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Placemaking / Displacement: Architectures of Exclusion in the Bay Area

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Abstract:

This working paper presents new research and argumentation regarding the way we think about the material culture of place and argues that thinking hard about place is essential for addressing social inequality in our cities. Drawing on new empirical research – ethnographic observation, photography, and interviews – it takes the varied communities and landscapes of the San Francisco Bay Area as a lens through which to interrogate the prominent trend of so-called “placemaking” in urban planning, development, and design. I argue that placemaking is intellectually incoherent and frequently elitist in practice, often ignoring existing places while portending a real possibility of both displacement, through the destruction of existing place and their replacement with architectures of exclusion, and also placelessness, through the reproduction of generic, anonymizing aesthetics. The paper concludes by addressing the irony of the new places being made by the displaced – the unhoused – and positing a reclaiming of the term to understand the new architectures of marginalization in the Bay Area.
Placemaking / Displacement: Architectures of Exclusion in the Bay Area

Gordon C. C. Douglas

Place is an everyday sort of word, yet one that is thick, fraught, and still contentiously defined and employed in the social sciences. While exhaustively explored in geography, especially human and humanistic geography (Relph 1976, Fuan 1977), and social theory (Lefebvre 1973, 1974, 2009 [1979]; Harvey 2000, 2001; Massey 1994, 2005), the concept is also an essential one for how we think about – and do – urban planning, architecture, development, and community life. And understanding it is essential for addressing social inequality in our cities. Drawing on emerging findings from pilot-phase ethnographic research, this paper uses the varied communities and landscapes of the San Francisco Bay Area as a lens through which to re-examine the idea of place and, specifically, to interrogate the trend of so-called placemaking in urban planning and development and try to think productively about reclaiming this term for social justice. Following some further introduction of the placemaking trend and a short review of geographical theory on place and space, the remainder of the paper presents the problems with placemaking through a quick tour of its different manifestations in the Bay Area, from central urban neighborhoods in San Jose and San Francisco to suburban-industrial Silicon Valley to the shocking, inspiring, tragic magical urbanism of Oakland’s largest informal settlements.

The Tyranny of Placemaking

Placemaking has become an exceedingly popular trend in contemporary planning and urban design, probably most prominently in the context of “creative placemaking” efforts, which use public art and a variety of other playful, colorful, interactive design elements (think pink Adirondack chairs, playable pianos, public ping-pong tables) to “activate” an area thought of as in need of activation. The National Endowment of the Arts defines creative placemaking as:
“leveraging the arts and engaging design to make […] communities more livable with enhanced quality of life, increased creative activity, a distinct sense of place, and vibrant local economies that together capitalize on their existing assets.” In an influential white paper for the Mayors’ Institute on City Design (also an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts), Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa (2010: 3) argue that creative placemaking “animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired.”

Creative placemaking at work: a painted intersection (with parklets, string lighting, and temporary event street closure in background) in the trendy SoFa District of Downtown San José.

With or without the “creative” in front, placemaking in general has the same basic goal – taking spaces that somehow lack for a sense of place and then using the tools and elements of urban design, both formal and informal, to make them into places. As one recent article in Commercial Property Executive (a real estate development trade publication), entitled “How to Make your Property a Place,” puts it, “Placemakers combine location, culture, and a community
structure to create occupant-centered assets” (Rosario 2018). The author notes that, “While the definition is constantly evolving, placemaking is a design concept that is being adopted throughout the real estate industry” (Ibid., emphasis in the original). Indeed, placemaking can be thought of as a sort ideal in planning and development, more than a best practice, almost a given, necessary consideration. It has become almost on par with sustainability or traffic management and mobility as something that planners strive for, and something that everyone from transit agencies to real estate developers to everyday community members is told they should prioritize.

In practice, placemaking looks like efforts to create more inviting, walkable streets and public spaces, places to sit, consume, and be at a human scale, featuring design elements like planters, pedestrian plazas, food trucks, public events, etc. Placemaking is a driving ethos behind trends like the “pavement to parks” programs in many cities (originating in San Francisco) that convert parking spaces into small parklets or close streets and intersections to vehicular traffic. It is the justification for efforts to fill surface parking lots with farmers markets, food trucks or shipping containers, and to enliven urban streets in any number of similar ways from public events to consumption opportunities to public art and landscape design. Some expression of local culture and identity is often also part of the project, whether explicitly through imagery and architecture intended to reflect a prominent ethnic group or interesting history, or simply through use values and aesthetic choices that signal to visitors what sort of (trendy, artsy, crafty, child-friendly, glamorous, etc.) place they are in.

