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REFLECTIVE ESSAY

On the writing of "How spaces become places: place makers tell their stories"

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Abstract
This essay describes the background research and theorizing—developing a critical pragmatism—that has led the author to collect and analyze 7 prior books of "practice-focused oral histories". The most recent of these collections of practice stories focuses on the work of place making in three parts: first, traditional if innovative architectural and urban design and public dispute mediation practices; second, place making that deals directly with issues of racial and multi-ethnic tension in communities and cities; and third, place making centered on leveraging and enhancing the arts.

Keywords Place making · Race · Space · Urban design · Participatory design

1 Introduction

In How Spaces Become Places: Place Makers Tell Their Stories (Forester 2021), we find detailed, practical accounts of architects and designers, urban planners and community activists who teach us about innovative and collaborative work. In Sellwood, a neighborhood of Portland, Oregon, neighbors reclaimed and refashioned their intersections; in Providence, Rhode Island, residents transformed the river running through their downtown with music and bonfires to create the "WaterFire festivals." In Oldham, nearby Manchester in the UK, congregants of different faith communities began to self-segregate themselves less, and to meet together more often, to ask questions and to learn from and about one another. In Brooklyn, New York, a community justice center committed to safety and services alike significantly transformed public trust and community engagement too. At the Minnesota-Wisconsin border's iconic crossing of the St. Croix River, a mediator helped 28 rival stakeholders to hold the transportation agencies in abeyance enough to design a new bridge. On the Oregon coast, planners committed to community engagement, transparency and accountability put participatory design to work. In Oakland, California, architects worked against racial animus and common convention by integrally involving community members in iterative design processes. In Rochester, New York, and New York Mills, Minnesota, community activist-planners leveraged the power of the arts to transform ordinary spaces into vibrant places.

In all these and still other cases, place makers worked collaboratively and responsively with residents in the face of legacies of fear and violence, distrust of government and experts too. These place makers worked neither solo nor in siloes. They were not "rocket scientists" or geniuses, not heroes. Instead they were, this book shows, experienced, talented and diversely trained improvisers who responded to local conditions by asking local residents and diverse experts alike what might be possible—and how it might be possible: how community members, authorities and specialists could work together to transform underused or unsafe or dormant spaces into vibrant, useful, attractive places (Forester et al 2021:5). To say that these place makers were often facilitators and good, responsive listeners—who convened productive conversations and "made music together"—would be true, but it understates the case dramatically.

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2 The method: using practice-focused oral histories to inform a critical pragmatism

Collaborating for 20 years together, my Cornell Global Development colleague, Scott Peters,[1] and I have developed a method of producing "profiles of practitioners"[2] in the form of "practice-focused oral histories."[3] This method has led me to publish eight books exploring the micro-politics of urban planning and place-making practices (e.g., Forester 1999; Reardon and Forester 2015). These studies have presented the work of planner-mediators in the USA, participatory action research responses to Hurricane Katrina, Dutch street-level democrats, Italian and Israeli planners and place makers, and more. In each case, with colleagues I have sought to examine and interpret urban actors' practical judgments, their situated responses to difficulties, the practical ethics and politics of their daily work more broadly (Schwartz and Sharpe 2012; Vickers 1965).

2.1 Theoretical premise: somebody has to do the work

Underlying this empirically oriented method, of course, there is a theoretical agenda and backdrop, one that we can call a "critical pragmatism."[4] The contribution of a critical pragmatism to the planning, place making and policy studies literature might best be put, if somewhat polemically, this way: the planning, place making and policy studies literature has kept a dirty little secret—and that secret is this: somebody has to do the work! Real actors must not only "think about" or "imagine" the futures of cities, the dynamics of policies, the character of places, the resistance to neoliberalism—but real actors have to work with others in the face of power and conflict, uncertainty and ambiguity, given opposition and possibilities of coalitions, etc., to actually shape those futures, improve those policies, transform those spaces into better places.

