The Routledge Handbook of Placemaking

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Preface

Publication details

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Published online on: 31 Dec 2020

How to cite :- Jason Schupbach. 31 Dec 2020, Preface from: The Routledge Handbook of Placemaking Routledge
Accessed on: 30 Dec 2023

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Two months ago, I was thinking that this preface should outline for you how this opening chapter explores the interconnected policies and procedures that make up the history of placemaking, with a large focus on the role of creatives in the placemaking process. How the term ‘placemaking’ is itself challenged, and how the concepts of doing no harm, building communities from asset-based strategies, equitable development, and placemaking that emerges from repression and expression of cultures are outlined. That was before COVID-19. Before the world was turned upside down economically and physically. Before the tears, before the fear and the defiance, before worldwide protests against racial and economic injustice… just before. Before was when we could connect physically with minimal worry. Before was when public space could be safe and a place to meet, buy and sell, and celebrate. Before was when cultural anchors were places of group celebration, spiritual movement, and economic success. Before was when economic, environmental, and racial injustices were already bad, and now they are horrible.

We must not give up hope and longing for ‘before.’ The worst thing that could happen in response to this crisis is if it becomes an excuse for privileged placemaking ‘experts’ to experiment with new or broken unjust urban policies. As Alissa Walker wrote recently:

If the coronavirus has made anything clear, it’s that cities cannot be fixed if we do not insist on dismantling the racial, economic and environmental inequities that have made the pandemic deadlier for low-income and nonwhite residents. Yet many prominent urbanists have simply tweaked the language from their January 2020 tweets and fed them back into the propaganda machine to crank out COVID-tagged content, perpetuating the delusion that all cities need are denser neighborhoods, more parks, and open streets to magically become ‘fairer.’  

(Walker, 2020)

We can and will do better, we must. As the chapters in this section outline, there is much to be learned from the history of placemaking efforts that is relevant to the work we all have ahead of us to rebuild a more just society.
What we learn from this chapter

The intention of this chapter is to lay some groundwork for the reader in the historical policies and procedures which make up the scope of placemaking, with a large focus on the ‘creative placemaking’ movement of the last ten years. Following chapters challenge these ideas and policies, as do chapters here.

James Lima and Andrew Jones’ chapter describes an American history of placemaking from an economic development policy perspective. Lima describes the many different forms the movement has taken, and the good and bad outcomes of those policies, and expresses a perspective that many in the current urban planning field in the States take when viewing this history.

Both the chapter from Jennifer Hughes and that from Sarah Calderon and Erik Takeshita describe in detail a partnership between the federal government and foundations to respond to the Great Recession – what some called the ‘creative placemaking’ movement. Because the Great Recession in the States was primarily a housing crisis in which homeowners’ houses became worth less than their mortgages, Americans’ mobility for employment plummeted. Hence a response was needed that helped people where they lived. A series of ‘place-based’ initiatives were launched by the Federal government, foundations, and NGOs in response to these conditions. These writings focus on a slice of this larger ‘place-based’ movement called ‘creative placemaking,’ which is generally assumed to be the role that creatives or a local culture of a place have in its development. Just over a decade old, the policies and funding that supported creative placemaking, and the movement’s accomplishments and failures are described in these essays in detail. These essays also work to try and describe what needs to happen next.

An enormous amount of knowledge was generated in the past ten years about the ways that humans can use their creativity and cultural expressions to build the equitable communities that they want and deserve. Chapters by Jeremy Liu and Kim Cook describe these processes in detail, using examples of where people build place despite harsh physical conditions (the Nevada desert were Burning Man occurs) and/or great injustice lives. Lui presents a history of repressed cultures and the places they built in response to that repression, suggesting that there is much to be learned from these histories in our new work ahead. Cook similarly gives examples from her work in New Orleans and with Burning Man to describe projects, and the processes behind them. Those looking for answers about ‘what works’ in placemaking practice should spend time with these essays.

What’s next?

Obviously, the authors in this chapter do not represent the wide scope of people whose voices must be heard as we rebuild. They do not outline in full the 400 years of racial injustice and violence that has occurred in the United States that influences almost all urban policy in the country. We offer these essays as a starting point for a conversation. It will be critical going forward to embrace the multitude of voices necessary to build communities of justice, and to not repeat the mistakes of the past. People make place, and they are demanding change. Place still matters, and how we build it together matters more than ever. The last ten years of placemaking work grew from a crisis – the Great Recession – and a new one must take shape to respond to this crisis. Let us remember that we have been through trauma and must reform our society through healing-centered practices that work to solve the longstanding issues we suffer from. We must collectively work together to pull the best practices from the history of placemaking and build a new collective response, a response that values and respects the humans who live
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in a place. What a complex puzzle we have to solve, and what opportunity to unleash creative thought into that process!

Reference


Further reading in this volume

Preface: The radical potential of placemaking
Cara Courage
Chapter 1: Introduction: what really matters – moving placemaking into a new epoch
Cara Courage
Preface: ‘Disastrous forces, accidental actions, and grassroots responses’
Tom Borrup
Chapter 7: Conflict and memory: human rights and placemaking in the City of Gwangju
Shin Gyonggu
Chapter 19: Placemaking in the ecology of the human habitat
Graham Marshall
Chapter 24: Artists, creativity, and the heart of city planning
Tom Borrup
Preface: The only thing constant is change
Kylie Legge
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