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# Sense of place, social dynamics and development - A case study of Nieu Bethesda, Eastern Cape, South Africa



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A case study of Nieu Bethesda, Eastern Cape, South Africa

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## **Abstract**

Global migration patterns are showing a trend towards urbanization and marginalization of small towns. In the Karoo region of South Africa there is a relatively high number of small towns that are going against the trend and becoming economically successful. Research on place identity in the small towns in the Karoo region has shown that place identity has varied greatly and is unique for every town, but that there is an appealing sense of 'Karoo lifestyle' in small Karoo towns. This study aims at finding out if there is a link between the positive economic development of small towns and the sense of place amongst the inhabitants of the town, with the aim of linking positive sense of place with economic development. The study was carried out in one example of a small Karoo town, Nieu Bethesda, using qualitative interview methods to gain insight into the sense of place amongst inhabitants. The results showed that the sense of place was important to all residents but varied between white and colored residents in terms of what their bond/relationship was to the place, which translated into their wishes and visions for the future of the town. The white residents of the town wished for the place to remain the same and resisted infrastructural developments whilst the colored residents wished for infrastructural development. The results show that the sense of place among the inhabitants varied greatly between individuals but that the residents' sense of place had a large impact on the development and economic growth in the town.

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## 1. Introduction

The Karoo region in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa is a semi-arid environment that covers approximately 40% of the geographic area of South Africa (Nel & Hill, 2008). The Karoo has a low population density, which has traditionally been dependent on extensive sheep farming. This form of land use has become economically marginal, and in combination with changes in state policy has consequently led to a transition away from sheep farming to game farming and tourism (Nel & Hill, 2008). This has had a pronounced effect on the landscape in terms of land degradation (Keay-Bright & Boardman, 2006) but at the same time has had a positive influence on the tourism industry in some Karoo towns with a few individual towns in the Karoo area having been successful in establishing themselves as popular tourist destinations. This has not been the case with all towns in the Karoo, and a high number of towns have suffered from negative growth rates and changing demographics (Nel & Hill, 2008). Despite the marginalization and demographic changes, Leimgruber argues that these changes are not always wholly negative as they can sometimes encourage people to find creative alternatives to provide income for themselves (Leimgruber, 2007).

Knightley Ingle describes the movement towards creative alternative incomes in his paper on the Karoo, 'A 'creative class' in South Africa's arid Karoo region (Knightley Ingle, 2012). He describes the development of tourism and the 'Karoo lifestyle' that has grown in the Karoo region in the last decades which has attracted what he describes as a 'creative class'. The creative class described in Knightley Ingle's paper includes educated professionals such as artists, designers and other professionals, people who chose to move to the Karoo in order to pursue the Karoo lifestyle (Knightley Ingle, 2012). This influx of educated professionals is undoubtedly having an impact on the dynamics of the towns that they are moving to, as seen in the shift from farming to tourism.

The attraction of a Karoo lifestyle has drawn many city dwellers to a number of small Karoo towns. One reason given by many researchers to explain this movement of people from big cities to small towns is the concept of 'place identity'. The identity of a small town is often uniquely bound to the place and the unique place identity can be the pull factor for many city-dwellers who go searching for a Karoo lifestyle according to Ferreira's study (Ferreira, 2007). She discusses the place identity of small towns as well as the importance of other factors such as tourism for the place identity of a small town. She points out the importance of tourism in the development of small towns, and argues that towns should work to preserve their unique heritage as it will complement and encourage tourism and aid in maintaining the place identity of the town (Ferreira, 2007).

If a town or place can have a strong place identity then it goes without saying that the people living there will also have opinions, feelings and emotional attachment to the place, also known as 'sense of place'. A person's sense of place is dependent on their personal experience of the place and is unique, and includes how a person relates to both the social and physical aspects of a place.

## **1.1 Aim and central questions of the study**

In the Karoo region there is undoubtedly a strong pull factor that draws many people to relocate to the small towns that are scattered throughout the region. This paper aims to explore the sense of place of the residents of a small but successful Karoo town, Nieu Bethesda, and explore the possibility of linking sense of place in Nieu Bethesda to its success as a small Karoo town; to find a correlation between sense of place and small town development patterns. The central questions for the paper are:

1. What are residents of Nieu Bethesda's sense of place, i.e. how do they relate to their surroundings, including the social and physical characteristics of the town.
2. How does residents' sense of place affect the dynamics of the village in terms of the activities, jobs, development plans?

## **2. Theory**

### **2.1 Sense of place**

The way that residents of an area relate to their physical and social surroundings is important for understanding the dynamics of an area. There are many definitions of the term 'place' and in this paper the definition has been taken from Speller (2002), also used by others authors such as Hauge (2007), whose definition is as follows 'place is a geographical space that has acquired meaning as a result of a person's interaction with the space'.

The concept of place is central to this study and more so the concept 'sense of place' which is defined as how residents of a place relate to their surroundings; what feelings, opinions, etc. they have towards the space they live in.

As mentioned above sense of place is defined in this paper as the attachment and associations a person feels towards the place in which they live. Sense of place is described by Shamai as having three phases of development of intensity of feeling (Shamai, 1991, pg 349). He describes the first phase as the person developing a sense of belonging for the place, which then progresses to become an attachment to the place. In the final stage the person feels a sense of commitment to the place, and by this phase they are willing to act to do something for the place (Shamai, 1991). When a person has reached this level of sense of place that they are ready to act to preserve, change, protect etc. a place that it can be said that sense of place can have an impact on the development of the place. The impact can manifest itself in a person feeling strongly about the physical attributes of the place and wanting to protect, preserve or develop them (see for example Shroeder, 2007; Gosling & Williams, 2010).

