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The Role of Placemaking in Universities and Their Surrounding Communities: A Literature Review

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THE ROLE OF PLACEMAKING IN UNIVERSITIES AND THEIR
SURROUNDING COMMUNITIES: A LITERATURE REVIEW

by

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to serve as a comprehensive review of the literature on placemaking in higher education. To our knowledge, no comprehensive review of placemaking in higher education currently exists. We aim to fill this gap in the literature by answering two main questions: First, how is placemaking is implemented on college/university campuses and their surrounding communities? Second, what are the effects of these placemaking efforts? This literature review was conducted through a systemic search of three databases, in addition to references and general search engines. This review highlights the sparse, yet diverse, literature on this topic. Findings highlight how universities today strive to achieve cohesiveness within their campuses and in their surrounding communities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Although the exact origin of the term "placemaking" is unclear, the concept is thought to have first emerged through the seminal publications of writers such as Jacobs and Lynch in the early 1960s. By the late 1970s, placemaking had grown more popular amongst urban design scholars such as Tuan, Whyte, and Sime, who advocated for a more human-centered approach to the rapidly growing urban areas of their time (Salzman & Lopez, 2020). Although the concept of placemaking is not new, the concept has broad implications and remains poorly defined in the literature. Placemaking can take on many forms – architectural, social, and cultural, to list a few. However, amongst the many defintions for placemaking, a central theme remains constant – placemaking is the process of attatching meaning and purpose to a space. Forming a sense of identity and connection with a physical location is what transforms a *space* into a *place* (Berti et al., 2017). For the purpose of this thesis, we will focus on placemaking as it relates to spaces in higher education in an architectural context.

The Post World War II era ushered in an unprecidented amount of growth in the number and size of universities in the United States and other countries. During this time, architects, planners, and university leaders placed the majority of their focus on individual buildings rather than master plans. The effects of that practice continue to be felt today, with fuzzy big-picture campus design resulting in "sprawling, fragmented, and isolated campuses" (Hajrasouliha, 2017). Although many universities have re-embraced campus master plans in an attempt to restore a sense of cohesiveness, an essential aspect of planning continues to be looked over – the

perspective of the students who occupy the campus. There is little evidence that students' views are taken into account during the planning process. Students are not oblivious to this – when one student was asked by researchers if they would like to have more say in how their campus was designed, they stated " I do, but nobody listens!" As stated in O'Rourke & Baldwin, "People who share a space are often the best people to ask about place design; yet it is still common practice for 'experts' – planners and architects – to plan using a 'top down' apprach, leaving people feeling disconnected from places they percieve do not fulfil their needs."

Outside of the campus, the university plays an important role in placemaking within their surrounding communities. Historically, the two were closely connected; universities would often take their names from their surrounding cities (Hebbert, 2018). Over the past century, the role of a university within its community has evolved from being its defining characteristic to actively pursing placemaking within it (Ehlenz, 2019). Universities, especially large ones in ubran environments, can serve as facilitators for innovation districts, drawing companies to their surrounding area and creating employment opportunities (Pancholi et al., 2020). However, many universities have fostered and projected a sense of disconnect, and even hostility, toward their communities. In the early 20th century, many universities expressed distaste with their rapidly urbanizing surrounding areas (Ehlenz, 2019; Freestone et al., 2019). Some chose to relocate to more rural locations thought to be more conducive and fitting for scholarship, while others doubled down on their hostility toward their community with their architecture. One example of this is the University of Pennsalvania:

"As Penn's campus grew more splendid it became an island of privilege in a sea of poverty. Penn effectively cordoned off its campus by erecting buildings that faced

inward, going to far as to put the loading dock of Van Pelt Library on once-gracious

walnut street" (Saffron, 2015)

Other univiersities have followed similar approaches in the past. However, efforts have been

made to rectify these once hostile and alienating practices.

The purpose of this thesis is to serve as an exploration of the literature on architectural

placemaking in higher education and their surrounding communities. To our knowledge, no such

review of the literature on this topic currently exists. This research serves to answer two main

questions. First, how is placemaking implemented and evaluated on college/university campuses

and their surrounding communities? Second, what are the effects of these placemaking efforts?

