

# Inclusive Placemaking: Building Future on Local Heritage

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**Abstract.** The original placemaking philosophy was based on the recognition that place is intrinsically tied to cultural values, ones tested by generations of human interaction. Its practices have created a growing body of knowledge of the design strategies and physical elements that make vital public spaces and successful development projects. However, without proper consideration of local history and heritage, such practices might not leave room for character and distinctive beauty. The result can be places that are again more a manifestation of planning principles and generalised design strategies than integrating urban cultures and communities. Without inclusion of the attributes that people want to preserve, adapt, rehabilitate, or even reconstruct, public space may present a missed opportunity to produce specific, beautiful places. Careful approaches to existing structures provide a sense of continuity, comprehensibility, meaningfulness, and coherence – the values of importance beyond aesthetic satisfaction. Placemaking practices might be expanded again, to advocate for more sustaining, organised complexity, and reconciling new urban communities with adaptive places full of character.

**Keywords:** Community · Heritage · Placemaking · Reconstruction · Urbanism

## 1 Introduction

The New Urban Agenda, adopted by the UN at the end of 2016, will guide the future development of cities for the next twenty years [15]. One of its new aspects is its recognition of the central role of public space and placemaking, as the essential framework for sustainable urban development and regeneration. Habitat III's Issue Paper on Migration and Refugees in Urban Areas ([14], p. 3) points out that “the generic urbanization model of the last forty years has fostered segregation over integration. As cities grow due to migration, they must also plan in such a way as to foster ‘placemaking’ for all city dwellers, migrants, refugees and IDPs included”. As the challenge turns toward the implementation of the agenda, placemaking may be seen as an essential attitude to bring together many disciplines necessary to the planning, design, and management of just and thriving cities for all. Public spaces can be powerful tools to reconcile differences and build social cohesion.

## 2 Origins of Placemaking

Placemaking as an approach which broadens the scope of community involvement, is already experiencing its shining moment in western cities [32]. The range of projects, conferences, trainings, publications, planning initiatives, and grant programmes still seems to be growing. Decades into the movement, urbanists can create successful places that bring public space to life and generally seems to work for almost everyone. It is a good time to remind the founding principles of that movement (or philosophy) and consider if we always remain consistent and firm in its applications.

The foundational concepts of contemporary placemaking might be traced to the second decade of the 1950s, in the works of the U.S.' *Fortune* magazine authors, principally William H. White Jr. and Jane Jacobs—and the British *Architectural Review*'s authors, Gordon Cullen and Ian Narin. They were very critical of the modernist redevelopment projects: pompous, formalistic, sterile patterns which became oppressive voids for pedestrians. Their articles, which appealed to the small scale, the local, and the particular, were collected by Whyte, first as a series in *Fortune*, and then in a book entitled, *The Exploding Metropolis* [40]. It was a manifesto for complexity, choice, integration, anti-expertise-ism, and citizens' participation in urban planning and design. Jacobs' essay, *Downtown Is for People*, precluded the ground-breaking, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* [18] that furthered debate on the virtues of intimate traditional neighbourhoods, their human scale and layered complexity, as well as the value of networks.

However, during the 1960s and 1970s, the characteristic of modernity's reliance on experts—ones focusing on the orderly and the innovative—left many cities commonly cleared of identity and history. The worst fears of *The Exploding Metropolis*, both about the nature of downtown redevelopments and suburban sprawl, came to be realised. Yet, in later years, the authors' response to the massive misconstruction of cities around the world became the spearhead of counter movements for urban preservation and environmentally sound urban design [38].

Organisations such as the Project for Public Spaces (PPS), Island Press, Congress for New Urbanism (CNU), and many others, active locally and internationally, advanced the fields of community planning and public involvement through research, experiments, publications, and workshops. Rather than continuing the discussion on superficial aspects represented by the tallest buildings, iconic structures, or spectacular infrastructure, they focus attention on what should be common sense, but in fact is very difficult to comprehend: the experience and sense of living in the city.

## 3 Beauty of Places

The concept of placemaking is essentially about deliberately wanting people to stop, enjoy and linger, rather than move through. Beauty affects us in many ways, but is always a reason for attending to the thing that possesses it. Since it is in the nature of tastes to differ, studies of architecture were freed in modern times from the discipline of aesthetic judgement. The firm anchor of tradition and technique enabled our predecessors to regard their roles as central to the curriculum, but when the judgement of

beauty lost its rational grounds, it appeared ever more elusive to look for objective principles of taste or a public conception of the beautiful. Beauty is nevertheless a real, and in some respects, universal value, anchored in our rational nature; the sense of beauty has a necessary part to play in shaping the human world ([31], p. xii). There are various types of beauty though: one type is a matter of being, the other is a matter of appearance. Exploring beauty, one might either investigate the deep structure of the world or sentiments of people.

