Introduction (2020)

Five years after our original dialogue on placemaking was published in *Avery Review* (Fennell and Tucker, 2015), we reconvened in 2020 to revisit our initial interest in the topic and reflect on how the discourse and practices have evolved. Drawing on our diverse reference points as an artist and as an anthropologist, we consider the ways in which our field experiences have introduced contradictions and complexities facing the field at large. Starting out with a dialogue focused on recent experiences in Chicago and broadening in 2020 to include reference points in Philadelphia and New York City, this interview considers developments in the critical literature of placemaking as well as a number of specific case studies including Rebuild Foundation and the Village of Arts & Humanities. In conclusion, trends regarding storytelling and concerns about how these practices confront issues of equity during the public health crisis are considered.

Displacemaking (2015)

As two former Chicagoans who think about the politics of urban development in and beyond Chicago, we decided in the early summer of 2015 to stage the kind of dialogue we, and our publishers at the *Avery Review*, would be eager to hear at the Chicago Architecture Biennial. The starting point was our shared concern with the now firmly established set of practices known as ‘placemaking’ and we branched out into art, philanthropy, and planning. In order to ground our conversation, we read two recent White Papers on the subject, ‘Places in the Making’ (Silberberg, 2013) and ‘Creative Placemaking’ (Markusen and Gadwa, 2010). Placemaking, as one of these papers defined it, involves ‘the deliberate shaping of an environment to facilitate social interaction and improve a community’s quality of life’ (Silberberg, 2013).

*Catherine Fennell (CF):* One can’t follow the politics of urban redevelopment in Chicago without coming across conversations about the importance of ‘place’ or ‘placemaking.’ These conversations seem to have picked up especially in the last five or six years, in tandem with the ‘Great Recession.’ Yet these terms don’t seem that prevalent in New
York, the city where I currently reside, at least not in everyday talk. What should we make of the tractability of these terms in some cities and not others?

Daniel Tucker (DT): Chicago is a city that uniquely combines (some of) the wealth of Manhattan with the abandonment of Detroit. This opens up the city as a policy lab where there are resources to test ideas, and disinvested contexts and populations to test them on. That combination accounts for top-down policy experiments as well as some of the more quasi-grassroots interventions. I say ‘quasi,’ because the grassroots is a bit more embedded within power structures in Chicago than in a city with a more thorough abandonment. So placemaking might emerge in Chicago as a rhetorical bridge between those different sectors. It seems like NYC has plenty of placemaking projects, but they are much more integrated into the logic of planning there as opposed to being layered in as a special project like in the context of Chicago. Bloomberg could be considered a placemaker, while Giuliani was a ‘broken windows’ guy (that might pave the way for placemaking?). Bryant Park, Project for Public Spaces, and Times Square are all proto-placemaking efforts, no? Maybe the term is less commonly used because of the ubiquity of the concepts?

CF: Chicago’s long been a space for producing knowledge about urbanism and experimental interventions that would retool urban life. You see it already in the writings of the Chicago School sociologists. More recently, you see it in the city’s ambitious public housing reforms of the past 20 years, in which public officials, private developers, and philanthropic foundations partnered to refine redevelopment approaches that might prove to be useful in other cities. So, for instance, consider how staff and trustees of Detroit’s Skillman Foundation recently looked to Chicago’s MacArthur Foundation for ‘placemaking strategies’ that would mitigate the effects of the foreclosure crisis at the neighborhood level. Skillman was looking at MacArthur’s ‘New Communities Program.’ This program emerged when that foundation sought to stimulate community-based quality-of-life planning initiatives as public housing came down all around that city. Terms like ‘community’ and ‘place’ resonate emotionally, but they also need to be situated within an inter-urban economy of knowledge and development practices.

What’s certainly ubiquitous in New York is just how much private interests are able to capitalize on novel development opportunities. The case studies we read were all clear that placemaking projects and the ‘vibrant places’ they create have quite quantifiable returns. For instance, we learned that ‘in just the two years following [Bryant Park’s] restoration, rental activity in the area increased by 60 percent’ (Silberberg, 2013, p. 31). Seems like a winning prospect.

