

# **Placing Placemaking: Exploring what constitutes best practice in UK universities**

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## Pulling focus to placemaking

**This paper has UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and placemaking practice in its focus– who is doing such projects, how they are done, with whom and where? These concerns take their cue from the NCACE Cultural Knowledge Exchange and Placemaking strand of work, which is concerned with better understanding and showcasing some of the key ways in which collaborations between universities and the arts and cultural sector connect to place; and how the wider placemaking agenda is both shaped and is being shaped by such activity. The strand also seeks to shine a light on the impacts, values and benefits of collaborative networks, partnerships and models of good practice, and to create a space for exploring how such work might be better supported and funded into the future.**

This paper is by no means a comprehensive review of all place-concerned activity happening in UK universities, but rather it aims to give an indicative sense of the current HEI-placemaking field, barriers to such work, and what could constitute best practice. It was conducted in part through conversations with David Amigoni (Keele University), Alison Clark (Assistant Director, Culture Sport & Tourism, Durham County Council), Debbie Squire (Head of Place and Civic Engagement at Sheffield Hallam University, and part of the Civic University Network team), and John Wright (Postdoctoral Research Associate, Centre for Cultural Value, University of Leeds); and in part through secondary research; in part through a reading of a selection of the 2021 arts and humanities REF submissions; and in part, drawn on my work as a placemaking leader across university and community partnerships and practice.

## A definition of placemaking

First of all, however, the elephant in the room has to be named: there are few concrete or sector-agreed definitions of placemaking, although there are many implied understandings of placemaking in existence. This allows space for a number of divergent and contradictory practices to self-declare or be named as placemaking.

This is no small issue. Firstly, if we don't know what placemaking is, how can we say we are doing it, much less measure it and understand it? Secondly, without a definition, any intervention in place can call itself placemaking, and we are open to 'placewash' (Pritchard, 2019), where corporate or state interest developments are given a veneer of placemaking through a 'placemaking-lite' process of consultation and design interventions.

When placemaking is given explanation, it is referred to variously as: a material practice that works to create an improved public realm; a cultural practice that centres community voice and agency; a civic practice that facilitates activities that define a place; an economic practice that works to support a place to thrive. In reality, placemaking is all of these practices, conjoined through a multi-variant cohort of stakeholders that work across physical, social, economic and cultural realms of place.<sup>1</sup> Its measures of success are both generic (though not standardised) across practice and also site-specific, so may range from changing transit policy to improved health and wellbeing metrics, to improving hyperlocal to whole-region place function and public realm design.

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1 The National Endowment for the Arts *Creative Placemaking* White Paper (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010) is widely, indeed globally, attributed to being a first in naming the attributes of (creative) placemaking practice, and variations of the same can be found across the sector, including from well-known placemaking agency, Project for Public Spaces' What is Placemaking? explanation of its practice for example, through to each placemaking project and practitioner having their own understanding and facets to practise.

Irish architect, urban designer and educator, Emma Geoghegan, has recently offered a definition which, playing this back against my own experience as a placemaking practitioner-academic, is a definition that holds traction:

*‘Placemaking is about strengthening the connections – physical, social, economic and cultural – between people and the places they share. It incorporates but goes beyond the creation of better public spaces and facilitates the civic activities that define a place and support its ability to thrive. Successful placemaking is by its nature inclusive – by supporting the engagement with and use of a place by all members of a community, it creates a framework for sustainability and long-term equity of access and use.’*

IAF, Pocket Guide 3, 2023

Moving forward with this ‘sense’ of placemaking, we can ask: what is similarly impacting what universities think of, and practice, as placemaking?

## **Driving the UK HEI placemaking agenda**

Secondly, it is worth noting some of the external and internal factors that bear influence on HEI place agendas.

Firstly, from a point of national policy, there is the UKRI *Place Toolkit*. While this does not specifically include the term ‘placemaking’ it does include place as response to its 2022 five-year strategy to meet the UK’s ambition to be a leading research and innovation nation, and advocates for: an increase in place-concerned funding applications, UKRI place-ecology expertise and cross-sector geographically-located clustering. There is also the UK’s Innovation Strategy, which has place as one of its pillars and is calling for institutions (such as universities and colleges) to increase their local economic and societal impacts.

