The Routledge Handbook of Placemaking

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Placemaking in the ecology of the human habitat

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Author preface

The author’s perspective on the three themes discussed in the chapter reflects his first-hand experience as a seasoned urban designer. He has contributed to the national, regional, and local design policy referenced; was a director of the pilot Urban Regeneration Company Liverpool Vision; a Built Environment Expert with Design Council CABE contributing to the Building for Life programme; and, an active member of several regional design review panels and the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) national panel. The most important thing learnt on that professional journey is that an optimistic perspective is an essential attribute for both experts and communities alike in successful placemaking; more so than any concepts or theories about placemaking. We’ll come back to this.

Introduction

While the following discussion is UK focussed, the economic shapers of contemporary urban settlements are generic across the globe along with the urban design theory underpinning urban policy-making. The understanding of ‘place’ as a complex socio-emotional experience is captured by Cresswell’s (2004) definition of place as ‘space endowed with meaning.’ However, ‘place’ is a fluid state where ‘meaning’ can ebb and flow, influenced and directed by complex changes generated by individuals, communities, and wider external forces. Sarr and Palang (2009) present a noteworthy explanation of this complexity in defining place and placemaking through an exploration of theoretical approaches and methodologies on the relationship between humans, environment, and landscape. Within this chapter, I will work with Cresswell’s simple definition, and focus on why ‘meaning’ is important from a placemaking perspective. The physical environments that surround us are no longer the wild ones that served our basic foraging needs. Instead, they are human habitats crafted by us to provide surpluses. This habitat is still ruled by the evolutionary and ecological processes of our social species, but the scale at which we cooperate with each other has enabled us to reshape and colonise most environments in the world. While this cooperation makes us supremely adaptable, our ability to survive extremely harsh environments also, paradoxically, makes us susceptible to exploitation. Examples include our endurance of prolonged warfare, lifetime impoverishment, and the many negative
impacts of disadvantaged urban living. Though people can survive in these environments, their lives are often shortened by sickness and typified by non-cooperative community relationships. As a model aiming for thrival and not just survival, our urban settlements should feel like eutopia (‘well-place’), but in practice this is far from the case. Many forms of exploitation make places fragile and therefore unsustainable for individuals, groups, and sometimes whole societies (Diamond, 2005). The aim of this chapter is to identify the failure of process in contemporary urban planning and explore how an understanding and application of evolutionary psychology and human ecology could provide better models. In short, the ethos of any urban model should start and end with people in mind.

Theoretical underpinnings of urban planning

I began formulating this chapter on an aeroplane over Northern England on a clear November evening. As we approached from the sea, settlement patterns became clearly defined against the black landscape. Cities blazed and villages twinkled, with traffic pulsating in capillary ribbons of red and white around and between them in endless streams. There is a purity in this systemised image of our human habitat from the night sky. There is also a terrible beauty in its scale, sprawl, and traffic volume that can only be appreciated from above. It’s a living plan from this perspective, unlike our everyday experiences on the ground, in place. This is the strategic view of our contemporary environment where we can reflect on the complexity of our habitat while not being overwhelmed by the complications of living in it. We will start our exploration at this strategic level, noting that there are many players, from administrators to users, that determine how well the system functions.

The education of every urban planner and designer starts with the primary theories and concepts of architecture, town planning, landscape, and urban design. While these ideas are not usually applied as tools in practice, they form the bedrock of professional opinion and belief. Perhaps the most enduring of these from a physical design perspective is the work of Vitruvius, famous for his Ten Books on Architecture written in the first century BC (transl. Morris, 1960). Known as the ‘Vitruvian Virtues,’ he proclaims that structures must exhibit the three qualities of firmitatis, utilitatis, venustatis – stability, utility, beauty. While we continue to perceive cities as collections of buildings rather than spaces for people and togetherness, architecture remains the dominant narrative among urban designers.

