PLACEMAKING

PEOPLE, PROPERTIES, PLANNING

EDITED BY

DAVID HIGGINS • PETER J. LARKHAM

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Preface

In recent years, anyone with a professional interest in the built environment will have become aware of the idea of "placemaking" – particularly in town planning, urban design, or property development. It has become prominent in planning education and academic research, where it has also spread into other disciplines. So, when the "property, planning and policies" academic team at Birmingham City University was considering how to reposition our work to engage interest – with colleagues at BCU and other universities, with practitioners, and with current and prospective students – placemaking became a useful focus on which most of us could agree most of the time. We initially collected our thoughts, drawing on our interests and knowledge, and produced a short illustrated booklet aimed at a professional readership. This has been the nucleus of the current book: much extended and updated, with an interdisciplinary focus, seeking to extend placemaking ideas – but still the product of the BCU team.

David Higgins
Peter J. Larkham
Stratford on Avon, 2024

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Chapter 1

Introduction

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Abstract

This introductory chapter discusses the concept of "placemaking" and how it has developed and expanded since its relatively recent origins. This book extends the remit of placemaking further to consider issues such as finance, law, and digital technologies, in addition to some more familiar applications. The structure of the book and the contents of the following chapters are introduced.

Keywords: Urban design; community neighborhoods; real estate renewal and repurposing; multidisciplinary perspectives; built environment sustainability

Introduction

The power of "placemaking" is in transforming spaces – creating a sense of place, shaping an identity. It offers stakeholders – residents, businesses, local governments, and organizations – meaningful places, whether by deliberate or accidental process. The character and identity of places are linked with the people who created and shaped the space, their values and aspirations for the places in which they live and work, and the society within which they operate. Stern (2014) relates this concept with the creation of significance or meaning.

This significance, the importance of a space, therefore needs to be identified, and the physical product – the place – needs to respect and reflect that meaning (Hes et al., 2020). Of course, many places will have multiple layers of meaning, of different significances to a variety of entities. As shaping places is usually an expensive process, placemaking is mediated through consideration of finance and other resources, and thus, the implications of related objectives such as sustainability, gentrification, and economic development must be recognized. But we should also recognize that placemaking can operate at a wide range of scales,

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from the very small scale and local to areas and districts within cities (probably the most commonly considered scale) but also to entire settlements or even wider regions (perhaps least-considered). The term "placemaking" has come to be applied principally to the shaping of new developments, although it can logically and appropriately also be applied to the reshaping of existing neighborhoods, towns, and cities. Placemaking as generally conceptualized, as a formal activity, tends to offer specific and broad solutions, this fuzziness of scale and application could also lead to fuzziness of concept (Cilliers et al., 2015; Stern, 2014).

In many uses, "placemaking" has become almost synonymous with "town planning" and "urban design." The United Kingdom's Royal Town Planning Institute, for example, supports its members "to deliver outstanding placemaking that creates inclusive, healthy, prosperous, sustainable and happy communities" (RTPI, 2024a). There is also an uneasy relationship with "urbanism" – is "guerrilla urbanism" not just a bottom-up expression of placemaking (Foth, 2017; Hou, 2020)? However, this usage may be little more than current professional and political fashion, and a deeper exploration of the ideas and applications is timely.

This book explores a multidisciplinary perspective on placemaking, examining both some familiar applications and making links with some less-familiar themes including legal, financial, and digital. In looking outside the more familiar boundaries of the concept, we can explore the wider relevance of placemaking: its connections with the ways in which society and cities work and with how the world is rapidly changing. We argue that placemaking is central to the urban future, but that future will be very different from even the recent past.

