

AN EMPTY SPACE, A VIRTUAL PLACE: CULTURAL LIFE AND CREATIVE SOLUTIONS IN BESIEGED CITIES

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INTRODUCTION

The term “placemaking” has been used since the 1990s by the non-profit organization Project for Public Spaces based in New York. They define placemaking as “an overarching idea and a hands-on approach for improving a neighbourhood, city, or region, placemaking inspires people to collectively reimagine and reinvent public spaces as the heart of every community”.¹ “Placemaking can be basically summarised as the art of making better places for people”, although what makes a place “better”, why and how to make it better, lies at the core of the matter. The purpose of placemaking is to create places that bring people together. Lepofsky and Fraser argue that “place-making is participation in both the production of meaning and in the means of production of a locale”.²

The expression “creative placemaking” was coined by Ann Markusen & Anne Gadwa in a report written in 2010 for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), where a broad, descriptive and encompassing definition was provided: “[i]n creative placemaking, partners from public, private, non-profit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighbourhood, town, city, or region around arts and cultural activities. 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.”³ It is worth saying that the report was based on two decades of American placemaking activities involving artists and other related cultural workers who were engaged with local government, community members and even private entrepreneurial stakeholders in rehabilitating decaying urban neighbourhoods and other impoverished or otherwise declining spaces. Born out of a response to what has been named the Great Recession of 2008 (the subprime mortgage or the financial crisis), it has contributed to step off a creative placemaking grant program, “Our Town”,⁴ and inspired the promotion of similar activities even outside of the USA.⁵ The economic merits of such practices, already promoted by the original report, have certainly contributed to the success of creative placemaking, particularly when paired with the rise of the global city and the creative cities paradigm where cultural industries and artistic intervention has been seen as a catalyst for business and economic growth.⁶ This has often put creative placemaking under suspicion of serving a neoliberal agenda, but some have argued that creative placemaking may still lead to more just cities and

community building, through "increased participation" of residents working with artists and cultural agents, activities that allow sharing knowledge and common experiences, contributing to an enhanced sense of place and, finally, to the creation of better public spaces.⁷

The “A Place” approach to the concept of place

The notion of place supersedes knowledge boundaries: place is intrinsically linked to existence, in so far all being is “being-in-space” (the Heideggerian *Dasein*). Places not only “are”, but they “happen”;⁸ they are more events - which happen to someone - than objective realities. Around an idea of place, people and memories, events and meanings, practices and experiences, become assembled, or gathered. As Casey, following Heidegger,⁹ contended, “places gather things in their midst-where “things” connote various animate and inanimate entities”. Agnew¹⁰ structured the variety of phenomena that places bring together in three components, which altogether make a place: location (physical setting), locale (social and cultural relationships) and sense of place (the human capacity to produce meaning). For Sack,¹¹ a place is a texture in which three domains becomes interwoven: the empirical, the moral and the aesthetic. As Cresswell contends, “Places both gather and disperse”. A place can be thought of as a fixed image we have of something - an idealized memory of the past, an archetype - or as an open process in continuous change. In this second case, the question is then “why and how particular places gather particular things at particular times?”.¹²

Following these and other conceptual and practical proposals regarding the importance of places in the configuration of community, the purpose of “*A-Place: Linking places through networked artistic practices*”, a project co-funded by the Creative Europe programme (2019-2023) - is to design and implement art-centred placemaking activities in six European cities: Barcelona, Bologna, Brussels, Lisbon, Ljubljana, and Nicosia, in order to connect meanings and experiences associated to places across cultural and geographic boundaries. The activities were planned to be carried out in the socio-physical territory, with activities embedded in public spaces, and with the involvement of multiple social groups. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 at the start of the project led to reconsideration both the programme of activities, and some basic tenets on which the project was based: place, public space, community building, co-creation. In fact, the notion of public space, as circumscribed to physical space, was challenged, as public space was extended through digital media. Likewise, social contact continued through the social media, facing the impossibility to physically meet in streets and squares. In the same way, spaces for creation and exhibition became equally virtual ones, all around the world, with artists intensifying the development of their creativity using digital media and disseminating their artwork through the web.

