

A-PLACE: LINKING PLACES THROUGH NETWORKED ARTISTIC PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of A-Place “Linking places through networked artistic practices”, a project co-funded by the Creative Europe programme (2019-2023) is to design and implement art-centred placemaking activities in six European cities –Barcelona, Bologna, Brussels, Lisbon, Ljubljana, and Nicosia– to connect meanings and experiences associated to places across cultural and geographic boundaries. Placemaking activities will be carried out with the participation of both local residents (from multiple cultural backgrounds) and transient population (refugees, tourists, business travellers, temporary workers), in collaboration with artists and educational staff participating in the project. In this paper, we outline the scope of the project, describe the first-year programme of activities, and discuss the methodology to be applied in their evaluation.

Keywords: placemaking, creative placemaking

INTRODUCTION

The re-appropriation of public spaces by their users, which defies the regulations set by professional planners and policy-makers, has been gaining ground in the last decades, to the extent that it has become part of newly “institutionalized” form of planning. A diversity of practices, including placemaking, creative placemaking, tactical urbanism, pop-up urbanism, performative urbanism and community art-based interventions, among others, coincide in the need to foster bonds between people and the spaces they live in, and to find ways to increase their sense of

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belonging and advocate their right to the city: collaboration between professionals (artists, planners, sociologists) and non-professionals; promotion of interdisciplinary creative practices embedded in the social and built environments; and creation of exchanges between social groups from multiple origins and cultures.

PLACE AND PLACEMAKING

The idea of place conveys the existence of bonds between people and the environment they inhabit. For Sime (1986), “The term 'place', as opposed to space, implies a strong emotional tie, temporary or more longlasting, between a person and a particular physical location”. A “sense of place” is inherent to human beings, as they are able to create bonds with the spaces they live in to make them the places of their existence. As Relph (1976) argued, places are “centres of meaning, or focuses of intention and purpose”; meanings and functions which are not the same for all cultural groups.

Place and placemaking are hardly distinguishable if we think of a place as a social construction process which involves multiple actors and audiences in diverse ways. The term “placemaking” has been used since the 1990s by the non-profit organization Project for Public Spaces based in New York. They define placemaking as “an overarching idea and a hands-on approach for improving a neighbourhood, city, or region, which inspires people to collectively reimagine and reinvent public spaces as the heart of every community” (Project for Public Spaces, 2007). Placemaking helps to unveil the potential embedded in the social fabric through the empowerment of community members. As such, it is part of a collaborative process to reinvent and reimagine everyday urban spaces, while promoting social and cultural identities and values.

Placemaking, as an action-oriented approach for community empowerment, can encompass a wide range of activities, from short-term interventions to long-term cooperative projects embracing multiple experts and disciplines. The purpose of placemaking is to create places “that benefit everyone - places that connect existing residents, instead of dividing, alienating, or displacing them, and places that enhance the existing character of a neighborhood, instead of erasing it” (Kahne, 2015). Place-based practices carried out with the participation of facilitators (artists, sociologists, architects) can help individuals to unveil the memories embedded in the living environment (Till, 2008).

In our global, multicultural societies, placemaking can become instrumental to reinforce the coexistence of diverse ethnic groups in neighbourhoods and cities thus giving rise to a superdiversity by which “individuals of diverse backgrounds may come together and form bonds based on a variety of identities or interests” (Foner et al., 2017). Superdiversity is a new condition of permanently increased, varied and fragmented pattern that can be detected in our cities. This term, coined

by Vertovec (2007), refers to a diversification of diversity which surpasses the conventional interpretations of interculturality (Meissner and Vertovec, 2014). The most evident challenge is a diversification of interests in society which gives rise to intercultural conflicts and makes it difficult for the urban design and planning practices to find a common ground to build upon. On the other hand, superdiversity creates distinct and novel forms of everyday life, which can also be creatively addressed.