### **2.2 Local economic development and tourism**

The Karoo region is characterized by its small towns dotted throughout the region. The region is considered to be a marginalized region in terms of local economic development as there has been a trend of negative migration and negative economic growth. (Nel & Hill, 2008). The development of this region has been slow and according to Atkinson the government has overlooked the region in terms of its local economic development policies (Atkinson, 2009). In her discussion on the dynamics of small town economics Atkinson describes the two views on local economic development, the first stating that local efforts can

encourage and sustain economic development and the second that there are secondary, outside forces that will determine whether or not a small town's economy will grow (Atkinson, 2009). In her study on a small Karoo town Atkinson uses Tweettan and Brinkman's theory of 'internal combustion' that supports the idea that economic growth can come about by the ingenuity and commitment of local entrepreneurs (2009). She finds that the local entrepreneurs can indeed have positive economic effects on the local economy but that a good relationship and cooperation with the municipality was important (Atkinson, 2009).

In terms of tourism in small towns and economic development there has been a study carried out in South Africa by Ferreira who concludes that tourism can often depend upon and tap into the town's place identity and that this is something that should be encouraged as it will encourage economic growth in the town (Ferreira, 2007). At the same time she argues that the cultural heritage and characteristics of the small town must be protected in order to preserve the place identity (Ferreira, 2007). This study highlights the challenges that face small towns where economic development is dependent on tourism but at the same time the tourism is dependent on the place identity of the town and the place identity is in turn dependent on the small town feel and characteristics. The challenge is therefore to keep the place identity intact and allow tourism developments to aid the economic developments of the small town without risking the place identity being altered negatively.

In this paper, the theories presented above regarding sense of place, local economic development and the role of tourism in development will serve as a base for the analysis of Nieu Bethesda and the processes at play there.

### **3. Method**

During the weeks prior to the field study literature on qualitative research methods was reviewed to ensure that the appropriate method for collecting and analyzing material could be selected. The primary method chosen for gathering material for this project was the use of semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen as it is best suited to the main aims of the project; to gain information on the residents' sense of place. With a semi structured interview the interviewees are at liberty to answer the questions in their own way and also to lead the conversation in the direction they feel most comfortable. This method is not without its faults as it may be difficult to access the information required for the study in a structured and easily discernible way. It is important however, when exploring interviewees sense of place that they are given the leeway to express themselves in the way they prefer.

When in the study area I conducted 23 interviews. The informants were chosen at random during the initial stage of the stay as they were approached in cafes, in the craft stalls and in the shops. After an introduction of myself and the project aims the informants were asked if they would like to participate in the interview. In most of the cases the informants were willing to participate, though there were 2 residents who did not wish to participate, and although they did not explicitly say no when asked, they gave clear signals that they were too busy to participate on several occasions.

The interviews were all recorded using a Dictaphone. This method of recording the interviews was chosen as it was important for the main aims of the project not to lose any information from the interviews. The interviews were transcribed for analysis, during which a

short summary of each interview was written, highlighting the main points of interest from the interview.

Despite the few who did not participate, the majority of the residents approached were willing to participate and they were very welcoming of the interview and the questions asked. It was through the first informants I was able to make contact with other residents in the village, using a snowball method. Though informants were met through this method, it was still important to get a sample group that was relatively equally divided between male/female and white/colored; this because it was important to get a balance between gender and race in order to ensure enough data was collected for every group.

In 13 of the interviews the interview was carried out on a one to one basis but in 5 of the interviews two people were present. This was not a planned method but came about organically in the field when the informants were for example sitting together and both agreed to be interviewed and wanted to carry out the interview together. This occurred both with white and colored informants and is not considered to alter the informants' answers for the questions asked in this study. If anything it enriched the interview as the informants felt more comfortable and were able to talk for longer around the questions asked.

The secondary method used in the data collection process was informal interviews. This method was not planned before reaching Nieu Bethesda but in some meetings and casual conversations with residents I was able to gain information, opinions and feelings that the residents shared with me. This method was adopted in the field as it was appropriate at the time of the conversation and was useful in casual settings where the use of a Dictaphone and a structured question sheet would not have been appropriate.

The map of Nieu Bethesda (Figure 3) presented in the introduction section was generated using ARCGIS, a digital mapping program. The data files were provided by the Geography Department, Rhodes University. The land use layers were added by the author after spending time walking through the village for several days noting the land use for each property/part of the village.

Lastly it is important to mention that an important part of the field work was through cultural immersion whereby I spent as much time as possible interacting with locals and getting to know them personally. Also, by staying in the village I was able to create my own impressions and my own sense of the character of Nieu Bethesda. I experienced all the tourist activities offered in the village and made visits to all the cafes and restaurants.

### **3.1 Limitations**

The method used in this project has its limitations, both in the method of semi structured interviews as mentioned above, the informal interviews, as well as in the communication with some of the informants. The first language of the majority of the residents in Nieu Bethesda is Afrikaans. This was primarily the case among the colored community, where Afrikaans is the first language and English is taught in the primary school from Grade 4. Whilst all the informants could converse in English, it became obvious during some of the interviews that the informants were struggling to express themselves fully in English. In one of the interviews where two colored ladies were interviewed together, the informants crossed over into Afrikaans on two occasions as they were searching for the English word for a particular item or idea. The level of English of some of the informants may have affected the material

collected, and if this type of study were to be carried out in future it may be useful to have a translator for some of the interviews.

Despite the choice not to use a translator I feel as though the interviews were successful. There are limitations when using a translator in interviews as the translator may misrepresent the informants or alter the questions to suit their own opinions. During my time in the field I found that patience was the best tool in dealing with any language problems, as the informants were able to express themselves in their own way even if it may have taken a longer time for some to find the words in English. Also, without a translator it is often easier to achieve and maintain a relaxed and natural atmosphere which I found to be the case during my field work. During the interviews I was welcomed into peoples' homes and workplaces which may not have been the case had there been a formal interpreter present. With regards to the individuals who did not wish to participate it could be argued that their views and answers may have added another perspective to the results, though this cannot be known either.

With regard to the informal interviews it may be argued that the information from this type of interview may not be accurate in its entirety as it is casual conversation between the interviewer and the informant. It relies on the integrity of the interviewer to determine the whether or not an interview can be regarded as valid. This leaves room for error, but can, as mentioned above, be useful in gathering information that would otherwise have been left out of a more formal interview setting. Lastly, the choice to use a Dictaphone for recording the interviews may have affected the interviews as some people may feel uncomfortable being recorded. This is a choice that was made during the method selection for the project and despite the potential negative aspects of using a Dictaphone, it was decided that the advantages of using a Dictaphone outweighed the disadvantages for this study.

