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## Places

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The Place of Imagination

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## The Place of Imagination

*“There is a hillside from which we could see our whole town, but private houses now claim the view.”*

*“A rushing, bounding brook runs through my town, but I can’t sit on its banks because there is no public access.”*

*“A wonderful old building I have photographed for years is being razed for a convenience store.”*

We all have such places in our lives, but we have come to accept their loss as a matter of course. We leave planning, whether constructive or destructive, to planners and developers, thinking the issues too complex for our lay minds. Against a background of environmental degradation, historical amnesia, the decline of community and the absence of spiritual values, the loss of these small places seems minor and inevitable.

Or so we have come to believe.

There are people who believe otherwise. They believe the responsibility for our landscapes lies best in the hands of those who live in them and care about them. They believe the quality of our ordinary, daily environment is crucial to our sense of well-being. They believe that the economic health of a community is strengthened by a sense of history and a sense of place.

At the Brattleboro Museum and Art Center in Brattleboro, Vermont, a group of citizens, volunteers and staff gathered some of these people together in a project called *Our Town*. The project was a creative response to the

**The *Our Town* program offered Brattleboro residents opportunities to explore their feelings about the town and their experiences in it.**

**Photo by Clemens Kalischer.**



There was really no choice about where I would head: to Flat Street. Flat Street is the way I go to work. But as I was walking toward it today it occurred to me - really for the first time - that there were several other ways I could go to work: down High and right on Main, or down Eliot and Green or even down

Eliot and right on School. But I always take Flat Street. I realized that Flat Street is not only the way as in a path to work, but the way as in how to work. I mean, in Brattleboro, it is the street where the real men work. These are the guys who make something: Dunklees, Brattleboro Kiln Dry. Today as I was walking out it I was flooded with vivid memories of my father going off to work - to do the thing he passionately loved to do. I almost always wanted to go with him, especially on Saturdays, when instead I had to go off to *shul* with my grandfather, who was an Orthodox Jew. He was no less passionately involved in this activity than my father was in his. My father's plant was about a half-hour drive from our house, located on the Cuyahoga River. This was the industrial area of Cleveland, the area known as the Flats. This was the first time the association of names had ever occurred to me, although I had been aware of the sources of my interest in these kinds of work places.

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—Norton Garber

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**The town of Brattleboro.**  
**Photo courtesy Brattleboro**  
**Museum and Art Center.**

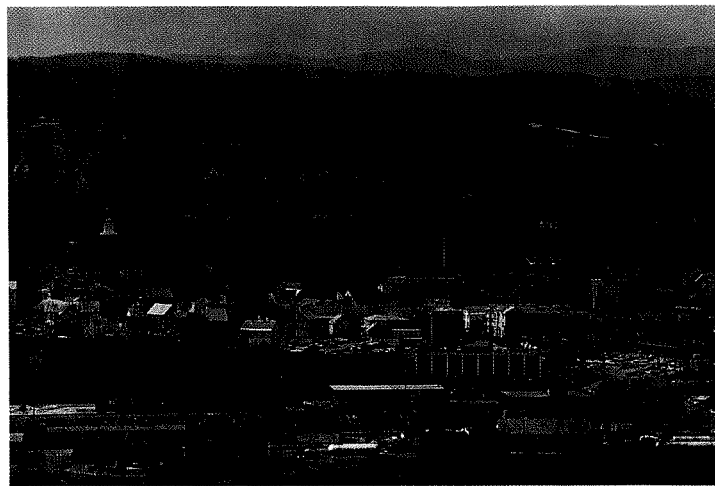
problems Brattleboro, like many New England towns, is now facing: transformation of agricultural land into building lots; suburban commercial development sapping the vitality of the town center; a main street that turns its back to the river; a river's edge claimed by industry, making it inaccessible to people; increasing traffic congestion; the need for decent, affordable housing; declining water quality and uncontrolled growth.

The Brattleboro Planning Commission is as overworked as most planning boards and spends its time responding to crises rather than planning for the future. When the Vermont Legislature passed a law in 1988 requiring that towns write new plans and include citizens in the process, the Brattleboro Planning Commission and the Windham Regional Commission looked to the *Our Town* project sponsors for assistance.

