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Displacemaking

AS TWO FORMER CHICAGOANS WHO THINK ABOUT THE POLITICS OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN AND BEYOND CHICAGO, WE DECIDED IN THE EARLY SUMMER OF 2015 TO STAGE THE KIND OF DIALOGUE WE WOULD BE EAGER TO HEAR AT THE CHICAGO ARCHITECTURE BIENNIAL. THE STARTING POINT WAS OUR SHARED CONCERN WITH THE NOW FIRMLY ESTABLISHED SET OF PRACTICES KNOWN AS “PLACEMAKING.” IN ORDER TO GROUND OUR CONVERSATION, WE READ TWO RECENT WHITE PAPERS ON THE SUBJECT, “PLACES IN THE MAKING” AND “CREATIVE PLACEMAKING.” PLACEMAKING, AS ONE OF THESE PAPERS DEFINED IT, INVOLVES “THE DELIBERATE SHAPING OF AN ENVIRONMENT TO FACILITATE SOCIAL INTERACTION AND IMPROVE A COMMUNITY’S QUALITY OF LIFE.” PRACTICAL IN SCOPE, THESE PAPERS SYNTHESIZED COMMONLY REFERENCED LITERATURE AND CASE STUDIES. OUR HOPE IS THAT THIS CONVERSATION CAN PROMPT OTHERS TO DO THE SAME AS WE ALL CONSIDER THE ROLE OF PLACEMAKING IN CHICAGO, THE BIENNIAL, AND BEYOND.

—CATHERINE FENNELL AND DANIEL TUCKER

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Catherine Fennell: One can’t follow the politics of urban redevelopment in Chicago without coming across conversations about the importance of “place” or “placemaking.” These conversations seem to have picked up especially in the last five or six years, in tandem with the “Great Recession.” Yet these terms don’t seem that prevalent in New York, the city where I currently reside, at least not in everyday talk. What should we make of the tractability of these terms in some cities and not others?

Daniel Tucker: Chicago is a city that uniquely combines (some of) the wealth of Manhattan with the abandonment of Detroit. This opens up the city as a policy lab where there are resources to test ideas, and disinvested contexts and populations to test them on. That combination accounts for top-down policy experiments as well as some of the more quasi-grassroots interventions. I say “quasi” because the grassroots is a bit more embedded within power structures in Chicago than in a city with a more thorough abandonment. So placemaking might emerge in Chicago as a rhetorical bridge between those different sectors. That said, I kind of disagree with your map. I think talk about placemaking is much more common in other, smaller cities such as Minneapolis, Houston, San Francisco, and Philadelphia, where I live now after fourteen years in

Chicago. It seems like NYC has plenty of placemaking projects, but they are much more integrated into the logic of planning there as opposed to being layered in as a special project like in the context of Chicago. Bloomberg could be considered a placemaker, while Giuliani was a “broken windows” guy (that might pave the way for placemaking)? Bryant Park, Project for Public Spaces, and Times Square are all proto-placemaking efforts, no? Maybe the term is less commonly used because of the ubiquity of the concepts?

CF: Chicago’s long been a space for producing knowledge about urbanism and experimental interventions that would retool urban life. You see it already in the writings of the Chicago School sociologists. More recently, you see it in the city’s ambitious public housing reforms of the past twenty years, in which public officials, private developers, and philanthropic foundations partnered to refine redevelopment approaches that might prove to be useful in other cities. So, for instance, consider how staff and trustees of Detroit’s Skillman Foundation recently looked to Chicago’s MacArthur Foundation for “placemaking strategies” that would mitigate the effects of the foreclosure crisis at the neighborhood level. Skillman was looking at MacArthur’s “New Communities Program.” This program emerged when that foundation sought to stimulate community-based quality-of-life planning initiatives as public housing came down all around that city. Terms like “community” and “place” resonate emotionally, but they also need to be situated within an inter-urban economy of knowledge and development practices.

What’s certainly ubiquitous in New York is just how much private interests are able to capitalize on novel development opportunities. The case studies we read were all clear that placemaking projects and the “vibrant places” they create have quite quantifiable returns. For instance, we learned that “in just the two years following [Bryant Park’s] restoration, rental activity in the area increased by 60 percent.” Seems like a winning prospect.

