CONNECTIONS: Approaches to relationship-based placemaking

SUMMARY PAPERS FROM BOOK LAUNCH
OCTOBER 2017

About MELA:

MELA's mission is to bridge cultures through the creative design and use of public meeting places. We have four strands of work; thought leadership and policy-making; community-led engagement and development; collaborative design and placemaking; and research. MELA is a social enterprise constituted in August 2015. There are 20+ Associates from diverse backgrounds and professional disciplines interested in addressing the positive and negative impacts of diversity in the city.
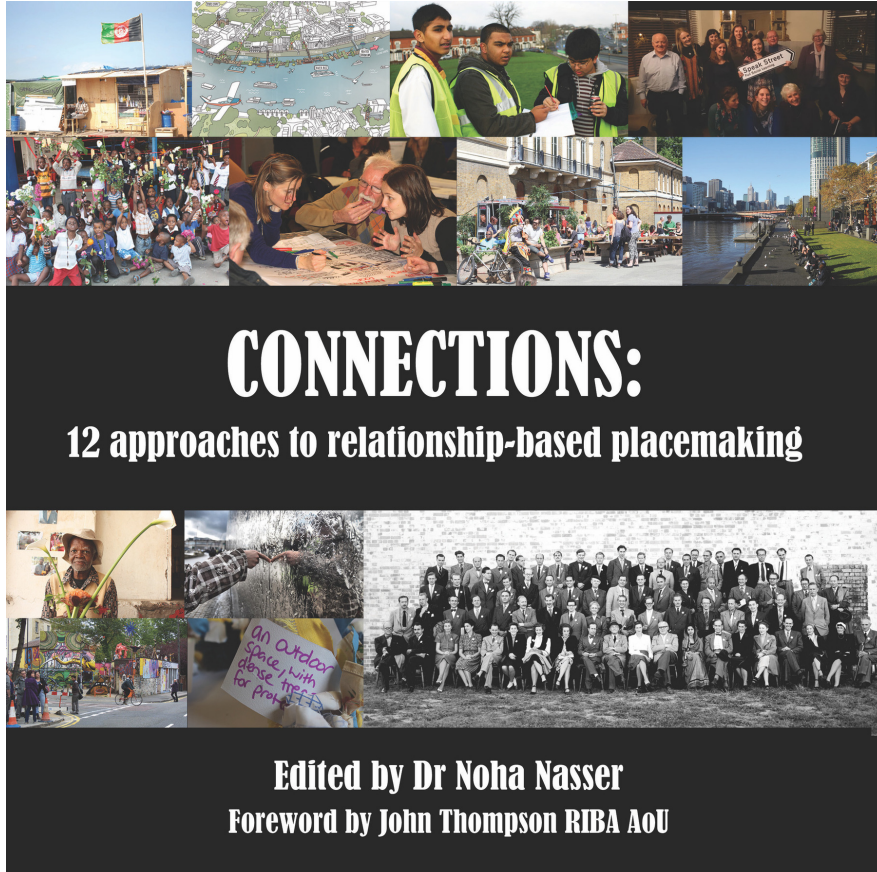
The Context

In 2016, MELA published a book called Connections: 12 Approaches to relationship-based placemaking. It was a collaborative effort in which 12 MELA Associates explored their own practice in building connections between people from diverse backgrounds; between people and the places they live; and between people and professionals. Three major themes ran through the chapters which were explored in more depth at the Connections book launch in October, 2017.

The first theme was building trust – the critical ingredient for people to engage with each other to shape a shared future, and for professionals to support community-led placemaking initiatives that will be much more sustainable long term.

The second theme was designing in places with complex and diverse identities – in a globalised world with large scale immigration, places are no longer homogeneous. Places have become complex with competing identities which make a place interesting, but at the same time can exclude some groups from feeling they belong. Placemakers, whether they are professionals or local communities require the awareness to make places feel like everyone belongs when they design those spaces of encounter and meeting.

The third theme was bridging communities – a new desired outcome for those placemakers that engage with communities in diverse areas. Bridging communities marks a shift from consultation and engagement with those with the confidence, education and capacity to express their views, to another model in which the placemaker is the facilitator of community-building across societal divides to reach a more equitable and inclusive place.