But it’s important to note here that a private corporation drove this restoration, not a city government’s parks and recreation department. And here’s where imaginations around development, placemaking, and urban or regional competition seem to overlap: if cities that attract tourists and a young, talented workforce have enticing public places like an elevated rail line reimagined as a park (New York’s High Line), or a derelict city park reinvented as a premier events and gathering space (New York’s Bryant Park), wouldn’t it be good for other cities to have that too, especially if they will become competitive in an era of inter-urban competition? In the US, we need to recognize that placemaking is first and foremost a development activity that emerged during the very decades we saw federal and state investments in urban infrastructure, housing, and social programming diminish.

I want to pick up on your observation about placemaking and broken-windows policing. All the cases we read emphasized the need for ‘vibrant’ spaces and talked
about a diversity of users and uses. But who and what counts as ‘vibrant’? We read that Bryant Park ‘provides much-needed amenities to anyone who wants to use them,’ including ‘award-winning restrooms.’ We read that it ‘welcomes the homeless – assuming the vast number of other visitors will diminish any negative effect the homeless may have.’ After a day of working in the public library in Bryant Park, I can go outside into the park that surrounds it, sit on one of those folding green chairs, and unwind. But attempt to stretch out on the lawn? I promise you, someone will be by to tell you to sit up. Bryant Park Corporation might officially welcome the homeless, yet it doesn’t welcome homeless-like activities and their potential ‘negative effect.’ ‘Vibrant for whom, and toward what end?’ need to be questions we ask of all placemaking projects.

But I also think we should avoid simply reducing this very complex story to big interests, real estate developers, or philanthropic donors. Clearly, placemaking projects strike a chord for many people, in many different cities. Otherwise they wouldn’t take hold or be so exportable. Those chairs all over Bryant Park? They’re light. I can pick them up. I can reposition them to get the best view of what’s going on. I feel like I have some say, some autonomy, some ownership over how I use, or in the language of the cases we read, ‘activate’ that space. But it’s important to ask about the relationship between the demand for places that (for some) feel authentic and flexible, and the demand for urbanites – citizens, workers, neighbors, etc. – who bring flexibility and authenticity to the table. It’s especially important to ask these questions as the kind of large-scale public works projects or social investments we associate with a different era of city building recede further into the past.

The pieces we read together all argued that artistic practice can be harnessed toward placemaking, and several made a strong case that placemaking is inextricable from the activity of redevelopment and small-scale entrepreneurialism. You’re an artist who has thought long and hard about development, but you’re also an artist who has been pulled into institutions with concerted commitments to ‘creative placemaking.’ I’m thinking of your residency at The University of Chicago’s Gray Center for Arts and Inquiry, just one of the new initiatives happening on campus along with its ‘Arts Incubator.’ After 50-plus years of cutting itself off from its surroundings in ways that advanced the devaluation of areas to the west and south, my alma mater has recently been capitalizing on real estate investment and development opportunities in its own backyard. One way it is doing this is by promoting ‘creative placemaking’ projects on the peripheries (or frontiers) of its expansion.

For example, one of the first instructions I got as a newly arriving graduate student in the fall of 2001 at an orientation session for new students was to avoid waiting at the ‘desolate’ Green Line train and bus stop on Garfield Boulevard and Washington Park. Today, if I need to pass some time while waiting for the bus to campus, I can stop in at a quirky storefront café right next door to the Arts Incubator. It is named ‘Currency Exchange,’ after a business that used to occupy this site – a one-stop financial services station for people too poor and too disenfranchised to have a regular bank account. Such businesses typically charge hefty fees for services like cashing a paycheck or paying a utility bill. While waiting for the bus, I can get a nice cup of coffee or a really good biscuit, a nod to culinary traditions of Black migrants who settled the South Side of Chicago just as ethnic whites abandoned it. While there, I might take in the work of local artists, or an event featuring discussions about community-driven arts initiatives. Theaster Gates, a well-known artist who is also on faculty, is the brainchild of this
Displacemaking 2015 and 2020

space and its programming, but the university actually owns the building. How can or should we draw firm lines between development, entrepreneurialism, and artistic practice?