As has been argued elsewhere, the sorts of spaces created under the mantle of placemaking can be less than the democratic, locally relevant, popularly accessible urban public spaces that we might hope for (see e.g. Starowitz and Cole 2015, Douglas 2018). They often rather wind up being spaces of privilege and affluent consumption, designed around white, middle-class priorities with white, middle-class aesthetics – what George Lipsitz (2007) has
called “The White Spatial Imaginary.” What’s more, as I argue here, these new places are often “made” right on top of, and to the exclusion of, what is already there, which, it should surprise no one to realize, is usually actually already a place. In this way, creative placemaking can displace real places, becoming what the artist Vicki Meek (e.g. 2018) and others have taken to calling “creative placetaking”.

This is more than wordplay. Because the question of place, and it’s meaning for human life and identity, is anything but trivial. Exploring these questions presents an opportunity for a much needed visual and spatial sort of ethnography of urban development and community change that can be hugely valuable for framing and ultimately participating in debates about extreme inequality in cities, local identity, cultural and demographic displacement, public space and homelessness, and the broad but fundamental question of what a good city looks like.

There is perhaps nowhere riper for such an investigation than the San Francisco Bay Area in California. San Francisco is by some measure the birthplace of many of the most prominent models of contemporary placemaking (see Park(ing) Day, Parklets, Pavement to Parks program, and the activists-cum-design outfit Rebar), while the Bay is not only one of the most unequal urban areas in the United States, but one where this extreme inequality may also be most visible in the built environment. Living in the region, moving across it for work, fun, and daily life along with some 9 million others,¹ it is impossible to ignore the signs of inequality and exclusion in urban space. And it is impossible not to realize just how non-trivial the question of place has become for people’s lives and the politics of planning and development that shape them.

¹ While the Bay Area has long been locally defined by the 9 counties that “touch” the San Francisco Bay (with a population of just under 8 million), the more accurate understanding of the metropolitan region today, reflecting the social and economic realities of an expanded regional system and commuter shed, is the Census Bureau’s 12-county San José-San Francisco-Oakland Combined Statistical Area, which had a 2018 estimated population of 8.9 million (California Dept. of Finance 2018). See also Schafran (2018).
Space and Place and the Possibility of Placelessness

Place must be understood in relation to its more abstract foundational form, *space*. When we talk about space in social science, we mean physical geographies – usually areas or landscapes. When critical theory had its “spatial turn” it was to acknowledge the significance of physical space for history, materiality, production, conflict, and everyday life. So what is physical or geographical space, and how does it relate to place? There are multiple understandings of space in geography, dating back to Greek geometry and philosophy (Mazúr 1983). On one hand, space can be something analogous to an empty, underlying featureless container for things, given definition only by what occupies it. (This classical understanding of space was prominent in some physical geography, and perhaps still undergirds the all-too-prevalent “blank canvass” attitude in urban planning and design.) On the other hand, space has also been understood in terms of the relative significance of many differentiated spaces, which have strong effects on the things happening in or upon them (at its extreme, this perspective may instead justify an equally problematic sort of geographical determinism). Finally, as Mazúr (1983) has urged, a non-classical understanding, and more useful one, describes space as neither as empty abstraction nor deterministic individual cases but as an elementary building block of the physical and human geography of our world, interconnected by numerous spatial relations and defined in relation to human experience. Or, as Massey (2002: 25) writes, “space is concrete and embedded too. It is no more than the sum of all our relations and connections.”

It is in this context that place can be defined as those spaces that are filled with human meaning and value. This prominent understanding, which is crucial for a sociology of place in actually existing social worlds, comes from the humanistic geography of theorists Yi-Fu Tuan and Edward Relph, among others. For them, space and place are defined phenomenologically in terms of human experience and interaction, and the fundamental point of distinction between space and place is in the relationship to people and to cultural meaning, the distinction between
the distant and intimate. If, for Tuan (1977), space is an area or location understood at a distance, without specific value or social connections, then intimacy gives social meaning to a space, and makes it a non-abstract – a place. For Relph (1976), to understand a place is to understand the intensity of attachment, involvement, concern, and “insideness” that people have for a place. In other words, place is meaningful, experienced, and mediated, while space is more or less distant and abstract. But the two are also “dialectically structured in human environmental experience, since our understanding of space is related to the places we inhabit, which in turn derive meaning from their spatial context” (Seamon and Sowers, 2008: 44, after Relph 1976). To understand one, we must understand the other.

