

# Design for Placemaking

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## 1 Introduction

Placemaking has been defined as the process of building communities around a place, working with communities to build urban space into home-like places (Project for Public Spaces (PPS) in the 1980s). Moreover, Placemaking has been intended as a transformative strategy focused on people, aiming at strengthening social relationships to share meanings about a place (Buser et al., 2013 in Romeiro, 2017). But what are the role and the specific strategies that Design can play and implement in Placemaking processes? A Cumulus Working Group, named Design for Placemaking, has been recently launched to address this topic from an education and training perspective. On the occasion of the IASDR conference, we want to enlarge this perspective by focusing on research activities and providing a theoretical understanding of the issue. Starting from the preliminary case study carried out, which involved different international design schools and institutions (e.g. George Brown College, ELISAVA, Tongji University, etc.), we want to grasp a reviewed theoretical understanding of Design for Placemaking focusing on research activities using a Grounded Theory perspective.

## 2 Design for Placemaking

The concepts behind Placemaking originated in the 1960s. We can identify Jane Jacobs and William H. Whyte as those who offered innovative ideas and approaches on how to “think” of cities and design them starting from people (LeGates & Stout, 2020); Jacobs, indeed, supported the idea that people are the owners of streets (“Eyes on the Street”), while Whyte focused the attention on the importance of creating social life in public spaces. This focus on people and their participation has been stressed in more recent reasonings; for example, as Landry highlighted, a creative city should encourage people to work with their imagination going beyond the urban engineering paradigm in city-making (2012). Design, in all its forms (service, product, graphic, etc.) (Manzini et al., 2023), can fill and coherently act

in a frame where policy, planning (engineering, architecture, urbanism), and civil society encounter, fostering the communication between different stakeholders; moreover, design can facilitate creative patterns of use of spaces, which can become places thanks to the involvement of physical, cultural, and social identities into the equation.

The provisional definition of Design for Placemaking, which we started our conversation with and the selection and analysis of relevant case studies, sees it as a collaborative process by which we can shape our public realm by acting on “soft” infrastructural and intangible (cultural, relational, policy, etc.) levels to maximize communal value/common good and sustainability in a community-centricity perspective and configure, re-configure and re-signify the space (from space to place).

## **2.1 Places: Spaces for/by Communities**

The Design for Placemaking panel addresses different topics proposed in the IASDR conference, particularly those discussed in the Communities and Spaces and Services tracks.

Being members of a community demands being active placemakers, which means participating with others in thoughtful, careful, and responsible actions (Schneekloth and Shibley, 1995). But what is a community? We cannot address here this very intricate socio-philosophical topic. Still, we can say that, if not well re-defined, this is a risky concept, especially nowadays where societies as identities are multi-composed and need to be considered in all their complexity. The concept of community, therefore, serves to recall the challenged human rights and contemporary questions of identity and the control of power (Bagnasco, 1999). Said that, (Design for) Placemaking is a holistic and operative concept that can be associated with small-scale grassroots activism to improve public spaces (LeGates & Stout, 2020); for these reasons, Design for Placemaking includes a bottom-up approach, where end users are involved in different phases of the project: from the idea generation to the managing of solutions. Community Centered Design (CCD) is the proper approach for Design for Placemaking since it scales methods and tools of User Centered Design (Meroni, 2008) at a plural level. This approach is crucial in the Design for Placemaking, which must rely on ethnography, co-creation, and co-design tools and activities to envision and implement (when possible) new solutions “coherent with the context and allowing non-designers to apply their knowledge and professional skills to the issues discussed.” (Cantù et al., 2013: 2).

Paraphrasing the words of LeGates and Stout (2020), Design for Placemaking takes a space to create a place to give shape to a community and a community to make a place.

## **2.2 Aims and discussion**

The Design for Placemaking panel aims at investigating on a possible specific design perspective about the activities and interventions included in its renewed definition. Starting from the presentation of the analysis of case studies collected through the involvement of the Cumulus Working Group members, we will collectively discuss on the roles and strategies that Design can play and put in place in Placemaking processes. Several experts and scholars will participate in the panel, such as Luigi Ferrara (George Brown College), Albert Fuster Martí (ELISAVA), Ezio Manzini, Pierre Echard (ESA Saint-Luc Bruxelles), Anna Seravali (The School of Arts and Communication Malmö University). Here are only some of the questions around which we will articulate a collective discussion on Design for Placemaking:

- How does Creative Activism enter/can enter these processes? What are the boundaries of the design action?
- How Design for Placemaking can fully enter and be considered in policy making?
- Who participates? How to really give a voice to marginalized populations?
- Do designers have to design “everything”, or are blank spaces for free interpretation needed?
- What about non-urban areas? Are they included in this discourse?
- How to go beyond the human-centredness of Design for Placemaking activities?
- Does (local) history matter, or is it a limit to envision new/different futures?
- How can new technologies, such as AI, improve Design for Placemaking practices?
- What’s the role of arts in Design for Placemaking?
- What is the scale of Design for Placemaking projects? Are these projects scalable?

We encourage the attendance of IASDR participants who have developed theoretical and practical experience in Design for Placemaking topics as presented here. However, we welcome all IASDR participants interested in these topics who want to improve their knowledge and participate in the discussion.

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### About the Authors:

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**Anna Meroni:** Professor Meroni, from Politecnico di Milano School of Design, is P.I. of different research projects in service and strategic design for sustainability to foster social innovation, participation and local development. With a specific expertise in co-design strategies, methods and tools, with regard to the specific topic of this panel, she is proponent and co-coordinator of an international Cumulus Working Group on Design for Placemaking. She is Deputy of the School of Design of Politecnico di Milano.

**Daniela Selloni:** Assistant professor, service designer and researcher at the POLIMI DESIS Lab (part of the Department of Design of Politecnico di Milano and founder of the network DESIS, Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability). Her research mainly focuses on service design, social innovation and on methods and tools of co-design. She has worked on numerous national and international research projects, dealing with placemaking, urban commons, design for democracy, design for policy, sharing economy.

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**Luigi Ferrara:** Architect, designer, educator and storyteller. He is the Dean of the Centre for Arts, Design & Information Technology at George Brown College in Toronto, Canada and Director of the internationally acclaimed Institute without Boundaries (IwB). He has served as President and Senator of Icsid and lectures around the world on topics as diverse as design and sustainability, design management, urban planning, information technology, digital media, telecommunications and the network society.

**Albert Fuster:** Architect and PhD in Architecture by ETSAB-UPC, Barcelona. He has been the Academic Director of ELISAVA, Barcelona School of Design and Engineering since 2014. He has lectured on art, design and architecture in international schools and conferences. He launched the platform Design for City Making with professor Ezio Manzini and is co-director with Roger Paez. He has collaborated with Ferran Adrià and elBulli team since 2013 in the project for the new creative lab in El Bulli restaurant in Cala Montjoi (Roses, Catalonia).