DT: There are many conceptions of what it means to be an artist, and certainly the identity of an artist is different than a coherent definition of art, despite many definitions leaning toward art being anything that is made by a self-identified artist. I recently read a piece by Willa Cather from 1920 on ‘The Art of Fiction,’ where she explains:

Writing ought either to be the manufacture of stories for which there is a market demand – a business as safe and commendable as making soap or breakfast foods – or it should be an art, which is always a search for something for which there is no market demand, something new and untried, where the values are intrinsic and have nothing to do with standardized values.

(Cather, 1920)

I think Cather’s range of what writing ought to be corresponds with the broad definition of art that is utilized in placemaking literature. For those advocating placemaking, great importance is not placed on the content or form of art – the point is to get artists’ bodies into particular contexts. Literally described in Creative Placemaking (Markusen and Gadwa, 2010) as ‘an entrepreneurial asset ripe for development,’ those bodies represent latent capital, with the caveat later acknowledged that ‘artists are twice as likely as workers overall to have completed college degrees… yet artists’ median annual income lags behind that of other professional workers by 19.4 percent.’

If you are an artist working today, you cannot ignore developers and policy-makers’ instrumentalization of your entrepreneurial yet precarious position. You must make an effort to negotiate your relationship to concepts like ‘creative industries,’ ‘placemaking,’ and ‘civic engagement’ in the same way that artists have also (and continue to need to) grapple with categories like ‘beauty,’ ‘politics,’ ‘identity,’ ‘community,’ and ‘autonomy.’ For instance, there are those artists that continue to advocate for autonomy, yet their bodies are as functional as any other body as an ‘asset ripe for development,’ and so it is irresponsible to act as if that isn’t taking place. Considering that, I am not sure that a firm line between the noncommercial and the commercial is any more possible than one between the autonomous and the instrumentalized. But I do think that tension requires artists to be strategic about their engagement with creative placemaking and the like in order to both advocate for art and deepen democratic participation and redistribution of resources.

CF: You’re someone who has built your artistic practice around the exploration of popular or grassroots social movements. Much of the placemaking discourse positions placemaking as a bottom-up, radically democratic, or civic activity, in marked contrast to more top-down interventions. Is creative placemaking akin to a social movement?

DT: To address this, let me dig into the texts a little bit. Rhetorically, placemaking is described as ‘iterative, process-oriented, combining tactics’ and ‘decentralized’ – which all sound a lot like the descriptions of the open source software and global justice movements of recent decades – and is directly compared with the environmental sustainability movement that emerged in the 1970s.

The texts we read seem to waiver between claiming that the placemaking professional of the past is gone and making numerous references to ‘the placemakers’ as if they are a class of people. In my reading of the texts, most projects strongly rely on
some kind of ‘creative initiator’ taking the lead role. They seem to correspond with social theorist Michael Albert’s ‘coordinator class,’ who are often the people performing most of the creative and empowering parts of a job. A veteran of the New Left, Albert has described the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s in the US and Europe as being shortsighted about the role of the coordinators – saying that these movements put a lot of energy into direct democracy but never addressed that fundamental division of labor, which became reproduced in the leadership of many of their organizations.

While my gut tells me that placemaking and social movements are different on the basis of professionalization, I have to admit that there is as much professionalization in social justice activism as there appears to be in placemaking. I think that movements and creative placemaking both need to struggle against this professionalization in order to retain what is really most important about both – people taking control of their own lives and environments.

**CF:** One of the assumptions driving the discourse on placemaking is that far too many Americans move through spaces that lack a coherent or fulfilling ‘sense of place.’ These soulless spaces are ready to be ‘activated’ through artistic or design-based activities into vibrant and inclusive places where one might stroll, sit, and talk, or maybe even eat their lunch in the company of others. It’s fair to ask ‘who’ is included and left out when we talk about this ‘lack,’ but harder to entertain the aspirations driving it. How/why should we do both?