Drawing on this understanding, I suggest three problems with placemaking from a sociological perspective. And not just theoretical or rhetorical problems, but very practical ones from the standpoint of urban planning and, as it were, placemaking. The first is the danger of assuming a non-familiar or difficult or ostensibly non-meaningful place is not a place, and is thus in need of placemaking. This is, at best, ignorant; at worst it is elitist and racist. The second is the danger of replacing authentic place with “placelessness”: “the casual eradication of distinctive places and the making of standardized landscapes that results from an insensitivity to the significance of place” (Relph 1976, Preface). This is tragic, and risks prioritizing the dominant aesthetics and flattened tastes of mass society at the expense of meaningful places, not to mention real utility for inhabitants. The third problem is displacement. If the meaning and social value of place is predicated on what Relph calls “insideness,” then the opposite experience is “outsideness,” as when a person feels alienated from an unfamiliar place in a foreign land, but also, more problematically, when excluded from a new place or a changed place that was once home, and left displaced or without place. This is nothing short of violent.
Placemaking in Actually Existing Places

Like San Francisco, its more prominent sister at the other end of the Bay, San José is obsessed with placemaking. This is not just following the lead of a sibling that’s older (by a year) or bigger. Actually, San José is the largest city in the Bay Area, as it has been since the mid-1980s. At just over 1 million residents, it is larger than San Francisco, the third largest municipality in California, and the 10th largest in the United States. This doesn’t mean it always feels like it, in fact in many ways it is still a giant bedroom community with more residents than jobs and fewer people coming in during the morning commute than there are leaving for jobs in nearby towns with strangely now-familiar names like Cupertino, Mountain View, and Menlo Park. Arguably, San José could use some attention to place. But it is not without a sense of place, including places in both the meaningful experiential sense of its people and communities and the sense of charming, human-scale, character-rich urban places that placemaking would seem to want.

So the irony is that the city’s heavy focus on placemaking comes despite its underlying place-full urban fabric. Central San José, where the vast majority of placemaking efforts in the city can be found, is already home not only to a sizeable corporate downtown with walkable streets, sidewalk cafes, and a density of transit options, but a broad urban core typical of many old West Coast cities: low-, mid- and high-rise apartment buildings, Victorian houses, and craftsman bungalows broken by wide boulevards, strip malls, and auto shops as well but also walkable pre-sprawl neighborhood high streets with sidewalk fronting shops and services that Jane Jacobs might even appreciate. It has more “place” to it – and has for over a hundred years – than almost anywhere else in Silicon Valley. And yet, in the rush to prove its hard-earned city status to the world, the self-styled “capital of Silicon Valley” has not only run hard toward modernist highrises, rapid transit, and bicycle infrastructure, but also toward parklets, painted crosswalks, and all manner of creative placemaking. City Hall, the downtown business
association, the local Knight Foundation, and even the regional office of the AARP have gotten in the game.

Telltale signs of generic creative placemaking brought to Plaza de César Chávez in Downtown San José, actually the site of California’s first state capitol.

The point is not that adding newly designed placemaking elements to this context is necessarily bad at the level of any individual interventions. Far from it. Placemaking can have many positive benefits, from creating public spaces, community spaces, to providing valuable urban greenery, discouraging car dependency, even infrastructural features like storm water accommodation.\(^2\) The point is that it’s rich, and ironic, and ignorant, and potentially deeply problematic culturally and symbolically, to talk about placemaking in neighborhoods with long history and proud identity, with visible community culture, local businesses, architectural charm, and other signs of place. Especially because the new places, such as they are, may not be reflective, or even aware, of what was already there, replacing it instead with designs, aesthetics, and intended uses that reflect the cultural ideals of their creators and the hoped for consumers they aim to attract (Douglas 2018).

