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Creative placemaking and placekeeping evaluation challenges from the practitioner perspective

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The following is an interview with Roy Chan, Community Planning Manager at Chinatown Community Development Center in San Francisco, California.

**Maria Rosario Jackson**

Please tell us about Chinatown Community Development Center and the evolution of its creative placemaking/placekeeping practice.

**Roy Chan**

The Chinatown Community Development Center (CCDC) started in 1977 as the Chinatown Resource Center (CRC), an advocacy organization born from the Civil Rights movement and the movement to create ethnic studies at universities. With new waves of Asian immigration as a result of the Immigration Act enacted in 1968, there was a tremendous need in ethnic neighborhoods across the country to serve new immigrants. CRC was founded by volunteer grassroots organizations that came together to address quality of life issues in San Francisco’s Chinatown, which served as a vital immigrant gateway. Many of these volunteer advocates were recent college graduates, who grew up in the neighborhood and understood first hand the need to address Chinatown’s overcrowded living conditions, the need for affordable housing, improved open space, and better access to public transit.

Over time, the Chinatown Resource Center eventually became the Chinatown Community Development Center, which began to develop affordable housing. Unlike other community development corporations, CCDC came out of a grassroots advocacy perspective first and then evolved into realizing the need of building community ownership through the creation of affordable housing. The organization has grown tremendously over the decades and today serves over 3,000 resident tenants in over 30 buildings in not just Chinatown, but throughout the northeast sector of San Francisco and beyond.
Maria Rosario Jackson

CCDC has nurtured the creation of a strong grassroots tenant base in Chinatown. Currently the Community Tenants Association has over 1,000 members, composed of mostly senior citizens. They meet weekly to engage in cultural activities together, support each other’s needs, and are active in advocating for policy that supports affordable housing and other neighborhood issues.

Even before the term creative placemaking was coined, CCDC’s programs have integrated arts and culture as a strategy for community development. Arts in the Alley, for instance, showcased the work of local visual artists in empty or underutilized Chinatown storefronts. NoodleFest was a community food competition that creatively highlighted restaurants serving noodle dishes in Chinatown and pasta shops in neighboring North Beach community. Chinatown Alley Tours has been an alternative, youth-led walking tour of the neighborhood that showcases the lived experiences of residents and local businesses, many of them located in Chinatown’s intricate alleyway system. All of these projects have built intergenerational bridges that also supported the local economy by uplifting the inherent cultural assets and traditions embedded throughout the neighborhood. When I joined the organization, we received funding for our creative placemaking efforts, and the work became more intentional and transparent as a strategy.

What’s amazing about CCDC’s approach to community development is that it honors lived experiences in the neighborhood in a comprehensive way. CCDC operates from a framework that everything is connected: from land use controls to keep encroachment from the neighboring financial district, to advocating for public transit lines because most residents walk in this dense neighborhood, to advocating for public open space because most residents live in overcrowded conditions with the critical need to socialize. At the heart of CCDC’s vision is the belief that Chinatown’s cultural identity is only intact when the housing stock is preserved for residents so it can continue to serve as an immigrant gateway and a place for senior citizens to age without having to leave their community. The everyday culture practiced by residents is at the heart of the community’s shared identity.

Maria Rosario Jackson

Earlier you mentioned how college courses in Ethnic Studies were a part of the origins of the organization, can you say more about that?

Roy Chan

In 1968, in response to the new waves of immigrant populations, a student movement began at San Francisco State University which advocated for a curriculum that truly spoke to the experiences of Asian Americans and other ethnic groups. Quite frankly, these were perspectives that were left out of the standard US history curriculum. Many of the young Asian American activists, including CCDC’s founding director Gordon Chin, saw this movement, known as the Third World Liberation Front, as being vital to the shaping of API (Asian and Pacific Islander) students’ understanding of themselves, their families, and their role in the community and city.

The movement started at San Francisco State University in 1968 and then continued at UC Berkeley in 1969. The integration of Ethnic Studies was the birth of a larger movement in the Asian American Pacific Islander population to uplift and preserve places like Chinatown as vital places for generations of immigrants. The movement galvanized a generation of activists coming together to advocate for their communities in the 1970s. This movement led to the creation of several grassroots volunteer organizations in Chinatown that have fought to improve the quality of life and protect residents from displacement in Chinatown.