Within the HE sector, one significant initiative is the gathering of institutions around the notion of the civic; both as a small ‘c’ that may manifest through a number of HEI and sector strategies, and also as a big ‘C’ through the Civic University Network (founded in 2020) and Civic University Agreements. These are ‘civic strategies, rooted in a robust and shared analysis of local needs and opportunities, and co-created with local partners.’ Such commitment may present itself through involvement in local place-based endeavours such as Cultural Compacts Initiative (ACE, 2020) as well as individual projects of small or large scale. Internally, universities may respond to national and local place-based policy and need through cultural strategies, though this is by no means a universal occurrence for the UK HEI sector (Greenlees, 2023), as well as through research and teaching.

## **HEIs and placemaking in practice**

Pulling focus now to get to the placemaking practices of UK universities, a first look at the content of ‘place’ in this consideration.

Programme Director for the AHRC’s Place-Based Research Programme, Dr Rebecca Madgin (2021), states that ‘Place is the foundation stone of individual and collective life, a geographic location and a repository of emotions, experiences, meanings, and memories.’ Places are experiential, psychogeographic, of territory, sites of data collection, and they are where policies are enacted.

Where the University of Glasgow-hosted AHRC Place Programme comes into this is in aiding an understanding of the terrain of place-based work: its complex ecologies, identities and

communities; the interpretation of data into place-shaping knowledge pertaining to place identity, the people and place connection, and in engaging communities of place in its culture and heritage (Madgin, 2021). It can do this equally through creative practice as well as through research to tell the story of a place and its people. Where the Place Programme intersects with placemaking practice is in its co-production of an evidence base to understand the past and present of place, as well as shape its future. This evidence base will make the case for place-based investment and place-informed policy and practice, and it will be created in collaboration with communities, academic, government and industry (ibid.).

We can now turn to the practice of HEI placemaking, bringing in aspects of sector thinking and best practice, to consider what UK university practice both is and could be.

### **Placemaking site**

While it's obvious to say that all placemaking projects have a site, it does perhaps have to be stated that not all projects sited in a place are placemaking.

Placemaking projects are in some way 'located', happening in a geographical place with clear site demarcation. This site can be of various scales, from the hyperlocal of a street, to a neighbourhood or whole city or region. This was seen in the reading of a selection of the 2021 arts and humanities REF submissions, with projects happening at the scale of one or more residential streets to projects operating across a whole conurbation or region. Not all projects were concerned with including the issue of the place location into the project; some projects took their cue from its cultural, social, economic, political, environmental and ecological condition and carried this on throughout. These issues were of the material, the relational, the commerce and the civic aspects of place.

'Location' for a university has two further and specific implications. Firstly, that the placemaking site can be that of the campus (however geographically organised): the community in question here is the student body, the staff body (equally, as academic and professional staff) and the immediately neighbouring residential communities. Secondly, and slightly flipping the notion of 'site', while there is an obvious home for placemaking in arts and humanities, equally, placemaking projects are also likely to be sited in social sciences disciplines such as business studies, geography and sociology.

### **Placemaking models**

Placemaking involves a number of cross-sector partners around the placemaking table, working in concert towards shared goals. Like any partnership working, when it comes to hierarchical organisations (which universities undoubtedly are) the person who represents the partner at the table, their level of seniority and decision-making capacity and the support they command within their leadership team will affect the success of their involvement, and potentially, the success of the placemaking endeavour as a whole.

In the HEI context, placemaking interest may originate from and projects may be led by an individual, acting through a professional services remit, or as a course, discipline or department leader. The academic individual may or may not act in the formal capacity of their academic role: they may also be acting in the capacity of a professional creative practice, yet bringing the resources of the university into the project. The project may happen across the course of a term or academic year, or may have a duration of several years.

With greater capacity, placemaking endeavours can increase in scope – such as number of partners, a greater geographical range – and begin to operate more strategically. Thus, strategic model projects will be a whole institution as the project partner: it may be the one HEI representative in project meetings, but buy-in will be across the institution and at senior level. This model can also include a number of HEIs across a city or region, in partnership, and to the purposes of the other project partners, acting as one. At this scale, there may be many other partners, or many other communities. As has been seen in initiatives such as Cultural Compacts, the power of multiple-stakeholder models of working is in getting these partners around the same table – an approach mirrored in the practice of placemaking as an interdisciplinary and cross-sector process.

