Placemaking

1. Definition

Placemaking may be defined as the art of creating recognizable, unique and liveable places with a distinct place identity, an identity that works both internally, to residents and users of a place, and externally, to people outside, who may not even have visited the place in question but who nonetheless have an image or mental map of that place. While placemaking has a lot to do with iconic buildings, attractive green spaces and livability, it relies heavily on narratives, performances and medial images.

2. Example

Juliane Borosch discusses a striking example of a collective placemaking that is both community- and corporation-driven.[59] It has been unfolding in Detroit since the early 2020s. Here, urban planners, citizens, artists and a global corporation are not explicitly working together, but each of these pivotal actors in urban development plays a critical role in a major push to change iconic parts of the urban infrastructure. The goal is placemaking by "changing the metonymy".[60] This means that there is a concerted effort to change the fact that Detroit has come to stand for global postindustrial decline and socio-economic disintegration, while vacant iconic buildings in Detroit have come to stand for the loss of urban jobs and urban functions. Rather than destroying this metonymic relationship by, for instance, implementing new urban infrastruc-

ture, participants from a variety of social sectors have reassessed the meaning of iconic buildings that had lost their former infrastructural purpose. And they are redefining these buildings as both sites of heritage and future ambitions. In this architectural case of placemaking, a single building such as Michigan Central Station (see fig. 12), beginning with its inception through its heyday and its decline as much as its revitalization, is understood and accepted "as the face that Detroit would [...] show to the world."[61] After the Ford Motor Company bought the disintegrating Michigan Central Station in order to turn it into the hub of its "new mobility campus", it grounded its repurposing plans in the history of popular uses of the building as both a "screen" on which to literally project the future of the city (by multimedial projections onto the façade, which also allowed participants to "broadcast" their individual hopes for Detroit to Detroit audiences) and as a "second face" through which to read the city.[62] Ford's conversion of the building into what the central virtual exhibit is currently calling "the epicenter of innovation at the intersection of technology and society" indicates the importance of placemaking practices for big businesses as much as for city dwellers and administrations.[63]

Fig. 12: Michigan Central Station under Reconstruction, courtesy of Juliane Borosch

3. Explanation

Research on placemaking – particularly on place perception and mental maps – informed by environmental psychology argues that "[p]erceptions of places (are) derived from people's information flow, such as newspapers, magazines, books, movies, television, and other forms of the media".[64] For virtually all places about which we have at least some information – accurate or not –, even first-hand personal experience is pre-formed by images and stories about that place. This obviously has profound consequences for tourism, investment decisions or decisions about where to take a place of residence, because hardly a place people choose to relocate to, search for a job or spend their holidays will be a clean slate to them before they first see it for themselves. While this phenomenon is highlighted by the 'instagrammification' of tourist destinations with, for instance, the deliberate creation of photo opportunities, the phenomenon is much older than social media.

In spatial research, there is a common distinction between space – often understood as abstract, non-personalized and devoid of a specific identity – and place – a space that, not least through stories, memories, anecdotes and personal associations, has become meaningful to an individual or a group. This means that one person's abstract space can at the same time be another person's meaningful place. A classic account of places commonly perceived as lacking meaning and specificity is anthropologist Marc Augé's *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, which describes places like airports, shopping-malls, train stations or chain hotels as classic examples of non-places. It is clear, however, that such an anonymous place can become a highly specific, meaningful place to an individual if it becomes associated with personal experiences and stories.

As for the identity and specificity of individual cities, German sociologists Helmuth Berking and Martina Löw introduced the notion of an "intrinsic logic of cities".[65] Their notion implies that the identity and historical development of a city (and, by implication, of a site, a neighborhood or an entire region) needs to be taken into account when attempting to understand its present or to shape its future development. This also suggests that the stories crafted to promote a

city or a region should carefully be made to suit an audience's expectations or assumptions: a story does not need to confirm such preconceptions but at least needs to be aware of them and should plausibly engage with them.

4. Applications

Should a post-industrial city use a long-defunct iconic building or its manufacturing, coal and steel past in its self-promotion? This will be emotionally charged and meaningful to many residents, but to overly rely on it runs the risk of musealisation and of being perceived as remaining stuck in the past. In their placemaking activities, such cities will therefore frequently seek to combine references to their past with something that is decidedly oriented toward the future, such as new types of mobility and energy production.

In a 2018 image film, for instance, the regional economic development agency of Germany's Ruhr region sought to promote it as a vibrant and attractive region to live, work and invest in.[66] Accompanied by appropriate imagery, a voice-over narrator highlighted the comparatively low cost of living, the fairly relaxed housing market, the large number of students in the region, and its diverse population. A section on the region's vibrant cultural and night life had the narrator say "We are the city that never sleeps – sorry, New York". While surely meant to be understood as a provocative, jocular remark, the phrase can also be read as displaying a problematic uncertainty about one's own position. "Know what league you're boxing in!" is how a group of students from the Ruhr region responded to this video in a placemaking seminar. In this case, the language used to promote a place is clearly at odds with an audience's perception of what is realistic – or at least attainable. Moreover, the over-emphasis on authoritative storytelling in this clip indicates a detrimental faith in cinematic place-making at the expense of concrete efforts to engage communities, enhance livability, foster a visual identity or develop compelling and differentiated urban development strategies.

A further point to bear in mind is the need to distinguish internal from external audiences of place-making: While there may be tar-

geted messaging that works for both audiences, there may also be messages more suitable to making residents feel at home in a region than to addressing external potential visitors or investors – and vice versa.

Finally, while the importance of narratives to placemaking has been increasingly recognized (they can clearly be central to endowing a place with meaning and to promoting place identity and specificity), it also seems appropriate to warn against *over*-emphasizing the power of stories: while narrative strategies and strategic narratives are vital to urban development, they should not be expected to be able to *replace* compelling and differentiated urban development strategies. Placemaking, it is clear, is a complex undertaking that has to be driven by dedicated communities, attentive urban administrators and businesses or corporations that have a credible local engagement. This endeavor needs to confront successes as much as failures in order to take long-lasting effect.[67]

Related entries: Narrative, Path-dependency, Scenario, Scripts

Further Reading

Buchenau, Barbara, Jens Martin Gurr, Maria Sulimma, eds. *City Scripts: Narratives of Postindustrial Urban Futures*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, forthcoming.

Courage, Cara, Tom Borrup, Maria Rosario Jackson, Kylie Legge, Anita McKeown, Louise Platt, Jason Schupbach, eds. *The Routledge Handbook of Placemaking*. London/New York: Routledge, 2021.

Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Random House, 1961.

Loh, Carolyn G. et al. "Placemaking in Practice: Municipal Arts and Cultural Plans' Approaches to Placemaking and Creative Placemaking." *Journal of Planning Education and Research* (2022): n. pag. https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X221100503.