

Reimagining Contemporary Urban Planning with Placemaking

Abhishek Behera

Master of City and Regional Planning
Georgia Institute of Technology

May 2017

Advisor: Prof. William J. Drummond



Cover
Artist with his works on 40th St New York City, adjacent to
Bryant Park

(Source: Author)

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*For the following cities:
Delhi, for being my home,
Paris, for making me fall in love,
Mumbai, for showing me a dream,
Libreville, for bringing me closer to nature,
Ahmedabad, for teaching me how to succeed,
Atlanta, for introducing me to the free world,
San Francisco, for preparing me to let go,
New York, for letting me find myself,*

And all the other cities who have been part of my journey thus far.

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I am grateful to my parents and brother for their constant support and belief in all my academic and professional endeavors.

Abstract

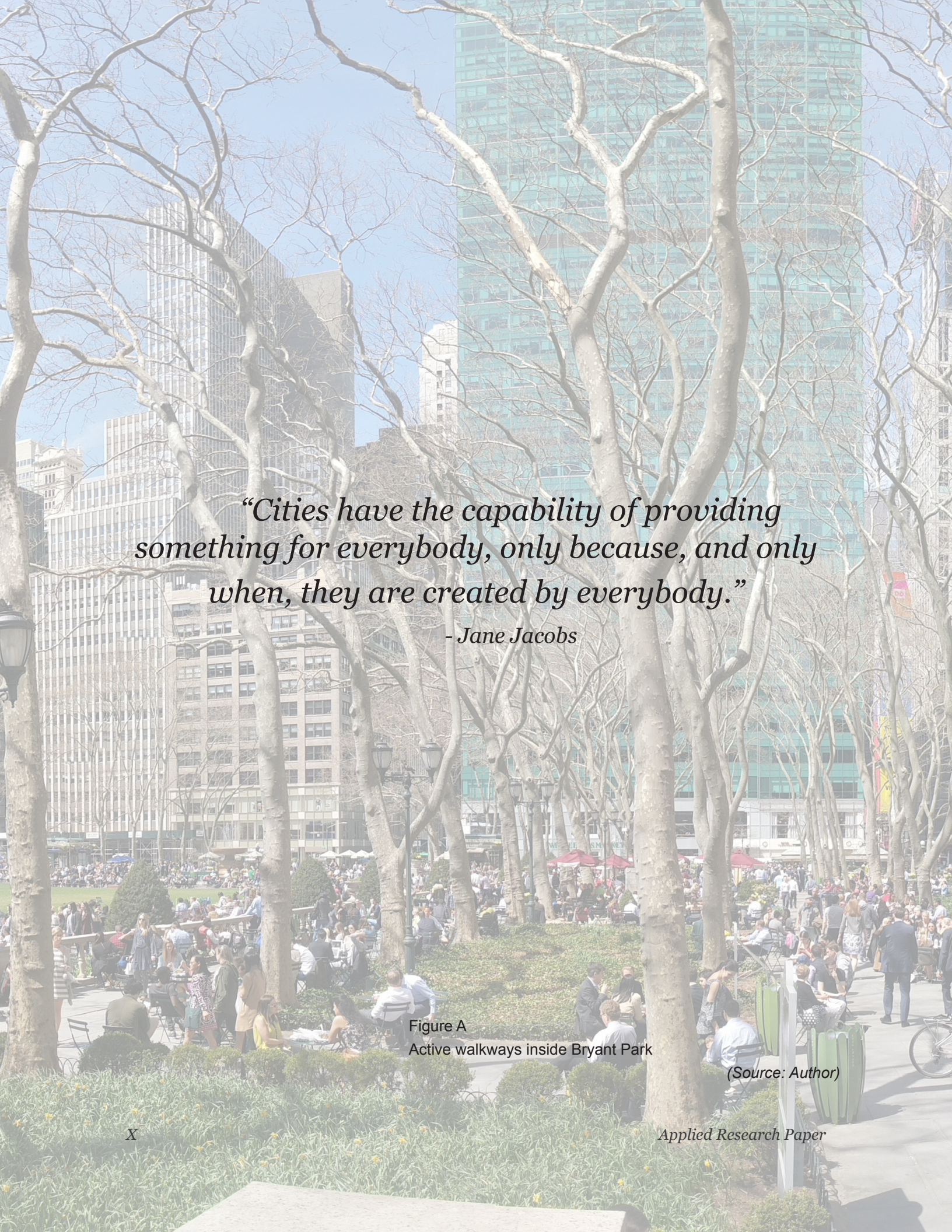
In the recent years placemaking has become one of the buzzwords in the related professions of urban planning and design. Often misunderstood as a process for creation of good urban design, it is being misused by developers and planners alike. Placemaking is a deliberate effort to bring communities closer and achieve a common vision for the place one inhabits. It is the process of "making" places, with a prime focus on the making, by virtue of which good public spaces get created. With contemporary urban design becoming data driven, and dependent on software and apps, it is facing a fatigue and sense of mistrust amongst the communities. This paper talks about how placemaking as a tool can be used to strengthen the process of urban planning and create effective plans that have been collectively prepared. A symbiotic environment can be created, by which one element fills in the gaps of the other and both support the process of creating better livable communities and cities.

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“Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.”

- Jane Jacobs

Figure A
Active walkways inside Bryant Park

(Source: Author)

1.0

Introduction

Within the field of urban planning a number of observers criticize the lack of understanding of the physical, volumetric design aspects, a symptom of too few planners possessing the design vision (Bacon, 1960, 1963). It is often termed expert driven with absence of adequate exchange of ideas and the planning initiatives to the users and communities. This has led to a sense of mistrust with the civic agencies within the communities (Silberberg, 2013).

