



An introduction and précis of the topical collection: “transforming ‘space’ to ‘place’ in high-density urban areas: what roles can landscape and urban planning play?”

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1 "Placelessness" in high-density urban areas and the aims of the topical collection

High-density urban areas intensify, diversify, and sometimes alienate events and encounters in cities, posing challenges to planners and designers in achieving and maintaining a fit between urban environments and people’s urban experience. This fit provides inhabitants with meaningful experience and as such helps transform "space" to "place" (Ndubisi 2003, p. 119). High-density urban areas can affect how people behave and respond to their surroundings and, consequently, shape their sense of place. However, our understanding of these effects is hitherto limited (Chen et al. 2020; Duranton and Puga 2020; Hall 1997, pp. 214–216).

Landscape and urban planning has long contributed to creating places by both learning the social meaning behind the nature of spaces and providing appropriate spatial interventions (Holgerson 2015, pp.14–17; Natarajan 2017, p. 5). The difference today is that the socio-spatial interconnections are unprecedentedly intensive, with more people and denser areas connected through various networks. This topical collection will help clarify the roles landscape and urban planning have played and can continuously play in transforming high-density urban areas from fractured, cyborg “space” to synergic, organic "place" that is unique, distinctive, and meaningful to the inhabitants (Batty and Marshall 2017; Xiang 2017).

This topical collection of *Socio-Ecological Practice Research* (SEPR) seeks to:

- draw attention to the myriad socio-ecological, economic, political, and technological forces that collectively create and re-enforce "placelessness" in high-density urban areas;
- explore and showcase the innovative and transformative landscape and urban planning practices that respond effectively to the complexity, uncertainty, and disruption in our social, economic, and technical systems, to successfully transform "spaces" to "places";
- examine and critique new data, performance metrics, and new methods for landscape and urban planning practice and research that facilitate the human endeavor of place-making;
- illuminate directions for future research in placemaking and place-sustenance in high-density urban areas.

2 Three themes on transforming spaces into places

This topical collection contains six papers from both scholars and practitioners, including applied basic research, practice research, and showcase. The geographical variations among those papers add a diverse narrative to the transformation of spaces to places. Cities in this topical collection vary by their sizes, natural features, economic and institutional contexts, including Beijing, a megacity and the capital of China (Wu et al. 2021); Shenzhen, an emerging megacity of China (Guan and Rowe 2021); Los Angeles, a sprawling American city (Pan 2022); and six other US cities—Tucson, Arizona (Li and Yang 2021); Midland, Texas (Luo et al. 2021); Austin, Texas; Denver, Colorado; Louisville, Kentucky; and Portland, Oregon (Winslow 2021). These cities face diverse issues in the socio-ecological process of transforming spaces into places in high-density urban areas, offering an excellent opportunity for readers to learn how

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cities address issues pertaining to socio-ecological practice from around the world.

The papers in this special collection are organized by three themes.

2.1 Shapes of spaces

Spaces are both social and physical phenomena. ChenHe Guan of NYU Shanghai and Peter Rowe of Harvard University challenge the singular notion of smaller urban blocks and grid arrangements in recent national planning policies in China (Guan and Rowe 2021). They use spatial indices to examine the transformation of urban block structures, which previously consisted of mega-blocks (sixteen hectares or more), in a high-density city at three different scales, from blocks through communities to the whole city. They argue that the spatial diversity and flexibility, rather than the oversimplified dichotomy of big size versus small size, of urban blocks play an important role in shaping the lived experience of people and thus affecting placemaking.

Shujuan Li and Bo Yang of the University of Arizona examine how the size and shape of 141 parks in Tucson, Arizona, affect the parks' usage (Li and Yang 2021). They use an innovative method based on big data and straightforward metrics to identify vibrant urban spaces that can further inform future designs. In the context of Tucson, they find that winding river parks are attractive to residents, possibly due to the hot weather in Arizona; smaller parks are more popular during weekdays, whereas larger parks are more popular over the weekends.

2.2 Making, keeping, and evaluating green solutions

Hong Wu of the Pennsylvania State University, Yizhao Yang of the University of Oregon, and Jie Hu of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign showcase the Beijing Olympic Forest Park in Beijing (Wu et al. 2021). An essential part of the green infrastructure to support the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, the park later integrated itself into the local urban contexts and offers a getaway for high-density urban living in this megacity. Drawing on first-hand information from leading planners and designers, they present how the park's design elements were inspired by Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. and substantiated through modern construction technologies, and conduct a decadal evaluation of the park's performance through a social-ecological lens.¹ While the success of the park in transforming space into place in such a high-density

city has been well documented, they note that the lack of public engagement in the design phase and the lack of an adaptive management mechanism for long-term care have tempered the continuing benefits of the park.

