The Routledge Handbook of Placemaking

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Introduction

Publication details

https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780429270482-1
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Published online on: 31 Dec 2020

How to cite :- Cara Courage. 31 Dec 2020, Introduction from: The Routledge Handbook of Placemaking Routledge
Accessed on: 17 Oct 2023
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780429270482-1

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INTRODUCTION
What really matters: moving placemaking into a new epoch

Cara Courage

This Handbook was initiated at a time when the ten-year anniversary of the Markusen and Gadwa (2010) National Endowment for the Arts Creative Placemaking White Paper was on the near horizon; was being written when the nomenclature of climate change was changing to climate and ecological emergency; and its final editing took place during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic and the beginnings of the global Black Lives Matter and race justice protests after the (at the time of writing, accused) murder of George Floyd while in Minneapolis police custody. The Markusen and Gadwa White Paper became an era-defining moment for placemaking, and as we look from 2020 to 2030 and beyond, undoubtedly COVID-19 and racial and climate justice will engender change in placemaking practice, and these concerns are foregrounded in this Handbook: indeed, as this book calls for looking again at current placemaking narratives and demands new ones, it signals the time for placemaking to evolve, as is only correct for a people- and place-responsive practice with a radical potential at its core.

COVID-19 has put what really matters in our public realm into sharp relief, and in sum, what matters is the human. The pandemic is anti-place: in particular, it is counter to the particularly urban design of collective occupation, and has created a fear of human proximity and taken from us our familiar collective social experiences and sites of serendipitous encounter (Sennett, 2012, p. 38; Soja, 1997, p. 20; Watson, 2006, p. 6) in the public realm. Our common response of a physical distancing from others is contra to the human desire for interaction and contra to public-realm and built-environment design: these places are designed to be animated. As fiscal economies suffer worldwide, so too we find ourselves in something akin to a place-based social or cultural recession. There is an emotional toll in seeing from a distance but feeling ever close the places we have a connection with, that we have made and shaped in our own lifetimes, lost to us, even if, we hope at the time of writing, temporarily. Singularly and cumulatively, the virus does not discriminate – but the pandemic, within our structural and social systems of oppression, does, cleaving further open structures of intersectional discrimination and vulnerability, and, in large part, the burden of social distancing and care falling upon the marginalised and the lowest paid. Those that kept our places working for us but who were previously consigned to its margins – the street cleaners, the bus drivers, the delivery drivers, amongst many others – are not ‘unskilled workers’ but ‘key workers’; public life has not shrunk for them, their worth far in excess of their remuneration. What has placemaking ever looked like for those that have been overlooked in public realm life?
If we ever took it for granted, we now appreciate the full value of human-centred public space when it has been taken away from us – not least, the right to protest in it, and remark has to be given to those places mentioned in this Handbook that have now become sites of Black Lives Matter protest and of police brutality. We see people resist the term ‘social distancing,’ in favour of ‘physical distancing,’ as they take their social life online and animate their neighbourliness on the front step when clapping and banging pots and pans for the pandemic frontline workers in the UK for example, and as they give time to street-level community support networks. Our spatial perspective has pivoted to the hyperlocal of place, where grocery shopping is a walk away and people buy from suppliers in the local economy. Outdoor exercise is within a close-by boundary, and people are using parks and discovering walks previously unknown or out of reach to them in their previous day-to-day routines: a ‘relocalism,’ if you will. If the public realm has changed, our need for social ritual hasn’t. Its site may have moved, however: rainbow posters in windows, balconies as galleries and concert venues, rooftops becoming distanced gym classes. Our distanced sociability affirms to ourselves and to others that we are still here, that the public realm is still there, and that our community is relevant and must be seen and heard.

What is placemaking?

