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PLACES | PEOPLE | ECONOMY



Sam Bucolo,
Swinburne University of Technology, Australia
“Exploring the role of design through research which is focused on our economy through the lens of interaction (proximity) between people and places within our communities.”

Claudia De Giorgi,
Polytechnic University of Turin, Italy
“Design for territory is evolving beyond local connotations by considering an expanded world, to be reinvented through multidisciplinary reflections on the sustainable relationship with resources, the material cultures linked to them and the real dimension of our presence on the planet.”



Frédéric Degouzon,
L'École de design Nantes Atlantique, France
“In a time of globalisation going backwards and despite a clear recognition of design as a solution to complex issues, how close should be design practice to be efficient, detail driven and systemic?”

Giuseppe Lotti,
University of Firenze, Italy
“The design between opening and closure / globalisation and localisms / lands and borders: roles and responsibilities”





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Placemaking through Creative Practice: Enabling Change and Empowering Future Change-makers

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Abstract | Toronto, Canada experiences both the benefits and challenges that come with rapid urban growth. Challenges include increased racial and economic inequities; lack of affordable housing; loss of community space in redevelopment, and marginalization of citizen voices across planning processes. There is a zeitgeist of Toronto as an emerging world class city based on economic, cultural, and environmental qualities, yet it struggles to ensure inclusion, access, and social justice for all its citizens. Design Manifesto 2020 (DM2020) explores community-driven placemaking across the metropolitan area as it gathers stories of lived-experience in creating spaces and places. How can we learn from successful local initiatives to foster creative solutions elsewhere and further, how can we impart the process of community engagement as an ethical tenet of design praxis and pedagogy? This paper takes a mid-project look at the narrative inquiry process of storytelling and its potential for greater inclusive community-based placemaking.

**KEYWORDS | COMMUNITY PLACEMAKING, NARRATIVE INQUIRY,
INCLUSIVE DESIGN, DESIGN ACTIVISM, DESIGN PEDAGOGY**

1. Introduction

“As both an overarching idea and hands-on approach for improving a neighborhood ...placemaking inspires people to collectively reimagine public spaces as the heart of every community” (Project for Public Space, 2020).

Placemaking is a collaborative and powerful tool for community-building. It can be driven top-down by politicians seeking broad development goals, or bottom-up with grassroots activism in fostering ad hoc solutions. At the core is the value-added concept of employing a community's strengths and aspirations to reflect its unique identity in shaping the public realm (Stewart, 2018). The US-based non-profit Project for Public Space (PPS) implements placemaking by animating the public sphere, positing that systemic neglect of places leading to marginalization of neighbourhoods demands *systemic change* through locally driven transformations (Project for Public Spaces, 2020).

In Toronto, neighbourhoods are experiencing the negative aspects of large-scale urbanization. Indigenous, Black, Youth, LGBTQ2S, Newcomers and other strong communities want a greater say in planning their communal spaces. Historically left out of mainstream planning discourse, the communities have also been systemically ignored by sectors developing and influencing city building processes. The result is a list of exclusions including forgotten densities, lack of affordability among other lived realities (Pitter, 2020). Toronto Foundation's Fallout Report (2020) on COVID-19 states the virus creates an even greater risk with challenges in respect to health services, food security, employment and stable housing (Ayer, 2020. p.9). Robust placemaking policies and plans based on community need, immediate and longer-term, will need greater 'resilience' for existing and new challenges to come.



Figure 1. View of Toronto from western edge of Greater Toronto Area and Lake Ontario. Image highlights the city shoreline, the renown CN Tower and built-up downtown core with offices and condominium towers.

Toronto (figure 1) is awakening to its role in decolonization, and reconciliation with Indigenous communities amid a national call for nation-to-nation dialogue.