**DT:** There are a few moments in the two texts we read where the authors articulate how cities arrived at the state they are presently in (which, presumably, they’re trying to get out of via placemaking.) The general narrative is that big infrastructure projects messed up the intimacy of cities and then deindustrialization changed their physical, social, and economic landscape. The lineage of thought traced as a canon of placemaking includes Jane Jacobs (1961) and Kevin Lynch (1996) among others. Henri Lefebvre (1968) and David Harvey (2013) were also invoked, to point to a more critical take on the redistributive goals that placemaking projects might take on in relationship to the concept of the ‘right to the city.’ If placemaking as a discourse can hold some of these critiques alongside lighter and more positive practices consistent with the definition offered in *Places in the Making* – ‘The practice aims to improve the quality of a public place and the lives of its community in tandem’ (Silberberg, 2013) – then it could be a really powerful and useful framework for creating more participatory and equitable cities.

Back to your reference about the University of Chicago. I see these major institutions like University of Chicago or University of Pennsylvania doing a dance where they direct resources toward repairing damaged relationships with surrounding communities with art and social justice programming at the forefront. Cynically I’d say these instances of community building, outreach, and resource sharing are serving as multicultural Trojan horses for the ongoing expansion of the university’s development agenda. But I also recognize that institutions are people as much as they are structures for people to pass through. And incorporations of the concepts of the ‘right to the city’ could facilitate some kind of small-scale but meaningful reparations to neighboring communities.

I am curious about the role conflict can play in placemaking. For instance, when we started this dialogue in early June, an article came out on a local website about neighborhood residents opposing a new pop-up beer garden in the Point Breeze...
neighborhood of Philadelphia. The Center City – adjacent neighborhood is historically African American and is experiencing a high rate of displacement. When the developer who is backing this business was defending his plan, he explained that ‘the beer garden is really just the backdrop… We have food trucks, we have a farmstand, we have a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) drop-off, flea markets, yoga classes’ (Henninger, 2015). Sounds like a laundry list of vibrancy. What do you think is the endgame for this kind of sharing economy, a locavore placemaking-driven development?

**CF:** Asking about endgames is important. I think we need to not only be clear about what the endgames are, but also about for whom they’re conceived. Point Breeze’s story is particular, but there’s something very familiar here for those who think about the transformation of American cities over the past 30 or so years.

Point Breeze is in South Philadelphia. Before it was an African American neighborhood it was an area where Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants and their children lived. Many of them, like my grandmother, left South Philadelphia for the suburbs as soon as they got the chance. Now some of their grandchildren have become interested in such spaces. So, the endgame for one group of people – financially stable, young white people – might be getting the chance to live in dense urban spaces in which they feel rooted or grounded. What is this group so hungry for that makes the idea of locality, of local food boxes, or whatever else is on that laundry list, so appealing? Answering that question would force us into a serious examination of suburban America and the types of social collectivities it promoted. This examination would have to go beyond knee-jerk critiques of ‘placeless’ suburbs or naive gentrifiers. What is the endgame for current African American residents of Point Breeze or similar neighborhoods in Chicago, Detroit, or Cleveland? They have been waiting for decades for substantial reinvestment. Now that it’s finally arrived, it’s come as opportunities to consume craft beer and similar products. Asking about the endgame of placemaking for these residents forces a serious reckoning with the unevenness of how goods and services are distributed in urban space, and how that distribution extends long-standing racial and economic inequalities.

What you have in this case are two very different visions of a healthy place and what it takes to sustain it. The first vision seems to suggest that what’s necessary is energetic young folks who gravitate toward similar self-improvement projects. So, let’s gather together with our yoga mats, or make sure that we, as neighbors, buy from local farmers. Such projects do have a collective ethos, but it seems to me that this ethos is underwritten by the experience of individual or shared consumption. The other vision does not rely on energetic young consumers, but on general resources distributed in ways that would sustain a much broader group of people. What do long-term Point Breeze residents want? The article tells us that they hoped for investment in a recreation center or a library. These institutions are especially important for the care of very young and old people. These groups may not have any substantial spending power, but long-term Point Breeze residents see their care as important. What’s more, making such institutions viable usually requires resources that exceed those available in a sharing economy, no matter how chock-full of goodwill it may be.

And that’s what is most interesting to me about these calls for ‘placemaking’ – they do articulate a vision of collective life and obligation. Yet this vision seems somewhat narrow, safe, and conflict averse. Energetic young people or creative, entrepreneurial types passing around local vegetables or selling each other craft beer might activate one particular vision of a healthy place. Yet it is still unclear to me how such gestures will
guarantee that all of Philly’s, or for that matter Chicago’s, rec centers, libraries, schools, and parks are open, well-maintained, well-staffed, and safe places in which a range of people can play, learn, and spend time.