While global lockdown destabilized economy and challenged the international leaders, at the human level the pandemic generated isolation, loneliness, and nostalgia for the public space, with a significant raise of helplessness and fear. As a reaction, many creative expressions started to redefine a sense of community across different countries and locations, strengthening solidarity and cooperation, also through social media initiatives. Human beings basically needed to feel connected with each other, even if the virus outbreaks demanded that people remained apart, looking at the outside world from behind their windows. The quarantine has raised the awareness about the essential role of urban public spaces for the functioning of cities and societies. But the question arises: Will public space be the same?

Reflecting on (pandemic) public space

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, two main ways of looking at public spaces seemed to re-emerge: the possibility of death of public space and the bio-power perspective. The first, mostly anchored in Sennet's work,¹³ pointed to a present and future where our significant lives had moved to private settings and public spaces became only spaces for (rapid) mobility. The second, based on Foucault's meaningful work,¹⁴ dealt with the dangers of allowing governments and authorities to increase the control over people's bodies and behaviours in public space, predicting that this specific solution for an emergency would prevail beyond the pandemic moment and eventually would change public life completely. In this context, we work with a definition of public space that engages Henri Lefebvre's work on the social production of space and proposes to focus on representation and meaning to imagine a future where public spaces will not be dead and/or overly controlled. Lefebvre's proposal encompasses three elements that create social space, each one being informed by and constituted through the other two: 1) the representations of space, which refers to how space is conceived in abstract by authorities, architects, etc.; 2) the perceived space, or the material form of space produced and reproduced by actual practices; and 3) the representational space, meaning the ways space is directly lived and shaped by everyday practices, memories and experiences.¹⁵

Don Mitchell argues that public space is a space within which political movements can stake out the territory that allows them to be seen (and heard) [...].¹⁶ In that sense, we can say that public space and public sphere – Habermas defined public sphere as non-necessarily physical spaces of expression of public life in democratic societies - are two separate entities, but they are not mutually exclusive and public spaces can have public sphere qualities.

Another way for us to look at public spaces is to highlight the production of shared meaning. For Rogério Leite, urban spaces only become public when invested with meaning. In other words, when actions attribute meanings of place and belonging to certain spaces, and when those spatial environments are also contemplated in the construction of meanings of the actions.¹⁷ Hence, public spaces not only provide the tangible and physical realm for a shared sense of being with other humans,¹⁸ they are also the places where the differences between groups and individuals can become visible and confrontational.

THE PROJECT ACTIVITIES

The project team of the School of Architecture La Salle, Barcelona, reacted to the pandemic situation by creating "A Confined Place". The proposed activities dealt with the perception and representation of places using mixed media (photography, video, graphics, and texts) that were fully developed and disseminated online. The activities included three sections:

1. Photographic representation of space in the confinement. A pedagogical programme designed and implemented by the School of Architecture La Salle (Barcelona, Spain) to perceive and communicate the experience of living in the confinement through photographic media;
2. Artistic interventions in times of lockdown with hybrid media, a call organized by Urban Gorillas (Nicosia, Cyprus) to create an online repository of experiences about the sense of place during the period of confinement.
3. Short films on the transformation of public spaces during and after lockdown. City Space Architecture (Bologna, Italy) invited filmmakers to rethink human existence and the ways people can live together in the 'new normal'.

The works produced in these three sections addressed several topics which offer interesting insights into the sense of place that emerged during the pandemic, and the impact on public space, such as the transfer of activities from public to private domains.

