COMMUNITY
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Placemaking Revisited

Vera Smirnova
Virginia Tech, School of Public and International Affairs
Blacksburg, Virginia, USA
veras@vt.edu

Vanessa Guerra M
Virginia Tech, School of Public and International Affairs
Blacksburg, Virginia, USA
vguerram@vt.edu

UN Habitat recently adopted its first public space resolution, which incentivizes international communities to employ placemaking strategies and encourage inclusive and sustainable community change through physical urban design. Scholars argue that healthy, creative, and walkable places, parks, and streets stimulate people's interpersonal interactions and, supposedly, renovate abandoned, disenfranchised communities (Florida 2002; Glaeser 2011; Duany and Plater-Zyberk 1994). However, one needs to recognize the limits of this philosophy.

With this explorative piece we aim to start a productive debate over questions related to whether genuine community change is possible through placemaking today. Can walkable, comfortable, interactive, and creative public space nurture equality, inclusion, and social justice? Does placemaking offer communities necessary safety nets to protect them from the negative effects of economic growth and market competition in cities? Or, is placemaking today merely *one* of the many marketing strategies helping cities compete for external investments in the era of neoliberal capitalism, especially when public services are undermined or completely diminished? In this piece, we briefly explore various effects of capital circulating through urban spaces and the complex interactions of actors involved in placemaking. We hope others will expand and build upon this introductory endeavor.

Neoliberal Production of Place

Comfortable and interactive public spaces are, ideally, accessible not only to the affluent. But, without commitment to social welfare programs such as rent controls, zoning regulations, provision of affordable housing, or access to public transportation, any revitalized neighborhood would inevitably face land value increases followed by escalating real estate prices and, most likely, evictions of local communities (Slater 2011).

Several cities around the world are currently expanding and testing placemaking initiatives, also known as restructuring, revitalization or regeneration of urban spaces.

Through a multi-faceted approach to planning, design and management of public space, placemaking's inevitable effects include enhancing walkability, community engagement, cultural opportunities, and attraction of business investments (Project for Public Spaces 2009). However, according to Neil Smith (1982), such urban interventions are commonly accompanied by a set of other institutional arrangements such as open land markets and private property rights. These unregulated urban interventions result in profitable redevelopment that creates opportunities for capital accumulation, sometimes, at the expense of local residents affected by rising rent prices, lack of affordable housing, work instability, unemployment, displacement, and spatial segregation (Slater 2011). This phenomenon is also known as gentrification.

Part of the issue lies in the motivations behind these urban interventions. Previous experiences show that whether urban rehabilitation is executed or not often depends not on existing demand or as a result of cities' strategic planning policies, but on how much productive investment capital returns to the affected area after revitalization (Slater 2011) - framed by Neil Smith a 'rent gap' (1982). Rent gap theory, which aims to explain the process of gentrification in economic terms, describes the difference between current rental income of land and potentially achievable value (Smith 2006). From this point of view, in order to increase rent and the value of land property, investors select which areas are "worth" renovating and which ones are not. In most cases, investment in urban space will only be made if a rent gap exists (Smith 1982), which is why some placemaking initiatives aim to improve already privileged places in downtowns and city business districts instead of focusing on marginalized and spatially segregated communities in the urban periphery where the land value is substantively lower.

The following example illustrates how, in the words of Logan and Molotch, urban renewal processes are often just another "strategy for capital circulation and accumulation in space" (2007, 10). Highline Park, in New York, opened in 2009, is one of the most substantial contributors to gentrification in the city (Loughran 2014). The revitalized park was built on a historic freight rail line elevated above the streets on Manhattan's West Side, and should complete construction in 2018. It is impacting neighborhoods as it grows (Moss 2012). Each year hundreds of tourists and young professionals enjoy the benefits of a world-class park surrounded by corporate offices and thriving luxurious restaurants. However, local residents, who have lived and worked in the area for decades, are being displaced due to the 103% increase in property values near the park and local shops are being closed due to a 35% loss of their profits (Moss 2012).

This example demonstrates how, in spite of all the benefits of the provision of vibrant public spaces, it is essential to acknowledge that placemaking and urban regeneration practices are often only one step within a broader process of economic, social, and spatial restructuring. In spite of the all the potential benefits that placemaking could have on communities, it is essential to conduct a deep analysis of its claims to inclusivity and the effects of these spaces on local populations.

