

# Place-making as an attentive urban presence

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**ABSTRACT:** The article critically discusses place-making, which is currently gaining attention in various disciplines of science and practice. Place-making is a concept with great potential to rebuild a multidisciplinary language to better identify and respond to the challenges of sustainable urbanisation. After briefly discussing the shift that the concept is provoking in the social sciences, about design, as well as politics and activism, the author points out the risks inherent in it and shows how they can be transcended by inscribing in place-making senses relating to, among other things, the multi-species urban community, hybrid spaces, verticality and transborderity of the contemporary city. The conclusion is a manifesto that points to place-making as an everyday attitude, a common concern for cities as shared space.

**KEYWORDS:** sustainable urbanisation, relational sociology, activism, Anthropocene

## FOR SUSTAINABLE URBANISATION

The city is a global phenomenon. According to the UN-Habitat report, the United Nations Commission for studying and coordinating human settlements, 4 billion 378 million 994 thousand people live in cities worldwide (Knudse, 2020). Projections indicate that by 2030 this number will exceed 5 billion people, and cities will be home to 60% of the global population. Cities are growing at different rates. Slowest in the so-called developed countries. Several times faster in those ‘least developed’. Cities are responsible for the bulk of national economic production and the spread of dominant cultural trends and practices everywhere. The global phenomenon of cities, however, lies not only in their popularity as places to live but also in their interconnected network. It is about economic, migratory, climatic, and—increasingly—political con-

nections. And that's a good thing as we urgently need coordinated action to properly direct the role of cities in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the UN, or to put it another way: if we want to survive as a species.

The power of cities and urbanisation processes also has its horrifying dimension. The area of cities is growing faster than the number of people living there, resulting in the rapid depletion of biologically active surfaces. The main driver of global urbanisation is migration. Unfortunately, the number of people arriving in cities is growing faster than the ability to provide them with basic infrastructure. One billion people live in slums. Social stratification and inequalities in access to essential services (housing, quality food, parks, public spaces, etc.) and life opportunities are also evident. Chaotic and inequitable urbanisation worsens urban living conditions and increases the risk of diseases (crowding promotes epidemics).

As the authors of the report above rightly write, these challenges require urgent states' and public institutions' responses. Politics need to commit more than before to urban planning, pursue policies that foster ethnic diversity, gender and age equality, push for a green economy, engage more inaccessible housing, and ensure that the fruits of all these efforts also reach those most in need, so that, for example, necessary greening does not trigger gentrification processes.

There will only be sustainable urbanisation with inclusiveness, a development that respects the environment, efforts to abolish inequality, and attempts to incorporate the spontaneous and informal into city planning. Given these conditions, the meaning of cultural institutions is also changing. And it is not about creative industries but, first and foremost, about building a culture of cooperation, empathy, understanding, and concern for the city as a commonplace (Krajewski, 2018). After all, sustainable urbanisation requires public intervention and the resident's participation in the conscious production of the city's space, or, as it has been called recently, place-making.

I suggest taking a closer look at this category of place-making. Critical analysis is an essential step in building a shared language among different disciplines and types of practice, which we need to address the challenges more quickly and effectively. In the first part, I reconstruct the meaning of the term while being careful not only to indicate its sense but also to understand better its performative power, that is, what change it brings to different fields of knowledge and practice. In the second part of the paper, I apply the technique of questioning the hidden premise proposed by Howard S. Becker (1998) to see the dangers inherent in thinking and designing space according to the idea of place-making. Regarding the literature on the subject, I also show how these limitations can be transcended. The last part does not so much summarise as indicate place-making, at the most basic level, as an attitude towards space that anyone can develop, in line with the general ideas of the concept—integrating the efforts not only of the researcher but also of the practitioners of urban life.

