

CAMERA/ACTION!

Film as Planning Intervention

By *Leonie Sandercock and Giovanni Attili*

IN 2006, soon after the release of our first documentary, *Where Strangers Become Neighbours*, we were invited to the small town of Burns Lake in north central British Columbia by an anti-racism coordinator and community activist. The activist had seen the film and thought we might be interested in a story that was unfolding in her community. Two anecdotes were sufficient to grab our attention and persuade us to make the journey north.

The first anecdote told of a conflict between the Village (i.e., municipality) of Burns Lake and the Burns Lake Band, a sub-tribe of the Carrier Nation, who has inhabited this region for thousands of years. As part of a dispute over land and taxation that culminated in the year 2000, the Village had shut off water, sewer, and fire services to the reserve in the middle of winter (with temperatures typically around minus 30° Celsius.) How could such a thing happen in twenty-first century Canada, a country with an international reputation as a defender of human rights? Was this an anomaly, or an instance of an ongoing history of colonization, we wondered.

The second anecdote described how, in 2005, some local youth in the town, Native and non-Native, had

written and performed a song about racism and violence in the town, calling their song “Leave It Behind.” This raised another question of whether and how, amidst a history of segregation and conflict, some people were struggling to change things? How well were they faring?

As planners who had begun to explore the potential of film as a catalyst for social transformation, we were eager to see whether there was a role for us as researchers/planners/filmmakers in helping to bring about a shift towards more equitable economic, social and political relations between Native and non-Native peoples in this town. Could we become involved in a local struggle for both reconciliation and the decolonization of planning, through the tools we could bring: film technology and artistry, and our values and skills as planners?

Thus began a five-year (and still continuing) action research project using film as a way of approaching collaborative and transformational planning. In what follows we discuss the role of film in a deeply divided community, asking to what extent it can open up a new space for dialogue about the past, present and future. And, beyond dialogue, to what extent film can lead to action, to different ways of doing things, to alternative imaginings that can re-shape the fragile co-existence of two peoples, Native and non-Native Canadians, towards reconciliation and partnership.

We begin with a description of our collaborative filmmaking approach. Then we describe the action piece of the action research, how we took the finished film back to the communities whose stories it tells, organizing screenings followed by dialogue circles, evaluating that process and then engaging in ongoing planning activities with those communi-



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ties. In conclusion, we ask what has been achieved and whether film can be seen as a way of advancing transformative planning and contributing to the decolonization of planning in (post)colonial societies.

Collaborative Filmmaking

Burns Lake has a population of six thousand, almost equally divided between First Nations and non-Native Canadians. The Carrier people had been forced onto reserves by the provincial government in 1914. In the absence of any treaty process, the Burns Lake Band was allocated 400 acres of land, one-third of which was appropriated when the town site was laid out a year later, setting the stage for almost a century of conflict over stolen land. We entered this community in 2006 with a specific action research agenda. What was the nature of the conflict between the Village and the Band that came to a head with the Band taking the Village to the Supreme Court and the Village shutting off wa-

ter and sewer services to the reserve? What if anything had changed in the five years since the Supreme Court case? What opportunities and obstacles were there for First Nations social and economic development? Who were the change agents? And what might our role be?

We spent a year doing the work of developing relationships (with both the Band and the Village), conducting library research and making sense of what we were reading and hearing. The more we learned about the operations of power and privilege in this small town, the more compelling we found the story to be. In spite of some significant changes in attitudes and social relations since the Supreme Court case, there were clearly ongoing struggles and frustration in the relationship between the Village and the Band. Our dawning perception was that the state of the current relationship was grounded in history: in a lack of awareness on the part of most non-Native residents of the consequences of First Nations' lived experience of colonization and particularly of the dysfunctional and intergenerational effects



Map created by Giovanni Attili

of Indian residential schools; and anger and frustration on the part of First Nations residents, since historic injustices had never been acknowledged, were ongoing and were not being addressed. In other words, the past was still very much present, distorting what contemporary goodwill existed, and blocking a path forward.

