Tracking the Social and Economic Transformation Process in Kitimat, BC
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Background

When industrial investments come to small communities, the local social impacts can be significant and transformative. The town of Kitimat has been an industrial centre in northwestern British Columbia since the early 1950s. The town is now experiencing a large number of industrial construction projects that will change and renew the local economy. These construction projects will also impact and change the community. This project involves a long-term tracking study of the economic and social transformation processes now getting underway in Kitimat, BC.

Context

The town of Kitimat is an ideal location in which to study social and economic transformation associated with large industrial construction and renewal projects. This is because Kitimat was created as the prototype of new industrial towns in Canada's resource hinterlands. It was constructed in the early 1950s in support of the Aluminum Company of Canada's (Alcan) new smelter facility. The town site was designed by eminent United States planner Clarence Stein. Stein drew upon British "new town" models which included ample green space and he drew inspiration from the "garden city" movement. Stein's vision for Kitimat blended the economic needs of industry to have a stable labour force with the social needs of families and workers to feel part of a stable, permanent, and welcoming community. As noted in the opening to his Kitimat master plan, Stein argued:

> The purpose of Kitimat is the industrial success of the plant. That success will depend on the degree that workers are content, that they feel like living in Kitimat. Unless the town can attract and hold industrial workers, there will be continuous turnover and difficulty…. The workers must find Kitimat more than temporarily acceptable. They must be enthusiastic about it as a particularly fine place in which to live and bring up their families. It must become the place they want as home land, the town they are going to make their own.

In order to integrate the needs of the company with the needs of residents, Stein designed Kitimat with three elements:

- Site planning techniques to separate land uses (especially residential and commercial from industrial).
- Neighbourhood design principles to create functional housing areas (especially for the target population of young families with small children).
- Economic principles to ensure built in diversity (adding new industries and new economic sectors to avoid the pitfall of single industry dependence).

While Stein designed Kitimat to accommodate a population of over 50,000, the town never achieved a population of more than 14,000. While it historically had a methane / ammonia plant

as well as a pulp and paper mill, in addition to Alcan's expanded facilities, today the town is in a much different circumstance. The methane / ammonia plant has been closed, as has the pulp and paper mill. The Rio-Tinto Alcan facility is just beginning a complete replacement of all buildings to bring the nearly 60 year old technology up to modern standards. In addition, there are construction projects about to get underway for various proposals including liquefied natural gas and others.

Methodology

The research will involve two aspects. The first is the tracking of available and emerging data on industrial projects, temporary and permanent workforces, and various other community economic and social development topics identified in the literature as important during these sorts of renewals. The second is the use of longitudinal, qualitative interviews with people involved in a range of community sectors. The interviewees will meet with the research team one time each year to review how economic and industrial activity is reshaping and changing the community. In 2012, the interviews will focus upon characterizing Kitimat in the years immediately prior to the current start-up of industrial construction projects.

Literature

A wide range of literatures have examined this process of large industrial construction projects and the implications of industrial restructuring or renewal. The opportunity in this project is to track a significant moment in the industrial history of British Columbia, test ideas and theories from a range of literatures in a specific place, and to communicate back to those literatures findings based on field work.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a number of studies (often within the discipline of sociology) explored the phenomena of "big companies and small towns". This was linked to the rapid expansion of large industrial investments across Canada's resource hinterland during that period (Bowles 1982, 1992).

In the 1970s and 1980s, another literature examined the creation of resource-based "instant towns" across Canada's provincial norths. These instant town developments were a more concerted effort to organize the earlier ad-hoc approaches to significant resource developments. This was driven in part by the need to manage both provincial government, as well as local government, expenses. Attention in this literature was to the creation of new social institutions within these towns (Bradbury 1978, Gill 1984, Halseth and Sullivan 2002).

In that same period and since, much attention has been directed to energy boomtowns. The focus in this case is on processes of disruption and accommodation as large numbers of newcomers moved into established small towns. This is an extensive literature that looked at both short and long-term transformation processes and will be an important part of the literature to be tested in Kitimat (McLeod and Hovorka 2008, Storey and Jones 2003, Tolbert 2006).

Since that time, literatures have looked at the impact of social and economic restructuring in established resource / boom / instant towns. This focus derives first from the ongoing processes

of job losses and economic stagnation that marked many such places after the global economic recession of the early 1980s, and second on those select places that experienced significant growth pressures (Emery and Flora 2006, Halseth Markey and Bruce 2010).

Closing

The opportunity of this research is to look at a place that has been a successful social and economic community for over 50 years, which has also struggled with economic stagnation and population losses since the early 1980s, and where now significant economic investments will bring new people and new economic facilities and conditions.

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