#### 4. Study Area

The study area is Nieu Bethesda (see Figure 2); a typical rural Karoo town situated 60km north of Graaff-Reinet in the Camdeboo Municipality. It lies in a small yet fertile valley near the Compassberg Mountain in the Sneuberg mountain range (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1. View of the valley in which Nieu Bethesda lies.*

*Source: Stephanie Shenton*



*Figure 2. Location of Nieu Bethesda in Eastern Cape, South Africa.*

*Source: Google Maps.*

According to the South African Statistics Council (Stats Online, retrieved from the internet) it has a population of 1,007 people, divided between two main areas of the town. Figure 3 shows the town, with the two main residential parts of the town shown in yellow (where the main tourist attractions/accommodation is situated and the primarily white residential area) and the purple area showing the township Pienaarsig (the primarily colored residential area) (Figure 3). There are 866 colored and 78 black residents predominantly living in the township, Pienaarsig (shown in purple on Figure 3), and 60 white residents in the main area of the village (shown in yellow on Figure 3). The light green area on the map shows land that is used today for grazing and farming, and most of this land belongs to farmers who own farms in the surrounding area to the village or who own houses in the main village. The light blue lines on the map show the furrows, an important part of Nieu Bethesda's water distribution system, and the dark blue lines show the Gats River that runs through a large part of the town.

# Nieu Bethesda



Figure 3. Land use map of Nieu Bethesda – shows the land use in the village.  
Source: Geography Department, Rhodes University (data files) and Stephanie Shenton (mapping).

#### 4.1 History of Nieu Bethesda

Nieu Bethesda is situated in a fertile valley in the Sneeu Berg Mountain range and before the village was established the land was farmland. It was during the 18<sup>th</sup> century that the first Dutch farmers settled the Sneeu Berg Valley, followed by English settlers in the 1820's. The Dutch settlers were devout members of the Dutch Reformed Church and after years of making the 7-8 hour journey into Graaff-Reinet to attend services they petitioned to the mother church to build a church locally. In 1878 the Pienaar family who owned all the land in the valley at that time sold a portion of their farm, known as Uitsyck to the church for the development of village of Nieu Bethesda. The residents commenced work on their own church, a grand building that was inaugurated in 1905. (Sheard, u.d.) Today the building is still the highest and most imposing in the town (see Figure 4).



*Figure 4. The Dutch Reformed Church in Nieu Bethesda.*

*Source: Stephanie Shenton.*

Some of the tenant farmers moved into the village from the surrounding farms, and the village was soon a well-established settlement. A school was built that, in later years, held 200 hundred pupils. The first teacher was a man called Mr. Immelman; the name has since been given to one of the streets in the village (Sheard, u.d.). “In its heyday Nieu Bethesda boasted a water mill, a garage, leather works, a blacksmith, a clinic with full time nursing sisters, a railway station at Bethesda Road, a railway bus that came out once a week and brought the post, a manual exchange and three general dealers. The village flourished as a farmers’ center for meetings, sport and recreation, and had its own town council” (Sheard, u.d.).

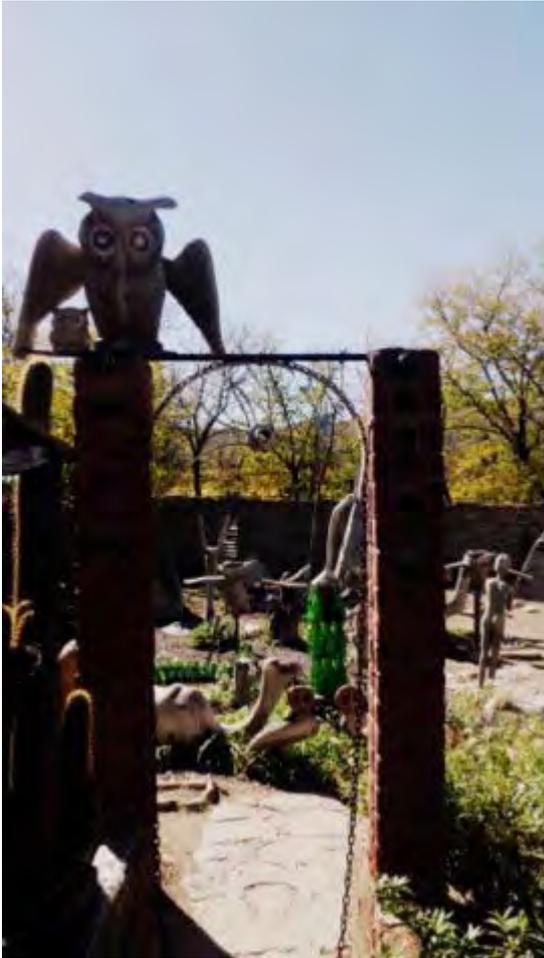


*Figure 5. One of the original shops in the village, now closed.  
Source: Stephanie Shenton.*

The township, called Pienaarsig (see Figure 3), was built in the 1980's under the ruling government's policy to separate the town (Sheard, u.d.). The relocation of the colored residents to the newly built township changed the dynamics of Nieu Bethesda. The township continued to expand as the white community dwindled during the period between the 1970's and the 1990's until the revival of the village began and 'outsiders' began to move into the village.

#### **4.2 Tourism in Nieu Bethesda**

The village receives a large number of visitors every year as it has become a popular tourist destination. The main attraction of the town itself is the well-known 'Owl House', which is the house of the late artist and sculptor Helen Martins that has now been converted into a museum. Her legacy has rendered Nieu Bethesda of cultural interest to artists of all genres as well as resulted in a substantial influx of tourists visiting the museum every year. The Owl House has undeniably had an important role in generating initial interest in the town, though today there are several other attractions in the town, many of them centered on some form of art. The village boasts a community art center, sculptors' galleries and several other art galleries in the cafes in the village.