The two commissions had conceived a series of public discussions to elicit participation by townspeople, but the organizers of *Our Town* wished to go further. The organizers hoped to draw people who are not usually involved in the planning process, perhaps because they feel powerless, overwhelmed, intimidated, indifferent, or just too busy. The organizers wanted to take people back

to the beginning, to help them remember why they like living in Brattleboro.

*Our Town* was designed to encourage people to discover and articulate the meaning of place in their lives and in their communities. The project organizers believed that developing this personal sense of place is a neces-



sary first step in the process of linking personal perception to public policy. This belief is articulated by planner Robert Yaro: *[G]iven the right setting, the right evocation, the right stimulus, many of those people who put themselves in the "don't know" column turn out to be very articulate and outspoken concerning the special qualities they care about in their own communities. People can become vehicles for places.*<sup>1</sup>

Yaro, senior vice president for plan development at the Regional Plan Association in New York City,

is an innovative planner who can say from direct experience, "Stewardship springs from connectedness—it gives people back a sense of thinking responsibly on behalf of the whole community."

*Our Town* sought to evoke the proprietary feelings people have for the particular places in which

*location—any environment, if you will—into a place, is the process of experiencing deeply. A place is a piece of the whole environment that has been claimed by feelings.*<sup>2</sup>

The key to unlocking these feelings, which we all have, lies in the realm of the imagination: memories, images, fantasies, associations, sensations, symbols, dreams and stories. We begin with the language of the heart, a language that underlies all others. We can make powerful connections between ourselves and our environment by tapping into this dimension of experience. Sharing these findings with others can be equally powerful.

In recognition of the diversity of people's perceptions and modes of expression, *Our Town* offered a wide range of ways for people to explore their communities and their feelings and to give shape to their experiences. During the spring, summer and fall of 1989, the Brattleboro Museum offered a series of exhibitions, lectures and workshops led by geographers, planners, architects, psychologists and artists. Some of these workshops are described here; all of the activities in these workshops could be used in any community by any group or individual wishing to understand, celebrate or influence their environment.

The *Our Town* workshops began with a deft evocation of childhood memories of place. Roger Hart, director of the Center for Human Environments at City University of New York, asked participants to recall a place they liked and a place they disliked from their childhood and adolescence, and then to draw pictures of these places. As each person shared his story with the others, deeply held feelings emerged and personal mythologies unfolded.

An African-American woman who grew up in Roxbury remembered standing by the railroad tracks, imagining with pleasure the destinations of the train travelers; her special place carried her beyond her circumstances. A woman who grew up in Vermont had a secret spot in a shed from which she watched the rest of her family; she was free to observe but not be engaged. Several people

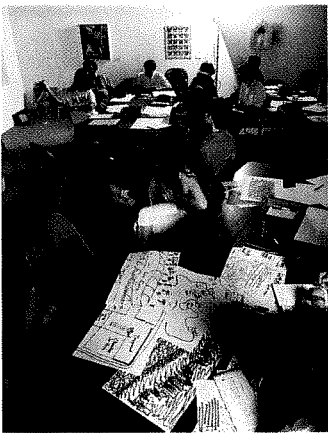
had played in little wild pockets of nature, creating rooms, forts, houses, or other types of imaginary spaces and worlds.

People's most disliked places were too often school playgrounds with sterile, blank surfaces and desultory play equipment that had provided no purchase for the imagination. Their favorite places tended to be ignored by adults: overgrown, abandoned, or forbidden places, in-between places where they had been able to create their own worlds with found materials and their imaginations.