### **THE POPULARITY OF THE CATEGORY: PLACE-MAKING IN SOCIAL SCIENCE, DESIGN, POLITICS, AND ACTIVISM**

The word itself, place-making, has been gaining traction in recent years. I conducted

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a quick literature survey, searched the Scopus database, and identified its most popular works, primarily in the design and social sciences. Reading the abstracts and the essential works became the starting point for formulating the following observations.

As it turns out, place-making is gaining popularity among activists and activists concerned about the city, artists, officials, designers, and researchers. Architects, sociologists, anthropologists and social geographers, and urban planners are increasingly discussing and addressing place-making, psychologists, climate science experts, and specialists in the economic value of places and public health. Many of these writings plead for a 'softening' of traditional concepts of the study and management of urban space to value their local conditions and the perspectives of various stakeholders and to express the hope that the actions for a better city will accompany writing and discussing place-making.

Place-making is thus a popular category but also an inclusive one. As such, it is integral to rebuilding the shared language of urban thinking and fostering action at the intersection of disciplines and practices. Having this potential as a language and strategy for thinking about space and place-making supports efforts for sustainable urbanisation (Knudse, 2020). Thinking in terms of place-making helps to see the many intertwines relevant to making this form of urban development a reality: thought and action, observation and intervention, now and later, growth and equity, politics and activism, economics and climate, integration and conflict, planning and happening, institutional and informal, the social and the non-human, structure and process, local and global perspectives, science and the humanities.

Architects refer to place-making when they want to mark their departure from thinking in terms of master plans, infrastructural determinism and expert domain action in support of recognising the importance of communities in the production of space, the role of local diagnosis and consultation (see, for example, Rogerson et al., 2010; Chapman, 2011; Andres, 2013; Røe, 2014). Activists write about place-making to consider the city-forming potential of tactical urbanism: grassroots interventions directed at self-created playgrounds, meeting places, urban furniture, and other social devices. Tactical urbanism has been popularised mainly after the 2008 economic crisis, a time when similar forms of action seek a way to meet needs in scarcity, but also inspire other models of urban thinking that cross the perspective of the market and expert action; sometimes also the autocratic state (see, for example, the text on tactical urbanism in Iran: Lak and Zarezadeh Kheibari 2020). Urbanists also consider the grassroots resourcefulness associated with action in space as an essential dimension of resilience in crises (Coaffee, 2013). Social geographers, on the other hand, mention place-making to point out, for example, that the familiarity of everyday interactions and the emergence of a cross-border way of life is as essential to good neighbourly relations in borderland as institutional cooperation (Scott, 2013).

Place-making also attracts politicians, local officials, and researchers working on equality policy. The former is concerned with it, if only in response to globalisation and non-places' rise (Augé, 1995). In this context, thinking about the city in terms of place-making is supposed to bring back neighbourhoods and restore places' distinctiveness and residents belonging to sites nearby (Rogerson et al., 2010). For similar

reasons, place-making is also popularised among those concerned with migration (i.e. Hume, 2015). Migrants' involvement in spatial interventions (e.g., cultivating community gardens) and its impact on settling in and gradually becoming empowered in a new place is being researched (Biglin, 2020). The effect of the ability to inscribe one's will in space to strengthen identities at risk of marginalisation is also analysed toward categories like sexual minorities (Spruce, 2020) or women studying abroad (Anderson, 2012). The relationship between involvement in small spatial interventions made in the immediate neighbourhood and the 'possible self' and ambition of life goals set by children and adolescents is also being explored (Prince, 2014).

As a perspective for thinking about the production of social value in space, place-making is also being turned to by today's economists. They use the concept to see the potential in the informal urbanisation and economy of cities in the Global South (cf., e.g. Lombard, 2014) or when considering the marketing of places—for example, how street food festivals produce locality as a monetisable value (Lau & Li, 2019) or looking at the spatial and architectural determinants of innovation, especially in the context of urban complexes for creative industries (Pancholi, Yigitcanlar, & Guaralda, 2015). The category of place-making is also an essential part of the currently popularised discussions about the city of short distances, where it helps to see the social, environmental and city-making benefits of accumulating critical services close to one's place of residence, but also the multifaceted program that creates such neighbourhoods (social gathering places, educational services, stores, cultural centres and venues, jobs, etc.). Importantly, place-making appeals to those interested in designing far more utopian communities. These projects grow out of a critique of global capitalism (for, among other things, cultural uprooting and precarization of the labour market) and appeal to the idea of self-sustaining indigenous communities, development based on the local community's strengths (Veracini, 2020).

