

# HELYI IDENTITÁS REGIONÁLIS SZINTEN

Városkörnyéki tájak kezelésének lehetőségei New Jersey példáján

## LOCAL IDENTITY ON A REGIONAL LEVEL

*Approaches and methodology of managing suburban cultural landscapes in New Jersey*

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### ABSZTRAKT

Az ember és a hely kölcsönhatása helyi identitást teremt, amely eligazodást nyújt bonyolult világunkban, és kötődést, valahová való tartozást biztosít a lakosok számára. Idővel, ahogy egy közösség kulturális kölcsönhatásai kapcsolatot teremtenek a narratívák és a helyek között, a helyi identitás alakul, fejlődik. A városi terjeszkedés hatással van a helyi identitásra: a városok terjeszkedése következtében a jelentőséggel, jelentéssel bíró helyek megváltoznak, újak jönnek létre, míg mások teljesen eltűnnek. Emellett a népességen belüli változások is eredményezhetnek elhalványuló narratívát, mivel a narratívát eredetileg létrehozó csoport elköltözik. A helyhez kötődő kulturális történetek változását az USA városkörnyéki, agglomerációs fejlődésének összefüggésében tárgyaljuk, ahol a külvárosi területek növekedését gazdasági célok vezérlik és a területrendezés irányítja. A New Jersey állambeli Middlesex megye a New York-i metropolisz területén helyezkedik el. A mintaterületen arra a kérdésre keressük a választ, hogy a regionális szintű területi tervezés hogyan támogathatja a helyi identitás megőrzését, kialakulását egy változó környezetben. A New Brunswick-i magyar közösség története példaként szolgál, mint egy olyan csoport, amely a huszadik század első felében erős helyi identitással rendelkezett a mintaterületen, ugyanakkor ez napjainkra elhalványult.

*Kulcsszavak: helyi identitás, kultúrtáj, környezettervezés, városkörnyék* ©



**Figure 1:** Middlesex County is located in central New Jersey, New Brunswick is the County Seat and has a Hungarian heritage

### ABSTRACT

The interaction of people and place creates local identity, providing orientation in a complex world and a sense of place for residents. Over time, as the cultural interactions of a group creates links between narratives and places, local identities evolve. These identities are impacted by urban expansion: meaningful places are included, changed or completely built over completely by urban sprawl. Additionally, changes within the population may result in a fading narrative, because the group that originally created the narrative moved away. The flux of place-related cultural stories will be discussed in the context of suburban development in the US, where growth in suburban areas is driven by economic goals and guided by land-use planning. Middlesex County, New Jersey, is situated in the New York metropolitan area and will serve as a case study for the question of how environmental planning on a regional scale can support local identity within a changing environment. This includes the story of the Hungarian community of New Brunswick as an example of a sense of place that was strong in the first half of the twentieth century, but that faded over time.

*Keywords: sense of place, cultural landscape, environmental planning, suburbia*

### INTRODUCTION

Place attachment of individuals and the local identities of communities are closely intertwined. These place bonds help people to navigate their environment and establish a sense of belonging in an ever-changing world. A missing connection between meaning and place is among the numerous criticisms of suburban living in North America. Suburbia and its associated sprawl stand for a condition of “placelessness”, with repetitive, single-family housing and white middle-class families living in neighborhoods of low-density. Airgood-Obrycki, Hanlon & Rieger (2021) make it clear that this “image is, of course, no more than an imaginary” ([1],1263). However, the uniform character of suburbs makes it easier for people to settle into new locations. The psychological science research of Oishi et al. [2] explains that the uniformity of malls and homes provides familiarity in a highly mobile society. This is among the reasons why the highly individualistic US has a highly uniform suburban landscape, in addition to the advent of the car and the post-World War II building boom [3].

On the other hand, a local identity along with a sense of place helps people to navigate a complex environment and fosters social interaction [4]. The question is how can environmental planning support local identity on a regional scale? Our case study will be New Jersey, the most suburbanized state in the United States with a strong home-rule tradition (municipalities have the final say in land-use decisions, regional planning is weak). We will zoom in on Middlesex County in central New Jersey, which has close transportation links to New York City (figure 1). The county includes characteristics that reflect the overall state: the north and center are highly (sub-)urbanized with two primary cities of New Brunswick and Perth Amboy, while the southern section contains rural fragments of forest and farmland. New Brunswick is the county seat, and hosts the main campus of Rutgers University and the international headquarters of the Johnson & Johnson corporation. The county’s economic strength attracted immigrants, including a significant Hungarian community. Our team developed flexible regional planning tools for the county, suitable for home-rule, that acknowledge the link between cultural heritage, green infrastructure and ecosystem services [5].

