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. PLACE MAKING AND THE UK'S LARGEST HOUSEBUILDERS

Peter Jones and Daphne Comfort

Abstract

The concept of place making has attracted growing attention as part of possible solutions to the shortage of new housing development in the UK and in the recent White Paper on the future of the planning system, the UK Government called for more attention to be given to placemaking. At the same time, place making has become an increasingly common element in the lexicon of the UK's largest housebuilders. This commentary paper outlines some of the characteristics of place making, reviews how some of the UK's largest housebuilders are addressing place making and offers some reflections on placemaking and the creation of new housing developments and communities.

Keywords Place Making; Large Housebuilders; Sustainable Development; Inclusion; Well-Being; UK

Introduction

Within recent years the concept of place making has attracted attention as part of possible solutions to the shortage of new housing development within the UK. In drawing attention to the *'sustained criticism of the quality and quantity of new housing'*, the Royal Institution for Chartered Surveyors (2016), for example, argued *'placemaking has never been more important in creating thriving, sustainable communities where people genuinely want to live, work and play.'* More recently, in the *'Introduction'* to the *'Planning for the Future'* White Paper (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government 2020) in suggesting that the planning system was central to *'tackling head on the shortage of beautiful, high quality homes and places where people want to live and work'*, the Government called for *'a greater focus on placemaking.'* At the same time, place making has become an increasingly common element in the lexicon of the UK's largest housebuilders. Barratt Developments (2020), currently the UK's largest housebuilder, for example, claimed *'we continue to invest in design and placemaking to ensure all our developments become communities that are socially, environmentally and economically viable.'* With these thoughts in mind, this commentary paper, outlines some of the characteristics of place making, reviews how some of the UK's largest housebuilders are addressing place making, and offers some reflections on placemaking and the creation of new housing developments and communities.

Placemaking

In many ways, people have been making places, for themselves and for others, in which to live, work, play and worship, for example, since the earliest human times, but formal expressions of the thinking behind placemaking date from the 1960's onwards. Strydom et al. (2018), for example, traced the origins of the concept of placemaking to the work of Jane Jacobs, William Whyte, and George Andrews in the 1960's and 1970's. Project for Public Spaces (2018a), for example, claimed *'the placemaking movement was born over forty years ago, when pioneers like Jane Jacobs and William H Whyte published their groundbreaking ideas about Americans and the urban experience'* and *'back then there was*

no name for that way of thinking – they simply showed us that cities should be designed for people, with walkable streets, welcoming public spaces, and lively neighbourhoods.'

In the years since then, the concept of place making has become a wide church, it has attracted attention in policy and practice arenas and in a range of academic disciplines, and it has a range of definitions and meanings. One of the simplest definitions is *'placemaking is the process of creating quality places where people want to live, work, play, shop, learn, and visit'* (Wyckoff et al. 2015), while for CBRE (2017), the global real estate company, *'place making happens when buildings are transformed into vibrant urban spaces that offer wellbeing, pleasure and inspiration.'* Pierce et. al (2010) defined place making as *'the set of social, political and material processes by which people iteratively create and recreate the experienced geographies in which they live.'*

For some commentators and organisations, place making is about public space. Project for Public Spaces (2018b), for example, *'inspires people to collectively reimagine and reinvent public spaces at the heart of every community.'* CBRE (2017) argued *'placemaking has many aspects, of which changes to the public realm are the most fundamental.'* At the same time, CBRE (2017) outlined how place making in the public realm can create, or enhance real estate value, for example, by altering the image of an area, creating a new destination for visitors, residents and workers, adding an element of vitality to an area, so that it can be used for events, or establishing the character of a newly developed area. Place making can also be an important element in the process of urban generation. Heritage, described as the *'contemporary use of imagined pasts'* (Pendlebury and Porfyriou 2017), often plays a central role in urban regeneration and here, place making is often focused on rebranding.

While most of the work on place making has been focused on urban, and increasingly on suburban, areas, it can also have a rural focus. Stewart (2010), for example, outlined how place making had been operationalised within public forestry within the UK, and she called for research into how place making methodologies and attachment to place, could be integrated into forest management policy, planning and implementation. Asselin (2016) employed peoples' stories and narratives to explore experience and place making in contested forests in the Yukon Territory in Canada and suggested that *'stories of place should invoke the voices of people who create them',* and that *'descriptions of their activities, and where possible in their own voices, can serve better than most academic or government writing in expressing the importance of place.'*