However, beyond the Vitruvian Virtues, several urban theorists published works in the mid-twentieth century that questioned the modern practice of large-scale city development and set in train the contemplation of how we design cities well for people. Reflecting on the theories and concepts underpinning this movement, Marshall published a paper titled ‘Science, pseudo-science and urban design’ (2012), introducing his paper with a quote from Jane Jacobs: ‘As in the pseudoscience of bloodletting, just so in the pseudoscience of city rebuilding and planning, years of learning and a plethora of subtle and complicated dogma have arisen on a foundation of nonsense.’ While asking if this is important, Marshall concludes that there is a need for ‘more systematic verification and critical assimilation of scientific knowledge within urban design theory.’ In his paper, Marshall critiques four classic urban design narratives in detail: The Image of the City (Lynch, 1964); The Concise Townscape (Cullen, 1961); The Death and Life of Great American Cities (Jacobs, 1961); and A City Is Not a Tree (Alexander, 1965). All published in the 1960s, Marshall notes that they remain uncritically accepted after over half a century by many educational institutions and practitioners alike.

Building on this emerging urban design platform, architects Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter (1978) published Collage City, a critical analysis of Modernist city planning. The title of the
book conjures an attractive visualisation of the above theories, legitimising a *bricolage* of different utopias in contrast to single-handed city models. However, they argue that the ad hoc assembly of historic fragments (what some consider best practice today) provides temporary solutions to problems, with the risk that they become dated as quickly as any totalitarian, fresh-slate approach. They argue for a middle ground where the fragments are applied strategically but not prescriptively by urban designers, with emphasis on the quality of the public realm. Their final paragraph reads: ‘Utopia as metaphor and Collage City as prescription: these opposites, involving the guarantees of both law and freedom, should surely constitute the dialectic of the future…; and, possibly, even common sense concur.’

A common thread in these theoretical approaches is acknowledgement of the human experience of place beyond the educated architectural narrative. They innately look at the science of placemaking, although they do not employ a scientific method in place analysis. While the consideration of cognitive maps, affective navigation, art of relationships, social understanding, and managing complexity are all recognised psychological matters in the context of human habitats, the disciplines of psychology have yet to make inroads into the contemporary training, practice, or policy guidance of built environment professionals. This invites the question whether urban design is merely big architecture, where placemaking is an emerging discipline more concerned with people in place. Instead of conceiving places as the ‘built environment,’ should we instead conceptualise them as the ‘living environment’ (Corcoran and Marhall, 2017), recognising that science is no less creative than art, and that both disciplines are complementary requirements for successful placemaking?

This ecological lens underpinned by psychology and sociology does frame the practice and teachings of some of landscape architecture, with Lawrence Halprin an early exponent. Unlike his contemporary urban theorists, Halprin’s leading concept, the *Ecology of Form* (1982), is an exploration of natural processes and ecological relationships in the context of the methodologies of Gestalt psychology. Encouraging people to participate in the creation of their own environments, Halprin brought abstracted natural form and process into the urban fabric, translating them into everyday lives, and developed a methodological approach to participation and co-design in *Taking Part* (1975) and *The RSVP Cycles: Creative Processes in the Human Environment* (1970). Halprin was a Modernist and thus connected to an international critical conversation, unlike the largely uncritical bubble containing urban design and placemaking. Halprin states:

> To be properly understood, Modernism is not just a matter of cubist space but of a whole appreciation of environmental design as a holistic approach to the matter of making spaces for people to live… Modernism, as I define it and practice it, ‘includes’ and is based on the vital archetypal needs of human beings as individuals as well as social groups.

*(Walker and Simo, 1994)*

But perhaps Halprin was an outlier, and the resource system of place is too wide to be contained by a single movement. Is this why the optimal model of place is so elusive? Or is it because the complexity of place gets in the way of a simplistic notion of cities as engines of economic progress?

**Emergence of urban design and regeneration in the UK**

In practice, academic theories are usurped by a consensual professional narrative revolving around client briefs, the management of development projects, and navigation through the
planning system. This is the business world where products are sold, where fashion, style, and conservative clients and planners’ rule. In response to the negative impact of this practice, urban design emerged as a discipline, building on the UK Conservative Governments regeneration agenda for the 1980s post-industrial urban wastelands. Within a decade of Government putting regeneration on the agenda, and providing significant funding and opportunity for designers, everyone from architects to planners was describing themself as an urban designer. However, they promoted different codes according to their professional backgrounds. Planners generally espoused old Garden City principles, others the architecturally led New Urbanism concepts from the US, while many architects simply rebranded their masterplans as urban design. Despite the creation of the cross-disciplinary Urban Design Group and its call for joined-up thinking and holistic methods, emerging multidisciplinary practice simply created uneasy silo thinking under a single roof. Increasingly it became dominated by architectural concepts and styles.