Displacemaking (2020)

In this second interview, conducted in late April 2020, five years after the original specifically for this volume we revisit questions about placemaking practices’ relationship to equity and inclusion while also considering the standardization of these practices and the status of ‘place’ at a moment of pandemic.

Catherine Fennell (CF): In recent years I’ve noticed some standardized features of ‘placemaking’ practices, at least those that unfold within smaller-scale urban community economic development efforts. So, in addition to moves to bring a recognizable ‘place brand’ or ‘place identity’ to a particular area, I’ve noticed similarity across social programming undertaken under the banner of ‘placemaking’: small stages or covered shelters for social meets ups and theatricals, community game or play nights, or the incorporation of ‘storytelling’ events and tours. The latter are especially interesting to me because they evoke standard methods that a professional ethnographer might employ to investigate ‘the lived experience’ of our interlocutors – interviews, oral histories, guided walks, etc. Has there been a similar move to draw artists or at least recognizable aesthetic practices into placemaking projects? What do you make of them?

Daniel Tucker (DT): I’ve seen the same patterns. Professionalization is certainly one culprit. Placemaking has become a cottage industry: consultants fulfill every aspect of placemaking projects, from project management and community engagement to the more open-ended role of artists, who sometimes teeter between those employed for their critical self-expression and those who are effectively designers fulfilling the demands of a client. Often there are filmmakers and even social scientists brought on to document the project. Within a low-budget lab atmosphere, these roles can become hybridized. Certain tried-and-true tropes emerge, especially if you have people either working on multiple projects in multiple cities using a similar or identical set of techniques, or because the field has gradually been codified through funders, or educators like myself teaching these techniques. Most art schools would not have offered courses of this nature a decade ago.

As placemaking has become professionalized, the cost of making an ‘engaging’ new public space has intensified. It can be cost-prohibitive to design a space that will last. That task might actually be better suited to landscape architects who are prepared for that challenge but also charge appropriately. An artist hired instead might fall within the budget but not build something lasting for the community to take pride in. How many small grant-funded parklets in disrepair does it take before new lines get drawn? And if the line says that pop-ups are all that can be funded, then programming has to be front-and-center. So yeah, sometimes standard tools develop because they look good in documentation, sometimes because they’re cheap, and sometimes because they work.

A more critical discourse about placemaking has developed that argues for place-keeping. Thanks largely to the work of writer and arts administrator Roberto Bedoya (Schwartzman, 2017), practitioners have also begun to interrogate what constitutes
the work’ of place. In the ethical minefield of these practices, engaging people around ‘stories’ or ‘lived experience’ allows outside practitioners to effectively de-center themselves. People leading this work in communities where they have deeper histories are then able to mobilize their sensitivity to the relationships they’ve cultivated by doing work that shares hidden histories that would not be immediately apparent from less attuned perspectives.

I’d love to hear more about the ways you see storytelling functioning in relationship to placemaking and ‘doing ethnography.’ How do you understand the appeal of storytelling within placemaking efforts? Do you see a connection to the equity issues alluded to in the tension between placekeeping vs. placemaking?

CF: I understand why ‘placemaking’ programming might foreground storytelling or oral history collection. It’s a way to incorporate local or resident perspectives into broader development processes that have a history of leaving such perspectives behind. These practices are something of a corrective, as part of a larger turn within planning or development circles to become more sensitive to the thoughts, needs, and wants of long-standing community members. And they can imbue a place with the feel of particularity, of texture, of authenticity.

The question I have at a moment of more formal or even professionalized approaches to placemaking would be the terms on which facilitators would invite and then include these perspectives. When I’ve observed these sessions, it quickly becomes apparent that some kinds of stories, histories, or perspectives are valued over others. So, for example, take a point often valorized in placemaking discourses, the conviction that robust public social life characterized by a density of diverse persons and the possibility of chance meetings among friends, acquaintances, and strangers is a good. There’s a world of difference in asking someone to reminisce or tell a story about general practices of social togetherness, i.e. the things that you and your family or neighbors do or used to do together here, and asking them to reflect upon why some forms of social togetherness are valorized over others, or how their neighborhood became diagnosed with needing more ‘place’ or ‘togetherness’ in the first place.

