Author's note: this chapter begins not with a Forward, but a Backward – a perspective on where I have been, on a journey from community development to creative placemaking and back again. This is my practitioner story that picks up, along the way, three inspiring examples of how communities of color have always relied upon creativity to resist and grow. These are three, among many, examples I have encountered in my own search for the future of creative placemaking grounded in equity, justice, and resilience.

Backward?

Bent over, pulling weeds from the dirt, beads of sweat worked their way down my face, stinging my eyes. In Boston, the summer of 2000 was sweltering. The community garden plots farmed by Chinese seniors at the Berkeley Street Community Garden (BSCG), sheltered under meter after square meter of lush bitter melon and its fuzzy vines, offered a welcome respite. These cool, green ‘rooms’ also shielded their occupants from a mainstream Boston society that did not know what to make of the rambunctious, ad hoc, and sprawling reach of these bountiful gardens, nor the gardeners who tended them. These garden plots manifested food sovereignty and economic self-sufficiency while simultaneously expressing a cultural and social identity constantly under threat of erasure by policies, actions, and neglect.

I was the Director of Community Programs for the Asian Community Development Corporation. Volunteering at the BSCG was a way for me to get to know the neighborhoods of Chinatown and the South End in Boston. Working alongside our community youth leaders and Chinese American seniors to pull weeds was definitely in the job description. The BSCG was riotously verdant and layered with purpose and meaning: flowers and ornamentals interspersed, plot-by-plot, with bitter melon and bok choy. Well-tended, polite gardens competed for attention – largely losing – against intensively cultivated micro-farms. The clash of Western and Eastern, expressed via overlapping (sometimes even clashing) aesthetic, gardening, and agricultural traditions, and even social norms, was as much a feature of the space as the daily practices of the garden.

It was eye-opening to meet these seniors and learn about how they squatted on the land after the cancelling of the infamous ‘Inner Belt’ highway project in 1972, which became the first
step towards the permanent protection of the BSCG land by a land trust. They not only helped save the land, but became ongoing stewards, organized and intently focused on protecting the rights of the Chinese American community to have a place to grow food for their families and neighbors. The Chinese American seniors who tended the plots were doing much more than gardening, however. These seniors were carrying on a traditional agricultural practice that manifested food sovereignty and economic self-sufficiency while simultaneously expressing a cultural and social identity constantly under threat of erasure.

The more I literally dug into the soil of the BSCG, the more I uncovered the true culture of Chinatown – a culture that extends far deeper than the stereotypes most tourists know. This culture is expressed through economic self-sufficiency, creative resilience, and active resistance against erasure, homogenization, and disenfranchisement. I came to regard the BSCG as the most authentic example of Chinese culture in Chinatown. I also came to see it as the most vibrant manifestation of democracy in a city where most have little sway over the forms and uses of spaces. This enraging fact was even more true for communities of color like Chinatown, which had suffered successive waves of trauma from eminent domain displacement, ongoing marginalization, and underlying racism embedded in mainstream land use policies, such as the urban renewal land takings for the Interstate 93 and 90 highways in the 1950s and 1960s, and the rezoning of all adult entertainment uses from around the city into this one neighborhood in 1974. In these gardens, in this nexus of social, cultural and political agency, held by these Chinese and Chinatown seniors, I found creative placemaking. The work of the Asian community development corporation (CDC) became supporting the self-organization of and advocacy by the gardeners. We commissioned an artist to create a pathway, a fence and other infrastructure to both showcase the garden and protect the rights of individuals to grow and express themselves in each plot.

Traditional Asian enclaves in the United States have names such as ‘Chinatown,’ ‘Little Tokyo,’ and ‘Little Saigon,’ and they emerged from an era where communities of color were segregated into defined areas by redlining and other policies. Although these place names seem representative of diversity, they actually serve for many outsiders as little more than place markers of generic exoticism as exemplified by the common refrain that a visit to Chinatown is the cheapest ticket to the Far East. My experiences in the BSCG garden led me to wonder how Asian American communities across the United States can transcend historical and ongoing marginalization. How can labels such as ‘Chinatown’ serve as beacons of ethnic pride and possibility when they originate out of a racist and discriminatory legacy? How can Chinatown be politically, economically and culturally valued – as much by the people rooted there and for what the place means to them, as it is for those who visit as a destination?