Successful and beautiful places, where people love to live, work, and play, have emerged in different ways: organically or through regeneration; rarely through an overall planning. Today we have an unprecedented capacity to analyse, identify, and learn what makes them great, be it history, architecture, walkability, grandeur attractiveness, or intimacy. It is crucial to consider not only what constitutes great places, but also the ways people transform their environment.

Judgements of value tend to be comparative. When we judge things in respect of their beauty, our concern is very often to rank alternatives. The pursuit of absolute or ideal beauty may distract one from the more significant and urgent concern of getting things right. It is far more important to achieve order in our surroundings and to ensure that our senses, including the senses of fittingness, are not repeatedly offended. Much that is said about the importance of beauty ignores the minimal beauty of an unpretentious public space like a street or community garden, as though they belonged to a different order of value from a church by Bramante or Le Corbusier's villa. Still, those minimal beauties are more important to our daily lives and more intricately engaged in our decisions than the great works of architecture. Besides, for their beauty, the latter often depend on the humble surroundings that those lesser beauties provide. They create a soothing and harmonious context of a continuous narrative as in a square or a street where nothing particularly stands out and good manners prevail [31].

## 4 Dangers of Routine Placemaking

Over more than half a century, placemaking practices have created a rich and still-growing body of analytic tools, e.g. [4, 13] planning and design strategies; [1, 16, 26, 34]; and tactics [22]; as well as knowledge of the physical design elements that make welcoming public spaces and successful development projects, e.g. [19, 28, 36]. The organisational and physical solutions for the design of people-friendly places have been tested, evaluated, categorised, and valued [12] (Massengale and Dover 2013), [37].

Such knowledge is a precious achievement, but a shallow use of it could lead to another type of default urbanism filled with places that are more a manifestation of generalised planning and design principles, than local cultures. A commonality of features and design elements: street-level retail, painted crosswalks and cycle paths, sidewalk cafés, street vendors, food trucks, movable chairs, container gardens, summer beaches, etc., seem to indicate that people everywhere want the same things. One could have the impression that we can easily create good places that generally work for almost everyone and can do it effectively as well as economically. The main danger of

such an approach is that it might not leave room for local identity. If generic design elements—similar to ones that have proven successful at bringing a number of public spaces to life—are to be treated as a universal remedy, there is a possibility that the specific characteristic of place may be marginalised.

Uniqueness of characteristic marks and layers of history and traditions—each reflecting the context of topography, climate, and culture of the specific neighbourhood and generations of its members—is what produces natural complexity of urban tissue. The original placemaking philosophy was based on the appreciation of diversity and the recognition that place is intrinsically tied to culture. Facing the danger of routine application, the universe of placemaking needs to be expanded again, beyond a concern with the physical and economic aspects of vitality. The narrow focus on walkability and mix of functions without incorporation of values, such as history, heritage, and the embedded culture, would present a missed opportunity to produce uniquely different and beautiful places.

## 5 Building Future on Local Heritage

To avoid placemaking routine, one needs to break the reliance, typical for modern architecture and planning, on self-styled experts, making way for the new and the original [25] or random, thus disorganised complexity [30]. Such practices—resting on a series of mutually supporting myths: functionalism, purity of form, marketisation, and maximum performance—left our cities often cleared of vibrant places.

Traditional architectural ethics requires that aesthetic concerns in the public interest trump private interests. A key question concerns how to broaden the scope of recognition of such obligations and the categories of responsibilities architects should have to places [11]. True sustainability of urban environments depends on organised complexity, where all different structural scales link together coherently. According to Salingaros [30], useful complexity is generated only in adaptive techniques of design. Adaptive urban geometry cannot be designed, but has to be derived from basic principles of urban complexity [2, 29]. Biology and computer science teach us the necessity of having a stock of traditional typologies to help in finding creative solutions [24].