Ask those balcony singers, rooftop exercisers, or street cleaners what placemaking is however, and its highly probable that you will be met with a blank look. Despite the intense and pervasive placemaking activity of the past ten years, and indeed the years before it, there is still a need to explain what placemaking is to those within our sibling sectors as much as to those outside them. In all my research and practice, I have not come across one single placemaking definition that is used by all (and indeed, different definitions appear throughout this Handbook), and to a degree, definitions are avoided. One could be left wondering if placemaking is even ‘a thing,’ if it is so amorphous or undefinable. There are several reasons why a placemaking practitioner or organisation would want to avoid a definition: naming what you do too tightly may limit funding and commercial opportunities, and for the individual practitioner, one can define one’s own work and position in and vis-à-vis this field. Conversely, naming what you do as placemaking, in your own definition, is a self-fulfilling prophecy – ‘I make place, therefore I am a placemaker’ covers a wide range of practices in opposition to each other from ideological purviews (see below.) Placemaking may be so new as sector, when placed next to architecture or urban design for example, that it could also be fair to say that we are still defining the field – and indeed, that is a function of this Handbook. But equally, could the term placemaking have become meaningless as a result of its disparate, dilated, and obscured use? While not having an accepted definition of placemaking can be used to one’s advantage, it is far from certain that this is to the sector’s advantage. Just as with the terms ‘green’ or ‘eco,’ and their use to the point of losing any meaning, the placemaking term is being applied to almost any project in place, and those projects – urban farmers’ markets, an outdoor cinema, a pop-up park – are all looking familiar no matter where in the world you may find them, despite their relative merit.

For me, what differentiates placemaking from other built environment sectors, and should be central to any understanding or definition of it, is that placemaking is an approach and a set of tools that puts the community front and centre of deciding how their place looks and how it functions. There is a community imperative in placemaking. As artist Jeanne van Heeswijk said, ‘The community is the expert in being the community’ (van Heeswijk, 2012): in placemaking, the community, however defined in the particular context, is recognised and valued as the expert in being the community. The moment you take the community out of placemaking as both spearheading and equal stakeholder in its process, the process is no longer placemaking and the
radical potential of this place-based process is completely lost. Placemaking, when done well, has an agency of relative expertism (Courage, 2017), joining equitably community (however self-defined), architects, urban designers, artists, policymakers, planners, developers, Mayors and city administrations, educators, housing departments... and uses the existing assets of a place to their best effect and facilitates creative patterns of activities and connections – cultural, economic, social, environmental – that define a place and support its ongoing evolution. Placemaking represents a paradigm shift in thinking about planning and urban design, from a primary focus on buildings and macro urban form to a focus on public space and human activity – what happens in these spaces, why, how, and with and by whom, and not: this is all the stuff of placemaking. There is a twofold need for the processes of placemaking. First, it demands all those involved to work across sectors and out of silos, and often with art practice, especially that of community and social practice or socially engaged art. These particular art practices, as collaborative and transdisciplinary, are best placed to lead by example here, and indeed to break some of our sibling sectors’ fear of the trial-and-error of process. Second, there is a need for architects, urban designers, and planners to pay ever more attention to local knowledges and desires in order to give depth to the meaning of their place designs, in a generative, open source, and open-ended process without, or with an unknown, built environment output. Again, artists have a vital role here, driving and incubating the conversations through community-based and explorative and testing methodologies.

In this placemaking, people have their love of place confirmed, renewed, valued; their place attachment activates as place stewardship; which leads to increased social cohesion and wellbeing; which in turn results in the genuine formation of the vibrant, liveable places that administrations, planners, and developers the world over are working to variously create or secure (Courage, 2017). When projects are done with integrity and hold the expertism of the community paramount, the community are active producers, not consumers, of the public realm. But like anything that happens in the public realm, placemaking is of contested power and politics. The very real situation for many at the community end of placemaking – or, at least, what is branded as placemaking – is of wholesale social cleansing, communities evicted and dispersed by developers, artists brought in to place wash (Pritchard, 2019). The reader may not recognise in this book what has become normative placemaking practice. This is not bad thing. This Handbook deliberately (re)situates into placemaking discourse non-normative, subaltern (Louai, 2012), and diverse knowledges.

