Introduction

Let’s take a walk. The moment we step out of the door and onto the street we are embraced by place – and from here our relationship with it begins to build. Roland Barthes told us:

The city is a discourse, and this discourse is truly a language: the city speaks to its inhabitants; we speak our city, the city where we are, simply by living in it, by wandering through it, by looking at it. Still the problem is to bring an expression like ‘the language of the city’ out of the purely metaphorical stage.

(Barthes, 1986)

Certainly, for so many of us these most basic of activities – the wander, the view, or the lived engagements along the street – have once again become precious gems as we reacclimatise to rapidly shifting ‘normals’ of everyday life. What is different today may surprise Barthes, in that the ways we connect with the places most local to each of us are evolving fast. The languages for connecting have now begun to move beyond the purely metaphorical and towards more symbiotic, responsive, and active discourses. As we continue our stroll, what signs and signals do we now pick up about the street we are on? What prompts us to stop and look again, or acknowledge someone we’ve not met before?

From our simple walk – and equally thanks to authors including Barthes, and more recently, Deyan Sudjic (2017), Collin Ellard (2015), and Anna Minton (2012) – we learn how the environments we pass speak to us, helping us build perceptions of what lies around us. We have described previously (Vitiello and Willcocks, 2011a, 2011b, and 2006) how we each build our own dialogues with places through urban lexicons – drawing upon the language of the elements that transmit a place’s character to us, and defining our own place within it. As we first encounter the setting, we take in cues and clues that build our impressions and actions as we move through the place. As we get to know it, we change what we ‘hear.’ We also change the ways we want to speak back – through who we connect with and the ways we react to, interpret, or repurpose the street.
Between 2008 and 2019, the *Urban Lexicons* project allowed us to learn from widely diverse neighbours, citizens, placemakers, and urban managers through a series of street workshops (see for example, Vitiello and Willcocks, 2012), in cities including London, Barcelona, New York, Adelaide, and Parramatta. Time and again, we saw that the adjectives, offered by or drawn from a place, can be more important to how a person connects with it than the physical construction or the advertised lifestyle which may be projected. The lexicon of a place is made up from experiences lived through sensorial signs – of love, life, welcome, security, and more – each in interplay with our behaviours, perceptions, and imaginings of that setting. This approach learns from foundations set out between authors including Landry and Murray (2017), Charles Landry (2012b), William H. Whyte (1980), and Kevin Lynch (1960), who each help reflect how people instinctively or unconsciously draw together images of city spots, which frame our impressions and actions in response. And yet, our world and our place within it is being turned upside down.

With the first coronavirus lockdowns of 2020, we were told the world would never be the same again. Almost immediately the streets and neighbourhoods we live between came to occupy so much more of our daily encounters. Traffic reduced dramatically, while the home and all that is most local to us became essential in ways previously taken for granted. People began to revalue and reimagine the role of the street or neighbourhood in their lives. Our efforts to stay connected with others through shifting digital and physical norms became exaggerated, while social distancing became core in our uses of public space. Through all its tragedy, this new era quickly stimulated the start of transformations that many felt were overdue, including evolving physical and social ties with the places most local to us. People spending more time where they live means people noticing things and being part of new shapes of activity in public places. Everyday experiences of streets and the stories that unfold from them are different now. But the changes have been a long time coming.

**How the city speaks to us**

Before there were streets there was land. Places were made and interpreted, in mind and body. ‘The language of landscape is our native language’ (Whiston Spirn, 1998, p. 15), even if it’s an idiom many urban dwellers have lost. Nature writers George Monbiot and Robert Macfarlane urge us to find this connection again, pointing us to the earliest Aboriginal Australian songlines, which described how each significant landform was both a tangible object and an intangible sign (Macfarlane, 2013, p. 112). Has this human art of symbiotic relations with our setting been forgotten with the world’s shifts towards urban life? Neuroscientist Colin Ellard (2015, p. 15) suggests that a defining characteristic of humanity is that we build onto the landscape ‘to change perceptions and to influence thoughts and feelings; by these means, we attempt to organize human activity’. This works to impact us so deeply he says (ibid., p. 81), that we ‘can grow to love a building or place in much the same way we love a person.’ Urban explorer and essayist Walter Benjamin was enthralled by these deeply personal urban encounters:

> To lose oneself in a city – as one loses oneself in a forest – that calls for quite a different schooling. Then signboards and street names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks or bars must speak to the wanderer like a crackling twig under his feet.  
> *(Tonkiss, 2006, p. 119, quoting Benjamin, 1986)*

For him, relating to the city is through small everyday encounters that require time together to learn its peculiarities and character. Ellard attests that our innate relations with space and our impulse to respond have stayed with us. He points to sensorial and contextual details affecting
How the city speaks to us…

how our reactions ‘can be read easily from our bodies. It is seen in our posture, the patterns of our eye and head movements, and even in our brain activity’ which is ‘massaged by our experience’ wherever we go’ (Ellard, 2015,17). Cultural critic Rebecca Solnit explores how the act of walking is the act of getting to know a place.

A city is a language, a repository of possibilities, and walking is the act of speaking that language, of selecting from those possibilities. Just as language limits what can be said, architecture limits where one can walk, but the walker invents other ways to go. (Solnit, 2014. p. 213)

When cities became vehicle-centric we could argue that we lost that act. But the COVID-19 pandemic slowed patterns of street life, which we had previously assumed were the default. This slowing has gifted us the chance to look and listen more closely, reimagining our localities as we look forward to what’s next. Hans Karssenberg, Jeroen Laven, and Mattijs van’t Hoff with collaborators, including Jan Gehl, have long-championed the ‘city at eye level’ and tell how ‘our perception of public space depends on viewpoint and distance, the speed at which we move is crucial. Our senses are designed to perceive and process sensory impressions while moving at about 5 km/h: walking pace’ (Karssenberg, Laven, Glaser, and van ’t Hoff, 2016, p. 318). Through the unusual start to the 2020s, streets and skies quietened, priorities began to change, and so people–first lexicons quickly became more prominent; from ‘Heart the NHS’ posters and chalk drawings as signs of love, balconies and decorated doorsteps as stages for shared applause or creative expression, and socially distanced parks and wider pavements as signifiers of people-centred freedom. As the meaning of these spaces rapidly shifts, we must remember that the carrier of the message means little without the reader. Just as we each have our own vocabulary borne out of our background and life experiences, we each speak different ‘dialects’ of place. The perspective of the ‘reader’ may be of resident, commuter, worker, or tourist. Yet the responsibility of anyone who considers themselves a ‘placemaker’ is to make this meaning visible and negotiable.

Viewed in this light, the act of placemaking should be a ‘revelation’ – the art of revealing meanings, connections, and agency in place. Yet, to whom do we turn to reveal the meaning of a street, neighbourhood, or city? Rarely to designers or planners, despite their central role in building. It is the communities who put on the play and make sense of the stage. Architect and author of the pattern-language movement that inspired Wikipedia, Christopher Alexander believes that cities should be shaped by all of us, as they were for millennia. This notion of a shared and open language is essential to its survival, he suggests. ‘Architects themselves have lost their intuitions. They no longer have a widely shared language which roots them in the ordinary feelings people have’ (Alexander, 1980, p. 233). In response, he offers 256 ‘patterns for building’ as components of collective new lexicons, drawing upon existing understandings: ‘To work our way towards a shared and living language once again, we must first learn how to discover patterns which are deep and capable of generating life’ (Alexander, 1980, p. xii).