CREATIVE PLACEMAKING

The term “creative placemaking” arose as a result of a programme of the National Endowment for the Arts in the United States “to integrate art and design in community planning and development, build shared spaces for arts engagement and creative expression, and increase local economic activity through arts and cultural activities” (Landesman, 2013). The aim was to help “public, private, non-profit, and community sectors” to develop strategies to “shape the physical and social character of a neighbourhood, town, city, or region around arts and cultural activities” (Markusen and Gadwa, 2010). Creative placemaking was part of a “creative economy” in which the “creative industries” would play a key role, together with the “creative citizens”, in the making of “creative cities”.

The addition of the adjective “creative” to placemaking gave rise to a new discursive practice, devised by government agencies, funders and other institutions (Zitcer, 2018). Within this “mode of production of the objects of knowledge”, the artist becomes one more member of a partnership whose aim is “to develop projects that have a public impact”, together with other placemakers (e.g. developers, citizens, local authorities). However, if “creatively planned”, placemaking can bring about lively public spaces, preventing emptiness and isolation by enhancing the capacity to experience humanized and meaningful places.

Creative placemaking and urban planning can be related to each other in so far as the first provides solutions to the problems created (or not solved) by the second. Thus, Walker contends that “Placemaking really happens when people utilize recreational, social play and lingering spaces – and artists doing art – in ways that actually help solve a design problem” (Walker and Marsh, 2019). For Marsh, the function of creative placemaking is to repair or fix designs that people’s use has proven them to be wrong: “Creative placemaking is an effort by artists to be part of this work of place fixing, and also part of undoing the social damage that these choices have caused for communities” (Walker and Marsh, 2019). Courage (2014) opposes the top-down “creative placemaking” with what she refers to as “social practice placemaking” which comprises “a cluster of co-produced, polylogic and relational creative practices” which are “temporary; low cost; quick to install and dismantle; informal; spontaneous; driven by community issues” and represent a “process with a focus on the relation between subject, object, and space”. These tenets are also shared by the planning “tactics” that De Certeau (1998) opposed to

“strategies”, both terms now embraced by “tactical urbanism” (Lydon et al., 2012). As Hou concluded, “Under the banners of tactical urbanism, creative placemaking, pop-up, and so on, improvised uses of urban spaces have become a method of urban design interventions and even development strategies”, which are becoming increasingly accepted by institutional actors and adopted by companies as part of their marketing strategies (Harris and Nowicki, 2015).

Today, planning practitioners are challenging conventional practices developing new approaches which are more critical and process-driven (McKeown and Courage, 2019). Along this line, performative urbanism (Wolfrum and Brandis, 2015) aims at shifting the focus on perception and interpretation to “action, politics, design”, in order to move urban planning and architecture beyond the limits of “objects and images”. These alternative practices question existing power relations and offer alternative ways to bring together time, place and communities. In this sense, the concept of spatial practice can be extended to integrate social and political realms, which lead us to think of placemaking as a diverse form of civic-situated knowledge creation .in-and-through design which, as Miessen (2017) contended, lead us “to go beyond conventional physical construction and venture into the construction of realities—to not follow existing protocols, but to proactively generate them.”

A COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAMME OF PLACEMAKING INTERVENTIONS

The purpose of A-Place (2020), a project co-financed by the Creative Europe programme (2019-2023), is to strengthen the bonds between people and places through creative placemaking practices. A number of interventions are planned for the first year of the project, in the cities where the partner organizations operate physically, as well as in digital spaces. The activities to carry out, actors involved and the objectives they pursue are next summarized.

- **A Calm Place in Schaerbeek (Brussels)** aims at enabling exchanges between students and residents in this superdiverse neighbourhood, with mixed cultures and ethnicities, and creatively exploring the potential of the strong presence of the student community. Integrating temporary interventions with the North Brabant Saint Lazare Renovation Contract, the placemaking activities –on-site events around a mobile installation (Mobile Hub) and learning activities involving students, artists, passers-by and residents (Learning Bubble)– will re-discover a green space next to Maison des Arts and transform it into a space for reflection and encounter. The interventions will help to visualize daily practices and activities and to facilitate socialisation between people of different origins and backgrounds, thus contributing to the rethinking and transformation of the urban space.

