

FROM CREATIVE DESTRUCTION TO PLACE MAKING IN THE VILLAGE OF ST. JACOBS

Case Study

St. Jacobs, Ontario

June 2024

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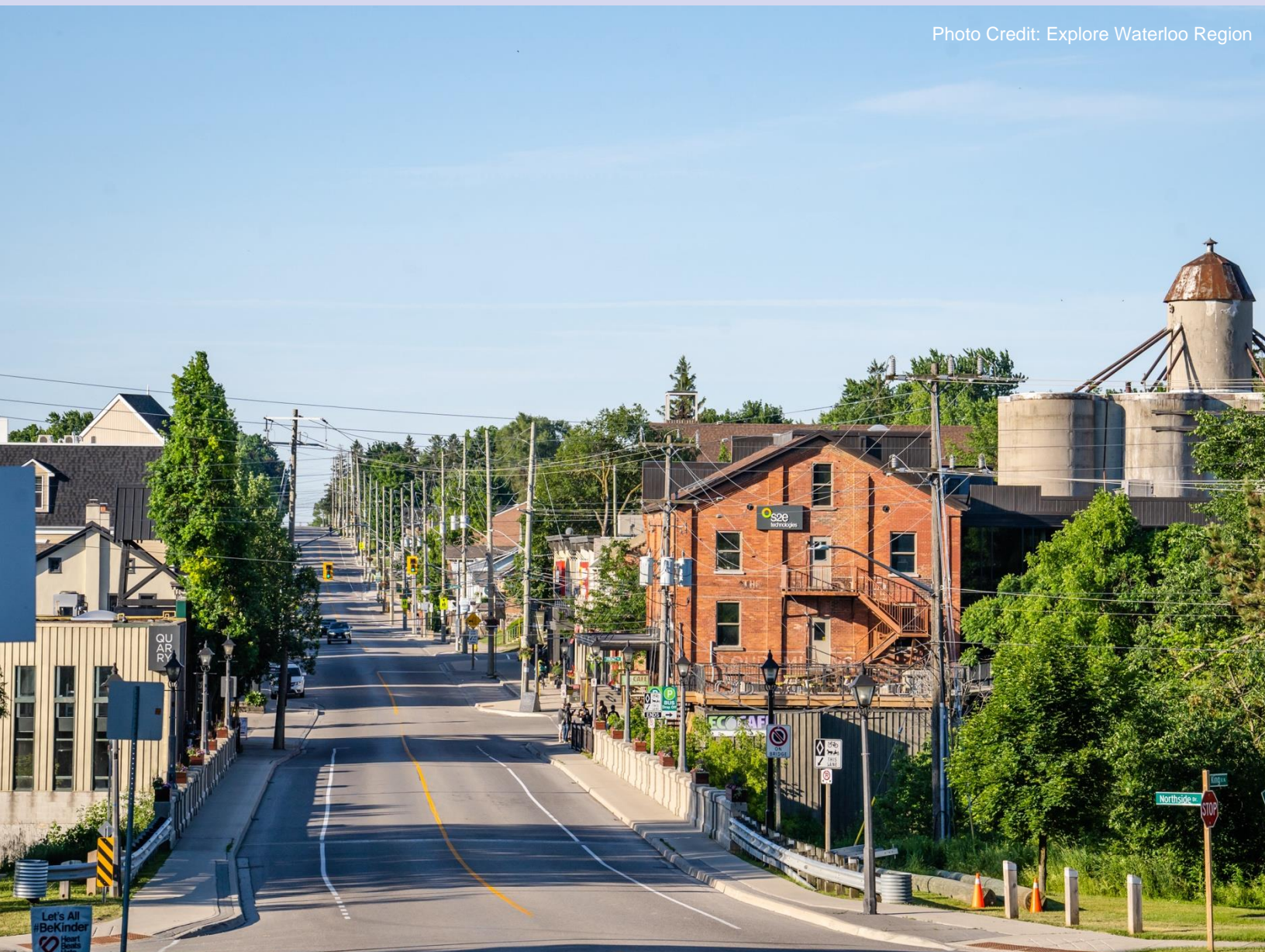




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St. Jacobs is a village in southwestern Ontario within the historic township of Woolwich, near the City of Waterloo. In the 1850s, St. Jacobs was settled by a group of Pennsylvania Dutch who became known as “Old Order” Mennonites, due to their conservative lifestyle. Now, this village of fewer than 2,000 residents attracts more than one million visitors annually. While the village originally drew visitors keen to experience its traditions and heritage, today its biggest draw and internationally recognized asset is the St. Jacobs Farmers’ Market. Over the years, the growth of tourism, arrival of new residents from nearby cities and increased adoption of modernity have led to a decline in traditional rural culture and sense of community within the village, causing discontent among the long-term residents of St. Jacobs and the departure of “**Old-Order Mennonites**.” Such inadvertent transformation is unsurprising, considering tourist destinations can often fall victim to their own success, and rural communities with limited capacity are particularly vulnerable to the unsustainable growth of tourism.

