



Identity - American Indians and Planning

“Who do we want to be?”

In the autumn of 2006 Joren Jacobs and Henk-Jan Kooij visited Minnesota, USA, to study planning in Indian reservations for their Master thesis. Their research problematizes concepts like “planning” and “identity” and tries to reveal what they mean in a context very different from The Netherlands. Connecting American Indian identity to the activity of planning, their research produces interesting insights about the functioning of Indian reservations in present times.



This is the American Indian, or Native American, as he is more often called. It is a very spiritual man; he knows the ways of nature, and meditates regularly, smoking his peace pipe. He is very wise and many people visit him to seek his council. Sometimes he makes contact with the Great Spirit, in an ancient ritual that takes place inside a sweat lodge.

Why – for heaven’s sake – do we want to study planning in the Indian reservations? Based on these kinds of images, you’d reckon there will probably be no such thing as planning over there. Our images, however, deceive us. The image provided above is a very stereotypical picture of the American Indian. It is hardly possible to find a single American

Indian that fits this image. Nonetheless, images like these, as a matter of fact, influence our suppositions about American Indians, which leads you to think that American Indians don’t do planning.

Suppose they do planning; what would this look like? Would they make spatial plans for their reservations? Are there participative processes, in which different stakeholders try to reach consensus with the help of trained spatial planners? In this case too, our perception of planning determines what our research questions will be. In reality, planning in the United States might be completely different from Dutch planning, let alone in Indian reservations.

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Studying planning in Indian reservations

Then how should we study reality as it is – knowing that all our research questions are heavily influenced by our frames of reference, knowing that our images of American Indians and of planning might not be in accordance with reality?

When we set out to do research in two American Indian Reservations in the State of Minnesota, questions like these emerged, because our suppositions about American Indians and planning changed rapidly as we set foot on American soil. Experienced academics in the field of “indigenous studies” helped us to find our way into the history of American Indians, and told us how we should deal with them in conducting our research. For this we were very grateful but at the same time we realized that we were dealing with one of the many possible perspectives on the matter. We felt that these helpful academics were also advocating for the American Indians – understandably so. Our aim, however, was to gain insight in planning practices, not to make a case for or against American Indians. We had to find a way to deal with both our own aims and the question of how to do our research without harming American Indians.

One thing was clear; well-known concepts, like planning, Indians, and scientific research, first had to be problematized. We know their meaning in our own country but what do they mean here, in an Indian reservation, in Minnesota, USA? Before proceeding with the research, we found we had to gain some deeper understanding of these questions. Therefore, among others, we introduced the theoretical concept of identity.

Identity crisis

In The Netherlands, people generally think they know what identity is; it is who you are, or it is the character of a place, or it is your culture. Even in planning, the concept is applied to say something

about a place; for instance, that it has a strong identity because there are many historical elements. For American Indians, as we found out, identity is much more complicated. The concept touches on many areas of interest. What is the American Indian? Is there one kind of American Indian? Who decides what American Indians are? Do you have to know who you are, before you know what you want? Should you know what you want, before you do planning? What do American Indians want? Do they live in wigwams? Do they drive cars? Is that what they want? Do the kids want to go to McDonalds too?

In The Netherlands we kind of have a sense what the answers to these questions are. In Indian Reservations, we don't. So we examined stories of American Indian history – both from the perspective of American text books, and from the tellings of American Indians themselves. They often conflict; they select different elements from “actual” history and present those as what really happened. Americans celebrate the discovery of the continent and the settler life, while Indians talk about cultural domination, poverty, and genocide. There is no one truth out there. There are only multiple stories that can be strategically applied to either maintain the status quo, or to force a change.

History has brought American Indians where they are now. It involves making choices if they want to change that situation. In order to make a case for American Indians as a group, however, images have to be constructed – images of history, images of the enemy, images of the self. No single American person can be found who will claim responsibility for the poverty of American Indians. Still, American Indians claim that it is America's fault. The other way around: American Indians claim that their culture has been destroyed. But at the same time, many of them have adopted American culture, and frankly don't

want to go back to their old culture. The images are useful, but they are not always realistic. Rather, they are used to get something done. To create and maintain an image of American Indians as very wise, noble, and spiritual people, may benefit tourism and provide income. Another image is possible too: in some reservations casinos have been established that generate a lot of revenue. Because they don't have to pay taxes (established by treaty) they keep a lot of money themselves, which they use to buy expensive homes and cars. This image can be used against American Indians.