Artworks' digital communication

The programme of activities included three ways of participation according to the sections above: 1) a blog on the perception of domestic space in times of confinement; 2) an open call for artistic interventions in times of lockdown; and 3) a short film competition on the changes in urban life and public space after the confinement. The activities were presented and disseminated through the social networks (Facebook and Instagram).

1. Photographic representation of space in the confinement

Students from the higher education institutions participating in A-Place were invited to contribute to the Blog “A Confined Place” with photographs and texts reflecting on their experiences with places in the time of confinement (Figure 2). The blog was also opened to the participation of other educational institutions, from secondary schools to higher education.¹⁹ A series of topics were suggested: The emptied city; spatial thresholds; the city inside home; inhabited roofs; communal spaces; and augmented spaces. The blog, with the same graphic identity of the project, promoted the dialogue between people from different geographic areas.

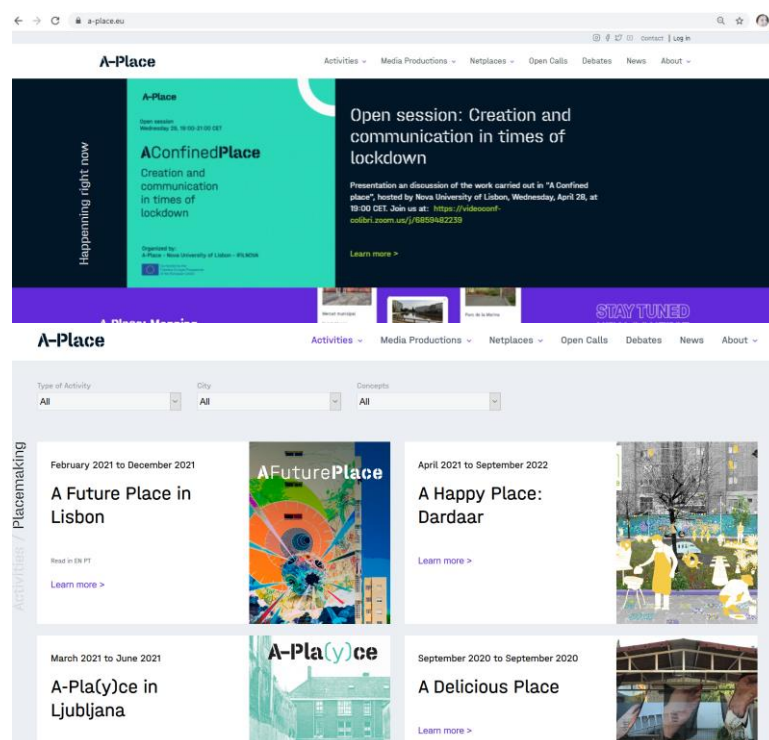


Figure 1. A-Place website (<https://www.a-place.eu/>)