The process of civic engagement in contemporary planning practices has been reduced to a mere ticking off requirements in a checklist (Walker, 2017). Community participation in the United States includes public hearings, reviews, and feedback sessions. These required participation methods, for which planners and officials present the new plan to the audience with a limited feedback session, have become counterproductive and cause mistrust with the agencies (Innes & Booher, 2004). It becomes a practice of periodically updating the public about the process and arriving at final plan. Rarely do issues or concerns of the community get addressed via this process. – because there is a pre-conceived list of issues identified by the experts. The final realized physical outcome in many cases has

been great spaces, but the spaces have not necessarily become places which are actively used and to which the community has an emotional link with a sense of ownership (J. Jacobs, 1958/ 2011; Madanipour, 2006; Whyte, 1980).

This paper explores placemaking as a process that includes community in the process. The study hypothesizes that placemaking as process for creating great public spaces through community engagement, can be effectively used as a tool to provide long lasting support to planning initiatives. As a process, placemaking engages people in participating and transforming spaces they inhabit. This allows creation of a sense of ownership and pride. As a tool in urban planning initiatives, placemaking, can make the planning process transparent, effective, and community driven. Placemaking places emphasis on the goal or the common good and the process to arrive at it, and not just the result of the place (Rondon, 2017; Silberberg, 2013).

The purpose of the paper is to see the possibility of using placemaking for strengthening planning process by empowering the community and stakeholders to voice their concerns and address them in a collaborative manner. The first section of the paper provides a brief overview about the need for and qualities of a good urban place, and how the process of placemaking has been used to achieve the same. Based on case studies, interviews and interactions with organizations in New York, Boston, Atlanta and other cities, the second section discusses the different types of placemaking strategies that placemakers and other organizations have adopted over the past few decades. The next section highlights the challenges encountered in this process. The fourth section explores the differences and similarities in placemaking process and urban planning, and how the two can be integrated to benefit our cities. The paper concludes with suggestive steps for overcoming challenges in

placemaking as a way forward for effective integration with the planning profession, producing a holistic process that transcends the different planning specializations and making the initiative more comprehensive, acceptable, and realistic.

2.0

Need for Placemaking

2.1 Design, city and its people

An October 2014 post on the Facebook page Humans of New York. It had a picture of an old white couple, presumably on the streets of New York City, which read, “We’re all victims of the architect. Architecture is the only art that you can’t help but feel. You can avoid paintings, you can avoid music, and you can even avoid history. But good luck getting away from architecture.” We human beings are constantly surrounded by architecture and cannot escape the built form – and nor can we escape the un-built. The un-built in a layman’s term for what is left in between the buildings – the public space.

American urbanist and journalist, William H. Whyte noted that public spaces play a critical role in quality of life of the society. His time lapse photography research has been pivotal in understanding pedestrian behavior and interactions with the city spaces (“William H. Whyte”). His ideology focuses on creating spaces that facilitate this interaction between people and the community at large. UN-HABITAT Executive Director Joan Clos i Matheu further deliberates on the ideas of Whyte and notes that the public spaces are assets to a city – “What defines a character of a city is its

public space, not its private space... The value of the public good affects the value of the private good. We need to show every day that public spaces are an asset to a city.”(Porada, 2013; Project for Public Spaces, 2012).

While Whyte was the editor of Fortune Magazine in 1958, one of his contemporaries and mentee, Jane Jacobs wrote an article – Downtown is for People which was the catalyst to her more famous work – The Death and Life of Great American Cities. In the article, she critiques the rampant scale of development happening in the cities such as New York and Philadelphia as ‘monumental bores’ and lifeless, lacking any sort of human activities and vibrancy, ‘There is no logic that can be superimposed on the city; people make it, and it is to them, not buildings, that we must fit our plans’ (J. Jacobs, 1958/ 2011).

This built and un-built exists at all scales – building, public realm (street, block, open spaces etc.), neighborhood, city, region. And it is the continuing daily interactions between human beings, the built, and the un-built that becomes the basis for (re)designing the urban realm (Childs, 2010). It is these interactions that make a space become a ‘place’, adding another dimension to collaborative nature of urban planning and design, and move ahead from the execution and implementation to the more utilitarian nature of the plan, catering to human use.

2.2 The idea of a ‘good place’

The success of a good urban environment depends on what roles these places play in the transformation of modern cities that are governed by political stability, economic opportunities and cultural identities. The urban environment not only creates the physical identity of the space, but also influences the stability of the

market, and encourages development. This creates competition between the players to strive for higher quality, thereby influencing the future of the city, environment, and its governance – by encouraging healthy and informative participation (Madanipour, 2006).

The attributes of an urban place are not just the physical form but the multiple layers attached to it. These places are often characterized by a (1) sense of livability – a place that provides comfortable living conditions (Wyckoff); identity, control, and access to opportunity – mixed character of the city that is culturally and economically distinct (Madanipour, 2006; Wansborough & Mageean, 2000) and has purposeful imageability and legibility, where the residents have individual and collective ownership of the surrounding environment which, and ability to make choices (Walker, 2017); (2) open communities and public life – allowing purposeful, catalytic, and relevant participation and voicing of concerns, and facilitate social interactions including active and passive engagements, entertainment, leisure and relaxation (Mehta, 2009; Whyte, 1980).; (3) self-reliance – self-sustaining and reduced dependency on scarce resources; and (4) social justice – opportunity to live in a pluralistic society (A. Jacobs & Appleyard, 1987). A good urban public place cater to our functional, social, and economic needs.

2.3 Making of a place

A crude explanation of urban design is the shaping of the parts of an environment in-between the built-forms and the interactions between the various building typologies (Childs, 2010). Often considered as an ambiguous mix of professions, it is treated as an extension to architecture, where there is an emphasis to the design and not to the urban, thereby ignoring the complexities that are

associated with cities (Inam, 2002). On the other hand, city planning, which began with the idea of designing cities, is not just the relationship between the built and un-built, but also address specific public goods, based on collective utilitarian needs (Childs, 2010; Mehta, 2014).

The ancient cities of Harrapan, Mesopotamian, or Roman civilizations were designed based on the social structure, civic activities, safety, and scale – that is, they were based on human use. This slowly led to evolution of design and character of such places, i.e. the identity, during the medieval European and Asian eras. This utilitarian root idea has remained the same, only the context of ‘people, place, and time’ changed.