CONNECTIONS:

12 approaches to relationship-based placemaking

Edited by Dr Noha Nasser

Foreword by John Thompson RIBA AoU

In exploring the above themes, the concept of 'placemaker' is fluid – it is not only institutional placemakers who have been educated and trained to plan, design and manage places, but it includes all those who use a place, whose daily behaviours make the place what it is, and whose presence (whether transient or permanent) change the place continually.

What follows is a summary of the conversations that took place at the Connections book launch with 85 guests and which will form the starting point for research and dialogue about the future of relationship-based placemaking. Nine authors engaged with guests and posed a question to get the conversation started.

BUILDING TRUST

THE AUTHOR'S QUESTIONS

1. Conflict is inevitable when people from different cultures and backgrounds co-exist. As professionals, how can we resolve these conflicts in the interest of building a tight-knit community?

2. 'The Map is not the territory" – What creative strategies do we need to explore and employ, to work in unfamiliar and new contexts/situations to respond appropriately and effectively?

3. In the age of fake news and the power of social media to drive mis- and dis- trust what can we, as MELA and its supporters do to engender trust in communities of the advisors and officials with whom they interface? Is it about power balance? Experience? The need for proof in everything?

The first question posed by Antonia Jenkins, a conflict mediator, explored whether trust can be orchestrated. Often groups, cultures, and individuals choose where they live and who they associate with. Like attracts like. However, this behaviour can also lead to isolation, and in extreme cases, conflict. Is there a role for placemakers to intervene? In Singapore, as an example, state policy identifies quotas of social mixing in different areas. To a large degree this model has been considered successful with the diverse communities co-existing and being inclusive. But is this democratic? Are there other institutional mechanisms by which people can encounter each other to build trust and mutual understanding? Schools and the potential for having an intercultural ethos were highlighted as excellent example where positive attitudes and behaviours from a young age could be shaped. The celebration of each other's festivals was another example, or the Big Lunch, an annual street party in which neighbours ate together in their street. There was a belief that trust has to be enabled, either through policy, an institutional ethos, or a neighbourhood initiative. At the centre of these solutions is the need to nurture interpersonal encounters that would allow people to get to the root of the conflict and what their individual and group needs are.

Politically, however, trust is fundamentally about understanding different value systems. It was highlighted that different sides of the political spectrum may want the same thing e.g. social equity, but they disagree on how to achieve it. This is down to their different values which prevents them from listening to other perspectives. The key is to have an open conversation about values and recognise different values do exist and to focus on where can we find the common ground – even at a systemic level.

The final point, is the importance of the leaders in communities who can build trust. Councils and government need to play an active role in supporting community-building initiatives, and in particular to fund, train people and provide appropriate meeting places. How to get this support is not clear.

The second question posed by Sandra Hall, a public artist, discussed how we work could be more effective in partnership. This was in relation to the fact that public artists, like Friction, can reach out and fast-track trust and activity in communities, and people on the margins. Artists can find ways to give people permission to come to the table. One practice that Sandra has adopted is the idea of a dinner meeting. By identifying those movers and shakers in a place, public dinners can provide a safe space to build trust. But how can this form of community-building continue throughout a placemaking project, rather than an initial exercise to 'warm up' local people ahead of major regeneration? Often creativity is marginalised in placemaking. Artists make an intervention, raise the bar, and the confidence of that group, but how can this work have a longer and more robust legacy? Can more institutional placemakers accept the complexity of places that artists can highlight as 'outsiders' to the area where things can be said that may not be comfortable? Sandra's conversations show that creativity can build trust but that this needs to be maintained throughout the lifespan of an urban development project.

The final question by Sarah Sayce, a researcher and surveying professional, discussed the notion of 'trust' and what it means in terms of building communities and making connections.   In her own experiences Sarah had provided evidence that our commonly assumed trust in the professional to serve their clients – and society's best interests had broken down. A particular project which had set out to examine case studies of sustainable communities, had revealed that too often lack of mediation and 'soft' skills by many professionals had led to the communities with whom they were engaging feeling that their own voices were not heard and that development was something done to them rather than for or with them. Professional curricula are lacking in the skills and knowledge needed to engage and empathise with communities – key elements that build trust. How can professionals regard themselves on an equal playing field as communities? How can professionals get rid of 'titles' and a sense of superior knowledge, in favour of an approach based on 'what is your problem and how can I help you?' Often the titles and roles change attitudes to professionals. This hierarchical institutional approach upheld by professionals sits uncomfortably with the more lateral institutions in communities. How can the professionals and communities learn to 'dance together'? New skills sets are needed.