That said, place making is also very much a multidisciplinary academic concept and it has attracted attention from researchers in a range of disciplines. Specific examples, drawn from the literature in three disciplines merit brief attention, because they provide some academic context and reference points for the review of the way housebuilders address place making. Cilliers and Timmermans (2014) recognised that *'while place-making is an important tool for experts to utilize in community planning, it should be accompanied by a thorough understanding of the contemporary social dynamics of place and the implications it has for the people who inhabit these places.'* The authors emphasised the importance of *'incorporating public perspective into the place-making process'* and of employing *'creative participatory processes to attract stakeholders and enhance their willingness to partake in the participatory planning processes'* (Cilliers and Timmermans 2014). Strydom et al. (2019)

explored the development of theoretical trends in spatial planning to help to identify emerging theoretical perspectives. Here the authors identified a change in placemaking from an initial concern with the production of a physical place due to a design strategy, towards a process which serves as an agent of social change and democratic intervention, and argued that in recent years *'placemaking has been transformed into a community practice in which individuals have been empowered to learn and share skills'* Strydom et al. (2018)

Placemaking is an increasingly important theme in the marketing and development of tourism. For Lew (2017), for example, *'tourism destination planning and marketing are fundamentally place making actions intended to shape the image and imageability of a place'*, and an understanding of place-making provides *'insight into research questions on the political economy of tourism and the roles of hosts and guest in co-producing tourism places.'* More specifically, Dupre (2019), conducted a systematic literature review to analyse how the concept of place making had been defined and developed within the contexts of urban development and tourism. One of the findings of this review was that place making can lead to a loss of heterogeneity and diversity within urban environments and this, in turn, poses challenges for the production of inclusive places.

Geographers have explored the role and importance of place making in a variety of contexts. In addressing urban regeneration, Jones and Evans (2012) focussed on what they saw as the mismatch between policy rhetoric on the importance of a sense of place and the outputs of regeneration schemes, which deliberately seem to efface the relationships between communities and urban spaces prior to redevelopment. The authors concluded that building place associations cannot be done quickly and *'the affective and emotional connections to a locale which create place need time to establish themselves between individual bodies and their surrounding environment'* (Jones and Evans 2012). More specifically, and from a feminist perspective, Dyck (2005) explored the often-hidden, everyday work of women and the roles they fulfil in place making.

Place Making in UK Housebuilders Discourses

While there are over 300,000 housebuilders in the UK, a relatively small number of companies dominate the marketplace and most of these companies, including Barratt Developments, Persimmon, Taylor Wimpey, Redrow, Countryside, the Berkeley Group, and Crest Nicholson, emphasise their role in placemaking. Taylor Wimpey (2019), for example, reported *'our approach starts with placemaking – ensuring the design and layout of our sites promotes social, environmental and economic sustainability. We are exploring how we can help new communities become established more quickly on our developments and investing in research and development so we can keep improving our homes.'* More specifically, Taylor Wimpey claimed that good placemaking involves developing housing schemes that are well connected and integrated into their surroundings, with layouts that blend in with the topography, landscape and existing buildings, neighbourhoods that prioritise pedestrians and cyclists, a network of green spaces and easy access to schools and other community facilities. Taylor Wimpey also reported looking to integrate historic buildings and other local features into its developments

The former Howe Barracks site, now Royal Parade, just outside Canterbury, provides an illustration of Taylor Wimpey's approach to place making. Here, the company built a range of two bedroomed apartments and two, three, and four bedroomed houses. The development includes a 5-hectare park with paths and trails, natural play spaces, ponds, woodland, a community orchard, and allotments, has good access to a variety of schools, shopping facilities and transport links, and some of the former barracks buildings are in community use. Further, Taylor Wimpey claimed that community is at the heart of the development, and that local residents have the opportunity to become a part of the Howe Park Trust, a new, and ultimately independent, organisation which will, in time, own, maintain, and manage the open space and community buildings at Royal Parade.

In claiming that *'development is all about people'*, the Berkeley Group (2019), which specialises in *'large scale regeneration opportunities'*, reported *'we take a holistic approach to placemaking, which goes beyond the conventional role of a developer and puts the strength and well-being of the wider community at the heart of every plan.'* Further, the Berkeley Group (2019) claimed to have *'the financial strength and placemaking expertise to take on the most difficult long term capital intensive developments'*, designed to transform *'these underused places into successful neighbourhoods'*, and to create *'greater economic, social, environmental, and commercial value over the full development cycle.'*

Kidbrooke Village, originally a Royal Air Force Base and more recently the Ferrier local authority housing estate, in Greenwich, was developed as a regeneration project, by the Berkeley Group, in partnership with the Royal Borough of Greenwich and the Mayor of London. The development consists of four distinct neighbourhoods, namely the Village Centre, Meridian Quarter, Blackheath Gate and City Point, with one, two and three bedroomed apartments, penthouses, and town houses, ranging in price from just under £400,000 to just over £1 million. The Village Centre has a supermarket, coffee shop and pub, the development includes 35 hectares of parkland with a range of wildlife and habitats, and residents have access to their own gym.