Since the beginning of 20th century, there has been a distinct shift during and post industrialization (Childs, 2010; Schwartz, 2015). The needs of people started to get attention. With cars being available to the American middle class at affordable rates, there were more cars out on the streets. The planning remained utilitarian – designing to accommodate the needs of the people. However, the focus started shifting from people to accommodate interests of industries and machineries, and their byproducts. Rapid industrialization, auto-centric planning, and suburbanization became the identity in the post war American cities. Bad urban design, and lack of public spaces were an outcome of this cultural and social dynamic shift in society. The idea of placemaking – process of making places – originated during the 1960s and 70s with the writings and ideas of Jacobs, Lynch, Whyte, and others, who wanted to re-focus on human-centered planning and design ideologies (Silberberg, 2013).

Taking the liberty to modify President Lincoln’s Gettysburg speech during the American Civil War, on the lines of Jane Jacobs and W.H. Whyte, design is ‘of

the people, by the people, and for the people'. This role of 'people' in designing and planning for cities seems to have changed over recent years. With increasing focus on economic impact, monetary returns, adapting to technological innovations, and numeric validation of plans based on projections, the process of city design has changed its approach. This divergence in planning process has led to an increasing dependence on the experts and 'outsiders', and distancing from the end users and the desires of the community.

Our cities and towns are developing and growing at uncontrolled rates – and mostly in an unplanned fashion. With more number of people migrating to cities in the search of opportunities, these cities are facing numerous challenges. Open spaces and streets are poorly planned for these changes and often become chaotic. This is putting a tremendous pressure to design and build more inclusive and more functional cities. Concerns of public health such as walkability, clean air, greenery, accessibility to clean water, waste management, resiliency etc. are also weaved into this complex tapestry.

Cities belong to everybody. Public spaces are the most underutilized and yet valuable assets of the city. If these spaces are developed in the right manner, they can help in creating a diverse community by bringing people closer, fostering civic identity, and catalyzing economic development (Porada, 2013; Project for Public Spaces, 2012). The paper discusses identifying this right process – understanding the tools and techniques that can help facilitate generation of social capital, community revitalization, and satisfy indicators of quality of life. In her 1958 Fortune Magazine article, Jacobs concluded with “Designing a dream city is easy; rebuilding a living one takes imagination.” This is where placemaking takes form.

2.4 Placemaking

Placemaking has multiple definitions for different people and organizations, both government agencies and non-profits, interweaving similar ideologies seeking to create quality living places (Wyckoff). But the most striking definition I came across was from Anabelle Rondon of Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance: ‘Placemaking is a magical process. It brings people together by doing things’(2017).

Placemaking is a human-centered process of urban transformation (Silberberg, 2013) that helps in strengthening the connection of people and the places they share (Project for Public Spaces, 2016). It is a bottom-up, asset-based approach that emphasizes collaboration and community participation (Toolis, 2017) of a diverse group of people that inhabits or uses a place to ‘discover needs and aspirations’ to create a common goal or vision for the place that is constantly evolving (Placemaking Chicago). Placemaking as a process that not just focuses on creation of these places or promoting good urban design principles, but also addresses social, cultural, economic, equity, and health concerns of the society.

During the past half century, the concerns of placemaking have also evolved. It had started as movement to increase public participation and advocacy in preparing urban renewal plans, but has adopted other goals over the course of time. In the 90s placemakers started realizing the role of art and culture in rejuvenating public places. With initiatives from National Endowment for Arts (NEA) placemakers started encouraging use of various art forms to create a cultural sense and identity of the place (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010).

Changes in living patterns and advancing technological changes have further broadened the scope of placemaking. Contemporary placemaking processes address issues of transportation such as walkability, access to transit, bike share;

public health concerns such as sanitation, rising obesity rates; social issues of gender and racial equity, mixed neighborhoods, women safety, homelessness; economic issues of job creation, gentrification; and other pressing matters like expanding suburbia, climate change, etc. (Silberberg, 2013; Walker, 2017)

The first step in any successful project is to get out and meet the community and stakeholders to understand the history of the place (Placemaking New Zealand) and develop insight on how it functions or should evolve (Project for Public Spaces, 2016). These initial partnerships help in providing the community with a sense of ownership and fostering long term trust with the placemakers for creating an authentic vision that is true to the needs of the community. Apart from the residents, these community stakeholders include local governments, city departments, elected officials, business owners, developers, representatives from other city initiatives (Giuffrida, 2016), neighborhood or business alliances, grassroots organizations, local institutions like colleges, schools, libraries etc.(Rondon, 2017), police departments, and social welfare organizations that deal with homelessness, crime rates etc. (Walker, 2017).

Whyte (1980) noted that the problem with places 'is that (they) are not over used but underused'. This arises when places are just 'designed' by an outsider. Human beings use – or disuse places depending on their needs. Lack of adequate seating can prompt people to take support against a railing or pole. They might also stop coming to the place if it doesn't address their need of seating or comfort. Necessity is the mother of all inventions. Based on community inputs and requirements, elements can be introduced that fulfill these needs and aspirations, and once completed, will be utilized to the fullest. These elements need to be 'triangulated' or tied with each other to provide multiple options and generate more activity (Project for Public Spaces, 2016). The same seating, if not coupled with a

shade or some sort of activity or a view can get underutilized or misused. But, if placed near a water fountain or a food kiosk or an activity area, they can become breakout spaces that remain active throughout the day.

Placemaking is an assimilation of smaller goals to achieve the bigger ones (Walker, 2017). These goals do not have to be physical designed spaces, but can also be getting two new stakeholders on board and sit together to brainstorm (Giuffrida, 2016). Smaller goals are easy to achieve, in smaller frame of time and limited budgets – lighter, quicker, and cheaper (Project for Public Spaces). Achieving smaller goals can also create a domino effect and help to increase the network and outreach (Rondon, 2017), generate interest among the naysayers or Nimbyists, accelerate funding, improve faith with the participating agencies and funding sources, and encourage future funding opportunities. These smaller steps get easily tested, and if necessary refined or reverted or modified.

