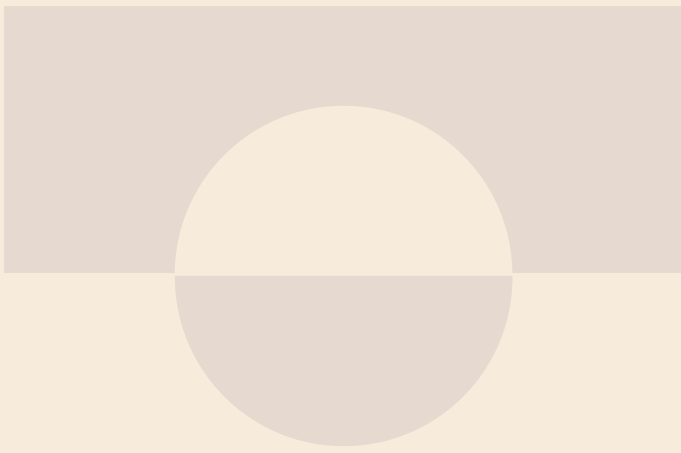


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Proceedings

Nantes, France
2025



ethical leadership
a new frontier for design



Ethical Leadership: A New Frontier for Design

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Ethical Leadership: A New Frontier for Design

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Table of Contents

Adapting Healthcare Design for Innovation: A Co-Design Approach to Transforming Facilities	2
<u>Ms. Manon BERTHEREAUX¹</u>	
<i>1. L'École de design Nantes Atlantique</i>	
Advancing Territorial Design: Practices and Projects Taxonomy	17
<u>Mrs. Line Lorre¹</u> , <u>Dr. Clémence Montagne²</u> , <u>Mrs. Marine Belluet³</u> , <u>Mr. Simon Boussard⁴</u> , <u>Ms. Clara Tortorici⁴</u>	
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Amplifying social initiatives of the Third Sector in the venetian landscape	18
<u>Prof. Raffaella Fagnoni¹</u> , <u>Prof. Pietro Costa¹</u> , <u>Prof. Gianni Sinni¹</u> , <u>Ms. Maria Manfroni¹</u> , <u>Mr. Giovanni Foppiani¹</u> , <u>Mr. Alessandro Lodovini¹</u>	
<i>1. Università Iuav di Venezia</i>	
Co-design and public policies for an educational equity in a secondary school	43
<u>Dr. Anna Majó¹</u> , <u>Ms. Lena Macau Sanz²</u>	
<i>1. University of Barcelona, 2. PhD student</i>	
Co-designing for accessibility: design-led strategies to improve airplanes washroom for people with disabilities.	66
<u>Mr. Simon Tremblay-Turcotte¹</u> , <u>Prof. Ernesto Morales¹</u> , <u>Mr. David Gotti¹</u> , <u>Mr. Ahmed Hadj Hassen¹</u> , <u>Prof. François Routhier¹</u>	
<i>1. Université Laval</i>	
Community Engagement in Co-designing Design Education: insights from the “School Day” initiatives and the shifting curatorship role of institutions in educational transformation.	75
<u>Mrs. Silvia D'Ambrosio¹</u> , <u>Dr. Andrea Manciaracina¹</u> , <u>Dr. Francesca Mattioli¹</u> , <u>Prof. Anna Meroni¹</u> , <u>Prof. Francesco Zurlo¹</u>	
<i>1. Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano</i>	
Confronting the Legacy of Slavery at the University of the South: An Empathy-Based, Student-Engaged Collaborative Approach	100
<u>Ms. Laura Battaglia¹</u>	
<i>1. Virginia Commonwealth University</i>	
Contact Improvisation and Co-design Practices	114
<u>Prof. YA LIU¹</u>	
<i>1. Tsinghua University</i>	
Cultivating Care: Ethical Pedagogy For Collaboration in Public Spaces	115
<u>Ms. Lakshmi Srinivasan¹</u> , <u>Dr. Daniele Busciantella-Ricci²</u> , <u>Ms. Khushboo Jogani³</u> , <u>Dr. Malay Dhamelia³</u>	
<i>1. BITS Design School, 2. University of Florence, 3. BITS Design School, Birla Institute of Technology & Science, Pilani</i>	
Design Empowerment : Participatory Governance in Renewable Energy Infrastructure Planning	144
<u>Ms. Xueyi Li¹</u> , <u>Prof. Yonghong Liu¹</u> , <u>Dr. Tobie Kerridge²</u>	
<i>1. Hunan University, 2. Goldsmiths, University of London</i>	

