

Towards Reviving Public Urban Spaces: A Placemaking Approach for Creating Vibrant Places

Prof.Dr. Amal Abdou
Professor of Architecture,
Faculty of Fine Arts, Department of Architecture,
Helwan University, Cairo, Egypt

Prof.Dr. Yasser Elsayed
Professor of Architecture,
Faculty of Fine Arts, Department of Architecture,
Helwan University, Cairo, Egypt

Nora Selim
Assistant Lecturer of Architecture,
Department of Architecture Engineering,
New Giza University, Giza, Egypt

Abstract — This research explores the concept of public urban spaces and placemaking, emphasizing their transformation from spaces to meaningful places. It delves into the process of transitioning from a mere space to a place, highlighting the factors and considerations involved in creating vibrant and inclusive public places. It discusses the relationship between placemaking and urban design, tracing the evolution of urban design thinking through different traditions, such as the visual artistic tradition, the social usage tradition, and the emerging place-making tradition. It provides an overview of the placemaking concept, highlighting its people-centered approach, key principles, and the various types of placemaking. Finally, the research will conclude with an integrative placemaking approach, which encompasses the functional, social, cultural, economic, and environmental aspects.

Keywords— Placemaking, urban design, vibrant places, integrative approach,

I. INTRODUCTION

Public urban spaces encompass all publicly owned or accessible areas that facilitate social interaction, cultural expression, and economic exchange. These spaces shape a city's character and image, allowing people to socialize, exercise, play, relax, volunteer, buy and sell goods and services, make connections, express political views, appreciate art or architecture, or simply enjoy being outdoors. Public spaces have significant psychosocial effects, influencing mood, stress levels, behavior, and mental health. They can counteract anxiety and loneliness, create a better sense of security, and positively impact physical health.

Placemaking in public urban spaces involves combining various characteristics to create vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable ecosystems. It aims to transform these spaces into multifaceted environments that meet functional needs, foster social connections, celebrate cultural diversity, improve the natural environment, and contribute to local economic development. (Amirzadeh, M., & Sharifi, A., 2024).

A. Research Problem

This research argues that the development of public urban spaces is presently proceeding, but without consideration of the concept of placemaking or public participation in the decision-making process which end up lacking elements that attract users. In addition, the lack of amenities, such as adequate illumination, monitoring, accessibility, and maintenance, contributes to insecurity. At certain times, some of these spaces are unattractive, psychologically uncomfortable, and unsuitable for social interaction and recreation because of the perceived unfriendliness of nature and vegetation towards their users.

This highlights the underutilization of the placemaking concept in current urban development, which needs clear emphasis on developing a new integrative public urban space design through the placemaking concept.

B. Research Aim

The aim of this research is to explore the concept of public urban spaces and placemaking, focusing on their transformation from mere spaces to meaningful places that play a central role in shaping community life. It seeks to address how public spaces evolve into vibrant, inclusive, and community-centric places that enrich the lives of users. It aims to explore the factors and considerations involved in this transformation, as well as the benefits that successful public places offer to individuals and communities. By understanding this evolution from space to place, the research aims to shed light on the importance of creating engaging and purposeful public spaces in urban environments.

C. Research Methodology

This research will use literature review and theoretical analysis to explore the concept of placemaking, its principles, types and how it has evolved. It will highlight the importance of participatory approaches for developing public urban spaces. This review will conclude by highlighting the different aspects of placemaking in public urban places which identify factors contributing to their vibrancy and inclusiveness.

II. FROM "SPACE" TO "PLACE"

Place-making is a social production process in which the users recognize and regulate landscape. The functional "physical space" of a place is distinct from the physical space itself. The recognition of spaces as areas is a result of the activities and visitors that use them (Fataar, A., & Rinqest, E., 2019). The primary focus of space is on the biological requirements of individuals, as well as its utilitarian value, which includes recreational and aesthetic activities and psychological restoration. Nevertheless, a more comprehensive assessment is required, which considers the relationships that individuals have with their surroundings. Place refers to how people perceive a landscape in relation to identity regulation, self-reflection, and social integration. When a person or group associates a space with their personal experiences, cultural values, and social significance, it transforms into a place as shown in figure (1).