### SUBURBS AND IDENTITY

The sprawling expansion of metropolitan areas is a global problem. Today, more than one-half the world’s population lives in urban areas; by 2050, this is projected to be more than two-thirds. Most of this population growth will result in further expansion of urban and urbanized areas. Suburban areas will have increased density, and land – currently used for forestry or agriculture at the urban fringe – will become suburbanized [6]. The scientific community of urban scholars, geographers and planners has not yet found consensus on a definition of suburbs. Forsyth [7] sees as a common thread the “outer locations in the metropolis and their relative newness” (ibid, 14). Airgood-Obrycki [1] et al. develop a discussion that explores geographic delineations of suburbs and identifies data that support these boundaries, revealing much about our understanding of both cities and the suburban space. He points out that the US federal Office of Budget and Management (OMB) made the deliberate decision not to develop a definition of suburban zones.

To my knowledge, central European statistics also do not identify suburban zones as a particular census category. In American English, the term suburb identifies



◀◀ **Figure 2:** Neo-colonial townhouse development, Highland Park, NJ

◀◀ **Figure 3:** Magyar Reformed Church, New Brunswick, NJ

**Figure 4:** Monument for the Victims of 1956

**Figure 5:** 2023 Hungarian Festival in New Brunswick

one area while suburbia describes the overall cultural phenomenon, however, both terms are commonly used in planning and design discussions, along with the original German terms *Vorstadt* (before-city) and *Zwischenstadt* (in-between city). Recently the term peri-urban areas gained relevance in the context of the integrated European Union research project PLUREL. [8] A significant difference between these terms and the term suburbia is that they have almost exclusively remained within the field of professional and scholarly discussions while suburbia made it into the realm of US popular culture [9]. The geographer Donald W. Meinig [10] even includes the suburbs in his description of three American Symbolic Landscapes: New England, Main Street America and the California Suburb. I put forward the hypothesis that America's prosperity and success in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is closely linked to the growing cultural importance of its suburbs.

In the American boom years after WW II, suburbs became the place to fulfil the American Dream. At a time when inner cities were burdened by conflict and decline, the single family home with eye-level oven and white picket fence was the desirable place to bring up a baby boom-era family; all made possible by the automobile and the expanding highway system [3]. Emerging post-modernist discussions criticized the resulting expanse of uniform residential areas of cul-de-sac and strip malls as assemblages of cookie-cutter homes without any local character [11]. New Urbanist architects made numerous

field trips to Europe, admiring the walkable towns and the smaller role of the automobile. The outcomes of these trips produced historic looking homes, malls, and town centers intended to replicate the feel of Main Street America. These residential developments are still commercially very successful. The curb-side appeal of most new residential developments in New Jersey follows a neo-colonial design language, decorated with ornamental, low-maintenance landscaping, with little distinctive character (figure 2). Charles Waldheim criticized this development as “reactionary cultural politics” and “nostalgic sentiments” of New Urbanism, and suggested a more process-oriented landscape thinking [12].

To explore the question of how suburbia can gain a sense of place without the repetition of historic replicas, a brief consideration of the genesis of sense of place is helpful – and how it relates to the term “cultural landscape”.

#### CULTURAL LANDSCAPES AND SENSE OF PLACE

The distinction of a cultural landscape has become an object of administrative preservation procedures – sense of place has not, although both terms are intrinsically linked. Raymond et al.[4] describes two possible approaches to sense of place. The first is a relatively new, relational perspective, that puts a focus on how a sense of place is forged nowadays, “how we can conceptually or empirically understand how people go about fashioning their world into meaningful places” (ibid, 3). This provides

the tools to explore a shifting sense of place when long-time residents move out and newcomers take their place.