The era of the ‘built environment’ was born, encompassing planning, development, and regeneration. Initially referred to as an ‘industry,’ it was soon elevated to ‘sector’ status. This terminology and referencing reflect the increasing scale of operation and economic importance of this activity consistent with the way government viewed its function. Since the 1980s, governments have encouraged public authorities to move departments concerned with the built environment into the private sector. The first discipline outsourced was engineering, leading to the growth of international super-sized ‘one-stop-shop’ consultancies and the stripping out of professional built environment expertise from local authorities. The immediate consequence of this is that there was no intrinsic and embedded knowledge of place, pride, or sense of ownership in the people that administer the stewardship of places. All that remains is a statutory skeleton staff of planning and highway officers. In contrast, public health has not been outsourced in the same way, retaining a credible critical mass of excellence and knowledge for population health within the public sector. In this way, any residual idea of urban theory underpinning the work of the public sector is squeezed out alongside any sense of duty to provide environments conducive to thriving for communities, and with little space left for theory in the business plans of the private sector. Traditionally, local authorities prepared bespoke guidance on elements of place-making with the purpose of benchmarking quality aspirations for their local areas. This included conservation policy, guidance to building owners, planning briefs to guide areas of change, and development briefs for specific sites etc. These proactive tools now need to be bought in from boutique urban design consultants with no locally vested interest, accountability or opportunity to monitor and nuance the guidance over the long term. Quality outcomes rely on the experience, expertise, and capacity of the client manager within authorities.

This creates a contradiction. While government seeks improvement to place design on the one hand, it has set design activity remote from place and community. Focussed on economic outcomes rather than a plural model including wellbeing and sustainability, it is destined to fail. The idea that ‘authority’ and strangers are doing things to ‘communities’ instead of with them becomes clear. Artist Amy Casey (2020) captures a sense of this: ‘In my paintings, I have been trying to find stability in a landscape with no land. How can we find our footing in a world that seems to be constantly shifting?’ The recognition of the ecological flow of cities in this statement, contrasted with the almost universal lack of agency people have over this process, makes the city just like any wild forest we previously foraged; not such a bespoke human habitat after all.

An urban renaissance – improving design

When the Blair Labour Government took office in 1997, they commissioned a Task Force of built environment professionals to establish a vision based on design excellence, social
wellbeing, and environmental responsibility for declining urban places. Their report ‘Towards an Urban Renaissance’ (1999), provided the basis of the ‘Urban White Paper: Our Towns and Cities – the Future’ (Department of the Environment, 2000). This was the beginning of a new millennium and new aspirations for urban places. The Town and Country Planning Act 1990, which controls the development of all land, was reformed by the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 and again reformed by the Planning Act 2008. The Coalition Government subsequently introduced further reforms to the primary Act with the Localism Act 2011. These are significant changes over a short period of time within a planning landscape that needs stable and long-term processes for places and their communities to thrive. In practice, much of this change centres on deregulation aimed at stimulating local economic growth, which is not always complementary to the claimed objectives of increasing design excellence, social wellbeing, and environmental responsibility.

The first action from the Task Force recommendations was the establishment of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) and for CABE to publish urban design guidance in support of the Planning Act targeted at local authority planners, private developers, and their design teams. The result of this, By Design: Urban Design in the Planning System – Towards Better Practice was published in 2000. The national regeneration agency, English Partnerships (EP), concurrently published the Urban Design Compendium with similar guidance targeted at the agency’s project managers who were responsible for all public regeneration investment. Both documents were enthusiastically welcomed by planners in the public sector, because like the project management surveyors in EP, they had little or no design training or experience and yet both groups had become the front line of this Urban Renaissance aiming to drive up design quality in all new developments. In the private sector, feelings were mixed about these documents. The emerging urban design practices embraced them, partly because they were authors or contributors, but also because they provided a supportive touchstone for their specialised practice, helping to drive up the aspiration of their public and private sector clients. Architects on the other hand were less enthusiastic, perceiving the guidance as rules that would suppress their creativity. They also levelled similar criticism at the new national design review panel directed by CABE and the regional panels established by the new Regional Development Agencies.