The art of discovery can start close to home – revelations are all around us. Charity Common Ground suggest that however ordinary we think of our streets and neighbourhoods as being, they are the classrooms that offer us the fundamental place-based language to learn from: ‘What makes each place unique is the conspiracy of nature and culture, the accumulation of story upon history upon natural history’ (Clifford and King, 2006, p. ix). The distinction lies in the detail: ‘Small details spark the telling – a line of trees, the shape of a roof, the name of a street. They help us to share knowledge of what makes a place.’ They argue that, ‘Little things (details) and clues to previous lives and landscapes (patina) may be the very things that breathe significance into streets’ (Clifford and King, 2006, p. xi).
As participants in our workshops made evident, every detail plays a role in how it communicates, whether we intend it to or not. For example, so-called security measures were commented upon for their detrimental rather than reassuring contribution to street safety. ‘Horrible metal railings,’ said Mark, reporting on galvanised palisade fencing, as he exited a station. ‘It’s just all ugh! … concrete round things for no reason, railings and CCTV,’ reports Simon on the same spot. He continues, ‘It’s bizarre that it’s oppressive yet it’s really open at the same time, so why should it feel that way?’ (Vitiello and Willcocks, 2011, pp. 120–21).

Meaning can be made and stories shared not only through those aspects that persist, but also those that are transient, moving, momentary. Indeed, it’s the expression and interpretation of individuality that sets out the changing soul of a place – glimpsed for instance through a hand-painted pattern, or an array of planters by a doorstep. They are signs of identity, often personal, built, carved or painted into a cityscape. Alexander again, calls out that ‘the pattern language in your mind is slightly different from the language in the next person’s mind; no two are alike; yet many patterns are also shared’ (Alexander, 1980, p. 203). The life of a place’s language evolves with the people who are attached to it and as external forces trigger change. The pandemic stripped public spaces of their usual function: as places to commute through, work, or socialise. As we rapidly reinvent ways of living, everyday places take on new roles and are animated by different signifiers. Communities are redefining what place can mean through new rituals and reappropriation. At the time of writing, we are still ‘feeling it out,’ yet it’s clear that a stronger connection is unfolding and a sense of specific local character emerging. So, how might we reappropriate our streets and mark meaning through these spaces differently, going forward?

As we rejoin our walk down a street, we find these patterns with rich variation and elements shared. Take Ridley Road, a market street in London’s Hackney. Representations of shop owners’ identities are woven into the urban fabric, evident when stalls lie still and shopfronts shuttered. Afghan rug sellers, Jamaican grocers, Armenian bakers, Nigerian tailors, Pakistani butchers – all paint clues to a sense of pride in their respective origins, a celebration of idiosyncrasy and personal self-expression. Local entrepreneur Kollier Din-Bangura identifies ‘These small business owners … They’re landmarks of a space, that’s why people come. These people are the currency’ (Vitiello, 2020). And yet these well-established signs of Dalston’s identity remain under threat. Ubiquitous chains have moved in at the tail of the market, while signs adorn house fronts proclaiming, ‘Save Ridley Road.’ Sensing this erasure of character, this shared language has been captured over decades – by filmmaker Patrick Kieller in London (1994); The Decorators’ Ridley’s Restaurant Stall (2006); and by photographer Tamara Stoll’s Ridley Road Market (2019). This battle between local distinctiveness versus homogenisation is seen on streets worldwide. It took some 200 voices to make Stoll’s record of Ridley Road. To build upon what makes a place special, it will take a multitude of experiences to imagine and act upon its future. Common Ground make a call for ‘a radical shift in the way we plan … towards a more responsive, detailed way of changing things’ (Clifford and King, 2006, p. xiii). This is about embedding citizens as life-long place makers, leaving frames for meaning and opportunity to be interpreted in step with the flux of communities. It’s about revealing how a city speaks to us, but more importantly, allowing us to respond.