The story of the International Hotel was a defining moment of this movement. The International Hotel was one of the last standing single-room occupancy hotels in what was
Manilatown, a long-standing neighborhood next to Chinatown. Manilatown was several blocks long and where Filipino men and women lived in Single Room Occupancy (SRO) hotels. During the 1970s, real estate speculation from the nearby financial district and urban renewal pressures led to the demolition of numerous SRO buildings and the displacement of hundreds of residents and neighborhood businesses.

The International Hotel was the last standing building, and for a year, activists came together and fought to protect and preserve the tenants in that building. It wasn’t just a residential hotel, but it was also an epicenter of community activism as it housed Everybody’s Bookstore and Kearny Street Workshop which created groundbreaking community arts programming. This moment in the movement was an amazing coming together of thousands of activists and residents in Chinatown and Manilatown protesting the eviction of I-Hotel residents in 1977. To this day, if you talk with people from that generation, like our founders former directors Norman Fong and Gordon Chin, many of them would point back to that period as the inspiration to serve the community for so long and to inspire youth leadership.

**Maria Rosario Jackson**

It sounds like that what was happening back then is what we are now calling ‘equitable creative placemaking’ and ‘creative placekeeping’. The roots of current CCDC ‘creative placemaking’ had important origins in what you just described.

**Roy Chan**

Yes.

**Maria Rosario Jackson**

Please tell us about your role in the organization?

**Roy Chan**

I was trained as an urban planner at UCLA with an emphasis in affordable housing development. Over time, what really resonated with me was the critical role that culture plays in building wellness for immigrant neighborhoods. After working in the urban planning field for many years, my career path led me to the area of arts administration at the Oakland Asian Cultural Center where I worked directly with artists and cultural keepers to activate public spaces in Oakland’s Chinatown. Seven years ago, I returned to community planning work at Chinatown CDC in San Francisco as the practice of creative placemaking began to emerge across the country.

At CCDC, I currently manage our Community Planning department, which is made up of both planners and community organizers to collaboratively advocate for a neighborhood planning approach that responds directly to the needs and assets of residents. Our team’s work over the years has focused on a range of quality of life issues in greater Chinatown. A big part of our work is to not only mobilize stakeholders to public meetings, but to walk the neighborhood every day to more deeply understand how residents live, use space, and practice their culture. This then enables our planning work and decisions to be more rooted in lived experiences and cultural rhythms of the neighborhood.

One of our key responsibilities in the Community Planning department has been to uphold the Chinatown zoning regulations adopted in 1987 by CCDC and community leaders who saw the critical need to protect the neighborhood character of Chinatown. Most of the buildings in Chinatown are three to four stories tall with small neighborhood-serving businesses on the ground floor and residential or institutional uses on the upper floors. Chinatown leaders worked
with the City to develop land use controls policy to limit building heights to six stories and limit the types of building uses that are allowed, such as restricting office use and formula retail.

During the 1970s and 1980s, there were significant speculation threats to Chinatown from the encroaching financial district nearby. At the time, Chinatown had the same zoning of commercial high rise as the neighboring financial district. Luckily, the City was embarking on a zoning revision of the area, and community leaders argued that Chinatown needed to have its own zoning designation to protect its neighborhood character where so many families and seniors live in a dense urban environment.

Since 1987 when the zoning was adopted, Chinatown CDC’s planning department has acted as the gatekeeper for development in the neighborhood. We’ve built political power and have a pretty close relationship with the planning department in the City. When development proposals that test the limits of the zoning emerge, the city planning department typically consults with us first to ensure that there’s community support.

Amazingly, if you walk around the neighborhood, you will immediately notice the edges of the Chinatown zoning where three-story buildings with neighborhood retail and housing stand next to corporate high-rise buildings in the financial district. This community and CCDC effort around adopting and upholding zoning and planning has been essential to keeping Chinatown intact.

Along with that zoning, we work very closely with volunteer advocacy groups made up of residents and leaders in the community. These grassroots organizations preceded CCDC, and today they still serve as the local voice to speak on behalf of the community. One advocacy group is called Chinatown TRIP (Transportation Research and Improvement Project), and their focus has been around improving public transit lines that serve the neighborhood, promoting pedestrian safety, and extending the Central Subway line into the neighborhood, while pushing back on transportation issues that hurt the neighborhood.