The city is learning Indigenous principles of placemaking among many other first nations' cultural and creative practices. Urban Indigenous youth are emerging place makers engaging ancestral knowledge for 'connection to place' (Hood, 2017). It is a poignant moment to understand how connection to a place has meaning for communities seeking equitable opportunities to participate in growth. Design Manifesto (DM2020) considered this opportunity in developing its research project for capturing how Toronto's six historical boroughs are faring with community-based placemaking and with a view of sharing the collected placemaking stories back to the city. The two-year research project was launched in January 2019 as part of the annual Toronto DesignTO event with a public forum at OCAD University. After the city amalgamated in 1998 to become a single municipality of Metropolitan Toronto, there remain six geographic regions based on the prior boroughs of Toronto, East York, York, Scarborough, North York and Etobicoke (Toronto.ca). The initial framework for listening to citizen stories for the design of community space was based on these geo-political boundaries but has since shifted to a framework for learning about the critical economic and social boundaries that actually influence or impede community placemaking. Over the last decade, three distinct economic boundaries (figure 2) as reported by Hulchanski (2007) have now emerged, and these have a profound effect on community placemaking success.

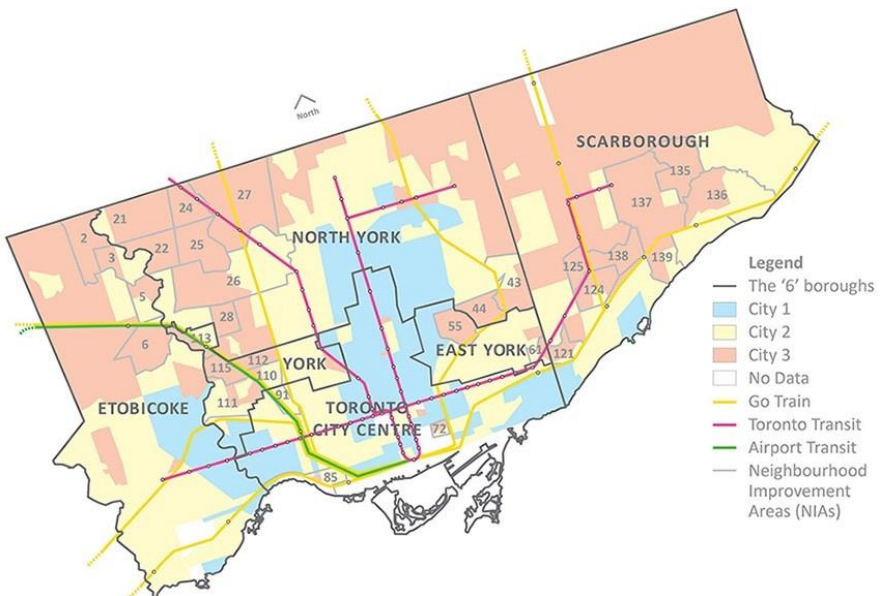


Figure 2. Map of Toronto showing six former municipal boroughs, three emerging economic cities, and an ineffectual transit system which isolates much of Toronto's population from the city centre.

City #1 has the wealthiest neighbourhoods (Toronto, Downtown) and City #3 comprises west (Etobicoke), east (Scarborough), and north (North York) regions supporting the fastest growing number of newcomers with 50% of overall city population. These larger areas include a car-oriented middle-class, less efficient public transit, and densification of older neighbourhoods. City #2 surrounds the downtown (includes York, Mid-Town, and East York) where the once middle class and upwardly mobile is now splitting into either City #1, or #3. As a result, Toronto, while more diverse, has also become more economically divided (Hulchanski, 2007, p.2). Expensive high-rise developments engulf central and mid-Toronto neighbourhoods. These have been isolating older social housing communities and the research has heard from residents concerned for falling behind the urbanization curve. The new realities of Covid-19 pandemic and other challenges yet to come highlight that community-based placemaking matters, if only to confirm community identity and reinforce 'connection to place'.

2. A framework of inclusive storytelling

DM2020 is collecting personal stories in order to respectfully capture citizens' account of their own lived realities in placemaking. This data collection method of narrative inquiry leads to discourse analysis (Gray, 2018). Stories of local placemaking actions are positioned in the research as *case-stories*. Participant storytelling also contributes to a broader discussion about community-building that generates collaborative responses to issues of the day. In forums and workshops both in person and online, case-stories, and the co-created outcomes of community events become the 'research findings'. The qualitative data collection will ideally evolve a set of community informed planning tools for placemaking applications, and for design pedagogy and practice. In its second year, DM2020 continues to apply the narrative inquiry method and has welcomed over 100 citizens to date with seniors, students, art practitioners, community animators, and design activists sharing their experiences with placemaking across Toronto (figure 3).