Names do not a place make, and the difference is vast between merely naming and doing the authentic work of building up a community where the voice, power, and agency of people are at the heart of its physical manifestation. Into this chasm, creative placemaking and community development can either fall – and fail – together, or together build a bridge that crosses the greatest divides of racial, economic, and social inequity that all societies face.

**People making places**

Over my decade of work in Boston Chinatown, I began to seek out inspiration and explore the legacies of creative, community responses to oppression, disenfranchisement, discrimination, racism. The mainstream use of the term creative placemaking fails to define and advance a community development practice because it does not encompass and recognize the historic and contemporary legacies of placemaking that have harmed communities, such as Robert Moses’
remaking of the very fabric of New York City in 1900s, nor recognize the way communities have utilized placemaking as an act of resistance against oppression. When it is most authentic, creative placemaking isn’t superficial or even a new strategy for community or economic development; it is an essential part of community self-determination. The three cases that follow are some of the most inspiring to me as they represent this definition of creative placemaking among communities of color that hold different sorts of promise and resonance for the future.

Among all of them, survival is a central driver – survival in the face of slavery, White Supremacy, oppression, and exclusion. Likewise, they each represent a community’s expression of this survival, and each happens in place, where the community and the geography are inextricably linked. In picking these cases, I asked myself: What are the revolutionary, radical, and resistance moments in US history that involved taking ‘ownership’ of a place, that transformed that place into what we desire, need, express, and used that place as a platform or stepping stone from which to further liberation? The risk in casting a net across history so broadly for these cases is that their social and political contexts are so different, and thus, while there are lessons to be drawn from each, their selection does not mean that their situations are equal or even comparable. Rather, I am connecting these past cases to present projects and efforts and to highlight how advocacy or policy change happened as a result in the ‘Forward!’ part of this chapter.

Maroon settlements of the Great Dismal Swamp

Maroon settlements – renegade communities of escaped slaves – have been documented in the Americas and the Caribbean as far back as the 1500s. The largest known Maroon settlement in what was to become the United States was in the Great Dismal Swamp – an almost impossibly remote 2,000-square-mile marshland rife with dense underbrush, snakes, alligators, and insects. The swamp stretches from southern Virginia to northeast North Carolina along the Savannah River. Documentation of life in the Great Dismal Swamp comes both from firsthand accounts, which are relatively scant, and archeological research.

Some estimates surmise that thousands of escaped slaves, along with Native Americans and some Whites, took refuge in the area between the 1600s through the end of the Civil War. It is believed that the earliest inhabitants of the Great Dismal Swamp were indigenous Americans seeking refuge from European settlers (Youssef, 2017). Escaped slaves began to settle in the swamp in the 1700s. Some became acquainted with the swamp when they were put to work dredging a canal connecting the Chesapeake Bay to the Albermarle Sound. After the canal was completed, companies of slaves were sent to the swamp for months at a time to produce shingles and planks from the cypress and juniper trees that grew there. ‘The wilderness offered them a modicum of freedom not found on the plantation; they fished, hunted, and worked at their own pace, the requirement being that each person produce a given number of shingles’ (Diouf, 2014). As their work took them deeper and deeper into the swamp, some of these slaves seized the opportunity to take permanent refuge there.

Some of the Maroons sustained themselves by working in timber camps, where advantageous arrangements could be made between the slaves also working in the camps (the slaves were credited a fixed amount of money for every thousand shingles they produced and Maroons helped them increase their shingle output) or directly with the White lumbermen. Still others worked as entrepreneurs, trading their shingles for money or provisions (Diouf, 2014). Life in the outer swamp was arduous – pay, food, and clothing were all meager, and the Maroons were at constant risk of capture by bounty hunters. At the same time, they enjoyed a freedom and self-determination denied their brothers and sisters on the plantations. Diouf cites a Maroon who escaped for Canada and fondly recalled moving freely in his bark canoe, hunting wild hogs
and cows, chasing bears away, and enjoying singing sessions with the community’s preacher (Diouf, 2014).

