

# Holistic Place Making: Yangon Reimagined

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**Abstract:-** We have developed the concept of Placemaking through four theories: Cultural Landscape Theory, Place Attachment Theory, Heritage Theory and Environmental Psychology. Yangon was chosen as a case study to conduct the survey. This study presents a visionary exploration of urban development in Yangon, focusing on the implementation and impact of placemaking initiatives. Through an in-depth analysis of recent survey data of over 300 participants of varied demographics in Yangon, it offers insights into how placemaking can shape the city's evolving landscape. The study found out that even though above 90% of the participants are willing to participate in this initiative to build better sense of community, the struggles they face include limited funding and resources, lack of support and engagement and at the same time difficulty in dealing with regulatory and bureaucratic hurdles. During current political turmoil and while the country continues to pursue Ethnocracy, this survey was conducted. The participants have also favored many possibilities including tactical urbanism, creative placemaking, participatory placemaking, public art initiatives, better urban design and landscape architecture, community gardens, public markets and street fairs. Even though most people have not participated in this initiative before, almost all of them are willing to take part in creating public places that are accessible and inclusive while acknowledging the severe economic struggle and administrative bottlenecks. The findings underscore the importance of collaborative efforts in urban regeneration, revealing how placemaking can effectively address the unique social, cultural, and environmental needs of a city.

**Keywords:-** Holistic Placemaking, Inclusive Urban Planning, Community-Centered Design, Rejuvenating Yangon.

- **Placemaking** is a practice architecture in which Spaces are transformed to Places. Biophilic design is creating places that would increase our connectivity to the natural, historical, cultural, geographical, and ecological aspects of a surrounding.
- **Holistic Placemaking** is a concept developed through four theories: Cultural Landscape Theory, Place Attachment Theory, Heritage Theory and Environmental Psychology.

## I. INTRODUCTION

*"First life, then spaces, then buildings – the other way around never works."*<sup>1</sup>

*"A good city is like a good party – people stay longer than really necessary because they are enjoying themselves."*<sup>2</sup>

Imagine a city where Spaces are transformed into Places and they are not just material shapes and forms, but actual Places which are cultivated to thrive with a flourishing community life. This exploration into Yangon's urban development looks beyond traditional architectural concepts through the lens of human-centric approach namely Placemaking. We have discovered that over 90% of our survey participants in Yangon are not only ready but eager to contribute to this vision, despite facing challenges like limited resources and bureaucratic difficulties. Their enthusiasm for diverse placemaking methods reveals a collective ambition to create inclusive, vibrant public spaces. This study presents a brief yet comprehensive picture of how Placemaking initiatives can transform Yangon, highlighting the essential role of community builders and architects in revitalizing urban setting. Amidst the chaos and struggles yet, imagining a possibility of the city where everyone has a sense of belonging is somewhere begin with.

**Cultural Landscape Theory** explores the intricate relationship between landscapes and the human cultures that shaped them. It involves the understanding of cultural meanings and values, traditions, practices, stories that has shaped the spaces over time.<sup>3</sup> In other words, it is the silent narratives of the cities; stories of resilience, creativity and adaptation that has shaped them throughout the course of time. Understanding it, allows us to approach Placemaking with more respect and sensitivity. Anne Whiston Spirn constantly urges us to focus on genius loci (the spirit of place) when designing a place.<sup>4</sup> Cartography holds such power, the art of claiming and assigning spaces, by drawing lines of exclusion and inclusion.<sup>5</sup> Designing and managing places without understanding the cultural DNA of a place would lead to profound mistakes.

<sup>1</sup>Jan Gehl, *Cities for People* (Washington, Covelo, London: Island Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup>Jan Gehl, *Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space, Landscape Journal*, 1989, VIII <<https://doi.org/10.3368/lj.8.1.54>>.

<sup>3</sup>James M. Rubenstein, *The Cultural Landscape: An Introduction to Human Geography*, 12th edn (Pearson, 2016).

<sup>4</sup>Anne Whiston Spirn, *Language of Landscape* (Yale University Press, 2000).

<sup>5</sup>Denis E. Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).

