

The morphology of placemaking – from urban guerrilla and formal street experiments to mobility and metropolitan regions

Verônica Natividade¹, Ana Rivas², Benjamin Büttner², Todor Stojanovski³

¹ Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil/ ETH Zürich

² Technical University of Munich, Germany

³ KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Sweden

Abstract

Placemaking is becoming a mainstreaming paradigm in planning. It arises from urbanist advocacy for small-scale, incremental, “do-it-yourself” (DIY) urban improvements referred to as guerrilla, pop-up, tactical, DIY or everyday urbanism. It is defined as any act of citizens to change their urban environment. It involves collectively creating, transforming, maintaining and renovating the places in which they live. It includes daily actions and everyday routines and special, celebratory one-time events. This paper looks at placemaking interventions and street experiments in Brazil, Mexico, Sweden and Germany from a morphological perspective. It creates a quadrant of placemaking where it pins various projects on the axes formal-informal, designed-not designed, expert initiatives or local community engagement to classify placemaking acts from informal beatifications such as painting and graffiti, arty insertions, celebratory events as well as more formalised interventions, like parking replacement, repurposing street sections and transforming entire streets. It argues that the bureaucratic planners did not thwart the very vibrancy and spirit of the bottom-up everyday urbanism. Instead, we see gradual urbanists institutionalising placemaking as a planning paradigm. However, placemakers have remained on the smallest scale in cities, restricted to the street scale in particular, not concerned with the neighbourhood or regional scale where cities are experienced on the move. For urban morphologists, one question emerges: how placemaking fits at various morphological scales and how planners and urban designers who work with neighbourhoods can harness the rise of placemaking to work on multiple resolutions, from the street to the metropolitan region?

Keyword: *placemaking, street experiments, urban morphology, urban design*

Introduction

People use a variety of public spaces to relax, protest, buy and sell, experiment, and celebrate. Placemakers and experts on public spaces explore the many ways that urban residents, with creativity and determination, appropriate public spaces to meet their own needs and desires. Familiar or unexpected, spontaneous or planned, momentary or long-lasting, these activities continue to give cities life and vitality (Franck & Stevens, 2006). Placemaking is an urban paradigm that aims to grasp those activities and shape them in urban interventions. Thus, placemaking is defined as any action of the citizens to change their urban environment. Placemaking simultaneously emerges as a planning and urban design movement that finds precedents in the writings of Jane Jacobs, Henri Lefebvre, and Michel de Certeau, who emphasise everyday life, “right to the city,” and tactical urbanism, respectively. It is a bottom-up action by individuals or groups. It can be done with the support of others or can be an act of defiance in the face of power; it can be planned and organised

by experts or spontaneous acts of the citizens, local community or outsiders. It included daily actions and routines and special, celebratory one-time events (Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995). Placemaking is not just about people's relationship to their places; it also creates relationships among people (in places). It embeds the concept of place and the city as an aggregation of places. It focuses on place and the people-in-place and looks at cities and everyday life to make cities (Chase et al., 2008 [1999]).

This paper looks at placemaking interventions and street experiments in Brazil, Mexico, Sweden and Germany from a morphological perspective. Urban morphologists dissect elements of the urban form at various resolutions and describe interactions between urban form elements in a morphological structure. Although placemakers have worked strictly on the smallest scale in cities or the street as the underlying urban form element (Caniggia & Maffei, 2001 [1979]), the street experiments modify this generic morphological structure to include streetscapes and embrace the perceptual environment (Stojanovski, 2019) as means to propose spaces with symbolic meaning. Bertolini (2020) classifies those street experiments by ascending functional complexity: re-marking streets, repurposing parking space, repurposing streets sections, and entire streets. This paper argues for a broader scope, institutionalising placemaking as a planning and urban design paradigm. Unlike the scientific paradigms that tend to replace each other, the planning paradigms flow parallelly as juxtaposing tides. They emerge and withdraw in random patterns. Sometimes they crush and sometimes rise stronger, helped by different paradigms. The rise of placemaking should not be the regional eclipse, but urban morphology can support placemaking to embrace the urban conurbation, from the exciting street in the downtown to forgotten brutalist cityscapes and industrial zones.

