

# The SAGE Handbook of Social Constructionist Practice



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Typeset by Cenvoe Publisher Services  
Printed in the UK

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**Library of Congress Control Number:**

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

978-1-5264-8887-9

# Placemaking, Social Construction, and the Global South

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, interest in the concept of place (as opposed to space) has emerged across a spectrum of social science disciplines, such as planning (Friedmann, 2010), public art (Fleming, 2007), and community building (Gober & Trapido-Lurie, 2006). 'Place', in these diverse disciplines, has been defined as sense of place, attachment to place, place meanings, place dependence, place identity, and place-based planning (Amsden, Stedman & Kruger, 2011). The spectrum of these studies, increasingly referred to as placemaking, is wide and touches on and borrows from a variety of areas. This chapter affirms that place-oriented approaches can be linked with community-based approaches, which have become more widely researched among academics, and the knowledge produced is being used by policymakers and managers. Specifically in community building, there has been an expansion of disciplines tackling this topic

(besides the traditional fields of psychology, sociology, anthropology) and the link with placemaking seems to enrich both approaches to help communities develop. The fields of tourism and leisure are some of them, serving as tools for community building by engaging citizens with possible visitors, as well as with surrounding natural resources. For example, some studies focus on place transformation, having food production sites becoming spaces of touristic experience while bringing community development (Everett, 2012); another example is a film-induced tourism influencing the construction of a sense of a place (Alderman, Benjamin & Schneider, 2012); within leisure there is also a growing interest in leisure places creating meaning and purpose of life as a generator of more affirming identities (Williams, 2002). Despite the progressiveness of these ideas, these interdisciplinary and innovative perspectives have been chiefly on areas in the north hemisphere. Santos (2014) attributes that to the historical power that the North has

over the global South. The term global South has been emerging in transnational and post-colonial studies and refers to what may also be called the 'Developing World'. According to Santos, Western domination has strongly marginalized knowledge and wisdom that had been in existence and further developed in the global South. This knowledge is not being accessed and distributed to the global North due to what Santos calls 'epistemological blindness'. Santos (2009) argues that in times of globalization and interconnectedness, it is imperative to recover and valorize the epistemological diversity of the world: there is plenty of new knowledge being developed to cope with contemporary struggles such as accelerated urbanization, peripheries of large metropolitan cities in need of innovation, and sustainable development. Furthermore, in times of thinking global and acting local, from a placemaking perspective, Richards (2017) outlines the need to incorporate multiple dimensions within the constituencies and descriptions of the community experience.

Social construction, as a relational epistemology (Gergen, 2015; McNamee & Hosking, 2012), can offer a theoretical understanding to support those ideas, contributing to an expansion of intelligibility among multiple experiences of the world. By articulating placemaking with constructionism and offering an illustration, this chapter also aims at expressing the diversity and richness of the worldview of the global South, which embraces different races, religions, and cultures, all co-existing in a syncretism which produces local knowledge. The chapter will also expand on the connection and articulation of placemaking and the approach of social construction as a relational epistemology. It will show, by an illustration from the global South (Brazil), how placemaking practices are translating social constructionist ideas into action. We argue that the process-oriented focus on placemaking and the emphasis on emergence articulate really well with the philosophy of social construction.

All these combinations can value and hold the epistemological diversity that the world needs, bringing a more creative and innovative approach to community development as well as new ways of knowing, embracing knowledge as plural and holistic.

## DEFINING PLACEMAKING AND CONNECTING TO COMMUNITY BUILDING

Placemaking is a relatively new area of knowledge/application coming mainly from cultural geography, focusing on values, perceptions, memories and traditions of a group and how they create meaning in a certain geographic space, developing a sense of place (Wortham-Galvin, 2008). It has also been used to develop interesting activities in a place mostly designed by urban planners and landscape architects.

Wyckoff (2015) brings one possible definition: 'Placemaking is the process of creating quality places where people want to live, work, play, shop, learn, and visit' (p. vi). This author proposes a connection with an entrepreneurial approach in order to also bring economic development to a region, focusing on a more strategic placemaking to public policy.

This approach has also been growing in the fields of leisure and tourism (Coghlan, Sparks, Liu, [Winlaw](#), 2017; Derrett, 2015; Hultman and Hall, 2012), especially among those working in destination management and marketing, promoting the visibility of a destination in more participatory ways. According to Lew (2017), a review of 62 placemaking publications showed that tourism was a primary focus for 27 (43.5%) of the publications, and was peripheral or non-existent in the others. The focus is usually on public spaces and how people can (or cannot) connect with them, framing, shaping, and creating meaning around that. Placemaking as an approach brings an intentionality into

the process of creating this sense of place, the belonging aspects of a place. It is an interdisciplinary approach that grew beyond geography, tourism, or destination management, bringing a participatory approach to increase the livability of a community.

