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Placemaking for Connecting Communities

[*1]Ira Kazi

[2]Sabeen

[*1]*Indus Valley School of Art &Architecture, Department of Architecture, Karachi*

[2]*Department of Architecture, Mehran U.E.T, Jamshoro, Sindh, 76062, Pakistan.*

[*1]*kazi.ira@gmail.com*

Abstract

The urban planning paradigm globally has undergone a significant shift. Considerations for 'smart growth' are leading to innovations in design of buildings that have a minimal or zero carbon footprint and smart transportation options. While technology has an important role to play in green building design and smart forms of transportation, it is also being used to make cities and people more 'connected' and 'integrated' and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is being leveraged to make cities more inclusive. ICT tools are providing citizens with greater and speedier access to information and are catalyzing greater civic mobilization. The project that forms the basis of this Paper finds an interesting interface between 'public space design', a critical feature of a 'smart and green city' and use of ICT tools with the merger to lead to the development of a greater social capital, economic vibrancy and environmental improvement. The project has aimed to target a number of aspects critical to the emerging understanding of public space design and are presently not finding a apace within the urban discourse here in our city and country. These include identifying 'passive' spaces, creating an 'identity' of the space, using the space design to promote building a 'social capital', design a space having a profile of 'inclusivity' and having a 'smart', 'technology' based interface created between the space and ICT options.

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary urban landscape faces unprecedented challenges as rapid urbanization, climate change, and technological advancement reshape how communities interact with their built environment. In response to these challenges, placemaking has emerged as a transformative approach to urban development that prioritizes community engagement, social capital formation, and the creation of meaningful public spaces that foster human connection [1]. This paradigm shift represents a fundamental departure from traditional top-down planning models toward collaborative processes that recognize communities as the primary stakeholders in place-based interventions [2].

The evolution of placemaking theory reflects broader changes in urban planning philosophy, moving from expert-driven approaches that often resulted in "targeted criticism of the proposed development by the host community and a lack of trust in the motives and priorities of the professionals involved" toward community-centered methodologies that challenge and empower local communities to take ownership of space planning [3]. This transformation has been particularly significant in the context of public space design, where research demonstrates that well-designed spaces serve as both "a product and producer of change," catalyzing social development through increased communication among neighbors and providing crucial infrastructure for community resilience [4].

Central to contemporary placemaking discourse is the recognition that public spaces function as fundamental infrastructure for community development and social capital formation. Studies have consistently shown that the perceived quality of public spaces exerts positive effects on sense of community, with design elements that facilitate social interaction serving as the primary factor for enhancing community connection [5]. This understanding has led to the development of sophisticated frameworks for creative placemaking that incorporate indicators such as place attachment, connection to nature, sense of place, and community identity formation [6].

The integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into placemaking processes represents a significant frontier in contemporary urban development. Digital placemaking initiatives leverage augmented reality, smart city technologies, and participatory digital platforms to enhance community engagement and create new forms of social interaction in urban spaces [7]. Research demonstrates that ICT tools can provide citizens with greater access to information, catalyze civic mobilization, and create innovative interfaces between physical spaces and digital communities [8]. These technological interventions have proven particularly valuable in post-disaster recovery contexts, where citizen-driven placemaking processes help strengthen social capital and address spatial, temporal, and social gaps created by urban disruption [9].

The relationship between placemaking and social capital formation has become increasingly central to urban planning theory and practice. Social capital, defined as the networks of relationships that enable communities to function effectively, is both a prerequisite for and an outcome of successful placemaking initiatives [10]. Research indicates that tactical urbanism and creative placemaking practices can generate social sustainability by fostering new social relationships and innovative models of community interaction [11]. This bidirectional relationship suggests that placemaking interventions not only require existing social networks but also serve to strengthen and expand community connections through shared engagement in place-based activities.

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The challenges facing contemporary urban communities—including social fragmentation, environmental degradation, and economic inequality—require innovative approaches that leverage both traditional community development strategies and emerging technologies. Placemaking offers a comprehensive framework for addressing these challenges by creating spaces that serve multiple functions: fostering social interaction, supporting economic development, promoting environmental sustainability, and building community resilience [12]. As cities continue to grow and evolve, the principles and practices of placemaking provide essential tools for creating urban environments that truly serve the needs of their inhabitants while building the social capital necessary for thriving communities.

The urban planning paradigm globally has undergone a significant shift. Design principles of the age of modernity that compromised on individuality and focused on size and promoted urban sprawl are giving way to considerations for compact and strategic urban development. A critical trigger to this change is the understanding that human actions are contributing to altering the climate and the activities having the most profound impact are housed predominantly in the urban context.

Considerations for 'smart growth' are leading to innovations in design of buildings that have a minimal or zero carbon footprint with carbon dioxide being the leading green house gas contributing to climate change. Smart transportation – public transport, vehicles running on cleaner energy and promotion of walking and bicycling are replacing the transportation construct where the private automobile ruled. A transition is taking place from fossil fuel based energy uses to use of renewable that are finding a space in transportation, buildings and spaces.