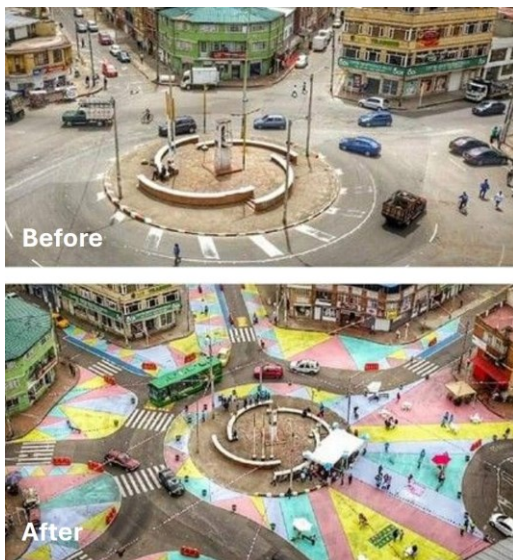


Fig. 1: Transformation of an urban space to a pedestrian friendly place

Diverse stakeholders possess differing "conceptions of place," and it is imperative to consider their socio-economic and cultural heritage, access to power, knowledge, and capital when integrating their interests (Wesener, A., et al., 2020). As people use and live in places, they imprint their identity on them, adapting to the physical environment and the values, behaviors, and perceptions of those around them, as shown in figure (1).

III. PLACEMAKING AND URBAN DESIGN

Urban design is the process and outcome of the design and development of constructed environments, including cities, towns, and villages. Its primary objective is to establish connections between people and locations, movement and urban form, nature, and the built fabric. A variety of fields, including geography, planning, architecture, and sociology, have implemented the global process of placemaking. Placemaking dedicates itself to the development and enhancement of spaces, fostering continuous actions and partnerships that empower individuals and enhance communities (Dash, S.P., & Thilagam, N.L., 2023).

Placemaking, which is the process of establishing a setting that instills a sense of place in an area, is a component of urban design. Establishing identifiable urban spaces, aesthetically appealing public spaces, unique architecture, and identifiable landmarks, along with establishing a human element through compatible scales of development and ongoing public stewardship, can accomplish this. However, placemaking extends beyond enhancing public space design; it also facilitates the creation of inventive activity patterns and connections (cultural, economic, social, and ecological) that characterize a place and foster its continuous growth (Dupre, K., 2019).

The 1960s introduced the concept of placemaking as a response to the dominant urban planning theories and practices that emerged during the Second Industrial Revolution. The displacement and fragmentation of communities that utilize space were the result of the widespread adoption of automobile transportation in urban planning and modernist architecture. The blandness of modernist architecture also influenced the growth of the placemaking movement (Akbar, P. N. G., & Edelenbos, J., 2021).

A. Placemaking Evolution

In 2021, Matthew Carmona identified three broad traditions of urban design thought: the visual artistic tradition, which was primarily product-oriented and concentrated on visual qualities and aesthetics rather than cultural, social, economic, political, and spatial considerations; the social usage tradition, which emphasized the social use of urban space and the meanings people attach to their surroundings; and the making places tradition, which synthesized both the visual artistic and social usage traditions (Hes, D. and Hernandez-Santin, C. eds., 2020).

In contrast to the diverse cultural, social, economic, political, and spatial factors and processes that contribute to the success of urban areas, the visual-artistic tradition reflects a more architectural, earlier, and narrower understanding of urban design. In this tradition, the aesthetic experience and visual qualities of urban spaces are paramount, as shown in figure (2). Most architects were product-oriented and believed that urban design could enhance urban experience by offering visual stimulation and spatial diversity. They identified design education as a critical component of successful urban design and prioritized physical form characteristics (Canter, D., 1977).