This thesis will separate the literature into two categories: placemaking within the campus, and

placemaking for the surrounding community. Methods and results from individual papers will be

discussed in their respective categories.

METHODS

Using the ProQuest, ESBCOhost, and APAPsychinfo databases, a systemic search was conducted to identify peer-reviewed articles that mentioned or discussed architectural placemaking within the context of higher education. The initial search filters only included articles that were peer-reviewed and in English. The search terms used included (placemaking OR "place making" OR "place-making") AND (university OR college OR campus OR "higher education"). From the initial search, duplicates were removed. Articles were then screened for inclusion using titles and abstracts. If an article was determined to be likely eligible, the full text was retrieved and screened further. Additional studies were identified through the reference lists of the included articles, and general search through the University of Central Florida Library and Google Scholar.

The main criteria for inclusion was that the article must explicitly mention placemaking in an architectural context in higher education as a central theme of the article. Articles were then categorized as either relating to placemaking within the university/college campus, or the surrounding community.

RESULTS

The initial search yielded 352 articles from ProQuest, 203 from ESBCOhost, and 26 from APAPsychinfo, totaling 581 articles. 200 duplicates were removed, leaving 381 articles to be reviewed via title and abstract for potential inclusion. 6 full-text articles were retrieved for full-text review. 2 were then deemed eligible for inclusion. 2 additional articles were found via references, 6 via Google Scholar, and 3 via UCF Library. In total, 13 articles were included in this review. 7 articles are categorized as relating to placemaking within a college/university campus, and 6 are categorized as relating to placemaking within the surrounding community. The methods and results of each article are briefly stated here.

Placemaking Within the College/University Campus

Placemaking: Attracting and Retaining Today's Students

Method: This is a review article of placemaking strategies utilized by community colleges, including Lansing Community College, Morton College, and St. Clair Community College.

Results: Budget constraints is the greatest obstacle in placemaking efforts for community colleges. However, the colleges listed were able to utilize low-budget methods to increase comfort and a sense of identity in their respective institutions. Lansing Community College planted ivy along the base of concrete walls to provide a more inviting image to students passing by and displayed more than 300 framed images relating to various religions and aspects of American history to increase a sense of diversity and inclusion. Morton College connected their campus to the community by creating a wall graphics that displayed the stories of historical

figures from Illinois and the names of Chicago and Cook County's major roadways. St. Clair Community College displays fossils found in the region to provide students with an educational opportunity about the surrounding areas prehistoric history (Knight, 2016).

<u>Student Engagement in Placemaking at an Australian University Campus</u>

Method: This study incorporates multiple designs, including naturalistic observation, survey, and interviews. Researchers collected student opinions on an unpleasant area of the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) in South East Queensland, Australia. Two large dry-erase boards were displayed in the courtyard, asking students to write what they think of the space and how they would like to see it developed. Several student writing at the board were randomly selected to participate in a brief survey about the feedback method. Semi-structured interviews were held with critical stakeholders of the university about keyholder issues, the case study area, and their experience with placemaking. A computer visualization exercise was also conducted to explore possibilities for relocating an intrusive sculpture in the area.

Results: Feedback written on the boards indicated a desire for more art-based activities, landscaping and design features, food and alcohol options, and shade & shelter. All students surveyed replied positively toward the feedback boards, but some were doubtful as to whether their opinions would be taken into account. Interviews generally conveyed a sense of poor place identity, saw the physical structure of the survey area as a barrier, expressed a desire for diversification of available facilities, saw stakeholder consultation as valuable, and desired the relocation of an intrusive sculpture (O'Rourke & Baldwin, 2016)

Place-Making: An Approach to the Rationale behind the Location Choice of Power Places

Method: Researchers distributed a questionnaire about power places to students at Iowa State University. Researchers then inserted all power places into a geographic information system (GIS) and displayed them in an areal view to identify clusters. A space syntax analysis was then conducted to identify micro-economical patters of the space in terms of its spatial culture and walkability.