Placemaking as a community of practice?

Placemakers have a concern with community as an outward entity, but we turn the lens inwards now, to the consideration of placemaking as a community of practice. Succinctly, a community of practice is a group of people who ‘share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it as they interact regularly’ (Wenger, 2006, p. 1). The community can be any group engaged in a common intentional process of knowledge sharing and creation (ibid.), developing unique perspectives on their shared concern and a body of common language and approaches (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 5). Activities undertaken by a community of practice may include: problem-solving, seeking experience, discussing developments, documentation projects, visits, mapping knowledge and identifying gaps (Wenger, 2006, p. 2), pondering common issues, exploring ideas, acting as sounding boards, creating tools and standards, and developing tacit shared knowledge (Wenger et al., 2002, pp. 4–5). Participation is essential to the community of practice: it is through participation that identity and mutual recognition and practices develop, and connection, meaning, negotiation, and action occur (Handley et al., 2006, p. 643). The outcome of this is a practice based on a ‘craft intimacy,’ ‘close interactions around shared prob-
lems and sense of commonality’ (Wenger et al., 2002, pp. 120–2). Communities of practice are comprised of three dimensions: the domain, its joint enterprise, what it is about; the community, its mutual engagement, how it functions; and the practice, its shared repertoire, what capability it produces (Wenger, 1998, p. 2; Wenger, 1998, p. 72ff, in Fuller, 2007, p. 21). Some members will participate as they care about the domain and want to see it developed; others because of the value of having a community to interact with as peers; and others to learn about the practice and develop craft (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 44).

The domain of placemaking, on first look, is self-evident, but in practice is contested and negotiated. Whereas one can identify as a placemaker, the intent and outcomes of one’s placemaking may be wholly different and in opposition – think here, the difference in practice between top-down and bottom-up placemaking (see, Placemaking Typology, Courage, 2017, pp. 72–76). However, as a relatively new practice, negotiating the domain is both the first task of the community and its ongoing task, critical as it is to community development (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 45). With placemaking, a global and intentional community, as understood above, and a body of knowledge is iteratively and generatively forming, comprised of a shared repertoire of resources – experiences, tools, language, problem-solving, for example (Wenger, 2006, p. 2). The activities undertaken by a community of practice are akin to those undertaken by placemakers through their practice, and, via increasing formal and informal knowledge exchange, these activities are being turned inwards to the placemaking community itself; a craft intimacy is emerging that could situate placemakers from different locales in a common frame of practice. This however is a moot point for the sector. Wenger et al. (2002) present seven principles for cultivating a community of practice – design for evolution, open to dialogue between inside and outside perspectives, invite different levels of participation, develop both public and private community spaces, focus on value, combine familiarity and excitement, and create a rhythm for the community (ibid., p. 451) – and state that it requires a coordinator and that those in the community take on leadership roles (ibid., p. 5) to connect those at the core of the community to those on its periphery through ‘build[ing] benches’ (ibid., p. 57). While placemaking encourages an evolving design and intra- and inter-sectorial dialogue for example, this is not uniform across sector, locale, or site (see below), and whereas one can identify a coordinator at a project level, as well as accommodate differing participation levels and tenures, is this possible or correct for the sector as a whole? Furthermore, the ‘top-down’ and the ‘bottom-up’ dialogue is given much noise in placemaking, but is this dialogue meaningful? One cannot deliberately cultivate a community of practice, but ‘elicit and foster participation’ (ibid., p. 13). Is it more prudent then to consider a number of coalescing communities of practices as a sector ecology?