Placemaking is an evolving process. It is also dynamic. Over time, communities adapt to newer technologies and improvements around them, their needs also change. With this, the public places also evolve around the changing needs. The process of placemaking allows for this flexibility (Project for Public Spaces, 2016). Unlike other planning and design processes, placemaking doesn't have a fixed set of strategies or procedures (Rondon, 2017). It acknowledges every community to be unique, with different political systems, socio-cultural and economic dynamics, and concerns. These differences are the strengths for a placemaking process. A successful placemaking process can assimilate these differences. It may not solve all issues, but, if done in the right way, it has the potential to address the concerns of the community in a collaborative manner.

3.0

Types of Placemaking

Over the years, the activism against bad public spaces, has slowly broadened to foray into aspects of quality of life and the right to the city. Right to the city, coined by Henri Lefebvre (Silberberg, 2013) got noticed when it was included in the 2001 City Statute of Rio de Janeiro and slowly spread in Brazil and other Latin American and European countries. Based on ownership, access, participation in the designing and functioning of public amenities and spaces, right to city has broadened its scope along the lines of placemaking.

Mark Wyckoff, professor at Michigan State University's Land Policy Institute, identifies placemaking as 'a process to create quality places that people want to live, work, play and learn in'. His addition of quality space to the more traditional definition of placemaking, makes it aligned with the contemporary urban planning language. His definition is however a description of the end – creation of quality places -- but he lays more emphasis on placemaking as a process to achieve the goal.

As a process for creating quality spaces with a diversifying array of goals, placemaking has expanded from building or improving public spaces to include concerns of community health and safety, social justice and equality, sustainable

economic redevelopment, capacity building initiatives, tourism, art and culture, immigration, homelessness etc. to include nurturing civic pride, ownership, and a sense of place. The goal or outcome of the process, methods applied, time taken to execute, funding, civic participation etc. are key to differentiate between the different types of placemaking processes (Wyckoff).

With quality of spaces as a primary and common goal, Wyckoff identifies three types of placemaking. There are subtle differences depending on how the observer wants to evaluate the process.

1. Strategic Placemaking; goal oriented and a focused approach to address concern(s),
2. Creative Placemaking; revolving around art and cultural character of the space,
3. Tactical Placemaking; short termed and deliberate change.

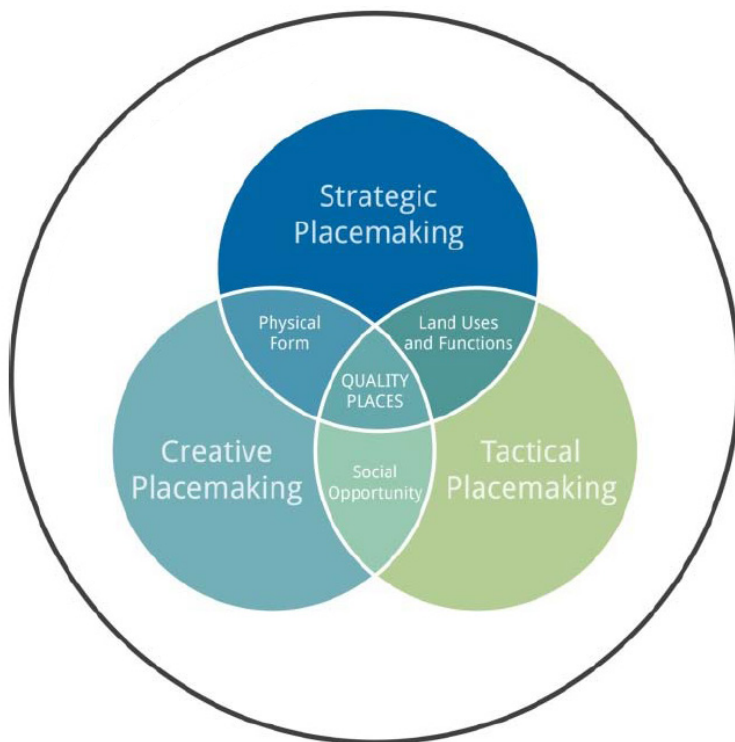


Figure 1:
Diagram explaining types of placemaking processes

(Wyckoff)

3.1 Strategic Placemaking

Strategic Placemaking aims at creating places by working towards a common goal focusing on socio-economic improvements in an area. It aims to create an active space by multiple calculated and planned processes, linked with each other, primarily with an economic goal. With a relatively longer project span compared the other two tools, strategic placemaking is a deliberate attempt at attracting a targeted group of people, by creating profitable conditions for businesses and retail at specific nodes or corridors of a city.

As Meg Walker (2017), Vice President at Project of Public Spaces, points out the example of Downtown Detroit, MI, placemaking has *'encouraged people being on the streets and public spaces, which helps the retail and restaurants and convinces developers that there is some potential for redevelopment'*. She describes it as an interdependent, symbiotic process where people attract businesses, and vice versa, which also deals with crime and safety concerns.

Case Study: Bryant Park, New York City NY

The Bryant Park revitalization in New York City is one of the biggest and well-known precedent for placemaking across the United States. Bryant Park, and the area around it, were facing issues of drug dealing, pan handling, and homelessness, with a severe decline in conditions since the 1970s. The Bryant Park Corporation (BPC), started by Dan Biederman in 1988, is a nonprofit private management company entrusted with restoration of the park, and now maintains and manages the business improvement district with help of private funds. With the New York Public Library along the 5th Avenue, Bryant Park covers a two-block area in Manhattan between 40th and 42nd Streets. It now has well-maintained paths and

plazas lined with trees, along with reading areas, kiosks, and small cafes catering to visitors and workers from the business around the park and neighboring blocks with ample seating. There are other activity areas where people engage in different kinds of fun activities as can be seen in Fig 4 below.