Other Maroons lived much more remotely in the inner swamp, some for generations, keeping the locations of their settlements secret from anyone with whom they came in contact. That contact was limited: Diouf ‘cautiously concludes’ these Maroons lived in small, family-oriented groups (Diouf, 2014). Some Maroons never saw a White person and it is believed some stayed in the swamp for years after Emancipation because they had not heard the news. Maroon housing was responsive to its environment and designed to avoid detection. In the Great Dismal Swamp, this typically meant small shanties on stilts or braced against trees and constructed from materials in the immediate environs. Given the dearth of tools, construction required supreme ingenuity. Yet the shelters could be large and elaborate, containing furniture, stoves, and wooden pipes. These abodes were often built beneath sturdy trap doors that kept them camouflaged. Maroons in other locations constructed equally complex yet hidden abodes in caves and tree trunks. While the swamp’s ‘Borderland Maroons’ often traded, stole, or were given necessary supplies, the ‘Hinterland Maroons’ had to be entirely self-reliant. They farmed, growing crops such as corn and sunflowers, despite the extreme inhospitality of their environment. They also fished, hunted, made baskets, and traded. They married and created families. One advantage to living so remotely was that the threat of capture was minimized. While militias frequently attacked more accessible Maroon settlements, history shows no report of a ‘hunt’ in the inner Great Dismal Swamp (Diouf, 2014).

Despite the extreme conditions, the Great Dismal Swamp and other settlements afforded the Maroons an autonomy and a feeling of security denied them in slavery. ‘I felt safer among the alligators than among white men,’ observed one Maroon (Youssef, 2017). Historical archaeologist Dan Sayers characterizes the swamp as a ‘landscape of power,’ noting that the settlement’s existence shifts the narrative of slaves solely as victims and shows that they were ‘people who were resilient, and constructed their lives and constructed the places in which they lived’ (Shapiro-Perl, 2014). The Great Dismal Swamp offers an intrinsically place-based narrative of self-determination, resistance, and intentional community-making, albeit under the most tyrannical of conditions.

These communities of resistance and resilience presage more contemporary sites of Black self-determination in place, including the Black Panthers’ free breakfast and education programs in Oakland, California, and the Village of Arts and Humanities in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The vernacular creativity of an alienated people manifests in these places that also operate on the symbolic level: known, expressive, and influential far beyond their geographic boundaries. Like the Maroon Settlements of the Great Dismal Swamp, these two more contemporary cases are ‘rare examples of people undermining inequalities and oppressions inherent to capitalistic modes of production and social worlds by forging and perpetuating a novel social world outside the capitalistic world.’ The 10 generations of Maroons of the Great Dismal Swamp ‘stand among the few who have successfully undercut the brutal and racist world… They were successful because they accurately critiqued the racialized capitalistic world within which they were imbedded’ (Sayers, 2016).

**Casitas of South Bronx and New York City**

In the first half of the twentieth century, the South Bronx provided stable neighborhoods for largely European immigrants. As the century progressed, the area became home to increasing numbers of Puerto Rican, West Indian, and African-American residents, many fleeing destabilization in their own countries, or steered there due to illegal redlining practices, and seeking
job opportunities for unskilled laborers in the post–World War II boom. (Redlining is the concerted and systematic discrimination by federal, state, local policies, and private business against residents of specific neighborhoods. In practice, it impacts primarily African American and other racial and ethnic populations. It continues to this day in various guises, including in emergency response times, availability of ride-sharing services, and the targeting of predatory lending practices.) Between World War I and World War II, corporate and government forces wrought extensive destruction on the South Bronx community. From the 1930s through the 1960s, under the direction of city planner Robert Moses, New York created one of the nation’s densest concentrations of public housing in the South Bronx. Moses also spearheaded the construction of four highways and three bridges through the community.

These projects dislocated tens of thousands of residents and, when completed, segregated races and concentrated poverty (four housing projects were targeted to low-income Latinos and African Americans, while one was targeted to middle-income Whites) while also disrupting the collegial character of the neighborhood. Where small businesses and front stoops once lent themselves to friendly exchanges, imposing towers now kept people isolated. Another Moses-led project, Co–op City – a collection of 35 high-rise buildings constructed in the North Bronx – ‘sucked’ thousands of middle-class residents from the South and West Bronx during the 1960s and 1970s, while Moses’ expressways facilitated the migration of the borough’s more affluent residents to other parts of the city or the suburbs.