This latter point may be borne out by the following consideration. The value of a community of practice is both short- and long-term: help with immediate problems, reduction in time searching for information or solutions, problem-solving enhanced with a wider perspective, community-supported risk-taking, benchmarking of expertise, and sustained professional and practice development (ibid., p. 15). Here again, we can recognise a project-level practice of placemaking, if not a sector one, that is developed enough to ascribe community-of-practice naming to. However, for a community of practice, value may not be apparent at the start; it may not be apparent to those outside the community; it will change over time and form a systemic body of knowledge (ibid., p. 59). The surfacing of value and its sustained (re)creation is key to the success of the community of practice (ibid.). A lack of value recognition and the constant re-creation of value to those outside of the practice will be something that many placemakers recognise, if only anecdotally.

If placemaking is a community of practice, it is a distributed (ibid., p. 118) one – across intent as much as cultures and geography – and this poses a challenge to it emerging and evolving as a
community of practice, as each subcommunity has its own habitus (Bourdieu, 1997) which can lead to miscommunication or misunderstanding (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 18) when joined as a whole. Wenger points to designing distributed communities to overcome issues of connections and visibility, geographical distance, hierarchies, isolation, and lack of encounter opportunity (ibid., p. 116). However, one cannot avoid the tension that may arise from distributed communities’ crossing of boundaries, diverse affiliations, and competing priorities (ibid., p. 117). The concept of the micropublic (Amin, 2008) or the microcommunity (Kester, 2011) may prove useful to apply here, as both concepts work with difference in a group through relational means, accepting disagreement as a positive force in collective endeavour; as too might an ecology of culture thinking, with dynamic aspects within a larger ecosystem, feedback loops, emergent behaviour, and interdependence and self-organisation. Furthermore, as a community of practice grows in size and duration, the capacity to know all may diminish, and those at its beginning, and as an operational core, may feel antagonised by newcomers. This risks any ensuing multiple sites or trajectories of practice (Hughes et al., 2007, p. 5) not being acknowledged and the reproduction of continuity rather than the fostering of transformation (Hager, in Fuller, 2007, p. 22). Arnstein’s *Ladder of Participation* (1969) may prove useful here, understanding as it does both progression through, and differentiated status of, participation – a more nuanced position than the community of practice ‘participation or not’ purview.

The next placemaking epoch

Over the last ten years, placemaking has evolved through its collaborative and iterative approach, gathering new constituents of practitioners and professions along the way and becoming increasingly cognizant of its political implications and agency. To become a community of practice, an ally to all citizens, and to respond to times of crisis, there is much to evaluate across the placemaking sector. This is alongside an asking of the place-based, and ergo placemaking, ‘new normal’ of the COVID-19 pandemic what value does public space offer in a lockdown for those of us placemakers privileged enough to have time during the pandemic to reflect? We are also asking: what is ahead of us and what do we want to keep from this time and take forward to our ‘next normal’?

The next ten years pose challenges for society that have place and placemaking implications. While placemaking alone cannot change the conditions that produce and maintain structural inequalities – from climate crisis, ageing populations, poor mental health, to systematic inequality, social segregation, and the place-based aspects of these – as placemakers we have to ask ourselves if we are fit for purpose to serve our communities and places and co-create real and integrative solutions to the most pressing concerns of contemporary and future living. The ideal of placemaking offers a practical, proactive, and integrated approach to place: does its reality match that? Furthermore, in the next ten years, the placemaking and regeneration projects of recent years will be reaching a point of maturity that opens them up to a lived-in, experiential evaluation. How do we ensure these evaluations don’t remain in the realm of a performative participation, being side-lined and silenced, and instead are listened to and generatively embraced?