- **A Confined Place** is a programme of activities, open to those willing to express and share the experience of living in the period of confinement through the digital networks, using a variety of mixed techniques including texts and storytelling, drawings and photographs, audio-visual works and performances. The goal is to

create a sense of place derived from sharing a confinement across the globe, connecting people's experiences and contributing to community building in this exceptional period.

- **A Hidden Place in Ljubljana** focuses on the revitalization of an empty plot in the Bežigranski Dvor district, a place without a collective memory or use. The placemaking intervention is carried out together with Trajna, a non-governmental organisation dedicated to promote community economies, creative research, workshops and eco-infrastructure design. We are inviting youth and adults (teachers from nearby schools, parents and child and young relatives, as well as other interested residents and passers-by) to approach the site, to inhabit it and to transform it into a place. This way, it will be possible to reveal the diversity of the ways through which a place can be "sensed" (perceived and felt) by different age groups within various learning environments (formal and informal).

- **A Joint Place in Kaimakli (Nicosia)** will be organized in conjunction with the "Pame Kaimakli" neighbourhood festival, whose aim is to use artistic and spatial practices to facilitate the interaction between the community, the artists and the public. Over the period of one week, representatives of partner organisations (architects, artists, students) will collaborate in the design and implementation of actions which address the current problems of the neighbourhood, using a variety of media (installations, performances, video and photography). This way, academics, artists and students will participate in a joint construction of a sense of place, together with the community.

- **A Sound Place in Lisbon** will involve the collaborative creation of a cultural soundscape of the Martim Moniz surroundings –one of the most multicultural neighbourhoods of Lisbon– by collecting residents' and non-residents' sonic perceptions and using them as materials for the creation of music pieces to be played in a live concert. The placemaking activities will include an installation of videos and photos representing the sounds of the neighbourhood. They will contribute to fostering social inclusion and dialogue between social groups, and will provide new insights for the ongoing rehabilitation plans in the area.

- **A Visionary Place in Bologna** will comprise workshops, talks and small events, which will be part of the Urban Visions festival. The programme will include a section to discuss the living conditions of migrants, refugees and displaced communities. The placemaking activities will concentrate on the Porto-Saragozza neighbourhood, in the south part of the city, near the well-known Arco del Meloncello. The goal is to increase the awareness of the need to integrate marginal groups in a joint construction of a sense of place and belonging.

- **A Weaved Place in L'Hospitalet (Barcelona)**. The multiplicity of social groups with different origins, the marked differences between neighbourhoods, and the transport infrastructures (railways, highways) have given rise to a fragmented social and physical territory in this municipality, which is part of the metropolitan area of Barcelona. The purpose of the activities –workshops, public space interventions, photography exhibitions, video screening– is to involve students,

citizens, artists and architects in the search for a shared identity, by connecting these social and physical fragments.

The interventions, planned with the participation of local authorities, will bring new insights which will inform on-going rehabilitation plans. They will engage members of the various social groups to share the multiple meanings associated to places.

Altogether, the ultimate purpose of the interventions planned in the different cities and contexts is to create a network of multidisciplinary practices which help to overcome the idea of place understood as a limited space meaningful to a group or community.

EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF PLACEMAKING INTERVENTIONS

The evaluation of the impact of placemaking in public space remains an open challenge. Assessment tools –such as the one prepared by the Michigan State University Land Policy Institute (MSU, 2015)– can be used to analyse the kind of placemaking –strategic, tactical or creative– that better suits the needs of a community. The Project for Public Spaces (2017) suggests to carry out a continuous process of re-evaluation by comparing the answers obtained after the implementation of the actions with those collected in earlier phases. In the specific case of creative placemaking, it has been argued that the vagueness of the term does not help to assess the expected impacts. Thus, Zitcer (2018) claimed that “With the range of projects classified as creative placemaking, it can be hard to know what fits under the category—or what would fail to fit under its capacious umbrella”. In addition, in creative placemaking is “almost certainly that results will diverge from initial intentions” (Markusen and Gadwa, 2019). To overcome these uncertainties, the various stakeholders involved in a creative placemaking action tend to pay attention to the objectives that suit their own agendas. But even so, it is difficult to define indicators to monitor impacts and to have access to the data to assess them (Markusen and Gadwa, 2019).