How we speak back

Combining collaborative, inclusive design processes with a responsive streetscape can enable natural patterns of call and response. We understand that listening to a place is largely reflective, but how do we speak back? Put simply, this is about how we respond in, and to, a street and its setting. As with any language, these responses can be understood as ‘passive’ or ‘active’ voices.
A passive voice reflects those responses prescribed by the environment – passive by design. Take the straight line described by a long narrow pavement and the limited set of experiences we’re offered. It encourages us to keep moving along, rather than slow down or engage. For placemakers and managers, these passive forms mean that we behave – acting predictably and in line. They also mean that we take our personal experiences with us, with little evidence of our ‘language’ or dialogue left behind for others to pick up on. In contrast, through speaking back in active voices, we bring our own contributions to a place. We are able to change the experience of that setting for ourselves and others, even if momentarily – usually in balance between forms of affordance and appropriation. If the context ‘affords’ (Norman, 2013) us the agency to bring something of ourselves to the street, our response may not be predicted but it is supported thanks to the structures in place. Resting against a bollard, sitting on a step, or painting on an open street art wall all make us feel ‘heard.’ Alternatively, we might speak back by ‘appropriating,’ to bring a different possibility forward. These alternative and unexpected visions might be seen on a scale between dissent and affirmation. From guerilla gardening to forms of graffiti, from unplanned activities such as kids playing in the fountains in London’s Granary Square, or a group of neighbours trying something new for their street. Architect-activist Santiago Cirugeda’s (1997) rental of on-street skip spaces supports different kinds of activities for locals, crosses between afforded and appropriated speaking back. His interventions playfully bend the rules to open up possibilities for others.

Whether passive or active, we need to ask ‘whose voice?’ As host to many walks of life, public realm is, by nature, contested space. It can be dominated by groups who at times have little consciousness of their hold over a site and how their very presence can put off or encourage others. Figure 45.1 offers examples, giving a glimpse of the breadth of voices in play or contestation. Accumulated signs of identity or common interest are of course ‘read’ by others differently. Yet, in full view of all, public space acts as a soapbox – to welcome or deter the unheard and unseen into the open and reassert ownership. From large-scale protests to small temporary takeovers, actions become gestures that begin to alter the way a place invites to speak back, marking a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXAMPLES</th>
<th>Unprogrammed</th>
<th>Programmed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speaking with</td>
<td>Walking along a pavement, to get from A to B; Playing hopscotch on somebody else’s chalk drawing on the pavement.</td>
<td>Waiting for the bus at a bus stop; responding to a local authority planning consultation; socially distanced queuing at the post office.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive Voices</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking with</td>
<td>Hopscotch chalk drawings on the pavement; Skateboarding in the street environment; Graffiti or land art; Protestors tugging down a statue with ropes; Playing music or having coffee from the doorstep with neighbours; leaving plant pots on street near your home</td>
<td>Making new market-stalls for Somers Town at MAKE@Story Garden; Booking to paint at Market Road Gallery; Park(ing) day; Splash Adelaide; Socially distanced street party between neighbours. Santiago Cirugeda’s street skips; Weekly doorstep-applause for emergency services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active voices</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Rosanna Vitiello and Marcus Willcocks

powershift among users. Responsive street design and temporary programming can make places that more people feel fundamental to – breaking down barriers of age, gender, race, class etc. by shifting perceptions of who a space is for. Take gender: public space has classically been a male domain, and ‘simply presenting as female in public space increases vulnerability to violence’ (Cosgrave, Lam, and Henderson, 2020). Female-led projects such as Her Barking by StreetSpace aim to redress that balance, collaboratively designing and testing low-cost ‘experiments’ and installations with women to improve perceptions of safety. Or consider children, whose imagination loosens the limits of what a space can be used for. Family-first thinking is seen in projects like urban innovation group 1319’s aUPA in Argentina, which develops a network of pop-up play spaces that take over abandoned lots, creating a ‘structure that can turn any urban void into a child-friendly place’ (Trecediecinueve, 2017).