2.1.1 Critical pragmatism questions "given" constraints

A "critical" pragmatism suggests an approach that engages concerns that a more conventional pragmatism might not. Conventionally that is—or better, perhaps, colloquially—"pragmatism" seems to imply expediency, doing what is possible within the apparent constraints, acting without scrutinizing the contingencies of those constraints, acting as if one must be resigned to given, status quo relationships of power. But a "critical" pragmatism, in contrast, represents a theory of action that situates actors in evolving, conflict-ridden, structurally shaped settings in which "relationships of power" are hardly monolithic without vulnerabilities and limits of their own. A critically pragmatic account asks not so much how actors act in political contexts, but how actors recognize that their contexts are contingently and politically constructed themselves, thus open to creative adaptation, challenge and change.

2.1.2 Interdependence and complexity require improvisation

Further, a critical pragmatism *presumes* settings of plurality and thus conflict, of interdependence and so the need for negotiation and even mediation, settings too of complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity, that call for analysis and interpretation. A critical pragmatic account of planning practice can be quasi-naturalistic, then, in two senses. First, it recognizes the historical, political and ethical settings in which planners and place makers actually work—settings of plurality, complexity, interdependence, normative fluidity. Second, it assesses how planners and place makers perform the practical judgments and care-full actions that allow them to "work" in those settings. Such work draws upon the habits and conventions, ordinary routines and customs, which allow us generally to organize, manage, invent, disrupt and change working relationships. Beginning with the recognition of planners' and place makers' "pragmatic imperative"—the need to answer the question, "Now what?"—a critical pragmatic view of their work must try to do justice to their managing relationships with diverse others as they act context-responsively—and thus must improvise as they do so (Forester et al. 2016:3–5).

So the project of a critical pragmatism that motivates gathering "practice-focused oral histories" works to take agency seriously, to situate it in historical, structural, ethically and politically entangled contexts—contexts open to possible futures that are contingently more or less just, beautiful, efficient or sustainable. In that intellectual context, the voices and experiences, the surprises and mistakes, the moves and tips of practitioners wrestling with planning, place making and policy analysis become historical data, certainly not last words about that work, but first words to honor phenomenologically and to take into account.[5]

[1] https://www.amazon.com/Scott-J-Peters/e/B003ZP7D20. Cf. O'Connell and Peters (2021).

[2] See https://courses2.cit.cornell.edu/fit117/ (albeit an outdated but still functional and useful site for students and collaborators).

[3] For analysis of the pragmatics and ethics of such narrative accounts, see, e.g. Forester (1999, 2018), Cf. Peters (2010), Peters et al. (2018).

[4] On critical pragmatism, see Forester (2013:3, 2016:280–296).

[5] For related studies of practical judgment in diverse public contexts, cf. Vickers (1965) and Schwartz and Sharpe (2012).

2.2 Interviewing strategies

The strategy of producing "practice-focused oral histories" builds in at least two protections, however, against unbridled subjectivity, speculation or random opinion.

2.2.1 Revealing grounded practical judgments

First, curiously but crucially too, these interviews work to ask not, "What did you *think* about … (for example,) the pressure from the politician?" but *instead (to ask),* "How did you *respond to* (handle, deal with, move in regard to)…. the pressure from the politician?".

This deceptively simple shift focuses attention on grounded practice, on situated action, and not on cognition, opinion, analysis, speculative hopes or fears. It turns out that respondents can provide detailed accounts of "what they did when," accounts that are often far richer in detail than their own retrospectively rationalizing explanations.[6]

We are able to learn from that richness of practical response in ways that extend beyond the practitioners' own rationales. No one has put this insight better than the moral philosopher Iris Murdoch, who wrote of our learning from examples of good conduct this way, "Where virtue is concerned, we apprehend more than we clearly understand, and we *grow by looking*" (Murdoch 1970:31), emphasis in original; cf. Forester 1999, ch2).