But it’s important to note here that a private corporation drove this restoration, not a city government’s parks and recreation department. And here’s where imaginations around development, placemaking, and urban or regional competition seem to overlap: If cities that attract tourists and a young, talented workforce have enticing public places like an elevated rail line reimagined as a park (New York’s High Line), or a derelict city park reinvented as a premier events and gathering space (New York’s Bryant Park), wouldn’t it be good for other cities to have that too, especially if they will become competitive in an era of inter-urban competition? So Chicago got its Millennium Park about a decade ago, and just this summer, “The 606,” an elevated rail line converted to a walking and biking trail. The 606 is being touted as a premier placemaking project, yet it hasn’t escaped those living along it that property values and property taxes will rise. In the US, we need to recognize that placemaking is first and foremost a development activity that emerged during the very decades we saw federal and state investments in urban infrastructure, housing, and social programming diminish.

I want to pick up on your observation about placemaking and broken windows policing. All the cases we read emphasized the need for “vibrant” spaces and talked about a diversity of users and uses. But who and what counts as “vibrant”? We read that Bryant Park “provides much-needed amenities to

anyone who wants to use them,” including “award-winning restrooms.” We read that it “welcomes the homeless—assuming the vast number of other visitors will diminish any negative effect the homeless may have.” After a day of working in the public library in Bryant Park, I can go outside into the park that surrounds it, sit on one of those folding green chairs, and unwind. But attempt to stretch out on the lawn? I promise you, someone will be by to tell you to sit up. Bryant Park Corporation might officially welcome the homeless, yet it doesn’t welcome homeless-like activities and their potential “negative effect.” Similarly, a friend who lives along The 606 stirred up ire in an online forum last year when she asked about the lack of public restrooms on or along the trail. The responses ranged everywhere from worries that such bathrooms would attract bad elements, to admonitions that well-mannered children should learn “to hold it,” to speculations that children should just ask business proprietors near the trail to let them use the restrooms. But as my friend pointed out to me, the areas surrounding the western segments of the trail are still very much associated with gang activity. Young people who hail from there—so, lower-income Latino youth—are not likely to be welcome to use a bathroom in a café, assuming of course, that such cafés are even there. “Vibrant for whom, and toward what end?” need to be questions we ask of all placemaking projects.

But I also think we should avoid simply reducing this very complex story to big interests, real estate developers, or philanthropic donors. Clearly, placemaking projects strike a chord for many people, in many different cities. Otherwise they wouldn’t take hold or be so exportable. Those chairs all over Bryant Park? They’re light. I can pick them up. I can reposition them to get the best view of what’s going on. I feel like I have some say, some autonomy, some ownership over how I use, or in the language of the cases we read, “activate” that space. But it’s important to ask about the relationship between the demand for places that (for some) feel authentic and flexible, and the demand for urbanites—citizens, workers, neighbors, etc.—who bring flexibility and authenticity to the table. It’s especially important to ask these questions as the kind of large-scale public works projects or social investments we associate with a different era of city building recede further into the past.

DT: The Creative Placemaking paper we read was directed toward advocating for a more responsive public policy to support these initiatives that would increase the livability and competitiveness of places. I wonder what you think about city “ranking” as a motivating factor for these kinds of initiatives? There are obvious economic advantages that converge on places based on their tourism, academic, quality-of-life rankings—and yet these rankings have almost no rigor or regulation. As a researcher, how do you feel about the impact these practices have on planning and public policy?

CF: Well, a quick Internet search yields a host of such rankings. I’m an anthropologist, a field that wears its qualitative heart on its sleeve. I’m not up to or for the task of making such rankings accurate or rigorous. I don’t really know if Lafayette, Louisiana, really is America’s “happiest” city; Boulder, Colorado, its “thinnest”; Boston, its “smartest”; San Francisco its “most creative”; or Washington, D.C., its most “ambitious.” Yet it’s remarkable that places built to facilitate modes of production that are no longer viable make the list of Ameri-

ca's "dumbest" cities. Certainly any study that argues that a high concentration of people with college or doctoral degrees makes a city "smart" (as opposed to "dumb") should give us pause. What exactly are we measuring here? Valuations of post-secondary education? Access to post-secondary education? Educational achievement suited for the types of work that is most lucrative in a contemporary economy? I'd want to know a little more.

The pieces we read together all argued that artistic practice can be harnessed toward placemaking, and several made a strong case that placemaking is inextricable from the activity of redevelopment and small-scale entrepreneurialism. You're an artist who has thought long and hard about development, but you're also an artist who has been pulled into institutions with concerted commitments to "creative placemaking." I'm thinking of your residency at The University of Chicago's Gray Center for Arts and Inquiry, just one of the new initiatives happening on campus along with its "Arts Incubator." After fifty-plus years of cutting itself off from its surroundings in ways that advanced the devaluation of areas to the west and south, my alma mater has recently been capitalizing on real estate investment and development opportunities in its own backyard. One way it is doing this is by promoting "creative placemaking" projects on the peripheries (or frontiers) of its expansion.

