



THE 29TH IN A SERIES OF ARTICLES DEVELOPED FROM REGULAR PUBLIC FORUMS SPONSORED BY THE LESLIE HARRIS CENTRE OF REGIONAL POLICY AND DEVELOPMENT. MEMORIAL PRESENTS FEATURES SPEAKERS FROM MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY WHO ADDRESS ISSUES OF PUBLIC CONCERN IN THE PROVINCE.

MAKING ISLANDS MATTER

BY BOJAN FURST

And there it is, right between Article 51, promising a fair and equitable taxation policy, and Article 53, establishing an independent National Bank of Croatia. Tucked right in, somewhat out of place in Section 3 of the Croatian constitution dealing with economic, social, and cultural rights, is Article 52. It declares that sea, seashore, islands, and other natural resources are of special cultural, historical, economic, and ecological significance to the Croatian state and people.

“Croatia without islands would not be Croatia,” a resident on the island of Vis, anchored in the middle of the Adriatic Sea, has told me. That sense of being valued and, maybe just as importantly, of having it written down in the country’s most important legal document, matters. It matters in how islanders see themselves and it matters how those not of the islands see them. It matters because, once in the constitution, it becomes binding and it requires an action by the state, whose interests and rights clearly come with a set of obligations, too. That’s how Croatian islands, all 1,300 or so of them, but especially the 50 permanently inhabited ones, ended up with a state-level administrative body of their own called Islands Administration, a detailed development framework called National Island Development Programme, and the Islands Act, a comprehensive law providing a legal framework for island development and island life.

Maybe I am reading too much into it, but as a photographer who moonlights as a graduate student (or a graduate student who moonlights as a photographer, I am not quite sure which), I can see the physical expression of that self-confidence, the certainty that one matters, embodied in the built landscapes of Croatian islands. The solid stone steps generations of islanders have been ascending on their ways to christenings, weddings, and funerals for the past 800 years; thousand-year-old olive trees; and town streets made to last for eternity all speak to me of the confidence among the islanders that they are here to stay.

So it is a stark contrast to walk around the equally visually stunning landscapes of Newfoundland’s

smaller islands. The lightness of wood structures on Fogo Island; the way stages and stores precariously lean into the sea on Change Islands; the houses that huddle along the shores, seemingly helpless against the ice, wind and ocean make me wonder if the islanders’ understated presence on these small northern isles has to do just as much with the harsh political and historical circumstances of their existence as it does with the unforgiving climate. The original settlers were first discouraged by the commercial interests of English fish merchants. Resettlement policies later all but forced entire communities to relocate, houses and all, often under acrimonious conditions. Neglected by policy makers (somebody on Fogo Island quipped



This stage on Change Islands is as much about what is in the photograph as what is missing. At the height of the cod fishery, stages such as this one would be surrounded by flakes for the drying of fish and a hub of activity. All photos by Bojan Furst.

that that is the best case scenario), residents of smaller Newfoundland islands were never offered any assurance that they would be there tomorrow. Under those circumstances, why would one build a stone structure to last a millennium? How foolish would you need to be to try to float all that stone across the sea, if you had to?

Aside from their radically different climates and policy environments, the isles surrounding the main island of Newfoundland and those of the Croatian Adriatic are not that different. Once-large inshore fishing fleets are reduced to a fraction of their former glory. Komiža, a fishing town on Vis Island, not unlike Joe Batt's Arm, once had seven fish plants and hundreds of fishermen. Today, there are 60 fishermen left and no fish plants at all. On Change Islands, one of the 39 fishermen still working told me that "you got to want to be here to stay here." Those are almost exactly the same words used by a resident of Biševo Island describing their situation.

Islanders on both sides of the Atlantic will tell you about young people leaving, unemployment, the seasonal nature of work, an aging population, and struggles to make a living. Just as Fogo Islanders wear many hats, a Vis islander said that "people can live well here, but not if they want to do just one thing to make a living."

The main difference between the people who call Fogo Island and Change Islands home and those from Vis Island and Biševo in Croatia is a subtle one. There is a tiredness in lilting Newfoundland voices when they speak about what needs to be done to ensure their future. They are not looking for a handout or even help, far from it. They know that "more than any other communities, island communities have to make do with what they have." All they are asking for is an understanding of their situation and of their islands from those who create policies and laws that regulate their daily lives.