Background

We see gradual institutionalising placemaking as a mainstreaming planning paradigm. In this process, global consultancies of expert placemakers reach starchitecture fame. Through his consultancy company and "Making Cities for People" advocacy, Jan Gehl has profoundly improved public spaces in cities worldwide. Placemaking stands together with other urbanism and urban design theories, unlike the scientific paradigms that tend to replace each other. On the contrary, the "urbanisms" as planning paradigms flow in parallel as juxtaposing tides. They emerge and withdraw in random patterns. Sometimes they crush and sometimes rise stronger, helped by other paradigms. Indeed, "urbanism" is a word with two conflicting meanings in English that makes it "inherently a contested field" (Chase et al., 2008 [1999]). From the bricolage of French *urbanisme* to the English wording for planning, urban design and placemaking, the words "urbanism" and "urbanists" describe the advocacy for holistic urban planning and urban design, including making cities with no design or plan, as shown in Figure 1.

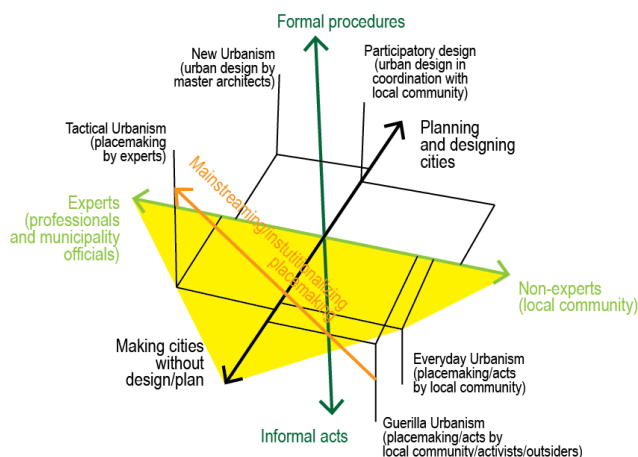


Figure 1. Maps of the emerging “urbanisms”. Institutionalising placemaking moves from a space of informal acts of making cities without design or plan by non-experts (or the local community) to tactical urbanism and expert placemaking.

Urban morphologists extensively anatomise the urban forms’ elements at different resolutions (Conzen, 1960; Moudon, 1994; 1997; Kropf, 1996; 2009; 2011; 2014; 2018; Scheer, 2010; 2016) and describe their interactions in a generic morphological structure (Kropf, 2011; 2018). In a different spectrum of urban analysis, environmental psychologists recognise layers of nested environments. Thus, the perceptual environment is the space where people are directly conscious and give symbolic meaning. It embraces the environmental perception and Gordon Cullen’s (1961, 1967) serial vision to modify the generic morphological structure by including streetscapes and creating an urban space envelope (Stojanovski, 2019).

In the end, both public spaces and placemaking can be understood typomorphologically (Frank, 1994). Societies structure their spatial practices by developing and classifying types (Franck & Schneekloth, 1994). Those types are not static; they have history, tell histories (Southworth, 2005), change over time and vary considerably between cultures and between different groups within the same cultures. Through people’s rich activities in the public space, spaces become “loose” (Franck & Stevens, 2006) and stage a wide variety of uses not initially intended for those locations. Accessibility, freedom of choice, and physical elements that occupants can appropriate contribute to the emergence of a loose space, but they are not sufficient. For a site to become loose, people themselves must recognise the possibilities inherent in it and make use of those possibilities for their ends, facing the potential risks of doing so. The chance that looseness will occur varies with a place or building type, in which the types are the categories that cultures have developed to organise the world, beliefs, and activities (Schneekloth & Franck 1994). What one does and how one does it differ significantly according to the type one is occupying, with some types allowing for more freedom of choice of activities and more means of carrying them out.

The following section presents placemaking examples seeking to identify types that propagate worldwide (as “parklets”), positioning them within the morphological structure and discussing the context within various morphological resolutions.

Placemaking examples

Rio de Janeiro, Brasil

Streets are a fundamental part of urban social life in Rio de Janeiro. The city's dwellers, called "cariocas", elected streets and public spaces in general as the preferred socialisation spots. It is not unusual to be surprised by an unplanned party that takes the lanes of a street or a spontaneous luau on a beautiful summer night on the beach. The municipality has assimilated this existing cultural trace and the recent boost in the placemaking movement to formalise a "Parada Carioca" programme in 2015. The nine parklets built under the programme between 2015 and 2020 were located in the wealthiest parts of the city. They contrast tremendously in budget and purpose with other placemaking experiences in impoverished areas not supported by Parada Carioca Programme, as shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Placemaking of contrasts in Rio de Janeiro. Formal parklet in Barra da Tijuca (left), constructed within the programme "Paradas Cariocas". Placemaking experience in Favela Rio das Pedras (right), idealised and constructed by Gabrielle Rocha, an architecture graduate student at PUC-Rio