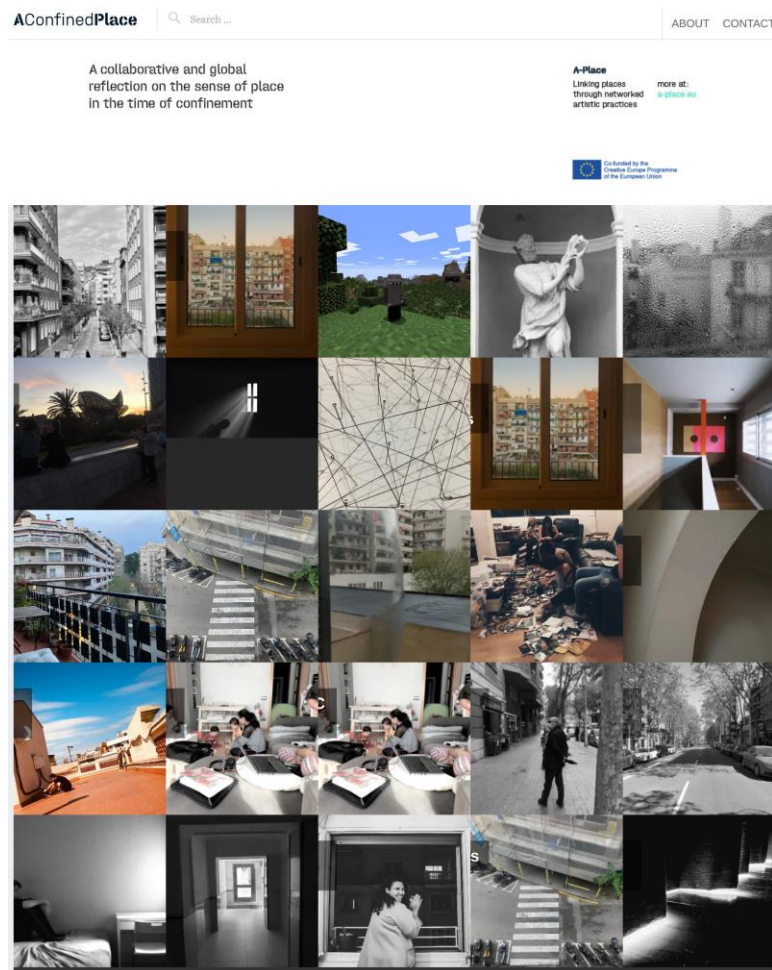


Figure 2. Blog “A Confined Place” (<https://aconfinedplace.wordpress.com/>)

In the blog, contents were divided in three categories: Institutions of provenance, themes referred previously or “No category”. The category “Institution” received 115 entries combining photography and text. This category has the subcategories of the partners involved: La Salle School of Architecture (99); Nova University of Lisbon (3) and the University of Ljubljana (2). “Themes” received 98 posts divided in sub categories: augmented spaces (15); communal spaces (18); inhabited roofs (5); spatial thresholds (22); the city inside home (31) and the emptied city (40). “No category” received only two entries. It is interesting to notice that participants choose to identify their posts with location (the reference to the physical space) and to themes that expresses the vision of a (located) confined life.

At the School of Architecture La Salle, the work done in the blog was intertwined with a regular course dedicated to architectural space and photography. In this course, students read texts on the meaning of place and summarized them in concepts and exercised their capacities to derive meaning from photographs from other authors. With this previous conceptual framework, they took photographs of their living places during the lockdown.²⁰

One of the students who contributed gave an interview one year after in Lisbon and spoke about how they felt being part of a community participating in this activity. Students' opinions about their experiences can be heard at <https://www.a-place.eu/en/debates/47>.

2. Artistic interventions in times of lockdown

The open call “A Confined Place”²¹ was addressed to those people who wanted to share their experience about living and transforming confined places through mixed-media. The categories were chosen in order to connect this activity to the concepts that ground the project: Living in the confined place and transforming the confined places. As stated in the event Facebook page, the call was addressed to “Any citizen, professional or not, individually or as a member of a team or organization”. The submission and dissemination were done on digital social networks.

3. Short films on the transformation of public spaces

The Short film competition "A Confined Urban Vision"²² was the 3rd activity of “A Confined Place”. That is, places of present and future community. The main purpose was to widen the meaning of places in the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, and rethink human existence in the time of the pandemic by documenting ways of living together or apart in the ‘new normal’. Once more, all information was disseminated in digital media. A multidisciplinary jury composed of “A-Place” project partners was appointed to select the shortlisted films and the winner.

FROM EMPTY SPACES TO VIRTUAL PLACES: A SHORT CONCLUSION

“A Confined Place” was a response to the isolation of people at the beginning of 2020, and a solution to the impossibility of living and sharing experiences in physical public spaces. Seeking to take advantage of the isolation measures that have taken place across the world, the activity was designed as an interactive platform, with a direct appeal to participation, without borders, seeking to follow the main objectives of the Project: developing placemaking practices, contributing to the creation of attractive places and strengthening ties between people and communities. Although it was an arduous and sometimes difficult task to fulfill the initial objectives of the project, the redefinition of activities had positive results. From our point of view, the involvement of some students and teachers contributed to overcome the difficulties of a sudden change in pedagogical practices, which educational institutions were forced apply. And last but not least, some activities of the “A Confined Place” activity was an opportunity to explore the potential of new technologies, in inventing new modes of civic participation and artistic creation.