A CALL FOR CHANGE



The Village of St. Jacobs has reached a critical crossroads, where the case for change is clear— while there is a desire to sustain tourism, the village also wants to reclaim its communal values and rural traditions. Recently, the business and resident communities of St. Jacobs converged around one need: the village must prosper as a living, breathing, thriving community without banishing tourism. Emerging from this need for change, a multi-year, multi-phase Place Making Project was undertaken by the St. Jacobs Business Improvement Area (BIA), Regional Tourism Organization 4 (RTO4) and researchers from the University of Waterloo. Over the course of this project, the team has found that tourism needs to be woven into the community fabric, with a creative regenerative approach that requires care, intentionality, engagement and authentic dialogue between partners. Such dialogues are currently in motion and form the basis of the Place Making Project.

ADVANCEMENT OF TOURISM IN ST. JACOBS

Photo Credit: Explore Waterloo Region



Since its founding in the 19th century, the Village of St. Jacobs prospered primarily as a service centre supporting the local Mennonite population. By the early 1970s, its function as a rural producer (providing feed, fabric and flour) had stalled. Meanwhile, visitors started to arrive in St. Jacobs to glimpse the cultural landscapes of a bygone era and the old-fashioned lifestyles of the “Old-Order” Mennonites, such as travel by horse and buggy. Anticipating tourism would revitalize the economy, Milo Shantz, a local entrepreneur and developer, began commodifying the village to host tourists (Dahms, 1991; Mitchell, 1998). Though most people saw no risks in this approach, there was concern among longstanding residents about transforming this idyllic rural space into a commodified (and contested) heritage-scape, rife with consumption and hedonism (Zukin, 1992).

In the 1990s, Claire Mitchell and her colleagues investigated this type of transformation using a six-stage model of *creative destruction*, the cyclic pattern of growth and decline under capitalism¹. [Mitchell's model](#) indicates that the initial success of tourism during the early commodification stage results in rampant private sector investment, including the development of vaguely symbolic experiences and faux products attracting *post-tourists*, content with inauthentic historical attractions². Since then, the Village of St. Jacobs had rapidly moved from advanced commodification to advanced destruction (Mitchell & de Waal, 2009), prompting further commodification, the decline of rural kinship, the departure of the Mennonite community and inevitable frustration and concern over the loss of authenticity. The settlement of affluent new residents on the outskirts of the village exacerbated this advanced destruction and accelerated *creative enhancement*, attracting new forms of economic activity, such as boutique stores and leisure facilities³ (Mitchell, 2013; Mitchell & Randle, 2014).

¹ **Creative destruction** is a concept introduced by economist Joseph Schumpeter (1943) that refers to the cyclic patterns of growth and decline under a capitalist regime, which begins with the quest for profit or surplus values, eventual investment in newer technologies and the destruction of the old ones.

² **Post-tourists**, as referred to by Maxine Feifer (1985) and John Urry (1990), are the tourists who, instead of a mirror-image of history at tourist attractions, feel content by its inauthentic imitation.

³ **Creative enhancement** is a term coined by Claire Mitchell (2013) in describing the transition of a task- and heritage-scape to a 'multi-functional' economic state through the advent of boutique- and leisure-scape.

PLACE MAKING PROJECT

Photo Credit: Explore Waterloo Region



Until recently, tourism and community development were dictated by a growth and profit-centric agenda. Historically, the business communities with the most influential voices and government ties (i.e., the BIA) dominated conversations, sidelining residents. However, the responsive mindset of the network of people involved in the Place Making Project in St. Jacobs has shifted this status quo. For example, the current BIA leadership recognizes new residents, mainly new entrepreneurs and young families, and sees the need for ongoing dialogue within the community. Initially, the BIA leadership team contacted the University of Waterloo to facilitate this dialogue process, which led to re-envisioning the project. The project draws on diverse voices to formulate a collective vision for the Village of St. Jacobs.

Phase One: Interviews (Spring/Fall 2020)



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The project began by speaking with 16 members of the community representing local businesses (not limited to tourism) and residents who agreed that St. Jacobs must stand the test of time. In fact, most favoured tourism for economic sustainability and socio-cultural vitality. A prominent member of the longstanding community expressed that *“if tourists don’t come, there’s no theatre for the residents [...] there will be no year-round income to keep the restaurants open.”* She added that *“if they [tourists] come, they learn, feel included and feel part of the village.”* But there are tensions and confusion. Most longstanding residents are weary of seeing their traditional way of life disregarded yet commodified by tourism developers with an unyielding appetite for growing profits. Two self-identified “invisible Mennonites” maintained that some investors *“view the village as a business opportunity and should have addressed”* the local community’s concerns. Numerous participants, representing both businesses and residents, including a government official, echoed that *“it can’t just be about tourism; St. Jacobs must [...] diversify the economy”*, while a company executive argued *“St. Jacobs finds itself amid the confusion of what they are all about?”* Easing tensions and fears called for engaging in dialogue, marking the starting point for subsequent project phases.