Meanwhile, corporations began to automate their manufacturing facilities or move them to the American South or overseas, in search of ever-cheaper labor. Between 1947 and 1976, New York City lost 500,000 manufacturing jobs (McLaughlin, 2019). Although trade jobs were theoretically a viable alternative for those without a college degree, many unions in the higher-paying trades denied membership to non-White laborers. While civil service provided a career path for many, unions in the more lucrative uniformed professions such as firefighters and police exercised similar racist practices. By the 1960s, one-quarter of the South Bronx’s residents received welfare. A decade later, that number increased to 40 per cent (McLaughlin, 2019). This systematic racism hollowed out a stable economic base and set the stage for an influx of heroin, marijuana, and crack cocaine. The sale and use of these drugs, coupled with new laws imposing harsh sentences for drug crimes, led to dual epidemics of AIDS and mass incarceration, further decimating the community (McLaughlin, 2019). The impact on the physical environment was stark. Seven census tracts in The Bronx lost more than 97 per cent of their buildings to fire and abandonment between 1970 and 1980; 44 tracts lost more than half their buildings (Flood, 2019). Some of the fires were due to arson, often on behalf of landlords losing money on their investments. Severe cuts to the fire department exacerbated the problem.

Amid this landscape of segregation and disinvestment, many of the South Bronx’s sizeable Puerto Rican population – 30 per cent of the total population in the 1980s – began reclaiming their community through the creation of community gardens and the establishment of casitas de madera, one-story houses constructed on vacant city-owned land in a style that evoked the colorful vernacular architecture of Puerto Rico’s working poor. (*Casitas also began to appear in East Harlem and the Lower East Side, two other Puerto Rican enclaves.*) Collectively built and often constructed from salvaged materials, casitas are often fully outfitted, with comfortable furniture, televisions, and full kitchens. Electricity is often tapped from a nearby lamppost or secured through arrangement with the superintendent of a neighboring building. Water comes from a rain barrel or nearby spigot. The casitas are painted in vibrant colors reminiscent of the Caribbean and purposefully decorated with found materials. Notes Joseph Sciorra: ‘These are not haphazard uses of ephemera reflecting a ‘culture of poverty’ but like the casita itself, are instead a deliberate and conscious manifestation of deeply felt values, beliefs and needs in
culturally specific and meaningful ways’ (Sciorra, 1966). The *casita* is typically surrounded by
gardens and a non-vegetated yard known as a *batey*, which may feature benches, domino tables,
chicken coops, gardens, barbecue pits, a stage, and a patio for dancing (Sciorra, 1994).

*Casita* activities are plentiful, their role in the life of the community myriad, from sheltering
the homeless to serving as social clubs and cultural centers (Sciorra, 1994). *Rincon Criollo*
(‘Creole Corner’ or ‘Downhome Corner’) is possibly the first and one of the best-known *casitas*.
Established in 1974 by José (Chema) Soto, the original structure was built on a formerly garbage-filled
city lot, cleared by Soto and his friends. Soto and community members built a larger structure
on the site following a fire. *Rincon Criollo* hosted renowned Puerto Rican performers such
as salsa band leader Andy Montanez and television personality Iris Chaco and was known as a
hub for traditional music and dance forms, such as the *bomba* and *plena* (Sciorra, 1994). The *casitas*
became safe, family-friendly places for daily gatherings and community celebrations in the midst
of a scarred neighborhood where crime was a daily reality. Children were introduced to traditional
dance, drumming and other arts in concerted attempts to keep them from succumbing
to street life. Members – admitted not through application but via introduction and disproportionately, but not exclusively, male – watch sports, play dominoes, and tend gardens. *Casitas* also
became neighborhood centers – places to discuss and organize around local concerns. *Villa Puerto Rico*, for instance, regularly offers assistance with voter registration, public benefits registration,
and housing concerns. More than a sentimental backdrop for the garden, the *casita* is a workshop
where craftsmen carve drums and speckled carnival masks and where local children learn dance
steps to rhythms that first came to this hemisphere aboard slave ships’ (Gonzalez, 1990).

Despite the vibrant colors and the safe, convivial environment, Sciorra notes that the *casitas*
have their roots in a culture of oppression, based as they are on the vernacular architecture that
emerged from colonization of the homeland by tobacco and sugar farmers:

For those who have lived the *casita*, pieced together its walls and inhabited its space, the
moribundly nostalgic *jibaro* iconography mass produced in the service of tobacco and
alcohol companies as well as the islands tourist industry invades their memories. But
for many of the former *casita* inhabitants I spoke with in New York City, the building
recounts a history of toil, suffering and struggle that stands in marked opposition to
such saccharine imagery.