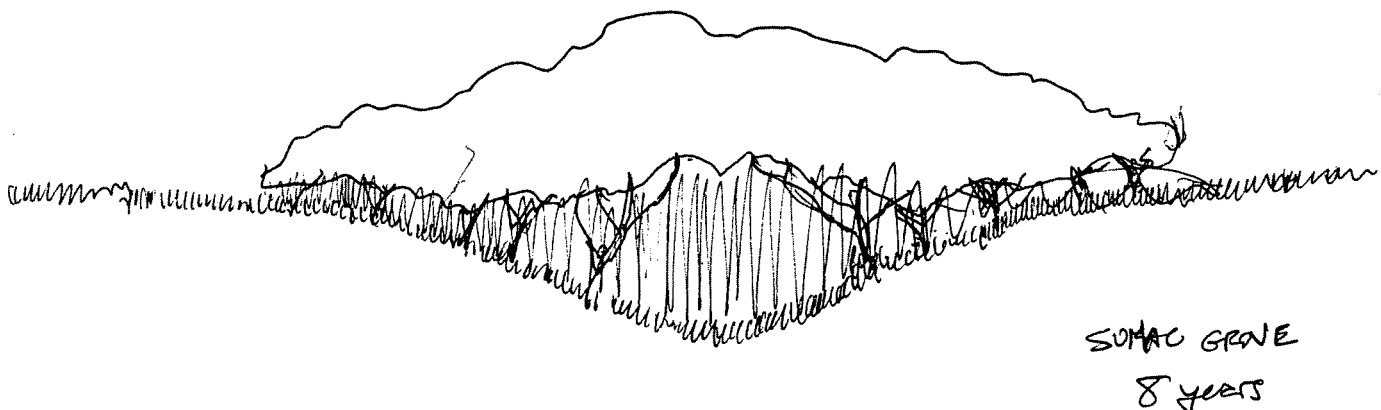
Hart deplored the increasing rationalizing and sanitizing of our land-

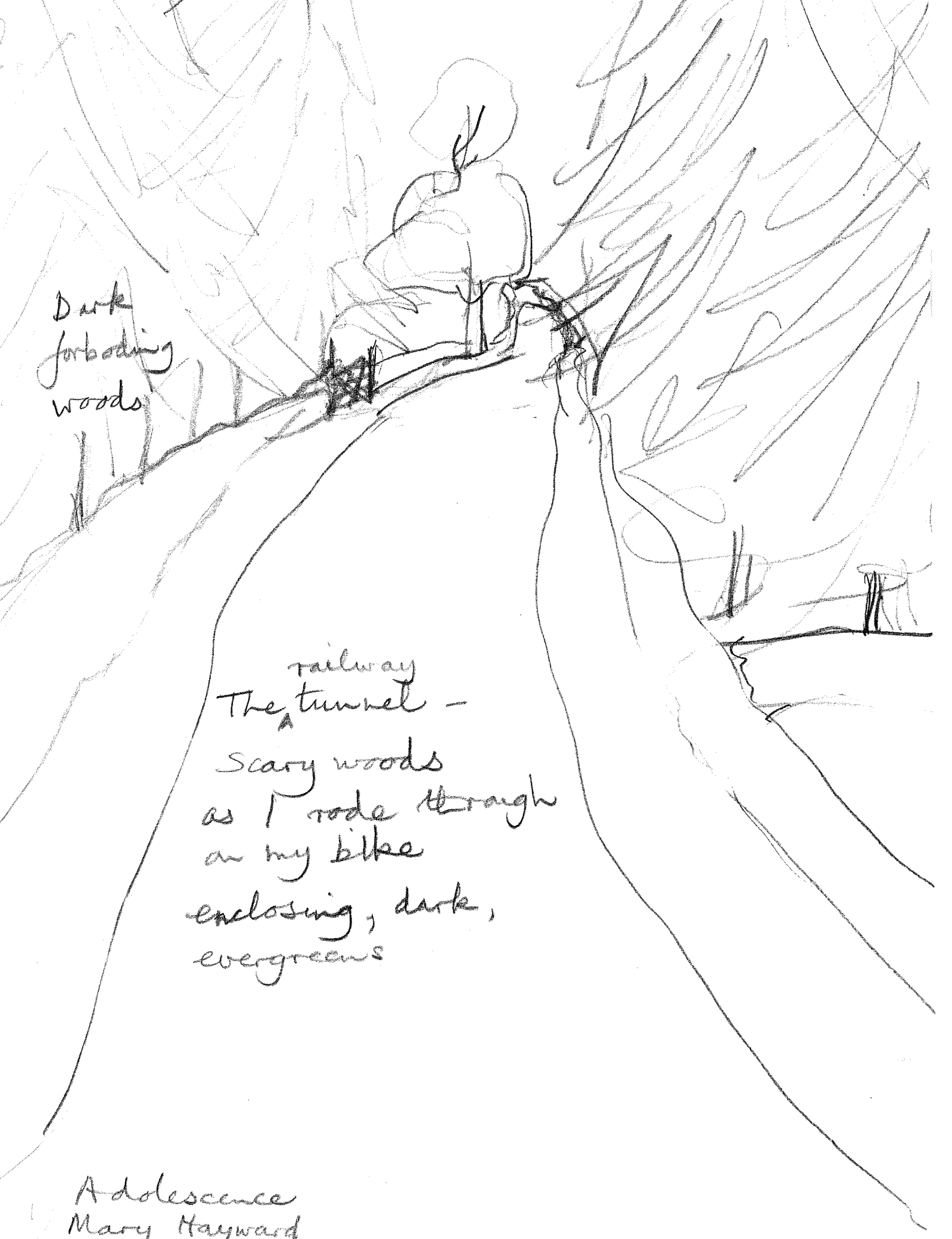
scapes, processes that starve the need growing children have for exploration, discovery, invention, risk, privacy, creativity and interaction with natural forces. In the deep experience of their own places, children develop a connection with the environment that forms a basis for future responsibility to the environment.