2.2.2 Asking not "why?" but "how?"

Second, these interviews sought carefully to ask practitioners *not, "Why* did you do X?" but rather, "*How* did you come to do X?"[7] As fieldworkers know, asking another person *why* they did something can evoke a "justification" that might satisfy the questioner, or it can produce a "reason" that satisfied them for doing what they did, or it can even surface a "motivation," some future objective, that prompted them to act as they did. But in none of those cases does the interviewer learn about their more detailed reading of the context in which they acted and how they fit their enacted response to that context.

In interviews about *the person* acting, we might well ask, "Why did you….?"—but in interviews about lines of practical judgment, about practical action and performance, we can do better by asking them about *their reading of the situation* in which they found themselves—by asking instead, "How did you come to do X (what you did)?" This question will often evoke a response on the order of "I saw A and B happening, and I knew E, cared about F, so I did X." In sum, asking "why" often evokes a justification for the questioner; but asking "How did you come to do that" often evokes a grounded, descriptive account of a practice situation and response.

3 Pedagogy for practice: storytelling, moral entanglement and surprise

The premise of this research, of course, holds that place-making practices are not so much technical but are instead practical (Schön 1983: 21, Nussbaum 1990: 68–73, Schwartz and Sharpe 2012:8). The tasks of teaching and learning about such practices, then, involve not so much presenting or discovering context-independent truths—think of explaining the square root of 4. Instead, learning about practical judgment requires detailed renderings of both practices and complex contexts together—so that students and researchers alike can appreciate and discern context-responsive, appropriate practical actions. Think here of learning to manage a group activity, or to respond with kindness, or to seek an old goal in a new situation (Nussbaum 1990: 66–75, Frank 2012: 92, cf. Mattingly 1998:97).

We can *learn* from these accounts—as students have in classes—in several ways. The popularity of these profiles in classes has come without doubt from the legibility and accessibility of these "practice stories" as told in the first-person *voices* of the practitioners.

3.1 Identification

That accessibility and first person voice register allows an "identification" with the practitioner who's given the account of their work and that allows a learning via empathy and recognition of the morally entangled situations the practitioner has faced (Nussbaum 1990:156). So Al Zelinka reports working on the Oregon coast and hearing that local residents had been put off by the jargon of "mixed use" spoken by previous consultants who'd been subsequently fired (Forester 2021: chapter 2). As Zelinka learned, so students could learn with him in that case.

Similarly, when Malik Yakini points out African-Americans' resistance to young and white, presumptuous and condescending do-gooders coming to Detroit with "a missionary attitude," white students can find their own presumptions checked in class, just as students of color have felt affirmed, having had similar experiences (Forester 2021: chapter 8). More generally, as practitioners have recounted how they have learned from surprises, for example, students and other readers can learn with them, recognizing the unexpected, following the practical logic of response to such surprise in

[6] See here, of course, Weick's extensive work, e.g. (Weick 1998).

[7] I remain indebted to fieldworker Linda Shaw, in conversation, for this advice; cf. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011)

action. Here the reader learns as the practitioner has learned, "internally" within the story.

3.2 Telling details that inform readers' questions

But readers can also learn not just from the style, cadence, emphases, twists and turns of the practitioners' speaking, from their narrated recollections, but from the ways that their narrated work addresses, or fails to address, particular concerns and questions *that the reader brings to the text*, "externally," we might say. So, as readers we might be interested in questions of power or exclusion or uncertainty or negotiation or empathy or coalition-building, and much more, and by asking from a given narrative profile how its examples of practice might inform *those* issues, we can learn too. So when Michael Pyatok describes his firm's use of "design kits" to involve community members in iterative processes of suggesting housing layouts and changes, talking together, weighing various options' advantages and disadvantages, readers interested in deliberative processes can learn about their ritualized aspects (Forester 2021: chapter 1). As readers bring their "external questions" to the profiles, these practice-focused oral histories can bring telling experiences and situated, qualitative data to bear upon those questions.

3.3 So, what sort of stories are these?

3.3.1 Affordable housing development and community planning

In the opening chapters (Forester 2021: chapters 1, 2), we see Mike Pyatok's work as an engaged architect building affordable housing and facing neighbors' distrust and fears of who the new tenants might be. We see Al Zelinka commuting from California to the Oregon coast to plan for four small municipalities after they had fired a first planner who seemed more attached to their jargons than to their clients.