WHAT IF DESIGN COULD TRANSFORM THE WAY WE THINK AND MAKE PUBLIC POLICIES ? PROPOSING A NEW MODEL : THE POLICY DESIGN JOURNEY	577
<u>Mr. Christophe Gouache</u> ¹	
<i>1. Strategic Design Scenarios</i>	
A Moss-Supported Emotional Regeneration Kit: Posthumanism Speculative Design for More-than-human Sociality and Communities	599
<u>Mr. Herun Chen</u> ¹ , <u>Prof. Francesca Valsecchi</u> ²	
<i>1. Tongji University, 2. tongji university</i>	
A Systemic, Sustainable and Territorial Dynamic Canvas to combine ecology, economy and regional planning.	600
<u>Dr. Florie BUGEAUD-REMOND</u> ¹ , <u>Prof. Eddie SOULIER</u> ²	
<i>1. beewö, 2. University of Technology of Troyes</i>	
Agonism/Antagonism. Sport and territorial regeneration through examples of tourism, sociability and marketing.	620
<u>Prof. Elisa Poli</u> ¹	
<i>1. NABA, Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti</i>	
Biodesign and innovation inspired by nature. Regenerating territories and ecosystems through design	633
<u>Prof. Ursula Bravo</u> ¹	
<i>1. Universidad del Desarrollo</i>	
Care in Urban Design: Reclaiming Identity and Embracing Idleness through the Third Landscape	639
<u>Dr. niloofar amini</u> ¹	
<i>1. lecturer,</i>	
Communicating Urban Perception: Digital Tools to Inform Urban Regeneration Initiatives	649
<u>Dr. Sabrina Scuri</u> ¹ , <u>Prof. Marco Quaggiotto</u> ¹	
<i>1. Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano</i>	
Cultural Spatial Synergies. Interactive and Digital Community Maps as a Tool for “restorative design”	650
<u>Dr. Mirko Michelacci</u> ¹ , <u>Prof. Alessandra Maria Laura Bosco</u> ¹ , <u>Dr. Lucilla Calogero</u> ¹	
<i>1. Università Iuav di Venezia</i>	
Design for placemaking: enhancing the intangible and soft aspects of the city. Reflections from an educational standpoint.	673
<u>Prof. Daniela Selloni</u> ¹ , <u>Prof. Carla Sedin</u> ¹ , <u>Mrs. Silvia D’Ambrosio</u> ¹ , <u>Prof. Anna Meroni</u> ¹	
<i>1. Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano</i>	
Designing for a Good Life	688
<u>Dr. Jaron Rowan</u> ¹ , <u>Dr. Cecilia De Marinis</u> ¹	
<i>1. BAU College of Arts and Design of Barcelona</i>	
Designing for Multispecies Cities: Envisioning Coexistence Experiences Between Humans and Plants	700
<u>Dr. Francesco Vergani</u> ¹ , <u>Mrs. Maria Maramotti</u> ¹	
<i>1. Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano</i>	
Housing for Good: Catalysing Ecological Citizen(s) a Method of Designing ‘Sustainable Conditions’	716
<u>Dr. Robert PHILIPS</u> ¹ , <u>Dr. Luke Gooding</u> ²	
<i>1. Royal College of Art, 2. Stockholm Environment Institute</i>	

Chapter 2

REGENERATIVE CITY AND TERRITORIAL DEVELOPMENT

Co-designing benefits for People
and Nature

Track leader: Sophie Eberhardt, PhD
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Design for placemaking: enhancing the intangible and soft aspects of the city. Reflections from an educational standpoint.

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ABSTRACT | The multi-dimensional concept of placemaking represents a significant effort to infuse urban spaces with vitality and a community-centric ethos. However, the specific contributions of design in placemaking processes require further exploration, especially in addition to urban planning studies. This paper reflects on the various contributions of design in placemaking, examining its transformative potential from an educational standpoint. It builds upon an inquiry conducted by the Cumulus Working Group, "Design for Placemaking," which seeks to investigate this field as distinct from architecture and urban planning.

Drawing from a literature review, the paper provides a preliminary definition of design for placemaking as a collaborative process that leverages cultural, relational, and policy elements to enhance communal value and sustainability. A central theme emerging from this definition is the recognition that design for placemaking primarily addresses the intangible and soft aspects of the city—such as the design of services, policies, collaborative processes, and accessible spaces that foster meaningful interactions and relationships. This approach adopts a community-centered, inclusive, and regenerative design perspective.

The paper then presents a selection of results from the inquiry, which collected case studies from design universities worldwide (UK, Canada, China, Spain, Australia, Mexico, among others). These case studies focus on the soft aspects of placemaking rather than its hard, infrastructural components. The intangible dimension of placemaking arising from these case studies is filtered through approaches such as the '15-minute city,' 'more-than-human,' 'service logic,' and 'community empowerment': they contribute to a more holistic understanding of placemaking, extending beyond physical spaces and the traditional human-centered approach.

Although still a work in progress, the inquiry has reflected on the reciprocity of care between urban spaces and citizens, the balance between community involvement and diverse stakeholder engagement, and the relationships between humans, non-humans, and the environment. These reflections are useful to suggest new educational paths for design students. Such paths would move beyond the design of physical spaces to envision how people can meet, work, and live while fostering a sense of community and shifting from mere 'space' to meaningful 'place'—where human and natural systems co-exist and co-evolve over time. While current design curricula may not fully support such programs, this inquiry offers a first step toward igniting a discussion on the need for comprehensive educational frameworks in design for placemaking.

KEYWORDS | PLACEMAKING, DESIGN EDUCATION, SOFT INFRASTRUCTURE, COMMUNITY

1. Introduction

Placemaking has emerged as a transformative concept within the broader discourse of urban development, characterized by its emphasis on shaping the public realm through inclusive, participatory, and community-centered approaches. While traditionally associated with urban planning and architecture, placemaking increasingly intersects with design, that is a discipline primarily concerned with the meaning and quality of the experience of the users, highlighting the role of intangible and relational dimensions—such as culture, collaboration, and shared meaning, indeed—in creating spaces that resonate with people's lived experiences. This paper explores these intersections through the design lens, positioning it as an enabler of placemaking because it looks at urban life's softer, and relational aspects before and beyond the physical interventions.