The workshop participants, infused with the potency of childhood perception, could return to their communities with the eyes and bodies of children and determine whether those environments served or betrayed the children growing up in them.



**Sharing childhood memories can uncover deeply held feelings and personal mythologies.**  
Drawings courtesy Brattleboro Museum and Art Center.





Dark  
forboding  
woods

railway  
The tunnel -  
Scary woods  
as I rode through  
on my bike  
enclosing, dark,  
evergreens

Adolescence  
Mary Hayward





While most of us tend to discount our perceptions of place as too private, personal, or singular to be of interest to others, David Dunlap, an artist from the University of Iowa, is keenly interested in these personal perceptions. He invited participants to share images and stories about special places and their relationships to those places. Dunlap made a room-sized map of the area and asked people to indicate on the map, by drawing or by writing, an association with a particular place.

Dunlap's challenge to participants was to make a bridge between the personal and the public realms, a crucial link if we are to sustain and develop our sense of public spaces. Some of the inscriptions on the map read: "Kippy is buried here. I love you." "There is a path that follows this shoreline. There are rocks to sit on and birds to see." "Dunkin Donuts is in the very middle of town. It isn't beautiful but it is important to many people. It stays open 24 hours a day. In winter

people keep warm there through the night."

Dunlap also asked people to lay claim to their favorite places in town by posting a small sign that read "Town of Brattleboro Permit." The act of marking a place, publicly and symbolically, made people's personal sense of connection with those places specific and vivid.

John Anderson, an architect from Burlington, Vermont, suggested that participants imagine a place stripped of its ordinary, practical reality and reduced to its essential qualities. By seeing its essence, one could then imagine how to clarify, augment, or change its actual character to forge it into a stronger, more powerfully evocative place.

Anderson encouraged people to imagine changes that extend beyond the possible into the visionary and to think in unrealistic but creative directions. He suggested that people's ideas would be richer for the excursion into the impossible. (Most planning projects assume the limitations of practical reality from the start and cannot imagine fresh solutions.)

For example, Anderson said he felt the need for a center to the town, so he drew one in the middle of Main Street, a stone circle with a pool of quiet water in the middle. One woman thought the layout of the

town was too confusing, unclear and multi-leveled, so she drew a tower from which one could see the whole pattern.

Working together, Anderson and Dunlap sent everyone out to explore the town through the lens of metaphor. Seeking to lift vision out of the ordinary, they suggested viewing the town as body, poem, mandala, sculpture: any evocative image.