The placemaking goal in general is to design and co-create places and spaces together with the locals that bring a better quality of life to people. It can include a variety of elements: from urban design, focusing more on the physical places such as buildings and schools, to arts and culture, aiming at creating a more vibrant environment, as well as highlighting sustainable businesses which promote financial means for community development. Social goals are usually a great part of placemaking and one that is quite related to the well-known community building approach.

One interesting example of transforming cities and communities through placemaking is the Project for Public Spaces, working in partnership with the United Nations ([www.pps.org/projects](http://www.pps.org/projects)). According to the professionals involved in this project the goal is to revitalize communities through enhancing connections between people and places. Working for more than twenty years, they describe placemaking as a philosophy and a practice based on participatory processes in which community is actively involved in the democratic decision making. These processes are not preordained; they are dynamic and evolving. Experimentation is key in making what they call 'lighter, quicker, cheaper' prototypes, which means solutions that are easy to implement, low-cost, and impact positively on the communities. Another example of placemaking is the work of the Department of Urban Studies and Planning (DUSP) at MIT, working with placemaking processes of the 21st century, as they say. That means building social capital by using the available technology of the information age, such as crowd-sourced production, social media platforms, etc., at every level of placemaking, from publicity and promoting awareness

to local agriculture initiatives (community gardens, for instance). The examples above can help incentivize and nurture community building approaches. Community building, however, comes from a different range of disciplines that have been well spread from the Social Work and Psychology fields (Nowell & Boyd, 2010; Townley, Kloos, Green & Franco, 2011; Montero, 2002). Community building traditionally aims at promoting social transformation, emphasizing the empowerment of community members and a sense of connectedness. The focus of community building is primarily on individuals (usually vulnerable populations) and how to empower them to fight for their rights and to find opportunities for their communities to develop. Participation is also key in creating strategies and approaching change. The *Handbook of Community Psychology* (Rappaport & Seidman 2000) features plenty of chapters on community building, focusing mainly on individual development, discussing many approaches to change, and highlighting the need to understand how people interact and how social systems affect development. Montero (2002) calls attention to how the dominant approach on community psychology dichotomizes subject-object, looking at individuals versus their environment.

Despite having different foci, placemaking and community building clearly share much common ground. Both seek complex understandings on quality of life, relating not just to economic but also social and cultural aspects, while focusing on life itself as the criteria to define quality, looking at relationships and ways of living in particular locations (Brandão, 2005). This encourages a sense of belonging in a certain territory and incentivizes people to become co-responsible for what is created there. Both actively promote community development; both encourage and advance public participation and community-led initiatives. And their relationship becomes even closer when looking at community building through the lens of social constructionism (Montero, 2002).



The goal here is to argue that the placemaking approach can be an innovative addition to community building, and that social constructionism can be a valuable theory to support the philosophical understanding and the creation of useful concepts and ideas around placemaking. While the classical approach of community building focuses more on individuals and empowerment, placemaking adds the design of places and spaces to generate powerful experiences, creating livable communities. The philosophy of constructionism has been increasingly used in community building, inviting a more relational focus on matters. The assumption here is that social constructionism can be a useful epistemology to both approaches, connecting them and expanding conceptual horizons.

### **PLACEMAKING AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM – AN ILLUSTRATION FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH**

The following illustration offers one concrete example of how placemaking, community building, and social constructionism may combine. This example is intended to be suggestive of imaginative possibilities, not necessarily definitive of how community building, placemaking, and social construction must necessarily work together. Over the years, a strong partnership has emerged between Brazilian and Dutch<sup>1</sup> universities together with local NGOs in Brazil. These partnerships have resulted in several types of collaboration focusing on placemaking. One of them is situated in the territory known as Perus, a neighborhood in the outskirts of São Paulo, and features Quilombaque, an NGO in the area. Quilombaque is currently developing leisure and tourism as a means for local development (Schroeder, 2018). The partnership between the universities and Quilombaque culminated in a placemaking intervention organized in Perus in December

2018, in which professors, researchers and students along with local guides, activists and social actors collaborated. The aim was to bring together a plurality of knowledge and narratives to experiment and to create initiatives to the development of the community-based tourism in Perus.

### ***The Region of Perus and Quilombaque***

Perus, with a population of 80,000, is not a well-known Brazilian community. The region has always suffered from lack of governmental attention and struggles with poverty, violence, and a high rate of homicide among black youth, as well as with the threat of displacement of indigenous communities. Although it is a poor area with no visibility, it features important history and many interesting stories, such as having had one of the first train stations in the country, as well as the first cement factory, which led to the arrival of thousands of migrants at the beginning of the 20th century (Siqueira, 2001).

