Participatory Placemaking for Community Building

Reflecting from Cases in Taiwan and Sichuan

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1. Introduction

This paper describes the increasing important issue of community building regarding '*placemaking*' approach and neighbourhood participation in the context of rapid urbanization. This will be illustrated with examples that include a placemaking solution based on the wooden clogs revitalization in Baimi, Taiwan; and community-driven reconstruction in Sichuan after a disastrous earthquake. Drawing on the literature and my own understanding, reflections on how community building can be achieved through planning and design have been developed. At last, this paper discusses the role of placemakers regarding planners, architects, social activists, local residents to deliver good quality of place as well as good quality of life in the urban context.

2. Community Building in Urban Context

a. Community Building in Theory

At the end of the 1960s, one of Turner's argument for the self-help housing paradigm is that "*Housing users know their needs better than government officials, and high regulatory standards undermine rather than guarantee more*

adequate housing." Initially, Turner talked about maximising autonomy from the state and individual household self-building. Later his focus changed to 'building community' (Mathey, 1992 in Jenkins, Smith and Wang, 2007). In America, community building has been known as a vital new response to urban poverty since late 1980s. "*The difference about community building is that it rejects a programmatic approach to poverty in favour of efforts that catalyse personal relationships and social networks to improve community life*" (Walsh, 1997). Nowadays, many people actively engage themselves in community building efforts for the sake of individual well-being and neighbourhood revitalization. There have been a wide variety of practices from simple activities like providing outdoor fitness facilities, to larger–scale efforts such as involving local inhabitants in the neighbourhood renewal projects (Walsh, 1997). Community building and its potential to poverty alleviation as well as neighbourhood revitalization should be seriously considered in the context of rapid urbanization.

In theory, community building has made great contribution to reconciling two ideological conflicts that frustrate poverty issues. The first split is over the causes of urban unemployment. The second is the divide between 'people' and 'place' strategies. 'People' strategies focus on the education, family support, and health care needs of the poor. 'Place' strategies concentrate more on rebuilding neighbourhoods with housing, retail development and attempts at job creation more than on human development (Walsh, 1997). Walsh also discusses that community builders need to combine both 'people' and 'place' strategies. These two factors connect the urban poor to mainstream labour markets and prevent them from remaining poor if they continue working in the original neighbourhoods.
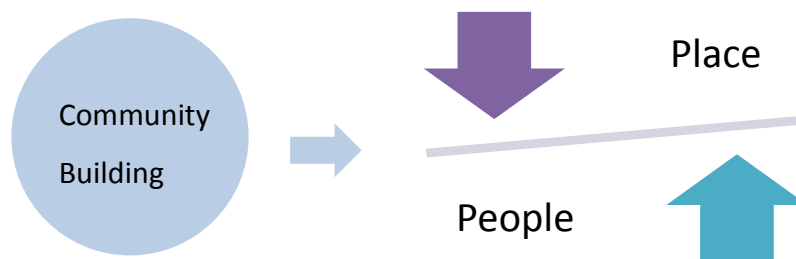

Figure 1: Acroding to Walsh, community building reconciles the divide between 'place' and 'people'.

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b. Community Building in China

The meaning of 'community building' in China differs from the placemaking approach mentioned above. With the promotion of 'community service' in the mid-1980s, the discussion of 'community' in China is situated within domestic debates around local governance and social welfare. It is also informed by international discourse on community (Bray, 2007). Then, there was the broader concept for the strategy of 'community building' in the 1990s. Initially, communities serve as a link between the government and citizens and have a close relationship with the government. According to Ding (2010), "*Building community service is essentially a matter of the spatial distribution of a variety of service facilities*." It then changes to "*offer comprehensive services that meet the spiritual and material needs of both special and ordinary groups*" (Ding, 2010). The topic of community building has most concentrated on relieving poverty over the past decades. Recently, housing issues have been mostly highlighted in the agenda (Ding, 2010). However, social organization in China has developed slowly because the community residents committees for grassroots are acting as an extension of the government instead of self-organizations of residents (Ding, 2010). It can be argued that community building in China starts during the transition from the traditional planner economy to a market one. This is quite different from the community building modes in Western countries. To some degree, in China, the focus has not been on promoting personal relationships and community networks for improving community life.

