

Place-making and Sustainability

A discussion series hosted by the Place Studies program
of the Center for Sustainability and the Environment

Temporary Places: The Balkan Refugee Route



Reflections by
Prof. Eric Martin,
Managing for
Sustainability

Disasters, terrorist activities, wars, and other factors trigger large streams of people fleeing crisis and seeking refuge. These flows reached record levels in Europe from 2015 to 2017, when many refugees took "the Balkan route," through Greece, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia, to reach north-western Europe. A massive response, one of the largest humanitarian actions in Europe since the Balkan Wars in the 1990s, included volunteers and organizations from the public and nonprofit-sector. Due to complexities and national variations in policy making, this crisis response consisted of five different, though somewhat overlapping phases, in which the "place" -- refugee camps and centers -- changed dramatically.

How does your work relate to the concept of place-making?

Refugees and migrants have a complex relationship with place. They have left their home and travelled through many different places, some welcoming and others much less so. They secure places to stay along the route in formal camps and informal squats. The places they are allowed access to often depend on their nationality, their family status, and their ability to be recognized as either a migrant or a refugee. And of course, they have hopes that their final destination might be a permanent place to live, work and prosper. Moreover, those that I interviewed, who work in these places, see them quite differently than those who use them. So the notion of place for refugees, migrants, and the humanitarian workers who staff or volunteer at such places, is a difficult and complicated one.

What are potential benefits and/or shortcomings you see for place-making in sustainability?

It is hard to conceptualize temporary places as sustainable. In many ways they are designed not to be sustainable. They provide a short-term solution to much longer-term problems and opportunities. But temporary places do imply the desire or eventual outcome for a more permanent, sustainable future, just one that will occur elsewhere. The more sustainability is built into temporary places, the better. For example, allowing temporary refugees to access permanent municipal schools, hospitals, or other services begins to bridge that gap. However, it also creates tensions between local populations that are disrupted by temporary inflows. And, many refugees and migrants fear permanence in temporary settings since it prevents them from reaching their ultimate goal. At some point, temporary places like refugee camps often do morph into more permanent places. This transition is extremely politically charged and often takes place without the input of those affected most.



What aspects of your work can we apply to a place-making approach to sustainability at Bucknell and in our local region?

Universities are temporary places in the course of a student's life. It is a more permanent place for those who work there. This provides a clash of perspectives on daily life in this place. Those who flow through an institution experience it quite differently than those who work and remain over time. Universities are a place to be remembered, while refugee camps are definitely not. In fact, much of what takes place in camps is a process of understanding and often forgetting the past with the hopes of a different future. Those assisting refugees are often ill-equipped to prepare temporary visitors for the future they seek, simply providing a stop along the way in the hopes of providing some good to populations who have experienced so much bad. While vastly different operations, this question does make one think a bit more about the notion of temporary users' experiences with institutions and place.

The Place-making and Sustainability discussion series invites the campus community to explore how we can apply a place-making approach to creating sustainable communities. As Andres Edwards (2010) argues in his book, *Thriving Beyond Sustainability*, place-making "involves nourishing our connection to the cultural and ecological fabric of our community" which then "encourages us to take responsibility for our neighbors and our resources."

The BCSE Place Studies program supports teaching, research, and outreach on how we imagine, sustain, and understand, and engage with place.