*Figure 6. Owl House.*

*Source: Stephanie Shenton.*

The artistry is not the only activity in the village and in the last ten to fifteen years there have been a number of other tourist activities launched in the area. In the region there are several game and commercial farms that offer tourist activities. They offer hunting, game viewing, experiencing a working sheep farm, retreats etc. The geology of the Karoo has also provided tourism opportunities for Nieu Bethesda as well as farms in the surrounding area as there are rich fossil deposits from the dinosaur era. There is a fossil-rich shale bed that is exposed around the Gats River that runs through the village (see Figure 3). In Nieu Bethesda there is a well-stocked fossil museum named after the famous South African paleontologist Kitchings who made a number of significant fossil discoveries in the Nieu Bethesda area. The museum offers fossil walks in the shale bed around the river and a small number of farms in the surrounding areas offer similar activities.



*Figure 7. Fossil extraction at the Kitchings Fossil Musuem.*

*Source: Stephanie Shenton.*

The village also has a number of cafés and restaurants that offer anything from light meals to fine dining. All of the restaurants and cafes stock art and crafts from local artists as well local produce. All the eating establishments are located in the main streets of the village bar one restaurant which is located in the township. The township restaurant offers its guests traditional food in a township setting. There is also a brewery and cheese deli in Nieu Bethesda that offers handmade cheese, salamis and beer. This has become a very popular place for tourists and locals alike. The local pub is also popular among the locals, as well as the tennis club that is open every Saturday for locals from the village and farmers from the surrounding area. There are a number of small grocery shops in the township and one small shop in the village that stock some dry goods. For all other shopping the residents must travel to Graff-Reinet.



*Figure 8. Township shop with owner, Abraham.*

*Source: Stephanie Shenton.*

Tourists can also enjoy donkey cart rides run by a local colored man from the township who offers tourists a tour of the village with anecdotes and stories about the locals and his own family. They can also enjoy browsing through the craft stalls outside the Owl House, have a

hair cut in the hair dressers that is open 2 days a week or browse in the small clothing boutique that has recently opened. Most Saturdays there is a village market in the main street near the Owl House where locals and farmers bring their crafts and produce to sell.



*Figure 9. Donkey cart rides.*

*Source: Stephanie Shenton.*

There are quite a number of places to stay in Nieu Bethesda, ranging from backpackers to exclusive guest houses. Walking through the streets it seems as almost as though every second house offers accommodation.

When it comes to finding out about Nieu Bethesda there are several web sites offering information about the village and what to do there. The high numbers of websites relative to the size of the village serve as an indicator of the level of tourist activity in Nieu Bethesda. The websites are well maintained and informative of the activities and accommodation available in the village.

Getting to the village is only possible by car; there is no bus service that runs between any of the neighboring towns to Nieu Bethesda. This is a challenge for the township residents, very few of whom own cars, as they have to pay a high price to get out of the village in ‘taxis’; mini buses that are privately owned and operated. The road from Graaff-Reinet to Nieu Bethesda, 60kms, was tarred just over a year ago, but the road was not completed, leaving the last 6kms a dusty gravel road. The inaccessibility of the village to travelers who do not own a car does limit the tourism opportunities, especially the lower budget tourism.

## **5. Results**

### **5.1 The people of Nieu Bethesda**

In this section of the results the answers to the questions about the origins of the people are presented. The results of the interviews showed that all of the colored people were from Nieu

Bethesda apart from one person. The person not from Nieu Bethesda was from Ethiopia and has settled in the township to start a business running a shop. He stated that he had moved to Nieu Bethesda because he saw a business opportunity. He saw the need for a well-run and well-stocked shop (Abraham, 2012). The rest of the residents who are from Nieu Bethesda all attended primary school in Nieu Bethesda; some had then gone to high school in Graaff-Reinet. Two people had gone away to work in other parts of the country, but they had both chosen to return to Nieu Bethesda, both answered that they chose to return because it is their home and their family is in Nieu Bethesda. One of the residents who had been away to work was retired and had come to Nieu Bethesda because she wanted to die in her home as family is important, but it was also important to die in Nieu Bethesda so as to avoid high transport costs for bringing the coffin from Johannesburg (Annie, 2012).

Amongst the white residents who were interviewed all were from other parts of the country, though two were from a farming community around Nieu Bethesda. When asked why they chose Nieu Bethesda the residents gave similar answers. All white residents answered that they greatly appreciated the space in Nieu Bethesda, the vastness of the night sky and the view of the stars at night. Three residents also stated that they liked the low crime in Nieu Bethesda, one of whom had moved to the village from Johannesburg a year earlier (Debbie, 2012) and two of which had moved to the village 2 years earlier (Nico & Victoria, 2012). Another factor that attracted the residents to the village is the beauty of the area. The head police officer in the village who moved there only 8 months before the study took place had moved there from Graaff-Reinet. He stated that the people in the village are 'friendly and cooperative with us [the police officers]' (Darren, 2012)

Nico and Victoria, the owners of the local bookshop, first came to Nieu Bethesda on a day trip from Port Elizabeth and instantly fell in love with the village. They spent the next 5 years looking for a property in Nieu Bethesda before finding one that suited them and was within their price range (Nico & Victoria, 2012). They have been in the village for two years.

Another couple, Idil and Neil, who own the oldest restaurant in the village, have been in the village for 11 years. They moved into the village from their farm near the Compassberg for financial reasons, and have enjoyed their time in the village. They enjoy the quietness of the village (Idil & Neil, 2012).

Daleen, a playwright and author, moved to the village a few weeks before the time of the field study. She came to the village to get some peace and space in order to spend time writing her book. She chose to come back to Nieu Bethesda after having spent time there previously when she wrote a play about Koos Malgas and Helen Martins, the artists who created the Owl House (Daleen, 2012).