Moreover, intertwining artistic practices with community life can help to develop new forms of conviviality. But the assessment of a socio-physical transformation process is neither straightforward nor easy. The evaluation needs to be specifically “designed” for each placemaking action, taking into account each context. This also implies the consideration of the expectations of the various actors involved (e.g. artists, planners, citizens) and their shared goals and values. Placemaking impact assessment, therefore, is inextricably linked to the placemaking activity.

The impact assessment methodology we have outlined for the A-Place project will combine socio-ethnographic, phenomenologic and aesthetics theoretical frameworks to critically explain how placemaking enhances social participation and inclusiveness, and help to improve relations between community groups, by strengthening social cohesion. We will use specific impact indicators to describe

the dynamic process of transformation of indifferent spaces into engaging places, such as the enhancement of social interactions, the emergence of intercommunity discourses, and the increase in experiences of perceptions of places.

In order to acquire the data required for this assessment, we will use diverse methods and tools (e.g. interviews; sound capture; photography; video; notes, and sketches; press narratives; oral and written testimonies and the inhabitants' oral narratives). These data –collected, compared and collated in accordance with the specific methodology adopted for each placemaking activity– will help to evaluate issues such as:

a) The capacity to artistically express the sense of place with a particular media. The strength of expression can be taken as an evidence of the potential impact on different scales, targeted at actors with higher artistic sensitivity.

b) The potential of the performed action to transform physical and social space. Here we can identify, for example, rituals in particular places, potentially developed or disturbed by the actions, and changes in the understanding of multicultural realities in the local, regional and/or global socio-physical context.

c) The social impact of the placemaking actions, and its capacity to strengthen community ties. This capacity can be evidenced by the integration of the actions into everyday routines.

d) The communicative value of social media. Sometimes the impact of placemaking needs to be found far from where it took place, in the various social media platforms.

e) The originality of the action. A fresh inventive reinterpretation could be more influential than an alleged original work, which entails a potential fear of novelty. On the other hand, a total novelty may offer potential for greater long-term impact.

f) The capacity to integrate the dimension of time. Creative placemaking is an incremental process that is not limited to static spatial interventions or outcomes.

g) The capacity to transcend the disciplinary boundaries by bridging artistic practices and organisations with citizens and other actors such as academia, civic and governmental organizations.

CONCLUSIONS

Nowadays, there is a myriad of approaches aimed at encouraging the participation of people in the construction of a sense of place, by engaging multiple and diverse actors in a joint creative effort: placemaking, creative placemaking, community-based art, tactical urbanism, performative urbanism, do-it-yourself urbanism, etc. The activities planned in A-Place share the basic principles underlying these practices –enabling social cohesion, supporting inclusion and civic engagement– and they can adhere to a larger or greater extent to any of them depending on each particular intervention. Precisely, the creation of a network of overlapping and interrelated practices across disciplines, territories and cultures –rather than the adoption of an overarching theoretical framework– is what the project aims to achieve.

While the mere engagement of a diversity of actors –local authorities and policy-makers, residents and artists, students and faculty– in a joint placemaking intervention can be considered valuable in itself, it is necessary to design and deploy methods and tools to identify to which extent the shared objectives have been achieved. This evaluation process needs to be designed ad hoc for each placemaking activity, with the resources at hand, and their findings need to retrofit the next cycle of placemaking interventions, thus helping to feed a long-term process which goes beyond a concrete performative action.

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