**Place Attachment Theory** explores the psychological and emotional connections people have with particular locations. The backbone of the theory is in understanding how and why certain places hold more significance to the individuals and communities than others. It integrates elements of geography, sociology, and psychology to explain how deeply our memories and emotions are tied to certain places. Understanding it is a crucial part of urban planning.<sup>6</sup> Places do not just shape us. We shape them too. Among the cases that studied most in Place Attachment Theory is 'Home'. Home is a place that unlocks the sense of belonging and a place where you kept your deepest memories. Whether a café that you frequented in childhood, or a neighborhood park with friends where most fun happened, holds different meaning to you than any other places even if everyone else deem it to be better. Those hold special places in our hearts creating warm, nostalgic sense of belonging. Understanding this theory requires analyzing factors such as individual experiences, social connections, activities and uses.<sup>78</sup>

**Heritage Theory** highlights the significance of preserving historical, cultural and environmental legacies within societies. It emphasizes the legacy of heritage not just as a record of the past, but shape the community life and identity. It plays a critical role in shaping policies and practices around cultural and natural preservation.<sup>9</sup> UNESCO categorize Tangible and Intangible Heritages differently.<sup>10</sup> Tangible Heritage include cultural properties, natural properties and cultural landscapes while Intangible Heritages include oral traditions and customs, performing arts, social practices, rituals, and festive events and traditional craftsmanship and knowledge. The landscapes our ancestors shaped carry their stories, serving as a constant reminder of our origins and identity. We also need to acknowledge that history is written by the victors. Understanding the places require studying it from several perspectives to see the shackles of the narratives. Placemaking can be a powerful tool for honoring and celebrating heritages, while ensuring its relevance and meaning for future generations.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Irwin Altman and Setha M. Low, 'Place Attachment', *Human Behavior and Environment*, 12. Springer, Boston (1992).

<sup>7</sup>Norsidah Ujang and Khalilah Zakariya, 'Place Attachment and the Value of Place in the Life of the Users', *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 168 (2015), 373–80 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.10.243>>.

<sup>8</sup>B. B. Brown, I. Altman, and C. M. Werner, 'Place Attachment', *International Encyclopedia of Housing and Home*, December, 2011, 183–88 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-047163-1.00543-9>>.

<sup>9</sup>Kenneth R. Olwig and David Lowenthal, *The Nature of Cultural Heritage, and the Culture of Natural Heritage*, 2015.

<sup>10</sup>'UNESCO' <[www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org)>.

<sup>11</sup>International Council on Monuments and Sites, 'ICOMOS' <<https://www.icomos.org/en>>.

**Environmental Psychology** highlights the need of designing places that are not just functional but also psychologically uplifting. It studies the relationship between people and their environment. Gary Snyder's statement 'Nature is not a place to visit. It is home.' best reflect the field. The study covers both natural & built environments. It focuses on both positive and negative effects.<sup>12</sup> Which includes reduction of stress in nature, urban crowding, and the connection between mental health and environmental degradation.<sup>13</sup> This field is increasingly relevant in architectural design, urban planning and policy-making where understanding of human-environment interactions is crucial for creating sustainable and liveable communities. 'Biophilia' is the term used for our innate love and tendency to bond with nature. Placemaking with Biophilic approach includes integrating natural elements, promoting connection to the wider environment of local ecosystem and Prioritizing sustainability. The benefits include improved well-being of individuals and society, greater creativity and innovation, stronger social connections and environmental stewardship.<sup>1415</sup>

## II. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND OF YANGON

According to Grant's sketch, the town had an extremely diverse population before colonization. Grant visited Yangon from 1836 to 1849. Churches and mosques were found along the route that led to the Shwe Dagon Pagoda. The present-day city of Yangon was laid out in 1852 by the medical doctor Montgomerie, who had a significant role in the planning of colonial cities. In order to minimize unsanitary conditions and an increase in crime, his suggested new city plan aimed to reduce traffic congestion, promote proper ventilation, and stop spread of fire. It was based on the general British philosophy of colonial urbanism and featured wide streets arranged in a grid pattern, symbolizing human order. Based on this idea, Fraser revised and drafted the plan and Sir Arthur Phayre accepted them for implementation.<sup>16</sup> At the time, Yangon was just as congested and densely populated as cities in India, Back Drainage Space system introduced by Montgomerie contributed the city immensely. Fraser's plan gave about

<sup>12</sup>Raymond S. Nickerson, *Psychology and Environmental Change*, ed. by Tufts University (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates).