The idea of strategic placemaking is reflected in the mission statement of BPC which aims “*to create a rich and dynamic visual, cultural and intellectual outdoor experience for New Yorkers and visitors alike; to enhance the real estate values of its neighbors by continuously improving the park; to burnish the park’s status as a prime NYC tourist destination by presenting a meticulously maintained venue for free entertainment events; and to help prevent crime and disorder in the park by attracting thousands of patrons, at all hours, thus fostering a safe environment (Bryant Park)*”. As can be noted, the goal is to foster economic development by active placemaking in the park and the edges, which attracts people, and thus creates a safe environment for all.



Figure 2:
Panoramic view of Bryant Park, New York, NY taken in front of
the New York Public Library along 42nd St

(Source: Author)



Figure 3:
Panoramic view of Bryant Park, New York, NY taken in along
6th Ave showing the activated plazas

(Source: Author)



Figure 4:
Weekday break out sessions of juggling at one of the activity
corners of Bryant Park, New York NY.

(Source: Author)

3.2 Creative Placemaking

Creative or art-based placemaking in many aspects is like strategic placemaking. At Urban Land Institute's (ULI) 2016 Housing Opportunities Conference, Kimberly Driggins, defined it as an '*intentional use of arts and culture to shape physical, social, and economic future of communities*', with an added intention of civic engagement around socio-cultural diversity, stronger economic development and improved quality of life (Hoban, 2016). This term was first used by Markusen and Gadwa (2010) in a white paper for National Endowment for the Arts that discussed the transformation of character of a community around arts and cultural activities. Creative placemaking not only 'animates' public and private spaces, but by bringing a diverse group of people together, it also enhances structures and streetscapes, adding a visual appeal to the activated spaces.

With a time range comparable, yet, lesser than strategic placemaking, art-based placemaking attracts people to an area for the cultural activities taking place. It deters people from going to other areas seeking different kinds of activities. It becomes a one-stop-destination for different kinds of activities. The place becomes activated by local cultural music or dance events, art work, local artists and painters, etc. People come not just to sit, view or participate in such cultural activities, so the place boosts other secondary economic activities such as restaurants, bars, hotels etc., thus encouraging the local businesses and fostering public safety. (Pollock & Paddison, 2014)

Creative placemaking, unlike strategic placemaking, can be a 'by product' of an existing cultural institution such as a museum, library, market etc. (PPS_ Placemaking, 2015). These are institutional places that host certain elements and thus can be an anchor to host other art and cultural development such as public

art displays, live music or painting etc. These act as informal small institutions (Wyckoff). One interesting example of creative placemaking is the Indianapolis bike trail, that connects multiple cultural institutions of the city. The first such initiative in the United States, it has not only fostered collaboration between these institutions, but also has made them more accessible to people via biking and walking. While this trail was being built, there were other programs that were looking at active and affordable housing, landscaping, reducing cars, air quality, way finding etc. – improving the quality of life (PPS_Placemaking, 2015).

Case Study: Boston Public Market, Boston MA

Again, placemaking is not about just creating good urban design. It is about the needs of the community that can be anchored around certain establishments, requirements, or goals. The Boston Public Market is in a block between I-93 and the Boston City Hall - a brutalist period architecture flanked by an enormous plaza near the Government Center T-station. The plaza, if seen in isolation, would be an urban designer's paradise. Between two government buildings, it has ample seating, trees, and soft and hardscape elements. Yet, this place remains empty for most of the time (even on a weekday), except for few tourists on the Freedom Trail or office goers coming in and out of the station during the peak hours. What is interesting to note is that people are thronging the Congress and Union Streets towards the Boston Public Market and the farmers market on the Hanover Street leading to Rose Kennedy Greenway. The markets sell fresh farm produce and locally caught fish from the bay and the rivers. Situated near numerous historic structures such as the Quincy and Faneuil markets, the Boston Market District Feasibility Plan prepared by PPS (2009) for the Boston redevelopment Authority outlines an active and vibrant Market District that caters to the community of farmers and fishermen by not only providing them

with a place to sell their produce but also as an active retail space helping build the local economy around activities of cultural significance. Regarding the plaza, which hosts some of the market activities, it is interesting to note that people are attracted to the more active, culturally (local) significant area in comparison to a designed (by experts) public space.

Case Study: Buford Highway, Atlanta GA

Marian Liou started using the Instagram handle 'weloveBuHi' as a tool for community building and engagement. Buford Highway or 'BuHi' is a five-lane road to the north of city of Atlanta with communities of ethnic diversity on either side. It is famous for its pan Asian and Mexican restaurants. WeLoveBuHi as a grassroots initiative started when development in the area started increasing with the proposed redevelopment of General Motors Assembly plant, which posed as a threat to the multicultural diversity of the area (Zyman, 2016). The corridor has been selected for one of the Atlanta Regional Commission's Livable Centre Initiative (LCI) studies in 2016, and through dialogues with the community and elected representatives the Bufford Highway Masterplan is being developed. Being an Asian-American herself, Marian Liou considers "Buford Highway (as) the story of the history of immigration in the United States. It's the story of the American dream. It's the story of small-business owners."(Lee, 2015). Along with showcasing the variety of food outlets, she is drawing attention to both the lack of amenities and increase of development in the area by programs such as bike tours, cinema nights and restaurant tours (Liou, 2016; "Marian Liou: #welovebui," 2016).

3.3 Tactical Placemaking

Tactical placemaking is exactly what the word ‘tactical’ means: ‘relating to small-scale actions serving a larger purpose, made or carried out with only a limited or immediate end in view, adroit in planning or maneuvering to accomplish a purpose’ (Meriam-Webster). Placemaking ranges from efforts that take billions of dollars and decades to see the light of the day, to cheap and quick grassroots efforts of pop-up urbanism that are easy to execute (and relocate or recreate). In all fairness, larger, bigger projects can consist of an assimilation of smaller projects that feed into each other.

Wyckoff identifies tactical placemaking as a short-term, goal-oriented, deliberate process that is used to generate interest within the community, stakeholders and civic bodies which may lead to a long-term transformation of the area. He combines the ideas of ‘Tactical Urbanism’ by Mike Lydon and Antony Garcia of Street Plans Collaborative, and PPS’s ‘Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper’, as tactical placemaking that focuses on quick, DIY projects in public spaces, with low risks, low cost (of installation or maintenance), and a possibility of greater returns.