Fig. 2: Visual artistic activities as an approach to improve urban spaces



Fig. 3: The social usage tradition transforms urban spaces into livable places

An influential urban designer and planner, Kevin Lynch is widely recognized as a pioneer of the placemaking concept. He conducted research on the process by which individuals perceive urban environments and mentally construct and navigate them. His findings underscored the significance of establishing unified spatial structures, clear pathways, and recognizable landmarks to enhance the understanding and experience of the city. Lynch's concept of "place identity" pertains to the distinctive attributes and qualities that render a location identifiable and distinct from other locations he uses Lynch, K. (1960).

As shown in figure (3), the tradition of social usage underscored the way individuals utilize space, which encompassed the concepts of perception and sense of place. Lynch advocated for an examination of individuals' mental images and perceptions rather than the physical and material components of urban environments, rejecting the notion that urban pleasure was an exclusive and elitist concern. Another prominent proponent of this approach, Jane Jacobs, contended that the city could never be considered a work of art because art was created through the selection of elements from life, whereas a city was "life at its most vital, complex, and intense." (Whyte, W. H., 1980).

However, Christopher Alexander's work also serves as an exemplary of the social usage tradition. He identified the dangers of approaching urban design in a manner that did not allow for a rich diversity of cross-connections between activities and places, as well as the failings of design philosophies that considered 'form without context'. In *A Pattern Language* (Alexander, C., et al., 1977) and *The Timeless Way of Building* (Alexander, C., 1979), he further developed his ideas by attempting to comprehend the formation of places as a sequence of "patterns."

The fusion of the two preceding traditions led to the gradual formation of a place-making tradition in urban design in the latter half of the twentieth century. The design of urban places as physical/aesthetic entities and as behavioral settings is a subject of undisputed interest in contemporary urban design as, shown in figure (4). This includes the "hard city" of buildings and spaces and the "soft city" of people and activities. In urban design, placemaking has become the dominant tradition and the norm in both practice and scholarship. It has continued to evolve and broaden because of the contributions of a broader array of allied academic and professional fields, with a particular emphasis on sustainable development. While some argue that this establishes a new tradition of thought and practice, it's more accurate to describe it as an evolution, building upon the existing foundations of place-making, rather than a revolution (Carmona, M., 2021).



Fig. 4: The placemaking tradition is concerned with physical, aesthetic entities and behavioral settings

B. Principles of Placemaking

The Project for Public Spaces (PPS) has identified several principles for creating great community places, which are guidelines to help communities successfully integrating different needs and points of view in a shared project (Council, M. P., 2008). These principles include:

- 1) **The community is the expert**
 Identifying the talents and assets within the community: Identifying the talents and assets within the community can create a sense of community ownership in the project.
- 2) **Creating a place, not just a design**
 To make an under-performing space into a vital "place," physical elements must be introduced that make people welcome and comfortable, such as seating and landscaping.
- 3) **Looking for partners**
 Partnering with local institutions, museums, and schools is crucial for the future success and image of a public space improvement project. They can provide support and help get the project off the ground.
- 4) **Observing**
 Observing how people use public spaces can help assess what makes them work or not work. This observation will help identify activities that are missing and what might be incorporated.
- 5) **Have a vision**
 A vision for any public space should come from each individual community but should include an idea of what kinds of activities might happen in the space, a view that the space should be comfortable and have a good image, and that it should be an important place where people want to be.
- 6) **"It Can't Be Done"**
 Creating good public spaces is inevitably about encountering obstacles, as no one in either the public or private sectors has the job or responsibility to "create places." Starting with small scale community-nurturing improvements can demonstrate the importance of "places" and help overcome obstacles.
- 7) **Embracing the process of re-launching a community**
 By embracing the process of re-launching a community, communities can successfully integrate different needs and points of view into a shared project.
- 8) **Form supports function**
 As it is determined by input from the community and potential partners, understanding other spaces' functions, experimentation, and overcoming obstacles.
- 9) **Money is not the issue**
 As elements like vendors, cafes, flowers, and seating are not expensive once basic infrastructure is in place. Community involvement in programming and activities can also reduce costs.
- 10) **You are never finished**
 Good public spaces that respond to community needs and opinions require attention, as amenities wear out and need change. Being open to change and having management flexibility is crucial for building great public spaces and cities.
- 11) **Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper (LQC)**
 Starting with the Petunias: Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper (LQC) approach is essential for experimenting with short-term improvements that can be tested and refined over many years. LQC projects involve short-term improvements and programs

that require a short timeline and a small budget, but they are not an end in themselves. Examples of improvements include seating, outdoor cafes, public art, stripping of crosswalks and pedestrian havens, community gardens, and murals, as shown in figure (5).