<sup>13</sup>S. J. Lepore, *Crowding: Effects on Health and Behavior*, *Encyclopedia of Human Behavior: Second Edition*, 2nd edn (Elsevier Inc., 2012) <<https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-375000-6.00117-8>>.

<sup>14</sup>Roger S Ulrich, 'Biophilic Theory and Research for Healthcare Design', *Chalmers University of Technology*, August, 2008, 87–106 <<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/285328585>>.

<sup>15</sup>Prakash Nair, Parul Minhas, and Karin Nakano, *Biophilic Design: Learning Spaces Inspired by Nature*, 2022.

<sup>16</sup>Tomoko Matsushita, Kimiro Meguro, and Aya Kubota, 'Comparative Study of Planning History, Spatial Development and Sociological Significance of the Back Alley in Yangon and Singapore', *18th International Planning History Society Conference*, July, 2018 <<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327155224>>.

43% of open space in the form of roads and back drainage spaces was fortunate for Yangon to avoid circumstances of overcrowding as in Indian cities. These 3 individuals along with many other influential colonial figures were awarded

with street names in Yangon. Montgomery Road is now known as General Aung San Road, Fraser Road as Anawrahta Road and Phayre Road as Pansodan Street.



Fig. 1: Vann Diagram developed for Holistic Place making

During her power, Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar claimed that Myanmar intend to surpass Singapore within 20 years. But there was a difference between those two visionaries: Lee Kuan Yew and Aung San Suu Kyi. Lee Kuan Yew did not bother to use discrimination towards Malays and Muslims even though he was raising a Nation as a result of expulsion from them.

Yusof Ishak was the first president of Singapore and recent president was Halimah Yacob. But the effort to eliminate Christian ethnic states<sup>17</sup> and genocidal attempts towards Muslims<sup>18</sup> continued on in Myanmar. This study call for the architects and planners not to continue in neglecting the plurality nature of astate to form better and more prosperous cities.

<sup>17</sup>Ardeth Maung Thawngmung, *The 'Other' Karen in Myanmar: Ethnic Minorities and the Struggle without Arms* (Lexington Books, 2011).

<sup>18</sup>Maung Zarni and Alice Cowley, 'THE SLOW-BURNING GENOCIDE OF MYANMAR ' S ROHINGYA Reasons .'' Tomás Ojéa Quintana , United Nations Special Rapporteur for Human Rights , London Conference On', 2014.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