The inquiry presented here is grounded in the work of the Cumulus Working Group (CWG) on Design for Placemaking, an initiative that seeks to investigate design contributions in this field from an educational standpoint. The CWG aims to establish a shared framework that integrates diverse perspectives, methodologies, and practices, recognizing the potential of design education to foster innovative approaches to placemaking. This collaborative effort is driven by the hypothesis that it would be meaningful to discuss design for placemaking as a distinct area of inquiry and practice. An area that synthesizes insights from multiple design disciplinary fields while maintaining a focus on intangible elements such as community relationships, participatory processes, and cultural narratives.

To achieve this, the research adopts a dual approach: reviewing the existing literature and collecting case studies. The literature review provided an initial exploration of placemaking's conceptual foundations and its connections to design, setting the stage for a collaborative exchange of ideas during the CWG's inaugural meeting at the Cumulus 23 conference in Antwerp (Sedini et al., 2023). Following this, a global call for case studies was

launched to gather insights from educational institutions worldwide, focusing on how design for placemaking is practiced, taught, and conceptualized across different cultural and disciplinary contexts.

This paper is structured to guide the reader through the multifaceted nature of design for placemaking. After this introduction, Section 2 offers a contextual background, synthesizing key themes and definitions from the literature on placemaking and its intersections with design. Section 3 focuses on the case study collection and analysis, presenting the study's preliminary results and highlighting the contributions of design education to placemaking practices, and the recurring themes identified in the collected case studies. Section 4 attempts to draft possible educational implications, reflecting on how the findings inform the development of pedagogical frameworks that support design for placemaking. Finally, some reflections on future directions are proposed, envisioning a roadmap for expanding the discourse and practice of design for placemaking through collaborative and interdisciplinary efforts.

Through this exploration, the paper aims to contribute to the growing recognition of design as a vital force in placemaking, advocating for a holistic understanding of the city as a system of relationships, i.e., a truly regenerative city, while emphasizing the need for educational programs that equip designers to engage with its complexities.

2. Placemaking and Design: Contextual Background

The concept of placemaking has evolved as a multidimensional approach to shaping the public realm, emphasizing the importance of people, community, and sustainability. This section outlines a brief overview of the origins of placemaking and identifies possible intersections with the design disciplines. Lastly, a set of emergent themes is highlighted as they served as the basis for the collaborative inquiry conducted within the CWG on Design for Placemaking.

2.1 Placemaking: Definitions and Origins

Placemaking is broadly defined as a process and philosophy aimed at transforming “spaces” into meaningful “places” through community engagement and creative collaboration. The literature underscores its roots in the ideas of urban visionaries such as Jane Jacobs and William H. Whyte in the 1960s, who highlighted the need for cities to prioritize human-scale design over car-centric urban planning. Jacobs' emphasis on “eyes on the street” and Whyte's focus on social life in public spaces laid the groundwork for placemaking as a participatory and community-driven process (LeGates & Stout, 2020). The term itself was popularized by the Project for Public Spaces in the 1980s, but its principles trace back to earlier initiatives such as Whyte's 1980 The Street Life Project (1969–1975). These early projects demonstrated how observing, listening to, and involving local communities could create vibrant public spaces tailored to users' needs and aspirations (LeGates & Stout, 2020).

Placemaking is more than an urban design methodology—it is a strategy encompassing public and private spaces' planning, management, and programming. It is rooted in bottom-up processes, encouraging active participation from end users in all design and implementation phases. Schneekloth and Shibley (1995) describe placemaking as a human act of transforming environments into meaningful places where community members engage in thoughtful and responsible actions to create a shared sense of belonging (Buser et al., 2013 in Romeiro, 2017).

Wyckoff (2014) identifies three specialized types of placemaking and two main intervention approaches. The first specialized type of placemaking is *Strategic Placemaking*, aimed at attracting talented workers while creating quality places, creating “talent hubs” and therefore attracting businesses, promoting job creation, and improving the neighborhoods income and quality of life. The specific characteristics and timeframes of Strategic Placemaking projects are slower and bigger in scale, having a bigger impact at the urban level. The second type is *Creative Placemaking*, which refers to a process where partners from public, private, nonprofit, and community sectors collaborate strategically to shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, tribe, city, or region through arts and cultural activities. This approach enlivens public and private spaces, revitalizes structures and streetscapes, enhances the viability of local businesses and public safety, and unites diverse communities to celebrate, inspire, and draw inspiration from one another (Markusen & Gadwa, 2014). The third type is *Tactical Placemaking*, it is derived from the concept of tactical urbanism, also known as DIY urbanism, guerrilla urbanism, and pop-up urbanism. It is described as small-scale, incremental urban design interventions that serve as a foundation for facilitating larger-scale investments (Lydon & Garcia, 2015). This concept implements low-risk trial and error concepts before making greater political and financial commitments. The aforementioned types of Placemaking can be achieved through two main intervention approaches, Projects and Activities (Wyckoff, 2014). *Placemaking Projects* are more permanent types of interventions, while *Placemaking Activities* are less permanent and faster to implement and usually intervene in the “soft” aspects of places.

2.2 Possible Contributions of Design in Placemaking

Design can provide multiple contributions to placemaking, serving as both a process and a tool for fostering connections between people and the places they inhabit. As Manzini, Fuster, and Paez (2023) suggest, designing for placemaking requires viewing the city as a complex system of relationships. This perspective transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries, integrating fields such as architecture and urbanism with emerging domains like service design, interaction design, and graphic design. Such an interdisciplinary approach reflects the inherent complexity of urban systems, which demand the integration of “hard” infrastructures—such as physical spaces and structures—and “soft” infrastructures, which include relational, cultural, and social dimensions (Landry, 2000). Landry (2000) highlighted that soft infrastructure is particularly critical in this process. It focuses on creating environments that encourage networking, communication, and interaction—what Landry refers to as “third spaces,” existing outside the realms of home and work. These spaces are essential for fostering vibrant communities, shifting the emphasis from purely physical developments to cultivating social and cultural connections that enhance the quality and amenities of public spaces.