\(^2\) I should also note that I helped lead a project, funded by the Knight Foundation, working with urban design and interior design students at SJSU and members of the local community to research, design, and install locally relevant streetscape improvements for one San José neighborhood that could absolutely be described as creative placemaking.
Research suggests links between such seemingly benign and progressive uses of public space as farmers markets to bike lanes with the privileging of whiteness and affluence (see Lipsitz 2007, McCullen 2008, Alkon and McCullen 2010, Hoffman 2016). My own work has connected this explicitly “do-it-yourself urban design” improvements, tactical urbanism, and creative placemaking (Douglas 2018, 2019). Such places can spatially reproduce existing social inequalities through the cultural coding of how a space is designed and who appears welcome to use it, so that even as they activate (or even “reclaim”) space for ostensibly positive uses, they may do so quite problematically as spaces that are not welcome to all.

The premise of placemaking in place feels perhaps especially ironic in San Francisco, one of most distinctive and celebrated cities – distinctive urban places – in the world. And its neighborhoods, like the South of Market District, the Mission, Noe Valley, are unquestionably place-full places, not because of the recent proliferation of placemaking, but a deep history of human experience and local character. And yet proliferate it has.

The Mission District is named for the 18th Century Mission San Francisco de Asís (aka Mission Dolores), the city’s oldest standing building, to which it is home (and which of course gives its name to the city itself). The neighborhood lies due south of San Francisco’s civic center along the BART rapid transit corridor and has been inhabited for some 2,000 years (the Spanish found two Yelamu villages in the area when they arrived in 1774). Beginning in the 1940s, the Mission District became a predominantly Mexican American neighborhood, on par with Boyle Heights in Los Angeles as a sort of Harlem of Chicano urbanism, which persists today. This cultural character, this sense of place, is written in the urban fabric of the neighborhood from storefronts to murals to the faces on the busy streets. However, due to a privileged location for jobs and transit and an arts and culture driven cultural cache, it has also been a destination for gentrifying newcomers for a couple of decades now. And it was on Mission Street in 2005 that a
group of art and design student activists called Rebar installed a temporary “park” in a metered on-street parking space, initiating the now-global phenomenon known as Park(ing) Day. Today, as if fated by that first provocation, the Mission has become the neighborhood with highest concentration of parklets (see Map below).


Parklets are an especially prominent placemaking trend, and as I have argued, an especially concerning one. Generally understood as public spaces (although policies vary), in many cities parklets are nonetheless authorized explicitly as economic development tools, usually granted directly to restaurants or other businesses to provide additional seating. Indeed the model typically relies on this: someone (not the city) must sign up to build and pay for the thing, and to maintain it on a daily basis. Some businesses fronting parklets have reported substantial increases in sales – one business in Columbia, Missouri, claimed a 139 percent increase in sales “just by having the parklets outside” (Cho 2013).
But this model, not uncommon in placemaking, and the emphasis on economic development in general, raises serious questions about parklets and in some ways makes it difficult for them to function as truly public, democratic spaces. However emphatically local policy and on-site signage might declare them to be public spaces, parklets typically look more like extensions of the businesses that sponsor them, effectively marking them as spaces of affluence that may not be welcoming to everyone. How welcoming are these public spaces to someone who cannot afford to buy a coffee, or who is pushing a shopping cart? A recent study by two UC Berkeley graduate students (Ecker and Kim 2014) confirmed exactly this confusion (and “pressure to buy something”) about parklets in San Francisco. Additional restrictions also tend to discourage some uses, including sleeping, stowing of personal belongings, or even simply “loitering.” And the application, funding, and ongoing maintenance expectations for these spaces also makes their successful realization more likely in front of new and trendy businesses with the economic strength, organizational capacity, and political capital to get them done.3 Not places that aren’t places already, but perhaps places that are changing rapidly, where they instead become part of the problem.

Indeed, because creative placemaking projects appear to be more common in newly-hip and “gentrifying” urban neighborhoods than in deeply impoverished, resource-poor areas, what benefits they do provide are unlikely to be felt where they are most needed, and instead often reflect the changing aesthetic tastes, consumption ideals, and desired use values brought by newer residents, bringing potentially negative impacts, such as cultural and socio-economic exclusion and displacement, to the very transitioning neighborhoods where they may do the most damage to existing place, marking them as neighborhoods in transition, places where new “placemaking” is going on.