The other white residents who were interviewed in this study were Allan and Stephen. They run a restaurant and art gallery in the village, though they do not live there permanently. They are based in Graaff-Reinet and come to Nieu Bethesda on the weekends and holidays to open the restaurant and gallery. They chose not to live full time in the village as they do not think they would enjoy it if they were there permanently. Their main reasons for not wanting to be in the village full-time are based on the small town politics that go on in the village (Allan & Stephen, 2012).

As shown in the above section, the colored residents are all but one born in Nieu Bethesda. The white residents are all 'outsiders', though some have been in the village longer

than others. All have settled in Nieu Bethesda for different reasons, though it is clear that all the residents are attracted to Nieu Bethesda because of the place.

## 5.2 What makes Nieu Bethesda special – residents' sense of place

This question was sometimes difficult for the informants to answer straight away. The main themes and key words that came out of the responses were centered on space, beauty, quiet, friendly people. The answers differed somewhat between the white and colored residents, with the white residents including the physical attributes in describing why Nieu Bethesda is special more than the colored residents. Despite the variation in answers from the different groups, all residents believed the place to be a special place. The only exceptions, to a small extent, were two residents who believed that Nieu Bethesda was somewhat overrated (Allan & Stephen, 2012). They felt as though it had been hyped up, especially the Owl House and the play by Athol Fugard entitled 'The Road to Mecca'.

Despite the two residents who did not feel as strongly for the village as other people, there were many themes and answers that were present in nearly all the responses. As stated above, the beauty of the area is given as a reason for Nieu Bethesda being so special. Bredette, a shop keeper in the main streets of the village adds that the Owl House, in particular, is a beautiful place (Bredette, 2012). This is echoed by two other residents, Ronnel, employed by the backpackers, and Donovan, a police officer, who acknowledge its effect of drawing visitors to Nieu Bethesda (Ronnel, 2012) & (Donnovan, 2012)

Ronnel (2012) also adds that people, after arriving in Nieu Bethesda then discover other interesting places too. Donovan (2012) describes the town as being a quiet place to live, and that many people come to see the stars.

The town is described as being friendly by two residents: Ronnel (2012) makes a point of how unusual it is to have people greeting you in the streets, and Darren (2012) thinks that the way in which people make you feel welcome is what makes Nieu Bethesda a special place. Juliette (2012), a young woman who works in the only township restaurant, stresses the importance of the community, and points towards how everyone knows each other very well, talk often and help each other a lot. Gerswin, a craft seller, agreed that the people are friendly and that there is a family feeling to Nieu Bethesda (Gerswin, 2012).

A new resident in the village, Daleen, says that Nieu Bethesda has a special energy field and that to live there you must be at peace with yourself and know yourself. You must be independent and know how to keep yourself busy. For her it is also a place of closure, and she says that the mountains that surround the village are comforting (Daleen, 2012).

Nico and Victoria from the bookshop said that they fell in love with the village from the first day they visited it. They describe it as having a unique atmosphere unlike any other village in the Karoo. The fact that it is still quite undeveloped and that there is a wide variety of people living there make it special to Nico and Victoria (2012).

Idil described the village as being special because it attracts so many strong minded, intelligent people. She also said that this is one of the difficulties of living in the town because of the small town politics that are a result of having so many strong willed people in the small village (Idil & Neil, 2012). Despite the difficulties she feels that the small town environment makes people achieve things that they probably would never have done otherwise if they were in a bigger kind of environment. She added that it is the people that make the village special

to her and her husband Neil; and that everyone who visits the village can see that there is something special about Nieu Bethesda but that it is difficult to describe exactly what it is (Idil & Neil, 2012)

A municipality employee, Collin, stated that he loved Nieu Bethesda because it is quiet and there is a sense of community; that it is like one big family (Collin, 2012). He added that although Nieu Bethesda is a nice place to live, he feels that the town would benefit from breaking away from the Camdeboo municipality and having an independent municipality. He feels that this would allow Nieu Bethesda to further develop its tourism which would help the whole community (Collin, 2012). He stated that increased tourism would not change the feel of the village, but would create jobs. When asked if he thought whether or not more colored residents would become involved in tourism in the future he answered that yes he did think so, and that this would be positive for the township community (Collin, 2012).

A former resident of Nieu Bethesda, Andy, who was interviewed in Grahamstown after the field study, confirmed this opinion of the village. He left Nieu Bethesda in 1993 after having spent 13 years there with his family. His interview shed a new light on the social dynamics of the village and his opinion on how much the village had changed from the time he arrived in Nieu Bethesda to the time he left gave the impression that the ‘small town politics’ make Nieu Bethesda a difficult place to operate a business and live in. His responses confirmed those of Allen and Stephen who also felt that Nieu Bethesda wasn’t really as nice as everyone makes it out to be. Despite Andy’s views on the village having changed a great deal during the time he lived there and post-leaving he still thought that the village is unique and has a special atmosphere (Andy, 2012).

### **5.3 Who visits / moves to Nieu Bethesda – push/pull factors**

Two residents told of how all sorts of people visit Nieu Bethesda, both South Africans as well as international visitors (Ronnell, 2012 & Darren, 2012). Darren (2012) adds that the sorts of people who come are those who are looking to relax in a laid back atmosphere, and people who like nature.

One resident explained how the town particularly attracts people with artistic interests (Debbie, 2012). She told of how the pros of low crime and ample access to water attract people, who can afford a house in Nieu Bethesda for the same price as a flat in e.g. Johannesburg. She also mentioned that there are many strong willed individuals in town, leading to a lot of “head butting”.

This opinion was also represented by Idil (2012). He thinks that some of what he refers to as “small town politics” arise as a result of the town being attractive to strong minded, intelligent people. Having lots of this sort of people leads to them finding it hard to “take the lead” socially, and the size of the town also tends to lead to people being sensitive to criticism, in his opinion. However, he also believes that the interaction of these factors leads to achieving great things that they might not achieve in a bigger environment.

Phillip (2012) stresses the importance of new people coming to Nieu Bethesda bringing new businesses. However, he feels that people do come and buy properties or build houses but often leave after only a few years.