This duality aligns with Sennett’s (2018) distinction between “*ville*” and “*cit *”. According to Sennett, the *ville* represents the physical, built environment of the city, while the *cit * refers to the social networks, cultural narratives, and collective meanings that give urban life its depth and vibrancy. Design for placemaking seeks to bridge these two dimensions, ensuring that the tangible aspects of the *ville* are imbued with the relational and cultural richness of the *cit *. By doing so, design creates spaces that support meaningful human interactions and foster vibrant, inclusive communities.

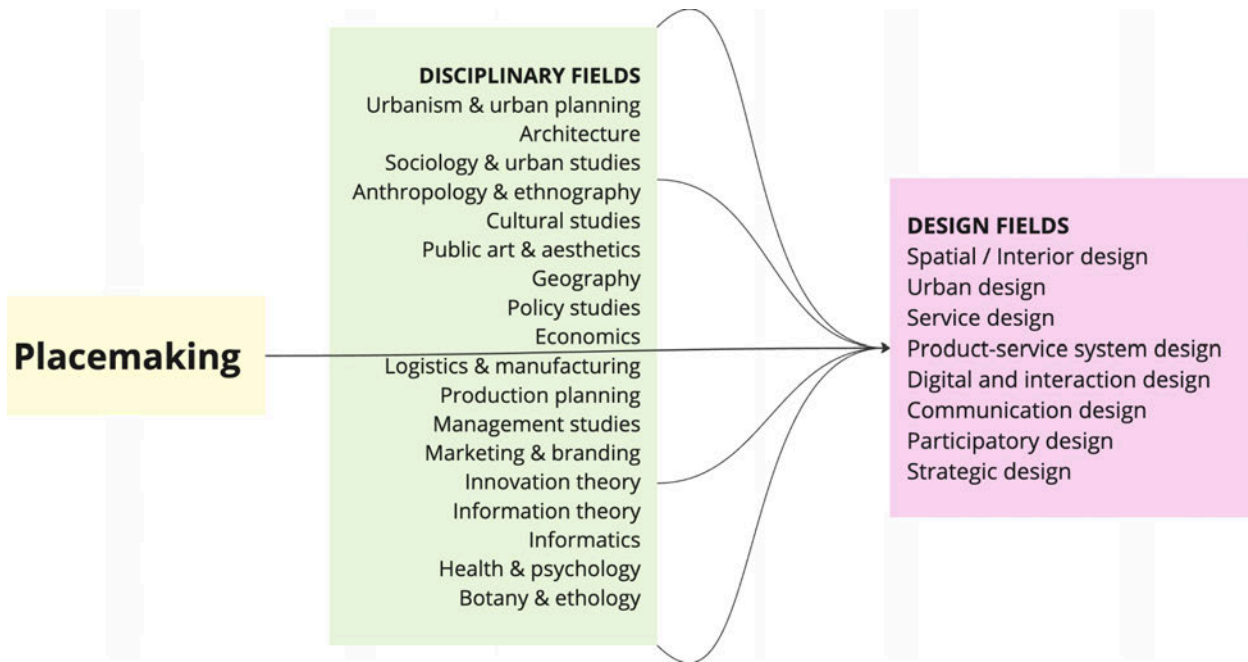


Figure 1. Attempt to position design for placemaking across different fields to explore overlaps and intersections.

The literature review carried out revealed several recurring themes that frame the discourse on design for placemaking. Key aspects among these are:

- **Community-Centricity and Sustainability:** Placemaking aims to maximize communal value and promote sustainability, particularly through socially inclusive practices (Buser et al., 2013; LeGates & Stout, 2020).
- **Participation and Empowerment:** Rooted in collaborative processes, placemaking involves engaging communities in shaping their environments, anticipating or managing conflicts, and so ensuring that design outcomes reflect local needs and aspirations (Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995).
- **Creative and Cultural Integration:** Creative placemaking integrates arts and culture into community development, leveraging these elements as catalysts for urban revitalization and social cohesion (National Endowment for the Arts, 2022).
- **Eventfulness and Social Life:** Placemaking manifests through events and activities, reinforcing the idea that vibrant public spaces are created through active use and engagement (Richards & Duif, 2019).
- **Service design for urban commons: Placemaking has a tight connection with urban commons,** because they can be approached through design. More specifically, they can be, i.e., co-designed and they can find a theoretical framework to address their intangible dimension in the theory and practice of service design (Meroni & Selloni, 2022).

These themes were presented at the inaugural meeting of the Working Group during the Cumulus 23 conference, sparking a dialogue that shaped the group's ongoing inquiry into placemaking practices. This gathering not only established a shared foundation for exploring the intersection of design and placemaking but also set the stage for deeper international collaboration and knowledge exchange. As a premise for the group work, there was the question of whether design, as a multifaceted discipline focused on user experience and meaning, had its own distinctiveness in approaching placemaking, and, therefore, a unique voice.