3 In San Francisco, an average parklet can cost a sponsoring business between $15,000 - $20,000 after permitting, design, and construction (Mark 2015).
Certainly some do associate them with these changes. In New York, where I began doing research that has evolved into the current project, the installation of a city bicycle parking corral out front of a café in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, raised the ire of some long-time neighborhood residents, who associated it explicitly with gentrification and ideals imposed from outside of no benefit to them. The corral was described explicitly by a Community Board member as intended to “bring people from outside of the community.” And we have data to show that cyclists, for instance, tend to be higher income and spend more as consumers. I saw the same thing around a large bicycle-oriented placemaking effort sponsored by the city in San Jose, asking this long time resident, Darrell, an Asian man who owns a small business in a predominantly Latino district south of Downtown that is beginning to gentrify rapidly, about the impact of something intended explicitly to bring a bunch of outsiders into the neighborhood on bikes.

A catchy slogan – “Make gentrifiers’ lives unlivable” – stuck to a parklet bike rack on Valencia Street in San Francisco’s Mission District.

All in all, because of who is behind them and who they are intended for, many these spaces do not really so much make new places as simply reflect the ideals, aesthetics, and uses of
trendy young urban consumers – the creative class – almost regardless of any local character besides that of the gentrifiers. This is the fear, that new places are being built for the purpose of economic development or at the behest of some businesses or gentrifiers that have caught wind of this trend, regardless of what was already there. And so not only does some placemaking look like displacement and exclusion on top of already existing places, but it also risks producing places with a sameness of upper middle class consumption that, despite their creative aesthetics, can be as aesthetically homogenous as a shopping mall or suburban office park.

**Making Placelessness**

The idea of placelessness is another key part of this story. It is a difficult one, because, as I have argued, place is a personal and experiential thing, and it is hard to accuse anywhere of placelessness. But Relph thought it was possible, and indeed worried that it was becoming increasingly common, for places to lose their sense of place out of a sameness of design, or as he put it, “the casual replacement of the diverse and significant places of the world with anonymous spaces and exchangeable environments” (Relph 1976: 143). This certainly describes the suburban-industrial landscape of dot com-era Silicon Valley, defined by “placeless campuses” of “one- and two-story tilt-up buildings surrounded by surface parking and buffered from streets by landscaping” (Grant 2018). (And worse, these spaces tend to be defended and inaccessible, difficult to serve via transit, and fortified by a combination of car-oriented planning and defensive, inward-looking architecture and design.)

Can placemaking do this too? Unquestionably, as particular forms, styles, and aesthetics recur time and again across prominent projects, from the popular Adirondack chairs, hammocks, and planters to the very paints used in pop-up pedestrian plazas. One of the most controversial of New York City’s pedestrian plazas was created at the request of the local business alliance in a
rapidly-gentrifying part of Brooklyn, producing a backlash from other longtime residents (see Douglas 2018). For community members I spoke to, the simple matter of the way the plaza was supposed to look – a reproduction of every other apparently trendy “Bloomberg plaza” they had seen in other parts of town – was a real part of the concern and alienation they felt with the project. It seemed not only to ignore that there was already a neighborhood there, but threatened to replace it with something wholly meaningless.

New pedestrian plazas in, clockwise from top left, Oakland, California, New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago.
How worrisome then to recognize that one of the biggest drivers bringing standardized placemaking aesthetics to neighborhoods throughout the Bay Area is the anonymizing sensibility and “white spatial imagery” of the tech industry. How tragic to bring this possibility of placelessness to the places that already exist, to real neighborhoods that might not look like much, and thus are ripe for new development and placemaking. We might consider now the South of Market District in San Francisco, now rebranded as SOMA, which the tech industry, taking advantage of some very convenient economic redevelopment policy designed to protect artists, has single handedly transformed from a home of immigrants, artists, gays and lesbians, and bohemians (powerfully captured in the delicate work of photographer Janet Delaney [2013]) to an increasingly sanitized, placeless corporate landscape. (SOMA is also second to the Mission in number of parklets, see Map on p. 10.)