#### 5.4 Visions for the future

Opinion was divided regarding if Nieu Bethesda is changing or not, whether this is a good or a bad thing, and what the future holds. Most residents were decidedly resistant to the idea of change.

One resident noted the change from being confronted with racism and not being wanted in shops when she was a teenager to this not being the case longer (Ronnell, 2012). She believes that although the community is not quite together, all parts are more used to each other and talk more, and this is a positive change for the town.

Many residents spoke of the impact that increased tourism has had on Nieu Bethesda. Donovan feels that not much has changed other than increasing tourism since the 90s (Donovan, 2012). The notion of tourism bringing large change is not entirely unproblematic; one resident felt it was important to keep big developers out of the village and avoid hotels being built, and said that they had already kept them out once before (Idil & Neil, 2012).

Phillip agrees that tourism has affected Nieu Bethesda a lot, bringing many new people to visit and live in the town. He also notes how many of the services previously provided by local butcheries, garages and shops have gone, and that residents now have to travel to Graaf-Reinet for these services (Phillip, 2012).

Ronnell (2012) feels that people who move to Nieu Bethesda don't understand that there are busy times and quiet times, and as a result often leave as soon as their business goes badly. Katrina and Rachel, craft sellers at the market outside the Owl House also said that Nieu Bethesda is a good, quiet and beautiful place (Katrina & Rachel, 2012) However, Daleen does not view this as a problem; she believes that people who do not belong in Nieu Bethesda will leave and others will come to keep the place alive (Daleen, 2012). One resident was worried by the idea of more people coming to the village at all; that more people would make things worse by leading to more crime and criminals (Debbie, 2012).

#### 5.5 Infrastructural developments in the town

In the village the current issues that the residents are discussing are infrastructural developments – tarred roads, street lights and ATMs. The residents have a lot to say about these issues. Their views were much divided about the tarring of the roads and the installation of street lights, but almost only positive about the potential for an ATM amongst the colored residents.

Two residents thought that the idea of getting an ATM was a good one (Debbie, 2012) & (Brendan & Malgas, 2012) saw it mostly as bringing the benefit of tourists finding it easier to support the local artwork if they could use their cards, while Debbie said that although it would be useful for the township residents, an ATM would bring with it the danger of somebody wanting to blow it up (Debbie, 2012).

When asked whether or not he would like to see ATM's installed in the village Police officer Darren said that he hoped not. He said that tar roads and ATM's would change the atmosphere of the village, stating that the problem is in the township as they don't earn a lot of money, and they have to pay a lot to go to Graaff-Reinet to get their money and for them it's very expensive (Darren, 2012) Debbie's comment is quite revealing about the divide in the village over the streetlights, she said 'We as whiteys have the luxury of being able to say no we don't want the lights' (Debbie, 2012).

On the issue of tarring the roads the majority of the colored residents felt that it would be a positive development while nearly all of the white residents felt it would be negative. Debbie could see both positive and negative sides of the idea of tarring the roads. On the one hand, she considered it good for herself as a business owner, but on the other hand, she feels it would change the character of the village completely (Debbie, 2012). This sentiment is shared by many other residents. Donovan (2012) also feels they should leave the roads as they are and Katrina and Rachel said that it wouldn't feel like Karoo anymore with tarred roads (Katrina & Rachel, 2012). Three residents pointed to the terrible condition of the roads, particularly when it rains as a good reason to get them tarred (Ronnell, 2012), (Bredette, 2012), (Brendan & Malgas, 2012). Brendan (2012) adds that tarring the roads would provide a big benefit for tourism.

When it came to the questions about the street lights the residents were divided as they were on the tar roads. The same pattern exists here whereby the majority of the colored residents are in favor of the street lights and the white residents are not.

Two residents from the township feel that the opposition to street lights in the village is odd (Ronnell, 2012), (Bredette, 2012). Ronnell (2012) doesn't think that street lights cause as much light pollution as people fear, and that stargazing is still possible; in the township there are street lights and people can still stargaze, she feels. Bredette (2012) doesn't like it when it's too dark. Phillip recognizes the concern for the character of the village, but still feels it would be a good idea to tar and put lights on the main street and the main road to the township (Phillip, 2012). Brendan sees the introduction of street lights as important protection against thieves (Brendan & Malgas, 2012).

Debbie, a white resident, opposes the idea of street lights, as she considers it healthy to have darkness at night (Debbie, 2012). Idil is also opposed to the idea of tarring the roads, as well as to the street lights. She says that there are very few places left where there is both an attraction for visitors as well as being old fashioned, and she would not like Nieu Bethesda to lose this quality (Idil & Neil, 2012).

## **6. Discussion**

### **6.1 Sense of place**

When it comes to what makes Nieu Bethesda special to people there were several key words and answers that were present in the majority of residents' responses. The responses differed between the white and colored residents. All residents have sense of place, and have a bond with the village itself.

The two exceptions to this were two semi-permanent residents, Stephen and Allen, who did not give the impression that they had a very positive sense of place. They are restaurant/gallery managers who come to the village 3 days a week to open and run their establishment.

Their answers gave the impression of a lot of small town politics that prevented the community from functioning as it could potentially. They did wish to move to the village permanently because of it. This indicates that they have a different sense of place than other village residents, many of whom acknowledge the small town politics but who do not consider it to be significant enough to influence them to leave.

The view that there is a great deal of small town politics was echoed by Andy, a former resident of Nieu Bethesda. He felt that although Nieu Bethesda was a special and unique place, its character had changed during the time from when he moved to the village to when he left. He stated that the small town politics made it difficult to operate a business in the village, especially if you are trying to make a living solely off that income.

Although there is undoubtedly a great deal of small town politics in Nieu Bethesda, the majority of the residents maintain that there is something, often difficult to describe, that makes it a very unique and pleasant place to live. There is, as mentioned above, a divide between the residents with regard to their opinions and feelings towards the place, and the divide manifests itself along a color divide, with the white and colored residents having quite different opinions and feelings towards the place.