Results: Results showed a majority of power places clustered in areas close to parking infrastructure, shops, roads, and bus & bike networks. Few green spaces were selected (Poplin et al., 2017).

Making a Place Out of Space: The Social Imaginaries and Realities of a Business School as a Designated Space

Method: A case study was conducted on a new building at the University of Technology Sydney Business School. A mixed research methodology was used, and data was collected on staff perceptions and usage of the building via online survey (distributed before moving into the building and 9 months after), focus groups, access data recorded by the security system, and ethnographic observations.

Results: Efforts to foster community and collaboration amongst building occupants were not well-received, as larger community areas led to smaller individual offices. Faculty newer to the university perceived the building as heightening their sense of self-importance and pride in the university, while more senior faculty did not (Berti & Simpson, 2018).

Master-Planning the American Campus: Goals, Actions, and Design Strategies

Method: 50 university master plans were identified and analyzed by common goals, actions, and design strategies.

Results: Four common design strategies were distilled from the plans: 1. a deficient to convenient campus, 2. An isolated to a contextual campus, 3. A segregated to a cohesive campus, and 4. A brown to an ecological campus. To evaluate campus form, seven dimensions are suggested: 1. Land use organization 2. Compactness, 3. Connectivity, 4. Configuration, 5. Campus living, 6. Campus greenness, and 7. Context (Harjrasouliha, 2017).

Studying Black Student Life on Campus: Toward a Theory of Black Placemaking in Higher Education

Method: This study utilizes a sociological framework to analyze Black student experiences at historically White institutions (HWIs). Black placemaking refers to the meaning, utilization, and creation of Black spaces at HWIs.

Results: Examining transient Black spaces on and off-campus may assist university leaders in preserving and creating Black spaces that are usually taken for granted or overlooked by a non-Black population (Tichavakunda, 2020).

Enhancing the Student Experience Through Placemaking: Georgia Tech's West Village Dining Commons

Method: This article highlights the design features of GTs West Village Dining Commons.

Results: Walkways connect student residence to the Commons. The Dining Commons are designed with group gatherings in mind, and includes features such as seven food venues, classrooms, offices, an outdoor stage, and firepits and water features for gathering. University themed graphics line the stairways. The upper level offers views of the city skyline, and the facility is built and maintained with sustainably sources supplies and materials (Braxton, 2018).

Placemaking Around the College/University Community

The University and its Neighborhood: A Study of Place-Making and Change

Method: A multidimensional typology was conducted using census data on housing value and rent to evaluate the effectiveness of community revitalization investments in 22 "anchor" university neighborhoods.

Results: Revitalization initiatives are correlated with positive neighborhood change. Nearly all investment strategies ranging from nonphysical (student community service) to economic, housing, or commercial revitalization returned economic growth in the surrounding area as measured by home value and appreciation (Ehlenz, 2018).

The Making of a City Campus

Method: The narrative article describes the University of Technology Sydney in relation to trends in physical campus evolution in response to urbanism.

Results: UTS has evolved from a historic workingman's institute to a modern university by engaging in institutional rebranding and a "design evolution from organic functionalism through high modernism to postmodernism onto a more nuanced independent urbanism." This article

also highlights the "compactness, connectivity, and context" that has come to be desired by university leaders, city planners, and students globally (Freestone et al., 2020)

The Campus and the City: A Design Revolution Explained

Method: This study explores campus design history via secondary sources and masterplans. This history is evaluated on three levels: the university's urban context, its internal layout and landscape, and its buildings and their use.

Results: The city-campus dichotomy has been reversed from the early 20th century idea of a university closing itself off to its surrounding community, maintaining exclusivity for the elite. Now, campuses should and do work to make the boundary between themselves and their community "at least porous, at best non-existent" (Hebbert, 2018).

Leading Through Placemaking and Boundary Spanning: Rural Christian Higher Education for the Common Good

Method: The unique position of the 31 Council for Christian Colleges and Universities member institutions is explored. Their role in creating place and community in rural areas is contrasted with that of urban colleges.