In other words, the fetish for urban placemaking means that even the urban turn in tech real estate risks still perpetuating placelessness as much as the banal office parks of the previous era, adding to the more aggressive problems of placetaking and displacement as well. As Grant (2016) puts it, “There is a palpable sense that both San Francisco’s social diversity and its bohemian culture – both accommodated by 20th-century urban decline – can’t survive its intense resurgence.” Of course, such places are not placeless for all: they make suitable playgrounds for wealth. Or, one could speculate, they might even serve to wipe clean the slate, revealing a placeless container on which to build new places in the future. This in many ways in the story of Amazon’s remaking of South Lake Union in Seattle, an area rife with new placemaking, and is now exactly what many in San Jose are concerned about with a 20,000-job “Google village” proposed for the city’s diverse downtown west side. Such interventions can somehow be simultaneously gentrifying and anonymizing – whitewashing in every sense of the term.
Displacement and the Re-Making of Place

The final piece of this puzzle, is what happens to the places that were there in the first place and, as important, the people who gave them their meaning as places to begin with. Placemaking can be actively exclusionary in several ways: Simply by boosting sales at local businesses things like parklets and plazas can contribute to higher property values and rents in changing neighborhoods, further driving away poorer residents or business owners. By attracting hip consumers and adoring coverage in the press, these amenities can begin to rebrand whole neighborhoods. And it is important to remember that many such spaces are also more controlled than a regular city street or sidewalk, with smoking, skateboarding, and lying down prohibited in many plazas and parklets, and in some cases language - such as prohibiting the ‘unreasonable obstruction’ of sitting areas and pedestrians, along with camping or the storing personal belongings – that clearly refers to the presence of homeless people. This is the third placemaking ill, the impacts of its more active exclusionary potential, not simply to ignore existing places, and to replace them with banal, placeless new spaces of generic corporate aesthetics, but the question of the dis-placed, and what place looks like for those who, ostensibly, have lost it.

The city of Oakland provides a wealth of tragic ironies in terms of place, placelessness, and displacement. (A well known piece of public art at the Berkeley-Oakland border, ‘HERE – THERE,’ is a play on the Gertrude Stein quote that “There is no there there” in Oakland, which the city has always embraced while trying to prove wrong.) Place and displacement are deeply rooted in “the Town,” a city that experienced its first real population boom due to wealthy refugees displaced by the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 and is experiencing another now due to those fleeing just how unaffordable the city across the Bay has become. But, perhaps as a reaction, the city today is more protective of its history and identity, and aggressively opposed to
any perceived threats to it, than perhaps anywhere else in the region. And the language of displacement, explicitly, has begun to replace that of gentrification among organizers and everyday residents, as people talk about the importance of this place, this home, to them, and the physical and emotional destruction caused by being displaced.

So what does displacement look like? People go in all directions, and find innumerable ways of making do. Many have spread to the far reaches of an expanded Northern California metropolitan region (see Schafran 2018). But for many, displacement looks sleeping under a freeway, in a park, alongside railroad tracks, or in some other piece of legally ambiguous land owned by the city, state, or other public authority. And for some it looks like the tenuous, and often dangerous, rebuilding of place in an informal settlement. In Oakland, the largest of these is an area known as the Village, currently (always temporarily, but for over a year now) located on a patch of city owned land off of E. 12th Street in the San Antonio neighborhood. A settlement of around 60 people – the number, like the very form of the place, changes from night to night – and comprising dozens of shelters ranging from tents and sheds to one-room houses known as “tiny homes” to elaborate fantastical structures built of plywood, tarp, and myriad found materials, the Village may be home to the displaced, but is anything but placeless.

A young man and woman who built a shelter together also created a small quasi-public sitting space in front of the shelter as well. In addition to several carefully arranged sofas and chairs, the young man has planted several small palms right in the soil, and used a little TSA-style rope line that someone donated as a “boundary,” helping to establish his own space. Of the

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4 In the last two years, Oakland activists have fought off the arrival of a corporate headquarters for Uber, successfully opposed a city-favored plan to relocate a baseball stadium in a low-income immigrant neighborhood that was seen as threatened by gentrification. The city has also been home to at least six arson attacks on new market-rate developments.

5 As of 2017, roughly 6,000 people in Alameda County are estimated to be homeless on any given week, around 50% of whom live in Oakland (see Alameda County Dept. of Housing and Community Development 2017, East Oakland Community Partnership 2019)
palms, he says, they are “a sign of me, a sign that I was here.” He continued, elaborating on life in the Village and on the streets of East Oakland: “I’ve been in this area so long it’s where I want to be. It’s a good place to be, especially if you know the individuals and you’re working on some sort of community.” As another man put it simply, referring to his tent, “This is my home. It’s made of nylon, but I have a cat and a chair. It’s a home.”

