

FINDING THE BALANCE OF INCLUSIVITY





INTRODUCTION

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As a concept that has been widely implemented around the world, placemaking has largely revolved around life in the Western world, with many examples and cultural contexts mainly taking into consideration the habits and seasons of the West rather than the East.

A classic example is the public field. Historically, urban green areas such as parks and fields have been characteristic of Western towns and cities, traditionally serving the functions of representation, wellbeing or urban hygiene.

While parks and public fields exist in many Asian cities, it is interesting to observe the differences in the way these spaces are used. In the West, people would gravitate towards the centre. Common activities would include playing games or laying blankets out for picnics during the day while people-watching and soaking in the sun. In the East, people would flock to the periphery of the field, where there may be seating and trees to provide shade from the sun or tropical rains, only venturing out to play in the evenings. While differing weather affects behaviour, there are also cultural factors at work; in the West it is desirable to have a tan, while in the East having fair skin is the goal.

The learning here is that spaces mean different things to different people and culture plays a key role in determining how or if it is used at all. In the same vein, culture becomes an element that influences who uses a particular space and who does not. Armed with this intelligence, designers can therefore create spaces that are more inclusive.

Despite the Western influence on Asian cities, there are many great cases of placemaking in the East, with interesting variations based on location and the interpretation of inherent culture and identity, some of which we highlight in this chapter. What is evident is that culture and participation are the cornerstones of ensuring and even creating inclusivity in spaces.

CULTURAL SENSITIVITIES

Culture in Asia is dynamic and diverse, where even in the same ethnic group there exist multiple layers of different sub-ethnic groups, each unique, with their own sense of individuality and identity. For placemaking in general, it can be dangerous to assign blanket assumptions on how people perceive their culture, and this is particularly detrimental in Asia where forces such as urban migration, education, and globalisation have shifted and shaped the way individuals perceive and uphold their own cultural identity.

While there may be a collective identity ascribed to the wider society, community identity consists of multiple layers, defined by various factors such as socio-economic status and psychographics. The resulting combination of both society's collective identity and the identity of specific communities is a uniqueness, an exclusiveness of identity and behaviour that needs to be decoded and built into the design of a space.

INCLUSIVE / EXCLUSIVE

When designing a space, the end-user is key. This end-user may not necessarily mean the person you actually see using the space, passing through or having lunch. Your ideal end-user may well be someone whom you want to woo into using the space, and this is ideally a user who will care enough about the space, adopt it as their own, feel a sense of ownership and perhaps even take control of managing the space in the future.

Many spaces may also be designed so that is *not* used in a particular way. Known as defensive design, we see this especially in vulnerable inner-city communities where there may be homeless individuals, undocumented migrants or stall owners without licences. Urban designers sometimes go to great lengths to create benches that deter people from sitting or lying down for long periods of time, for example. Or implement lighting that cannot be easily destroyed by those who prefer activities in the dark.

Local governments have the tendency to design for the exclusion of certain types of communities, but this often results in unattractive spaces devoid of families, women or children. This could be perhaps due to safety issues, difficulty in navigating around the space or the lack of appeal to children.

However, whether it is designing only for specific types of users, or designing to omit others, it is choices like these that could lead to exclusivity (Ratho 2020).

MAPPING CULTURE AND LETTING THE COMMUNITY LEAD

It is hard to be inclusive in placemaking if exclusivity is not understood or acknowledged, which is why seeking to comprehend local communities and cultural mapping is imperative before embarking on any sort of initiative. Recognising that each community is exclusive in its own way allows placemakers to work around the fact and include elements which encourage inclusivity. Inclusivity needs to be the key ingredient, not only in the beginning or through scattered engagement sessions, but throughout the entire process, from conceptualisation to implementation.



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This means letting the community lead the way in terms of setting the objective, identifying stakeholders, inviting different users to explore different solutions on-site, and overseeing implementation in ways that are useful and acceptable for them as a community possessing exclusive traits. Sometimes this means gaining trust — more than usual — and working with local NGOs who have already managed to gain trust, and who understand the different needs of the community.

INCLUSIVITY, CREATED THROUGH PARTICIPATION

Communities take more ownership when they have a chance to participate in the process and are invited to co-create from the get-go. The level of ownership may differ based on the scale of participation, which is why placemaking so strongly hinges on the process of community engagement to achieve inclusivity.