(Sciorra, 1966)

By the late 1970s, the *casitas* became targets of government harassment, such as in the form of
fines for improper trash disposal after garbage-strewn lots had been cleared or the attempted
collection of back-taxes for ‘continuous use’ of city-owned property. In 1978, then-Mayor Ed
Koch established the ‘GreenThumb’ program to regulate the unofficial use of city-owned land
for community gardens. Leases for the gardens specified that no illegal structures were permit-
ted, and the Koch administration began annulling leases for properties that housed *casitas*. When
Jane Weissman took over the ‘GreenThumb’ program in 1984, she informally reversed that prac-
tice. In 1991, ‘GreenThumb’ developed a standardized permitted structure. The city continued
to demolish *casitas* that do not possess ‘GreenThumb’ leases. Despite a movement to have the
*casitas* declared historic landmarks, the remaining structures remain unprotected. *Rincon Criollo*
was forced to move one block north in 2007 when the city reclaimed the property where it sat
for a housing development.

Despite encroaching development and the aging of its founders (Soto died in 2015), a
younger generation keeps the *casita* tradition alive. ‘We congregate on Sundays. It’s all about
community,’ noted Ivan Carrero, garden coordinator at the United We Stand garden. ‘We’ve
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been here for eons’ (Kensinger, 2019). Observes Sciorra: ‘The vibrant, life-affirming culture of New York casitas is a counter voice questioning political negligence and economic tyranny that have left so much destruction in their wake’ (Sciorra, 1966). The Peralta Hacienda Historical Park in the Fruitvale neighborhood of Oakland, California and the Sweet Water Foundation in Chicago, Illinois carry on this legacy of raising a counter voice to the dominant economic and political mainstream. Each brings together the literal and iconic presence of a home or house structure situated amidst a garden that represents not only a connection to the past, but a path forward towards liberation just as ‘the casitas were places where the community built their structures in order to establish their notion of an ideal world’ (Goldin, 2013).

Indian Canyon in the Unceded Ohlone Lands of California

By the mid-1880s, after nearly 250 years of contact with colonizers, the indigenous (Native American) population of the North American continent had been decimated through government-mandated genocide and forced relocation. Due to different colonial legacies, the atrocities committed against Native populations manifested themselves in distinct ways between the eastern and western parts of the continent. In the West, the enslavement and indentured servitude of tribes is a central feature of the founding of California, through the Mission system under Spanish occupation and even through the late 1880s, through the 1850 Act for the Government and Protection of Indians ‘known to critics as the Indian Slave Act, which allowed whites to basically kidnap Indians and force them to work against their will’ (Markus, 2013). The overlapping impositions of Spanish missions and Mexican and American rule disrupted, and then brought to the brink of utter destruction, the social, cultural, and ecological systems that had sustained thriving and vibrant indigenous populations for over 10,000 years.

Between 1769 and 1900, the Native American population in the area of California declined by 95 per cent. By 1990, California had the second-largest Native American population of any state, with 242,000 Native American residents. While most of these residents were Native Americans indigenous to California, many came to California from other states to seek employment in the metropolitan areas of the state, resulting in relatively large and diverse Urban Indian populations. There are over 100 reservations, many of them in remote rural areas, and in addition to the groups recognized by the federal government, with rights to government services and sovereign status, there are dozens of tribes attempting to gain federal recognition. Among these tribes seeking recognition are the Ohlone. Like many of the Native American populations in California, the Ohlone are not one tribe, but more of an ‘extended family’ of geographically bound villages with similar languages and cultural practices. Ohlone lands extended from the Carquinez Straits in the northern portion of the San Francisco Bay Area, south along the coast to Big Sur (Clinger, 2014).