To broaden the scope of placemaking in the era of global urbanisation, a constant inclusion is needed of changing trends in living and working, various technologies and diversity of people, comprising migrants and refugees. In such a dynamic environment, more importantly than ever before, local resources and services should reflect the meanings and values that people hold from the past and want to preserve, adapt, renew, or even reconstruct. Recreating organised complexity is possible if one builds on place's life-enhancing structural features, understood as the result of a historic layering of cultural and natural values and attributes, tested by generations of human interaction.

Fundamental to identity, heritage is one of a small number of things that globalisation cannot outsource successfully [32], but which can be successfully rebuilt. Post-war reconstruction of cities in Poland, such as Warsaw, Gdańsk, Poznań, Wrocław, and many others, is perhaps the most spectacular example of a 'resurrection' not



**Fig. 1.** Old town market place, Warsaw, 1945 (Public Domain)

only of complex urban structures, but also a spirit of places for new communities of people disinherited, displaced; migrants and refugees.<sup>1</sup> A spectrum of methodologies, including direct and indirect sources (relicts, inventories, measured drawings, iconographical representations) has been used during that long-lasting process, ranging from the most scrupulous reconstructions of Old Town and royal palaces in Warsaw [7], to an ongoing post-modern so-called ‘retroversion’ e.g. in Elbląg [20] (Figs. 1 and 2).

Particularly in Warsaw<sup>2</sup>, a near total reconstruction of a span of history covering the 13th to the 20th century was based on a community-driven action and grassroots national pressure against political, conservational, and architectural ideologies. The effect, combining extant features with reconstructed ones led to the “creation of an urban space unique in terms of its material dimension (the form of the oldest part of the city), its functional dimension (as a residential quarter and venue for important historical, social, and spiritual events), and its symbolic dimension (an invincible city)” (UNESCO World Heritage 1980) [35].

In 1980, UNESCO included reconstructed the historic centre of Warsaw on the World Heritage List, appreciating its universal value and stating that it meets two

<sup>1</sup> According to Davies, war and post-war resettlements in Poland (1939–56) were one of the greatest demographic upheavals in the history of Europe. They affected over 24 million people ([8], pp. 1013–1015).

<sup>2</sup> “Warsaw was deliberately annihilated in 1944 (...). The rebuilding of the historic city, 85% of which was destroyed, was the result of the determination of the inhabitants and the support of the whole nation. The reconstruction of the Old Town in its historic urban and architectural form was the manifestation of the care and attention (...). The reconstruction included the holistic recreation of the urban plan, together with the Old Town Market, townhouses, the circuit of the city walls, the Royal Castle, and important religious buildings.” [35].



**Fig. 2.** Old town market place, Warsaw, 2015 (Photo by author)

selection criteria: “to be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance” and “to exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time...”. “The reconstruction of Warsaw’s historic centre was a major contribution to the changes in the doctrines related to urbanisation and the conservation of cities in most European countries (...). Simultaneously, this example illustrates the effectiveness of conservation activities in the second half of the 20th century, which permitted the integral reconstruction of the complex urban ensemble” (ibid.).

The initiation of comprehensive conservation and reconstruction activities on the scale of the entire historic complexes contributed to the verification of conservation practices and brought exceptional examples of the “reconstructions of cities that had been deliberately and totally destroyed” (ibid.). In the face of recent humanitarian catastrophes, such as the destruction of Aleppo, one should be aware that the fate of monuments during times of mass destruction makes it impossible to apply the principle “to preserve and not to restore” in its doctrinal form and restoration and even reproduction of monuments may appear as a must [41] (Figs. 3 and 4).

Successful community-driven reconstruction of several Polish cities might be used as a case study of effective treatment for the numerous sites affected by military conflicts and natural disasters. It proves that restoration of architectural assets – especially when smartly combined with technical improvements of living standards – helps people to reconnect with their past or understand places they are going to live in and brings a profound healing effect to communities and individuals.

More recent urban revitalisation programmes and industrial heritage regeneration projects in Europe also provide examples of successful actions giving growing populations of post-industrial cities a sense of continuity, comprehensibility, meaningfulness, and an overall sense of coherence [21] Such projects prove that various types of built heritage may be a bridge to reconcile new communities and cultures with tradition and history—the localness. Through regenerative and adaptive design, drawing on issues of place-based identity, commonly identified assets might be carried forward into the future.