The second, humanistic-phenomenological approach asserts a stable essence of a place, a clear meaning that has evolved over centuries, and that should be protected against changes; these places can also be identified as cultural landscapes. In a rapidly changing world, meaningful places need the support of government intervention through planning and investment. The US National Park Service (NPS) has an important role in protecting cultural landscapes. Originally an outcome of the National Park Movement, geared towards the preservation of the natural beauty of the American West, the NPS owns and manages 941 cultural landscapes. [13] The NPS is doing important work that preserves and provides access to historic cultural sites. The New Jersey State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) oversees more than 1,700 historic sites, all of them considered relevant to the narrative of the state. Many of these places are further supported by friends' groups or other non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

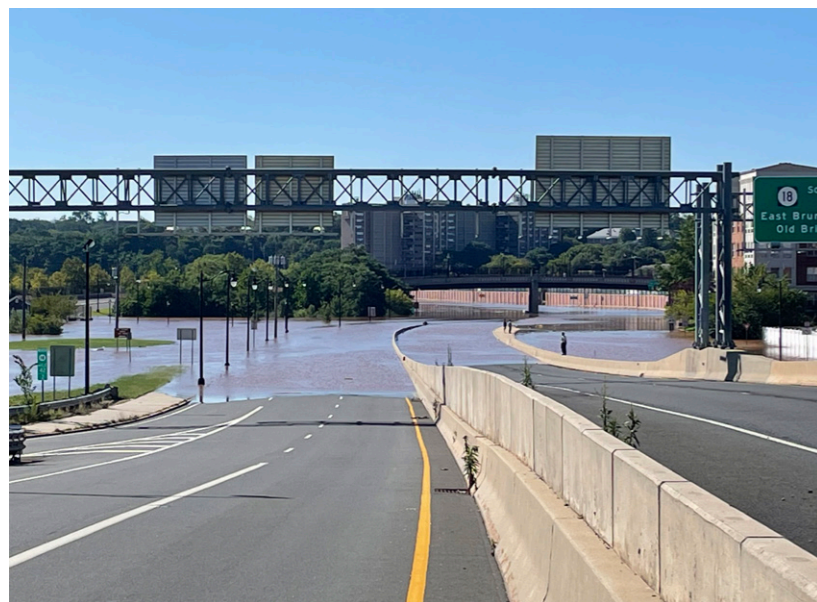
Traditional cultural landscapes are important components that can enhance the local identity of suburban neighborhoods. At the same time, everyday spaces, which do not “deserve” a dedication as a cultural landscape, can provide valuable contributions to local identity.

Landscape scholars, such as J.B. Jackson [14], [15], [16], place a focus on exploring ordinary spaces, as do Jon Stilgoe [17], [18], Chris Wilson, and Paul Growth [19], just to name a few. These authors claim that ordinary spaces

have value for social interactions within a community and that they create a sense of place that can be experienced every day. This ties back to the above-mentioned relational perspective on sense of place.

The Hungarian community in New Brunswick may serve as an example for developing a sense of place under a relational perspective, which became known to subsequent immigrant waves, by creating institutions and landmarks which were later transformed into objects of historic preservation. In the late 19th century, recruiters from Johnson & Johnson were touring central Europe to attract workers for the booming company. Tamas [20] describes job advertisements that were placed in Hungarian newspapers and recruiters who went from door to door in Hungarian villages. In addition, new arrivals from Hungary were recruited when they arrived in New York Harbor. So it happened that by 1915, 20% of New Brunswick's population was Hungarian. During its peak in the interwar period, the Hungarian population reached 6,500 members. These immigrants were here to stay, establishing a community with churches and other institutions, and at the same time living the American Dream of slowly assimilating within American society and participating in urban “white flight” after WWII.

The second wave of Hungarian immigrants came around the end of WWII, as displaced persons fleeing Soviet occupation. The already existing Hungarian community was an attractive anchor point. Although well educated, these new immigrants experienced difficulties



settling in because Hungarian degrees were not accepted. Many considered themselves temporary political exiles, hoping to return to their homeland when the iron curtain was pushed back.

The third immigrant wave followed the 1956 revolution, when more than a thousand refugees, called the 56-ers, came to New Brunswick. Because of cold-war US sympathy for victims of Soviet oppression, numerous immigrant students received scholarships. Among them was Julius Fábos, who received a bachelor's degree in plant sciences from Rutgers University in 1961. Fábos went on to teach landscape architecture at the University of Massachusetts and established the *Hungarian American Fábos Conference on Greenway Planning*.