Developing the Idea

Placemaking (as we represent the term simply for convenience, although "place-making" or even "place making" are often used – see Lew, 2017) is an inter-disciplinary concept that has become increasingly prominent in academic research and teaching and professional practice, since the mid-1970s (Jeleński, 2018). It emerged principally from the closely related disciplines of town planning, urbanism, and urban design, albeit that urban design was itself a new concept and urbanism a more Europe-centric one. Indeed placemaking is often seen as an approach to, or facet of, urban design (Madden, 2011; Thomas, 2016) or the link is strongly expressed but in other ways (for example, for historical districts: Li et al., 2020). It developed particularly in response to criticisms of modernist urbanism, after rapid urban redevelopments and expansion – particularly that following the Second World War and, in the countries affected, the extensive wartime damage. The speed, scale, and nature of these changes were increasingly identified and generating concern, even from the late 1960s as causing a lack of place in cities: they were losing individuality (Aldous, 1975) and becoming placeless (Relph, 1976). There were widespread – and continuing – discussions about the need to return to human-centered urbanism (Aravot, 2002; Kent, 2019; Strydom et al., 2018) and the approaches and techniques that could foster this

(Choi et al., 2016; Hyden, 2020 are examples). A pro-conservation movement emerged as one popular public and professional response (Cherry, 1974).

More recently, the growth in placemaking-related interest and activity has led the concept to have noticeable visibility in global environment-related discussions, to the extent that it has become embedded in major international agendas and declarations, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015) and UN Habitat's New Urban Agenda (UN, 2017). The placemaking connection to sustainability aspirations and goals often involves incorporating innovative design features such as green infrastructure, public accessibility, and renewable energy sources (for example, Dreiseitl, 2015; Donaldson & João, 2020; Schaeffer & Smits, 2015). These positive initiatives contribute to environmentally sensitive approaches which can mitigate the increasing threat of the changing climate and extreme weather events, particularly as the world's population, and particularly its urban population, continue to grow and consume finite resources.

Overall, placemaking has emerged as a social process focusing principally on the creation and management of public places that are characterful, vibrant, and safe: they function well for those who use them. This is particularly the view of the Project for Public Spaces, a prominent North American placemaking organization (PPS, 2011), although some might extend the approach to semi-public, if not also private, spaces. There is a focus on generating economic growth through this activity, much of it from tourism, especially cultural tourism. Placemaking is thus inescapably intertwined with property ownership and financial returns (Canelas, 2019, gives a London example). A legitimate question emerges from this: to what extent is placemaking distinct from other planning-related activities including master planning and urban design? According to Cilliers et al. (2015, p. 351), placemaking "differs from traditional masterplanning in the sense that its principal goal is to create a public place that attracts a wide variety of people and offers an experience that makes people return to the space." This is a narrower focus and, perhaps, a narrow interpretation of placemaking.

Although placemaking has become a widely recognized concept, familiar to many built environment professionals and at least recognizable to a wider public, it remains problematic in terms of its meaning, objectives, applications, and scale. The term's widespread use across a variety of academic disciplines, professions, and applications is likely to be largely responsible for this (Hes & Hernandez-Santin, 2020). As in the early days of "urban design," the term sounds comprehensible and familiar, but it lacks a commonly accepted definition and has multiple interpretations. Is it a theoretical framework for urban policy and design, a methodology or set of tools for practitioners? Recently, experts and academics have categorized it as both an "art" and a "science" (Fincher et al., 2016) – aligned to the United Kingdom's Royal Town Planning Institute and its focus on the "art and science of town and country planning" (RTPI, 2024b). As a result, the concept has been criticized – for example, in Punter's terms as an "increasingly vacuous mantra" (Punter, 1991, p. 352). It is right that we should be cautious of overuse and under-thinking as some terms become more familiar and more widely used. Is placemaking as we use it in this book related to "place(making)" as applied to conservation activism in Indianapolis by Lockwood and Heiderscheit (2023) or to its use applied to crocodiles and their

interactions with humans on a farm in Australia (Baynes-Rock, 2019)? Both papers challenge us to consider nonhuman agency and different applications of placemaking. However, since Punter's words were written, uses of placemaking in built environment professional contexts have arguably become more nuanced and sophisticated.