CABE went on to create the Building for Life (2008) protocol for residential development proposals which posed a checklist of questions for design teams and planning officers to use as the basis for discussion and negotiation through the planning application process. The first edition contained 20 questions, each worth zero or one point. The CABE rule of thumb was that a scheme needed to score a minimum of 14 points to have satisfied the requirements of the Planning Act and thus be eligible for planning consent. To strengthen the protocol, CABE set up an independent panel of accredited assessors and ensured that every planning authority in England had at least one accredited assessor within their department. However, while it is a good idea to set out clear principles as to what constitutes excellence in design, with peer review panels articulating those principles and tools like Building for Life filtering out poor design, in practice it is very difficult to define terms like ‘well designed,’ ‘well planned,’ ‘good design,’ or ‘design excellence.’ These terms are used throughout the urban policy documents and design review discussions, but when applied to real places with many players involved, the terms are wide open to interpretation and challenge. The problem of defining ‘good design’ and of reaching consensus among professionals is most evident during the design review process and in the negotiation of planning applications. Design and Access Statements are key documents in planning applications that set out how the proposal will deliver ‘good design’ in line with national and local design guidance and other statutory requirements. Residential schemes often include self-reported Building for Life Assessments too. Not infrequently, the two sides to the negotiation
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hold opposing interpretations of the generic guidance. Less frequently, design review panel members can also disagree among themselves.

From a placemaking perspective, this strategic context of urban space planning and design determines whether ‘places of meaning’ can be delivered or sustained. As Marshall notes, without ‘any systematic verification and critical assimilation of scientific knowledge’ the theoretical basis of good place design is based largely on an uncritical professional consensus of architectural practice. Essentially, it becomes a subjective value judgement on how people respond to places. Thus, when design guidance is put to the test, consensus fades. Our intrinsic human need to connect and interact with others effectively relies upon a public realm that affords this safely. In statutory planning instruments, this domain is the primary responsibility of highway engineers who define urban success in terms of free-flowing transport, a convention that often conflicts with urban design best practice and acts in direct opposition to the need to interact face-to-face in our public realms. Just like planners and development surveyors, highway engineers have no formal training or experience in urban design, concentrating instead on a technical agenda. While the design guidance documents described earlier explicitly deal with movement, they are largely ignored by this powerful group. Recognising these shortcomings, the Department for Transport commissioned their own design guide, *Manual for Streets* (2007). Unfortunately, its scope is restricted to lightly trafficked new residential roads, which undermines the effectiveness of design guidance on the quality of existing places.

**An urban renaissance – regeneration in the UK**

The second theme of this chapter is urban development and the disconnect from strategic thinking. The Urban Renaissance brought a positive focus to existing urban areas and communities, with emphasis on tackling difficult issues that were perceived to be beyond the resources of local authorities. These included failing and complex city centres and extensive areas of perceived housing failure in post-industrial cities such as Liverpool, Manchester, and Sheffield. Urban Regeneration Companies (URCs) were partnership quangos between local authorities, English Partnerships, Regional Development Agencies, and Government Offices. They had independent chairs and a board containing senior executives from the public, private, and third sectors, and a staff of executives with specialist skills, supplemented with secondees from the partnership organisations. The largely economic role of these URCs was to prepare visionary regeneration frameworks for their areas to raise aspirations and direct public spending to catalyst projects that would attract and support private inward investment. The authors’ involvement in the pilot URC in Liverpool was edifying from a placemaking perspective.