Urban Growth Machine

Contracting out public services to private firms, corporations, think tanks and NGOs undermines the value of collective power and, sometimes, genuine community change, especially if actors are driven by profit making (Harvey 1978). Motivated by market logic, corporations like Siemens, IBM, General Motors, or Microsoft channel their investments through cities and public spaces when engaging in various urban development initiatives around the world.

Although the idea that cities are spatial containers of social interactions was praised in the 1960s, Harvey Molotch's theoretical contribution of the *City as a Growth Machine* (1976) notably challenged those accounts. As Molotch argued, cities are loci of complex cooperation between urban elites, local businesses, and private and public corporations that collectively engage in producing and enhancing economic growth, thus, as he noted, "the very essence of a locality is its operation as a growth machine" (Molotch 1976, 310). This dynamic puts local areas in competition over investments to achieve more and more growth. Hence, one needs to look at urban space as a mosaic of competing interests.

> It has not been apparent from the scholarship of urban social science that land, the basic stuff of place, is a market commodity providing wealth and power, and that some very important people consequently take a keen interest in it (Molotch 1976, 309).

Placemaking as both "a process and philosophy" aims to strengthen a space's internal capacity to produce human interactions, increase community well-being, and, moreover, enhance a space's entrepreneurial and economic potential (Project for Public Spaces 2009). Placemaking measures, matrixes, and indicators of successful, walkable, healthy, and comfortable environments can be seen as a strategy for economic competition, helping cities to become more attractive to external investments - a necessary component of urban development in the era of neoliberal capitalism.

There are plenty of urban development initiatives that put "placemaking" in the forefront of their agenda. However, actors involved in these initiatives are usually multinational corporations, economic elites, or external agencies, not local communities. The mogul of global urban development initiatives, the *100 Resilient Cities* network, launched by the Rockefeller foundation and sponsored by such global conglomerates as Cisco, Microsoft, Siemens, World Bank, and others, emphasizes "creative placemaking" as one of its many core principles, claiming that placemaking helps to "develop a stronger sense of identity, building on native cultural assets to create more cohesive, healthy, and resilient places" (Schupbach 2015). The network promotes smart urban development strategies in competing cities from Amman, Jordan or Acra, Ghana, to London and New York by investing up to one million U.S. dollars per city. Moreover, it helps to "leverage additional billions through innovative finance" claiming that the benefit of being "one of the 100 city members of a $100-million effort" is already substantial and attractive.[i] The IEEE Smart Cities initiative, the World Economic Forum, Urban Development project, UN Habitat Resolution on Public Spaces, among many others, despite of their uncompromising help assisting cities in managing urban growth, represent opportunities for fostering market-friendly places, sometimes, at the expense of urban equality.

Placemaking, while aimed at nurturing a "profound sense of community" (Slater 2014) is, foremost, a crucial component of the urban growth machine.

Public Space as a Public Good

> There are many policies which, even in the short term, would produce a more democratic and egalitarian city: more and better public housing, rent control and regulation, community control of neighborhood space, expanding social welfare, strengthening progressive labor unions, and empowering social movements that embody the political ambitions of the urban working classes and poor (David Madden 2013).

Most placemaking initiatives are still uncritical towards the works and theories of their masterminds like Jane Jacobs, Christopher Alexander, or Enrique Penalosa and often forget to mention failures of their urban experimentations. Jane Jacobs' Greenwich Village today is an enclave for an all-white affluent professional community with the average price for a two-bedroom apartment at about $5,000 a month (Moskowitz 2016). Enrique Peñalosa invested $1.7 billion investment in transport infrastructure in a city where half the population lives in poverty, which still demonstrates the utopian reliance on the neoliberal "trickle-down" logic (Cervero 2005). Likewise, Peñalosa's initiative that cleared out Bogota's local marketplace, in exchange for a lavish public square, was followed by dispossession of hundreds of jobs (ibid). Whereas Christopher Alexander's renowned housing project in Mexicali resulted in backlash from the local communities and separation of their collective spaces with fences for protection (Ruesjas 1997). These types of mistakes are rarely mentioned in the numerous reports of placemaking initiatives.

Without social regulatory mechanisms in place, regeneration and revitalization of public spaces risk falling into the trap of the neoliberal logic - community change for the sake of growth and profit. Public space is a public good and a human right, not a marketing strategy, hence, it requires a more comprehensive and nuanced approach.

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Notes

[i] See "Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) About 100 Resilient Cites." 100 Resilient Cities. Accessed April 19, 2017. http://www.100resilientcities.org/pages/100RC-FAQ#/-_/.