**Fig. 3.** Warsaw, 1947 (Photo by Henry N. Cobb)



**Fig. 4.** Aleppo, 2015 (Photo by Abdalrhman Ismail/REUTERS)

Thus, it is important to sustain and spread the understanding of architecture of the urban built form, including streets and public open spaces, townscapes, and “shared places of memories and minor built cultural heritage” as basic categories of urban heritage “by designation” and “by appropriation”. The latter—social, or ethnologic heritage—is not necessarily empowered by any authority or competence, but simply by those citizens that recognise and transfer it to one another. Such heritage appears as a distinctive support of citizenship. Its legitimacy is based on its “capability to summon

up lay people, social actors and stakeholders”. It does not exist a priori, therefore, its definition has to be collectively devised and it will change continuously ([10], p. 11).

## 6 Dialogical Places

Building healthy, inclusive, functional, meaningful, and productive cities is perhaps the greatest challenge facing humanity today. For developing the culture of open, but specific communities and neighbourhoods, natural and cultural heritage can provide the consistent context for place-based tactics.

Urban structures and places used to develop over time in cumulative and mutable fashion, through additions and alterations. It is a big challenge to replicate the qualities, liveability, and character of places that have evolved for generations. Thus, authenticity is perhaps one of the most wanted values, but we often overlook it, chasing a recent trend.

New urban cultures appear more responsive to them as they instinctively tend to rediscover and reclaim historical spaces of various types. They often focus on peripheral places and communities that are marginal, and reconcile them with society or even lead them to centre stage. Such enterprises, known mainly from metropolises like New York, London, or Berlin; also from spontaneous revitalisation of Krakow’s district of Kazimierz [27], show how individual acts can be brought together to make strategic, city-scale change and confirm the need for a deeply inclusive approach. They also help to reconcile the aesthetic preferences of architects and the public.

Moving beyond the production of public spaces that generally work well, it is important to incorporate the values that are reflective of local stories. Places have many past stories to tell and to understand. People admire the places and buildings that speak to their values or the values they wish other people to perceive in them. Some of the last decade’s publications on beauty and ugliness in architecture, or the “architecture of happiness” [5, 26] show a sense of aesthetic division between trained architects or planners and recipients of contemporary architecture and urban spaces (dwellers, users, passersby). Architects are, empirically, the worst judges of what people want or like in the built environment [6, 33]. In that context, it should be noticed that the success of regeneration and revitalisation of many previously depopulated and degraded historical quarters and post-industrial sites in Europe lies not only in humanly scaled spaces, but to a large extent in the substance of old buildings. On the contrary, the modern, minimalist glass box, concrete slab, or parametric architecture, even if strikingly presenting itself in architectural fashion magazines, is often not what we respond to in real viewing situations [17]. Such differences in imageability—often described in literature since Kevin Lynch’s *The Image of the City* [23] and recently expressed at Rem Koolhaas’ exhibition at Venice Architecture Biennale 2014—should teach us more respect for traditional forms in architecture.

Building on more than forty years of experience in ecological design across a range of climates, cultures, and budgets, Day [9] agrees that sustainable design means much more than resource-efficiency, and points out the spiritual and emotional contexts of a place. A listening approach develops architectural ideas which are intrinsic to their surroundings. De Botton’s [5] consideration of people’s relationships to things and



objects, and particularly his thesis that buildings speak to people who listen, is not new. The system of symbols and rules by which places can talk to us, was most profoundly described in *A Pattern Language* [3]. It articulates the ways in which strong identity and deep connections can be not only read, but also reinforced by archetypal patterns of place design. In being attentive to the way that buildings, streetscapes, places speak to us, we could engage in more creative dialogical process of placemaking [39].

## 7 Conclusions

In the face of increasing cultural diversity of communities, the aspects of heritage and traditions of places need to be considered even stronger, not only in respect to singular monuments, but also in the wider context of a townscape. Contextual approach promises a valuable alternative or complement to globalised design, which often appeared destructive to healthy communities, not to mention the ones in crisis or transformation. The genuine attention on characteristic features and attributes of a place is necessarily broader and more in-depth than the one which results from giving priority to universal functions and individual aesthetics. Structures which organically grow from the interacting, sometimes conflicting requirements of place and people, may have a healing effect.

Placemaking inspires people to reinvent the social and cultural importance of public space around them, and resist the dominating position of private interest groups and their impact on public policy. Being aware of the value of local assets—including townscape, local businesses, intangible values, and traditions—self-organised communities are more likely able to negotiate the conditions under which outsiders can influence their space. The reconciling effect of placemaking might be founded on architectural and building heritage.

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