Jane Winslow of Texas A&M University explores critical points in a project life cycle from planning through completion to maintenance that affect long-term care of urban green infrastructures, as transforming space into place entails both tasks of placemaking and place-keeping (Winslow 2021). By comparing projects in four cities in the USA, she identifies issues that lead to ineffective maintenance practices in the development process. These issues, in a way, present similar challenges to those identified in the Beijing Forest Olympic Park project showcased by Wu et al. (2021).

Yi Luo of the University of Florida, Allyson Mendenhall and Claire Hempel of Design Workshop, and Jinxing Wei of M.A.O. (Shanghai) Construction Design Consulting Co. address a common challenge in the practice of landscape performance evaluation: the lack of baseline data for rigorous before-and-after comparisons (Luo et al. 2021). They share their experience of forming a scholar-practitioner partnership before construction to document baseline conditions. Their experience suggests that integrating baseline data collection into the conventional design process be key to an effective landscape performance evaluation, especially at an early stage of the process.

2.3 Embracing regeneration in placemaking

By adopting a regional perspective, Qisheng Pan of the University of Texas at Arlington analyzes how redevelopment of the land of the former March Air Force Base contributes to the regional economy (Pan 2022). The rebirth of unused land brings jobs and financial resources to stakeholders and communities, highlighting the fundamental role of economic vibrancy in transforming spaces to places.

3 Reflections and prospects

For decades, we have strived to balance human use and ecological concerns in pursuit of a sense of place (Forester 2021, p. 11). Does today's landscape and urban planning research adequately address the present complexity and uncertainty in the efforts to achieve the long-lasting placemaking goal of transforming space into place? An unfortunate fact is that places that support life are degrading with extensive urbanization and increased consumption, which is particularly true for high-density urban areas. This topical collection explores what role landscape and urban planning should play and exactly how the agglomerate concentration of everything presently in "space" can be transformed to "place" with a sense of identity and belonging in high-density urban areas.

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Researchers in this topical collection have made a timely contribution to the centuries-long effort of transforming spaces into places in today's high-density urban areas. They showcased innovative and transformative practices by real-world practitioners in coping with the myriad challenges; they saw the redevelopment and regeneration of urban spaces as a means of placemaking; they recognized such transformation as a spatiotemporal and socio-ecological process that requires a holistic way of thinking and pragmatic way of acting (Xiang 2020, pp. 122–123). Looking forward, they have also identified a few directions for future placemaking endeavors in high-density urban areas. These are

1. integrating new data and new data-collection methods with traditional datasets for developing a better understanding of the interactions between humans and the built environment (Li and Yang 2021, p. 290; Luo et al. 2021, p.128);
2. advancing interdisciplinary approaches to planning and designing with public engagement in the early stages and long-term care (Wu et al. 2021, pp.106–107; Winslow 2021, p. 305);
3. affirming a regional perspective in ecological thinking (Guan and Rowe 2021, pp. 46–47; Pan 2022, p.14 of 17).

With the identified future directions, I would like to offer three concluding remarks to reflect on the question we raised in the beginning: what roles can landscape and urban planning play in transforming spaces into places in high-density urban areas?

First and foremost, we can see that the significance of transforming space into place is only likely to increase in the context of changing interactions among people, space, and the virtual world. The urgency of understanding how spatial interventions affect the sense of place is heightened by the multiple environmental, public health, and mobility crises that currently haunt our daily life. Second, the holism that characterizes thinking and acting in all aspects of placemaking needs to be kept front and center when we move toward the future directions noted above and beyond. Particularly, not only does the present digital age refashion our experiences of space, but it also reshapes our relationship, through virtual connections, with the process of placemaking (e.g., Li and Yang 2021). Third, although high-density urban settlements bring us into shared space, we each bring our own sensibilities, preferences, and interpretations into the space to create unique spatial experiences. The triumph of such increasingly individualized experiences of space presents a tension for landscape and urban planning between sustaining personalized needs and maintaining a collective sense of place.

Taken together, I believe that landscape and urban planning, as this topical collection demonstrates, can and should live up to the ambition to be a reputable frontrunner of placemaking in the age of Anthropocene.

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emerging technologies and new data that may reshape our cities and urban life.

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