The era of 'fake news' and the power of social media can lead to a distrust of what we are told – breaking down confidence and trust. There was some agreement that mis-information and a scepticism about what was being promoted through social media channels was an issue, but others took the view that social media had played an enormously positive role in promotion of new 'communities' leading to genuine inter-actions and could help foster relationships.
 However, consensus was found around the experience that trust is both fundamental to social cohesion and making connections – but that it is in short supply. In terms of solutions, two words that were quoted throughout the conversations were 'respect' and 'listening': without these trust cannot be engendered.
 And as for social media whilst it has generally agreed it could be a force for building communities, it is not a replacement for face-to-face meetings - the need for which is paramount in making connections.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Trust has to be enabled, either through policy, an institutional ethos, or a neighbourhood initiative**
- **We need greater transparency and dialogue about our different values and where is our common ground**
- **Institutional Placemakers need to engage with leaders of communities**
- **Creativity is a builder of trust but should not be a one-off intervention at the start of the project but should be maintained throughout the lifespan of urban development.**
- **Professional education requires new skills sets for a diverse and complex world starting with empathy, listening, respect, and sensitive engagement.**
- **There is a role for social media in community-building, but nothing can replace face-to-face meetings and encounters .**

DESIGNING DIVERSE PLACE IDENTITIES

THE AUTHOR'S QUESTIONS

1. How can we develop a cross-cultural place-making practice, at scale, which embraces the non-rational side of the human character?

2. Designers typically design public spaces and leave the final space to be inhabited by the local community after the design is completed. Often the spaces may cater to certain groups over others. How can designers enable a process to be inclusive to current and future communities and allow spaces to evolve over time?

3. How can arts organisations work creatively at an urban scale?

The first question posed by Phil Wood, urban therapist, was to challenge people to step outside of their comfort zones and to find the positives in something they might habitually disregard or even consider as the antithesis of their professional practice – the non-rational, the emotional, the sensuous and numinous - the spirit of the people and places with which we work.

Many people interrogated the premise that placemakers must find ways of listening to and working with the non-rational sentiments which people express. How could such factors be evidenced and measured, and if not, how could professionals possibly work with them? This recalled the observation of opinion pollster David Yankelovich:

"*The first step is to measure whatever can be easily measured. This is OK as far as it goes. The second step is to disregard that which can't be easily measured or to give it an arbitrary quantitative value. This is artificial and misleading. The third step is to presume that what can't be measured easily really isn't important. This is blindness. The fourth step is to say that what can't be easily measured really doesn't exist. This is suicide.*"

Some people rightfully asked whether our non-rational instincts were not easily manipulable by populists with malign intent, and this is clearly something we should be vigilant of, but is no excuse for trying to pretend they do not exist.

There is the recognition that in our rapidly diversifying urban communities, we should now expect and come to terms with many different understandings of society, including ones in which the spiritual has always been front and central. One example is Feng Shui. Whilst western religions have had little or nothing to say about our relationship with space and form, this eastern spirituality might add new energy to our thinking in places where harmony and balance have so patently been lost. Building on traditions from other parts of the world could be relevant and open up a new process of thinking about places. Planners often want to fix things and there is no room for experimentation. The increasing use of temporary and meanwhile uses are one way to allow for new ideas to be tested. In one example in Melbourne, a programme of temporary uses tested new layouts, allowed for observation of how the space was used, and helped develop the brief for a more permanent intervention.
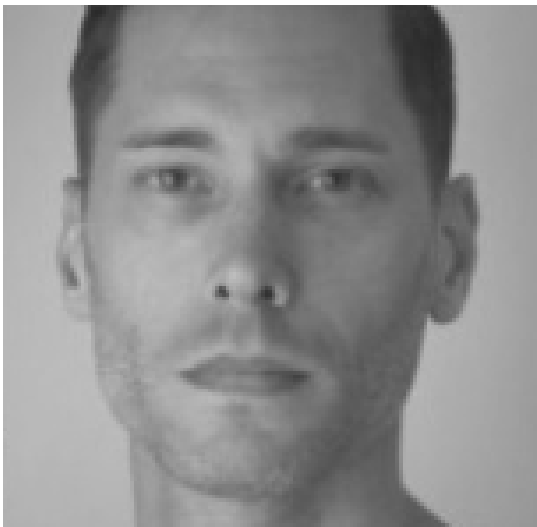
The final point is the combination of financial austerity and adherence to top-down guidance had severely constrained the scope for manoeuvre of current place-makers and – even more worryingly – the imagination and creative ambition of the emerging generation. It is argued the strength of the 'system' and the nature of professional education is creating people who are pulled into a rational approach to placemaking, preventing empathy and curiosity that would allow places to evolve and grow organically.