As with urban design (Rowley, 1994), placemaking can be considered as both process and product. One approach, derived principally from cultural geography, defined placemaking as "how a culture group imprints its values, perceptions, memories, and traditions on a landscape and gives meaning to geographic space" (Lew, 2017, p. 449). This definition focuses more on people and culture rather than physical or procedural aspects. In contrast, according to the Project for Public Spaces, placemaking is not just a final outcome but a means to an end (PPS, 2020). The process of placemaking allows a community to identify and prioritize its own needs. The academic literature for this approach commonly uses terms such as "sense of place," "place identity," and "place attachment," although each has its own separate and sometimes lengthy history of development and research (see Jivén & Larkham, 2003, on sense of place, for example).

A separate, but related, process-based literature focuses on participatory placemaking. Again, this has a very long history in town planning, focusing on the nature and extent of participation in a wide range of planning and environment-related issues and, particularly recently, on the use of technology including social media to extend participation including facilitating access for some traditionally difficult-to-reach groups in society (at the risk of creating more such groups among the less digitally literate) (Foth, 2017; Frith & Richter, 2021; Gonsalves et al., 2021; Morrison, 2022; Shtebuanev et al., 2023). We do need to identify and recognize the diversity of interests and potential actors in placemaking activities, and it is indeed possible that nonhuman agency and interests are under-considered.

Placemaking can be seen as both top-down and bottom-up (Platt & Medway, 2022). It is increasingly being recognized that placemaking is not (or should not be) solely the act of official actors such as planners, designers, and politicians but also needs to involve the active participation of local residents, users, and communities (Friedmann, 2010).

As vibrant places attract people and business, they will appeal to the commercial real estate industry. Remade places can attract and energize communities, leading local economies to prosper and attract local businesses. Placemaking at the scale usually practiced – street blocks to urban quarters – leads to communal areas (though not necessarily in public ownership) that promote social interaction, cultural diversity, local entrepreneurship, and economic growth. These factors directly affect the success, and hence the value, of real estate (principally commercial property, as placemaking initiatives rarely take place in locations affecting privately owned residential property). Through placemaking, it is recognized that (commercial) real estate investors and developers can enhance the overall appeal, functionality, and value of their properties and surrounding areas (Hines, 2023). The impact of small-scale and local placemaking, often carried out

without official sanction, on the social, psychological, and financial value of property tends to be less well considered.

There is an extensive product-based literature, but this tends to focus more on identifying examples of best practice, guides to "good places," and criteria such as "habitability" and "walkability" by which a good place – and, by implication, a good placemaking process – can be identified. The early-21st century focus on "tools and toolboxes" is certainly present (*Urban Design*, 2024).

Overall, therefore, placemaking is a relatively recent concept. It has relatively rapidly gained widespread visibility and use but in a wide range of applications and generating multiple definitions, approaches, and tools. It is a field sufficiently mature to have generated a substantial Routledge *Handbook* (Courage et al., 2021). It is useful to take stock of the position so far, but perhaps less useful to be too concerned about definitions, variations, and what is included or excluded. We argue that it is more constructive to explore range and variety, how placemaking can help us reposition urban places for an increasingly uncertain future, and therefore how placemaking needs also to be considered alongside issues such as law, finance, and digital thinking and technology.

The Shape of This Book

Chapter 2 examines placemaking and the United Kingdom's legal framework. Places are the product of a myriad of influences and a complexity. However, underpinning placemaking activity in each country is the legal and regulatory framework which provides a set of governing principles concerning the use of land that includes planning and development considerations. In the United Kingdom, the laws governing the planning system have changed over time and dispersed into separate and increasingly disparate jurisdictional laws and policies. Nevertheless, successive recent governments have been clear in criticisms of the planning system, describing it as "outdated and ineffective," recognizing the need for simplicity, clarity, and faster results. This chapter discusses the role and scope of law and policy in placemaking. It particularly explores the use of flexibility in responding to the impacts associated with the recent global coronavirus pandemic and the UK government's "build, build, build" economic agenda in a local context. In addition, this chapter considers the future of the planning system: exploring, among other things, the emerging priority of beauty in placemaking.