Placemakers and managers urgently need to support richer forms of dialogue through place, to design-in ways for people to speak back in active, not just passive voices. We know these are the relations with a street or city that grow to be resilient and support the ecologies of the place (Dovey et al., 1985). Yet, welcoming active voices can present messy, tricky challenges pressured by long-held approaches to place-making and planning. So often, the citizens’ role has been presented as passive consumer, rather than anything more intimate such as an acquaintance, friend, lover, or co-creator. Sociologist Richard Sennett argues for collaboration, suggesting that the worth of collaborative production is that it speaks in the plural, creating different versions of open cities, rather than in the singular. However, current planning systems bias singular definitions. They certainly don’t welcome ‘messy.’ Urbanist Michael Cowdy explained to us that the planning standard in many cities around the world has been in existence since the 1920s. This is not responsive to the demands of a twenty-first-century city population.

The future city needs to transform from a static planning system to a more adaptable model which is needs based.

(Cowdy, 2020, personal communication)

In the name of ‘participation,’ citizens are asked to attend a meeting or answer online questions, steered by those proposing a development. The ‘consultation’ box is ticked, and a development process continues out of public access. Such models set out prescriptively passive ‘conversations,’ in terms of communities’ chances to respond to their streetscapes. One example is a recent one-way dialogue at Bedminster Green, Bristol. Here, the lexicon of the neighbourhood is of paint-peeled steel railings, post-war rapid-build buildings, value-engineered infrastructure, and under-maintained but much-loved greenery. Gladly, this is supplemented with a warmth and richness of character thanks to the locals, who carry great soul and welcome throughout the area. As the neighbourhood changes, their voices must be embedded. Thankfully, classic planning consultation systems are evolving. Placemakers JTP pioneered collaborative planning in the UK based on the American Institute of Architects R/UDAT model, whereby charrettes with community and urban designers unpack local dreams and fears through rapid feedback sessions and sketches. Platforms such as Neighbourlytics or Neighborland open the conversation up online, enabling citizens to see immediately how design responds – the start of a digital–physical reciprocal relationship.

Increased responsiveness and active voices lend themselves to rapid change and surprise but also to trust and resilience. Yet planning at district or city scale takes a generation. So how do we allow these ‘messy’ models to become integral in a neighbourhood’s evolution? Speaking-back lends itself to the kinds of embedded ‘place-prototyping,’ modelled by projects such as MAKE@Story Garden. Here, community members from Somers Town in London’s Kings Cross
How the city speaks to us…

In recent years, collaborative efforts have emerged both with creative practitioners from neighboring Central Saint Martins art and design school and with other local organizations and groups. Through hands-on making, they sample and reimagine new designs to respond to how the neighborhood is changing (Central Saint Martins, 2019). Across the Atlantic, the Brickline Greenway in St Louis, Missouri, bestows a developing green cultural network of public spaces and pathways spanning 15 miles and 20 very different neighborhoods. Its goal is to connect communities, creating a ‘movement to open up St. Louis and its opportunities’ (GRG, 2020, p. 3) in a city with extreme social and cultural divides. Susan Trautman, CEO of public development agency Great Rivers Greenway (GRG) explains:

This isn’t just about building a greenway, it’s about using the greenway […] to ensure that we look at the entire process with an equity lens […] So, the questions became:

How would we make sure that we had voices at the table that had never been at the table?

(NRPA, 2020)

GRG gathered working groups on equity, economy, identity, and governance, comprising many people from across the city’s neighborhoods and backgrounds. They opened up a public call to rename the Greenway to the citizens of St Louis. They drew on universal features such as ‘the stoop,’ celebrated as a symbol of invitation across neighborhoods, ‘where generations have gathered and shared stories, bringing this intimate communal activity out into public space giving people a place to connect’ (NRPA, 2020). Landscape architects and local artists worked hand in hand through the design process, including the Artists of Color Council who have been integral to the vision, advocating for voices from the neighborhood; in short, an open and imaginative approach at massive scale.