Pyatok explains how a series of design exercises enabled his staff to learn about the views and needs and fears of site neighbors just as they also allowed the neighbors and prospective tenants to learn about design possibilities too. Detailing several projects, Pyatok shows how designers might collaborate with diverse community members, and we see how such collaboration can produce not only better design but also political support—when the time comes to go to city authorities (a planning commission or city council, for example) for formal support and approval.

In Zelinka's case, we see the difference between "hit and run" consultants—visiting briefly and then dropping off their reports, as consultants might do at times—and what Zelinka calls a "community immersion" process: stretches of round-the-clock time in the community, contacting press and politicians, multiple civic groups and passers-by, in an attempt to announce and actually enact a commitment to transparency, openness to ideas and criticisms and so to accountability too. Zelinka's version of community planning and place making, clearly, is not to bring outside deliverables to these communities, but to brainstorm and invent and assemble design ideas *with* community members who will then "own" their place-making efforts as implemented.

3.3.2 Place and safety in the face of racial and religious differences

In the book's middle chapters (Forester 2021: chapters 5–8), we turn to place makers who have had to wrestle with race and inequality, with intergroup antagonisms and even violence. James Brodick worked with Brooklyn community members to develop a multi-service community Justice Center and youth court in the Red Hook neighborhood known for its violence and drug problems. Father Phil Sumner moved to Oldham from one low income side of Manchester to another, arriving in the wake of racial and anti-immigrant tensions. In a stunning indication of the community setting he inherited, when he asked his own parishioners how they were getting along with their neighbors in the Islamic community, he heard, "Well, we don't really talk to them, do we?" He had his work cut out for him, and his chapter details that work—from convening interfaith dialogues and "Any Questions?" meetings to assembling and recognizing the musicality and cultural performances of Filipino and African community choirs.

Brodick had come to Red Hook when community "trust" in the criminal justice system stood, surveys reported, at roughly 12%. So Brodick too had a tall hill to climb. He did that, as he details it, with the extensive use of community members surveying their own neighbors to learn about and define both problems and solutions together. Along the way, Brodick's accountability and responsiveness to the Red Hook community became increasingly evident in the widening scope of services that the Community Justice Center came to offer. Far from bringing a fixed idea of a solution to Red Hook, Brodick catalyzed local place attachment and local involvement to organize a wide range of services, far broader than traditional youth courts or drug services typically offered, extending not only to employment and family services but even summer baseball leagues for youth. Place making here had left the architects' and landscape designers' sketch pads far behind. In Red Hook, Brooklyn and Oldham nearby Manchester, these place makers were creating safer communities, reducing threats of violence, building interreligious and interracial relationships and coalitions, all in and through collaborative, virtuous circles, and not through technocratic, quick-fix efforts.

In Azusa, California, near Los Angeles, soon to be planning professor Karen Umemoto found herself challenged not only to do the mapping of hate crimes and racial violence in the community, but to work with members of the Azusa Human Relations Commission as well. Her account of the workshop she led reveals the difficulties and the stakes that many community development efforts face: strong emotions of suspicion and fear, racial stereotypes and ignorance of others, participants with radically differing perspectives and basic information as well. Doing interviews beforehand, partnering with knowledgeable police and local officials, Umemoto worked to find ways for workshop participants to humanize one another, to see and listen with new eyes and understanding, to reframe issues and opportunities so that they might do their work together more effectively. Umemoto's case merges subtle rituals and sophisticated mapping, storytelling and recognition, initial suspicions at times giving way to acknowledgment and even partnership—as diverse, fearful, mutually wary community members came together to try to create a safer community for them all.