Outputs and outcomes vary. They may include an exhibition, artistic commissions and residencies, policy creation or development, social enterprise formation, or projects that work materially, as well as economically and culturally in the ecology of a place, anything from creating a community pub to a regional investment plan for example. This work may be funded from a course budget, possibly with additional budget from partners. Students may, or may not, be involved. To the extent of the capacity offered in this model, such projects are likely to work with the one community or a clearly defined small number of partners. Whatever the specifics of delivery, such projects may work in support of strategic institutional aims but will occur on an ad hoc or piecemeal basis.

### **Placemaking collaboration**

Going deeper into the notion of collaboration in place-based projects, how the university approaches these will be determined by its various research, teaching, business and knowledge exchange missions, and increasingly also by its civic mission (whether part of the Civic University Network or not), and in turn by how these will be translated into action through strategic institutional plans and documents, such as an institutional cultural strategy.

Universities can intersect with local to national place-based policy in myriad ways. One way has been through the afore-mentioned Cultural Compacts – small-scale but far-reaching strategic cross-sector cultural partnerships funded by DCMS and Arts Council England. Many such partnerships have matured through COVID-19, often proving essential to local recovery. Cultural Compacts all took the approach of identifying the place issue first and creating the partner cohort around that, and as such, found novel partner formations, with novel practices and outcomes (Courage, 2022).

We must also think of the process of collaboration within partnerships. Collaboration is a spectrum of practice, with varying degrees of depth, from ‘done to’ to ‘done with’, and terms used for ‘working with/in collaboration’ are various and seemingly interchangeable in the vernacular (and to this, see research from Toonen (2023) on co-creation in the site of the museum and the terminology co-creation spectrum). Thus, one person’s participant is another’s co-creator. Across increasing degrees of engagement, the public can be a one-off exhibition or performance attendee for example, to a participative workshop member. Or, public participation is as an intentional community of place who were involved across weeks to years as co-creators, co-developers and collaborators.

Similar registers on a scale can be applied to partnership terminology. Some might act as third-party delivery partners, others as equal stakeholders, for example. Benefits to the

stakeholder model include HEIs having a practical, creative and social resource to bring to partnerships, alongside their value as an ally to their place partners through their cultural capital and ability to invigorate action in the partners' ecosystem outside of the remit of the project at hand. HEIs are also recognised as bringing a critical aspect to support policy development with underpinning research, which gives project partners a legitimacy outside of the project.

## **What's stopping us? Barriers to placemaking**

A number of factors are thought to be hindering the placemaking potential of HEIs, or, equally, there are a number of factors thought to be essential to ensure success. What follows is not an exhaustive list, but the most salient factors considered to be essential in HEI placemaking best-practice.

### **Placemaking leadership**

Place leadership is a complex factor. Strong, confident, clear and pragmatic leadership is key to success, yet this can be undermined by the fact that those outside of HEIs may not think of the university as a site of leadership. Where good cultural leadership is present, this comes from sound executive leadership, not necessarily place leadership. A tendency for HEIs to position themselves in a partnership or conversation as having all the answers is also prevalent. Also prevalent is the need for place-based solutions to come from the sector, as a whole, and not the HEI, as a singular entity. If we think of the context of the cross-sector placemaking table, there is the need for leadership to be distributed amongst private sector, public sector, universities and third sector actors, and for seats at the table to be taken up by individuals and community groups as key influencers in developing place-based coalitions.

### **Placemaking reach**

The placemaking university is one that contributes to local solutions – and key in this is its reach both across and out of campus. Factors that will affect the degree of effective reach range from the flex, or not, across institutional vertical and diagonal hierarchies, the degree to which a university is research intensive and the degree to which students may come from the local residential population for example. University of Birmingham's City-REDI research (McNulty & Riley, 2023) pinpoints this issue exactly: hierarchy favours students from affluent demographics attending research intensive institutions which, in turn, promotes a place's connectedness to national and international knowledge and economic systems. However, post-92 universities tend to attract a less affluent, more local demographic and risk being left behind in place-based agendas and decision-making.

While any university model holds the potential to connect with civic partners and local communities through its academic and professional services teams, a local student demographic of course could be an advantage in placemaking, potentially opening up links with local communities and partners. The regional context is also a consideration, with a need for universities to think about their contribution to place at a regional level, to mitigate underserved regions being left behind because they lack equitable access to what a university would provide in regional placemaking.