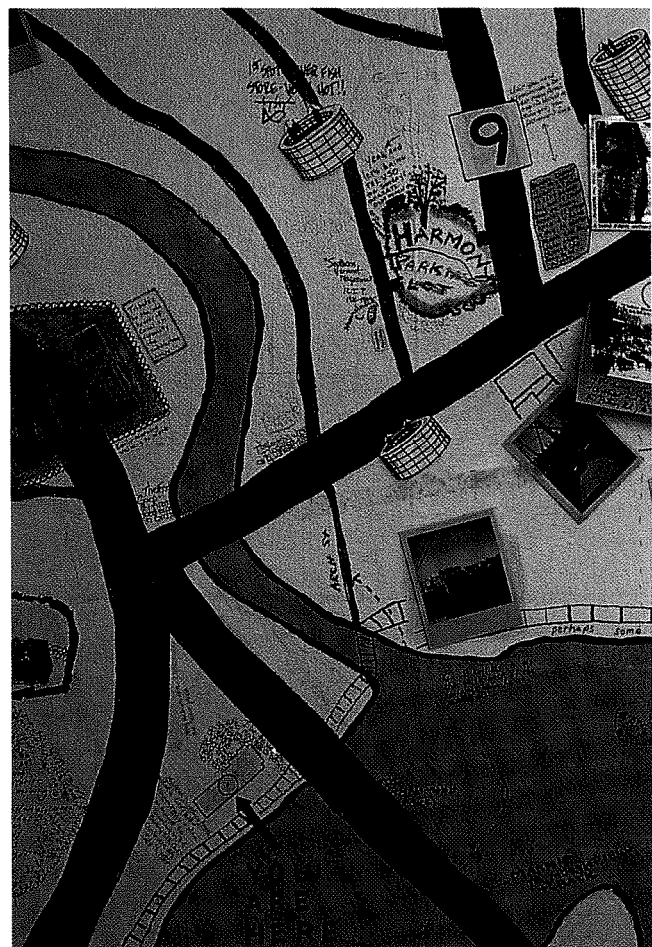
One woman, climbing into the rocky stream along which she walked to work, discovered that it held for her the same

essential qualities as the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon. She was able to translate the vast dimensions of the Canyon into this small, familiar site, thus joining what were for her the experiences of the sacred and the mundane.

**Participants bridged the personal and public realms by making a map that recorded their personal perceptions of Brattleboro.**

**Top: Photo by Clemens Kalischer.**

**Other photos courtesy Brattleboro Museum and Art Center.**

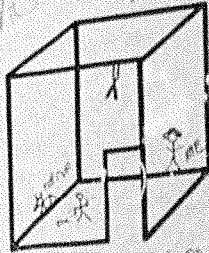




IN THIS WAY WE WEAVE  
OUR STORIES TOGETHER  
(THIS IS ALWAYS FINISHED)

**BREAST**

THIS ROOM YOU (US)



I CHASE YOUR PAID  
GET YOU ON YOUR FEET AGAIN  
TUCKER IS TO CAN YOU SEE

**HIP**

MY MAMME  
is Shane

**THIGH**

My name  
is Emily Peff  
and I go  
GUJHS!  
I play field  
hockey and  
on Monday  
we have  
a game  
against  
HAW

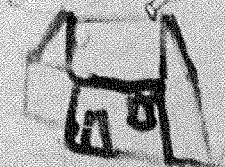
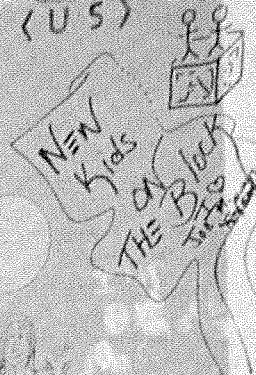
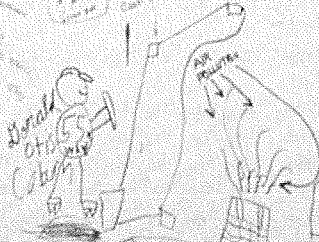
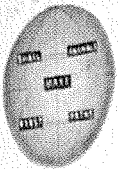
**KNEE**

**GALF**

**ANKLE**

**FOOT**

**TOES**



no one is saying  
in that house  
I'm  
I'm  
I'm

NEW KIDS  
ON BLOCK  
THE BLOCK  
SCHOOL

PEACE LOVE  
SHANE

SHANE

SHANE

One man plumbed his fascination with a nearby cemetery, finding that the tombstones' hints of the lives buried below evoked for him all the mystery of unconscious process.