We also have an open space advocacy group called the Committee for Better Parks and Recreation in Chinatown (CBP&RC) made up of residents and local community leaders, who advocate for the improvement of local parks and open space and find funding for it. Our team’s work has been to provide the technical support for these advocacy groups to function.

Maria Rosario Jackson
What you have described is critical work to sustain the neighborhood and protect it from significant forces. Can you tell us more about why you integrate arts, culture, and community-engaged design into how you do your community development work? What’s at the core of it for you today?

Roy Chan
If we look back throughout Chinatown history, it has been a place that has had to constantly remake itself in response to threats over the years. And these strategies always revolved around the preservation of its cultural identity which has been the glue to keep the neighborhood intact. The way we approach arts, culture, and design is to first acknowledge that it is already inherent throughout the community; from our restaurants and the different foods that are created/served, to activities that people do in the park, to people’s different cultural practices and traditions during different seasons, such as Lunar New Year and the Moon Festival. These traditions have been going on here for over a century, and they also are at the core of fueling the neighborhood’s economy. This deep shared sense of connection through culture continues to bind the neighborhood across generations.

Secondly, our creative placemaking work serves to uplift and strengthen access to the everyday culture that gives residents a sense of belonging. This involves connection to each other
and a sense that the neighborhood belongs to them. A big part of this work is removing barriers to cultural practice. One main barrier has been rising commercial and residential rents in the Chinatown that have caused the displacement of local residents and cultural groups (i.e. Chinese opera clubs, lion dance troupes) from gathering places where they have traditionally practiced daily culture together. There is a struggle for local access to public spaces (i.e. recreational clubhouses, dilapidated parks and alleyways) and large community banquet spaces that have historically served as cultural anchors in the neighborhood but have now been privatized by speculators for high-end commercial uses not compatible with the neighborhood. Our creative placekeeping work has centered around creative strategies for community control of these spaces through a reexamination of the local zoning controls and innovative partnerships with city government, community groups, and long-standing property owners. Along with that is the ongoing need to support legacy businesses and cultural institutions that have been operating on thin economic margins while struggling from years of local construction impact in the neighborhood and from the pressures of real estate speculation.

Right now, during our COVID-19 crisis, up to 70 per cent of Chinatown restaurants have closed. If you think about how people experience culture in Chinatown, the restaurants are really at the heart of social gathering through the simple act of sharing meals together. We’re realizing that the current pandemic has become a threat to our cultural identity. As part of the creative placemaking work, we are thinking creatively about how to support these restaurants by adapting different business models in a way that restaurants can continue to be a livelihood for immigrant workers. We’ve been developing a local meal delivery service by creating a community kitchen in our large banquet restaurants and delivering it to SRO residents who have been experiencing food insecurity. This program brings back unemployed restaurant workers, reopens familiar restaurants, addresses food insecurity and responds to the tremendous need for residents to feel connected to their food traditions in a safe way during these isolating times.

We are planning ahead to meet many different kinds of needs. When the Autumn Moon Festival happens in late September, and we’re still in this moment of social distancing, we’ll have to reconsider how to continue that tradition differently in Chinatown. The Autumn Moon Festival has historically been a time for moon cakes as well as other foods to be made and shared communally throughout the neighborhood as a celebration of harvest festival. As part of this tradition, a street festival brings live lion dance performances and dozens of booths selling different foods and gifts by Chinatown merchants along the Grant Avenue commercial corridor, drawing thousands of people over an entire weekend. This festival along with the Chinese New Year festival and parade in February highlight the annual cultural traditions that are the glue in Chinatown’s deep social cohesion for over a century.