While technology has an important role to play in green buildings design and smart forms of transportation, it is also being used to make cities and people more 'connected' and 'integrated' and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is being leveraged to make cities more inclusive. ICT tools are providing citizens greater and speedy access to information and are catalyzing greater civic mobilization.

The project that forms the basis of this Paper finds an interesting interface between 'public space design', a critical feature of a 'smart and green city' and use of ICT tools with the merger to lead to development of a
greater social capital, economic vibrancy and environmental improvement.

PROJECT CONTEXT

The proposed project is based in Karachi city, the largest city of Pakistan and one of the largest mega cities of the world with a population estimated to be in access of 20 million. Rapid urban growth, mostly unplanned has had serious consequences for the urban environment that includes degradation of urban public spaces, and reduction of green spaces.

Urban green areas have declined as a proportion to the urban footprint, from 4.6 percent (27 km2) to 3.7 percent (30 km2). It is significant that even though the green land areas have increased slightly, the proportion to the urban footprint has decreased.[13]

Not just green areas have declined but generally alternative public spaces that defined Karachi's public profile such as 'bazzars', neighborhood spaces have suffered due to growing environmental degradation, encroachments etc. The project was conceptualized and designed within this context – to develop a 'model' public space that focuses on a linear unused greenbelt space converting it into an interactive 'neighborhood' public space using the design principles of 'Placemaking'.

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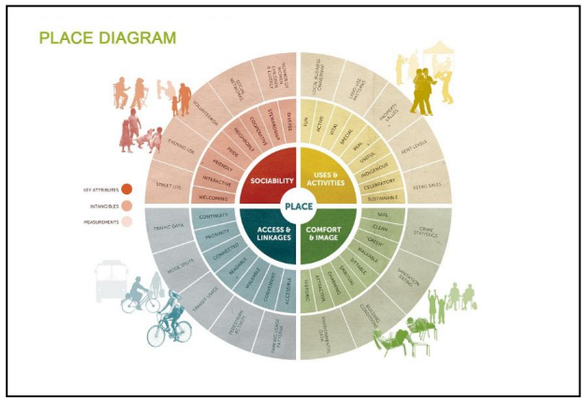
PLACEMAKING

Pioneered by the United States based organization Projects for Public Spaces, Placemaking is a design methodology that inspires people to collectively reimagine public spaces as the heart of every community.



Placemaking refers to a collaborative process by which we can shape our public realm in order to maximize shared value. More than just promoting better urban design, Placemaking facilitates creative patterns of use, paying particular attention to the physical, cultural, and social identities that define a place and support its ongoing evolution.

With community-based participation at its center, an effective Placemaking process capitalizes on a local community's assets, inspiration, and potential, and it results in the creation of quality public spaces that contribute to people's health, happiness, and well-being.[14]

PROJECT AREA

The project materialized as an output of the 4th Year Architecture Course – Open Public Space Design – of the students of the Indus Valley School of Arts & Architecture. The site of the project is located in the south of the city. It is a green belt in the neighborhood of Clifton Block 2. This green belt is surrounded by numerous important landmarks of the city. The site is well connected to the rest of the city through major roads. The total length of the site is 12345 KM and the total area is 082434 KM square.

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The project area is in the middle of a dense urban mixed use area. There are high-rise residential buildings around the site.

SITE ANALYSIS

Land use was documented and some analytical work was conducted that is outlined as follows.

LYNCHIAN ANALYSIS

A Lynchian Analysis was done to document the nodes and edges for the project site. This site has a boundary of a road which has various landmarks around. Some of the major landmarks include Agha Khan Hospital, Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture and China Town Restaurant. There are various nodes on the site which connects one side of the site to another. One of the most important node is where Nasservanji Park and Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture connects with a Dunkin Donuts outlet. This is a busy node.

ANALYZING OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS

An analysis was then conducted to determine constraints and opportunities that were to be addressed in the design process.

OPPORTUNITIES

The area houses a diverse land use mix of residential, commercial (example eating outlets) and educational. The restaurants provide an active night life also around the site. It connects to a major traffic artery of the city. Since the site is near to the coastline there are prevailing winds.

CONSTRAINTS

Pedestrian movement is severely restricted with cars parked even within the park site and pavements being encroached with commercial activities spilling on the side-walks. The node which is next to Indus Valley School or Art and Architecture witnesses severe traffic congestion in the peak hours. Since there is a lot of commercial activity happening throughout around the site there is no car parking provision. At some point the site is barren hence there are heaps of garbage on it which is burnt occasionally.

Before you begin to format your paper, first write and save the content as a separate text file. Keep your text and graphic files separate until after the text has been formatted and styled. Do not use hard tabs, and limit use of hard returns to only one return at the end of a paragraph. Do not add any kind of pagination anywhere in the paper. Do not number text heads-the template will do that for you.