Chapter 3 discusses a real estate perspective on placemaking: creating value with smart spaces. As placemaking is rapidly changing the urban landscape, the ways in which we view real estate assets and their value need to adapt to meet evolving community demands, where people create places where they want to actually live, play, and work. Increasingly, space in the city is linked to younger generations and the emerging knowledge (gig) economy. This interconnection is shaping current and future urban skylines, with buildings that offer new – and often combined – working and living environments. Foremost are co-living/coworking spaces, where owners and developers are looking beyond the offering associated with traditional office and apartment complexes. Owners and

investors need to understand the new avenues to create real estate value and seek opportunities to reap commercial rewards far beyond the historical property investment arrangements.

Chapter 4 examines placemaking and connectivity, in the new era of big data and smart cities. The governance of our towns and cities requires an approach that connects people with nature and places. Previous and current approaches have rarely done this effectively. Digital technology can be the glue that does this, provided that it serves the needs of the various stakeholders including urban communities. Identifying the potential connections across people, digital, and place themes, there is a need to identify and examine successful approaches, exploring some of the current practice (or lack of it) in spatial planning and smart cities. This can be considered by the use of a range of Internet of Things (IoT) technologies and methodologies which combine the use of socioeconomic data. This might include data collected from "wearables" or personal devices of users of the urban environment. This ambient domain sensing can provide the ecological data to show how digital connectivity is addressing the placemaking challenges alongside providing implications for urban governance and communities.

Chapter 5 recognizes that placemaking plays a crucial role in enhancing the quality of life in cities, necessitating a holistic approach and the incorporation of smart strategies. This chapter addresses the gap in existing research by exploring the integration of systems thinking and systems integration in smart placemaking within cities to make the placemaking more resilient, connected, and smart. The city is viewed as a system of interconnected and integrated smart places, where attractions, communication hubs, public spaces, and infrastructures seamlessly connect. The outcomes of smart placemaking include economic prosperity, environmental sustainability, health and well-being, safety and security, cultural preservation, innovation, and resilience. This chapter develops a framework that highlights the interconnectedness and interdependencies between systems thinking, systems integration, and smart placemaking. The framework provides guidance for city planners, urban designers, and policymakers in implementing effective strategies for creating vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable public spaces within the broader context of a smart and interconnected city.

Chapter 6 situates placemaking in the rhetoric and reality of sustainability and the need for transformative policies and actions. Sustainability features in the national and local policies of many countries but often lacks clarity in what it means in practice. Interpretations of sustainable development (or sustainable cities and places) vary widely between different countries and social, economic, political, and environmental actors and interest groups influenced by underlying values and specific contexts. Considering the already-evident impacts of rapid climate change and ecological breakdown, continuing with business as usual will add more pollution, resource depletion, and lead to economic and societal turmoil and collapse. A significant factor in past and current policy failures is that "weak" rather than "strong" sustainability models have been adopted laced with a voter-enticing rhetoric yet delaying painful, but essential, changes in production and consumption and a shift in focus away from profit toward human and ecological well-being. Making this shift requires a clear and ambitious regulatory

framework yet also flexible approaches and "agency" of citizens, employees, employers, and politicians for transformation across different geographical and institutional levels, moving away from competition and strive and making room for experimentation and creativity and new forms of collaboration and sharing. Relevant concepts, examples, and critiques can be gleaned from the ecological economic and social–ecological transformation literature, offering direction for the kinds of shifts in placemaking to achieve social and environmental justice.

Chapter 7 examines the linkages between placemaking, conservation, and heritage: a key aspect of this relates to place identity. Particularly in response to rapidly changing circumstances and environments, conservation (also widely known as "historic preservation") involves identifying and retaining an element of heritage, stability, and familiarity in both existing areas and informing the design of new areas. Yet this is a complex and contested process. It involves processes of valuation and selection: so whose heritage is being selected, prioritized, promoted, and retained, and whose is marginalized, redeveloped, and vanished? And individuals and communities do change over time, so the views and values of those communities are also likely to change. Incomers don't necessarily share the same values as long-term residents. On a wider scale, what is generally accepted as worthy of conservation also changes with, for example, postwar modernism, brutalism, and postmodernism becoming accepted; but difficulties with problematic heritage of war, destruction, slavery, and exploitation, for example, being contentious and potentially splitting communities. What one generation values, particularly if it is (relatively) new, can be seen by others as disfiguring, and this is very evident in the heritage and conservation of urban art and graffiti. A range of less-common examples from the United Kingdom, Europe, and elsewhere are used to identify and critique the processes and products – the landscapes of heritage manipulation, the decision-making processes, the power of individuals and communities. All these are critical factors in the complex interrelationship between placemaking and conservation, new and old.