Today, most Hungarians have moved from the City of New Brunswick to the suburbs, blending into the growing white middle class [20], but still patronizing local Hungarian institutions that include the American Hungarian Foundation, Hungarian American Athletic Club, the Hungarian Scout Home, the St. Ladislaus Catholic Church and the Magyar Reformed Church (figure 3). The Monument for the Victims of 1956 adds to the historic narrative (figure 4), while an annual Hungarian festival brings the dispersed community together (figure 5). However, Tamas [20] sees a bleak future: "It is unlikely that cultural heritage, personal friendship, the ideologies of sacrifice and mutual responsibility, and even the high status of "old values" will be able to maintain a cohesive force strong enough to hold the community together" (ibid., 632 pp.).

Today, New Brunswick has a majority of Hispanic and Latinx population with 46%, the Caucasian population is the second largest group (27%), followed by the African American or Black population (15%), while the smallest significant group is Asian alone population (10%). [21]

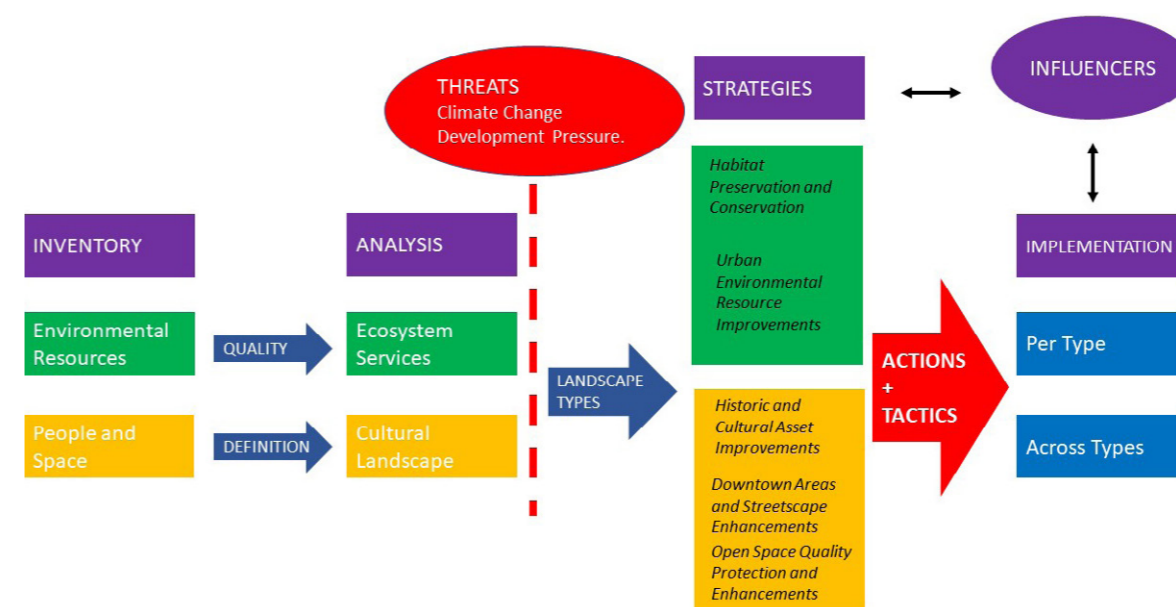
The Hungarian community in New Brunswick is one of many examples of shifting local identities within Middlesex County. Therefore, regional scale planning tools that support local identity must be flexible and considerate of the two approaches to sense of place outlined above. The humanistic-phenomenological approach is reflected through addressing established historic and cultural assets. The relational approach places an emphasis on the newly emerging sense of place.

The flux of place-related cultural stories will be discussed in the context of suburban development in the US, where growth in suburban areas is driven by economic goals and guided by land use planning.