Fig. 5: Short-term placemaking activations turns spaces into a venue of special events

12) **Triangulate**

As shown in figure (6), triangulation is the process by which external stimulus provides a linkage between people and prompts strangers to talk to each other. An effective pop-up project is usable and interactive, especially when creating a place, space, or destination. Sticky places are destinations in themselves, not just locations to pass by or travel through (PPS, 2015).

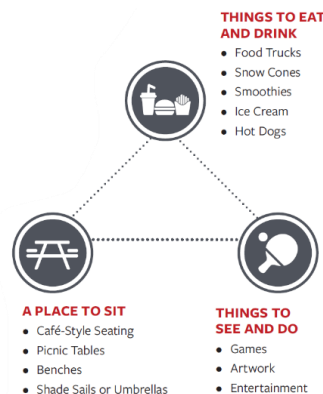


Fig. 6: Features of triangulation process

13) **The power of 10+**

The Power of 10+ concept suggests that places thrive when users have a range of reasons (10+) to be there, such as a place to sit, playgrounds, art, music, food, history, and people to meet, as shown in figure (7). Users who use space most regularly will be the best source of ideas for which uses will work best. Examples of great public spaces include parks with fountains, playgrounds, popcorn vendors, libraries with storytelling hours for kids, sidewalk cafes, bus stops, bike trails, and ice cream parlors (PPS, 2015).

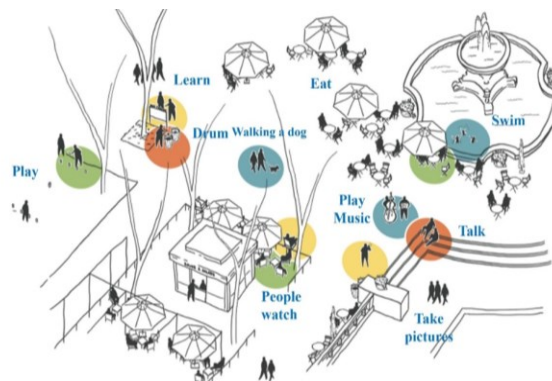


Fig. 7: The power of 10+ concept

C. Types of Placemaking

Wyckoff, M. A. (2014) categorizes placemaking into standard, creative, tactical, and strategic, as shown in figure (8). Standard placemaking involves discussions on tactical, creative, and strategic aspects of creating and improving spaces. Tactical placemaking revitalizes public spaces using innovative interventions, creative placemaking improves a place's economy, sociability, and livability, and strategic placemaking promotes economic expansion through infrastructure construction. All three focus on tangible objects and individuals, considering physical characteristics, practicality, and usage.



Fig. 8: Types of placemaking

1) Tactical Placemaking

Tactical placemaking is a technique that involves small-scale improvements that can lead to larger investments, often focusing on do-it-yourself projects. This approach has low risks and costs, as it allows for the execution of projects with minimal political and financial obligations. It also acts as a catalyst for energy generation within the community by implementing short-term commitment activities that are both viable and can start right now (Lak, A., & Kheibari, S. Z., 2020).



Fig. 9: Short term improvements for tactical placemaking

2) Creative Placemaking

Creative placemaking involves integrating arts, culture, and creative thinking into different areas of the built environment, bringing life and energy to public spaces, as shown in figure (10). This concept aims to rejuvenate buildings and urban landscapes, enhance local enterprise sustainability and public safety, and cultivate a sense of unity among a heterogeneous population (Courage, C., et al., 2021).