The more we talked with Native people, the more we heard about healing, about the kinds of healing that they had undertaken, as individuals and as a community. What struck us was that there had been very little, if any, healing between Native and non-Native people, and we wondered how planning issues could be dealt with without first dealing with that healing across the cultural divide. We believed that a film might be a way to begin such a process.

We began to imagine a film that would begin with an investigation of the causes of the Supreme Court case and the shutting off of the water and sewer, revealing not only a contemporary quarrel over the taxation of a mill on Band land, but also the preceding eighty years of conflict between the Village and the Band over expropriated land. Then we would excavate even further, to uncover the story of colonization and its technologies of power. Finally, we would look at attempts from within the community to begin to shift these toxic relationships, and pose the question, Is there a way forward?

We saw the film as a potential way of opening a difficult dialogue, of changing the lens on the past. And because we wanted to encourage dialogue, but starting from a different point, we envisaged a collaborative filmmaking process in which we were creating the space for new stories to be told, by voices hitherto unheard. We approached both the Band and the Village seeking their collaboration. We explained our ethical protocol, which was to bring back rough cuts of the film to the community (Native and non-Native) at every step of the editing process to ask for their input; to offer every individual we interviewed the opportunity to withdraw from the film if they didn't like how we used their words; and to bring the final cut back to the community for a community-wide dialogue. And we asked the Band and the Village what they would like to see come out of such a process.

The mayor, somewhat guardedly, agreed to cooperate. We had made the case that the film could potentially contribute to a shift in understanding within the village between Native and non-Native residents that might result in a less confrontational stance and more willingness to collaborate on joint projects for economic and social development. The Band was more enthusiastic. Members wanted their story to be heard, and they trusted us to tell it. They weren't sure what, if anything, might change as a result of the telling, but they recognized, as Chief Rob Charlie explained in the film, that they could not survive alone and they were willing "to forgive, although not to forget, in order to move forward as a people."

Returning the Film to the Community

We spent four months filming interviews in 2007, then two-and-a-half years editing the 90-minute, three-part film, *Finding Our Way*, during which time we returned to the community eight times for their feedback on various rough cuts. Once finished editing, we partnered with a social justice and community development NGO in applying for provincial (anti-racism) funds to use the film as catalyst for intercultural dialogue. We then embarked on three months of careful process planning in preparation for two community events (one for youth, one for the wider community) involving a screening followed by facilitated dialogue circles.

We convened an advisory committee of local leaders, which included the long-standing antagonists, the mayor and the chief, two new village councilors, the police chief, the high school principal, the high school drama and dance teacher and our own expanded team, which included skilled facilitators and community development planners. We ran a day-long workshop with this group, showing them the film, discussing their reactions and asking their advice on how best to organize a community screening. Among this leadership group there were diverse reactions, from shock and confessions of ignorance about this dark history by some, to an admission of mistakes on the part of other non-Native leaders, while the chief was happy that his people's story had finally been told. Somewhat surprisingly, both the

mayor and the chief declared that it was important for the community to see this film, in order to move forward, even if it was hard to watch and likely to produce strong emotional responses (from anger to denial, shame and guilt). We suggested a process of breaking into small dialogue circles following the screening and having these facilitated by local people whom we would train, ideally a mixture of Native and non-Native, youth and adults, possibly in pairs. The advisory group offered to help us recruit these facilitators. Chief Rob Charlie suggested a joint press release with the mayor encouraging people to come see the film, and also that he and the mayor should take the stage before the screening to express their support for this process and to ask people to watch it with an open mind. The mayor agreed.

We trained the facilitators, again by showing the film and having a dialogue circle to discuss their responses to it, which were moving and profound, bringing out further confessions of ignorance about the history of colonization as well as the specific local version of that, anger that this history was not being taught in the schools and a powerful desire to start making changes, especially on the part of the youth. We also held a special screening for the high school teachers in the town in anticipation of the high school students wanting to have discussions after the youth event. Teachers expressed relief that “the veil of silence about what’s been going on in this town has been lifted,” and showed great empathy for the lived experience of Native people, especially concerning the impact and ongoing effects of Indian residential schools. (One hundred and fifty thousand Native children across Canada in the twentieth century had been forcibly removed from their homes and placed in these schools, with the official intent of “killing the Indian in the Native child.” Forty percent of these children died, either in the schools or trying to escape from them.) Teachers were eager to have the film as soon as possible for classroom use and offered to help us with the community events.