The broader aim of the Cumulus Working Group was, and still is, to create opportunities for design communities to engage in knowledge exchange and shared reflection. Over the

first year, the focus was building relationships among participants, framing the topic, and cataloging existing initiatives of educational projects and research activities. These efforts were intended to produce a shared, comprehensive framework, as well as collect and review case studies and narratives from across the globe. By focusing on educational contexts, the group sought to understand how design for placemaking is explicitly or implicitly already being integrated into curricula and projects across institutions. This approach provided a grounded starting point, enabling participants to showcase their experiences and perspectives while building a shared knowledge base.

3. The Collaborative Inquiry “Design for Placemaking”

To collect case studies from across diverse educational contexts on the contribution of design in placemaking practices, the researchers set up the collaborative inquiry “Design for Placemaking”. This section outlines the inquiry, providing a brief overview of the case study collection and its preliminary analysis.

3.1 Case Study Collection

The case studies were collected through an online survey, inviting design universities and schools to submit projects developed with students. The first call was issued in May 2023 and remained open for seven months.

By this phase's conclusion, 51 case studies were collected from 13 respondent universities across geographically diverse regions, including the UK, Canada, China, Spain, and more. These cases were developed during Bachelor's and Master's programs, thesis projects, workshops, and research initiatives involving students, reflecting the global diversity and interdisciplinary nature of design for placemaking.

Among the 51 case studies submitted through the survey, a significant number came from the same university (Name of the Institution), reflecting a widespread focus on the topic of placemaking. However, despite this concentration and properly balancing this share, the majority of the cases were well-aligned with the key objectives of the CWG, which are:

- Demonstrating a clear connection between design and placemaking practices.
- Representing diverse geographic, cultural, and institutional contexts.
- Involving educational activities or outcomes tied to design disciplines.

The collected case studies were then analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Textual and thematic analysis were applied to identify recurring patterns, themes, and insights. Key focus areas included stakeholder involvement, project objectives, methodologies, and impacts. This mixed-methods approach ensured a systemic understanding of the data, capturing both the richness of individual case studies and broader trends across the collection.

The findings from this analysis were first presented at the IASDR conference in October 2023 (Sediti et al., 2023), where a panel discussion provided critical feedback and emphasized the need for further data collection. This iterative process allowed the CWG to refine its inquiry and expand the case study collection, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of design for placemaking in educational contexts.

3.2 Case Study Analysis

These results offer valuable insights into how design education contributes to placemaking, emphasizing the different fields of application, stakeholder engagement, and sustainability.

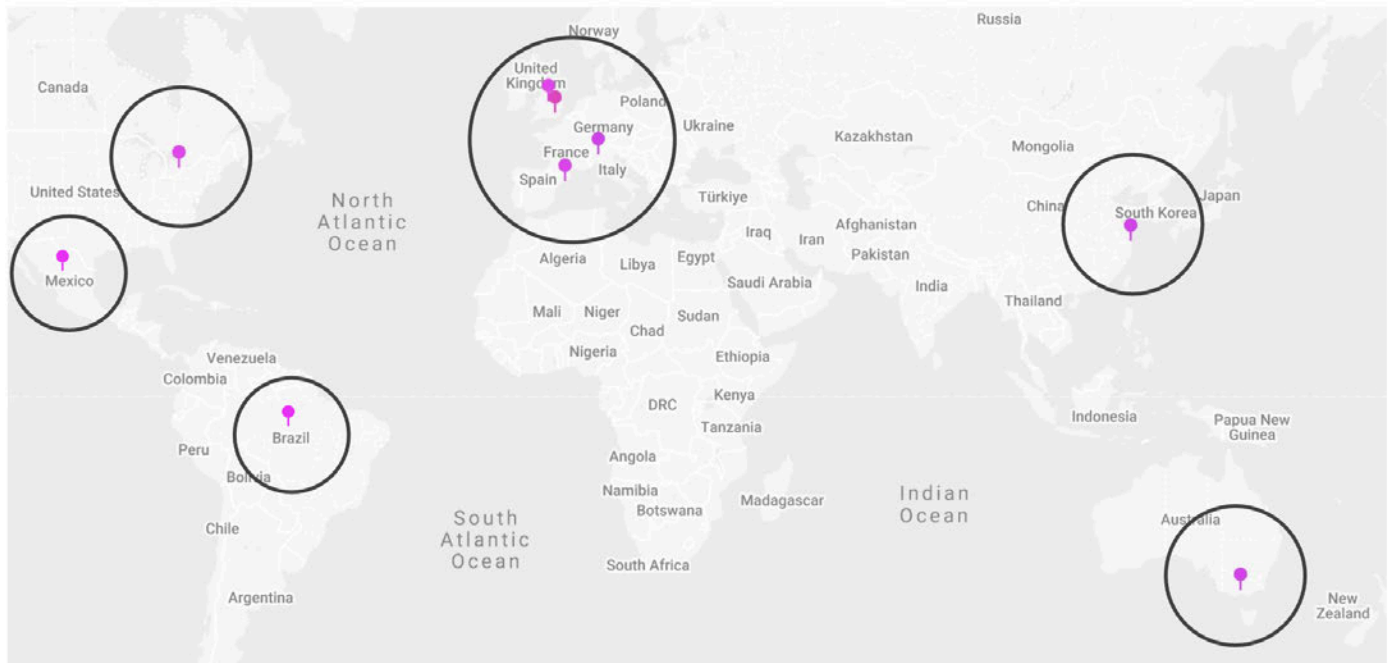


Figure 2. Ranking map of the responding universities. Figure developed by the authors as part of the CWG Design for Placemaking inquiry.