The project also aims to understand participatory action research (PAR) and participatory design in utilizing storytelling as a generator for social change discourse. Participatory processes are not new, they have been the key approaches for design of technology, products, services and space. However, lessons learned from the collaborative approach with stakeholders or 'end-users' seem to be lagging in design industry practices, particularly in real estate development according to communities contributing to the research. They continue to ask why local voices are not registering in the final design of spaces that affect their daily lives?



Figure 3. DM2020 Forum-East Scarborough Storefront. Community shares ideas and goals for placemaking with written and drawn ideas, sharing of stories, and group discussions.



Figure 4. Danforth Village Laneway Project. Changing an alley of neglected garages into canvases for mural artists. Photo courtesy of Bruce Reeve (2018).

Community placemaking in Toronto as elsewhere can result in ad hoc interventions for the empty niches in the urban fabric, or forgotten parks and thoroughfares. These are sometimes born out of frustration when neighbourhoods are neglected by authorities in managing public space. The solutions raise new questions for research:

1. What ad hoc solutions get city support?
2. What actions disrupt planning processes and lead to shifts in practice?
3. Do community projects need both public-private partnerships to be sustainable?
4. How do local projects foster greater equity in serving communities affected by systemic exclusion?
5. Is beautification a necessary first step in addressing neglected urban space (figure 4)?

Once analysed, case-stories gathered may help to answer these questions, and potentially guide creative actions across other urban contexts.

Participants invited to DM2020 events require two conditions: space (analogue and/or digital) for story sharing as ‘expert witnesses’ to their day-to-day experience (Lupton, 2017. p.32). Second, an audience willing to respectfully listen. Engaged interaction is not always assured and each forum results in various storytelling dynamics. Respectful listening empowers those sharing the stories with an understanding that shared knowledge will matter in making change happen and in better ways. Arendt’s seminal work *The Human Condition* identified that we are both affected by and effecting the world we create (Arendt, 1998). Identifying how the public realm can be more functional, accessible, liberating-communities strengthen connection to place equally as they establish their place in it. Shared experience stands as collective expertise for how to get things done and critically, for what should not be done again. Developers, governments and designers need to commit to leveraging community lived experience in shifting ‘*design for*’ to ‘*design with*’ people.

3. Participation in placemaking

The model of participation, well-established as civic engagement, gained both political and social traction with civil rights movements and civic activism in the mid-last century (Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995) but shifted towards the more practical approach for citizen engagement in planning new, or redeveloping older neighbourhoods in the 1990’s:

“...one that no longer viewed participation as ‘citizen power.’ The purposes of participation have been more modestly defined for information exchange, resolving conflicts, and to supplement the design/planning [processes]” (Sanoff, 2017, pp 9–10).

Participatory design, positioned as front-end activity in planning, requires community contribution and power sharing for effective decision-making. To achieve sustainable and long-lasting outcomes community action at front end of development, during

implementation, and importantly, at post-occupancy stages are needed. In this way, lived-experience can be validated as critical design knowledge. Community redevelopment rarely gets design feedback except through a maintenance complaints process.

Two decades into the 21st century, the participatory process is seemingly shifting from advocacy back to activism. In the North American context, it now responds to even greater racial injustices and economic disparities, with global pandemics and climate change posing further challenges. However, community voices will no longer be ‘silent’ (Cole, 2020). As large urban centres like Toronto brace for new urban growth, the resulting disruption will further marginalize established neighbourhoods excluded from planning decisions. Diverse, insightful Toronto voices like Desmond Cole, author and activist, and Jay Pitter, award-winning urban planner and place maker are affecting social and material change through participatory placemaking. Pitter is spearheading city-building projects for greater equitable public spaces in what she terms as ‘healing fraught sites’ (Pitter, 2020).

Genuine participation occurs when communities are “empowered to control both the agenda and the action” (Sanoff, 2017, p.8).