There are innumerable stories and histories of resistance and struggle against oppression among California’s Native American population. Near the present-day city of Hollister and in the Unceded Ohlone Lands of California sits Indian Canyon. The story of how it came to serve as ceremonial grounds for all indigenous people seeking traditional lands encompasses an inspiring intergenerational struggle to resist encroachment by the dominant White society. As the only land continuously held by the Ohlone people – the indigenous inhabitants of the San Francisco and Monterey Bay Areas – Indian Canyon is a fundamental example of placemaking as a continuous rejuvenation of community at the nexus of people and place. In the 1880s, Indian Canyon served as a safe haven for Native people who were escaping the oppression of the nearby Spanish mission at San Juan Bautista. The canyon is just a mile long, but it is vibrant with oak trees, streams, and a waterfall, making it an attractive haven then, and now (Chitnis, 2015).
The contemporary story of Indian Canyon starts with The Indian Allotment Act of 1887, also known as ‘The Dawes Act,’ a federal act that created a legal mechanism to break up tribal collective land stewardship into individual household ownership. The act was created under the guise of allowing Native American households to become self-sufficient as farmers, and allocating adult males 160 acres, adult females, 80 acres, and children 40 acres, each. However, the federal government’s true motivation was to enable White settlers to acquire lands that were formerly recognized as tribal territory. By some accounts, between 1887 and 1905, over 90 million acres of Indian-owned land disappeared under a White wave of policy and capitalism. Just over 100 years later, in 1988, Ann Marie Sayers successfully used the very same Dawes Act to take back control of her family’s land from the Federal Bureau of Land Management. Sayers used the Act to reclaim land that had been in her family for centuries in Indian Canyon (Trust Patent number 04-88-0047). It was the very same Act that Sayers’ great-grandfather used in 1911 to establish claim to the land in Indian Canyon as ‘an individual trust allotment’ of almost 160 acres. ‘My brother and I inherited the land that my mother owned who inherited it from her grandfather, my great-grandfather, Sebastian Garcia,’ says Sayers (Clinger, 2014). From 1980 to 1988, Sayers developed an argument that she could fulfill the stringent Dawes Act requirements: generate enough revenue enough to live on, reside on the property exclusive of a home elsewhere, and conduct grazing without irrigation. According to Sayers:

I worked with the Soil Conservation Service to see what we could do that this land could support. That is when we came up with West African pygmy goats. Then I had to build a home which is the log cabin I now live in… This allowed me to establish claim to the land adjacent to the original trust allotment. In 1988 I got the trust patent title for this property which consists of 123 acres.

(Clinger, 2014)

‘The canyon is alive through the power of ceremonies,’ Sayers says (Clinger, 2014). The canyon has a large arbor, seven sweat lodges, and 30–40 more sites where individuals can come for their ‘hamblechiya’ or vision/nature quest where they can commune with nature without being disturbed by anyone. These facilities are offered by Sayers to indigenous communities from around the world for their ceremonies, storytelling gatherings, dances, and cultural events. For nearly three decades, Sayers and her family have produced a storytelling festival where people have the opportunity to hear Native stories told by Native people. Since 2015 they have hosted a Sacred Prayer Run from Mission San Juan Bautista to Indian Canyon, a 19-mile relay retracing the steps many Ohlone took to flee the oppression of the Mission system (Indian Canyon Life, n.d.).

Other expressive practices for making the invisible visible include an ‘Imaginary Burdens Basket’ at the Canyon’s entrance for visitors, not to mention the overall subversion of the perverse Dawes Act policy, using Pygmy Goats no less. The legacy of Indian Canyon can be seen in more recent efforts to make manifest the intangible culture of threatened places, such as the Mauna Kea protest village that blocks access to the mountain by the construction crews of the controversial Thirty Meter Telescope. The village, in an expression of Native Hawaiian culture, encompasses all elements of life to sustain the kīaʻi, or protectors, including places of ceremony and worship, living quarters, and an onsite school. The creative application of land tenure strategies to preserving and expanding the indigenous stewardship of Indian Canyon are echoed in the Sogorea Te’ Land Trust, an urban indigenous women-led community organization founded in 2012 that facilitates the return of Chochenyo and Karkin Ohlone lands in the San Francisco Bay Area to Indigenous stewardship. One particularly creative approach used by Trust is the Shuumi Land Tax that remixes the Chochenyo Ohlone word for ‘a gift’ with a not-subtle-at-all...
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statement about the obligation all non-Ohlone residents to be part of supporting indigenous communities to reclaim land that was stolen from them. Describing the invitation that the Shuumi Land Tax and the Trust itself represents, co-founder, Corrina Gould asks:

How does this land trust become not just my dream, but it a dream of people in the Bay Area that really want to see something different? A way for us to humanize ourselves, a way for us to be together on land. We need a whole community to envision this, to dream this out with us, beyond the parameters that we’ve all been given.

(Sogorea Te’ Land Trust, n.d.)

Forward!

During the 1800s, the phrase ‘a Chinaman’s chance’ was used to describe futile situations and desperate circumstances. Today, does ‘a Chinatown’s chance’ represent the dead end of a marginalized population or the thriving hope of ethnic, place-based neighborhoods that nurture generations of community growth and opportunity? Since my time in Boston Chinatown, I have operated under the assumption that officially designated, ethnic-affiliated neighborhoods do indeed have a nurturing effect on community growth and opportunity. I believe they play a symbolic and strategic role in the struggle for social justice and equality among communities of color. The rise of formally designated cultural districts as a cultural policy strategy suggest that the reclaiming of place identity politics is underway, as in the officially designated Mission District of San Francisco and in the work to establish the Black Cultural Zone in Oakland.