Representing various design disciplinary fields, the submissions highlight significant contributions from spatial and interior design, urban design, communication and visual design, service design, digital interaction, and product design. This diversity underscores the multifaceted essence of placemaking as a domain of design practice. To maintain clarity, the results of the case study collection will be referred to as ‘projects.’ The term ‘project’ in our study encompasses student initiatives submitted by respondents as outcomes of their courses and educational programs.

Thematic analysis reveals that the overarching goals of the projects emphasize inclusivity, participation, accessibility, a sense of belonging, and a strong focus on the social dimensions of sustainability. Additionally, the analysis of project descriptions highlights recurring themes such as community participation, social inclusion, heritage preservation, and arts integration. Emerging keywords—such as active ageing, social change, innovation, and reflection—further illustrate these educational initiatives’ diverse aspirations and significant impacts.

TYPE OF STAKEHOLDERS

- > **Schools** (educational entities besides your institution)
- > **Industry**
- > **Government** (municipal, regional, national)
- > **Civil society** (community groups, voluntary organizations, social enterprises, cooperatives, etc.)
- > **None**
- > **Other**

RESULTS

Were there stakeholders involved in the educational activity?

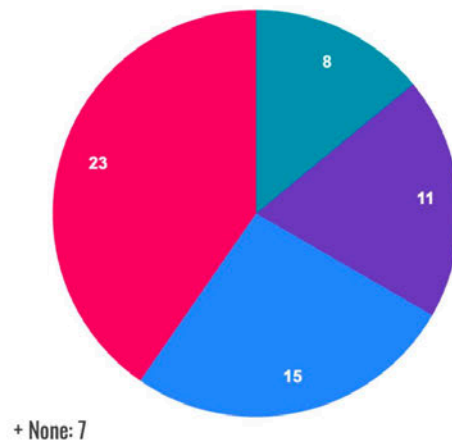


Figure 3. Results for the question: *Were there stakeholders involved in the educational activity?* Figure developed by the authors as part of the CWG Design for Placemaking inquiry.

Stakeholder engagement emerged as a cornerstone of these projects (Fig. 3). Most of them involved multiple stakeholders, including government bodies, civil society organizations, schools, and industries. Notably, only seven case studies reported no stakeholder involvement. This highlights the participatory ethos of placemaking, fostering co-creation and collaboration among diverse actors.

TYPE OF CONTEXTUAL LEVEL

- > **Micro** (street, square, ...)
- > **Small** (neighborhood)
- > **Medium** (city, town, village)
- > **Large** (beyond the city level)

RESULTS

Identify the contextual level of the project

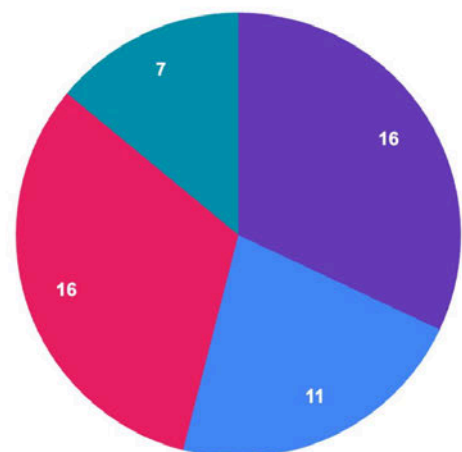


Figure 4. Results for the question: *Identify the contextual level of the project.* Figure developed by the authors as part of the CWG Design for Placemaking inquiry.

The projects strongly emphasize interventions at micro, small, and medium contextual levels (Fig. 4), reflecting the grounded and community-oriented nature of design for placemaking. Large-scale projects were less represented, which aligns with the localized and human-centric priorities of many educational initiatives in this field.

A significant number of case studies reported active involvement of final users throughout the project lifecycle. Specifically, 34 projects included users in the research phase, primarily through interviews and other qualitative methods, while 21 involved them in the

concept generation phase, often through co-design activities. This highlights a strong emphasis on participatory approaches in the early stages of design for placemaking, reinforcing the value of user insights in shaping project directions and outcomes.

Final users were actively involved throughout the project's research, development, and implementation phases (Fig. 5). The research phase predominantly employed primary and qualitative methods, such as interviews, while co-design activities featured prominently in subsequent phases, such as prototyping.

Table 1. Results for the question: *Was the project actually implemented, or will it be implemented?*

Response	N.
No	29
Yes and it is still on	10
Yes but it is ended now	6
No but it will	5

Notably, despite the involvement of stakeholders and end-users, most projects did not reach final implementation (Table 1). This reflects the educational focus of these initiatives, which are designed primarily as learning experiences rather than for immediate realization. Nonetheless, some projects achieved temporary or sustained real-world impact, showcasing the potential of educational activities to transcend their original context and deliver tangible results.