The call here is for embedding more imagination, and the invaluable roles of collective agency, in the public realm. In Designing Disorder: Experiments and Disruptions in the City, Pablo Sendra and Richard Sennett (2020, p. 22) cite the ‘overdetermination of both the city’s visual form and it’s social functions,’ with the outcome being, that ‘the urban imagination lost its vitality.’ As we write this chapter, streets and entire cities are now racing to reinvent themselves and change the way they work. Tragically it has taken a crisis for us to realise it is time to stop and think about what is vital going forward. Now it is time to rewrite our relationships with place.

Revoicing our relationships with place

Through the moment that our cities were forced to close down we have glimpsed our public spaces opening up. Individuals and communities, place-creators and managers are now revisiting the relations we want with our streets and neighborhoods. This era has fast-forwarded an already-emergent shift, away from place as a commodity, towards place as the living, breathing host of our lives; one where dialogue, interdependence, and people matter more. Richard Sennett has already set out an open city model, which should ‘free people from the straitjacket of the fixed and familiar, creating a terrain in which they could experiment and expand their experience’ (Sennett, 2019, p. 9). In practice, this hadn’t been easy. Yet, to quote Phillipa Bannister, director of Street Space: ‘Suddenly… there’s a chink in the armour of “normal”’ (Street Space 2020). Suddenly the street is reopening as a stage for so much more than driving – long the dominant urban language. With self-assigned agency, people are re-envisioning their streets as more personable places. Different voices are coming forward and rules of dialogue being redefined. In no time, roped-off playgrounds saw pavements turned into children’s canvases for
self-expression. Social distancing had us reinvent doorsteps, stoops, or parking spaces as gathering spots, and more. Such gestures marked new experiments to reveal future possibilities – as the opening lines to rewriting our relationship with place. Urbanist Stephanie Edwards describes this as ‘active use, adaptation and mis-use’ (Edwards, 2020, personal communication). None of this is by design, rather personal ingenuity and adaptation in seeing our surroundings through new eyes. Next, we must leave space for this to evolve. The popularity of ‘meanwhile’ use space (Madanipour, 2017; Bishop and Williams, 2012), has seen fantastic chances to try out and normalise different approaches for using city space. By definition however, the concept hosts limited-term possibilities, always subservient to a ‘greater’ plan, and normalises inequalities in terms of whose voice can be heard for how long.

How then can placemaking practices establish more equitable, ongoing iterative processes, where conversation remains open, where place is afforded, appropriated, and repeatedly recreated between community members, not just produced between built environment professionals and managers? How can chances to hear diverse active-voices become long-term normals, and different horizons, rather than sporadic opportunities? In our desire to learn from different voices, we shared our questioning with other practitioners and peers. Their responses veer from the technical language often used when speaking about the ‘built environment.’ Rather, evocative of the street workshops we conducted between 2008 and 2012, they lean upon an emotive vocabulary to talk about place. With thanks to these inputs, what follows are six characteristics that bring together collective ideas and opinions on establishing better dialogue and relations between people and cities.

**Trust**

If meaning making is about familiarity and growing stronger ties, how do we encourage a life-long relationship, rather than one-night stands with a place? Street Space champions the notion of ‘moving at the speed of trust’ (Street Space, 2020) as a starting point. In practice this means making changes in iterations with people over the long term, being dependable at every step. Sendra and Sennett (2020, p. 24–25) reflect that ‘The bonds of a community cannot be conjured in an instant, with a stroke of a planner’s pen; they too require time to develop.’ To this end, Shenzhen-based placemakers SANS(三思) trialed a system in Dashilar, Beijing, ‘where anthropology students spend extended amounts of time in the neighbourhoods to interview, and provide information to residents regarding interventions within the area’ (Gaddes, 2020, personal communication). These students became ‘Community Sensors’ for deep, qualitative data-gathering, giving locals agency through a safe, unofficial space to learn about projects and give feedback.