The Arts have a unique role in shaping public space, in ways that few disciplines can. DM2020 has revealed this to be particularly true for youth artists trying to make a difference by animating neighbourhoods that speak to their identity. Artmaking commands placemaking platforms including building facades, community centres, streetscapes, and digital space (Luger & Ren, 2017). A graduate in community development shared their story of trying to make a difference by bridging the gap between youth and powerful institutions. Taking jobs at various agencies including Parks and Recreation, the storyteller came to understand that major organizations were ‘hostile’ to urban youth—viewing them as potential ‘problems’ to be avoided, and discouraging their access to public space. It was clear that change was harder to achieve from *inside* the establishment where the storyteller felt their individual power systemically dismantled. As a result, the storyteller now opens up their home for creative gatherings with music, poetry readings...thereby making a welcoming space for youth to connect around the arts without fear of stigmatization and judgement. The arts drive both a discourse about the larger public realm, and equally foster moments of intimate placemaking where communities would not otherwise have a venue for creative expression. Case-stories gathered show meaningful placemaking happens by people desiring places that hold their creative dreams. This is a key distinction from placemaking driven by large entities, or top down by politicians with self-serving notions of planning legacies.

Grassroots placemaking can occur in both expected and unexpected ways. In 1995 Toronto got its first outdoor public bake oven and more have sprung up across public commons, offering ways for neighbourhood celebration. A guest place maker at the inaugural DM2020 event lives in one of Toronto’s 31 Neighbourhood Improvement Areas (figure 2).

Disappointed in the neglected state of their local park (a space lacking in minimal garbage collection), they began the task of improving the neighbourhood with a welcoming place for

residents to gather. The need was not for another ‘bake oven’, but for a Tandoori Oven, as this better reflected the cultural make-up of the community. In revitalizing the park so too was the community revitalized, and surrounding neighbourhood treated to a diverse perspective on food. The park has become a hub for community markets, another of this place maker’s many accomplishments.

Asking who holds city power and how it might be shared is a good way to start a community development conversation and avoid, what Dave Meslin terms ‘intentional or designed exclusion’. Meslin, a self-proclaimed ‘professional rabble-rouser’ actively involved in challenging Toronto’s politics, joined the project launch as a guest panellist (figure 5). He characterizes the city’s planning invitations to the public as an example of designed exclusion. In his Ted Talk “The Antidote to Apathy” he speaks to how cities ‘discourage engagement’, using a typical City Hall Notice of Zoning Application as an example. Ads placed in local newspapers invite the public to information sessions about new building developments. The dense text on the half-page ads is ‘impossible to read’ and all pertinent information on how to attend meetings is buried at the bottom in small font or typeface. This, says Meslin, is an example of intentional participatory exclusion (Meslin, 2010).



Figure 5. DM2020 launch at DesignTO 2019. Panellists left to right: community activist, Dave Meslin; Chair, Thorncliffe Park Women’s Committee, Sabina Ali; Toronto City Councillor and panel lead, Kristyn Wong-Tam; Public art critic, Spacing Magazine, Sarah Ratzlaff; Manager, Centre for Connected Communities, Ajeev Bhatia. Photo: research Team.

Neighbourhoods are keenly aware of their political capital in the approvals process. Planning proposals have been thwarted because of concerns raised by residents. The reimagined aim of the participatory design process is to put community and resident voices on par with centres of control in decision-making and to avoid potential confrontation in advance of approvals processes. “This must be done very early on in the process in order to contribute and lead the preliminary development design ideas” (Ratti, 2015, p.17).

For Indigenous urban communities there remains as architect Calvin Brook’s states ‘... so little in the fabric of the city that acknowledges them’ (Hood, 2017, p 48). New placemaking councils, local visioning exercises, and reinforcement of indigenous identity across the city of Toronto are being planned with the aim to respect indigenous knowledge in the development of spaces for gathering, storysharing, and cultural exchange (Hood, 2017, p.49). Community leadership in urban design is a means to accomplish buy-in for social change as new developments and revitalization become fully realized, but it must be given both respect and power to be effective.

