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Conference report – 4th International Institute of Place Management Biennial Conference, “Inclusive placemaking”

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Introduction: Inclusive placemaking

The 4th Institute of Place Management (IPM) International Biennial Conference series took place at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK, from 7th-8th September 2017. This is the second time the conference has been held in Manchester, adding to previous events in London and Poznan (Poland), and building on experience the IPM has gained through collaboration with other international conferences held in Berlin, Bogota and Utrecht.

The primary themes of the previous three IPM conferences - ‘Town Centre Management’, ‘The Business of Place’, and ‘Sustainability, liveability and connectivity’ - have acknowledged that the improvement of places draws from multiple disciplines, and the synthesis of this knowledge exists in many guises. By bringing together academics, policy makers, and practitioners working in place management and placemaking, the IPM’s International Biennial Conference aims to facilitate the development of theoretical, practical, and policy insights into making places better. To this end, this year’s conference had ‘Inclusive Placemaking’ as its overarching theme.

Placemaking as a concept has been with us for several decades now. As with many terms, it entered our language as a neologism, only to be taken over and integrated into the vocabulary of several spatial disciplines. Whilst we should accept that there are fads which come and go in the use of academic terminology, usually this kind of broad acceptance and adaptation means that the concept fulfils an existing need. As with most neologisms, especially when espoused enthusiastically by numerous disciplines, *placemaking* quickly lost any clear conceptual contours it may have had, and became rather fuzzy. Today everybody talks about – and many actually practice – placemaking; but what they do, exactly, remains vague. This, of course, may not always be a problem; on the contrary, it can even prove to be a useful operationalisation of a term. However, in creating a conference on ‘Inclusive Placemaking’, there was a need to define what should be included, and what should not.

The conference qualified *placemaking* with the predicative *inclusive*, thus emphasising the participatory strands of placemaking thinking and practice. Whilst it may be hard to agree what placemaking *is*, our delegates knew what placemaking *is not* – there was strong consensus that placemaking must not be top-down, exclusive, or authoritarian. Inclusive placemaking investigated countless ways through which collectives and individuals constitute places:

- extraordinary actions and everyday practices;
- institutionalised or informal participation;
- design and planning;
- policy-making, resistance, and collective action; and
- imagination and representation – just to name a few.

This is why placemaking is as appealing to architects, as it is to activists, place managers, or policy-makers.

Conference tracks

The conference drew together the work of a large number of academics and practitioners who, in one way or another, engage with inclusive placemaking in its many forms. The conference consisted of four major tracks:

- (1) Inclusive Placemaking, as the overarching theme of the conference.
- (2) BIDs and Business Networks, to reflect a core of the place management profession.
- (3) Museums and Anchors, a promising field that opens new opportunities for interdisciplinary work.
- (4) Place Marketing and Placemaking, a recurring theme of past IPM conferences, and several special issues of the *Journal of Place Management and Development*.

Each of these tracks was subdivided into several sessions, with the aim to maintain the purpose that the IPM is known for: bringing together practitioners and academics in a broad interdisciplinary and international framework.

The *Inclusive Placemaking* track comprised critical subthemes such as austerity and social deprivation, and food and health; political themes including governance, processes, and strategies; issues of design, architecture, planning, infrastructure, and civic spaces; and arts, culture and music, digital/data, and tourism. The research presented in this track, for example, sought to demonstrate how to achieve meaningful placemaking when sharing spaces and places that have experienced layers of history, occupation, and multiculturalism, facilitating a form of 'governance of difference'. Several papers in this track also tackled the issue of placemaking in a digital age, with presenters discussing topics such as the role of Facebook in negotiating multiple conflicting place narratives, the use of digital and social media in placemaking activities, and the role of the Christian Church in a digital age.

The *BIDs and Business Networks* track examined business networks and considered their role in inclusive placemaking. Presentations in this track engaged with a broad range of themes, with a healthy blending of UK and international case studies, for example BIDs and placemaking practices, business engagement in BIDs and other business networks, and BIDs' contribution to housing and residents, amongst other interesting topics.

The *Museums and Anchors* track addressed the role of museums, anchor institutions, and public spaces in cities, towns, and regions. Presentations in this track explored anchor institutions and their relationship with public spaces, not only as sites of production and consumption, but also as living entities that engage with communities in places and shape the neighbourhoods around them.

The *Place Marketing* track examined the role of place marketing and branding in placemaking. While accepting that place marketing and place branding have grown into important tools for positioning and communicating about places, presentations addressed certain inherent contradictions between place marketing and branding on the one hand, and placemaking on the other. Amongst the research presented in this track were also papers taking a more critical marketing stance, which in turn fuelled lively debate amongst delegates.