Democratic planning

Planning involves strategically applying images of identity, images of the past, the present, and the future. These images help to visualize a common future. In the state of poverty that most Indian communities are in, however, it is not easy to focus on long-term perspectives. Priority number one, for many American Indians, is to get enough money to make a decent living. In some cases the new casinos have provided such income. The only problem is that many people don't know how to deal with money. Coming out of a situation of poverty, they tend to spend the money to fulfill short-term needs. In many cases, these short-term needs appear to be liquor, drugs or – somewhat better – cars, hamburgers, and expensive clothing. In short, it is hard for people to really think about a future beyond the next couple of weeks.

If we problematize the notion of the American Indian identity some more (there is no such thing as one identity, let alone one group), new difficulties arise if reservations want to do planning. In every reservation there is a so-called tribal government. Generally, these are the best educated people on the reservation, or they are most experienced in dealing with public matters, being elected officials. The tribal government controls the revenues of casinos, hires staff, and



Are these, then, your typical American Indians?

plans developments on the reservation. Civilians are relatively passive. For example, some governments use casino revenues to build houses for their people, and some governments also give out money to their people. Sometimes, the only involvement of the people is that they vote for their representatives once every four years. Unfortunately, people seem to be easily persuaded to change their vote for financial benefits. We learned of a situation where one person would promise money to people if they'd vote for him. With a population of only a couple of thousand, this could have big consequences. One can imagine that the representatives elected this way, will proceed to pursue their own goals instead of the common good.

Furthermore, public participation usually stops after elections. This means that the responsibilities for public matters – especially regarding strategic or long-term policy-making – lie with the tribal government. And the extent to which they can live up to these responsibilities depends on the available amount of money.

We observed big differences between the reservations in Minnesota. The Mille Lacs Reservation, situated along a main highway, about one-and-a-half hours away from the metropolitan area of Minneapolis (relatively close for American standards), did relatively well with their casinos. They produced enough revenue to build some houses, buy some land, and set up and maintain a number of government departments – for instance planning, economic development, and natural

resources. The Leech Lake Reservation, which is located in the remote and sparsely populated northern part of Minnesota, makes a lesser amount of money, even though they have three casinos, whereas Mille Lacs has two. Realizing the fact that Mille Lacs only has about 1,500 inhabitants and Leech Lake has 10,000, it is not surprising that the “development” of Leech Lake is much behind Mille Lacs; their policies are less sophisticated and their government is less “organized” due to lower income.

Despite the relatively good position of Mille Lacs, no such thing as a sophisticated, democratic planning system exists. As a matter of fact, some plans are made only by one person who works somewhere in a government department, i.e. a fifty year plan for land use, economic development, and education – an integral vision on Mille Lacs' future – was made without public consultation or participation, by one long-range planner of the Corporate Commission (one of the agencies of the Mille Lacs tribal government). People could not be mobilized easily, he claimed, and if they were, they could only think about their own (short-term) benefit.

Futures unknown, questions unasked

At the moment, a lot of changes are going on. One is the establishment of the casinos, creating new wealth for some of the reservations, leading to better organization of tribal government, with professional staff, and money for dealing with problems. This has shown an increase

in housing development, and construction of businesses and roads. At the same time, the “natural” areas in which the reservations are located, are becoming more and more attractive, especially along the lakeshores, for the establishment of second homes, for (retired) Americans. Some of the (natural) qualities of these areas are threatened by these rapid changes. Spatial planning could be one of the ways to tackle these threads, establishing land use codes, spatial plans, and visualizing an attractive future for the communities of the reservations.

In order for planning to really fulfill such a role, the changes described above will first have to be perceived as problems or threads, preferably by major part of the community. This could provide a basis for better decisions about the use of casino revenues, for instance. In some reservations, people still vote for distributing the money among individuals (i.e. per capita payment), because these seems most profitable to everyone. To us it seems important for planning that people start to realize that using money for strategic or long-term goals, might be even more profitable to them, and especially to the younger generations. This, however, involves real choices to be made; stepping out of the identity crisis, choosing what – and where – you want to be as an American Indian.

Summary

Studying unknown contexts requires a good orientation. The research of Joren Jacobs and Henk-Jan Kooij, about planning in Indian reservations, therefore necessarily involves shedding new lights on familiar concepts like “planning” and “identity”. Their thesis proposes that both concepts have a very different – and sometimes problematic – meaning than they have in The Netherlands. This essay shows the different sides of American Indian identity. It shows that identity in American Indian communities is very unclear, and that this plays a vital role in the ability of American Indians to do planning. They have to ask themselves: “Who do we want to be?”.