Thinking about the city in terms of place-making is also popularised by climate education activities to raise awareness of the far-reaching effects of such everyday mobility choices (how I get to work, shopping, or university) or consumer behaviour (whether I buy from the local store, products sourced from local factories and crops, or vice versa—delivered by ship from places thousands of kilometers away). These mundane activities have environmental effects but also tangibly produce space. Promoting and spreading pedestrian movement in cities involves developing conducive infrastructure, such as seating, drinking stations or linear parks, but also translates into the vitality of services located in the streets and strengthening social relations. Such holistic thinking about activities in space can be found within the idea of those so-called Slow Cities, where the concept of deceleration is associated with the introduction of local policies aimed at strengthening specific, endemic 'cultures' of time and space (Mustonen, 2014), created through appropriate infrastructure investments and educational activities.

The results of thinking more intensively about the social conditions, manifestations and implications of the production of space is also a reflection of the complexity of this process—a recognition that places are produced and recreated not only in symbolic space or through materiality but also through the body, senses, emotions.

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Consequently, the development of the idea and practice of place-making has been accompanied by the growth of new study techniques that make it possible to analyse space in all these aspects (Stevenson & Holloway, 2017).

### RETHINK THE PLACE-IN-MAKING

Place-making becomes a shared and inclusive narrative for those interested in making the concept of sustainable urbanisation a reality. It is also an opportunity for perspective shifts in design disciplines. Considering space in terms of place-making also allows us to see space's plasticity and interrelationships. It is about more than just laying a new road, putting up a building or changing regulations. It also involves the human imagination and the body, which is dictated by emotions and has environmental impacts. Place-making can be defined simply as the constitution of space. German sociologist Martina Löw described this well (2016). She proposes to see space as a dynamic process within which the material is intertwined with the symbolic and the social with the institutional. In this view, each space is a set of rules reproduced through the practices undertaken in each place. In these rules, human spontaneity and systemic inequality are reproduced. Space is thus constituted not only by objects, animals, technologies, buildings, and elements of the natural world that are related to each other but also by organisations and law.

This relational thinking about space also allows us to notice some of the pitfalls of place-making better. We become more aware of these if we extract and then question the hidden premise (as suggested by Howard S. Becker, 1998) of the dream of co-creating a better city and world by developing better places. This premise can be formulated like this: place-making is the creation of specific areas or sites that are important to local communities, often with their active participation. It sounds friendly, but a few points are worth highlighting.

The hidden cost of the attachment to locality—the desire to tie specific communities more firmly to their place—may be the growing resentment of its members toward those living outside (Jackson & Beckson, 2014; Ottosson, 2014). As mentioned, for many in the design profession, the underlying role of place-making is to remind of how people experience architecture, find themselves in it, relate to it and complete it. Another risk involves precisely emphasising the subjective and thus overlooking that space is co-created by people, animals, and vegetation (Williams, 2014). The third risk is related to the longing expressed in some papers and projects for what is analogue, corporal, direct and familiar; it hardly fits the times when technology permeates our relationships and the idea of belonging is being transformed by the spread of mobility and migration (Lems, 2016). The fourth danger is that every act of place-making is also an act of place-taking, and the desire to create a meaningful place often involves not so much a lack of but a failure to recognise the value already present in it (Oakley & Johnson, 2013). This last sentence will cease to sound metaphorical when we recall the commercialisation of wild waterfronts or the gentrification that follows events in various supposedly 'forgotten' places. Finally, place-making may also foster the expectation that the processes of making space with local communities will proceed

unproblematic and conciliar manner, thus promoting the suppression of possible expressions of dissent.