The brief prepared by EP called for the development of a city centre masterplan but citing their draft *Urban Design Compendium* enabled us to take an alternative framework approach better suited to addressing the strategic issues. However, it was a revelation to discover that most people working on the regeneration had no design training and did not see design as their responsibility. Effectively, it was business as usual, with the URC seen as another funding opportunity and delivery agent. All authorities are economically dominated, and although they see the ‘value’ in architecture, they struggle with placemaking because its measures are not simple. Unfortunately, this short-term approach is blind to the considerable costs associated with not delivering or nurturing placemaking appropriately. Taking the framework approach, the pilot URC in Liverpool city centre successfully stitched the fabric of the city streets back together, and in the retail expansion at Liverpool One, the fabric was appropriately extended to re-join city quarters, producing more ‘social places.’ We achieved the delivery of ‘good design’ because it was a condition of funding or development land access, but we could not advance strategic
urban thinking or embed a positive placemaking ethos for the future. Political leadership is a fundamental issue in this. In short, places ‘choose to fail or succeed’ (Diamond, 2005).

The Housing Market Renewal Initiative (HMRI) was a second significant programme in the Urban Renaissance. Developed by the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies (CURS) University of Birmingham, the National Housing Federation used their research to successfully lobby the government’s 2002 Comprehensive Spending Review. The programme was a fresh-slate, one-size-fits-all approach, on an immense scale applied in many established but unique urban areas, conceived without any urban design underpinning. Authorities partnered with volume house builders largely without appraisal, analysis, or design consideration of the selected renewal areas, assuming these private companies were the only or the best agents of urban renewal. The decision-makers in the new public–private partnerships then concluded it would be uneconomic to regenerate the existing fabric, making mass demolition a fait accompli, despite government insistence that clearance should be a last resort. This mirrored the ‘clean slate’ approach of the 1960s where terraced housing was replaced with towers in open green spaces in the inner-city, and similar clearances in the 1970s where inner-city communities were moved to suburban New Towns. This was a third wave of the same mistakes where communities were destroyed, while new ‘places’ were rarely created. Partnering with developers on a purely economic basis bound the authorities to delivering a suburban built form within the inner city. This top-down economic process imposed the antithesis of best practice urban design, which cannot be overcome by any amount of community engagement or participation. In the context of Collage City, this is more like jigsaw planning without common sense or wisdom. Despite community opposition from London to Liverpool to Glasgow, the HMRI programmes implemented what they believed people wanted and needed (National Audit Office, 2007).

The main issues in the HMRI areas were social ones, exacerbated when communities were ‘cleansed’ from their areas, and the impact of that extended into the wider urban fabric, predictably damaging adjacent communities in turn. However, within the Urban Renaissance, New East Manchester URC illustrated a more sustainable approach to community-led regeneration. When the failure of places becomes too toxic to ignore, programmes like the recent national ‘Sink’ Estates Strategy or NHS Healthy New Towns are initiated, but seldom address underlying and complex social issues of place. However, addressing these issues is vital to the social sustainability of existing places and the shortcomings that make places toxic. It therefore raises the question: can ‘placemaking’ be the bridge between strategic urban planning and development led urban design?

**Placemaking – a social science approach**

Shifting our perspective from the strategic overview to the lived experience on the ground, we immediately find ourselves foraging in our environment for resources, drawing on all our evolutionary instincts, responses, and behaviours that have helped us to survive to this point of human history. This foraging includes resources such as trade, companionship, and cooperation in an environment of trust and safety. To understand our implicit needs, how we respond to our environments, and how these things effect our behaviours we must turn to sound science for models, not to architects or economists.

Psychological research over the past century has provided insight into our being, the significance of our individuality, and the evolutionary importance of living cooperatively with others. It provides an understanding of life-span human development through the cycle of our responses to environment, how this affects our behaviour, and in turn how our behaviours impact on the environment. When we find places harsh or suboptimal, it is often the result of
coercion from ‘outside’ rather than enduring cooperation from ‘within.’ However, even ‘harsh’ cities will endure because humans have evolved to adapt and cope with threat, change, and disaster, although neither cities nor their citizens will be sustainable if they remain in a chronic survival mode. Public health research identifies the negative impacts of cities on health and well-being as the ‘urban penalty,’ or the ‘urbanicity effect.’ Social disintegration and social isolation are identified as key factors, and where there are urban–rural differences, they survive controls for broad socio-economic factors. For example, Huxley and Rogers (2001) showed that communities characterised by high quality of life have greater sense of belonging, access to leisure opportunities, neighbourliness, sense of security, and less isolation. Conversely, communities whose residents report lower quality of life perceive that their neighbourhoods are failing to thrive, less neighbourly, and facilitate fewer leisure opportunities. Furthermore, Ellaway et al. (2001) reported that people living in under-resourced communities have lower levels of self-esteem, tend to feel lonelier and have less sense of control over their lives compared to those living in better-resourced neighbourhoods.