This root cellar on Change Islands reminded me of a face of an old man. It is also representative of vernacular architecture that is in many ways unique to small islands around Newfoundland.

Nobody on Change Islands said to me: “The state has good programs. Our elderly care is excellent, for example,” or: “The relationship between the government, the school system and the island is very respectful and quite encouraging.” Those are quotes from Croatian islanders. What a Change Islander did say is: “We always live on the edge. Always live on the edge, wondering. You’re always hanging by a thread all the time, eh? And that’s what you’ve got to continue off.”

Islanders know that it is their responsibility to build their own future; they are quite unanimous about that, here and in Croatia. “Nobody will come here and do it for you. If you want something done, then you will find a way to do it,” is a direct quote from a Vis islander and you can imagine that person nodding as a Fogo islander says: “We cannot wait for a merchant, or the government in St John’s, or anybody else to tell us who we are, to bring the answer. We have to make our own

relationship with the world, somehow, the markets and the people in the world. And we have to do it all the while holding on.”

But the difference is that a government policy that actively supports and encourages island initiative can make that struggle easier, and the islanders feel valued and respected for who they are and what they bring to the table. A sound government policy would not attempt to “save” the handful of still inhabited islands here, but it would create conditions and supports allowing islanders to set their own development course.

I worry about Croatian islands because I see programs and policies that are well designed but terribly implemented. I worry because the government has renamed the Islands Administration the Administration for Islands and Coastal Regions. (Words matter. An island community will never seem quite as important as a city along the coastline.) I worry because the treaty between

the EU and Croatia, which comes into effect next year, could have dramatic impact on island development and islands' core economic activities such as winemaking, olive oil production, and, above all, fisheries.

What gives me hope is Article 52 of the constitution. That, and the confidence you can hear in the voices of young islanders who chose to come back to their isles. In fact, the last census shows that the overall number of island residents has increased, although not on all of the Adriatic islands.

When I hear from Change and Fogo Islanders of hassles with fisheries regulations and frustration with business regulations that simply cannot be met in a rural and island setting, I cannot help but wish that things were different in those places. I cannot help but wonder what kind of a province we would live in now if, some 70 years ago, somebody looked at a map of Newfoundland and instead of an island saw an archipelago of islands. What if they saw strength in a network of small communities with unique identities and an enormous wealth of tacit knowledge residing in those communities? What if each of the isles became a laboratory, just like Fogo Island has? What if they had allowed for development of small-scale fisheries, innovative social programs, a truly distributed energy system, and an opportunity to create a diverse economy based on what we would today call a social network for innovation and development, but in reality is just what islanders have always done?

Instead, the development policy for Newfoundland and Labrador was and in many ways continues to be centred around large industrial enterprises and natural resources extraction.

More than one policy maker I talked to declared that communities like Change Islands are an essence of what it means to be a Newfoundlander. But they all, without exception, also frankly admitted that in terms of actual policy support for communities such as Change Islands there isn't much.

But there is hope here, too. It lies in the rich, layered identities of small islanders and their ability to organize in new and innovative ways to achieve local goals. Lack of a comprehensive island – or for that matter rural – policy is not necessarily an impediment to development. During a recent conference on rural development in Olds, Alberta, Dr Rob Greenwood of the Harris Centre advocated a distributed approach to rural development: small pockets of innovative, resilient communities



The stone steps of St Cyprian and Justin's church on Vis Island are an example of the typical stone architecture characteristic of Croatian islands.

networked together for support and the exchange of ideas. It is indeed an archipelagic method for solving problems that are bigger than any one of the islands could tackle alone, and that tactic does not need to be limited only to geographic islands. There are enough commonalities among Newfoundland outports, those on smaller islands and along the coast, and other rural communities, to build case-by-case initiatives and bring stronger voices and better solutions for better rural development practices.

One of the explicitly stated goals of Croatian island development policies is stabilizing and eventually reversing the demographic decline of island communities. Such a goal is possible because islanders and islands are seen and recognized as an important part of what it means to be Croatian. I don't believe it is a stretch to see the smaller islands in the Newfoundland archipelago playing just as important a part in what it means to be a Newfoundlander. **NQ**

Originally from Croatia, Bojan Furst is the Manager of Knowledge Mobilization with Memorial University of Newfoundland's Leslie Harris Centre of Regional Policy and Development, and a Masters candidate in Geography at Memorial.