This might be where one of the more critical roles of cultural or art institutions in place-making becomes apparent. It would be to push the most widespread ways of thinking about the place at a time when the concept is experiencing a renaissance and the number of ventures to make it a reality is increasing. Some of the strategies for achieving this goal are already being practised. Initiatives that articulate the politics of any intervention in space are needed first. This is not about narrowly defined politics but about raising the question of the values behind space interventions and talking openly about how they contribute to social inclusion and the abolition of inequality. The actions focused no longer on producing new places but on maintaining existing ones that need support would also be necessary. Animating spaces can involve inspiring the community to act and organising local actors, including institutions, to care together, which can sometimes include defending a place from a change of use (which threatens parks, courtyards in front of public institutions, or green wastelands). Maintenance and support are sometimes less visible, but they are just as important, if not more, than constant initiation.

Advocacy for places should also articulate that they result from the intertwining and interdependence of human and non-human actors. There is a growing tradition of spatial studies that consider how local cultures, albeit agricultural ones, depend not only on humans and their practices but also, i.e., on the field vegetation, cows, microbes and cheese (Eriksson & Bull, 2017). Along with these, there are also concepts of animating urban space that make the primary material of action, for example, the soil, and treat activities such as fertilising, planting, mounding, learning about its types, the organisms that live in it, and the like as activities that can effectively “reorient human relationships with the non-human in cities” (Robertson, 2020).

Soil brings back another issue that helps transcend a narrow understanding of place—the question of borders. It reminds us that thinking in terms of bios, that is, endemic living organisms, just like analysing communities as ethnos, runs the risk of territorialism, that is, plotting what is naturally at home and what does not belong here, dangerous in an age of global migrations and dependencies. In this context, wastelands can be as educationally crucial as parks or other developed greenery. Thinking about soil also helps to see that borderlands can be thought about vertically—looking at the layers, not just the edges of a place. Making observations from the ground about desiccation, seepage, and carbon sequestration more strongly highlights our relationship to climate challenges than looking at the earth from space because it thus situates us in the middle of, rather than outside, discussions about the Anthropocene (Arène, Latour, & Gaillardet, 2018).

The borderlands, as such, are also a rewarding perspective for thinking about the place because they point to two forms that such edges can take: borders and boundaries. The former are places where two or more cultures or types of flows and exchanges happen. Such vital encounter spaces differ from boundaries, which isolate and separate. Moreover, borders and the exchanges that occur at them can also function in two models: geo-economic and spatial projects (Sohn, 2014). In the former, a border is a

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resource that draws on asymmetrical relationships (something is cheaper here, better money can be made there) and thus fosters mutual instrumentalisation. In the latter model, the appropriate arrangement of space and the operation of institutions foster the creation of trust and joint, complementary ventures. We are gradually getting used to thinking in this way about borders between states and even ecosystems. Still, there needs to be more clarity in translating this thinking into a city discussion (Sennett, 2019). Recall, for example, the desire to centralise: it involves locating important events and facilities in the middle of a place while exhausting the boundaries when it is sometimes worthwhile to work the other way around.

The trans-local perspective I am trying to popularise here also makes us aware of the complex relationships linking places, spatial practices and technologies. It is not that we have some endeavour and technology that can be separated from it, like a peel from an orange. Smartphones, geolocators, tagging, and social media all participate in the state of space, densifying it and intensifying the relationships present in it and determining how we think about it and what expectations we have of it (Hjorth & Pink, 2014). So instead of fetishising the analogue in our concern for places, some mythical authentic and sensitive flesh of human relationships, let us focus on how and with what effect technologies define given locations, like people, vegetation, or architecture. They play quite a beneficial role in this process when they help coordinate encounters across a wide area or urban periphery (Waite, 2020).