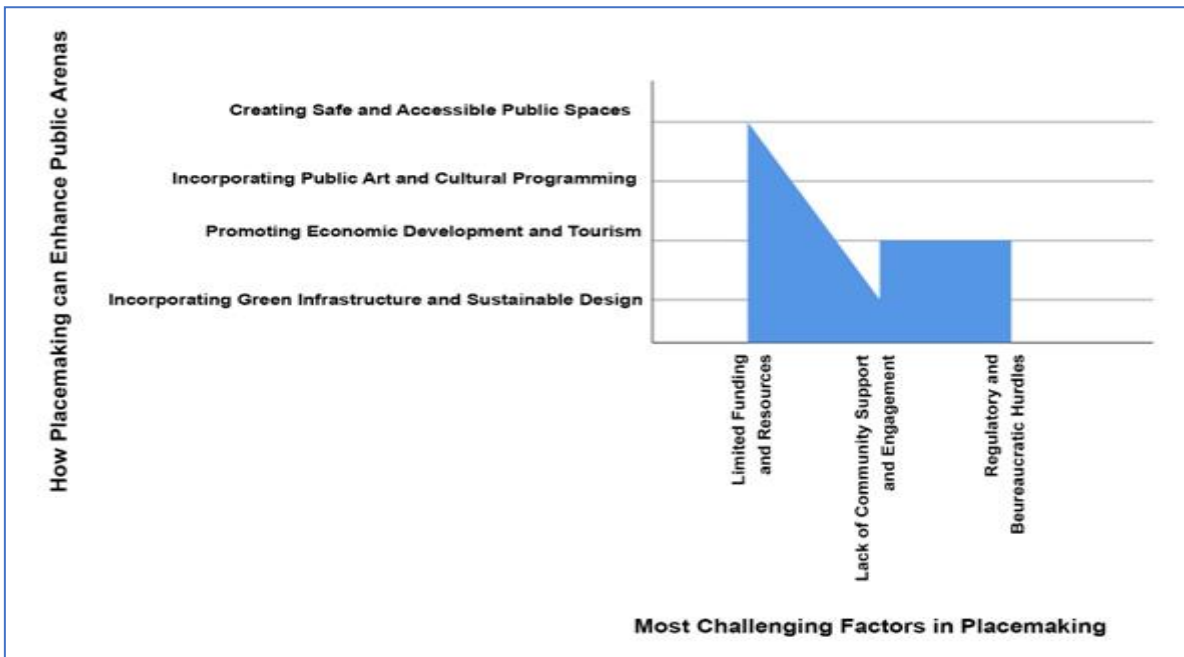


Fig. 2: Frequency Polygon of Perspectives of Survey Participants from Yangon on Place making Initiatives

IV. CONCLUSION

Gentrification, displacement, and lack of resources are challenges and pressing matters to consider. That is why, to truly thrive, place making must prioritize affordability through rent control, mixed-income housing, and equitable community investment, ensuring long-term residents benefit alongside development. This study has unveiled the immense potential of holistic place making to transform

Yangon's urban landscape by creating safe and accessible public spaces that foster a vibrant sense of community. By incorporating public art, green infrastructure, cultural programming and sustainable design, Yangon can not only promote economic development and tourism but also cater to the unique social, cultural, and environmental needs of its residents.

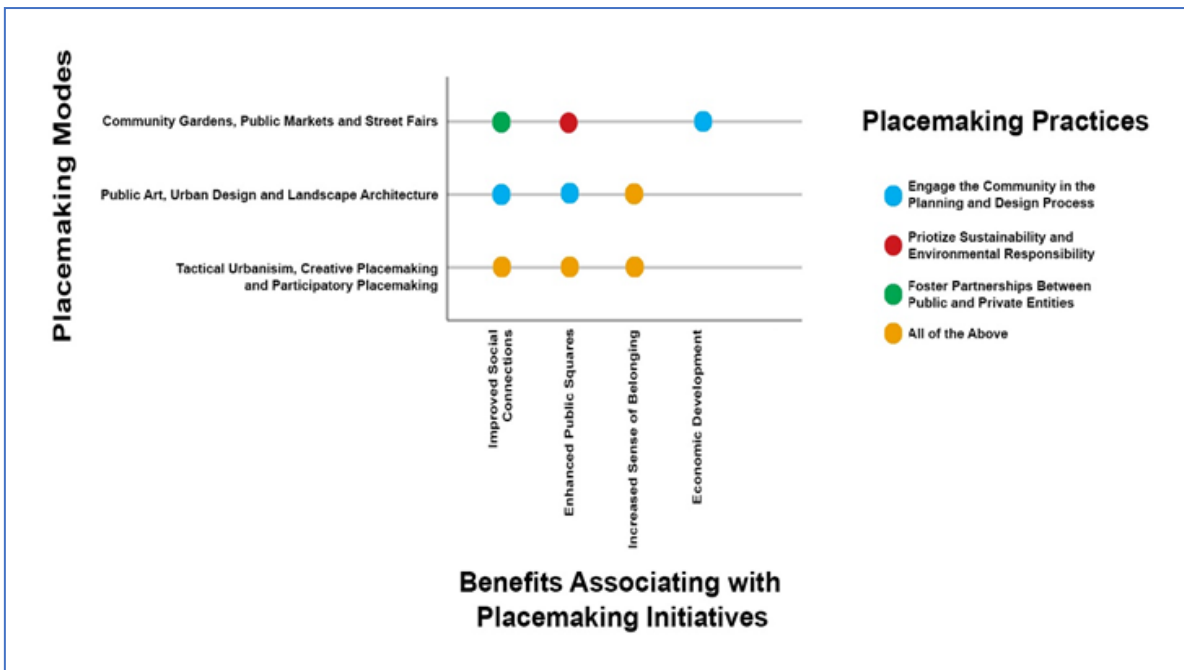


Fig. 3: Clustered Bar Chart of Favored Place making Practices



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