#### NEW JERSEY PLANNING EXPERIMENT ON SUBURBAN CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

Middlesex County is currently undergoing a mandatory update of the Masterplan, led by the Rutgers Voorhees Transportation Center (VTC). This project "Destination 2040" will provide local governments with a decision-making framework developed through various functional plans focused on smart development, environmental planning, pedestrian and bicyclist safety, housing, transportation,

◀◀ **Figure 6:** Flooding on Route 18 in New Brunswick  
**Figure 7:** Process Diagram



etc. The collaborative contribution of our CUES team is a planning experiment because there is no precedent of a Cultural Landscape and Ecosystem Services Plan within the US, where growth in suburban areas is driven by economic goals and guided by land-use planning.

In line with the relational approach to *sense of place*, we conducted a survey and found that the relationship of residents with their environment is formed by stories and experiences of individuals or groups that add to the meaning of place. The interaction between people and place forms a cultural landscape that is not limited to critical historic sites or spectacular natural scenes. This landscape approach may also include the strip mall and the parking lot, the retention basin of the warehouse, the industrial waterfront, the charming main street and the picturesque park. People can expect these diverse locations to become a sequence of places, a suburban story worth telling. Because these narratives very often include cultural landscape features and assets, the relational approaches must be accompanied by the humanistic-phenomenological approach. That approach places an emphasis on the sense of place of established meaningful places, including downtown character, viewsheds and historic areas.

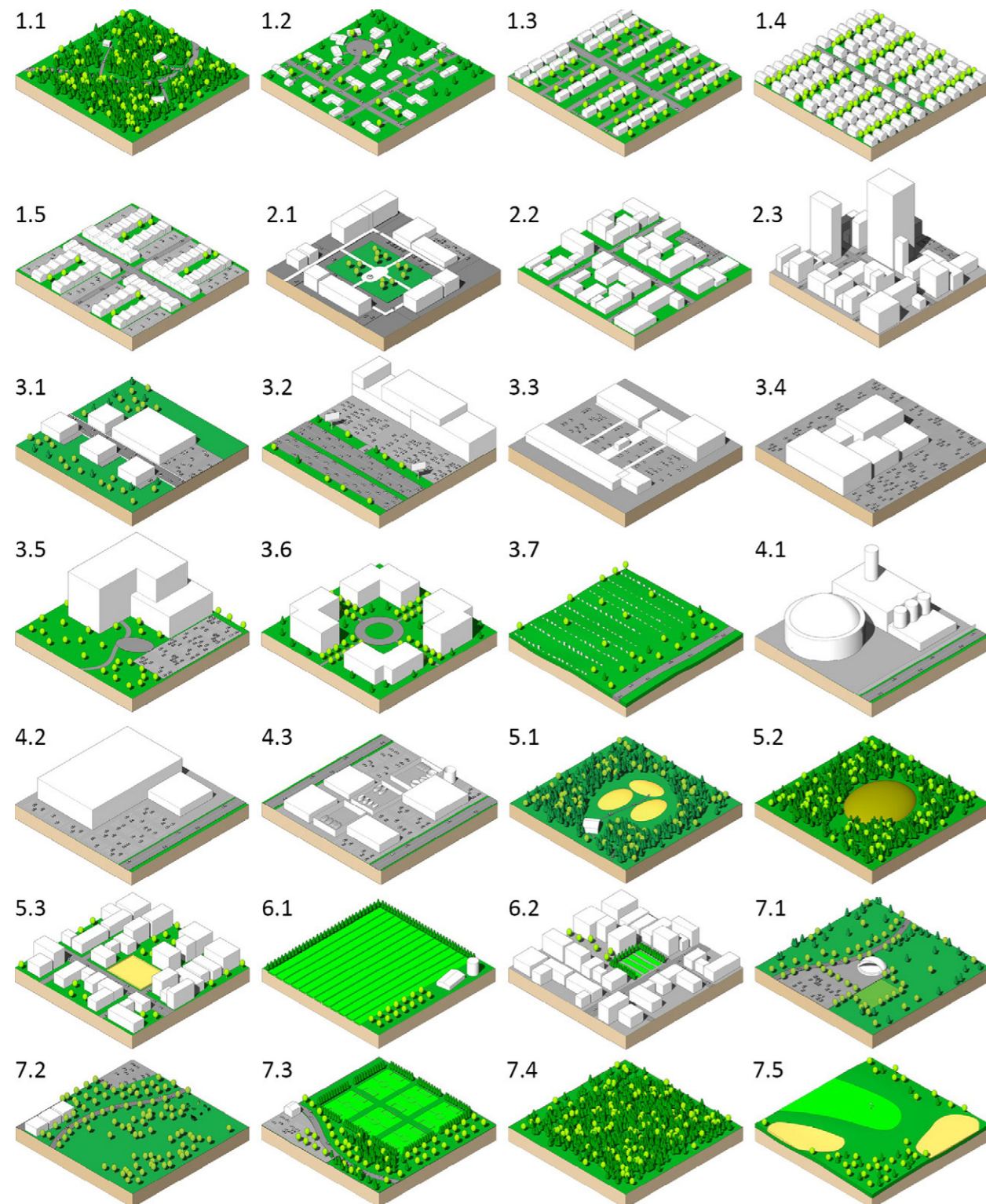
The overall cultural landscape findings were combined with a demographic and land-use analysis, a GIS-based inventory of environmental resources and an analysis of habitat quality and ecosystem services. For a more in-depth discussion of the project, see [22]. We found that the current main threats are the ongoing development