The southeastern edge of the Village, and informal settlement in the San Antonio area of Oakland, California.

Another man talked about the relative longevity of the site and the community there, even though things like individual structures are precarious (he’s rebuilt his several times), and occupants constantly shifting: “The only people that be around here is people that know each other. There’s a plot here that’s available, but somebody that doesn’t know us wouldn’t move in. If it’s our people, they can move right in.” While we were talking, a woman from the other end of the Village walked up to borrow some cooking oil. This is how community builds, and how places are made. Large encampments like the Village are anything but impersonal, thoughtless, non-places. The architectures are carefully considered, so too are the sites, so too the communities that result.
Another example is an informal settlement known as Housing and Dignity Village. Established in a city-owned lot with a fence around it, it was intended explicitly to provide a safe, clean, and sober space for women and families with children. From community dinners and food distributions to regular medical clinics and free wireless internet(!), it was even providing services to others, housed and unhoused, in the surrounding neighborhood, which is historically impoverished and under-served. Less than two months after the site was first occupied by a handful of tents, vehicles, and ramshackle structures, just over a dozen people were living there, including several children, when the city tore it down.

Indeed, while some cities, including Oakland, have allowed encampments in some areas and provided toilets and washing stations, a tactic to discourage homelessness is unquestionably also the unmaking of places. Not just encampments, but public spaces as well. One woman from Oakland told me of the park that she and other unhoused people hang out in while waiting for a shelter to open: “They took the BBQ pits out, they closed the bathroom, even for the kids.” In the Bay Area, we make places for some, while actively unmaking them for others.
Conclusion

Just as there may be nowhere like Chicago to see what red-lining, restrictive covenants, slum clearance, and other tools of 20th Century racialized urbanism actually look like written on the landspace and across social life, there may be nowhere like the Bay Area to see the extremes of inequality in America exposed in the built environment. I have argued here that placemaking is problematic for these reasons: the implied assumption that many non-familiar or underappreciated places are empty space in need of placemaking; the prospect of creating “anonymous spaces and exchangeable environments” in their place (Relph 1976: 143); the impact of displacing people through undemocratic placemaking that gentrifies and excludes. I have tried to illustrate each of these ills through examples from across the Bay Area.

I hope to have exposed the hypocrisy of placemaking as an urban design ideal, and its potential violence as a development strategy. I have also pointed to the tragic irony of the most marginalized of the displaced – the unhoused – being in fact the creators of real places, while the placemakers instead take places, and even replace them with what may to some seem like generic non-places.

What can we take from this? Well there are practical implications, and not just in terms of another plea to planners and designers to please stop talking about placemaking. One of the most significant and intractable of planning’s ‘wicked problems’ is the puzzle of improvement without displacement, and these many contradictions of placemaking cut to the heart of it. And we are beginning to have models for this that appear to work, including things like Fruitvale Village, a new mixed-use development in East Oakland, including new public space, being hailed as a success for affordable housing and cultural fit. In Chicago and Detroit, Emanuel Pratt and the Sweetwater Foundation talk about “regenerative placemaking”, providing examples of locally relevant, spatially, socially and historically conscious grassroots community planning and
placemaking efforts in some of the most needy places. Signs of place, and yes, even place-making, that are authentic, positive, and meaningful to the everyday people who live there.

Might Housing and Dignity Village, which presented during its 41 days a model of displaced, unhoused people, determined to stay in the city they love, not only helping themselves and others but building community and place in the process, be another example? To be sure, we need to house people, and place the displaced. In no small part, we need to do this by preserving places in the first place. But a lesson from the informal settlements of Oakland might at least be that before we think about design solutions for homelessness (a current fad architecture and design publications and in architecture and design schools) we look to the places being designed by the unhoused themselves. Going further, we might consider the potential for advocacy – especially for people like the women and children who were living at Housing and Dignity Village – that might be found reclaiming the idea placemaking for them. What if we took this word, that has become so bandied about and cynically employed, and talked about the tragic but inspiring stories of thousands of people, in seeking solutions to their displacement and insecurity, finding the “insideness” that Relph talks about even in the most outside and distant of places to those of us who do not live or understand them. Perhaps it could help protect and embolden them. Because theirs are places too.

Works Cited