3.3.3 Gardening and politics in detroit and paris

We see in two chapters about urban gardening, too, curiously enough, substantial lessons about place making and political history (Forester 2021: chapters 8, 11). In Detroit, Michigan, Malik Yakini explains that the development of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network had been inextricably interwoven with black community struggles for self-determination and autonomy, located in a history of suspicions of the resurgent power of the white suburbs. His account had been in response to a young white student from the nearby University of Michigan, a student initially appalled that Yakini was not more welcoming to her and her overtures of "help." Graciously but firmly, Yakini explains that what the student thought were the black community's problems were instead the all too familiar presumptions of white outsiders. Too often such outsiders had been more confident in their own knowledge than they were curious about—and respectful of—the Black community's particular political history and felt needs for dignity and power. Yakini's experience shows clearly the limits of any place-making attempts that remain blind to racial and political history.

In Paris, France, Laurent Baudelet details not only the development of community gardens, but how community gardeners had to overcome the resistance, incredulity and dismay of what she terms the "patrimony" of traditional French landscape architects and designers. In a telling example, Baudelet recalls her participation on a university "jury" assembled to judge a landscape architecture student's final project—attempting to design a garden allowing maximal community input and design discretion, minimizing the a priori control and specifications of traditional designers. Baudelet's more traditional colleague on the jury was aghast: "This will be the death of the profession!", he said. The lesson for place making, of course: design creativity and community involvement both might depend on the weakening, if not the death, of some of the traditional prerogatives of the design professions that at times have worked more to preserve the designers' power and authority and less to foster collaborative creativity and innovation with ever more diversifying communities.

In work as simple—or as complex—as urban gardening and urban agriculture, we see place makers' experiences teaching us about the political histories of professional power and community relationships. In Brooklyn and near Manchester, place making wrestled with cultural and multiethnic histories too, as did Pyatok's affordable housing work. In all these cases, place makers leveraged place attachment to fuel efforts not simply for change, but for community empowerment and self-determination, working with—rather than against—sources of expertise where necessary. In the practice-focused accounts of these place makers, readers can appreciate both the complexity of diverse settings and the range of skills, sensitivities and practical judgments that these place makers have had to make: judgments about building relationships in place that enact virtuous circles, virtuous as community members work to enhance the places they care about.

3.3.4 Art inspiring community development and place attachment

In four chapters, too, place makers show how diverse forms of art can inspire and contribute to local activities to transform neglected spaces into safer, even wondrous places (Forester 2021, chapters 9, 10, 12, 13). In Providence, Rhode Island, Barnaby Evans had the simple idea to integrate water and fire in a public art celebration. Residents might stroll along the riverside; braziers of wood placed in the river would burn in the evening light; music would play. He tried it; word spread and people loved it. This supposedly one-time event was a victim of its own success, and Waterfire was born. What began as a single event, an art installation, turned into a substantial, repeated event generating international attention, arts awards and substantial revenues to the city even as it required navigating webs of permitting, insurance costs, security measures, food regulations and more.

In Eagleby, Queensland, community planner Wendy Sarkissian partnered with artist Graeme Dunstan to reclaim a public park that had fallen into disrepair. Residents who saw discarded drug paraphernalia here and there feared to use the park. In the schools, as Sarkissian and Dunstan worked on environmental education issues, they came to see that Eagleby residents felt that surrounding communities stigmatized them as lower class, living somewhere undesirable.

Sarkissian merged her interest in theatre and performance with Dunstan's artistry, as he built an automobile-sized paper-mache model of "The Stigma," an eagle with a thumb pressing down upon it. Together they organized a public march to reclaim the community's park. Parents and children together had written hopes and fears on scraps of paper; these went into the Stigma. Then, after marching to the park with lighted candles as afternoon turned to evening, Eagleby residents encircled the Stigma resting in the park, and as they sang together, they torched the sculpture in a cathartic ritual of reclaiming not only the park but their own agency to make the park theirs once more. In Sarkissian's account, we see place-making rest upon aesthetics and ritual, community theatre and community-building too.