Chapter 8 discusses the findings of a research project rooted in the unique context of a late-Victorian square in south London, which had become largely occupied by squatters in the 1980s and 1990s. Over three decades, squatters (some of whom later became "legalized" as homeowners and tenants) mended derelict houses, created two community gardens and green streets, and set up a vegetarian café. The square, an oasis in the middle of London, is now a fashionable neighborhood to live and visit because of its enduring artistic flair and alternative cultural "feel." Through ethnographic methods, this chapter's authors focused on how residents transformed derelict buildings and neglected spaces, and on the evolving dynamics of this neighborhood as it underwent progressive gentrification, reflecting similar trends in many other neighborhoods in London. This chapter analyses these informal practices and interprets them as examples of creative placemaking. Framed by the intricate interplay between the community's initiatives and the challenges posed by contemporary processes of regeneration and gentrification, they explore how such practices shaped both the material fabric of the place as well as its immaterial character: its sense of community and identity and the feelings and memories associated with its built environment.

Informed by Lefebvre's theories on the social production of space and the "right to the city," this analysis emphasizes the importance of informality, everyday practice, spontaneity, and self-management in shaping and sustaining a vibrant urban culture. By exploring how these elements intersect with forces of regeneration and gentrification, this chapter aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of creative placemaking, the complex dynamics at play in the ongoing transformation of urban spaces, and the resilience of bottom-up, community-driven placemaking initiatives in the face of external pressures.

Chapter 9 focuses on the political dimension of placemaking. While placemaking has the potential to foment political change, recent discussion about placemaking seems to revolve more around its methods and outcomes. Departing from the perspective of placemaking as outcome, this chapter positions placemaking as a dynamic process, shifting attention to the actors involved and their motivations. This political dimension is explored, like Chapter 8, by adopting the framework of the "right to the city," enabling a critical examination of existing power structures and circumstances in the transformation of the urban landscape. Two cases of small-scale, informal, and "unauthorized" placemaking illustrate the questions about who has the right to make places, emphasizing the need for structural change in the transformation of urban spaces for public use. As the current approach for placemaking is criticized for fueling social inequalities, asymmetrical political processes and spatial issues, such as gentrification and displacement, a new framework is required to reorientate placemaking toward a people-led approach. The right to the city interprets placemaking beyond its physical outcomes but as a unique set of conditions and circumstances that facilitates or hinders people's ability to make a place. Moreover, the right to the city provides a lens to examine the processes involved in the transformation of the urban landscape and acknowledges the potential of placemaking to challenge these processes.

Chapter 10 outlines a selection of significant ideas emerging from research investigating the implications of the redefinition of theories of perception presented in the book *Overlooking the visual* (Moore, 2010). This is based on a sequence of case studies beyond the academic world, establishing a strategic landscape-led approach to placemaking at a regional scale that culminates in the West Midlands National Park, a radical new interpretation of the national park concept launched in 2018 at Birmingham City University. This chapter argues that this is the perfect time to take stock, see the bigger picture, and take a new look at regional planning – not as it has been traditionally conceived but from a landscape perspective. This is "landscape regional design." This is essential if we want to create better, more resilient places.

In the final chapter, we reinforce the overall premise of the book: placemaking is here to stay, has become an integral part of decision-making for the built environment, and has much of value to offer. Nevertheless, even dominant paradigms need critical attention, and this chapter reinforces the contributions of the individual chapters and the overall message that placemaking needs to be more holistic, to demonstrate more "joined-up thinking," in a fast-changing world in which our growing urban areas need to prepare for climate change and other