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Some Thoughts on Digital Placemaking

Media Architecture Compendium – Digital Placemaking

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Bits and Atoms

The act of placemaking – using this term or another way of expressing it – has a long history in both urban studies and urban practice [1, 2]. Seminal books by Jane Jacobs [3], Herbert Gans [4], and William H. Whyte [5] describe the significance of public space to well-functioning and lively cities, and the role that people play in turning spaces into places with meaning [6, 7]. When I think of placemaking, I am reminded of how Peter Jackson described his approach to the stage design of *Lord of the Rings* [8]. The people who inhabited Middle Earth for hundreds of generations left cultural traces, alterations, artefacts, remnants of their human existence on the environment. For example, the cinematographic image and stage set for Rivendell required Jackson and his crew to design housing, costumes and weapons that gave the viewer the impression of use and legacy over generations. They aged artefacts and applied, erased, and re-applied cultural marks and insignia in order to 'make' Rivendell the special and legendary place that J. R. R. Tolkien had intended.

Placemaking in cities works in a similar way, yet there are two timelines: natural placemaking and accelerated placemaking. I use the former to refer to the way humans occupy cities and in the process of doing so, they leave their mark on the city in a similar way to how Brand [9] describes the life of buildings after they are built: they are occupied, inhabited, decorated, customised, renovated, and so forth. Inherently linked to gentrification, accelerated placemaking stems from the desire of developers, construction companies, city officials to quickly breathe life into new urban developments and speed up the process that turns generic urban turnkey residential stock into – choose your favourite marketing slogan – 'vibrant communities,' 'liveable neighbourhoods,' and 'distinctive precincts.'

In the mid 90s, bits and atoms started to meet, and opportunities afforded by information and communication technology and the nascent field of ubiquitous computing started to be identified, studied and applied to the built environment [10, 11]. Both natural and accelerated placemaking was impacted by the advent of digitisation [12]. For example, the *Livehoods* project questioned the formal role that neighbourhood and suburb boundaries play in the

making of places by studying how people use location-based social media as part of their everyday life. The project data gave insights into the activity patterns and lived experience of city residents, which in turn described how people themselves go about placemaking across municipal boundaries [13]. Public wifi [14], urban screens [15, 16], and media architecture [17, 18] have also been used in the context of digital placemaking.

Challenges and Critiques

There have been various critiques of placemaking, particularly concerning the accelerated variety. Let's look at four common criticisms. First, many commentators have identified the risk of ignoring the history that came before. In response, digital storytelling has been used as a form of digital placemaking that not only enabled the study of a place's history, but also ways of embedding historic evidence and artefacts into the place itself [19].

Second, in order to avoid making places that suit the placemakers and their funders more than the current or future occupants, inclusive practices of placemaking are needed. Marginalised and economically threatened communities should be enabled to engage with their neighbourhood on their own terms and create their own urban imaginaries [20]. This requires transdisciplinary approaches [21], such as participatory design [22] and action research [23, 24], which have been borrowed from fields outside urban planning and urban design in order to be employed in inclusive digital placemaking initiatives. However, social inclusion and digital participation are not limited to the placemaking phase itself; they also apply to accessing and using the place afterwards. It needs to be acknowledged that public urban space is complex, and some city dwellers may either lack technical or physical access, or choose not to engage [25, 26].

Third, it is highly problematic that placemaking – either explicitly or inadvertently – supports gentrification of cities with the well-known set of associated issues and consequences [27]. Pursuing placemaking and place activation with the sole goal of economic gain, that is, making adjacent retail and residential properties more profitable and valuable, denies the socio-cultural opportunities that genuine placemaking can offer [28].