**Agency and expression**

Being yourself and feeling free to share: that is the root of a good relationship. Increased freedoms in the city enable people to express their contribution. As writer Emma Warren asserts, we need to ‘make some space’ for street-level social energy and creativity, the type that ‘make culture – and people – come alive’ (Warren, 2019). As architect Ivana Stanisic puts it, to ‘assert agency – making individual improvements such as guerrilla gardening or campaigning for improvements locally’ (Stanisic, 2020, personal communication). Urban ceramicist, Maria Gasparian says that for people to engage with their environment they must ‘be able inhabit it bringing their personal and social activities into it’ (Gasparian, 2020, personal communication).
How the city speaks to us...

Confidence

Citizen confidence is key in promoting agency in a place. Landscape architect Cannon Ivers, recounts Rab Bennet’s assertion that ‘The confidence of a city is in the public realm, the insecurities are in the skyline’ (Ivers, 2020, personal communication). Participatory City’s (2020) research reports growth in personal levels of confidence among participants in the Everyone Everyday programme of active community participation (Participatory City, 2020). Scaled up, what could this offer? Urbanist Kate Meyrick talks about ‘cities with an irrepressible mojo… exuding a confidence in who they are, warts and all.’ Such confidence has to be earned, not prescribed (Meyrick, 2020, personal communication).

Soul

We desperately need urban lexicons which better convey personal character and individuality. Author Barry Lopez articulates this unease: ‘We joke that one shopping mall looks just like another, that our housing development on the outskirts of Denver feels no different to us than a housing development outside Kansas City. But we are not always amused by such observations’ (Lopez and Gwartney, 2010). Copy-and-paste places are no joke – and come from lack of local knowledge. Vitiello’s Design Like A Storyteller workshops (2018) train urban designers to seek a deeper understanding of existing identity on the ground, translating symbolism into themes that drive design. Working with photographers, writers, or psychologists as experts in uncovering identity often reveals distinct and unseen insights about a place. Soul is life, defined by many markers. And in place this is fed by people, layering their personalities over time for the collective soul of a place to shine.

Reciprocity

The city is alive, yet often thought of as ‘built’ rather than ‘lived.’ Researcher Jessica Riley describes the reciprocal relationship we have with our streets – ‘continuously both actors and acted upon.’ Riley describes how these aesthetics of place shape our behaviours, beliefs and relationships; they are crucial to understanding our position in the world and with each other. Our responses to them offer us a reflection of the society we’re embedded in, of others we share it with and of ourselves. (Riley, 2020, personal communication)

Reciprocity also comes in shifting power structures. Sendra and Sennett point out that active ‘Communities… hold a powerful knowledge… of great value to urban designers. Partnering with these groups for the process of providing new public spaces and community infrastructure enhances socio-material interactions and starts new ones’ (2020, p. 108–109); while SANS(三思) Neill Gaddes advocates for ‘creating an exchange between government, stakeholders, users and communities that moves out of a hierarchical relationship based on money or expertise’, and in doing so ‘share horizontally’ (Gaddes, 2020, personal communication). Or, as one of the author’s neighbours suggests, seeing ‘planet and communities [as] clients of the city’ (Day, 2020, personal communication).

Love – and a little magic!

Love, in our relation with the city, is a verb (action), not just a noun (sensation). It can be shown through the intimate details that highlight care – flowers planted by a neighbour around a tree,
marks of craftsmanship, or detail that draws us in. They show that the contributors to the place have gone the extra mile, expanding to municipal scale if we move away from classic top-down/bottom-up structures to one of active care. Through passion emerges magic – a word that rarely makes it into an urban design brief. As we spend time with our neighbourhoods, professional and community placemakers need to intertwine excitement into an extraordinary everyday – keeping the love alive over time. Riley reminds us to ‘take note of what the materials in your environment are saying, what they’re doing to and for you and what it means to you. Question if that is what you want it to be… Talk about it.’ Architect Duncan Thomas sees our relationship in those magical places where ‘people feel free to have fun and live life’ and questions if ‘after the pandemic people might feel ready to celebrate life with abandon and not fear the consequences?’ (Thomas, 2020, personal communication).