Another man realized that his affection for an area called Flat Street could be traced back to special moments with his father at his father's workplace in a part of Cleveland called the Flats, thus merging present and past in his experience of this place and in his personal history. This activity gave participants confidence to approach places that are familiar and ordinary from a deeper, more playful and more personally truthful perspective.

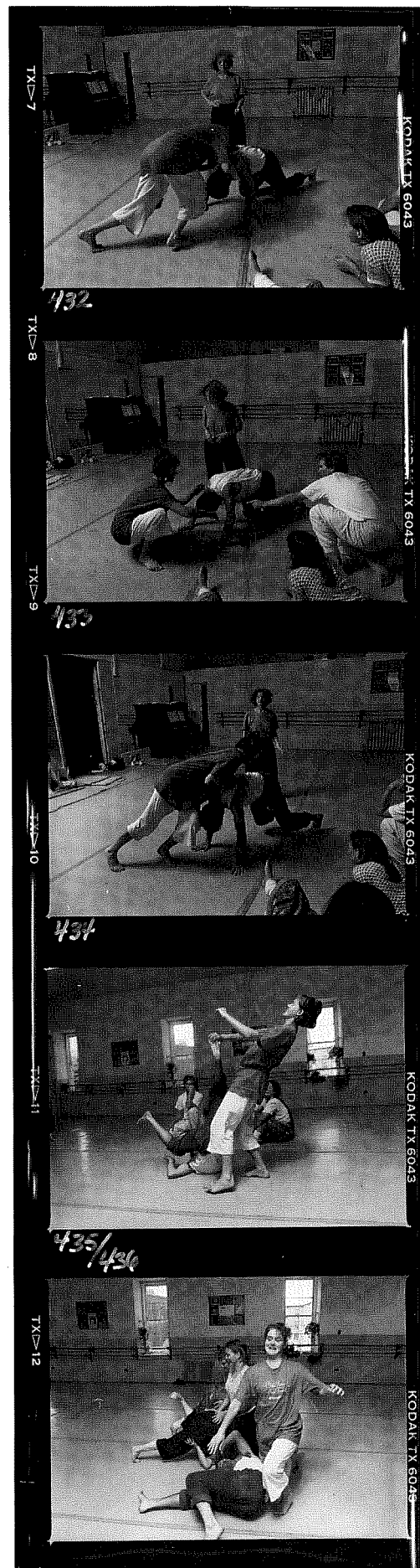
Tom Greeves from the Common Ground Trust in England helped participants further explore the relationship between imagination and place. Common Ground complements efforts to conserve rare, exotic and endangered places by turning people's attention to the places in which they live. It seeks to balance scientific rationales for conservation by honoring the emotional bond people have with their places. It uses the arts as a catalyst in this process.

Greeves asked participants to explore Brattleboro as an emotional landscape, to be responsive to the aspects of it that they liked, disliked, or felt

curious about. People then drew colorful, subjective maps, incorporating bits of found materials, serendipitous discoveries and long-cherished spots.

Alan Weisman, a writer, and Jay Dusard, a photographer, came from Arizona, where they had worked together investigating and documenting life along the Mexican-American border (published as *La Frontera*). Weisman explained the political and social dimensions of the landscape, teaching ways to interpret environments, to interview people with curiosity and without judgment, to divine lines of authority and networks of power, and to see every encounter as a mine of information about the entire community. Dusard offered participants guidelines for becoming aware of their whole field of vision, so that every element in a photograph contributes to the story being told. He encouraged people to treat a photographic encounter with a person or a landscape as an act of intense engagement and exchange.

Participants then went into the community in pairs, each pair with a camera. One pair spoke with and photographed the owner of a gun and archery shop, a place they had never entered but which revealed a culture of greater complexity and subtlety than they had



assumed; they saw the tensions between serious hunters and conservationists in a new light. Another pair talked with a mother and two children about the difficulties of living next to a bar in a rough neighborhood, which explained the broken windows on one side of the house and the tangle of weeds in the yard, which they had let grow wild not out of

neglect but to protect the flowers hidden within. Their story spoke of the indifference of police and town government to their problems. For the participants in this workshop, places were newly understood as subject to many forces, often conflicting.