Teresa Hoskyns had already underlined, perhaps too severely, "the increasing importance of virtual public space"²³. Hoskyns invoked then the comprehensive definition of public space proposed by Setha Low and Neil Smith,²⁴ which could also “be described through non-place-based definitions such as the media or the internet”.²⁵ Certainly, the author reflected on citizenship and democracy in contemporary societies, and she was very critical of how any lack of open and free access to physical spaces (e.g. the library, the university, the theatre, the swimming pool, etc.) can shape identities – often turning citizens into "docile bodies", to use Foucaultian terminology –, and ultimately restrict the exercise of citizenship and democracy. However, in spite of this and other dystopian approaches, what seems important to us, that is, what we should retain and conclude from recent experiences of creation and placemaking, is the urgent need to understand the extension of the concept of public space, far beyond its physical dimension. Empty spaces can be linked to virtual spaces, and transformed through technology into bridges for “the park, the square, the street, the market, and public buildings such as the town hall, the parliament, the shopping mall and so on”,²⁶ although we are perhaps not fully prepared for a futuristic and utopian urban portrait like the one that cinema has shown us for decades.

Glenda Caldwell and Carl Smith claimed that "The pervasive and ubiquitous nature of digital technologies have affected nearly all aspects of our daily lives, including the design and experience of

the built environment"²⁷. Even though it was written a couple of years before the COVID-19 pandemic, this claim has gained immeasurable proportions with the state of siege experienced in many cities, and even nations, in recent times. Writing about the hybrid city of the present, the authors emphasize that "The city of today is an interwoven series of physical spaces with digital layers of media and information."²⁸ "A Confined Place" implicitly confirms the power of that possible intertwining between physical places and virtual spaces, whether in everyday experiences in all dimensions of life or in citizenship practices, creation, community interaction, socio-cultural approximation, to name but a few.

More recently, Sarah Calderon and Erik Takeshita reflect on how moments of crisis have influenced the modes of creation throughout history. Their "*prolegómenai*" introduces a question that has become now frequent in artistic circles, too: "...crises put the stark realities of inequity into the spotlight, reinforcing the need to envision a different future and the importance of our relationships and the realities of our interconnectedness".²⁹ The pandemic literally suspended public and private lives. It revealed suddenly, and in the worst way, the extreme importance of places in everyday life and in the definition of our own condition of humanity.

"A Confined Place" placemaking activities, created in that context of social isolation, reacted to the closing of universities by reconnecting faculty, students, artists, and general audiences who, otherwise, could not pursue their academic, social and/or artistic activities. In a way, it emerged as a creative solution to a sudden and unexpected crisis and, at the same time, it might have created alternative spaces and places where people can share experiences, emotions, knowledge, etc. Students, teachers, artists and other citizens engaged in the challenge. Teachers launched and publicized their calls, and students and citizens participated with their artistic projects created during confinement and disseminated (and shared) through social media. Long before the pandemic, Internet had been used mostly for sharing content, but now it explores massively its capability and power as a meeting point, a space of multiple places for exchanging experiences, sharing emotions and creations. That is, places of present and future community. The hypothesis still needs to be confirmed, but the coming times will certainly reveal the huge scale of influence of this and other forms of "virtual placemaking".

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² This work was supported by the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P. [under the Norma Transitória] - DL 57/2016/CP1453/CT0076. Interdisciplinary Centre of Social Sciences, NOVA School of Social Sciences and Humanities.