Thus, every university has the potential to be an active anchor institution in the local place ecology. The institution's on and off-campus reach, its geographic and sector network engagement and its civic commitment determine the degree of success here.

## **Placemaking capacity**

In many a placemaking context, capacity delivery is an issue – and universities could have a part to play in mitigating this. Local authorities, their stakeholders and partners have straitened financial and knowledge resource capacities to deliver place plans, to work with local communities as co-creators of place-based policy, and in translating evidence bases into modelled programmes of work. The active anchor of a placemaking university can of course build evidence bases, and also be a strategic financial and knowledge partner, and offer skills and training in participatory methods to work with communities, as well as run such programmes.

## **Placemaking funding**

No doubt the reader can name a number of projects working to the placemaking models given above that are running successfully with local partners and communities, and that may have a reach nationally and/or internationally. Indeed, across the UK there are exemplar academic-place-community partnership projects that are driving regeneration, culture and heritage projects, social and economic innovation pilots and the like.

Examples of the REF 2021 snapshot survey, projects in the UK include: community regeneration, job creation and inward investment with communities in Belfast, at Ulster University; research-anchored community engagement that have led to individual transformation and personal and communal meaning making, at University of Plymouth; new public, community and institutional understandings of migrants through imaginative engagement with cultural, religious and architectural heritage, at Queen Mary, University of London; artistic interventions process revitalising rural community participation in development and planning processes across northeast England, at Newcastle University; Kirklees partnership to embed a mixed ecology of culture and creativity into the high street, with University of Huddersfield and Kirklees; and the creation of a methodology of knowledge co-production for inspiring entrepreneurial communities of practice at Keele Business School with New Vic Theatre.

The projects mentioned have a degree of longevity and embeddedness. To support this success, what is needed is a consistent and supportive funding ecology, one that permits working over long duration in the one place, with the same community and partners, and that is an effective ally to place-based enquiry. That allyship could take the form of brokering collective action and relationships, facilitating intra- and cross-regional or national knowledge exchange, or acting in an advocacy or lobbying role. Importantly too, the funder needs to be open to a fluid and place-responsive placemaking project model, permit agile models and reporting, hold space for plotting, trails and experimentation and support progressive forms of project governance.

## **Beware co-washing**

Lastly, a note of caution – beware co-washing. Co-washing – ‘community-washing’, akin to placewash or greenwash – is the institutional positioning to appear as if structuring an equitable research and development collaboration with a community (Shaw, 2023). That this is a barrier to best practice is self-evident.



## What could best practice placemaking look like for universities?

With some thought given then to factors of HEI placemaking practice and then factors that act as a barrier to that same practice, it's time to turn attention to what a model of best practice might look like.

Learning from the ground covered so far, we can affirm that best practice:

1. Has to be meaningfully located in the site of the subject project
2. Can happen at any scale, and on or off campus
3. Can operate tactically and strategically, but, with greater institutional capacity, projects have the potential to become more strategic
4. Has a greater chance of meaningful impact with a greater – though manageable – number of partners
5. Has to have partner and community reach, wherever it is located within the HEI
6. Needs to be anchored in the 'done with' end of the collaboration-partnership spectrum
7. Requires strong place leadership within the HEI
8. Can be a way to share resources across place and partners
9. Needs consistent and long-term funding to support long-term relationships
10. Does not engage in co-washing

There is of course a great degree of complexity and nuance behind all of these statements and taking a cross-cutting thematic approach to the list above will help us draw our learnings so far together to deepen and widen our understanding of what best practice in universities placemaking could and should be.

### Theme 1: Site to scale

When it comes to the site and scale of an HEI placemaking project or partnership, it is important to note that working across disciplines is important for understanding and interpretation, and that HEIs can work across spatial scales, and indeed, in rural or urban locales. Layered around this too is a university function that can be a conduit for local to national, to international, knowledge exchange.

### Theme 2: Tactic to strategic

HEI placemaking projects have the potential capacity to be not just a 'thinking about' space but also a 'doing' space, and a 'being with' space, working in an agile sense across research and practice cultures, being responsive to place-based issues as much as solution-finding. Universities can operationalise their internal expertise through top-down and bottom-up models, choosing when to deploy this tactical or strategic working as best suiting the project and project stage at hand. Research and campus culture also have the potential to bring place practitioners together in network and knowledge exchange, nurture communities of practice; and the resources to create digital platforms to foreground their place-based research and projects.

