with various transitions with population growth, population exchange between the rural and urban centres, tourism and a strong Indigenous rights movement. We had the opportunity to visit three indigenous communities: San Juan Chamula, where religious practices have been adapted from both colonial (Spanish-Catholic) and Mayan traditions, Oventic, an autonomous Zapatista community, and the Mayan ruins of Palenque.

Field school and conference topics ranged from Indigenous planning theory, language, culture, natural resource management and place-making to community organizing. Student presentations and research groups facilitated hands-on research with local community members on four key areas of landscape and natural resources, economic activity, Indigenous settlements, culture and world views.

We shared our experiences, perspectives, redefined and realigned our knowledge. We discussed the importance of understanding the philosophical and spatial relationships between values, beliefs and traditions and land tenure that are rooted in Indigenous communities. Today, "the struggle for balance has turned into a struggle for freedom and control as Indigenous planning values continue to be suppressed and vanished by Western planning values." (IPEX Culture & Worldviews Student Group, 2011)

Students were collectively asked to draft an Indigenous Planning Statement, a manifesto of sorts, which would summarize our experience and newfound perspective. The statement highlights

community-led planning based in an understanding and respect for community context, traditional knowledge, cultural identity, unlearning of colonial planning and development models, personal awareness of our assumptions, good communication, reciprocal learning and capacity building (IPEX Students, 2011). The role of the planner is to facilitate an Indigenous Planning process that is transparent, adaptable and responsible to the community. This must be done from a collective understanding that Indigenous planning can only be practiced when driven by the values of Indigenous peoples, and knowing that the role of non-Indigenous planners is to create the conditions for Indigenous planning to grow. This can only occur with a sense of collective responsibility and action.

### **What I learned**

The field school confirmed the uncertainty I feel that there is no standard framework or best practice to follow as each community has a unique context with its own opportunities and challenges. In order to gain rights back and move beyond perpetuating systemic structures of colonial oppression, planners (and society) need to acknowledge that our difference can be a strength. Non-indigenous and indigenous people and planners can support this process through decolonization of individual and planning practices. Social designers and planners need to seek out opportunities to create environments for resistance to oppression, action and transformation.

This experience has increased my awareness of oppressive systemic structures and processes that define the political and physical environments, and my role in perpetuating or changing colonial institutions. Social issues cross borders and we must be aware of our impact within and outside our communities and build diverse multi-level, stakeholder networks and coalitions to more effectively change policy and practices.

Dialogue, debate and reflection are crucial elements to learning from each other. Universities used to be more radical places but in my experience we are quite isolated in our studios, departments and faculties. Indigenous planning would be a valuable topic to build interdisciplinary relationships on and to unlearn colonial methods as they impact our personal and professional activities.

Canada is one of 2 countries who have not signed a UN resolution that recognizes the human right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation (Barlow, July 28, 2011). Students from Mexico were surprised that Canadian First Nations were not in very different situations than their own people with “boil water” advisories and inadequate housing. So what do we do about it?

We can begin to implement these principles into our planning toolkits but it often occurs on the individual or neighbourhood level rather than the national or international levels that can have more long term and collective impacts. I plan to explore processes of community mobilization and activism in my graduate thesis work and how it can be applied to systemic equitable community directed social change

### **Conclusion**

Humans are a small part of the interconnected ecosystems we inhabit and depend on. In order to be more inclusive, active participation in democratic processes, an understanding of indigenous world views, self determination and joint planning on issues related to land use, power

relationships and natural resources are needed. I believe through this foundation of Indigenous planning learning, I will be better prepared to work with marginalized groups of people to address planning issues both personal and political in nature. Starting with small and crucial steps to communicate, build trust, forge relationships and take action with communities, Indigenous or not.

### **2011 Planners Network Conference**

I was also able to attend the 2011 Planners Network conference on "Promoting Economic Development through Regional Cooperation and Planning" at the University of Memphis, TN from May 18-21, 2011. Presentation themes revolved around austerity measures, racial and class barriers, and student activism. Highlights included:

- A workshop in the Frayser neighbourhood in Memphis where there is a significant amount of housing foreclosure as well as community efforts to stabilize and renew the area.
- A bicycle tour of the Greater Memphis Greenline (to Shelby Farms) that utilizes unused railway right-of-ways for beautiful active transportation network.
- A documentary "I am Man" and panel discussion from participants in the 1968 Sanitation Workers Strike for civil rights in Memphis.

The local chapter of Planners Network MB's primary goal is "draw attention to the importance of planning in addressing issues of social inequity and environmental degradation." And quoting Peter Marcuse "Expose, propose and politicize!" To become involved visit:

<http://plannersnetworkmb.blogspot.com/>

I am extremely appreciative to AWB for this opportunity.

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