As placemakers, we know that social infrastructure is key to social action and social capital, and that a community’s place attachment is key in this, and it is these factors that in turn ensure strong social support networks. We are adept at seeing challenges from the purview of possibility and in connecting people. It is this asset, of connecting and networking people, that will come to the fore as we move into our ‘next normal’: joining in collaboration all local stakeholders and the communities of place, to deliberate on what we don’t want to return to in our lived and situated experience, as much as what we want to innovate, and to translate this into action.
An imperative of placemaking going forward is a public and enacted commitment to intersectionality: a place that is unwelcome for one is unwelcoming for all and serves only to perpetuate divisive social, political and material relations. A reliance on certain metric evaluations of place can obscure the experiences of those marginalised in the public realm and excluded from its discourse and decision-making. Who is allowed a place in our places, who is heard there, and who sits at the decision-making table, determines what our places can be, and an emancipatory and intersectional placemaking is key to achieving place justice. Achieving such a place is not a matter of engagement and empowerment. As placemakers, we do not empower people; people hold an intrinsic power, and it is our job to ‘create’ platform and share resources for people to enact their power. To quote co-director of Fun Palaces, Stella Duffy OBE: ‘We all have power. It is the system that denies some of us use of it’ (Duffy, 2019). It is within our gift as placemakers to change our sector systems and to use our knowledge of working with communities though change to assist mutual support networks to (further) develop, maintain, and grow as the key-stone in creating equitable and inclusive places. As placemakers we also have a responsibility to help amplify people’s voices – not to speak for them, but to use our professional privilege beside and with them – and interject this into the systems of place to put people at the centre of the decisions government and the private sector are making. This is a co-created engagement that is honest, transparent, and values-based and that respects and is in the service of the communities we work with.

The COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter have not just brought into sharp focus what really matters about place, but also that the stories, myths, and imaginaries we have built our economy and cities around are unfit to confront climate breakdown or intersectional social, racial, or economic inequity. We need new stories, and we need to listen to diverse narratives and knowledges. At the time of writing, we have no concrete way of knowing how the pandemic or Black Lives Matter will change the world and our places therein. What we do know however is that the material conditions and the psychosocial trauma many are now collectively experiencing for the first time has been the long-lived experience of indigenous people, migrants, and people and communities of colour – our responsibility, as placemakers, is not to extract from this lived experience, but to listen deeply and to learn from it and apply that learning forward, as well the white placemakers of us deeply listen to and learn from our people pf colour colleagues, and support emerging placemaking talent from marginalised demographics. Our recovery from the pandemic and our ability to adapt to current climate change and to mitigate what we can of climate emergency requires all of the work we have done before as placemakers, but also a radical transformation. Mental health, civic voice, community building, and equitable societies rely on inclusive, active, public space, where social infrastructure supports social integration. To get to this place, literally and metaphorically, placemaking needs to be the radical practice proposed above, a community-based process, and not an imposed top-down strategy or instrumentalized solution. Placemaking needs to work for social and environmental justice – this is what really matters and should be what shapes the next era of placemaking: to create places that heal, rather than harm.

References


Introduction


Further reading in this volume

Preface: Placemaking in the age of COVID-19 and protest
Jason Schupbach

Chapter 4: A future of creative placemaking
Sarah Calderon and Erik Takeshita

Preface: ‘Disastrous forces, accidental actions, and grassroots responses’
Tom Borup

Preface: The problem with placemaking
Louise Platt

Chapter 14: Experts in their own tomorrows: placemaking for participatory climate futures
Paul Graham Raven

Chapter 20: Displacemaking 2015 and 2020
Catherine Fennell and Daniel Tucker

Preface: Towards developing equitable economies: the concept of Oikos in placemaking
Anita McKeown

Chapter 35: Planning governance – lessons for the integration of placemaking
Nigel Smith
Chapter 39: Translating Outcomes: laying the groundwork for interdisciplinary evaluation of creative placemaking
Jamie Hand
Chapter 40: Transforming community development through arts and culture: a developmental approach to documentation and research
Victor Rubin
Chapter 43: A theory of change for creative placemaking: the experience of the National Endowment for the Arts’ Our Town program: an interview with Patricia Moore Shaffer, PhD
Maria Rosario Jackson
Chapter 44: Creative Placemaking and comprehensive community development: rethinking neighborhood change and evaluation
Maria Rosario Jackson