And fourth, a further critique of placemaking pertains to scale and impact. Placemaking and related design interventions such as tactical urbanism [29] and urban acupuncture [30] traditionally apply to scales of a city's locale smaller than the city itself. This begs two key questions: First, do such urban guerrilla interventions provide a real alternative to the way placemaking often drives neoliberal urbanism. Brenner argues they do not, because they tend not to engage in a dialogue with formal urban planning processes, and they remain small and hyperlocal [31]. Second, can placemaking through DIY urban design [32, 33] scale up from subversive city making to systemic change [34].

Premises and Prospects

In addition to a set of ongoing challenges, there are exciting opportunities on the horizon for cities, digital placemaking and the future of public space [35]. One of the most pressing areas relates to revisiting Lefebvre's 1968 imperative of "the right to the city" [36] in the digital age [37]. Currently, cities are often perceived as an agglomeration of residents with

city governments providing administrative management of the three “Rs” – the roads, rates, and rubbish. The notion of the smart city driven by technology companies, global accounting firms and consultancy service providers has changed this image (see Table 1). Cities 2.0 are perceived as corporations that are about the consumption of services, citizens are consumers, and the role of technology and digital placemaking is to increase growth and efficiency gains.

	City Government	**Citizens**
Cities 4.0	Collaborator	Co-Creator
Cities 3.0	Facilitator	Participants
Cities 2.0	Service Provider	Consumer
Cities 1.0	Administrator	Residents

Table 1: The evolution of the relationship between city governments and citizens

Understanding placemaking not as a way to optimise urban space for commercial gain, but – informed by Lefebvre’s “right to the city” – as a strategy to bring about radical social change and urban renewal through grassroots democratisation, changes this perspective. Some more progressive cities have started to employ community engagement approaches that embrace people as participants in decision making. Yet, the most genuine form of digital placemaking does not limit people to just providing feedback to city governments as part of conventional community consultation processes, it regards them as co-creators in a collaborative form of city making.

Projects such as *Liberating Voices* [38] and *Beautiful Trouble* [39] focus on the potential of grassroots activism. However, in order to overcome the top-down / bottom-up dichotomy, boundary-crossing dialogue is needed towards a ‘middle-out’ approach [40]. Visualising local voices from diverse communities on large digital billboards, Rebecca Ross’s project *London is Changing* (londonischanging.org) problematises the impact of gentrification on the personal lives of people. Her project hints at a much larger body of work to be undertaken as part of the digital placemaking rubric, that is, to figure out how urban media and placemaking can be used in a dialectic process to build agreement from disagreement [41].

Since the exposure to diverse ideas, networks and communities is considered to be crucial to innovation as well as the functioning of democracy [3, 28, 42], I believe that digital placemaking can play a role in facilitating a dialogue across citizens, communities, government, businesses, civic groups and non-profits. In particular, these adversarial relationships could leverage the productive capacity of dissensus and dialectic processes [41]. In this way, the city could become a platform for a kind of ‘6th Estate’ that can build on the role of traditional media as the 4th Estate and the Internet as the 5th Estate [43, 44].

Further along the road, blockchain technology and distributed ledgers provide interesting prospects for urbanism. The implications for placemaking are profound, starting with place ‘provenance’ all the way to ‘cryptosecession,’ which MacDonald and Potts [45] describe as “the most likely avenue for non-territorial decentralisation to ever eventuate. It demonstrates how fiscal exploitation is reduced and eventually eliminated as the capability of citizens to

move to non-territorial jurisdictions increases." Yet, they also see boundaries in the way future blockchain-based economies could become self-organised [46].

Finally, digital placemaking certainly also needs to face up to the challenges and opportunities for more sustainable ways of life, and as part of that not only create accessible and democratic cities, but also imagine the post-anthropocentric city [47].

Bio

Professor Marcus Foth FACS is the director of the QUT Design Lab, founder and former director of the Urban Informatics Research Lab, and Professor in Interactive & Visual Design, School of Design, Creative Industries Faculty at Queensland University of Technology. He is also an Honorary Professor in the School of Communication and Culture at Aarhus University, Denmark. He tweets @sunday9pm.

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