In the aftermath of recent global disasters (Hurricane Sandy; Chicago heatwave; Kobe earthquake; Tamil Nadu tsunami), studies illustrate that ‘social ties can be a matter of life or death – neighbourhoods with strong community connections regularly had the highest survival rates’ (Sampson, 2013). This extends to the prosocial behaviour they support which is central to the wellbeing of social groups across a range of scales where empathy is a strong motive in eliciting prosocial behaviour but is harder to sustain in disadvantaged harsh environments. Thus, poorly performing places are ‘toxic assets’ that generate their own negative costs, and placemaking to support resilient communities becomes of interest to everyone. While these findings put ‘placemaking’ at the top of the wellbeing agenda, there is disconnection between what people really need from their places and the practice of urban design.

The work of biologist David Sloan Wilson illustrates a way forward that embraces the human need to support ourselves and others. He has been applying modern evolutionary theory to understand and improve his home city of Binghamton, NY. In Darwin’s City (2011, p. 146) he says: ‘I really wanted to see a map of altruism… I saw it in my mind.’ Wilson contends that his pioneering approach can be applied to any city because ‘evolution takes place not only by small mutational change – individuals from individuals – but by groups becoming so well integrated that they become higher-level organisms in their own right – individuals created from groups’ (Wilson and O’Brien 2009, p. 156). Among the findings of Wilson’s group is that perceived neighbourhood quality is a statistically significant predictor of individual and group prosociality. A teenager’s tendency to behave in prosocial ways correlates with their own perceptions of neighbourhood quality and with the quality ratings of other residents, demonstrating that our prosocial cooperation is dynamic and contingent upon our perceptions of environment. Sustainable placemaking must understand the physical attributes of place that determine this conditional prosocial behaviour in order to produce environments that maximize citizens wellbeing and quality of life. Until we develop a model to affect positive change in both community and place, the creation of healthy and sustainable places will remain a slogan. The first step seems clear: we must design and maintain psychologically informed environments that reduce feelings of ‘threat’ and so optimise opportunities to interact and cooperate. The application of Psychologically Informed Environments (PIE) is already mainstream in hospitals and some workplaces. It needs to expand into urban design and placemaking.

Taking the PIE or human ecology approach in a world of rapid urbanisation and climate change will deliver and maintain optimum environments to suit the human condition and maintain the dynamic and symbiotic relationship between place, man, and culture. Several countries, including Wales and New Zealand, have put wellbeing at the top of their national
agendas, demanding action to deliver this in all policy areas. Perhaps it is time to reinvigorate the Urban Renaissance – there was nothing wrong with a vision based on design excellence, social wellbeing, and environmental responsibility. However, perhaps it should be redrafted in a way that emphasises the primacy of social wellbeing as an outcome delivered through good placemaking and resulting in environmental responsibility. The intuitive theories and concepts underpinning urban planning should be assimilated and verified by scientific knowledge, and new ones developed for prosocial places. Perhaps Collage City and its emphasis on the quality of the public realm is a useful metaphor, along with Halprin’s Ecology of Form. To reconnect the three themes of strategy, development, and experience requires more movement back and forth between the world of theory, the world of practice, and the world of experience, in cooperative action over our commons. This movement needs to be based on building optimism, because that is the only route out of languishing into a future of thriving. A socio-ecological approach is about more than a horizontal growth strategy for declining places. It is a vertical strategy to move places and communities from languishing to flourishing.

References


Further reading in this volume

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*Cara Courage*

Chapter 5: Making places for survival: looking to a creative placemaking past for a guide to the future
*Jeremy Liu*

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