Tactical Urbanism is an approach to neighborhood building focusing on small-scale improvements as a catalytic process for generating substantial interest and investments. It allows for smaller ideas to be tested locally with a specific target group and time before it can be taken out at a greater scale (Lydon & Garcia, 2015). What is interesting to note for this kind of placemaking is ‘the willingness to fail’ (Lydon et al.). There is no right or wrong with placemaking. An idea that is successful at one place may not be suitable for another city. Which when viewed from the larger perspective, is the main idea behind placemaking – to engage in the process of making a place, without necessarily actually achieving the desired or anticipated

goal (Rondon, 2017).

'Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper' (LQC) is a phrase borrowed and promoted by Project for Public Spaces from Eric Reynolds at Urban Space Management. As an implementation approach, it has various similarities with tactical urbanism, and is governed by the strategy of executing low-cost and low-risk improvements. However, PPS stresses that unlike tactical urbanism, which is for the community, LQC focuses on creating projects with (or by) the community (Project for Public Spaces).

In summary, tactical placemaking is a way to generate interest and experiment in a place. It helps in educating the community and stakeholders about the possibility of implementing the strategy in the longer run, thereby building future partnerships and trust for long-term placemaking.

4.0

Challenges in Placemaking

The process of placemaking comes with its own fair share of challenges – people, place, and time. As an urban planning tool, it is not any different. With the path, urban planning has taken in the past decades – as an expert driven process, there has been a growing sense of distrust with planning agencies. Having worked in the field for few years, I don't blame the profession entirely. Sometimes the profession suffers from bad practice, but most of the time it is a compromise the experts and policy makers need to make with the limited resources they are presented with.

Unlike science, placemaking (and as an extension, urban planning and design) cannot be generalized for places and simply apply a cookie-cutter model. Each neighborhood or street is different in a city and requires a different approach for a redressal. Apart from having different policies and jurisdictions, most often it is a lack of policies that are a hindrance to such initiatives. Even when placemakers can weave their way through these hurdles, getting a placemaking project started is a big task and funding them comes as a different process altogether.

In the technology driven world that we live in, things have become fast-

paced and people want quick answers and results. As seen with different types of placemaking, it takes time to engage communities, design a program, and to execute the ideas. While it can take several hours or days to implement a Parki(ing) Day initiative, it can take years to see the dividends in projects like Bryant Park.

4.1 People

Storytelling

One might call it marketing or salesmanship, but presenting an idea to people and gaining their support requires skills. We in the industry often fall prey to the new trending buzzwords. We tend to understand them (in most cases), because we are exposed to them daily. However, it is a challenge to explain these 'new' ideas to the community. And in most cases, the community is aware of the concerns, but only in hindsight. The process of reiterating these concerns with the idea of placemaking is often hard to advocate.

Advocacy is not only for the communities. There is a lack of understanding about the benefits of placemaking amongst public officials, elected representatives, developers and at times even the professionals. The choice of communication tools, thus, becomes quite crucial. The profession of design and planning has its own tools of communication, which the common public doesn't always understand easily. There is a lack of conscious effort to simplify jargon so that it can be understood by people without someone having to explain to them. Most of the current placemakers still rely on oral and written communication methods, without exploring possibility of visual aids.

Contextual expertise

Having worked with communities in New York and currently involved with Great Neighborhoods initiative of Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance in Boston, Anabelle Rondon notes that a placemaker should know the community in and out. S/he should be familiar with the concerns of the community. This process begins with gaining knowledge of previous studies and proposals, along with attending community events, dinners, etc. She however adds that this itself is a slow and not a cost-effective process.

It is not necessary to start a placemaking project from scratch – it can always be taken up from previous project. These previous projects are as important community assets as the people themselves. Lack of delivery of many public projects has led to development of planning fatigue amongst the community members, leading to a distrust towards agencies and lack of interest in any new project. This issue has been observed most often in historically neglected communities. Rebuilding this trust is a big challenge that many placemaking projects have been facing.

Getting a ‘true community expert’ and getting ‘authentic citizen participation’ (“Creating a Common Agenda,” 2013) is a challenging process. A community expert can not only address on-ground issues plaguing the community but can also help in getting allies, advisers, and collaborators on board with the process. Local leaders need to be educated about the value of place and to be put through a capacity building process to become champions of the community, so that even after the completion of project and without any professional support the tasks can be carried out at a community level.

Engagement

Challenges are not limited to selection of community experts but trickle down to ‘meaningful community engagement’, which is not just time consuming but also labor intensive. Placemakers at times lack strategic insight about ways to involve the community, and which poses threats to the creation of allies or coalitions and work on a longer-term plan. Engagement itself is a two-sided process. It deals with the who and the how of the process. Selecting community experts is a small part of the process. Critical to this process is the right choice of participants and stake holders. A strong management or a steering group can be very crucial to see the project to completion.

Lack of coordination between the stakeholders – various public agencies, private groups, resident associations etc. is a challenge that transcends professions. Placemakers and planners have always complained about lack of all participants coming together. Coming together doesn’t mean to coming to a consensus, it is more about discussing issues and concerns together and trying to resolve them (Dobbins, 2011; Giuffrida, 2016).

Placemakers along with the team of experts or leaders need to strategize ways to build trust, be inclusive, and bridge the gap between the traditional naysayers or the NIMBYists and the growing number of ‘over-enthused YIMBY type residents, via effective dialogues (Rondon, 2017). Most often it has been the absence of right people on the side or the reluctance of various groups (community members, public officials, agencies, developers etc.) to come together and discuss issues and find solutions (Giuffrida, 2016).

4.2 Place

Policies

One of the biggest obstacles to creating more great places is local zoning. Zoning laws determine how the land is to be used in cities and towns. These laws can determine the way people will be using the land in terms of how much infrastructure needs to be built and how much density can be achieved. However, these laws and policies do not change or adapt as frequently, as one would expect. It is not always the fault or attitude of the city administration, but zoning laws genuinely take time to write and revise and cannot be therefore changed on a frequent basis.