The FavLab placemaking project materialised in Favela da Maré in 2019, one of Rio's most impressive favelas in size and morphological diversity. Favela da Maré is a group of 17 slums, the home of almost 140 thousand souls in an 800 thousand square meters area. Despite Maré's dwellers' severe economic restrictions and state absence, Maré is no exception to Rio de Janeiro's urban culture of intense street life. Locomotion is mostly pedestrian, and the buildings strongly connect to the streets. Although restricted in size, this combination favours a vivid usage of the public space, which is frequently the stage for parties and spontaneous cultural events. The FavLab Maré workshop outcome was an interactive light installation for children activated by the voice. Graduate students from PUC-Rio architecture school and young favela residents came up with a mix of digital and analogue manufacturing processes to gather the installation. The statement behind the funny game made it evident that voices from favela are powerful and must be heard. The toy was a great success among children, who spontaneously took part in the assembly process. Even adults had fun with the toy.



Figure 4. Images from the FavLab Maré workshop. It consisted of a series of interlaced pipes equipped with sound sensors connected to an Arduino board that would control the led light stripes inside the pipes.

Mérida, Mexico

Merida is the capital of Yucatán, with a population of ca. 1 million inhabitants. Merida’s current municipal development plan (2018-2024) set a core goal to make Mérida a sustainable, inclusive, safe, functional and innovative city. One of the initiatives that have been carried out to achieve these goals was the “Anda Mérida” project implemented in 2020, which promotes active mobility and the recovery of public space through a participatory methodology in two of the oldest and emblematic of the city: San Sebastián and the Ermita de Santa Isabel. The project was initiated by the local municipality in coordination with different stakeholders such as GIZ (German cooperation for Sustainable Development), SEDATU (The Ministry of Agrarian, Territorial and Urban Development), IMPLAN (The Municipal Planning Institute), Tomate collective, and Comex through its “Mexico bien hecho” initiative and residents. Overall, the main street was reclaimed, in which two road intersections were intervened through tactical urbanism, mainly using paint and temporary elements. In addition, the interventions were made around a market and primary school, reducing the speed limit, making it safer for pedestrians by widening sidewalks, painting safe pedestrian crossings, and prioritising cyclists.



Figure 5. “Anda Mérida” project seen through the aerial photo (left) showing the opening event with stakeholders and the community. Tactical urbanism elements (right) such as traffic cones, paint and temporary furniture (right) were employed to calm traffic and make the street safer (photos by Colectivo Tomate).

Stockholm, Sweden

Stockholm is the capital of Sweden, with 2.5 million inhabitants in a sprawling urban conurbation. Inspired by the advocacy for placemaking and everyday urbanism, Stockholm Municipality started various projects to improve public spaces. These projects vary from repurposing parking spaces, creating car-free “summer streets” to transforming car-dominated arterials into public spaces. All the placemaking and street experiments are coordinated formally with the City of Stockholm. The most common placemaking interventions in Stockholms are parking spaces conversion into bars (can be called “barlets”) and car-free “summer streets”. The “summer streets” also often include parking spaces converted into bars (the barlets). Some barlets have persisted even under winter 2020 because of concerns with virus spread.



Figure 8. *The summer streets of Stockholm. The City of Stockholm closes the streets for car traffic during the summer and inserts benches and artwork.*

Munich, Germany

Munich is the capital of the State of Bavaria, with around 1.5 million inhabitants. Due to the strict lockdown and mobility restrictions during the boom of the pandemic in the first quarter of the year 2020, the city was forced to offer citizens recreational spaces and safe modes of transportation creatively. As a result, the city implemented six pop-up bike lanes, fourteen summer streets from which four played streets for kids and hundreds of parklets or “Schanigärten” emerged to allow local restaurants and shops to open and keep the local economy active. Pop-up bike lanes (see Figure 9) appeared overnight and took Munich’s citizens by surprise during last year’s summer and stayed until the beginning of winter. They were undoubtedly welcomed by enthusiast cyclists and allowed citizens to use them as an alternative to public transport. In 2019, inspired by Stockholm, the city of Munich implemented a trial pilot with its first two summer streets. In 2020, due to the pandemic requested by citizens and the need to create space for neighbours to meet and stroll without fear of any danger or motorised vehicles, the summer streets were upscaled from two to fourteen with the help of different associations, clubs and private organisers, offering several activities, market stalls, recreational activities, cultural and sports programs that promote social cohesion.