For example, one of the first instructions I got as a newly arriving graduate student in the fall of 2001 at an orientation session for new students was to avoid waiting at the "desolate" Green Line train and bus stop on Garfield Boulevard and Washington Park. Today, if I need to pass some time while waiting for the bus to campus, I can stop in at a quirky storefront café right next door to the Arts Incubator. It is named Currency Exchange, after a business that used to occupy this site—a one-stop financial services station for people too poor and too disenfranchised to have a regular bank account. Such businesses typically charge hefty fees for services like cashing a paycheck or paying a utility bill. While waiting for the bus, I can get a nice cup of coffee or a really good biscuit, a nod to culinary traditions of black migrants who settled the South Side of Chicago just as ethnic whites abandoned it. While there, I might take in the work of local artists, or an event featuring discussions about community-driven arts initiatives. Theaster Gates, a well-known artist who is also on faculty, is the brainchild of this space and its programming, but the university actually owns the building. How can or should we draw firm lines between development, entrepreneurialism, and artistic practice?

DT: There are many conceptions of what it means to be an artist, and certainly the identity of an artist is different than a coherent definition of art, despite many definitions leaning toward art being anything that is made by a self-identified artist. I recently read a piece by Willa Cather from 1920 on "The Art of Fiction," where she explains, "Writing ought either to be the manufacture of stories for which there is a market demand—a business as safe and commendable as making soap or breakfast foods—or it should be an art, which is always a search for something for which there is no market demand, something new and untried, where the values are intrinsic and have nothing to do with standardized values." I think Cather's range of what writing ought to be corresponds with the broad definition of art that is utilized in placemaking literature. For those advocating placemaking, great importance is not placed on the content or

form of art—the point is to get artists’ bodies into particular contexts. Literally described in “Creative Placemaking” as “an entrepreneurial asset ripe for development,” those bodies represent latent capital, with the caveat later acknowledged that “artists are twice as likely as workers overall to have completed college degrees...yet artists’ median annual income lags behind that of other professional workers by 19.4 percent.”

If you are an artist working today, you cannot ignore developers and policy-makers’ instrumentalization of your entrepreneurial yet precarious position. You must make an effort to negotiate your relationship to concepts like “creative industries,” “placemaking,” and “civic engagement” in the same way that artists have also (and continue to need to) grapple with categories like “beauty,” “politics,” “identity,” “community,” and “autonomy.” For instance, there are those artists that continue to advocate for autonomy, yet their bodies are as functional as any other body as an “asset ripe for development,” and so it is irresponsible to act as if that isn’t taking place. Considering that, I am not sure that a firm line between the noncommercial and the commercial is any more possible than one between the autonomous and the instrumentalized. But I do think that tension requires artists to be strategic about their engagement with Creative Placemaking and the like in order to both advocate for art and deepen democratic participation and redistribution of resources.

CF: You’re someone who has built your artistic practice around the exploration of popular or grassroots social movements. Much of the placemaking discourse positions placemaking as a bottom-up, radically democratic or civic activity, in marked contrast to more top-down interventions. Is creative placemaking akin to a social movement?

DT: To address this, let me dig into the texts a little bit. Rhetorically, placemaking is described as “iterative, process-oriented, combining tactics” and “decentralized”—which all sound a lot like the descriptions of the open source software and global justice movements of recent decades—and is directly compared with the environmental sustainability movement that emerged in the 1970s.

The texts we read seem to waiver between claiming that the placemaking professional of the past is gone and making numerous references to “the placemakers” as if they are a class of people. In my reading of the texts, most projects strongly rely on some kind of “creative initiator” taking the lead role. They seem to correspond with social theorist Michael Albert’s “coordinator class,” who are often the people performing most of the creative and empowering parts of a job. A veteran of the New Left, Albert has described the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s in the US and Europe as being shortsighted about the role of the coordinators—saying that these movements put a lot of energy into direct democracy but never addressed that fundamental division of labor, which became reproduced in the leadership of many of their organizations.

While my gut tells me that placemaking and social movements are different on the basis of professionalization, I have to admit that there is as much professionalization in social justice activism as there appears to be in placemaking. I think that movements and creative placemaking both need to

struggle against this professionalization in order to retain what is really most important about both—people taking control of their own lives and environments.

CF: One of the assumptions driving the discourse on placemaking is that far too many Americans move through spaces that lack a coherent or fulfilling “sense of place.” These soulless spaces are ready to be “activated” through artistic or design-based activities into vibrant and inclusive places where one might stroll, sit, and talk, or maybe even eat their lunch in the company of others. It’s fair to ask “who” is included and left out when we talk about this “lack,” but harder to entertain the aspirations driving it. How/why should we do both?