As much as chance meetings or storytelling sessions unfolding in places like a well-designed parklet might be exciting for some, they are, depending on histories of segregation and criminalization, unpleasant or downright dangerous for others. I have seen placemaking approaches acknowledge or welcome histories or stories that are unexpected or even difficult, for instance, narratives about racial discrimination, civil unrest, and the like. But my question is still toward what end? How are such histories and stories framed, edited, archived? What ‘takeaways’ emerge in the process of crafting and consuming them, and for whom?

Here the distinction that Roberto Bedoya and Jenny Lee draw between creative ‘placemaking’ and creative ‘placekeeping’ might be helpful. Let’s define ‘place’ as feelings of social cohesiveness anchored by the material and aesthetic dimensions of a particular geographic location, dynamic feelings that take shape over long stretches of time. If you start with the assumption that ‘place’ is lacking and needs to be made, then the intervention begins already from the assumption of some kind of deficiency. And because ‘place’ is so often taken to be a reflection of its inhabitants, that deficiency gets mapped onto the very people associated with a particular location. Yet if you assume that ‘place’ already exists, then the task is somewhat different. It’s less about moving to fill a hole or even ‘activate’ some nascent force that members of local communities have been unable to marshal. You are not asking community members to choose
between or authorize several designs or plans. They are not consultants or even ‘stakeholders’ among a varied group of equally legitimate interests or perspectives. They do not embody texture, particularity, or history, or perform place for others, including the professional ethnographer or oral historian who might collect, assemble, or relay their perspectives and stories for some audience. You are rather starting from the assumption that they have long built and kept the conditions of local social cohesion and that this invaluable work not only needs to be recognized and honored but centered and continued. If the fruits of this work as well as the conditions that fed it are respected, there will be a better chance that the people at the center of it will likewise be respected. They stand a stronger chance of being able to remain in place, and reap whatever benefits remaining there holds. The chance to remain opens up the possibility of equity. In the United States at least, the possibility of enlarged equity is especially important for communities that have faced systematic disinvestment and neglect from municipal and state governments. How have artists working explicitly in the vein of placemaking or placekeeping thought about equity?

**DT:** In the five years since we first talked on placemaking, there has been a shift precisely around the term ‘equity’ across the myriad of groups and voices involved in public art and community development. It can appear like a sea change, but that chance actually emerges from slow-burning relationships and conversations in groups like Art x Culture x Social Justice Network — so, the very groups steered by Lee and Bedoya and likeminded people. This change has unfolded alongside continued struggles and high-profile critiques about the politics of leadership within arts organizations and of course leadership’s implications for who gets funded, hired, and exhibited (Sargent, 2018). Professionalized arts administrators, critics, and artists are all confronting the politics of representation and its material consequences. At the same time there is so much community activism taking on the material manifestations of symbolic capital in the city’s landscape. A great example of this is the #blackbrunch campaign that disrupted over-hyped Sunday brunch spots with actions about police brutality and the racist policing that often accompanies gentrification (Romney, 2015).

You mentioned the valorization of social togetherness, and I cannot help but think about earlier precedents for this like the ‘Third Place’ discourse. Can you speak to how that earlier conversation might grapple with the question of equity? How is that discourse getting resuscitated during this pandemic, as some people seem to be mourning the loss of public space and social life, while also mourning the loss of life?

**CF:** My sense from following conversations within planning about ‘place’ over the past 20 years is that placemaking discourse’s traction within planning but also civically minded art practices in the US at least must be situated within longer standing frustrations with development in late-twentieth-century America. The critiques of geographic isolation and anonymity that you see intensifying in the 1990s — so the very critiques out of which paeans to place and ‘third place’ emerge — pick up on earlier frustrations concerning modernist planning schemes. In the United States, these frustrations reach back at least to the 1950s.