There are success stories for projects undertaken with community engagement across Toronto that counter the many developments lacking in critical community-based placemaking needed for sustaining ‘connection to place’. A well-documented example is Toronto’s St. Lawrence Neighbourhood—a tri-level government partnership under what was then new housing policies of 1970’s that remains a model for engaged participatory design (Sewell & Jacobs, 1993). Recent revitalization projects for older social housing complexes are working with a mixed income solution and added social value in the form of new cultural and recreational facilities. This aims to bring greater diversity of land use and people together for stronger economic viability and increased standard of living. Regent Park (2009–present) redevelopment (figures 6–8) is such a case, however, the outcomes of these development models are not fully known (Moos et al, 2018). Given that communities were already highly mixed, revitalization projects may result in less diversity by reducing affordability; displacing long-time residents and newcomers, or by making gentrification attractive to upwardly mobile dwellers in ways that further exclude prior communities.



Figures 6, 7, 8. Regent Park, Toronto's renown 69-acre public housing project, isolated the neighbourhood from main streets. Above shows a collection of images for regent Park-an apartment tower being torn down during revitalization, a public art installation, and the replacement mixed-use facility along Dundas Street East. Photo courtesy of Bruce Reeve.

4. Role of the creative practitioner: A work in progress

Citizens aim to make change happen without formal processes but can run afoul of planning authorities. The planner-designer, historically delegated to facilitate community engagement, present their projects in methods that will foster approvals and expedite implementation. Bearing the mantle of best-educated in theory and practice, they interpret people's needs and manage their expectations (Sanoff, 2017). Vital in making formal placemaking happen, they are also groomed for this leadership (Ratti & Claudel, 2015). Le Corbusier's 'urbanisme' expressed in la ville contemporaine of 1922 was a colonial planning vision for eradication of 'urban blight' with 'systemic development' to improve a citizen's quality and standard of living, all aimed to house the masses of future urbanites (Guiton, 1981). The ultimate orchestration of such a creative vision would fall upon the conductor—the architect. The designer's 'creative vision' on behalf of the community remains strong to this day (Ratti & Claudel, 2015). A discussion should be formed around how designers shift from interpreter of communities needs to facilitator of inclusive design processes that aligns both development and community goals. DM2020 research partner Bryan C. Lee Jr, co-founder and design principal at Colloqate, a design justice firm based in New Orleans, USA fosters inclusive design of places to ensure racial, social, and cultural justice. Colloqate state that "For every injustice there is an architecture built [to] sustain and perpetuate it" (Colloqate, n.d.). Bryan inspires young design professionals to collaborate with social change makers in community orchestrated solutions for mitigating systemic exclusion.

“Injustice and inequity manifest relative to their respective contexts. We are attempting to grow the Design Justice field through organizing students, academic theory, and community collaboration.” –Bryan C. Lee, AIA (Colloqate, 2020).

Colloqate is shifting the designer’s role from ‘conductor’ to community collaborator in driving planning and design of urban space.

In respect of the art, the City of Toronto’s Planning division implemented a ‘Percent for Public Art Program’ in 1985, which secures one percent of gross construction costs for any new development towards public art. These guidelines ensure the program is applied in a consistent and informed manner citywide while controlling where and how it is manifested (Toronto, 2010, p.13). In this context, the arts practitioner can become an interpreter of planning aspirations, managing community expectations, while the community remains an ‘end-user’ rather than a co-creator. When the arts partner with endowed agencies to become “cross-sectoral intergovernmental partnerships for placemaking” (Zitcer, 2018, p.2), the impetus becomes how to attract visitors and investors rather than support grassroots placemaking through art practice (Eisinger, 2000, p. 322).

Across Toronto, from City # 1 to City # 3 there is an exponential rise in mixed-use tower development with the welcomed percentage of programmed art, but in what had been smaller scale, community-focused neighbourhoods (Nasser, 2019). Determining who is included and excluded from decision-making processes is an ethical act: “Those involved select and exclude aims and boundaries for any project; privilege ways of working at the expense of alternative methods” (Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995, p.13).

An outcome of exclusion in decision-making is not only the loss of creative alternative ideas, but disempowerment for those left out. Gentrification, positioned for economic and cultural revitalization and implemented under the guise of eradicating ‘urban blight’, assumes that where and how people live should be measured against economics and investment in urban growth. The planner, designer and artist remain the creative interpreters for development, caught between client/owner, builder, authorities, and the ‘end-user’ (Ratti & Claudel, 2015). The process still begs the question, for whom does all this benefit?