The Thai community of Los Angeles worked for years to establish ‘Thai Town’ in the Hollywood neighborhood. Historic Filipino Town in Los Angeles, the three remaining Japantowns in the United States, and many other communities are working to restore, enhance, or revive their identities as positive monikers through creative placemaking. For a community to be officially recognized means that, at some level, there is an acknowledgment of their existence and a practical justification of their needs. By merely requiring those in power to say names like Chinatown aloud, we make mainstream society acknowledge differences. The irony, I would suggest, is that the name Chinatown isn’t ethnic enough to give pause to those outside our community. Visitors won’t stumble over its pronunciation, and that missing pronunciation pause is transformative; it has the power to transport someone from comfort to confusion, from the United States to somewhere abroad, from complacency to complexity. It is this amplification of difference that can lead to respect for diversity, to acknowledgment of a community’s contributions to the greater good, and to recognition of community needs that the mainstream cannot otherwise imagine.

For this reason, the Asian CDC created other creative placemaking projects that strengthened the community through resident-led planning and planning, engagement, and organizing around neighborhood advocacy, and housing development, and expressed Chinatown’s identity beyond its geographic boundaries. Working with artist Mike Blockstein and 10 community youth leaders, we combined youth organizing, digital storytelling, and a community master-plan process into ‘A Chinatown Banquet,’ an interactive project designed to generate empathy among policy and political leaders of Boston and others outside of Chinatown for the neighborhood’s priorities. We revived the legacy of movie theaters as intergenerational and intercultural social spaces in Chinatown through an annual week-long, free, outdoor film festival called ‘Films at the Gate.’ We reclaimed parts of Chinatown that had been seized through urban renewal and eminent domain by asserting a form of site control – moral site control that used history and art to catalyze organizing, community planning, and political advocacy to successfully influence
a land-use decision. The Hudson Street for Chinatown campaign, which reclaimed Parcel 24 from the Massachusetts Highway Department at nominal cost, became a significant expansion of housing, open space, and cultural space for the community in the One Greenway development, including the Pao Arts Center. We supported community youth, leaders, and advocates to operate a pop-up library for several years to recreate and reimagine the Chinatown Branch Library that had been shuttered and never replaced decades earlier. A new Chinatown Branch Library is now being planned as part of the Asian CDC's next development. Using a virtual world gaming engine, we created a game called Participatory Chinatown that used a digital manifestation of Boston Chinatown, archetypal neighborhood stakeholder avatars, and community quests to generate intra-neighborhood empathy for complex and contentious community planning processes.

Reflecting on these examples, I realize that my creative practice as a community developer was channeling legacies of placemaking that persist from the Maroon Settlements, Casitas, and Indian Canyon. We were building up a vibrant and thriving community, in plain sight of those who sought to disempower and oppress us, where Chinatown could grow and maintain an authentic identity, economy and society. We were supporting expressive placemaking that projected this identity through forms both ancient and contemporary at the Berkeley Street Community Garden on land previously deemed unwanted. Finding ways for policy to serve our needs, to the point of subverting the mainstream or status quo in our own unique ways, led to the rare successful reclaiming of land taken by urban renewal at Parcel 24. Around the country in rural and urban places, in communities of all kinds, these legacies persist.

Creative placemaking as a defined field of practice arrives just as the challenges to community development threaten to swamp past gains and hinder sustained equitable development; seemingly intractable and deepening economic inequity, unforeseen and unforeseeable disruptive changes to the systems of work, housing, and health, and the fraying of social cohesion across the country call for new approaches. We can and must look to ‘landscapes of power’ – and resistance – in communities around the country and in our past to shape creative placemaking’s growth.

References


Further reading in this volume

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 8: Queer placemaking, settler colonial time, and the desert imaginary in Palm Springs
Xander Lenc

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 E Kwaas and Hayun Park

Martin Zebracki

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

Chapter 28: Integral placemaking: A poiesis of sophrosyne?
Ian Wight

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

Chapter 35: Planning governance: lessons for the integration of placemaking
Nigel Smith

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
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