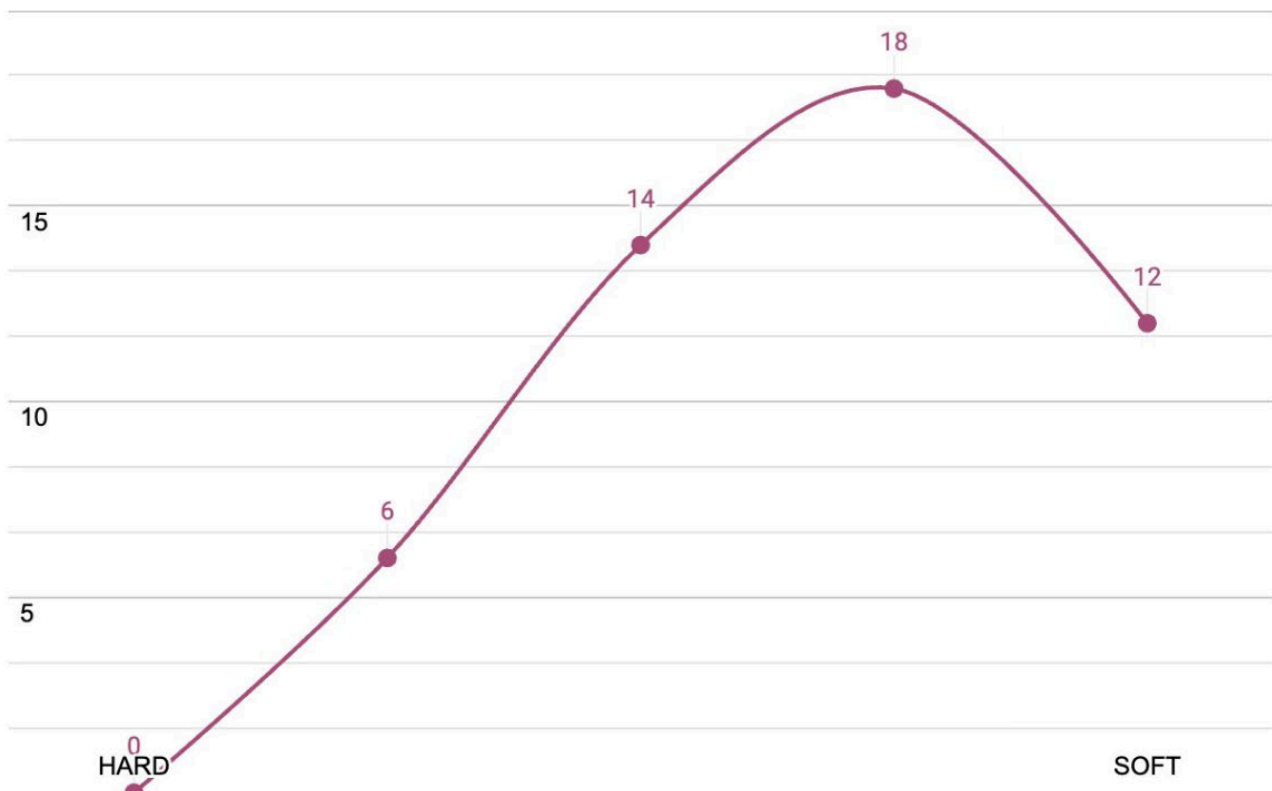


Figure 5. Results for the question: *Did the project focus more on infrastructural aspects (hard) or on cultural, relational, and policy aspects (soft)?* Figure developed by the authors as part of the CWG Design for Placemaking inquiry. Figure developed by the authors as part of the CWG Design for Placemaking inquiry.

A notable observation from the case studies, which recalls the initial discourse about “ville” and “cité”, is the distinction between tangible (“hard”) and intangible (“soft”) outcomes. In fact, while many projects focused on “soft” outcomes, such as fostering relationships or enhancing community engagement, the interplay between these “soft” and “hard” infrastructures is critical to placemaking, because the latter can eventually hinder or enable the former

Before launching the case study collection, the researchers identified a very preliminary, and actually ill-defined, 20 tentative approaches and objectives to define design for placemaking. These were intended as ways of tackling placemaking in design projects, driven by principles, goals or perspectives. They are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. 20 Key Approaches resulted from the literature review.

20 Key Approaches	
1 Community empowerment	Enhancing local agency and collective decision-making.
2 Proximity and 15-minute city	Promoting access to daily needs within walkable distances.
3 Policy design	Shaping frameworks that support inclusive and participatory urban development.
4 Urban transformations	Driving systemic change in urban structures and dynamics.

5	Spatial affordability	Ensuring equitable access to public and private spaces.
6	Safety and inclusivity	Designing spaces that are secure and welcoming for all.
7	Urban regeneration	Revitalizing neglected or underused urban areas.
8	Social Entrepreneurship	Leveraging business models for social and community benefits.
9	Services	Designing public or community-oriented service interactions.
10	Urban spaces (public/private)	Rethinking how space is shared, owned, and used.
11	Digital/Spatial interconnections	Integrating digital tools into spatial experiences.
12	Citizen activism, guerrilla	Supporting bottom-up, informal, and spontaneous actions.
13	Participatory and/or performative art	Using art to engage communities in place-making.
14	Participatory design and stakeholder engagement for Placemaking	Involving users and stakeholders in shaping places.
15	Tactical urbanism	Testing small-scale interventions to prompt larger urban change.
16	Historical perspective and framework	Embedding historical context into design processes.
17	Service Logic	Framing place as a network of value-generating interactions.
18	Mega events, events	Leveraging events to activate and transform places.
19	Multidisciplinarity	Combining diverse disciplines to address urban complexity.
20	More than human	Including ecological and non-human perspectives in design.

At the beginning of the inquiry, the vagueness of these approaches was kept by purpose, to understand if the answers to the survey could have helped disentangle the issue. Hence, the research team decided to share this inquiry with respondents using a Likert scale to address this complexity. Community empowerment, participatory design, stakeholder engagement, and urban spaces and services received the highest ratings (Fig. 7).