Most often, placemaking explicitly challenges existing policies and regulations. Looking at the scale of projects or absence of successful legal precedents, lawmakers are hesitant to take risks, especially in dealing with issues and creatively reforming the laws – designers are not lawyers and vice versa. The naysayers are not just in the community, but also within the city halls. There are more advocates for ‘why it won’t work here’ compared to those interested in ‘how it can be made possible’ (Silberberg, 2013). This further gets bundled with the complexity and fine print text of zoning policies and regulations, which vary at different scales and levels, and the laws are not always comprehensible to a layperson.

Funds

Nothing comes for free, whether small umbrellas and foldable tables and chairs for the park, or resurfacing the street and pavement or printing pamphlets and

brochures or the simplest task of getting ice tea and cookies for a public meeting. The whole process requires funding. Funds are not just required for the physical execution of project, but also for personnel costs, marketing and design fees, and funding for community engagement processes, and the overall management and maintenance of the space (Silberberg, 2013; Walker, 2017).

Reliability of a funding source is one big challenge that placemaking faces. Funding for creation of public spaces from the various public agencies is limited, and placemakers can be dependent on the local business owners and developers, who have a vested interest in the project (Silberberg, 2013). Tactical placemaking projects have a limited or low budget and at times get funded via sponsorship or crowdsourcing – which is still a rigorous process. But when the needed budget is smaller, the project will be relatively easy to achieve. The bigger challenges are faced by the large scale non-temporary projects, where the dividends are earned at a much later date. This slow return and risks involved are a deterrent for investors and civic agencies that might show interest in funding opportunities. This quantitative nature of market poses a challenge to a more qualitative, human-scaled measurement matrix of placemaking.

4.3 Time

Time-line

Like all other processes in planning and design, placemaking too takes time. A three-staged process, it requires pre-construction, execution, and post construction. As observers, most often we see it only during the last two stages. As seen from the above challenges, it takes a quality amount of time and patience to

get the right stakeholders on board, to know about the community and its needs, to gather momentum with consensus, to organize public and private support, to secure political backing, and most importantly, raise funds. All these stages are crucial and interdependent, and can cause more delays than anticipated. This pre-construction stage, often in disorder and chaotic, can also enable community building (Silberberg, 2013; Walker, 2017).

The other challenge faced by such projects is the immediate expectation for results. Projects get judged prematurely, even before their true impacts on the society and the economy can be gauged. This not only impacts the management and maintenance process but also other future projects that would have developed from the initial project.

5.0

Making or Planning: Looking forward

I have been engaging in urban planning and design projects for the last five years in Gabon, India, and the United States. The projects have varied from developing special economic zones in equatorial Africa, to revitalizing an urban corridor, to developing feasibility masterplans for riverfront projects, to writing development guidelines for a proposed transit oriented CBD development, to revitalizing underused bridge under-spaces. Different cities and different countries provide different contexts and issues. However, the processes engaged in realizing these projects were similar. Having observing it both as a part of the 'system' and as an outside observer, I realized that in all of the projects involvement of the public was in the later stages or nonexistent.

Another issue that became apparent to me is that, contemporary urban planning and design practices have become very institutionalized. There is a sense of superiority that comes with expertise that hinders the progress of work and creates setbacks and problems in the future (Giuffrida, 2016; Walker, 2017). This egotistic perspective exists not only with the 'ordinary people', but also within the 'experts' themselves. Different agencies who have prime stake in projects do not

necessarily sit together to listen and address their mutual concerns. It is a harrowing process for the community and developers to keep shuttling between these agencies. What makes the matters worse is when concerned departments within the same agency do not sit and discuss.

In many ways, planning practice can be considered as the antithesis of placemaking, since it focuses so much on the large scale and aggregating data, and not on the other smaller elements that go into making places unique and special. In recent years, planning has become data driven (Dobbins, 2016). Projects have become more quantified than ever before. With the availability of multiple software packages, trends can be predicted. However, planning has distanced itself from the actual users and what their current and future needs are. Data when fitted into a software package would probably suggest building of an extra lane on the expressway, but that is not necessarily the desired solution.

Contemporary urban planning has a whole spectrum of processes. On one end, there are planners who are meticulously designing and ordering elements from building height, to the material of the façade, and the use of streetscapes and greenery to achieve and control the image and density of a place. On the other end, there are planners creating what they feel are the right kinds of zoning policies and incentives to allow places to be created more “organically” because of what the people living there want.

Placemakers are mediators (Rondon, 2017). They understand the community and have a relationship with them that they have built over time or since the beginning of the project. They help in bridging the gap between the community and stakeholders and the agencies or developers. They facilitate generating interest, and facilitating a dialogue between the ‘experts’ and the ‘ordinary people’. Engaging

the community from the beginning saves time and alterations in the future. This process reduces the 'back-and-forth' of design and can also come up with innovative ideas to deal with the residents' concerns (Giuffrida, 2016; Walker, 2017). Planning and design professionals are no doubt qualified and are well versed in their respective fields. As an expert, one would be aware of the required dimensions of a car lane or a sidewalk, or the distance between two trees. But it is via community engagement that one may find out if an extra car lane is required or having a protected bike lane is a pressing concern, or whether people would want extra seating facilities.

Placemaking has evolved as a tool over time. What started as a process of activism, and protests against untamed development in American cities, by Jane Jacobs and W H Whyte, has now become a tool for bringing communities, neighborhoods and people together (Silberberg, 2013). It is not exactly urban planning or design, but is not much different from them. Discussions have moved from 'what is a good urban design' and 'what is a good public space' to 'what and who makes a good public space'. There is an increased sense of ownership for the public realm and an interest to move towards a better quality of life.

The inclusivity of placemaking and openness towards social and cultural diversity is strengthening the process and is helping to bring people closer and making them aware of their differences and thus improving the social cohesion of the society. How can the professionals and experts, community members, public and elected officials, and private sector, come together and continue improving the momentum of placemaking and move forwards towards a better living place for the future generations? Below are some recommendations that based upon personal experiences and from works others have been doing, that can help make placemaking an effective tool for urban planning.