5. The young are alright: Empowering new voices

“Forgive no error you recognize. It will repeat itself, increase, and afterwards our pupils will not forgive in us what we forgave” (Yevtushenko, 1952).

As DM2020 continues into 2021 it becomes clear that younger voices for placemaking are determined to not only be heard, but to effect change. The project is learning how co-creating places with young place makers are vital for their survival. Interventions that humanize and animate forgotten urban areas buffer planned revitalization that sanitize and designs away spontaneous acts of placemaking. Case-stories identify how to make things happen at the margins of an expanding city. An example of a grassroot intervention for and

by youth is “Behind the Line”, founded by Artist Amir Akbari. The organization works with local businesses and community groups to develop creative programs and art projects that engage youth in challenging perceptions, raising awareness, and beautifying communities left behind as new development surrounds their neighbourhoods. Street art fosters spontaneous dialogue with passers-by, allowing nascent artists to share their work and stories, strengthening a community’s connection to place by the act of making art (figure 9).



Figure 9. Mural art by Behind the Line, a grassroots Toronto organization working with building owners to engage youth in creative practice and community-building.

The collected case-stories are growing in volume-informing opportunities for pedagogy at the post-secondary level. Social justice practitioners including Jay Wall of Rally Rally (Toronto) and Bryan C. Lee Jr of Colloqate (New Orleans), support the project’s push for NextGen practitioners to be more ethically and socially responsible when working on projects that aim to support communities. At a recent DM2020 design activism workshop (figures 11 to 14) facilitated by Colloqate, youth were asked to identify issues that emerge from shared knowledge in order to generate solutions to address the lack of empowerment in city planning. Access to, and quality of public space; weak intergenerational programming; and minimal resources to support education, and foster creative endeavours were the key issues identified. A recurring theme was the lack of respect displayed by those with privilege who control city finances, and social and recreational programs that impact youth.



Figures 11, 12, 13, 14. Creative Practice as Protest Workshop (CPP). Clockwise from top: Founder, Black Futures Now Toronto, Adwoa Afful speaks about her work with anti-oppressive placemaking practices; Sticky Note exercise to help get to know one another; Brainstorming placemaking ideas; Founder, Rally Rally, Jay Wall share posters he and a participant created to raise awareness about pedestrian and cycling deaths in Toronto. Photos by: Nick Sagar, 2020.

6. Conclusions

DM2020 set out to engage, listen to, and learn from diverse citizens across the six regions of Toronto, and as the project progresses, it is listening more intently to NextGen voices and the social and economic issues that diminish their neighbourhoods. An online discussion is being organized due to safe distancing measures that will pair DM2020 with a youth mentorship group from north west Toronto. The event will seek to learn how this community has fared during the pandemic and explore their placemaking efforts for community-building and economic stability. Engaging youth in narrative inquiry as part of both formal and informal learning is how DM2020 welcomes and respects youth

perspectives. Their lived experience is a catalyst for raising social awareness and fostering inclusive placemaking solutions for communities where they live, work, and play.

During tremendous urban growth, city governments are under pressure to implement expedient solutions. The collaborative placemaking model requires patience—a potential enemy of bottom-line outcomes. Diverse community voices, including voices of the very young, however challenging to hear for those of privilege and power, are important to inform, guide, and build upon, as ‘lessons learned’ that should not be repeated. Places also take time to develop and evaluate. The measure of success for a place should be gaged for equity and inclusion, including the humanistic qualities it supports and the respect it offers communities. To achieve this, it is necessary to have confidence in citizens’ capacity to conceptualize the design of places that reflect their collective need and creative dreams. Jane Jacobs, long time Toronto resident, acclaimed author and renown urbanist famously stated in her 1950’s *Fortune* article “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” (*Fortune Classic*, 2011).

Outcomes of DM2020 intend to highlight the ‘lessons learned’ from many case-stories gathered for transforming forgotten neighbourhood spaces into vibrant expressions of community identity. The creative artefacts of the work are yet to be fully realized, but the design of a shared-knowledge community planning toolkit, a checklist, or a roster of local-based solutions for inclusive placemaking are all under consideration.

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