Inspiring!

That was the word used to headline an editorial in the local paper (*Lakes District News*, June 2010) following



Photos courtesy of Chief Rob Charlie

the two dialogues/screenings. We structured the dialogues around three questions. What struck you most in the film? Is the history of relations depicted in the film still present in this town? What if anything should be done about that, and what would *you* like to do?

Fifty youth attended the youth screening, half of whom were First Nations, and forty remained for the dialogue, twenty-one of whom completed our evaluation questionnaire (required as part of our grant funding). In response to the question “How well did this screening and dialogue help your community address racism?” seventeen of twenty-one responses gave the highest possible score. In response to the question “How well did this screening and dialogue help your community identify pathways to working together across cultural differences?” twenty of twenty-one responses were very good or good. (These responses were similar in the community-wide screening.) Additionally, there were very positive responses to a question inquiring

about people's overall awareness of historical and current day relations between Native and non-Native peoples before and after the workshops, with many respondents noting a significant increase in awareness. Approximately 150 people attended the community-wide screening, 80 stayed on for the dialogue circles and 45 stayed to complete the evaluation, with 37 of the 45 noting a significant increase in awareness.

Qualitative answers from both youth and adults to the question "How will you act on what you have learned through the screening and dialogue?" contained many expressions of the desire to volunteer to work on community projects such as the Gathering Place (the conversion of the old high school, now the Band office, into an intercultural gathering place). And the two most common answers to the question "What other types of activities or events that bring people together would you recommend for anti-racism projects?" were either "more films or plays like this one" or "take this film on the road."

The mayor and the chief fulfilled their promise of both opening and closing the two events. In closing, the mayor acknowledged past mistakes made by the Village, and Chief Rob Charlie publicly buried his resentment, noting that four years earlier he had given up on the town, but now he was filled with hope in seeing the young people energized for change and the spirit of hope for moving forward reflected in the dialogues.

During the months of organizing the community screenings, our project team had also been working with the Band to develop a strategic plan for moving forward with the renovation of the old high school as a gathering place for First Nations and venue for youth, and discussing the possibility of leadership training for some of the youth who had volunteered as facilitators or who had expressed a desire during the workshops to get involved in community development projects. (The old high school was on Band land, and this was leased back to the Band after the new school was completed, although only after the Band occupied the premises.) This has been ongoing work for us in the year since

the dialogues. In the three months following the dialogue circles, further significant changes occurred. In August of 2010, the Village Council adopted a motion of support in principle for the renovation of the Gathering Place as an intercultural facility that will serve the entire community in a meaningful way, and for the development of a youth leadership program.

Reflections

Will the film succeed not only as a catalyst for dialogue but also for mobilizing commitment and resources around future planning projects? Like all good stories, ours must end on a note of suspense. We can say that the first community screenings were definitely successful as a catalyst for apparently transformative dialogue. But we don't know yet whether this will result in the mobilization of resources around community development projects.

Pondering the success of the film in opening new relational spaces and prospects for reconciliation in this community, the Gathering Place project is not necessarily the ultimate test. Word keeps coming back to us from the folks interviewed in the film that they are often stopped in the supermarket or gas station by community members who saw the film and want to talk about it, expressing compassion for what First Nations have endured, and confessing that it opened a window for them onto a history about which they had known next to nothing.

The planning intervention that we have designed begins with a healing process (catalyzed by dialogues that the film enables), proceeds through recognition of "the past as present" and moves on to a visioning process engaging with how things might be different. That final step can evolve into action projects of a more typical planning nature (from land use to economic development to facilities planning to health planning to improving governance). This is very much a work in progress, one way of moving towards the decolonization of planning in deeply divided communities. **P²**