Quilombaque, a local NGO founded in 2005, builds upon the rich history and stories of Perus to create a collective to resist and to convert the community into a safer and more productive area. The name is a combination of quilombo (a settlement of fugitive slaves) and batuque (a musical genre with African roots). Quilombaque uses storytelling, art, culture, and local resources to transform Perus into a livable place and a creative destination.

Quilombaque has engaged in extensive work to build an ‘intangible heritage’ of the region, a territorial museum, promoting Perus as a destination. The NGO manages this ‘intangible heritage’ in strategic as well as creative ways. They occupy abandoned places and areas in the neighborhood and they redefine the meaning of these places by transforming them into cultural establishments. These places become meeting and

learning spaces for locals, as well as a destination for visitors to learn about the local history and culture. The abandoned cement factory, for example, was converted into historical ruins and the empty space at a school a public library. In this way, the community was able to make important linkages with its past, but in repurposing the spaces, also ensured that its history is preserved as a living memory, and allowing for a dynamic continuity. Instead of being points of danger, fire hazards, and other sorts of liabilities, these neglected and derelict spaces have become sites of vitality, providing places to meet and locations where different elements of the community may intersect.

This territorial museum is organized as a series of paths or 'trails' (trilhas in Portuguese), taking visitors to different points of interest within the neighborhood. The trails highlight the cultural, historical, and recreational aspects of the community. They are about the past, present, and future of Perus, and offer pathways for exploring the area while also sharing important history and local folklore. The trails are managed by the NGO, creating and facilitating strong community networks, where each member can offer his or her own expertise and be a leader of a specific space or topic. Thus community knowledge and experience become assets, and subjects of interest and respect from those both within and outside of Perus. What might have once been overlooked, or seen merely as decadence, are instead celebrated and rightly understood as valuable. In this way, the shift in community life is both conceptual and tangible.

### ***Setting up the Placemaking Intervention***

A two-day placemaking project was designed, having the NGO, the community and universities (teachers and students) forming a team to work together. The team has worked under one of the core

placemaking principles, which is participation and experimentation on the spot together with those involved. To this end, two trails were selected as a sample for the exploration of the territorial museum. This was the starting point for creating dialogue and reflections for the territory, learning and co-creating in order to improve the quality of the place and people by exploring ways to develop sustainable businesses in the region. Also as part of the placemaking approach, collaborative practices are central to tap into the plurality of knowledge. Community members, tourists, academics, and students all learned from each other and shared different perspectives on the same topic.

The team together visited the territorial museum via the historical/cultural trails. All the participants (around 40 people, including students, employees, NGO volunteers, and some citizens of Perus) engaged in the activities offered along these routes as a way to understand them, dialogue about them, and finally provide valuable feedback and ideas for the strengthening of this community-based tourism. Through the design of experiences and storytelling, these two-day projects inspired all the participants to learn and to engage with the local culture.

### ***Opening the Project – The Mandala***

The official opening of the project comprised a ritual called 'mandala with the drums', an African ritual that represents the beginning of a relationship. The participants were introduced to the Jongo, a cultural 'wheel dance' from Africa that helps people integrate and connect. In a circle, Quilombaque members started playing the drums and all the participants started dancing, clapping, and singing. Quilombaque always promotes these openings to engage participants while introducing their local culture and their African ancestry, and as a way to preserve the traditions of their community.

After the mandala, the NGO shared an overview of who they are and how they are becoming an example of what Belmonte and Silvestre (2018) called 'resistance tourism'. According to the authors, there is an emergence of a 'resistance tourism' in the global South as a result of organized social movements that struggle for social rights developing alongside processes of resistance. Although these communities may be disparaged or neglected by local, state, and national governments, there is an effort by locals to resist and to persist over the years, recognizing and embracing their valuable cultural contributions and translating them into leisure and tourism experiences. Tourism offers one way to cultivate that outside interest, while also providing revenue for local people. The tourism also increases visibility, helps reduce isolation, and provides opportunities for cooperation and development. Quilombaque and the region of Perus have been resisting together, and as a result their tourism agency was opened in 2018.