**One workshop allowed participants to express their thoughts and emotions about the town through dance.**

**Photos by Clemens Kalischer.**

For people who experience the world kinesthetically, *Our Town* offered a movement workshop taught by Simone Forti, a dancer and choreographer from New York and Vermont. Forti is fascinated by the kinesthetic experience of ordinary realities, especially of places, and weaves movement, story, word and image into a sensuous extension of our thoughts and impulses.

Forti sent participants into the town to explore its surfaces, levels, structures







**Some *Our Town* participants surveyed town landscapes and interviewed residents; they learned that places are subject to many forces, often conflicting. Photo by Clemens Kalischer.**

and dynamics through their bodies and all their senses. They then reassembled as a group and developed a performance to share their findings with an appreciative audience. They danced the geological history of the town, rising into mountains and slithering as rivers; they spoke of encounters with reflections in windows; they balanced on docks, rocking with the water's movement; they created for their audience a delicately expanded version of the experiences we all have as we move through our daily lives, thus sensitizing everyone to the rich nuances of the experience of place.

Poet and geographer Denis Wood, from the University of North Carolina, led participants in a remarkable journey of discovery through the town, which was new and unfamiliar to him. He was able to open the eyes of participants who had long lived there to aspects of their town they had never noticed or questioned. One woman, who thought her neighborhood wasn't truly a neighborhood, discovered through investigations and questioning by Wood that it was immensely rich, interesting and complete. He asked provocative questions about every detail; like an archaeologist, he examined litter, monuments, power lines

and manholes to uncover connections and systems, and to reconstruct the whole fabric.

Once a personal connection is made, how does the desire to care for a special place translate into effective political action? Planner and educator Jeff Bishop, from Bristol, England, has developed a set of simple games and tools that enable people to jump right into the planning process. Both children and adults can learn very quickly how to think like a planner, developer, or architect.

Bishop chose an actual site in Brattleboro, a desultory strip of land behind the museum that borders the river, is crossed by railroad tracks and contains coal and oil storage areas. It is a place ripe for fantasy and rife with problems.

The assignment was to develop a plan for the area and to make it financially viable. Working in teams, participants explored the site and then developed rough schemes, making paper and cardboard models to work out the design.

One group created a paradise of fountains, restaurants, docks and storytellers, but couldn't make it pay. Another valiantly attempted to make an appropriate place for a day care center, but recognized the disparities in combining day care with office space. Another team wor-

ried about how to develop this new area without replicating or competing with existing businesses and facilities in the nearby center of town.

By the end of the day, everyone had had a taste of the difficulties and possibilities of working collaboratively and of designing a balanced, workable plan that addressed all their concerns. Everyone had learned to see beyond private interests and had found a global, complex way of thinking about land use problems. By assuming the roles of decision-makers, participants gained more access to the process, more empathy for decision-makers and more skills for engaging in real planning situations.

There were many other aspects to *Our Town*: Clare Cooper-Marcus and Brian Goodey taught skills for grass roots participation in town planning. An oral history project began to assemble stories from people who carry the past forward. A project began to develop footpaths from the center of town into surrounding countryside. A teachers' education program helped teachers develop curricula for their classrooms around issues of town planning. New links were forged between various parts of the community, and the Brattleboro Museum and Art Center created a new role for a

community museum by engaging in town planning and conservation issues.

At the core of the program lay the power of the imagination and its many forms of expression. The imagination is a source of strength, depth and clarity accessible to every individual and community struggling with the complexities and difficulties of change in the environment.

By finding personal and communal connection with the places we inhabit and by sharing those connections with others, we begin to create a larger sense of place and a deeper sense of responsibility to the places we love.

#### Notes

1. Quoted in Tony Hiss, *The Experience of Place* (New York: Knopf, 1990).

2. Alan Gussow, *A Sense of Place, the Artist and the American Land* (New York: Friends of the Earth, 1972).

**Brattleboro residents tackle the design and development problems of an industrial and storage site along the river that passes through town.**  
Photo by Clemens Kalischer.