### Theme 3: Partnership through co-creation to place leadership

Meaningful partnerships are at the heart of any placemaking project, the university placemaking endeavour can be no different in this, and it warrants some unpacking.

In placemaking, projects that are the most successful at meeting their mission and aims exhibit an equitable approach to partnerships and collaborations. They take a person to person/people to

people approach to project development; and enact a duty of care to the communities they work with. These projects involve a wide range of stakeholders, including centring the community, and are engaged in collaborative meaning-making and value creation.

Partnership working supports knowledge exchange, solution-finding and tactical and strategic working, if modelled as co-created. For it to be successful it needs to be built on trust and have in its sights, duration and longevity.

This co-creation needs to be in place at the start of a project. This is a factor in its own right, as well as a contributing one to trust building. There needs to be an early engagement of all stakeholders in the design process as much as any outcome or output – and to do this, universities need to develop new, or enrich existing methods, that can hold differing views through a process of meaningful co-creation to consensus formation.

The differing agendas of partners need to be fully comprehended and accounted for in the process, as do motivations and reluctances for getting involved. Universities need to make the offer to join a project meaningfully compelling to partners; and if invited to join a project, need to make their agenda and offer open and transparent. All partners need to understand that by engaging in co-creation and embarking on a placemaking process, culture change may be needed across all partners individually and across the partnership as a group. Arguably, the university has a skill to offer here in its expertise in creating learning environments.

#### **Theme 4: The c/Civic**

A c/Civic turn is happening in UK HE institutions with attention being paid to formal or informal means to advance a civic contribution to society: formal, capital-C ‘Civic’, through membership of the Civic University Network, ‘a national network maximising the impact of civic universities in their place’, or through local strategic agreements; or informally, as lowercase ‘c’ ‘civic’, as communicated through university strategic and missions.

How HEIs define their place, as geography, as relationship to each other, and as relationship to other anchor institutions, is the basis of any c/Civic response. Through the c/Civic purview, there needs to be recognition that HEIs exist in a particular place in local place ecologies and that this c/Civic role is being sought out by partners as matters of resource sharing, collection action, and equitable responsibility in place agendas, assessment measures and KPIs.

For those HEIs that understand the c/Civic way of being and of doing, they work better as a c/Civic university when it comes to place partnerships and impact – such initiatives, and their ripple effect legacies such as Cultural Compacts, would not have been able to happen without a c/Civic institutional mindset and permission-giving. The c/Civic and placemaking combined signal offers the potential to form new ways of working informed by the sector and locale and working from the ground up.

### **A conclusion – HEI placemaking informing placemaking**

Placemaking is a dynamic and relational practice, where those at the placemaking table sit in relative expertism and work as a community of practice. It is as much a material practice as it is an emotional or somatic one, and reaches all aspects of place provision. It is a collective, collaborative and networked endeavour and works to address issues of our lived experience across scales and long-term duration.

However, it is all too common for placemaking to be downgraded or lost in the gaps between disciplines, sectors, funding agendas, and between the perceived gap between the hardware and software of working with place.

There is a call to action coming out of this paper; what is at stake for your institution if you don't take a placemaking approach?, and indeed, how can you foster best placemaking practice at your institution? Thinking of these questions across a 360-degree institutional purview, not taking a placemaking approach opens up significant risk. There is the potential to miss out on opportunities for organisational, social and cultural growth, and of not being part of positive economic transformation and growth. Placemaking affords the opportunity to work to long-term goals, rather than taking a short-term position that further risks a failing to meet HEI KPIs and a plateauing of ambition. There are consequent risks here too: HEIs not contributing to job creation or delivering on education, employability and skills agreements/agendas; losing students on graduation to other places and regions or contributing to their sense of displacement in the university area; and HEIs become 'just' education establishments if not working to a local mission.

UK universities have an opportunity as anchor institutions in place – with shareable research assets, expertise in knowledge exchange, and access to far-reaching networks – to take up the challenge of place leadership, and in the process, to lead by example to extend both local and global placemaking practices.

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