Within the white community there is a sense of place that involves nature to a large extent; residents enjoy the physical attributes of Nieu Bethesda. They enjoy the open space, the nature, the stars and the isolation of Nieu Bethesda. This is not to say that the colored residents do not appreciate these features, and many people did mention the physical attribute of the village when asked the question ‘what makes Nieu Bethesda special to you?’

Whilst the colored residents may not have been as explicit in explaining what makes Nieu Bethesda so special in the same way as the white residents, they undeniably have a strong bond to the physical land and perhaps more importantly their traditional family land. For example the pensioner, Annie, who insisted that she must come back to her home village to ensure that she would die and be buried there highlights how important the bond with the land is. Another colored resident, Katrina, who had been away for some years working, decided to come back to the village 16 years ago to look after her aging parents. She left a job and partner in Cape Town to return to her home. This illustrates the strong family bond amongst the colored residents, a bond that links family and place to create a strong sense of place.

## **6.2 The economics of the village**

There is high unemployment in Nieu Bethesda, predominantly in the township. The employment opportunities in the village itself are limited. There are jobs available within the tourism branch as well as cleaning, gardening and other service jobs in private homes. The municipality employs five people full time and they have peace work projects that run for a few weeks at a time. The projects that are run by the municipality are primarily clean-up projects, to clear the streets of rubbish and overgrown vegetation. Although these jobs provide employment for a number of people, the work is temporary and dependent on municipality funding.

The majority of the township residents survive on government grants. Many of the colored and white residents feel as though the grants are a problem for the village as they encourage alcoholism and other social problems. The health worker from the township clinic feels as though the grants contribute to teenage pregnancy as young girls with no job

opportunities chose to have children in order to receive the government grant of R280 per child. The health worker also feels as though the number of children per family is also high because of the child grants. The social welfare system and high unemployment is changing the demographics of the township as most of the high school graduates want to leave the village in order to find work in bigger towns. According to a colored artist, the social grants are causing the people of the village to be lazy and not want to work. This opinion was shared by a white shop owner who wanted to start a local business employing local women to do textile work. She has been disappointed by the lack of enthusiasm towards employment and has struggled to find women who want to work in her shop.

The discussion around the social grants is interwoven with the infrastructure debate as the social grants are only handed out in Graaff-Reinet. People receiving social grants must travel to Graaff-Reinet once a month for all-pay day when the entire month's grant is paid out in a lump sum. The cost of a taxi fare to Graaff-Reinet is R50 each way. This means that a person must spend R100 of their money to go and collect their grant. The residents feel as though tarred roads would encourage more transport between Graaff-Reinet and Nieu Bethesda. The township residents all felt that an ATM in the village would greatly improve their lives as they could draw their grants directly in the village and save the R100 per month transport costs. There are risks that come with having an ATM, as Debbie, a shop owner, pointed out when she expressed concerns that an ATM attracts people who would want to blow it up to steal the money (Debbie, 2012). Another resident who works for the municipality, Phillip, remembered a time in the 1970's when there was a bank in Nieu Bethesda that was open once a week. He hopes that one day developments will happen and there will be a bank again in the village or at least a pay point so that people won't have to go to Graaff-Reinet once a month (Phillip, 2012).

The economic difficulties extend to the white community too. The tourist season is relatively limited, with the main tourist months being around Christmas and Easter. For the residents dependent on tourism for their main source of income this means that the off season can be very quiet and sometimes unpredictable. As many of the residents stated in their interviews it is very hard to make a living on tourism alone and as a consequence they have to have an alternate source of income. Nico and Victoria who own and run the book shop, for example, provide extra income for themselves through Nico working for a translation company and Victoria making crochet products to sell at the local market.

There are few people in the whole village that can sustain themselves completely on the income from their businesses. There are exceptions to this though, for example the owner of the local brewery makes a living off running his brewery as a restaurant and selling his produce locally. Even in his case though, his wife, works in Graaff-Reinet some days a week and some days a week in Nieu Bethesda. Another family that is solely reliable on the village for income is a family that owns the backpackers and several other accommodation establishments as well as the biggest restaurant in the village.

Other exceptions to this pattern are people who are retired, or are financially stable enough to be able to support themselves completely without income. There are several artists in Nieu Bethesda who sell their work internationally, and one resident who is living there for a short time, Daleen, a playwright/author who has taken a year out to live in the village and

work on her book. Apart from these people the majority have to work hard to support themselves.

### 6.3 Infrastructural developments

The issue of the tarred roads and street lights became one of great interest for this study as it was a topic that was discussed by all residents of Nieu Bethesda. Every person who was interviewed or just spoken to had an opinion on the tar road/street light issue. The residents were divided over whether or not tarring the last few kilometers of the road from Graaff-Reinet as well as tarring the main streets of the village would be beneficial. Similarly, the discussion of whether or not to put up street lights in the main village also left the community divided. The division over these two issues was not purely a color division, as there were some white residents for the tarring of the roads and street lights as well as some colored residents who were against them.

The tarred road that was completed a year ago from Graaff-Reinet to a few kilometers outside Nieu Bethesda has without a doubt improved the communications between the two towns. The drive that used to take 1hr 40 minutes on the bad gravel road now takes approximately 50 minutes. Whilst most residents, white and colored, agree that this has been a positive development, the debate arises over the roads in the village itself. The majority of the colored residents said that they would like the tarred roads as they would bring more tourists and more opportunities to the village.

The white residents bar a few think that the tar roads would change the character of the village, change the atmosphere. To the white residents a big part of what makes Nieu Bethesda what it is to them is intertwined with the quaint character of the village. Two residents said that the tar roads might bring more people to the village, but that the improved accessibility will lead to increased crime. As one white resident stated, she had already heard from a friend in the township that there had been an increase in the number of taxis (privately owned and operated mini-buses for people transport). She was worried that more outsiders were already starting to come into the village.

The extent to which the white residents are willing to oppose the tarring of the roads demonstrates the extent to which physical surroundings contribute to people's impressions and opinions of a place; how much the physical surroundings contribute to people's sense of place. It is interesting that in Nieu Bethesda that some of the residents feel so strongly against the tar roads that they are in a sense hindering development in the village.