Barratt Developments emphasised that placemaking principles are fundamental to its business and claimed that *'our customers want to live in great places that leave behind a positive legacy'*, and that *'we continue to invest in design and placemaking to ensure all our developments become communities that are socially, environmentally and economically viable'* (Barratt Development 2020). The company's Montague Park development of 620 new homes, including 140 classed as affordable, on a greenfield site in Wokingham, includes a new neighbourhood centre, a primary school with multi-use games area, a 12-hectare country park and good pedestrian, bicycle and bus access to the town centre. Barratt's Trumpington Meadows development, three miles from the centre of Cambridge, includes one, and two, bedroomed apartments and three, four, and five, bedroomed houses, set within a country park, and has good access to schools and shopping facilities.

Countryside Properties (2019) claimed *'a strong track record of placemaking'*, and to have *'been a leader in placemaking, design and sustainable development for over a decade.'* The company sponsors the Alan Cherry Awards for Placemaking, which rewards individuals from the public sector who have made significant contributions to placemaking in their communities. Redrow reported that its placemaking framework is built around eight principles, including community engagement, creating new, or enhancing existing, wildlife habitats, and better connecting people to them, through the thoughtful design of public

spaces, and creating sustainable and socially cohesive communities, with a diverse mix of housing types and tenures. Crest Nicholson (2019), claimed to enjoy *'an enviable reputation for its placemaking skills'*, and that its approach to placemaking *'extends far beyond the physical environment we create'* in that it *'encompasses building strong sustainable communities.'* Persimmon (2019) doesn't explicitly use the term place making, but emphasised that the company looks to *'provide sustainable neighbourhoods with high amenity value in places where people wish to live and work'* and to *'design our new housing developments so that they create a good place to live.'*

Reflections

Throughout much of the UK, large housebuilders are certainly creating new places but four sets of issues, sustainable development, inclusion, well-being, and the new planning proposals for England, merit discussion and reflection. For the largest housebuilders placemaking is very much bound up with sustainable development. Here housebuilders typically claim that their approach involves ensuring that the design and layout of new developments promotes social, environmental, and economic sustainability and they also emphasise the importance of paying attention to flood risks, sustainable transport and promoting local economic development. The Berkeley Group (2019), for example, reported *'we think long term and we invest more to create welcoming, sustainable and biodiverse places.'* Persimmon (2019) reported *'environmental and sustainability matters are receiving increasing focus both within Persimmon and within the housing industry generally'* and *'ensuring that we operate in a responsible way, and that we build homes and communities that are both efficient and sustainable, is fundamental to the continued success of our business.'*

However, two other facets of the housebuilders' commitments to sustainable development merit discussion. Firstly, the housebuilders' claims to be committed to sustainable development can also be seen as greenwash, the term used when communication messages are deceptively used to promote the perception that a company's products, aims, or policies are environmentally friendly. The largest housebuilders refute any such allegations, not least because greenwashing can damage both *'the relationship of trust between consumers and individual companies'* as well as *'the appeal of the company as an investment and loan destination'* (Dentsu Aegis Network 2018). In a similar vein, Kopnina (2019) has expressed the concern that *'greenwashing can backfire not only because it has limited benefits, but also because it poses a major threat to business operations if publicly disclosed.'*

Secondly, the language of sustainability is also employed by the largest housebuilders in describing contributions to the value chain, returns to investors and commitments to continuing growth and business continuity. Barratt Developments (2020), for example, reported *'we will continue to maintain an appropriate capital structure and a sustainable operating framework, with shareholders' funds and land creditors funding the longer term requirements of the business, and with term loans and bank debt funding shorter term requirements for working capital.'* Crest Nicholson reported that *'great placemaking and build quality must be balanced with delivering strong returns.'* In a similar vein, the Berkeley Group (2020) reported *'our vision is incorporated within our business model, enabling us to deliver value, creating sustainable returns for shareholders'*, while Countryside Properties (2019) claimed to be *'delivering sustainable growth and superior*

returns from our balanced business models through the cycle with a commitment to quality and integrity.'