It is also worthwhile to conduct activities that expand the understanding of the neighbourhood. I already mentioned that it was about such forms of it that are inclusive—welcoming and inviting. Now I am more concerned with where to ‘establish’ them. We are used to thinking in this way about sites located in residential areas, where we live, meet relatives and friends, and run daily errands. We do not feel this way about factories, mines, power plants or garbage sorting plants. But what if we started to? Imagine neighbourhood meetings, actions in similar places, and the advantages of the activities. These are, after all, places that affect the residential areas closer to us in very literal ways, and articulating these relationships by including spaces that mean something to the residents would give a better account of the controversies and enable the weaving of commitments. Perhaps place-making in such areas would make us begin to treat trash burning, coal mining or water purification not as the domain of chemical, physical or economic facts but as places of legitimate concern (Schaeffer & Smits, 2020). Spaces are not at all prominent, where different values are negotiated. Finally, virtual nodes are where we experience the conditions and consequences of living in cities.

It is also worth carrying out activities that draw attention to the role of protests in the constitution of the space of the present-day city. Despite the common sense advice to avoid protests when designing a city, within the recently popular new urbanism, they are associated with the consequences of unsuccessful spatial investments; according to conflict theory, they constitute one of the important city-forming events, both from the point of view of articulating a voice, the omission of which can lead to violence, and producing new forms of presence and connections with space (Kowalewski, 2020).

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## TO ALL PLACE-MAKERS! MANIFESTO RATHER THAN A SUMMARY

I have already hinted at the program and rationale behind further research directions that I would like to inspire with this paper indirectly in the previous section. The main idea is that the research and social practice inspired by the category of place-making should also encompass interspecies communities, hybrid spaces, the verticality of the city, neighbourhoods outside residential areas, and designing for conflict (to avoid violence). However, I would like to summarise the paper by referring to a more fundamental issue than what to study: how we can think and see our role in the city.

I read somewhere such a phrase: place-making is an everyday job. It summarises the last of the three tensions I would like to highlight at the end. The first concerns the intertwining of planetary and local perspectives in place-making. Effective and empathetic action thus requires the ability to scale up quickly, to switch in thinking from global impacts and conditions to locally undertaken efforts, even if it is listening for insects in a wasteland or working with bacteria in the soil. The second tension involves a willingness to work on a specific place, but at the same time, seeing the connections that link it to other sites, the hubs of transshipment, the crises in the cities of the global south, or legislative systems (see, for example, Bennett's [2016] fascinating analysis of the role of changing laws for creating the spaces of the first factories). It requires replacing material thinking with relational one. Finally, the third tension, expressed in the catchy phrase above, says that place-making is a daily work undertaken by everyone. We usually discuss place-making on two levels. At times, to emphasise the processual nature of place-making, to point out in this way that it is a consequence of actions taken by city users. Sometimes, to add depth to the intentionality of expert or activist actions directed at a given space's deliberate design or programming. What is missing is something in between: to point out, as in this catchphrase, that knowledge about the constitution of space, and the role of critical presence, should be part of everyone's daily practice.

Thus, place-making is more than an accumulation of knowledge from different orders. It is a perspective on thinking and acting in space, encouraging people to be in it in a thoughtful, empathetic and responsible way. Bruno Latour and Emilie Hermant used the notion of oligopticon when describing Paris a dozen years ago. They did so in search of an alternative to the Foucaultian panoptic gaze, usually applied to describe the city, which encourages a sweeping and panoramic discipline with a reduction in the complexity of urbanisation processes (2006). Oligoptic gazing perceives details, interwebs, and complications; it leads to knowledge that produces a different kind of power towards space. The role of residents, officials and experts, activists and urban designers ceases to be to look for places to mount up to embrace the whole and obtain this kind of pride. It is more important to be attentively present in a particular space and try to understand the consequences of mundane actions on its shape and its rules. All activities that will make such moments become commonplace are at a price. It is no longer a drift that throws us to other places or paths but an attentive mindful of the daily trail.



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