Amongst the colored residents the overwhelming majority were in favor of tarring the roads, both the remaining stretch of the Graaff-Reinet and the streets of the village. The main argument is that the tar road will improve the tourism opportunities as well as create new job opportunities. The colored residents also said that the gravel roads were ugly and too muddy during the rainy periods, making it difficult for them to walk around. This is a valid argument as one big rainstorm that occurred during the field study affected the roads dramatically.

The same discussion arises around the street lights. The township roads have had street lights installed but the white residents resisted the municipality's plans to install street lights in the main village. This is interesting both from the social aspect, firstly that the residents resisted the installation of street lights and secondly from the perspective of the municipality. The challenge that the municipality faces in Nieu Bethesda is an economic and social one.

The Camdeboo Municipality that Nieu Bethesda falls under does not have a strong economy. Collin, a municipality employee, feels that Nieu Bethesda would benefit from becoming an independent municipality so that it can more effectively manage itself. Without enough data from the Camdeboo Municipality as to how much money and input Nieu Bethesda receives from the municipality this point cannot be discussed further, although it can be said that the Eastern Cape in general is considered to be one of the poorest provinces in South Africa.

With regards to the questions asked about what people thought would happen in the future there seems to be mixed thoughts on what will happen. The colored residents could not give details on what they thought would happen to Nieu Bethesda, though many were positive and said they thought that things would get better in the future. Many of the colored residents' visions for the future are dependent on infrastructural developments such as roads, ATMs, street lights, more shops, more jobs etc.

On the other hand, the white residents hoped that Nieu Bethesda would not change in the future. They would prefer it if the village stayed the same, small Karoo town that it is today. Their vision for the future is dependent on little to no development taking place.

The difference in residents' visions for the future of Nieu Bethesda highlights how very different peoples' sense of place is, and how their sense of place is very much dependent on their physical and social surroundings.

#### **6.4 Concluding discussion**

This paper has explored the relationship between 'sense of place' and development in Nieu Bethesda and it can safely be said that a strong relationship does exist between sense of place and development in Nieu Bethesda. The town has a strong place identity that is attractive to residents and tourists alike, the majority of whom feel that Nieu Bethesda is a unique place that they are happy to live in. Exploring the sense of place amongst the residents has provided an overview of the social dynamics of the town. The 'mapping' of the residents' sense of place has provided a thorough understanding of the place identity of Nieu Bethesda which can be related to the past, present and future development patterns of the town. The slow infrastructural development can be explained partly by the sense of place amongst the residents, at least amongst the white residents.

Whilst there are a few individuals who feel that Nieu Bethesda is 'overrated' and not as special as people make it out to be, the majority of the people have a strong bond with the place. This includes both the white and colored residents, though the colored and white residents have a slightly different bond with the place. The white residents, all of whom have moved to Nieu Bethesda from outside, chose the place because of the nature, the space, the quietness, the variety and diversity of the people. The colored residents have a strong ancestral bond with the place, illustrated, for example, by the elderly resident who moved back to Nieu Bethesda from Johannesburg to ensure she would die in her hometown.

With regards to the future of the town the residents have different opinions of what they think would happen. The white residents would like the town to stay the same as it is the quaint, undeveloped, simple lifestyle that they feel make Nieu Bethesda what it is. They feel as though developments such as tarred roads, street lights and ATM's would change the character of the town. The colored residents feel as though the developments would improve the town and improve their standard of living by increasing their job opportunities.

The tourism in the village is considered to be a positive activity for the village, and all residents feel this. The colored residents would like to see an increase in tourism as they feel it would improve the town. Whilst the white residents are reliant on the tourism for their main source of income, they would not like the tourism to increase to such an extent that it would change the town. There is a contradiction in this as they need the tourism to support them, but at the same time feel that if the town developed into a major tourist destination it would change the town and they would no longer want to live there.

The difference in the opinions between the white and colored residents indicates that they relate to the place in a completely different way. This is an interesting conclusion that can be drawn from the study as it indicates the difference in sense of place between the residents. The white residents' sense of place is closely bound to the place and the quietness and slow development and although they need the tourism and some infrastructural developments in order to sustain their lifestyle and maintain their sense of place they do not want the place to lose its identity. The colored residents' sense of place is tied to the place though in a different way to the white residents' and they feel that development would be positive for their sense of place. In terms of Shamai's three stages of developing a sense of place it can be suggested that both the colored and white residents have reached the third and final stage of 'commitment'; i.e. both the colored and white residents are committed to the place and willing to protect and change it. For the colored residents their sense of place leads to a want for infrastructural and economic development and they are committed to this. For the white residents their sense of place is closely bound to the place identity and their commitment to the place takes the form of wanting to preserve it and prevent infrastructural developments. Both the white and colored residents' sense of place is equally strong, yet because of the difference in people's sense of place, the resulting behavior is different with one group wanting development and the other to preserve what is.

This difference is a point of contention in the town, and without cooperation and compromise between the residents as well as the municipality there could, potentially, be problems in the future. The difference between the opinions of the white versus colored residents of the town will potentially add tension to the atmosphere that exists today; one which is not without its lingering racial tension in the post-apartheid period.

The developments that many colored residents desire will change the place identity of Nieu Bethesda and the subsequent impact on the sense of place amongst the white residents will be significant. To what extent this will impact the development of the town remains to be seen – either the small town Karoo lifestyle identity will continue, or it will become an infrastructurally developed small town that risks losing its charm. The question for future research will be to see whether the small town Karoo lifestyle place will be sustainable, both in terms of the economics and the social dynamics of the place.

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## 7.2 Interviews

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## **8. Appendix**

### Questions/themes for interviews

1. Are you from Nieu Bethesda? If not, where are you from and how did you come to be in Nieu Bethesda?
2. What makes Nieu Bethesda special?
3. Is there a certain type of person that would move to or visit Nieu Bethesda?
4. Do you think that Nieu Bethesda is changing? What do you see for the future of the town?
5. What do you think of the tar roads, street lights and ATMs?