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DESIGN INTENT

The aim of the project is to revitalize an otherwise, under-utilized urban open apace, keeping in mind the guidelines by PPS (Project for Public Spaces), for the development and sustenance of a public space.

The design has been formulated, keeping in mind the predominantly residential neighborhood, the existing commercial and educational activity and the need for social inclusivity and interaction.

DESIGN

The design was driven by the core principles of the Placemaking construct that was adapted to the site specific needs. The main aim was to develop an inclusive and connected space offering an attraction for diverse profiles of people. In Placemaking 'form follows function' and this design marker was applied in the case of the project site.

DIVISION OF SITE INTO SMALLER ZONES

For the convenience in design the site was divided into four (4) zones. Each zone was then designed in correspondence with the existing activity surrounding that particular zone, so that the design seems like an extension of the existing activities only.

The design also introduces additional activities throughout the site. Collectively, the design accommodates various necessary and optional activities, which in turn will generate social activity.

DESIGN ELEMENTS

Design elements included seating areas, parking areas, outdoor dining areas, vendor's stalls, prayer area, public toilets, pathways, pedestrian walkways, jogging track, kids play areas, book bazar, reading areas, pavers, sports areas and informal amphitheater, way finders and signage.

PUBLIC SPACE DESIGN – ICT INTERFACE

- To create a connectivity and belonging to the space – it was proposed to develop a Facebook page of 'park users' where the 'urban space' becomes the pivotal focus for bringing the community together
- It was also proposed that a mobile application be prepared that 'maps' the space, in 3D imaging identifying locations and functions of space – information about the surrounding land uses – the restaurants, banks, academic institutions etc. The App was conceptualized to serve as a model that could then lead to mapping/documentation of public spaces in Karachi in an engaging and accessible manner
- The parking in the Zone B can be smart connected parking which will help in keeping a check on the parking slots through sensors. People using this parking regularly, can make the payment through smart phones. Integration with real time parking availability can be managed through digital signage. A lot of times there are traffic jams in this zone due to cars going around in search of parking so by having a smart connected parking, the traffic chaos will settle down and the user will be aware of the situation

DESIGN - ZONE A

Zone A is characterized by the commercial activity happening on either side of it. This activity includes eateries, a bank and general stores. Thus, the design for this zone accommodates parking areas, outdoor dining areas supporting the eateries and public toilets. Since this zone is also connected to the main road there is a lot of vehicular activity so a lot space for vendors is allocated.

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Currently on site, a space is demarcated to act as prayer area for the people working around the site. The design, therefore, includes a properly designed prayer area in the shape of a pavilion to facilitate this activity. The used water from the ablution and the public toilets in this zone can be recycled and reused to water the plants around it.

DESIGN – ZONE B

Zone B is also characterized by the commercial activity happening on either side of it, in addition to this, the presence of an institution i.e. the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture also acts as a dictator. The design hence accommodates, parking areas, outdoor dining areas and a play area for kids, which is sandwiched between the two dining areas for the parents to monitor their kids while enjoying their meals. Currently, the wagons facilitating the students of Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture use this area for parking. Hence the design caters to them by providing sufficient parking space and spaces for the wagon drivers to sit and wait.

DESIGN - ZONE C

Zone C is characterized by the residential activity on either side of it. The Agha Khan Medical Center and a mosque a mosque present on one side. The design includes parking areas, and also introduces a new activity in the shape of book bazaar. Book vendors, a reading pavilion and open air reading spaces are the design elements. Also the design includes interactive flooring at one end, in the shape of chess boards and snakes and ladder boards.

DESIGN - ZONE D

Zone D is characterized by the residential activity present on either side of it. The design accommodates sports activities that include a hard ball court, a skating ring, an informal amphitheater, seating area, garbage dump and public toilets.

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CONCLUSION

In order to revitalize underutilized urban spaces, this project exemplifies the transformative potential of combining information and communication technology (ICT) with Placemaking principles. The design actively promotes social capital, economic vibrancy, and environmental stewardship by concentrating on a linear greenbelt in Karachi, going beyond simple aesthetic enhancement.

By customizing each area of the space to its immediate context in terms of commercial, institutional, or residential. The zone-based design approach proved successful in making sure the area works as a seamless continuation of the current urban fabric. By adding a variety of activities, such as sports facilities, a book bazaar, and outdoor dining and play areas, a passive corridor can be transformed into a vibrant community center.

Importantly, the suggested ICT interface fills a significant void in the Global South's urban discourse by including smart parking solutions, a community Facebook page, and a 3D mapping application. It offers a scalable framework for utilizing technology to improve accessibility, inclusivity, and a sense of collective ownership among citizens in addition to efficiency.

This project is a crucial prototype that makes the case that the combination of innovative digital technology and careful physical design is what will lead to equitable urban development in megacities like Karachi in the future. It offers a scalable framework for transforming underutilized areas into intelligent, sustainable, and connected public areas that genuinely belong to the neighborhood. Advocating for the implementation of such projects and tracking their long-term effects on urban vitality and community cohesion will be the focus of future work.

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