Finally, 'food' was also an emerging theme at the conference, spanning multiple tracks, with a number of papers exploring the impact of food consumption practices and supply chain activities on placemaking endeavours. Such presentations investigated the importance of understanding what 'local' means in terms of products, particularly local food, and the importance of managing interactions between local food businesses. Whilst other papers focused upon policy interventions, such as local and shorter supply chains, and the positive effects such interventions might have in terms of sustainability.

Prize winners and speakers

Following a thorough review of the conference abstracts, the academic committee selected a best academic and a best practitioner paper, which were presented at the conference dinner. The best academic paper prize was awarded to Laura Reynolds for her paper *Questioning the rhetoric of inclusivity in the co-creation of city brands through Bourdieu's field-capital lens*. Whilst the best practitioner paper went to Caroline Kemp for her paper drawing upon the case study of Urban Food Street to study *Inclusive practices of solidarity in an era of (suburban) austerity*. These were two excellent papers which the committee felt possessed outstanding quality, relevance to the conference theme, and originality.

The conference also welcomed three insightful keynote speakers, the first being Ethan Kent. Ethan has been an inspiration to thousands of placemakers around the world for many years. He is Senior Vice President at Project for Public Spaces (PPS) in New York, NY, USA. He works to support placemaking organizations, projects, and leadership around the world to build a global placemaking movement. Having worked on over 200 PPS projects, Ethan has led a broad spectrum of placemaking public space transformations on six continents, often including comprehensive public engagement, user-analysis, planning, urban design, and visioning. In his presentation, Ethan shared his extensive placemaking experiences, and demonstrated the positive impact that building places around communities and the principles of inclusive placemaking can have on cities around the world.

Second, we welcomed Phil Prentice from Scotland's Towns Partnership to the conference. With over 25 years' of economic development experience across the public and private sectors, Phil's role as Chief Officer of Scotland's Towns Partnership is to drive sustainable change through collaboration and partnership. His work in helping to deliver the Town Centre Action Plan has delivered a step change in thinking and tangible progress across the country. In his presentation, Phil shared the journey that Scotland's towns and Business Improvement Districts have been on, and how policy makers can facilitate a more inclusive approach to development.

Finally, Daniel Cook from the Landscape Institute spoke about inclusivity, and how we need to consider both the natural and built environment in practice, in addition to how, as professionals, inclusivity is an important catalyst for innovation. Dan has a wealth of experience and knowledge spanning earth science, urban planning, policy, and politics, and he is committed to the future development of the landscape profession.

The IPM used the conference to announce the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with the Landscape Institute. The agreement will enable the organisations to work together to explore common ambitions and better enable their respective members to create and manage great places. Through combining both organisation's training resources and insight, the partnership will provide both place managers and landscape professionals with unrivalled opportunities to develop and learn. Building on the intentions of the conference, the practitioners responsible for managing our town centres, public spaces and local environments will become better equipped to attract businesses and jobs, preserve public realms for all to enjoy, and prepare for future economic and environmental challenges.

Conclusion: An inclusive community

As well as covering a broad thematic range of placemaking subject matters from various perspectives, the range of places discussed within conference presentations was also far reaching. From Tasmania, Melbourne and Sydney's northern beaches, to Sao Paulo, Indianapolis, Johannesburg, Malaysia and Siberia. From Albania, Rhodes, Corfu and Thessaloniki to Amsterdam, Valencia, Ljubljana and Berlin. Plenty of UK examples could also be found in the conference presentations, including Brixton, Birmingham, Buxton, Bath, Bristol, Carlisle, Chipping Norton, London, Liverpool, and Manchester.

Furthermore, the conference speakers came from 15 countries, with a healthy mix of practitioners, researchers, and policy makers. The interaction between these three interrelated groups was identified as one of the most positive benefits of attending the conference from delegate feedback. The IPM is leading the world in this respect, by creating an inclusive community of practice and scholarship that will change the way places are understood and managed. Indeed, the IPM takes great pride in the interdisciplinarity of its members, who come together – irrespective of their backgrounds - because they are foremost concerned with *place*.

Consequently, the IPM's 4th International Biennial Conference proved to be a stimulating and inspiring event, and one that is likely to encourage more people, whatever their profession, to become, or continue to be, part of the international placemaking community.

Selected papers from the conference will appear in a forthcoming issue of the Journal of Place Management and Development.