Arguably more radically, the housebuilders' employment of the language of sustainable development might be interpreted, as capture by corporate capitalism. Valenzuela and Bohm (2017), for example, argued that while *'the concept of sustainability was originally brought to light to stand against the growth doctrine of capitalism and the overconsumption of natural resources'*, four decades later, *'the term sustainability has been captured by politic-economic elites claiming that rapid economic growth can be achieved in a way that manages to remain responsible to environment and society.'*

Place making is also seen to be associated with health and well-being. The Project for Public Spaces (2018c), for example, claimed *'placemaking can improve public health by building community, shifting behaviour, and providing public access to resources like fresh food and greenery.'* The Town and Country Planning Association, with its origins in the Garden Cities Movement has long championed the cause of place making in supporting people's physical health and mental well-being. More specifically, the Town and Country Planning Association, The Kings Fund, The Young Foundation and the National Health Service (2019) provided details of healthy place making in a number of areas across England including, Barking Riverside in East London, Bicester, Ebbsfleet Garden City in Essex and Halton Lea in Runcorn.

At Halton Lea, for example, the priorities are to improve the people's experience of health care and well-being, by promoting services in the well-being campus in the former town centre, the building of a range of new homes and their surrounding environment to facilitate health, well-being and independence as people age, and enabling people to develop skills, access employment opportunities and nurture new businesses. At Ebbsfleet Garden City, the focus is on prioritising accessible health care and healthier eating for all the community. Here, the priorities are the development of a new model of health care, centred on a health and well-being hub, the promotion of healthier lifestyles through the design of the physical environment, and projects to promote and support healthier lifestyles for both established, and new, communities.

In outlining their approach to place making, the largest housebuilders emphasised that several of their new developments included a range of housing sizes. The Berkeley Group (2019) for example, reported *'our developments provide homes for everyone: from families to first time buyers, students to older people, and a mix of affordable homes which meet the needs of the local community.'* However, the housebuilders' approach to place making cannot be described as truly inclusive, in that it is focused upon those who can afford to buy, rather than those who have little option but to rent, accommodation. The term affordable housing is often interpreted as meaning housing sold at a discount of at least 20% below local market value, but even such discounts make access to many developments beyond the financial reach of some potential buyers, and, as such, exclude a significant proportion of the population. At the same time, some of the facilities and amenities within such developments are often provided exclusively for residents, rather than for the wider community.

Place making has traditionally been seen to be an element in planning policy. The most recently revised *'National Planning Policy Framework'* (Ministry of Housing,

Communities and Local Government 2019) advised that *‘planning policies and decisions should support development that makes efficient use of land’*, and emphasised *‘the importance of securing well-designed, attractive and healthy places’*, but it made no explicit reference to place making per se. That said, many local authorities within England have developed place making policies and published guidance on place making. Bath and North East Somerset Council, for example, adopted a Place Making Plan in 2017, and it forms part of the Development Plan for the District and is used in determining planning applications. The plan looks to help to *‘deliver better places by facilitating the delivery of high quality, sustainable and well located development supported by the timely provision of necessary infrastructure’* and *‘ultimately it is about creating good places that promote people’s health, happiness, and well-being’* (Bath and North East Somerset District Council 2017).

By way of an aside, place making is one of two principal policies within current Scottish Planning Policy, and *‘planning should take every opportunity to create high quality places by taking a design-led approach’* (The Scottish Government 2014). This, in turn *‘means taking a holistic approach that responds to, and enhances, the existing place while balancing the costs and benefits of potential opportunities over the long term’* and considering the relationships between *‘a successful sustainable place’*, *‘a natural resilient place’*, *‘a connected place’*, and *‘a low carbon place’* (The Scottish Government 2014). More specifically, several Scottish local authorities have provided guidance on placemaking. Glasgow City Council (2018), for example, has produced supplementary guidance on *‘the placemaking principle’* for the city’s Development Plan, which looks to *‘encourage placemaking’* by *‘promoting a design led approach’*, *‘directing the right type of development to the right place’*, and *‘insisting on high quality development that embodies the qualities of place.’*

Looking to the future, the new planning proposals for England (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government 2020), published in August 2020, are designed to simplify the planning process and to create a more diverse and competitive housing industry, and in emphasising the importance of *‘design and sustainability’*, look to encourage *‘a greater focus on ‘placemaking’* and *‘the creation of beautiful places.’* However, most commentators agree that the new planning proposals, if approved, will make it much easier for housebuilders to obtain planning permission for new developments. As such, the UK’s largest housebuilders may no longer feel the need to continue to publicly emphasise their commitments to place making to support their planning applications, and it remains to be seen if local authorities place making policies will hold any sway, if the determination of planning applications is little more than a formality.

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