A lot of our creative placemaking work has been around the improvement of the public realm with the understanding that it’s where everyday arts and culture are practiced. How do we maintain and enhance Chinatown’s open space so that daily cultural activities there can thrive? Whether it’s working with the City to ensure a truly participatory community design process for our Portsmouth Square master planning or ensuring that new improvements to the Chinese Playground are in line with residents’ daily cultural rhythms. A lot of our open space work over the decades has also been about preserving, improving, and cleaning up Chinatown’s unique network of over 30 alleyways. Alleyways are informal spaces that function as front porches for many of our residents living in SRO buildings. For instance, our oldest alleyway is Ross Alley. If you walk down that alley, you’ll get an amazing snapshot of daily culture happening organically – handmade cookies made for restaurants and visitors at the Golden Gate Fortune Cookie Factory, CCDC’s community art gallery 41 Ross that highlights the work of cultural keepers, the lion dance groups that practice at night in the alleyways in anticipation of community
events through the year, such as Lunar New Year. Civic engagement of various stakeholders in the neighborhood has been critical to our community design process. It’s a collective effort that involved building consensus among residents or family associations who reside upstairs, the store owners on the ground floor, and the daily visitors coming into Chinatown. With culture as a unifying frame, the process involves getting a full sense of the diverse needs and assets of the neighborhood.

What I’ve learned as a planner in these public workshops is an understanding of how people practice culture by asking the right questions. Oftentimes, as trained planners, we ask the typical questions of ‘What are your needs? How would you like to use this space?’ But I think what has really opened up this process of getting helpful input is when we asked people how they lived… from when they wake up to what they do and where they go throughout the day. By capturing daily life narratives of residents, we uncovered clues to how use of space fits into people’s daily activities and rhythms.

Maria Rosario Jackson

Foundations, government, and others who fund community development work often require proof of impact of creative placemaking? From your perspective, why does the work matter? How does it make a difference?

Roy Chan

Oftentimes, when we’re filling out grant report forms, the typical questions that they ask are ‘How many people actually came to an event? How many volunteers participated? How much more money has been invested in the neighborhood?’ Those are important questions, but we’re also discovering new ways of knowing what makes a difference, like just walking the neighborhood each day and seeing firsthand how spaces are transforming over time.

Since we’ve embarked on a more intentional integration of arts, culture, and design into our community development efforts, we’ve seen a number of storefronts that, without this intentionality, would have ended up for some other retail use, but were instead transformed into vital spaces for communal storytelling and culture making. Our community gallery space at 41 Ross, a formerly underutilized storefront, is the result of our community engagement work with the property owner, who has enabled CCDC to transform it into a dynamic, multi-purpose space for dialogue, for exhibitions, and communal celebrations. Walking past 41 Ross now is an affirming reminder of the importance in being good stewards of space for art and culture making.

945 Clay is an SRO building that CCDC recently bought from a speculator who tried to evict the tenants. Since we took over ownership, our team has worked closely with our asset management staff to fill the building’s storefront space with Asian Improv Arts, a vital performing arts organization. Now the space and block has come alive with dance and music that is inspired by the living history of Chinatown. I don’t think there’s been a dance or music space in Chinatown for quite some time. It’s really an ideal space with tall ceilings and great light that honors the artistic work of dancer Lenora Lee and musician Francis Wong, who are mentors raising up new artists in the community. CCDC has a long history of raising new leaders and now it’s exciting to be a part of reviving a storefront to raise new artists in the community.

Another way that we’re seeing a difference being made, is in the last two years, an unlikely coalition was formed with diverse community leaders who, in the past, would have never come together. This coalition has been facilitating new conversations around a shared need in Chinatown for more connected cultural spaces that tell our stories in new creative ways.

One coalition of cultural leaders started about a year and a half ago when Chinatown’s largest building, the Empress of China building, was sold to a developer who had very different inter-
ests than those of the neighborhood. Key leaders made up of property owners, business owners, CCDC, and arts groups such as the Chinese Cultural Center, the Chinese Historical Society, Center for Asian American Media, came together to convene every two weeks. At first, the conversation revolved around strategies to purchase the Empress of China building for community cultural use. Then over time, the coalition became a space to dialogue around a bold new vision of cultural resilience by identifying other key spaces for cultural revitalization as well as a vision to become a designated cultural district in the City of San Francisco.

Another way that we're seeing the work make a difference is the community process for our Portsmouth Square Improvement Project. Portsmouth Square is the largest open space in Chinatown and the most heavily used local park in the City’s densest neighborhood. In many ways, it’s been referred to as Chinatown’s ‘living room’ where SRO residents are able to socialize and practice their cultural activities together throughout the day. We just finished the conceptual design process through five public workshops that the City led and engaged significant resident participation through the mobilization work of organizers at CCDC. Our planning team partnered with filmmakers and storytellers to capture daily life narratives and living memories about Portsmouth Square as both a community living room and town square. These published stories served as an accessible entry point for over 300 park users to participate in each of the public design workshops, setting new attendance records for public workshops held in the entire City. By reframing these public workshops into storytelling/sharing events, the design process highlighted the significance of Portsmouth Square as a vital cultural anchor for so many people in the neighborhood.