Fig. 10: Umbrella sky alley reshapes the way to experience public spaces known as creative placemaking

3) Strategic Placemaking

Strategic placemaking involves carefully designing and improving public spaces to support a community or organization's strategic aims. This strategy involves 5- to 15-year relationships with government, corporate, and non-profit sectors, producing more extensive and less site-specific initiatives than others. The main purpose is to attract highly trained people who want to live there and develop a presence which will strengthen and expand the community rather than change it, as shown in figure (11). The main purpose is to

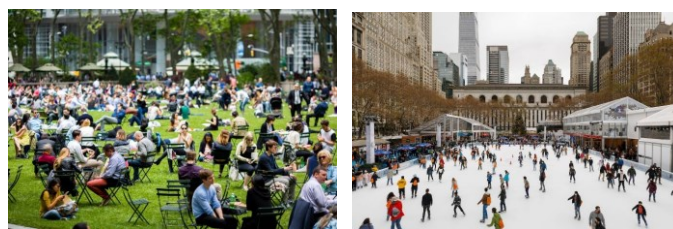


Fig. 11: A vibrant multi-functional park for community gatherings

boost the local economy, economic value, and community pride, as well as recruit more skilled workers and visitors.

D. Placemaking Process

Placemaking projects are unique due to their specific challenges. We must implement specific measures to ensure an inclusive process acceptable to diverse stakeholders. As shown in figure (12), project for Public Spaces (PPS) uses a five-step process to get more people involved in observing, planning, and shaping a place (PPS, 2017).

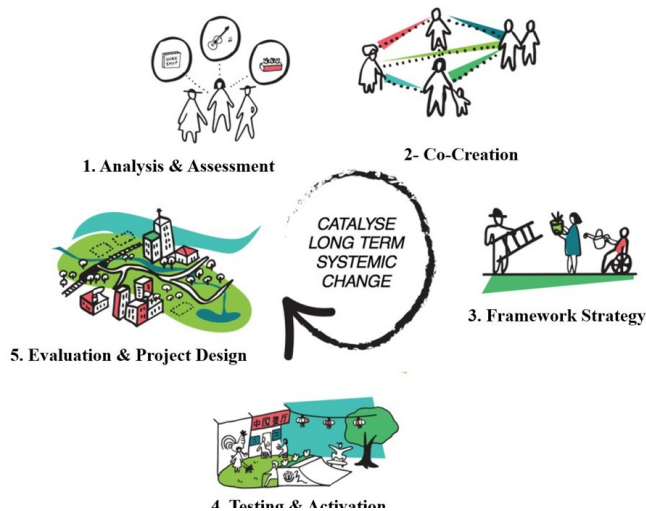


Fig. 12: Placemaking process

1) Step (1): Analysis and evaluation of various aspects

During the initial phase of urban planning, the city administration must make decisions and inquiries to determine whether to manage the task internally or enlist external experts. The municipal planning department is responsible for ensuring the participation of local collaborators by facilitating access to information and networks. During the scoping phase, establish a local support group (LSG) and stakeholder map to ensure a thorough understanding of the planning area.

Effective communication is crucial, and stakeholders' contact information should be entered into a database. Interviews with stakeholders and professionals are conducted to enhance understanding of the community and pinpoint opportunities and obstacles. These interviews help establish a preliminary list of emergent topics that will serve as a guide for the planning process.

Community members, such as community groups and private landowners, have excellent local knowledge and can benefit from improving their open spaces. Professional experts such as architects, urban planners, historians, and artists are critical in assisting with the planning and implementation process. They can assist with design, technical expertise, and drawings, ensuring the respect and preservation of the historic and local specifics of a place. Architecture, planning, landscaping, or transportation engineering students can also assist communities with creating idea sketches and technical drawings.

Local government officials play a crucial role in facilitating the best placemaking opportunities and ensuring compliance with relevant laws and ordinances during the placemaking process. A community's plans may require their approval to comply with these laws, and it is crucial to verify their alignment with official procedures before finalizing any work.