Jane Jacobs's *The Life and Death of Great American Cities* (1992) is an obvious touchstone for a moment of skepticism about modernist development pitched to single-use zoning and automobility. Skeptics worried that such development flattened everyday social experience, that encroaching suburbanization or hyper-dense urbanism would standardize social exchanges or rob them of variety or spontaneity. For Jacobs, suburbs and hyper-dense housing projects represented the worst development
outcomes because they demanded ‘togetherness or nothing.’ Either one embraced the stifling intimacy of a suburban life in which socializing occurred mostly in private, or one moved through anonymous housing blocs unable to connect with others. She argued that these flattened geographies sapped everyday life of character, spontaneity, and diversity even as they made inhabitants feel less connected, safe, and committed to common projects. Such concerns only grew more trenchant. Writing nearly 20 years after Jacobs, Joan Didion remarks that ‘the freeway experience’ is ‘the only secular communion that Los Angeles has’ (1979). In other words, its residents’ surrender to a short-sighted, self-interested individualism is the only collective end imaginable in a city experienced as so many disconnected points that drivers shuttle to, mostly alone.

The 1980s and 1990s saw a robust critique of the post-war American built environment emerge, a critique that treated this environment as both a source and a symptom of American anomie and social corrosion. A vocal contingent of planners and urban designers begins calling for a ‘return’ to a ‘golden age’ of American cities and towns, an age that apparently prioritized broad interactions through authentic streetscapes lined with parks, storefronts, and civic buildings, mixed-income housing, and multiple-use zoning. It’s at that very moment that interest in ‘third places’ explodes in urban planning and policy circles. These would be spaces beyond the two central nodes of contemporary life — ‘work’ and ‘home.’ So, places where a diversity of people gather with some regularity and informality, where one can expect to encounter and engage friends and acquaintances but also strangers in barbershops, neighborhood parks or libraries, cafes and the like. If some of this reminds you of the ‘placemaking’ conversation, it should. As much as placemakers might like to draw a line between what they do and the world of ‘third places’ there’s an argument to look at them together. Regardless of whether their commercial coordinates are explicit, these are places thought to merge spontaneity and familiarity, to promote contingency alongside cohesion. And it’s precisely these places that the closures of the COVID crisis have taken aim at. Have a look online and you’ll see laments for lost ‘third places’ stacking up. But these laments miss several key points that bear on equity, especially at this moment.

First off, ‘home,’ ‘work,’ and ‘third spaces’ only seem to be discrete because of the ways our contemporary socioeconomic order organizes labor. Home has never been the opposite of work. It takes an enormous expenditure of time, money, and effort to create the appearance that home is a space of pure intimacy and private affections. And while the cafe, the pub, the library, or even the parklet constructed by placemakers might seem to be a respite from both ‘work’ and ‘home,’ that respite is conditioned by labor relations as well as normative understandings concerning appropriate practices of being present. Even in ‘third spaces’ that place a premium on accessibility, there are conditions on what counts as appropriate speech and behavior. Those who promote third spaces or placemaking rarely foreground those conditions and their exclusions. This is nothing new. As others have pointed out, it’s really hard for Jacobs to entertain the idea that the ‘sidewalk ballet’ she watches outside her Greenwich Village apartment is an effect of race-based residential segregation. To her it just seems like a delightful and spontaneous mix of schoolchildren, Italian-American grocers, and bohemians. What’s so interesting about the pandemic is its capacity to foreground the conditions that made ‘the home’ seem like a place of pure sentiment or ‘the park’ a place of public access or spontaneity. Just ask the New Yorkers who find themselves reckoning with the fact that socializing in parks without prescribed social distancing measures or gear
could either, depending on who you are, get you a rebuke and a face mask from a patrolling police officer, or a summons to appear in court. And then there’s the very real problem that the folks who have no choice but to show up and facilitate the spontaneity of the ‘third place’ but also prop up the fantasy of a sequestered, private home – baristas, delivery people, and the warehouse workers who package goods, even police officers – are the most likely to contract the COVID virus. That discrepancy puts the conditions of place, its making, and its spontaneity in very stark relief.

But the tacit and implicit conditions of place, and placemaking enterprises, are not a new problem. We talked about it five years ago, and I know it’s been a persistent theme within placemaking circles. Do you think placemaking projects are capable of addressing it? Or rather, what would it take for them to address it seriously?