Phase Two: Survey (Winter/Spring 2021)



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In this phase, we surveyed 124 business owners and residents, to strengthen collective understanding of the participants' sense of interconnection and willingness to engage in dialogue to co-create a shared vision. The survey analysis reveals that despite solid camaraderie within the business and residential communities, the feelings of connection between these communities are mostly 'moderate' among the female participants and disparate among their male counterparts. Secondly, we found incompatible interests relating to (re)development schemes in the village. Residents, especially newcomers, lean heavily toward a more community *leisure-scape* free from tourists. While sharing similar interests, the business community suggested developing multifunctional spaces capable of generating revenue. Finally, our survey findings reaffirm the desire for a dialogue involving all parties, particularly with those voices typically least heard.

Phase Three: Community Workshops (Fall 2022)



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The key objective of our four community workshops was to map a community-centric strategy for co-creating a vision that addressed the tensions, confusion and intentions revealed in previous phases. These workshops established a strong desire for local influence on tourism (re)development. Participants made specific recommendations such as paved bike lanes, provision of electric scooters and e-bikes, more public transportation and shuttle services, fewer cars, more way finding and historical displays, to name just a few examples. Building on previous findings was an increasing interest in a shared *experience-scape* for locals and tourists alike. Through the workshops, the three pillars of St. Jacobs that emerged are the residents, businesses and environment. Any (re)development must be planned and managed in consultation with the residents, and in dialogue with partners, including special interest groups.

During the third phase of our research project, we also partnered with Regional Tourism Organization 4 (RTO4)⁷. Bringing in the expertise of *Clarity of Place*, an internationally recognized consultancy, we carried out two additional workshops and created a digital workbook. Throughout these extra workshops, residents continued to express their concerns about business interests, given that traditionally, growth has led to congestion and commodification rather than safeguarding the village's unique character. With such tension in the air, the people of St. Jacobs are calling out for *creative enhancement*. What makes this emerging age of creative enhancement more forward-thinking than Clare Mitchell recognized a decade earlier, is the forethought for nature-based experiences and rural offerings, i.e., fresh food produced by local farmers. When these ideas are combined, the message of phase three is that multifunctionality is critical to gaining and retaining renewed cultural authenticity and social vitality, while reinvigorating the economy.

⁷ More on this collaboration in [RTO4 Tourism Innovation](#)

Phase Four: Postcard Project (Summer 2023)

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Our latest phase was a Postcard Pilot Project to invite insights from children and seniors in the village. Phase four ran between July and August 2023, with the aim of gathering an intergenerational perspective, hearing from children and seniors about their shared experiences in the village. We engaged young participants (and their caregivers) during the Christmas-in-July event hosted by the BIA and asked them to draw what they love about the Village of St. Jacobs on a postcard. We shared then these postcards with seniors from a retirement home in the village and asked them to share their memories of the village and respond to the children's drawings on the postcards. Among others, two seniors who moved to the village from overseas—Brazil and the Netherlands, respectively—both expressed how they always enjoyed the village's diversity. We displayed the postcards and messages in an intergenerational dialogue exhibit at the TriSisters Art House in St. Jacobs for two weeks in August 2023, attracting more than 2,500 visitors.

EMERGING TOURISM AGENDA



Through this research, we learned that neither creative destruction nor enhancement can be attributed to tourism alone, as evidenced by the residents of St. Jacobs who both preceded and followed the village's move towards multifunctionality, as a place to live and thrive socio-economically. While creative enhancement seems more desirable than creative destruction, it must be independent of self-interest and a profiteering mindset. We anticipate (and advocate) that a regenerative approach would foster a mindset shift, pushing the community beyond linear thinking to instead adopt whole systems thinking to consider how all the elements of St. Jacobs are related and create a strategy that brings value to the entire village and all members of the community (Hutchins & Storm, 2019). We, as the project team, believe there is a need for a creative-regenerative tourism agenda to move St. Jacobs forward.

Tapping into the communal efforts in co-creating a vision for tourism, the regenerative tourism initiative we envision would foster "new ideas and avenues of activity and contribute to cultural vitality and potential regeneration dynamics" (Duxbury et al. 2021, p. 1). Given the unfavourable impacts tourism has generated (Dowla & Boluk, 2023), "creative tourism may serve as a tool to co-imagine with local stakeholders how to plan authentic experiences for visitors" (p. 239). Consistent with regenerative principles, throughout the project, we have intentionally tried to build connections with communities in places where tourism happens (Designing Tourism, 2022). Soliciting diverse views and experiences is essential to community engagement. As such, centring marginal voices draws attention to the importance of living in relationship with others, reciprocity and the intricate web of caring (Giddens, 1982; Noddings, 1992).

MOVING FORWARD

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It is not a cure-all, but creative-regenerative tourism is a timely intervention for tourism-reliant, smaller communities in the peripheral regions who want to be known, be heard and thrive, but at their own pace. Any such tourism agenda must be relevant to the local community. As we continue to learn, it is important to recognize that the local community is not uniform and debates will arise from their conflicting intentions. Yet their involvement is paramount to the efficient and effective management of local tourism. Though our work is far from over, the iterative dialogues with the St. Jacobs community have been instrumental in co-creating a collective picture of a better tomorrow. For creative-regenerative tourism to be realistic, it needs to be tailored to socio-cultural amenities, natural resources and expectations of communities.

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