2) Step (2): Co-creation

Step two of the planning process involves co-creation workshops with various stakeholder groups, including institutions, local communities, and academicians. These workshops aim to gain a comprehensive understanding of the

local situation, translate knowledge into action, and gather community ideas for integration into the planning process. The workshops identify emerging topics, opportunities, and current issues. The results of these workshops are beneficial for the subsequent phase, which involves developing a framework strategy. Tools can generate an inventory of the area's attributes, including infrastructure, land attributes, urban design, and accessibility, which serves as a foundation for establishing a shared vision for the future.

3) Step (3): Develop Framework Strategy

The third phase of the project involves developing an integrative strategy for the future of space and its surroundings based on the knowledge gained during the initial two phases. This strategy pinpoints potential subprojects and immediate solutions within the region, adaptable to the insights gathered in this phase. The Framework Strategy serves as a roadmap for future urban development.

4) Step (4): Testing and Activation

During the testing and activation phase, suggested subprojects and long-term interventions are evaluated in practice using short-term measures. An open call is issued for temporary, short-term projects in public spaces and adjacent vacant ground-floor areas, inviting placemakers from the city to contribute proposals. The planning team selects the most appropriate proposals for testing and support, aiming to determine if it is feasible to implement long-term planning strategies using low-cost alternatives.

This phase serves multiple objectives, including signaling an intention of redevelopment, building a sense of community, activating stakeholders, and testing different solutions in practice. The planning team meticulously monitors interventions to ensure accurate documentation and assessment, which will play a role in the ultimate project design.

5) Step (5): Evaluation and Project Design

In the evaluation and project design phase, the planning team collaborates with authorities to develop design-based solutions and construct detailed scenarios using 3D visualizations, maps, and drawings. Together with the municipality and other stakeholders, we compare and evaluate these scenarios to determine which project warrants further development. Local stakeholder groups (LSGs) must actively participate in this process.

E. Participatory Approaches for Developing Public Spaces

Technical standards have traditionally driven the design of public spaces, with community organizations playing a limited or reactive role. However, the concept of "bottom-up planning" or "collaborative" has emerged, emphasizing the importance of community involvement in the development of public services and spaces. This approach aims to transfer decision-making processes regarding public spaces to community organizations and close the distance between relevant actors, such as individuals, politicians, and planning and design professionals.

As shown in figure (13), the "participation pyramid" demonstrates the increasing impact of citizen participation in

placemaking projects. Transitioning from information sharing to collaborative partnerships and resident-led initiatives can more accurately reflect the diverse needs and aspirations of local communities, supporting a sense of sustainability and ownership. This transition has resulted in changes in the roles of government and other actors to support and facilitate increased resident involvement (Remesar, A., et al. (2002).



Fig. 13: Placemaking participation pyramid

1) A bottom-up approach

Local communities play a significant role in place-making, endeavoring to enhance and transform their surroundings with minimal or no involvement from other stakeholders, utilizing a bottom-up approach. Place-making activities conducted under this methodology are predominantly informal and tactical and often employ temporary, low-tech, and small-scale interventions, including cultural festivals and artworks, as shown in figure (14). The collective "mundane" activities of ordinary residents in their communities, who actively participate in the entire place-making process, also demonstrate place-making (Akbar, P. N. G., & Edelenbos, J., 2021).



Fig. 14: People of all ages participate in painting the intersection

2) A collaborative approach

A collaborative approach involves diverse stakeholders, including communities and experts, at various phases of place-making. A successful placemaking initiative necessitates a combination of components, including an open-minded decision-maker, a passionate community advocating for place-based ideas, and technical professionals who can transform ideas into action, as shown in figure (15). The formation of this ensemble is not an organic process but requires the concerted effort of a team of individuals (Cohen, M., et al., 2018).



Fig. 15: A collaborative placemaking approach with neighborhood residents, Beirut

3) Top-down approach

Decision makers often use a top-down approach, involving both the private sector and government agencies in delivering a place's vision. Large cities often perceive the government as both a decision-maker and a client, tasked with ensuring the community's well-being and making decisions that serve the public interest. Despite private sector-led development, the government still holds the authority and power in decision-making regarding the location, regardless of whether it is a profit or non-profit organization.

