

Placemaking



Dabaji & Conti (2020)

Bassel
Sleem

Cultural Placemaking and Wayfinding

Placemaking could be described as capturing the different senses and perceptions that a community has of a space, and giving meaning and an identity to that place. In this sense, culture is not restricted to artistic or social commodities but to the community as a whole, encompassing its dynamic and constantly evolving components. Placemaking has the ability of embracing current narratives as well as preserving the historic significance of a place and its people.

In the city of Bath in England, a new wayfinding system was implemented to showcase the historic prominence and heritage of the place. Multiple stakeholders, planners and designers were involved in developing this strategy. Native elements to the city were the main inspiration behind the system, part of which can be seen in figure 1 as one of many street features that help navigate users experience around the city. The project is nestled in the existing fabric of the old city and was completed in 2012 making the city more of a touristic attraction since.

Placemaking can achieve better success when community members are involved in the process.

Towns and cities have special features that must be recognized at first before implementing wayfinding strategies. The implemented systems could then work on highlighting these features, which are not just static objects but also relate to the perceived senses and thoughts of these spaces. Since community members and residents are best at pinpointing all of the elements that make their respective places unique, it is important that they take part in the process and implementation.



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Figure 1: City of Bath wayfinding system.

A series of placemaking projects done in three towns in Lebanon was successful in involving the right people to lead and take charge of implementing the strategies. Collaborating with local groups, such as The Chain Effect, Recycle Lebanon, and Urban Pins, allowed for workshops to take place, involving different generations of people from vulnerable groups living in these towns. The workshops played a major part in influencing the projects to be implemented because of the diversity of the participants involved. The approach to the project was then directed by the concerns being voiced, from both children and older people. This makes the project a more universal one that is inclusive to all people.



Figure 2: Mount Hope’s installation team adding signage to implement a community led wayfinding strategy.



Figure 3: Signage installed by nine community members of the town of Mount Hope.

When developing placemaking strategies, community participation is key. The approaches and methods used in the precedents described highlight the uniqueness in the communities and places targeted, which would not have been possible if members of these respective communities were not involved and their concerns not voiced. One example of a community led initiative is in the small town of Mount Hope in West Virginia, USA. Because the town did not have the required funding and resources to implement a permanent wayfinding system, a community organized committee strategically placed signage around neighbourhood centres to encourage people to walk and explore the streets leading up to the Main Street downtown core. The project’s affordability and temporariness made the wayfinding strategy a more successful one.

Communities share unique perceptions of a place. Placemaking should embrace and highlight these branded perceptions.

Inclusive Placemaking

CatalyticAction, “a design studio and charity that works to empower communities through strategic and innovative community-led spatial interventions” (Dabaji & Conti, 2020), led a series of community based projects in three different rural areas of Lebanon where the population of Syrian and Palestinian refugees was dense. The projects involved planning through a participatory approach as well as construction through community engagement. Their goal was to develop an inclusive placemaking strategy that emphasizes the importance of place over space, and is inviting not just to the Lebanese, but also to the refugees, whose presence in those towns is subjected to stereotyping and racism. The end results were three parks, each unique in its design and native to its town and people.



Figure 4: The access ramp leading to the park in Aarsal, Lebanon. The design of the latter was influenced by the surrounding landscapes.

Social Wayfinding

The idea of social wayfinding comes from humans’ needs to stay connected with each other. It is highlighted mainly through pedestrian accessibility that allows for easier connections to be found; however, the past year has shown us that a sociable community is not necessarily restricted to physical connections, but can also be implemented through virtual ones.

Figure 5: Travelers Rest town sign leading to the trail project, serving both vehicular and pedestrian users.



Alta (2017)

Figure 6: The Swamp Rabbit Trail in Travelers Rest rendered as a revitalized placemaking town project.



Alta (2017)

Placemaking and wayfinding showcase a community's identity.

In their chapter on *social relations, connectivity and loneliness of older rural people*, Hennessy and Innes (2020) discuss the relevance of the mentioned issues on rural communities because of the increasing loneliness elders tend to face in smaller towns. The chapter discusses different interventions that could be done to address this, such as one-on-one and mentoring strategies, which work by connecting older people facing isolation to other people, whether friends or mentors. **Focusing on the importance of connecting people, potentially through wayfinding and exploring places, has the capability of transforming this phenomenon into more of a social one.** This could be successful in giving more meaningful connections between people and places. Such strategies, in their own ways, recognize the diversity and uniqueness of each community and place, and could be implemented throughout various placemaking and wayfinding projects elsewhere in order to achieve more inclusive and specific results.



Figure 7: Afghan Bazaar, part of a placemaking project lead by Hassell Studio.

In Travelers Rest, South Carolina, the town took the initiative of highlighting the presence of one of its main walking trails, the Swamp Rabbit Trail. They were able to rebrand their town's image and assert its role as an outdoor lifestyle's catchment for Upstate South Carolina. Referring to figures 5 and 6, the trail project is seen as an example of how small communities can attract local and regional attention through little initiatives such as placing adequate signage, user friendly seating, lighting and public art. Focusing on such small elements, as a community led approach inclusive to all its members, could by its own nature give more prominence to the existing trail, and at the same time requiring minor maintenance of the latter.

Final Thoughts

As planners and designers, it is hard to achieve a good placemaking strategy without consulting and involving members of the community, whether in the conceptual process or in the construction and implementation phases. **A community is most understanding of and connected to a place, and it is our role to make the most out of their opinions in order to better brand this identity and showcase it throughout a place.**

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