Scott Adams, an urban designer, posed the third question aimed at challenging the current development and placemaking process from one in which the designer/developer imposes a design on a place. How can places be co-designed and changed over time in a way that is inclusive as people come and go? The increasing privatisation of public space is a major barrier to more laissez-faire placemaking because of the prescribed rules and ownership patterns. The recurring creative solution appears to be the use of meanwhile, temporary and pop-up spaces, but how can this be scaled?

"One view is to demand radical transparency and democracy by using online processes that create things difficult to erase because it shifts power to many voices. Local Authorities have a role to play in enabling this type of democratic and temporary placemaking by funding these initiatives, and shifting power to local people through legislative policies such as Neighbourhood Plans, Section 106 Planning Gain, and Community Infrastructure Levies. The key is giving communities an opportunity to take ownership and to understand what's in it for them, what would make them stay, and what are their reasons to stop in a place?

The third question by Juliet Bidgood, an architect and urban designer, examined the role of arts organisations in leading development that is responsive to communities. However, often arts organisations are embattled themselves and may need support to negotiate situations. They are part of the long term social infrastructure of a place but are coming under threat due to development pressure or funding cuts. These pressures mean that arts organisations are being forced to become catalysts in an area. Today, arts organisations are not only doing 'art' but partnering with other agencies such as artists studios, small-medium enterprises, schools and housing developers to add value. In particular, arts organisations can be more organic, regenerative and have insights into the community. The value of public art is arguable. Some artists don't really connect with communities or listen to what people in the area want or need. However, it is recognized that the role of arts organisations may not only be to produce public art, it could be as an advocate or facilitator. There is an interest in and enthusiasm for the pleasure of collaborative making with communities. Arts organisations can be the conduit for resolving resistance through making and doing things together.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

• Placemakers would benefit from non-rational approaches to understanding places even though they may not be measurable, they do have value
• Non-western traditions (that reflect the diverse and complex makeup of cities and societies) can offer placemakers new ways of designing harmonious and balanced places
• More room for experimentation, creativity and curiosity through temporary uses, meanwhile spaces, and pop-up spaces can provide sense of ownership and testable inclusive designs
• Use of online platforms to make radically transparent the many voices about place to counter mainstream narratives about place
• Local Authorities to promote community-led financing of neighbourhood-based initiatives
• Arts organisations are an important part of the social infrastructure of a place and can be an advocate and facilitator for urban and social development and regeneration.

BRIDGING COMMUNITIES

THE AUTHOR'S QUESTIONS

1. How can you involve all sections of the community in shaping the design and use of their community public spaces and create consensus?

2. What are the barriers local authorities perceive to making new connections with different sectors and how to overcome them? •

3. How can we support young people's community engagement / engagement in spatial planning in the current climate of cuts to front line services that could engage them?

In the bridging communities theme, Charles Campion, lead for community engagement at architects and placemakers JTP, discussed a number of issues. First, that many community engagement processes can often be dominated by "the usual suspects", or unrepresentative individuals and groups, and the challenge is to engage widely with others in the community. Work needs to be put into engaging meaningfully and to build the capacity of people of all age and backgrounds. Inward investment and regeneration often leads to gentrification making places unaffordable to existing businesses and residents - how do we keep the balance and soul of a place? Maintaining the affordability of an area is critical and solutions could be lowering business rates and subsidising rents for small shops and businesses. Socio-economic divides have been growing in many places and some local authorities are considering how to combat this. But local authorities and communities often don't speak the same language and property developers are often not engaged in these conversations. They often don't know what people are looking for. Can developers engage in the wider area? What are the barriers to them doing so? One solution is to improve the way in which the public and private sectors engage and consult their communities to introduce more participatory approaches involving the community, including through design Charrettes and the 'lens of placemaking'. The respectful partnership between private, public and community sectors is what creates truly sustainable places.