María Rosario Jackson
You have identified many ways in which the work makes a difference: in determining culturally appropriate uses of space, fostering intergenerational mentoring, leadership development, vitality of street life, new coalitions, identification of new community priorities, increased community engagement in planning and civic activity, among others. How do these kinds of impacts and ways of knowing match up with Community Development standards for evaluation and progress?

Roy Chan
We feel stuck in this loop of having to always answer mostly quantitative questions for Community Development standards. But I think it begins with reframing the questions as a way to rethink how we as practitioners understand and measure impact. Oftentimes, questions are asked about the number of housing units that are built and the income levels that we need to meet for those we serve. What often isn’t asked is how many residents in these housing units feel a sense of home; if they feel connected to their place and with their neighbors, if the design/staffing of the lobby or the community room in our buildings create a shared sense of belonging and community.

We’ve learned so much in the last five years since we took over management of over 500 units of public housing in Chinatown as part of the Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) program. Previously under the San Francisco Housing Authority’s management, these 50-year-old buildings deteriorated over the decades without much thought or understanding of how the physical environment impacted residents’ sense of ownership or feeling of home. Then over time, we also started to see the social fabric of these communities deteriorate and racial tensions rise.

And I think what we’ve been learning since we’ve taken over management of these projects is how critical the integration of arts, culture, and design are… from the design choices we make in the renovation of the community rooms and lobbies to hiring resident services coordinators...
who reflect the different ethnicities of the residents and are skilled at building connections/empathy across divides. We started this process as we began relocating tenants out of their units during the renovation, as a way to minimize the trauma of displacement and then their journey home to regain a deeper sense of community and belonging. Bringing in artists and storytellers to work alongside the resident services staff positively impacted critical transitions and homecoming in ways that would not be possible otherwise.

**María Rosario Jackson**

Do you think that the conventional ways of measuring success are changing?

**Roy Chan**

In some ways, yes. The transfer of management of public housing to community-based organizations like CCDC through the RAD program has been an acknowledgment that we need to go beyond conventional ways of doing community development and measuring success. When CCDC took over management of 990 Pacific, for example, we had to reimagine public housing and understand what success means from a community wellness perspective. When we began renovation of the building, we had to relocate all the tenants for several months. As a way to process the trauma they would experience, we hired an artist to document the residents’ journey of relocation to temporary housing during the renovation and the return home after renovation. The storytelling project was entitled *Coming Home: The 990 Pacific Relocation Story* and became a creative process of resident engagement and an exercise in trust building. The residents’ oral histories were presented visually on the walls of the building’s community room and during the public reopening ceremony in the community room. The tenants’ stories were displayed on the wall through moving photos that dignified their experiences. They revealed the significance of understanding the residents’ perspective to better inform how we manage housing and promote the care/investment needed to transform public housing into places of belonging, mutual trust, and connection. And those are the values that CCDC has been trying to uphold during this process of transforming Chinatown’s public housing projects.

I would say this is a beginning and an entry point to demonstrate how we can better measure success. I think there’s still a lot of work to do but we’re starting to see the fruits of the investments we’re making in creative placemaking.

**María Rosario Jackson**

You have alluded to some already, but what kinds of changes in evaluation would you like to see?

**Roy Chan**

Well for the 990 Pacific Coming Home Project, we had to do the additional work of building social cohesion from a cultural framework. That needs to be acknowledged in evaluation. I think it’s this work that moves community development beyond the implementation of basic building improvements to housing units, to a more comprehensive effort that aspires for these units to become places the residents can call home. And I believe there’s a quantifiable value to it. The federal government should invest in placemaking as a budget line item when we think of HUD projects like RAD. It’s incorporating not just housing developers, but artists and cultural workers to be part of a more comprehensive process of community development.

**María Rosario Jackson**

The community development field relies greatly on quantification of impacts. Do you think that impacts always have to be quantified?
Placekeeping evaluation challenges

Roy Chan
I don’t think so. I think there’s ways that we can capture a sense of belonging in qualitative ways.