Results: Rural evangelical colleges play an integral role in maintaining community and place in a time where young people in rural areas are rapidly leaving for greater perceived opportunity in urban areas. Rural evangelical colleges play an important role in creating "third space" – an area where the boundaries between college and community are blurred, and members of both communities can "eat, socialize, recreate, and conduct business" together (Mobley et al., 2018).

University-Community Engagement as Place-Making? A Case of the University of Fort Hare and Alice

Method: The study outlines the history of Fort Hare in the town of Alice, and its role in the community in a post-apartheid South-Africa. A case study is conducted on physical features of the university, and how they relate to the community.

Results: The University of Fort Hare has several design elements that distance it from the community. The campus is completely fenced and has no signage within the campus to direct visitors. These features, combined with an imposing entrance and little to no community engagement, maintains the status of the university and its occupants as "close to but not a part of Alice" (Thakrar, 2018).

University and Innovation District Symbiosis in the Context of Placemaking: Insights from Australian Cities

Method: This study interviewed 17 participants from stakeholders in two universities (Macquarie University and Queensland Institute of Technology) on their view of the "innovation district" placemaking strategy adopted by the universities.

Results: MU is identified as an Industrial Growth Area with the aim of attracting and clustering business around the university with infrastructure developments such as housing and shopping centers. Another central aim is to have a "borderless campus" so that the university blends with its surrounding community. While members of the community were impressed by QITs design and architecture, members of the university expressed a greater desire to have spaces for social and community interaction. They also expressed feeling as if the campus was "heartless", and in

need of features that will add vibrance, personality, and connection to the local community (Pancholi et al., 2020).

DISCUSSION

This literature review highlights the importance of placemaking within the university campus, and in its surrounding community. The main aim of this thesis is to answer the following questions: 1. How is placemaking implemented on college/university campuses? and 2. What are the effects of these placemking efforts? This thesis is able to answer these questions to a limited degree. Only three studies included in this review directly address the quesiton of implementation on college/university campuses (Knight, 2016, Berti & Simpson, 2018, Braxton, 2018). Berti & Simpson (2018) and Braxton (2018) highlight placemaking implementation at their respective universities; however, no information is given on the utilization or effect of such implementations. Knight (2016) highlights a more negative aspect of placemaking – the sacrifice of personal privacy (in this case, office space) for greater community areas that are infrequently utilized. Some studies, such as O'Rourke & Baldwin (2016) and Poplin et al. (2017) discuss strategies for soliciting feedback on possible implementation or current utilization of placemaking strategies. Surprisingly, open, green areas were not identified as the most pleasing to students, but rather accessible retail programming was selected (Poplin et al., 2017).

More literature exists on the implementation and effects of placemaking strategies outside of the university; thus, this review is better able to address the questions posed. This review also provides context around the sometimes fraught relationship and history around "gown and town". As highlighted by Freestone et al. (2019), Hebbert (2018) and Ehlenz (2019), Anti-urbanism is rooted in the history and design of many universities. Notable institutions such as the University of Pennsylvania and Yale have histories of anti-urbanism, with design choices meant to shut out the growing working-class environment around them. Present day, these

institutions, along with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Michigan, are implementing new design strategies to better integrate themselves within the fabric of their surrounding communities. This marks a new era in university-community partnership, along with university-led revitalization efforts that began in the 1990's (Ehlenz, 2018). A possible direction for future research could explore the relationship between Black and other Student of Color Experiences with placemaking at HWI institutions with a history of anti-urbanism.

This review has several limitations. First, placemaking is only evaluated within the scope of physical place and architecture. Placemaking can take many different forms, and studies that discussed college/university placemaking outside of an architectural context were deliberately excluded from the study. Second, the limited amount of peer-reviewed research on this topic might not cover the extent to which placemaking is implemented and its effects on university communities. Future research could include non-peer reviewed sources and interviews with college/university administrators, students, architects, and planners to uncover the extend of placemaking implementations.

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