Another important issue is that China's communities are weak in fostering a community spirit – a shared view towards identity with the communities in which they live and work. China's communities are service-oriented and aimed at problem solving (Ding, 2010). Due to the rapid urbanization and the rising social problems simultaneously, there is still a long way to go for the healthy development of China's community.

c. The Placemaking Approach

As mentioned above, 'people' and 'place' are two integral part of community building in the urban context which leads to the placemaking approach. Hamdi

(2010) would rather use '*placemakers*' rather than architect, planner or experts as the main body of community practice. "*Because it is inclusive of all who make and sustain the quality of human settlement*". He also believes that the intelligence of place is *"in the streets of places everywhere, not in the planning offices of bureaucracy*" (Hamdi, 2010).

   In terms of placemaking, the first thing that comes to mind is the word 'place'. It has been a commonly used word in all kind of situations regarding housing, building and living. "*The academic literature on place (and the related idea of placemaking) is growing rapidly across a spectrum of the human sciences and the professions, including geography, social anthropology, landscape architecture, architecture, environmental psychology, planning, and philosophy*" (Friedmann, 2010). Hence, the complexity of placemaking regarding multidiscipline and meaning add to the inclusive feature of placemaking in turn.

   Another important issue is place attachment, which is considered as one of the features of place. Although place attachment is an abstract concept, it turns into a problematic issue when the familiar place or neighbourhoods change. "*[Place attachment] is indicated when neighbours respond to newcomers, or the manners in which groups of neighbours decide to join up in an effort to improve the physical conditions of neighbourhood life*" (Friedmann, 2010). Placemaking develops from the joint understanding of what really belongs to the place and recognizing what really benefits the people with collaboration of identity and adaptability to the locality.

   Schneekloth and Shibley (1995) claim that " *Placemaking is the way all of us as human beings transform the places in which we find ourselves into places in which we live…Placemaking consists both of daily acts of renovating, maintaining, and representing the places that sustain us…*"They also use the Spanish word '*querencia*' which "*refers to a place on the ground where one feel secure, a place from which one's strength of character is draw*" This word is a pretty good reflection of what placemaking means to everyone in that it enables people to love and care for the place, which does not lie in the way of known as "*unique or supportive*", but "*because it is yours*" (Schneekloth and Shibley, 2000). Accordingly, placemaking dealing with 'place' and 'people' is a good approach for the planning process. It correlates spatial design with people's daily

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lives through creating relationship among people in places and it is a significant working strategy towards community building.

d. Participatory Process in Placemaking

Community participation has become a common theme to most placemaking processes. Usually, people in their place have local knowledge of their own lives and their own places. This knowledge is particular and specific, and relies on the experience of place. Although the knowledge itself is sometimes insufficient to tackle all the construction requirements today, this knowledge can be used for assess if a construction proposal is appropriate and its contribution to '*querencia*' (Schneekloth and Shibley, 2000). Hence, involving more of local efforts opens new areas for better understanding and identity within a community. Through participatory neighbourhood planning, people build strong sense of belonging, responsibility and ownership.

In terms of planning tools, structure plans instead of master plans are more appropriate because they are more inclusive, more open for difference and change (Hamdi, 2010). It is simultaneously more adaptable for participatory work in a large scale. Hamdi states that participation should not be something that is addressed only if time permits, but it should be an integral part of making design and planning efficiently.

"*Placemaking practice suggests that all participants in any construction event come together with their respective knowledge, and collaboratively construct a world through confirming and interrogating each other's experiences*" (Schneekloth and Shibley, 2000). It is promoted by the same authors to encourage '*dialogic spac*e' into the process of placemaking, which is known as allowing space for communication and collaboration of all interest groups. The strengthen lies in that it provides opportunities for local inhabitants to organize their messy and unformed knowledge through their activities to apply them in design for their places.