Communities need a consensus Vision to set the direction of their future strategies. Charrette type workshop Vision processes are fundamental in developing place designs and strategies with community involvement - it is the face-to-face contact that is so important and the building of relationships and confidence in the community networks. It's not enough to hold an event and expect people to come and participate - you need to animate the community in advance get to know them and build capacity. Workshops, surveys, websites, Minecraft gaming, focus groups are all ways to reach a wide audience and build momentum.

Every community needs a heart whether it's a public space or a High Street. The size of the public space is not the important thing – it is how it is used, how it is activated and curated. We need to invest more in our community hearts and local businesses which are the glue of the community. Small is beautiful in the business sense - small shops and family members provide more diverse, skilled work and training opportunities. We should be framing our taxation and grants to foster strong walkable community hearts.

The second question by Hannah Barter, an urban designer, reflected on her Learning Journeys project which aimed to transform the commissioning process of artists in Stoke by building connections between built environment professionals and artists. Through an engagement process both parties built a common language. Examples from Bristol, shows the power of artist interventions that continue to shape and inform the built regeneration of the city. Public art can be integrated into the public realm to enhance spaces and address other issues such as traffic noise. The highlight of engagement projects like Learning Journeys is to build and retain long-term relationships and new methods of working and commissioning.

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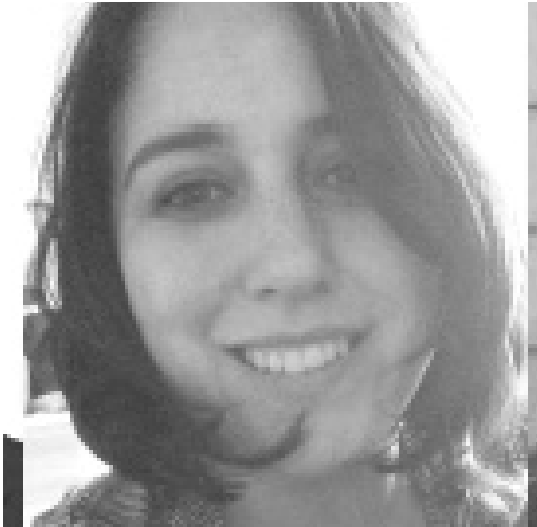
The third question by Esta Orchard, an environmental psychologist, questioned how relationships of trust with young people is under threat because of reduced resources. Young people are often left out of community development and planning processes. Do young people want to engage? Young people can mobilise other young people quite easily through their social media channels, but they don't feel invited or part of the development process. Where can we reach young people? Young people are not always visible. Due to anti-social behavior orders, more young people stay indoors spending time online and on social media. The loss of community centres and face-to-face meetings is what facilitated relationships. There is a need to invest in youth workers.

There is scope for more intergenerational work which is currently missing. Shared activities such as theatre, local clean ups etc. are one way of encouraging new relationships. Take another example such as faith groups where young people have a strong identity and have good intergenerational relationships. How can these kinds of relationships be nurtured in secular spheres? There is a need for a 'safe space' for young people to feel they belong and in which they can develop their civic responsibility. This is critical in the face of media portrayals of youth disadvantage that means young people have conflicting views of their place. This needs managing. Narratives are complicated and stories are simple. Participatory mapping can work well in identifying the limited choices young people have in where they live. "

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Maintaining a balanced place requires making a place affordable through mechanisms such as community land trusts, lower business rates and genuinely affordable rents**
- **Charrettes, Learning Journeys, and participatory mapping are some ways of building a shared language between institutional placemakers and young people through face-to-face encounters**
- **Every place needs a community heart to bring people together**
- **Community centres and high streets are critical bits of social infrastructure to build relationships and intergenerational activities**

What next?

MELA Social Enterprise wants to engage you in relationship-based place-making. To purchase your copy of the book you can here: www.amazon.co.uk/dp/1536938114/

If you have any ideas how we can continue to develop this agenda, please do get in touch

E: melasocialenterprise@gmail.com

T: 07712 672 121

T: @c0sm0p0lis

W: www.melasocialenterprise.com