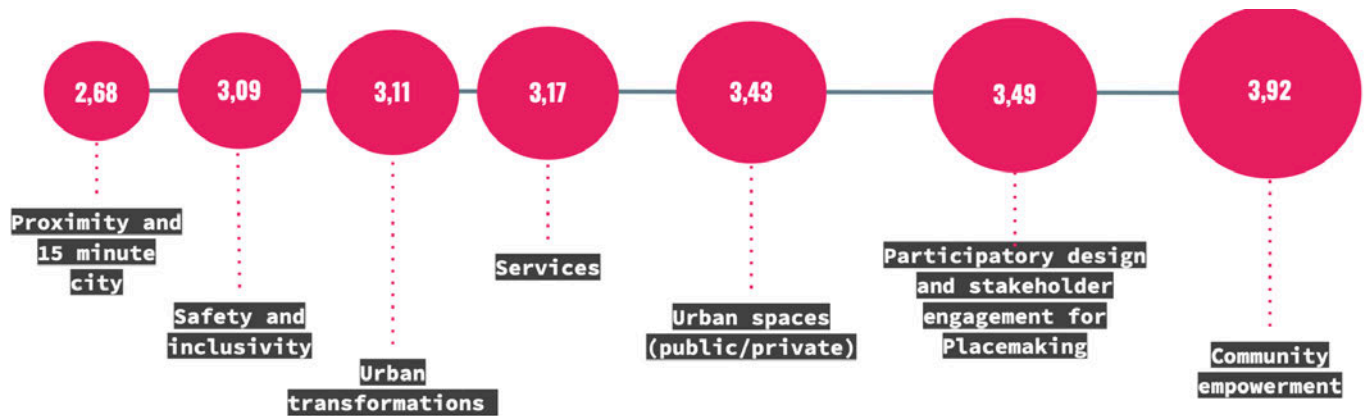


Figure 6. Results for the question: How much does the project consider the following Placemaking perspectives/approaches/objectives? Figure developed by the authors as part of the CWG Design for Placemaking inquiry.

Open-ended responses further highlighted the significance of bottom-up approaches, dialogical design, connectedness, design for remote and rural areas, accessibility, and immersive interaction as essential aspects of placemaking practices.

4. Discussion and Future Directions

Based on the presented case studies analysis, some very preliminary educational implications can be summed up in 3 main possible strategies to be applied in study programs or specific courses that address Design for Placemaking.

First strategy: a focus on users and stakeholders is mandatory. Community engagement emerged as a foundational aspect of successful placemaking projects. According to participatory theory and its application, early engagement is a precondition for fostering community ownership and co-production. Educational activities should include co-creation, participatory design methods, and stakeholder involvement as fundamental competencies that foster a deeper understanding of collaborative dynamics and the social dimensions of sustainability. This aligns with the principles of creative and tactical placemaking identified in the study, where projects originate from people and stakeholder engagement, whether as a result of spontaneous bottom-up initiatives or top-down calls to action. This strategy is particularly important when it comes to project briefs that prioritize community empowerment and spatial affordability goals. Programs should then include specific training on designing (more than) human-centered, accessible spaces through the systematic integration of marginalized voices, so that social equity and safety are actually considered in a project.

Second strategy: the outputs of design projects for placemaking are often of a "soft" kind, that is, interactions and services. For these kinds of artifacts, the design of the "hard" infrastructures is key: physical spaces and environments may foster or hinder certain interactions in a very straightforward way. In fact, they are possible "touchpoints" of service encounters that may happen or not. Service design theory (Vargo & Lusch, 2016) teaches that what matters in service design is the "logic", i.e. the rationale that can connect different artifacts and people for the purpose of providing a service in a use context (Stappers et al, 2023). Accordingly, city spaces can be seen as means for service provision: space embeds strategies, social relations and activities in a dynamic way, and the design of these interrelations together with, or prior to,

the design of the space is a strategy to foster civic engagement and sense of belonging. This is why curricula should strategically balance spatial and service design, teaching students how to integrate physical interventions with strategies that foster servitization, communication, and social interactions in public (or private) spaces. This aspect underscores the multifaceted nature of placemaking, which needs educational programs to integrate multiple design fields.

Third strategy: experiential and field learning must become part of designing for placemaking education programs, so incorporating real-life projects, workshops, and partnerships with local communities and stakeholders to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. While this strategy has proven to be effective across all fields of design, it is particularly demanding and relevant when it comes to urban commons and territorial contexts and requires new competences. On one hand, rapid ethnography is becoming part of every designer's skill set, laying the foundation for solid primary research and fieldwork. On the other hand, this must be complemented by personal relational abilities, social intelligence, and ethical competence, which shape an individual's capacity to understand specific circumstances, situated knowledge, and conflicting interests. Hence, teaching design for placemaking involves developing these abilities in students and creating opportunities for them to practice in real-life settings. For universities and educators, this requires establishing collaborative relationships with local authorities and policymakers, enabling students to gain awareness of territorial challenges and "safely" practice strategic dialogue with real players.

Looking ahead, the CWG aspires to collaboratively prepare a position paper and a set of education formats, and strategies to set a more solid, informed and networked approach to design for placemaking. This work, therefore, will serve as a foundation for future pedagogical developments, fostering a shared understanding of the topic and its multifaceted potential.

In the longer term, the CWG envisions more ambitious initiatives, such as dedicated colloquia, structured exchanges of students and faculty, summer and winter schools, and even international study programs. These aspirations underline the collective commitment to not only explore but also actively shape the evolving field, ensuring its relevance and impact in academic and professional contexts worldwide.

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