Thinking outside the box

Most often it is essential to remove our blinkers and try thinking outside the box. To make the planning process more inclusive, it is essential to include organizations and civic agencies that might not have been the first choice. In an ongoing project in Eugene, Oregon, in partnership with City of Eugene and PPS, lack of safety in downtown Eugene was one of the top concerns which was attributed to high rates of homeless people in the area (Chapman & Larkham, 1999; (“Places for People Downtown Eugene,” ; Walker, 2017). Using placemaking as a tool in the process of ‘reclaiming the Downtown’, was not just limited to taking back the parks and improving facilities, but also engaged social services and criminal justice systems. It not only helped to identify the real criminals, but also facilitated the involvement of ordinary citizens in the process of community building by providing them with better opportunities. Placemaking looks at the holistic development of the community – dealing with the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’, and requires a wider range of engagement process via multiple networks.

Effective communication

The mode of storytelling needs to broaden from the traditional use of words and numbers to more effective sensory aides of videos, infographics, photographs, and at times the use of touch. A simple graphical work (even if it is a photomontage using Photoshop) can be more effective to help in visualizing the projected outcome in comparison to handouts with text. Placemaking requires much more focused and constructive advocacy, negotiations, and documentation to create a movement of sorts, attract allies and friends, secure funds, and complete the project. It requires community centric and sensitive visionary storytelling (“Creating a Common Agenda,” 2013; Silberberg, 2013).

Communicating ideas can be more than just visual. It can be experiential too. Experiential communication is a passive approach to making people and the community aware of the challenges, which one does not realize in the daily routine. Greg Giuffrida (2016) and Marian Liou (“Marian Liou: #welovebuhi,” 2016) have used non-conventional techniques by collaborating with civic agencies in Atlanta such as bike share and transit facility (MARTA), to do tours of Memorial Drive and Buford Highway, their respective corridor improvement projects, to make the participants aware of the issues of traffic calming, bike lanes, inadequate sidewalks etc. This not only helps in getting the people out of their homes and engaging with others, but also enables them to step out of their cars and use another mode of transportation, making them aware of benefits of public transit and issues faced by pedestrians and cyclists (Giuffrida, 2016).

Community fellows

Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance has implemented a community network model with the Great Neighborhoods initiative, where one ‘empowered’ community, takes the leadership role and engages with few more – like a trickle-down effect. This helps build network, alliances and strengthens the coordination process at the management level as well as on ground.(Rondon, 2017).

From a managerial point of view, it is not easy to penetrate the community easily.. Documentation processes often generate hostility and result in a reluctance to share information. When done by persons from outside the community, it can become a much longer process. Appointing a ‘community fellow’ can help break barriers and form the bridge between the community and the placemakers (who themselves, in most cases, are a resource for agencies and alliances to connect with

the needs of the community). Such a person can be from the community or be sent to them to help in empowering and participating in daily activities.

Involving the youth and children is an important and crucial strategy. First, compared to the older generations, they would be the ones reaping the benefits of the placemaking process, and second, educating the young minds at an early age will benefit the society as whole in the coming decades. College students can be involved as volunteers for a small stipend and be trained for smaller tasks such as photography, communication, social media etc.

Policy reforms

Creative thinking does not necessarily have to be limited to design only, but can transcend design to include all other aspects of engagement and policy making. Smarter changes can help creating mixed and diverse neighborhoods. They can help making the process of placemaking (and future planning and design) as a more natural process in comparison to a forced remedy.

Policies that help identifying and funding placemaking projects, need to be brought to the table and implemented at a regional level. Most current funding comes from private groups and businesses, and therefore many projects end up concentrating in the downtown areas of the cities without breaking barriers and entering residential neighborhoods and suburbs, and smaller towns and other rural areas (“Creating a Common Agenda,” 2013).

6.0

Conclusion

Placemaking as a tool has broadened itself over time. It has forayed into areas of economic development, racial and gender justice, public health, environment protection, cultural regeneration, social diversity, etc. It no longer remains associated with just creating good public spaces, which had been synonymous with urban design, or concerned with activism and advocacy against displacement of neighborhoods due to construction of expressways.

Placemaking is ambitious and optimistic (Silberberg, 2013). It is a tool by which we organize ourselves to acknowledge the built environment and provide opportunities to all, irrespective of where they coming from or who they representing. Placemaking helps in disregarding the traditional hierarchical nature of city building. It makes everyone equal in influence and makes everyone aware of concerns of others. It highlights and celebrates the process of making of a place, instead of the result. It not only accentuates the physical environment of the place but also builds on the social capital on a human and emotional level.

Placemaking is a tool, while urban planning is a process. Placemaking can become an effective tool to facilitate and enhance the process of planning in our

cities and rural areas. Planning does not need to be top-down or bottom-up process throughout. It can also become engaging and participatory. It does not need to solve all problems. Nor does placemaking solve all problems. But the latter helps in addressing many problems, and helps in building a sense of involvement and a trust between various players.

If planning is the process of change, placemaking is one of the tools for change. The two are interdependent. Successful placemaking requires regulatory interventions and policies that support the process. It needs to be executed in a timely manner, and it requires sources of funding from public and private organizations and political support throughout. It also needs initiatives to protect the vulnerable groups such as minority and low income groups, homeless persons, etc. from being forced to relocate to other places.

Local governments, elected officials, and city planning and design departments have the responsibility to create a symbiotic environment where placemaking and urban planning co-exist and support each other – either through effective engagement or via regulatory frameworks. They can facilitate building a community vision with dynamic goals by supporting grassroots organizations and other nonprofits that are engaging in the placemaking process and to ensure that quality livable places are created without losing the trust of communities.

To achieve the vision of a quality livable place, it is important to re-connect with the people, and understand their aspirations and expectations, and on occasions ‘educate’ them about characteristics of good urban places. This will ensure that the places that are created will be vibrant, that the people using them have a sense of ownership, and that both people and places will evolving over time and adapt to the changes in the world and needs of the future generations.

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