There are many successes in such projects which involve participatory process especially for community building. Asian cities account for a crucial part of urban growth in the world. In the following part, the paper describes examples from

Taiwan to illustrate the standpoints mentioned before. I will also discuss how placemaking strategy is used for building community, offering livelihood and all kinds of assets.

e. Case of Baimi Revitalization, Taiwan -- Building on Culture of Wooden Clogs

Taiwan has been considered a good practice regarding community building since 1990s. The locals in the community have taken the lead role in the placemaking process. It is illustrated in the white paper of Council for Cultural Affairs (1998) as followed, "*The meaning of community building is to build a home or a village, where all the members have wholesome attitudes and values towards life as well as the virtue of life art. In other words, through promoting the quality of living environment to promote the quality of human beings.*"

One significant cornerstone for community building in Taiwan should owe to Chen Chi-nan, known as 'father of community building' in Taiwan. He launched the Integrated Community Building Programme in 1994 which was intended to "*attract the public to gaze at and appreciate local cultures, thus boosting the new native place movement, encouraging residents to participate in remembering and consolidating local cultures in their own communities*" (Chen, 2005 quoted in Chan, 2011). Supported by this programme, abundant renewal programmes in
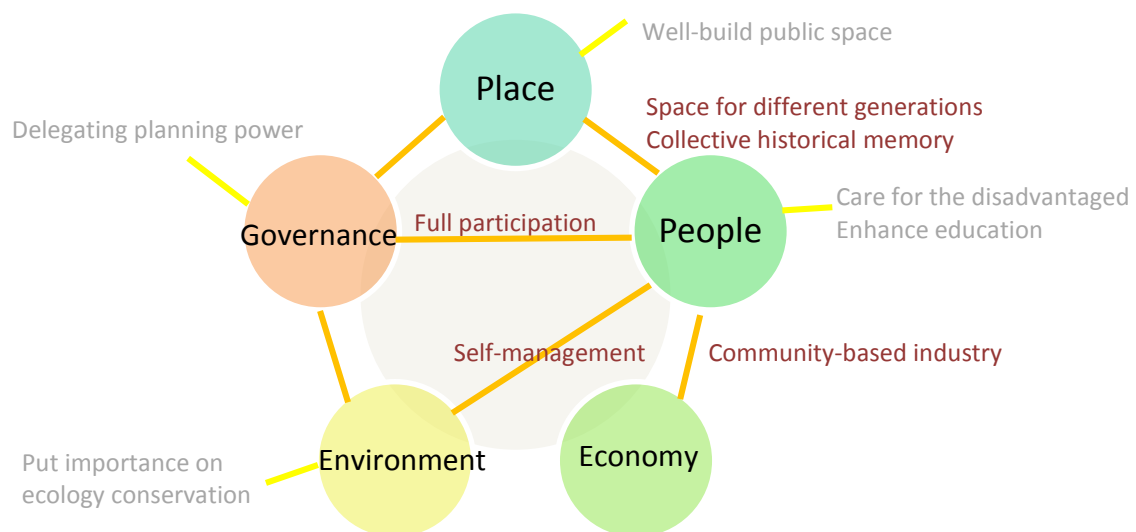

Figure 2: Core concept of community building in Taiwan

Source: http://ibook.tht.edu.tw/CourseFile/2161/13 社區觀光.ppt , remade by author

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Taiwan sprung up, most of which impressively reflected the culture identity of locality. One significant case is the revival of wooden clogs culture in Baimi, Taiwan. This case shows how the locals, via the Community Building Programme, have worked with government-related networks, organizations and tourists towards placemaking and the construction of local specialities.

Baimi community started in a self-organized way in the early 1990s when it was a polluted and sparsely-populated area due to the remnant of several factories during Japanese colonial period. The Baimi Community Development Association (BCDA) started community renewal from cleaning up the public space and exploring the cultural speciality for development. Some inhabitants recalled the old factory of making wooden clogs in the 1950s until they were replaced by plastic slippers. BCDA decided to develop their local speciality on wooden clogs through activities in the Integrated Community Building Programme so that the locals could get access to various kind of resources, knowledge, skills and support from NGOs and government organization (Chan, 2011). The local residents cleaned the surrounding of the abandoned dormitory of the fertilizer factory and reused it as the museum for wooden clogs. Professionals at the National Taiwan Craft Research Institute were also invited to offer expert advice to locals in designing their products. At the county level, the Ilan Cultural Bureau helped the community association to set up a course on business management and the marketing of wooden clogs (Chan, 2011). Several cultural workers and two craftsmen operate the museum, others residents volunteer to be interpreters and cleaners supporting the main work. Visitors can try local delicacy shops nearby, they can also participate in making wooden clogs themselves before buying them as souvenirs.