I’m a part of the Oakland Cultural Affairs Commission now and they just completed a report about creative placemaking, Roberto Bedoya’s report, in which the goal is belonging, culture is the frame, and equity is the driving force. It’s interesting because if belonging is the goal, I think the traditional quantitative measures probably won’t be able to capture success of that goal. We really need to investigate ways of measuring in more qualitative ways. And I think storytelling and collecting stories is a big part of that work in understanding people’s sense of belonging and connection that you might not find in numbers.

María Rosario Jackson
Are the evaluation practices that you hold as an organization different from what is typical in the community development and planning fields – the industry standards?

Roy Chan
It’s been an incredible learning process for us as an organization more recently, as we’ve taken over new management of public housing. Our creative placemaking work has touched different departments across the organization in a way that has brought into conversation new theories of change and ways of measuring success. It hasn’t been an easy process. I think for our housing developers and staff in our Community Organizing department, it’s always been about how many units we can acquire or how many tenants we can get out to a rally. Sometimes we’re stuck as an organization in that conventional pattern of what success looks like because we’re constantly reporting to funders with numbers in mind. Because of the creative placemaking funding that we’ve gotten in the last six years, our planning team has been able to take a step back and try these new methodologies and test new partnerships with folks in the creative field. And these other departments in the organization are taking notice of this work that reminds us all of our mission to build community more deeply and to build not just housing units but homes. And when we tell stories to show the impact in a more qualitative, human way, organizational mindset starts to change. The exhibits we’ve been showing at 41 Ross Gallery have been a big part of this educational process for our own organization as well as for folks in the community development and planning fields. These past six years have been an incredible learning experience for us and the rest of our organization. We’re still constantly filling out grant reports that adhere to a certain industry standard that doesn’t really fit with what we know matters. So, the work ahead is to go beyond this mindset and practice, continue to expand our view of what social change looks like, and as practitioners, become evangelists of this expanded view.

María Rosario Jackson
Are you hopeful about things moving in that direction?

Roy Chan
Yes, I am hopeful. I think crises such as the global pandemic we’re currently in could help us move in that direction. We’re in this moment of isolation where the need for social and cultural cohesion is evident more than ever before. It’s particularly evident in a place like Chinatown, where social gathering is a lifeline for our senior tenants living in SROs. They depend so much on the neighborhood for their daily routines and cultural food security is a big part of that. Early on in the pandemic, we realized how important access to local ingredients and foods were for residents sheltered in place. CCDC worked with local restaurants...
to develop a community kitchen where boxed hot meals were prepared and delivered to the
thousands of Chinatown residents unable to safely come out to shop/dine. We’ve learned that
in a state of isolation, ensuring a continued sense of familiarity for residents is so critical to
community resilience. City government, funders, and community developers from all over
have taken notice. It’s these types of creative placekeeping efforts and exposure during a crisis
that will push things to move in that direction in which culture keeping is vital to neighbor-
hood sustainability.

**María Rosario Jackson**

Thank you, Roy, for sharing your experience and your insights.

**Acknowledgments**

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**Further reading in this volume**

Chapter 1: Introduction: what really matters – moving placemaking into a new epoch
*Cara Courage*

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

Chapter 3: An annotated history of creative placemaking at the federal level
*Jen Hughes*

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

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

Chapter 6: Listen, connect, act
*Kim Cook*

Chapter 7: Conflict and memory: human rights and placemaking in the City of Gwangju
*Shin Gyeonggu*

Chapter 9: From the dust of bad stars: disaster, resilience, and placemaking in Little Tokyo
*Jonathan Jae-an Crisman*

Chapter 10: From moon village to mural village: the consequences of creative placemaking in Ihwa-dong, Seoul
*Jason F Kovacs and Hayun Park*

Chapter 11: *Free State Boulevard* and the story of the East 9th Street Placekeepers
*Dave Lowenstein*

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*

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

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

Chapter 21: Placemaking through parkour and *Art du Déplacement* (ADD) as a Singaporean applied performance practitioner in London
*Adelina Ong*

Chapter 23: Routing out place identity through the vernacular production practices of a community light festival
*Gail Skelly and Tim Edensor*
Preface: The only thing constant is change
Kylie Legge
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, Sama Choudhury, and Harriet McKindley