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BOOK REVIEW

Planning and Place in the City–Mapping Place Identity

Marichela Sepe
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'Place-making', 'place identity' and 'sense of place' have been widely used by cities in their urban design visions and strategies. Often, however, these notions have been reduced to mere buzzwords that remain undefined and somewhat abstract. Other dimensions of urban design have progressively overtaken 'place-making' as a design objective, while contemporary societies have become increasingly engaged in delivering functional and environmental targets. The reduced sensitivity to, or awareness of, 'place identity' has manifested itself in the built environment, with the tendency of some design professionals to design independently of context, reducing architecture to symbolic motifs rather than place-specific responses. These phenomena are particularly relevant in the face of our technological age and wider global forces that have broken down boundaries and often created homogenized urban environments at the expense of local distinctiveness. The virtual infrastructure that dominates the contemporary city provides a significant challenge to the physical concept of place by virtue of its nature, due to which, concepts of distance and time cease to retain the significance they once had.

In this book, Marichela Sepe skilfully conceptualizes, defines and tangibly analyzes 'place-making', through firmly grounded investigative analysis and an innovative approach that identifies qualities of places that may be assessed—distinct qualities that create meaningful places from otherwise anonymous spaces. The contemporary city is a complex entity due to its different layers and the rapid change that characterizes it. This complexity makes it harder to extract the relevance of 'identity' to urban design theory, and even more so to design practice, which is ultimately the main shaper of our built environment. This book transforms a potentially abstract notion that is 'identity' into an accessible concept that individuals may relate to, through the discussion of how identity may be (1) identified, (2) represented and (3) shaped.

Ultimately, place-making, as with good urban design, is measured against the degree of relevance that it has to individuals. This implies the need to go beyond mere physical site attributes (although one must not underestimate their important role in place identity) to a renewed attention on perception. In this sense, the central human focus of Sepe's research brings the discussion of urban design back to its roots, rebuilding on the strong legacy left by Kevin Lynch and Gordon Cullen.

'Place' and 'place identity' are accurately developed in the first section of the book by means of a well-structured account that discusses the different characters of places until arriving at the antithesis of place—non-place. Sepe redefines place in contemporary terms, in recognition of changing societal realities, and illustrates how the fundamental theories of Lynch and Cullen must be rethought and

updated in the light of the increased complexity of urban settlements. She neatly brings together different contributions into a thematic literature analysis, citing works by both theorists and practitioners (including the latter category is a wise decision, since it makes this account more tangible). It comprises an overview of different approaches to place analysis and contemporary methods and techniques—the 'virtual' (notably the work of W.J. Mitchell and Carlo Ratti), the 'lateral' (Stefano Boemi), the 'people-oriented' (Jan Gehl), the 'multi-scale' (MVRDV), the 'configurational' (Bill Hillier and the Space Syntax Laboratory) and Sepe's own 'complex-sensitive' approach, which in turn is the prelude to the Place Maker.

The Place Maker's utility is twofold—method and output. In terms of method, it manages to use different tools for place analysis and data collection, framing such data in the context of more traditional methods. It comprises nine phases with specific outputs every time. It is interesting to observe how the output *per se* evolves as the method progresses and acquires further layers of complexity until the final output is generated. While being useful, its quantitative component—namely the 'index of sustainability for place identity'—supports the broader qualitative discussion and does not override it.

In terms of output, the Place Maker produces two maps—analysis and design. The maps are inclusive, built in dialogue with local residents and visitors and in turn they translate into useful tools for practitioners. This has utility in future planning and design but it is also a tool for further dialogue with the end users themselves. The tool's dual purpose is one of its strongest points—its ability to relate to a community, who have shaped a place and who are key contributors to its success, as well as planners and administrators with whom key decisions in the transformation of urban settlements lie. In this manner, the Place Maker is a uniquely 'accessible' tool for technical and non-technical individuals alike, in contrast with some other methods that at times tend to be too scientific or abstract.

Part 3 of the book comprises case studies that put the Place Maker into perspective. The diversity of the case studies demonstrates the robustness of the Place Maker as it adapts to different circumstances and requirements. The case studies are rich in description and are vividly recounted in all their minute details, allowing readers to immerse themselves fully in the context being discussed without the need for having previously experienced the place in question. The case studies illustrate the utility of the complex maps of analysis (Phase 5 of the Place Maker method) in the identification of identity resources (Phase 6), which in turn develops into a questionnaire for planning and design interventions (Phase 7) and its eventual complex map (Phase 8), the latter containing a number of sensitive interventions that respond to the specificities of place.

Sepe writes in a clear and comprehensive manner, sub-dividing her discussions in short chapters, which allow for concepts to be easily synthesized. However, I felt that some of the 'complex maps of analysis' in the presented case studies were small and did not permit ease of readability (although some of them contained blown-up segments). This is a minor shortcoming in a book that is otherwise well illustrated.

One could further argue that, as a mode of representation, the planimetric format of the Place Maker's output constitutes somewhat of an anti-climax to the entire book. Maps are useful to synthesize large volumes of information. In addition, having a similar output from the different Place Maker phases allows for the cross-referencing of data, as well as the ability to 'add on' further layers of

complexity to the initial maps until the final output is produced. Nonetheless, it is a pity that three-dimensional considerations, which are critical in terms of legibility and perception, are ultimately represented in two dimensions. This limitation is partly offset by the development of the Place Maker software, which is also used to collate the analytical outputs throughout the course of the different research phases.

The 12 concluding principles for place identity enhancement provide useful pointers for future urban design policy making. Sepe describes these principles as being a 'checklist' for urban projects. Although I am generally wary of 'one-size-fits-all' checklists, in this case the principles become a further illustration of how well-grounded in practice the Place Maker method is, by translating into 'achievable' terms. These unassuming 'principles for place identity enhancement' are broad enough to be universally applicable and may in turn be easily adaptable to very specific contexts. They provide a fitting end to this well-developed book.

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