In conclusion, participatory methods for designing public spaces have become increasingly important in recent years, with the government playing a crucial role in ensuring their well-being and sustainability. By incorporating community involvement and a top-down approach, these methods can help create more sustainable and resilient public spaces (Teernstra, A. B., & Pinkster, F. M., 2015).

I. DISCUSSION

Placemaking practices exhibit the ability to classify public space initiatives and their corresponding governance structures into four distinct categories, which encompass a broad spectrum. Typically, project-driven initiatives are the result of hierarchical, bureaucratic leadership that places the highest priority on cost-effective and timely delivery. Spaces that comply with standardized procedures without regard for the unique requirements or preferences of the local community are frequently the outcome of such processes. Conversely, discipline-led projects, despite their aesthetic allure and increased value, frequently depend on the singular vision of design professionals and disciplinary divisions, resulting in public spaces that may not function as communal gathering areas. On the other hand, certain design professionals are increasingly embracing the place-sensitive approach, a deliberate effort to integrate community input, even though the decision-making process primarily relies on the expertise of architects and designers.

A truly well-placed strategy, in contrast, prioritizes a collective commitment to achieve place-centric outcomes through community engagement, rather than solely depending on community feedback. This method renders physical proximity into a shared purpose, thereby transforming the planning and management of public spaces into a collaborative endeavor that cultivates shared values and social capital. Local participants who are involved in this process develop a sense of ownership and are more likely to actively maintain the public space that results. This fosters a more profound sense of community investment and responsibility for the shared environment.

1) An Integrative Placemaking Approach

From the previous discussion, it is shown that urban placemaking is a multidisciplinary research domain as it concentrates not just on the physical element but considers the non-physical elements as well as the overlap among them. Placemaking can be categorized into various integrated aspects that contribute to the creation of vibrant and inclusive urban spaces, as shown in figure (16).



Fig. 16: An integrative placemaking approach

a) The functional aspect:

Emphasizes the importance of designing spaces that are not only aesthetically pleasing but also practical and user-friendly. Incorporating elements that serve the needs of the community ensures that the space is utilized effectively.

b) The social aspect:

Focuses on fostering community engagement and creating spaces that promote social interaction and cohesion. By involving the community in the design and activation of these spaces, a sense of ownership and belonging is cultivated, leading to the development of strong social ties within the public space.

c) The cultural aspect

Celebrates diversity and heritage by incorporating elements that reflect the unique identity and history of the community. Integrating cultural influences into the design and programming of public spaces helps preserve traditions and promotes cultural exchange among users.

d) The economic aspect

Revitalize public spaces and stimulate local economies by attracting businesses, tourists, and visitors to the area. Well-designed and activated spaces can increase property values, spur entrepreneurship, and create job opportunities, contributing to the overall economic growth of the community.

e) The environmental aspect

Underscores the importance of sustainable and green design practices. By incorporating green infrastructure, promoting walkability, and enhancing biodiversity, placemaking initiatives can contribute to environmental sustainability and resilience, creating healthier and more livable urban environments.

II. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, placemaking represents a holistic approach to urban design that goes beyond aesthetics to create places that are functional, socially engaging, culturally rich, economically viable, and environmentally sustainable. By embracing the principles of placemaking and involving the community in the

process, cities can transform underutilized spaces into vibrant hubs of activity and connectivity.

Through tactical, creative, and strategic placemaking interventions, communities can reimagine and revitalize their public spaces, making them more inclusive, accessible, and resilient. By considering the diverse aspects of placemaking — functional, social, cultural, economic, and environmental — urban planners and designers can create places that reflect the unique identity and aspirations of the communities they serve.

Ultimately, placemaking offers a framework for creating people-centric and thriving urban environments that enhance quality of life, promote social cohesion, and foster sustainable development. By prioritizing placemaking principles in urban planning and design, cities can build resilient, vibrant, and inclusive spaces that benefit residents, visitors, and the environment alike.

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