NOTES

¹ Project for Public Spaces, 2007, URL: <https://www.pps.org/article/what-is-placemaking>. According to De Brito and Richards (2017, p. 3 “Guest editorial” In *International Journal of Event and Festival Management* Vol. 8, Nº. 1, 2017 pp. 2-7 <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEFM-01-2017-0007>.

² Jonathan Lepofsky and James C. Fraser, “Building Community Citizens: Claiming the Right to Place-Making in the City,” *Urban Studies* 40, no. 1 (2003): 128, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00420980220080201>.

³ Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa, “Creative Placemaking,” White Paper for The Mayors’ Institute on City Design (Washington DC: National Endowment for the Arts & United States Conference of Mayors & American Architectural Foundation, 2010), 3, <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/CreativePlacemaking-Paper.pdf>.

⁴ Jen Hughes, “An Annotated History of Creative Placemaking at the Federal Level,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Placemaking*, edited by Courage et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 27–37.

⁵ Sharon M Meagher, “How Might Creative Placemaking Lead to More Just Cities,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of the City* ed. by Sharon M. Meagher, Samantha Noll and Joseph S. Biehl (New York and London: Routledge, 2020), 169–80.

⁶ Andrew Zitcer, “Making Up Creative Placemaking,” *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 40, no. 3 (2020): 278–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X18773424>; Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It’s Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*, Updated edition (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

⁷ Meagher, “How Might Creative Placemaking Lead to More Just Cities.”, 173-6.

⁸ Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place. A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings: From Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1993). Tim Ingold, “Materials against materiality.” *Archaeological Dialogues*, 14(1), (4 April 2007), 1-16.

¹⁰ John Agnew, *Place and politics: the geographical mediation of state and society* (Boston and London: Allen and Unwin, 1987).

¹¹ Robert Sack, *A Geographical Guide to the Real and the Good* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

¹² Tim Cresswell, “Place” in *The SAGE Handbook of Human Geography*, vol. 2, (Sage Publications, 2014), 3-21. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446247617.n2>.

¹³ Richard Sennet, *The Fall of the Public Man* (London: Penguin, 2002).

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics Lectures at the College de France, 1978-1979*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

¹⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *La Production de l’espace* (Paris: Anthropos, 1974).

¹⁶ Don Mitchell, *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space* (Guilford Press, 2003), 129.

¹⁷ Rogério Proença Leite, “Contra-Usos e Espaço Público: Notas Sobre a Construção Social Dos Lugares Na Manguetown,” *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais* 17, no. 49 (2002): 115–34.

¹⁸ Monica Degen, *Sensing Cities: Regenerating Public Life in Barcelona and Manchester* (London: Routledge, 2008), 4.

¹⁹ More details at <https://www.a-place.eu/en/open-call/6>

²⁰ A comprehensive description of the process followed in this course in connection with the blog can be found at <https://www.a-place.eu/en/reports/34>

²¹ More information at <https://www.a-place.eu/en/open-call/16>

²² More information about this activity at <http://filmfreeway.com/AConfinedUrbanVision>

- ²³ Teresa Hoskyns, *The Empty Place : Democracy and Public Space*. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 57.
- ²⁴ Setha Low and Neil Smith, eds., *The Politics of Public Space* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).
- ²⁵ Hoskyns, *The Empty Place*, 58.
- ²⁶ Hoskyns, *The Empty Place*, 58.
- ²⁷ Glenda Amayo Caldwell, Carl Smith, and Edward Montgomery Clift, eds, *Digital Futures and the City of Today : New Technologies and Physical Spaces*. (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2016), 3.
- ²⁸ Glenda Amayo Caldwell, Carl Smith, and Edward Montgomery Clift, eds, *Digital Futures and the City of Today*, 3.
- ²⁹ Sarah Calderon and Erik Takeshita, "A Future of Creative Placemaking." In *The Routledge Handbook of Placemaking*, ed. by Courage et al. (New York: Routledge, 2021), 38.

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