Figure3: Handicraftsman making wooden clogs
Source:http://www.yes98.net/home/space.php?uid=747&do=blog&id=22402

The case of Baimi is a good reflection of how locals in community are motivated to participate in placemaking and improve their living environment.

Through placemaking, residents have made wooden clogs the anchor of this thriving community. Members in the whole community work well, not only providing tourists an enjoyable place for visiting and recreation, but also helping the locals see a new prospect for their revived community. What wooden clogs mean to those residents is not only commodities, but rather handmade local artwork which carries the culture, history and communal spirit of the residents in Baimi (Chan, 2011).

f. Case of Reconstruction after Sichuan Earthquake – Neighbourhood Participation Builds Back Better

Unlike the mature community building mechanism in Taiwan, mainland China has a different perspective. For quite a long time, rescue and reconstruction in China rely completely on local government and residents themselves. However, after the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, this tradition has witnessed a change in which an increasing number of NGOs and other social agencies have taken on the responsibility on rescue and reconstruction.

Figure 4: Reconstruction is on-going in Sichuan
Source:http://news.sciencenet.cn/sbhtmlnews/2008/10/211468.html

Through collaboration, people come closer, a new sense of community identification and a new chance to reorganize and redevelop has been raised. It cannot be denied that NGOs and community groups played a key role in working with government and citizens to address the post-disaster reconstruction. They help local residents to help themselves to build up livelihoods for the survivors. For short time, they have attempted to rebuild housing and facilities as quickly as possible. Then comes the second step of providing permanent houses and other infrastructure like roads, farmlands, electricity and clean water. Social organization also set up a scheme

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including community engagement over the long term schedule of building schools, book clubs, hospitals, and housing etc.

While the earthquake was a terrible disaster, many communities in Sichuan took it as an opportunity to rebuild thoughtfully and sustainably. Using fewer resources, they tried to explore ways they could live and work in better harmony with their natural surroundings, and ensure a healthier and more resilient built environment for themselves and for future generations (ISC China, 2008).

The Sichuan earthquake has created a new surge of interest in community involvement in China. It offers opportunities for a renewed interest in creating more sustainable and resilient communities.

3. How to Achieve Community Building

Community building is a complex process that requires multidisciplinary efforts and cooperative endeavour. How can members including neighbourhood activists, community organizations as well as local residents commit to the wide range of participatory community building? Answers related to this question have posed great challenges and exerted immense responsibility for many people to reply.

a. Be Comprehensive at Early Stage:

"*Traditional antipoverty efforts have separated 'bricks and mortar' projects from those that help families and develop human capital*" (Walsh, 1997). Actually, these two aspects need to rely on each other to be integrated into the building initiatives. According to Walsh (1997) "*Community building is more of a framework for analysis and problem solving than a blueprint for urban action*". Community initiatives should be addressed in the domain of economic, social and political issues at an early stage. These aspects are all integral part of a larger whole system. Each section need to become more than the sum of its parts, thus leading to a thorough and comprehensive neighbourhood planning proposal.

Programs for community building should be shaped by the respective communities and not only imitate other cases. There are some other things that demand our attention. For instance, consideration should not be only restricted to

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daily routine, but on a border level regarding disaster mitigation, ecological friendly to make it sustainable. In some regions racism remains a barrier to a fair distribution of resources and opportunities in society. Therefore, equity and equality should be promoted for all groups. Another aspect that should never be forgotten is to plan a long-term solution for the community building since inevitable changes can lead to quite different situation. It is good to be open and allow space for changes. Good scheme are always flexible, they can respond to diverse needs and circumstances.

b. Consider Placemaking Strategy:

As mentioned above, placemaking strategy is a good pointcut towards community building. Each place, each culture is unique. Issues of social norms, climate and tradition should be all taken into consideration. Based on this, it is suggested to study local conditions as the starting point because reality serves as the base for adaptability. Although we cannot ignore the vulnerability, it is nevertheless important to build on the own local capacities strengths and assets. Building community also requires efforts to value cultural strengths such as inherent heritage or social identity of ethnic groups. It makes sense that placemakers take advantage of the local strengths to find key issues for their community building programmes. Placemaking can be done through daily acts of renovating, maintaining, and representing the places that sustain us to facilitate daily life. One approach towards placemaking as mentioned by Schneekloth and Shibley is to 'implace' architecture into the practice of placemaking. "*Architecture seen as a larger cultural enterprise implaces the expertise of the design culture, the architecture profession culture, and the culture of design-related professions within a composite culture of placemaking*" (Schneekloth and Shibley, 2000). Placemaking is an extensive activity and architecture can become a part of a larger practice of place. Design, practice and expertise enable good relationship among people and between people and place they inhabit. Therefore, every community need to find the tools and approaches that suit them best. Hence, human needs will be met and fulfilled, for the betterment of all.

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c. Enhance Participation and Collaboration

The participatory approach towards community building within the paradigm of placemaking has been emphasized for years. "*Strong families are the cornerstone of strong communities*" (Walsh, 1997). Efforts to help families help themselves are a good approach. It has been recognized that community building requires not just public programs and services, but private, independent institutions that cater to the social, emotional, and spiritual needs of residents (Walsh, 1997). Clearly, the emergence of many NGOs and other organizations can provide good support where they have collaborating partners and accessible resources. Collaboration among local inhabitants, community-based organizations, business, schools and other social service agencies in an atmosphere of trust, cooperation and respect are needed (Walsh, 1997). On the other hand, collaborative process enables one to exchange his own worldview and knowledge to see it in a different way (Schneekloth and Shibley, 2000). To sum up, engaging in participation and collaboration is crucial to strengthen the relationship between placemakers and the local community.

It is frustrated to see that some urban programs become alienated from the people they serve. It turns out that they will gradually lose support and trust from local residents. Taking the example in Sichuan, China for example, after the massive reconstruction work in 2008 and 2009, many NGOs which have been actively participants for a short time, then have left off without any consideration of future maintaince or long-term development. Programmes should consider a long-term perspective, build capacity among the locals, so that they can take over later.

4. The Role of Placemakers in the Process of Urbanization

It has been a widely accepted phenomenon that more and more planners, architects, social activities, local residents have carried collective efforts for the common theme of community building. Here, I would like to borrow the idea

from Hamdi to use '*placemaker*' regarding those who participate in the community building process. An increasing number of placemakers are involved for the beloved community, towns and cities. Whether they are doing the layout of neighbourhoods, designing the public spaces or conceiving community renewal programmes. The challenge is an on-going question of how placemakers can work together in an inclusive and multi-faceted way to deliver good quality of space and good quality of life.

As far as I am concerned, a placemaker first needs to have solid knowledge including social science, philosophy, geography, psychology as the cornerstone of concrete practice. These multidisciplinary input can help to expand the range of expert knowledge available on each project. Placemakers should also be more involved in the process instead of standing away from the public. They need to undertake social responsibility such as keeping consideration of both equality and sustainability in mind when doing a design. In addition, preservation of cultural identity should never be ignored whenever it meets with economic interest.

Apart from expertise, it is recommended for placemakers to show social concern about the surroundings. For instance, to find out what the disadvantaged groups really need before setting out an upgrading scheme; to take people from different age groups and ethnic groups into consideration respectively; to recognize what benefits will be attributed to whom, while what is at the edge of being lost. Planning is a time-consuming process, nevertheless, placemakers should face the challenge. Indifference to the latter will lead to adverse consequences for the vulnerable groups.

Community building deals with problems like homelessness, unemployment, family care and poverty, etc. This is the basic topic in the context of rapid urbanization process worldwide. In sum, it is everyone's dream for a thriving community. It is the duty of placemakers to take on this responsibility to do more and do better, for the sake of residents' common future.

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