Figure 9. Temporary pop-up bike lane in Munich during summer 2020 (left); parklets in Munich during summer 2020 example of a summer (middle); street during 2020 closed with temporary elements (right).

Results and Discussions

The placemaking examples illustrate various informal urban guerrilla acts of artistry and street performances to formal examples to reimagine and redesign streets. Figure 10 pins the various placemaking and street experiment examples in a quadrant with axes formal-informal, designed-not designed, expert initiatives or local community engagement to map placemaking acts and tendencies.

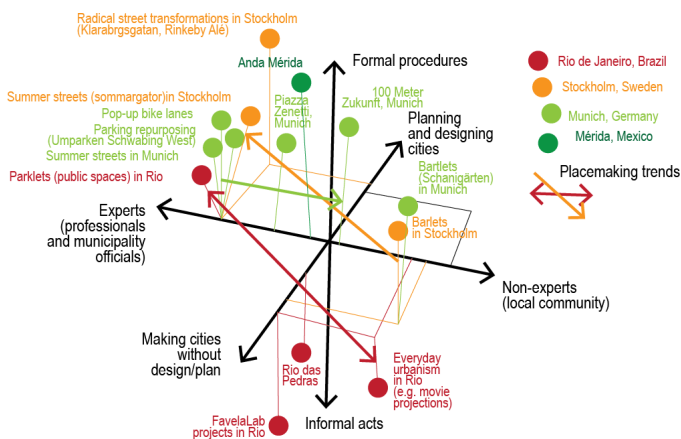


Figure 10. Placemaking and street experiment examples in the urbanism quadrant showing formal vs. informal processes, projects with plans or design vs. not planned or designed projects, expert initiatives or local community engagement.

At the morphological scale (Bertolini, 2020), the street experiments' degree of flexibility suggests a closer approximation to the concept of loose space (Franck and Stevens, 2006), and they are integrated and adapted differently across cultures. The “parklets” that emerge as public spaces in Rio de Janeiro or extensions of bars in Stockholm and Munich (so-called “barlets”) are excellent propagation examples. The summer streets are becoming very typical placemaking interventions encouraged and supported by the municipalities. Contradiction the predictions, the bureaucratic planners did not thwart the very vibrancy and spirit of the

bottom-up everyday urbanism. Instead, we see gradual urbanists institutionalising placemaking as a planning paradigm where municipal planners initiate placemaking.

Conclusions

This paper looked at placemaking interventions and street experiments in Brazil, Mexico, Sweden and Germany from a morphological perspective to reinforce that placemaking is becoming a mainstreaming paradigm in planning. First, the paper classified placemaking by scale from beatification interventions (painting and graffiti, arty interventions, celebratory events), parking replacement, repurposing street sections and transforming entire streets. Second, it proposes a quadrant of urbanism types and pins every placemaking and street experiment example on the map. Furthermore, this paper sought to identify types of placemaking interventions and street experiments that propagate worldwide inspired by typomorphological theories and go beyond generic classifications. “Parklets” and “summer streets” have become institutionalised, yet keeping the vibrancy and spirit of the bottom-up “everyday urbanism”.

Nevertheless, placemakers have remained on the minor scales in cities - the street – not concerned with the neighbourhood or regional scale where cities are experienced on the move. It is crucial to understand placemaking interventions that can embrace the mobile and the regional. The summer streets are always located downtown, and they cannot be used as interventions on a residential street in a suburban neighbourhood. Urban morphology and the morphological context can situate the policy by supporting placemaking to embrace the urban conurbation dissecting its elements and types, from the exciting street in the downtown to forgotten monofunctional cityscapes and industrial zones, from repurposing parking as generic type (to “barlets” in Stockholm and “schänigartens” in Munich). While “schänigartens” in Munich have a name that describes the type, the “barlets” in Stockholm do not have a Swedish parallel. The generic “parklet” term is used in Rio de Janeiro to describe luxurious designed public spaces in contrast to the lively everyday urbanism in the favelas. Even though the typologies vary across cultures, creating types lives within all societies (Schneekloth & Franck, 1994).

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