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Participatory Placemaking

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Editorial

By Ares Kalandides

In the history of urban planning, we have seen regular paradigm shifts that often reflect broader societal developments as much as disciplinary trends and fashions. Few feuds in the discipline have reached the emblematic status that had the one between Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs about the future of New York city in the 1960s: Moses, the powerful planner on the one hand who believed that only a destruction of the existing structures could lead to better city and Jacobs, the journalist-turned-activist on the other, who wanted to protect precisely what the first one sought to extinguish. Jacobs firmly believed that it was the lively streets of her beloved Greenwich Village, the mix of cultures and lifestyles, the animated grittiness of the public space that made cities worth living in. It was the place that people could identify with, the place that gave them a sense of identity and belonging. In short, *the sense of place* was what made places liveable for local communities. Any intervention in those places would have to be done together with those who inhabit them, defining priorities according to their needs.

These two concepts, the ‘sense of place’ and ‘community participation’, are at the heart of what has come to be known as the ‘placemaking movement’, which brings together academics and practitioners from all over the world. The idea of ‘making place’ stems from a phenomenological tradition in geography where ‘place is space imbued with meaning’. This is however much more problematic than it seems at first sight:

Firstly, this conceptualization of place is not the only possible one. On the contrary, the definition of the terms ‘place’ and ‘space’ as well as the relation between the two is one of the key debates in geography. It can be argued, for example, that places and spaces always have some kind of meaning for somebody.

Secondly, that meaning may be quite different for different groups and individuals; sometimes the ways that people give meaning to places may even stand in stark contrast to each other. Local communities don’t always have to be homogeneous nor do they always co-exist harmoniously.

Third, more generally, such exclusive preoccupation with place has often been characterised as deeply averse to change, a kind of protectionist introspection, that has given birth to localisms and nationalisms. Other conceptualisations of a ‘global sense of place’ on the other hand have tried to show that it is possible to acknowledge both people’s need to belong, but also the multiplicity and openness of the meanings of place.

Finally, the idea of participation itself is open to debate, concerning its principles, forms, institutional framework and actors involved. The idea that there is ‘a’ community out there that simply participates in urban development is strongly contested by both academics and practitioners.

None of the above means that places don’t have meanings or that participation doesn’t matter. Quite the contrary: it is the goal of this special issue on *Participatory Placemaking* to ask precisely those difficult questions above and draft possible responses.

The first contribution (Kalandides) opens up the special issue with an attempt at disambiguation. What do we mean by participation and what tools can we use to analyse it? Taking Berlin and its newly introduced policy on citizen participation as a case study, the article shows the possible meanings of participation, its challenges, opportunities and pitfalls.

Strydom et al. help trace the concept of 'placemaking' over time, across several disciplines and in different geographical contexts. Their systematic literature review throws light on the multiple uses of the term, as well as the overlapping and divergence between them.

Vaiou's contribution is a critical assessment of a case of participatory place development in Athens, Greece. By focusing on two phases of the participation process, she shows how the institutionalised practices of participation in the end created multiple exclusions. The paper approaches participation as a spatial process, producing interactions among people, creating emotional or material connections, exchanges and inevitably conflict, re-configuring (public) space but also extending (urban) citizenship.

Beza and Hernandez propose to look at what they call 'sustainability citizenship' and its relationship to participatory placemaking. Their case study is an informal settlement in Bogotá, Colombia. They claim that 'sustainability citizenship' and 'placemaking' are linked through their process-driven approach in engaging citizens for urban change.

Karge uses urban gardening to show the practices of citizen participation beyond fixed institutional frameworks. His case study, Himmelbeet in Berlin, paper examines the relation between urban community gardens and the placemaking concept. In particular, it uses the findings to discuss how a placemaking process can be initiated even if the principles associated with a placemaking process are not implemented from the start.

Benkö shows the possibilities and limitations of participatory placemaking processes in urban renewal in large prefabricated housing estates in Central Europe. What participation methods are used in different types of interventions such as individual transformation, regeneration projects on the municipal scale? How does self-organised and participatory place-making work in this specific urban, social and cultural situation?

Finally, Carra et al. change the perspective and show how the municipality of Reggio Emilia in Italy has used innovative participation methodologies in the 'Quartiere bene comune' project. Their article proposes a new model for the evaluation of public action between assumptions, operative processes, results and impacts.