DT: There are a few moments in the two texts we read where the authors articulate how cities arrived at the state they are presently in (which, presumably, they’re trying to get out of via placemaking). The general narrative is that big infrastructure projects messed up the intimacy of cities and then deindustrialization changed their physical, social, and economic landscape. The lineage of thought traced as a canon of placemaking includes William Whyte, Kevin Lynch, Jane Jacobs, Ray Oldenburg, Christopher Alexander, and James Howard Kunstler, among others. Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey were also invoked, to point to a more critical take on the redistributive goals that placemaking projects might take on in relationship to the concept of the “right to the city.” If placemaking as a discourse can hold some of these critiques alongside lighter and more positive practices consistent with the definition offered in “Places in the Ma-king”—“The practice aims to improve the quality of a public place and the lives of its community in tandem”—then it could be a really powerful and useful framework for creating more participatory and equitable cities.

Back to your reference about the University of Chicago. I see these major institutions like U. of C. or University of Pennsylvania doing a dance where they direct resources toward repairing damaged relationships with surrounding communities with art and social justice programming at the forefront. Cynically I’d say these instances of community building, outreach, and resource sharing are serving as multicultural Trojan horses for the ongoing expansion of the university’s development agenda. But I also recognize that institutions are people as much as they are structures for people to pass through. And incorporations of the concepts of the “right to the city” could facilitate some kind of small-scale but meaningful reparations to neighboring communities.

I am curious about the role conflict can play in placemaking. For instance, when we started this dialogue in early June, an article came out on a local website about neighborhood residents opposing a new “pop-up beer garden” in the Point Breeze neighborhood of Philadelphia. This Center City-adjacent neighborhood is historically African American and is experiencing a high rate of displacement. When the developer who is backing this business was defending his plan, he explained that “the beer garden is really just the backdrop... We have food trucks, we have a farmstand, we have a CSA drop-off, flea markets, yoga classes.” Sounds like a laundry list of vibrancy. What do you think is the endgame for this kind of sharing economy-, locavore-, placemaking-driven development?

CF: Asking about endgames is important. I think we need to not only be clear about what the endgames are, but also about for whom they're conceived. Point Breeze's story is particular, but there's something very familiar here for those who think about the transformation of American cities over the past thirty or so years.

Point Breeze is in South Philadelphia. Before it was an African American neighborhood, it was an area where Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants and their children lived. Many of them, like my grandmother, left South Philadelphia for the suburbs as soon as they got the chance. Now some of their grandchildren have become interested in such spaces. So the endgame for one group of people—financially stable, young white people—might be getting the chance to live in dense urban spaces in which they feel rooted or grounded. What is this group so hungry for that makes the idea of locality, of local food boxes or whatever else is on that laundry list, so appealing? Answering that question would force us into a serious examination of suburban America and the types of social collectivities it promoted. This examination would have to go beyond knee-jerk critiques of “placeless” suburbs or naive gentrifiers. What is the endgame for current African American residents of Point Breeze or similar neighborhoods in Chicago, Detroit, or Cleveland? They have been waiting decades for substantial reinvestment. Now that it's finally arrived, it's come as opportunities to consume craft beer and similar products. Asking about the endgame of placemaking for these residents forces a serious reckoning with the unevenness of how goods and services are distributed in urban space, and how that distribution extends long-standing racial and economic inequalities.

What you have in this case are two very different visions of a healthy place and what it takes to sustain it. The first vision seems to suggest that what's necessary is energetic young folks who gravitate toward similar self-improvement projects. So let's gather together with our yoga mats, or make sure that we, as neighbors, buy from local farmers. Such projects do have a collective ethos, but it seems to me that this ethos is underwritten by the experience of individual or shared consumption. The other vision does not rely on energetic young consumers, but on general resources distributed in ways that would sustain a much broader group of people. What do long-term Point Breeze residents want? The article tells us that they hoped for investment in a recreation center or a library. These institutions are especially important for the care of very young and old people. These groups may not have any substantial spending power, but long-term Point Breeze residents see their care as important. What's more, making such institutions viable usually requires resources that exceed those available in a sharing economy, no matter how chock-full of goodwill it may be.

And that's what is most interesting to me about these calls for “placemaking”—they do articulate a vision of collective life and obligation. Yet this vision seems somewhat narrow, safe, and conflict-averse. Energetic young people or creative, entrepreneurial types passing around local vegetables or selling each other craft beer might activate one particular vision of a healthy place. Yet it is still unclear to me how such gestures will guarantee that all of Philly's, or for that matter Chicago's, rec centers, libraries, schools, and parks are open, well maintained, well staffed, and safe places in which a range of people can play, learn, and spend time.