pressure and climate change. The negative impacts of rapid suburban expansion (habitat loss, shrinking cultural landscapes, increasing impervious surface, etc.) are making the already negative impacts of climate change (heat island effect, increased torrential rain and coastal flooding, etc.) even more severe (figure 6). These inventory findings of environmental resources informed the process of developing the flexible planning tool (figure 7).

In addition, understanding the relationship between people and space helped us to develop a working definition of the suburban cultural landscape and guided the definition of landscape types. These types were developed as a refinement of land-use categories used by New Jersey planners (New Jersey Tax Assessors' tax-parcel classifications and NJDEP's land-use zoning), while adding a spatial, cultural and environmental component (figure 8). 3-dimensional axonometric drawings were an important tool to capture the spatial characteristics that are comparable with the current planning system. The iterative process of drawing, developing numerous versions, was an integral part of the analysis.

Our study developed detailed suggestions for action and tactics (tree plantings, reduce impervious surfaces, green infrastructure, solar roofs, etc.) and how each could be applied to all land-use types. Because of the home-rule situation, we described the significant role that the municipalities, the County, State and Federal agencies, property owners and NGOs would have in implementation. Proposed actions for each type are coordinated, and

**Figure 8:** Landscape Types. Single, Low-Density Rural 1.1, Single, Lower-Density Suburban 1.2, Single, Medium-Density Suburban 1.3, Single, High-Density Suburban 1.4, Multi-Dwelling, High-Density Suburban 1.5, Rural Village Center 2.1, Suburban Town Center 2.2, Urban City Center 2.3, Single Neighborhood Building 3.1, Strip Mall 3.2, Plaza Shopping Center 3.3, Indoor Mall 3.4, Office Park 3.5, Campus 3.6, Burial Ground 3.7, Heavy Industry 4.1, Warehouse 4.2, Small Yard Or Other Light Industry 4.3, Active Landfill 5.1, Closed Landfill 5.2, Vacant 5.3, Rural Farmland 6.1, Urban Agriculture 6.2, Social Parks 7.1, Neighborhood Parks 7.2, Sports Parks 7.3, Nature Parks 7.4, Golf Courses 7.5

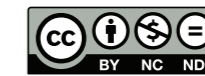


create built corridors and natural connections that support both people through ecosystem services and wildlife with uninterrupted quality habitats. These actions form a contiguous cultural landscape, fostering emotional responses that evoke a place's memory, identity or spiritual connection.

One example for an action to be implemented across multiple land use types is the proposed County-wide greenway network that follows the spirit of Julius Fábos's legacy. The greenway consists of linear natural or human-made corridors that provide ecological habitat and/or recreational qualities linked by a continuous path system. 41 greenway opportunity segments guide the implementation process encompassing over 300 miles of potential trails.

Overall, "Integrated Ecosystem Services and Cultural Landscape Plan for Middlesex County" provides flexible

and dynamic decision-making tools to strengthen existing efforts and enable municipalities to make environmentally and culturally conscious additions to their planning regimes that allow, support and may even create local identity on a regional scale. Because the implementation of the tool is happening while this article is written, the success of the planning experiment cannot yet be determined. However, it is already a contribution to the discussion of addressing the placelessness of the American suburbs through a flexible planning tool. The link to the European planning context is the topic of future research. ©



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