Hardly least of all, in New York Mills, Minnesota, and Rochester, New York, readers learn of the less fiery but no less transformative work of John Davis and Doug Rice. Both worked as community members and community organizers to build trust in each community, to appreciate the role that the arts might play—via a local Arts Center or the city's museums and public sculptures—to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary. In both cases, readers see that existing bureaucracies called for navigation and negotiation. Davis had to overcome the skepticism of the more traditional economic development advisor. Rice had to explore and craft working agreements with transportation engineers to create safer streets and intersections. But in both cases, the appreciation of the transformative possibilities of the arts inspired not only these place makers but the community members with whom they lived and worked. Each of these place makers faced and overcame disagreements and disputes, not through the force of academic argument but by patient and persistent attention to more attractive alternatives—options for place making that were attractive aesthetically and financially as well.

3.3.5 Working with conflict and public disputes

Throughout these chapters, readers can recognize how long-standing racial politics and economic inequalities have provided contentious contexts for the work of place making. If elements of rival arguments and dispute pervade these place makers' stories, nevertheless one chapter, wholly devoted to a regional economic development, transportation and historic preservation dispute, stands out.

Michael Hughes details his work enabling 28 stakeholders at odds with each other—at scales ranging from local through regional to state and federal—to resolve a complex 30-year-old dispute (Forester 2021, chapter 4). Hughes' account is easily worth the price of the book. Hughes explains to the transportation/highway engineers, eventually we see, that if they wish to construct a new bridge across the St. Croix River at the Wisconsin-Minnesota border, they will have to let the assembled 28 stakeholders design the shape, the massing and the esthetics of the bridge, "because they simply don't trust you to design it yourself." He might have been speaking Greek to them, of course, but he was not, and the engineers' authorities realized that indeed they had to let Hughes mediate an expertly informed but not determined design discussion. This story has to be read to be believed, but viewing the photographs of the resulting stakeholder-designed bridge as actually built, thanks in part to Hughes' place making intervention, provides the proof (see https://www.minnpost.com/earth-journal/2017/08/new-bridge-opens-over-st-croix-and-even-skeptic-finds-it-beautiful/).

4 Conclusion

These place-making accounts are both richly detailed, narratively compelling and pragmatically instructive. Even if any simple listing of "lessons learned" here risks being both simplistic and reductive, several stand out and might well prompt readers to refine them and innovate in turn. These place makers teach us that they do not work alone, and so they de-center the authority of design-experts and socialize, share and diffuse responsibility for transforming spaces into places.

These practitioners plan *with* others and they understand that their joint product must not be an a priori intention, a general goal, but a concrete set of actions that will be not fixed for all time but will adapt and respond to conditions of use—whether the "product" is a network of community gardens, affordable housing, an actual bridge between neighboring states, or safer streets where violence has previously threatened community residents. So these place makers do far more than produce "plans." They improvise practically and responsively in the spaces at hand. They involve expertise carefully, making sure that expertise remains accountable, not autonomous.

These cases teach us about the importance of place attachment and virtuous circles of engagement and creativity. We see the vibrancy, innovation, transformative qualities of *collaborative improvisation*, "collaborative" because rooted in conditions of interdependence, difference and connectivity, "improvisation" because community members together with designers are changing their worlds, changing their contexts, changing their spaces into fresh places in real time—as only careful and caring improvisation together can respond to such immediate changes with wonder, imagination, and ongoing commitment (Forester et al 2021).[8]

[8] Thanks to Will Butler for conversations exploring collaborative improvisation.

These place makers accounts are neither the last words nor the first words to be heeded about transforming spaces into wonderful places. They demonstrate the character of the work, the qualities of the enterprise, the range of skills and sense of care and surprise that grounded community place making can embody.

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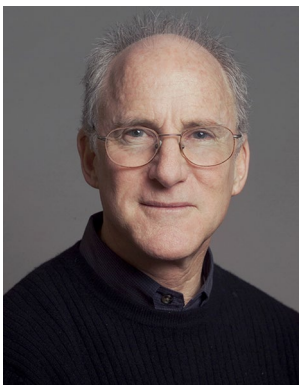

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