DT: I keep thinking about a project in my neighborhood in Philadelphia called ‘Lola38.’ Its tagline is: ‘A Creative Placemaking Project.’ That tagline decorates a sign on the odd triangular-shaped corner lot in between three major streets that is the site of a former bank, and now owned by a People’s Emergency Center (PEC) a Community Development Corporation (CDC) founded in 1972. I walk past ‘the bank,’ as ‘Lola38’ is commonly known, and in the last two months it has turned into a distribution hub for free food in the neighborhood. Every Monday a physically distanced line forms down the street and food is distributed from the building surrounded by brightly painted colors on the asphalt parking lot, where light strands hang. Until recently, any number of ‘place’ activations happened to engage neighborhood residents in arts and culture programming. But the site was initially a direct-service organization that then ventured into placemaking practice. As its placemaking programming has been canceled due to lockdown, the site has returned to its direct service origins. For the same reason it is an iconic site in the neighborhood appropriate for arts programming, marking a gateway between university development and neighborhoods, it is also an accessible location well-suited to organizing and distributing aid. But I love that the signage of the building suggests it is still ‘a creative placemaking project’ despite those activities now on hold. I love how it shows that placemaking projects could, depending on their precursors and prehistories, also be reconceived as rapid response or mutual aid.

Across town in North Philadelphia, the Village of Arts and Humanities, a recipient of numerous ‘placemaking’ grants has also pivoted toward direct service. The Village has also been involved in #FreeOurYouth and #freeoutmamas campaigns to release incarcerated youth and women during the pandemic. While the history of this organization could be read almost as an inverse to PEC – they are an arts organization that has gradually adapted to filling in the gaps often addressed by CDCs – they can be interpreted together as parallel case studies.

In both instances creative placemaking as a framework was used in a number of ways, opportunistically it was an opportunity to fund the kinds of activities the group was already engaged in under different names. Additionally, it was a way to assert a counter-narrative of what placemaking practice looked like when initiated by organizations with long histories of serving the communities of color that frequently experience the kind of public space policing and impending displacement that you mention above. This work and these sites have a totally different quality when paired with rapid response service and bail-out campaigns. Perhaps that quality offers a direction forward for this field where activism can be centered as an expression of values and potential for long-term trust building. Without it, the practices are at best an outlet for...
experimental park design and at worst, a kind of parasitic extension of the nonprofit industrial complex’s tendency to trade project-based grant funding while also turning a blind eye to the inequities that unfold around the parklet.

References


Further reading in this volume

Preface: the problem with placemaking
Louise Platt

Chapter 12: Public transformation: affect and mobility in rural America
Lyndsey Ogle

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

Chapter 15: Un/safety as placemaking: disabled people’s socio-spatial negotiation of fear of violent crime
Claire Edwards

Chapter 16: More than a mural: participatory placemaking on Gija Country
Samantha Edwards-Vandenhoek

Chapter 17: ‘I am not a satnav’: Affective placemaking and conflict in ‘the ginnel that roared’
Monag Rose

Martin Zebracki

Chapter 19: Placemaking in the ecology of the human habitat
Graham Marshall
Chapter 21: Placemaking through parkour and Art du Déplacement (ADD) as a Singaporean applied performance practitioner in London
Adelina Ong
Preface: The only thing constant is change
Kylie Legge
Chapter 34: Reconnecting cité and ville
Philip Graus
Chapter 36: Facilitator skills for effective collaborative placemaking
Husam AlWaer and Ian Cooper
Chapter 37: The Neighbourhood Project: a case study on community-led placemaking by CoDesign Studio
Lucinda Hartley, Eliza Charley, Sana Choudhury, and Harriet McKindlay
Chapter 41: Rituals of regard: on festivals, folks, and findings of social impact
Maribel Alvarez
Chapter 42: Creative Placemaking and Placekeeping evaluation challenges from the practitioner perspective: an interview with Roy Chan
Maria Rosario Jackson
Chapter 45: How the city speaks to us and how we speak back: rewriting the relationship between people and place
Rosanna Vitello and Marcus Willcocks