The streets of tomorrow

It is no exaggeration to say it is work like this which can save the world… it will be through lived experiences of doing the everyday differently.

(Marc Stears, Sydney Policy Lab, Participatory City, 2019)

How can we ‘do the everyday differently’ and turn the process of making places on its head? Sendra and Sennett (2020, p. 109) look towards ‘a city that’s much more experimental,’ involving ‘more people messing about in the streets than eyes [on the streets]… The first orders, the second gathers’ (ibid.). They point to the importance of learning together by doing together, discussed by Thorpe et al. (2016), and also advocate for ‘having facilities in the public realm that allow for a greater diversity of community activities. Addressing such collective and public needs through shared infrastructure.’ Willcocks has reported on forums designed as open infrastructures. Here, process-led forms of city-making coalesce via generative acts of discourse and deliberation–through–doing (Willcocks, 2017, p. 832). Now, we see citizen-led communities, public and private organisations push for new interpretations of street forms and processes. So, are we reaching a rare moment to initiate continuums for collaborative experimentation, to build-in place-prototyping, as the norm?

Frameworks that allow urban experiments in the long term support new economic and social infrastructures. In this context, University College London’s (UCL) Urban Lab (Campkin and Duijzoings, 2016) discuss an evolving menu of methods for ‘engaged urbanism,’ and Theatrum Mundi’s tools seek to ‘expand the crafts of citymaking’ (Theatrum Mundi, 2020). Listen deeper to frame a brief that focuses on what we want our streets to say and do for us, then turn to action and speaking back. Platforms, structures, and ongoing programmes for collaboration – such as Make@Story Garden, between Central Saint Martins and Somers Town/Camden community members; Splash Adelaide’s long-term scheme in South Australia; or Participatory City’s Tomorrow Today Streets – each give tangible tools and chances to speak with active voice in our neighbourhoods. Communities self-organize and build confidence, with support and knowledge-sharing available through these initiatives. The place becomes the platform, for people to bring different stories, ideas, and actions on the table. Such frameworks are adaptable in physique but also in programme. These approaches remain peripheral to professional practice of built environment design, yet they’re often quicker, less expensive, more inclusive, and shape more resonant places. They enable us to prototype, fail safely, reimagine, and can be shared or scaled for broader impact.

The arrival of COVID-19 was a disaster which has also levered–open a door to a new era. The principle urban shifts are not through destruction of the physical city, but through changes
to its uses, the agency afforded, and the meanings embodied, in relation to citizens. With budgets cut, the greatest value of placemaking is to enable the relationships that take place within it to flourish. Citizens are critical as lifelong placemakers and must be recognised as such – no place is made until the people bring their mark and their soul. Now is the time to establish practices that enable fluency of place in everyone, through open dialogues of action. Characteristics like trust, confidence, and magic may sound soft or untenable, but these are the powerful building blocks of more equitable, active, and self-sustaining cityscapes. The streets of tomorrow will be made, remade, and re-established through ongoing call and response. Are you ready?

Bibliography


How the city speaks to us...


Further reading in this volume

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

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

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

*Martin Zebiacki*

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

Chapter 22: Embedded Artist Project: Epistemic Disobedience + Place
*Frances Whitehead*

Chapter 24: Artists, creativity, and the heart of city planning
*Tom Borrup*

Chapter 27: Is ‘tactical urbanism’ an alternative to neoliberal urbanism?: reflections on an exhibition at the MoMA
*Neil Brenner*

Chapter 31: Seven generations: a role for artists in Zuni PlaceKnowing
*Theodore S. Jejela and Michaela P. Shirley*

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 McKindlay*

Preface: Evaluating creative placemaking: a collection of observations, reflections, findings, and recommendations
*Maria Rosario Jackson*

Chapter 39: Translating Outcomes: Laying the groundwork for interdisciplinary evaluation of creative placemaking
*Jamie Hand*

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 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*