In many cases, communities do not always speak the same language as designers and technicians, or do not know how to express their needs. It is important, therefore, that they are empowered with knowledge and given ways to discover and decide what they wish for their spaces.

RAYER BOISHAKHI PLAYGROUND, DHAKA, BANGLADESH

Md Sohel Rana (UN-Habitat) & Maruf Hossain (Work for Better Bangladesh Trust)

In Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, you see mostly youths — young men and boys — occupying parks and playgrounds, with almost no women, girls or toddlers in sight. The Rayerbazar Boishakhi Playground, poised for renewal, seeks to reverse this. According to the WBB Trust, the playground serves close to 250,000 dwellers in the area, but only 3.9% of those who use the park are girls under eight years old.

This situation is cultural. Despite advancements over the years, women in Bangladesh continue to struggle to achieve equal rights due to “societal norms and enforced restrictive gender roles” (Kotikula & Arango 2019). This includes safe access to public spaces and amenities. A recent World Bank report reveals that when asked about whether they feel safe outside their home, women in Bangladesh are lagging behind men by 30 percentage



points with only 69% of women feeling safe compared to almost all men. Also, while both men and women feel concern over safety in public spaces, the risk of sexual harassment affects women disproportionately.

The plan to transform the playground, (the brainchild of the Work for a Better Bangladesh Trust, in collaboration with HealthBridge-Canada and UN-Habitat, supported by the Dhaka North City Corporation), includes the provision of seating arrangements, security, lighting and other people-friendly facilities. More importantly, the aim is to reinvent the playground with input from the community — the end goal being a space that is equally used by both genders. “I want to play but I did not have a place to play when I wanted. I am happy now as I will be able to go to Rayerbazar Boishakhi Playground once the project is implemented. I will go there with my sisters and brothers and cousin to play every day,” explained Rubina Akter, an 11-year-old girl from the Ali Hasan Girls High School in Rayer Bazar, Dhaka (Rana 2019). By transforming the Rayer Bazar Boishakhi Playground, Rubina was provided a safe place that she helped build herself.

Innovative technology has shown great potential in community co-creation. The Block by Block Foundation's approach revolving around the sandbox video game, Minecraft, has been a critical tool in the making of the Rayerbazar Boishakhi Playground — engaging residents and young community members to visualise what could be, and giving them a voice. The approach empowers communities by allowing greater liberty and endless creativity which opens the way for real world outcomes.

Another wonderful example is demonstrated by Hack Our Play (HOP) in Singapore — an ongoing initiative bringing children, educators, and parents together to co-create play spaces from start to finish. Together, they are empowered to 'conceptualise, create and curate safe and unique play experiences' that differ from the standard playground equipment from a catalogue. Apart from fostering stronger bonds and a shared sense of pride and excitement, this exercise enables out-of-the-box thinking and solutions which are closer to people's desires, and as a result, are more inclusive.

To prevent the feeling of disconnection in rapidly growing cities like Hong Kong, the Sai Ying Pun neighbourhood connects new and old residents by identifying the cultural assets of the neighbourhood, for example, what does it mean to be a 'Sai Ying Pun-er'? What are places in the area that matter to people? The project was used to bridge the gap between elderly folk and children through activities such as Hopscotch and the care of plants where the elderly could demonstrate their knowledge and tell their stories. This also shows that the strength and knowledge of different kinds of end-users may help boost the involvement of others.

The strong connection between communities and food, found in almost all kinds of cultures, is another powerful example of how culture can create inclusivity. Even Singapore, an urban city-state with a fabricated landscape and a strong influx of migrants has found success in fusing the country's (predominantly) Indian, Malay and Chinese population through food. Although the multiracial Singapore society may identify with their respective tribes, they are all bound together through the sharing of food, culture and the precious little space they collectively own.

The well-represented cases in this chapter depict spaces that have been transformed into places that are inclusive and welcoming for all members of society, but also processes that are inclusive, taking into consideration the intended users of the space and the needs of communities with exclusive traits, belief systems, and social structures. They highlight the importance of representation in an end-to-end process; how having equally represented voices from various communities play a crucial role in creating inclusive spaces. It is also important to acknowledge and realise that community representation goes beyond what we would typically assume it would entail.

Communities should not only be represented by community leaders but also individuals who are not associated with specific groups.

All cases in this chapter clearly demonstrate both the vast diversity and exclusivity of Asian cultures, as well as using that understanding to create inclusive processes and in turn, inclusive public spaces.

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