## **VISITING THE TRAILS – SHARING VALUES, DIALOGUING AND CREATING SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS**

### ***Trail 1 – The Reframing Trail***

#### ***Subverting discourses and the emergence of new narratives of a place***

This first trail is called the reframing trail (*trilha da resignificação*) and features places that were occupied and reframed into meaningful cultural areas for residents. We, participants of this placemaking intervention, were guided by members of the NGO as well as some local communities that take care of the places visited. One of them is the Hip Hop House, a house that has transformed the surrounding neighborhood. The area of this house used to be an abandoned zone with high criminality and it was well known as a

dangerous place. After the occupation and the reframing, the locals were encouraged to visit the place and started to look at it with different eyes. As a result, businesses emerged; for example, locals built some stalls where they sell food, drinks, and other small items. The Hip Hop House became part of the territorial museum, and we had the opportunity to visit the place, to see some students and a hip hop performance by the local hip hop teacher. By converting an abandoned and violent place into a cultural center, the discourses of the place were subverted and new narratives could emerge, fostering positive dynamics and new possibilities for the neighborhood.

### ***Trail 2 – The Queixadas Trail***

#### ***Developing tourism and encouraging the fight for rights***

This second trail is built around ruins of an old cement factory in the region. The name *queixadas* is in honor of the group of workers at that factory who are known to have formed one of the first organized workers' movements (Bezerra, 2011). *Queixada* is the Portuguese name for the animal peccary, a sort of pig native to the Americas. Peccaries have several unique attributes and one of them is staying together in times of danger, an essential characteristic for their survival in the wild. The workers named themselves *queixadas* and adopted a non-violent strategy to fight for their rights. The NGO is heavily inspired by the *queixadas* and their movement, naming their tourism agency after them – *Agencia Queixada de turismo*. The ruins of the factory are now part of the territorial museum of Perus and the trail was designed not just to give the visitors historical knowledge (which was very rich and enlightening) about the factory but also to share the values of the *queixadas* through stories, inspiring people to fight for their own rights and the rights of their communities. This trail is an important example of how to



create places that engage people in their history while inspiring them to continue pursuing their dreams and their rights.

After visiting these two trails, a team dialogue was established. The NGO, together with lecturers, researchers, students and the community came together to share their experiences, insights, and knowledge gained from the visits. Students shared the ideas that had been generated during the visits, giving some input based on their expertise. The members of the Quilombaque also shared their experience and insight, mentioning, for example, the simple fact that having the students moving around the community already gives more visibility to the places and encourages the locals to turn up to check on what is happening and to interact with visitors. These spontaneous encounters promote interactions and new opportunities for the communities.

The participatory approach of placemaking, tapping into the plurality of knowledge present within the team, and connecting the local wisdom with academic knowledge, promoted new ideas based on the combination of first-hand experience and previous knowledge. By working together, new ideas and concepts could be shared and discussed, exploring practices that can support the community to increase their visibility as a destination, at the same time that the knowledge can be incorporated into education taken back to the universities.

### **PLACEMAKING THROUGH SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION LENSES: GENERATING NEW KNOWLEDGE AND PROMOTING PRACTICAL RESOURCES FOR ACTION**

The approach of social constructionism embraces knowledge as generative (Gergen, 1978), practical (McNamee, 2004), relational (McNamee, 1994), and always situated within a context, creating what is called truth within communities (McNamee & Hosking, 2012).

In this approach, knowledge is developed in interactions with others, through social exchanges, relationships, and dialogue (Gergen & Gergen, 2004). According to Burr (2003), 'Knowledge is therefore seen not as something that a person has or doesn't have, but as something that people do together' (p. 9).

Highlighting the contextual value of knowledge production and its practices is also part of placemaking, focusing its practices on the involvement, participation, and collaboration of a variety of social actors. By valuing their plurality of perspectives, new knowledge can be created, opening potential for new endeavors in a territory. Looking at placemaking through a social constructionist lens offers one exercise to legitimize knowledge as action (McNamee & Hosking, 2012), embracing and systematizing local knowing that can generate new possibilities to stimulate resilience in communities as well as destination projects, in this specific case (Ahern, 2011). Reflecting on this placemaking project in Perus, some constructionist insights can be drawn from the process.

#### ***(1) Build from what is Available***

This placemaking project started from what was already present and happening in the community, and the focus was on searching for 'what gives life to the system' (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). This approach is similar to the appreciative inquiry approach, which has as its methodology a focus on what is already happening and thriving, and trying to expand from those places. Despite the economic scarcity in the community, we learned that the NGO also embraces this approach: searching for the abundance and opportunities that are present in the community, going straight from envisioning to implementation, and taking concrete actions to realize their vision. In this way, intangible heritage and cultural and educational spaces can be created. Through the project we – from academia – learned that their innovative way

of creating a destination is a great illustration for the field of placemaking and social construction. By embracing the opportunity of what is present, people can promote more places and spaces for social inclusion. The Quilombaque team has a concept for that: 'sevirologia'<sup>2</sup> meaning that under adverse conditions they still act by finding their own ways to make things happen. We are proposing here to transform this attitude and action of sevirologia into a resource that can be useful to help and inspire other communities to learn from them. We are calling it: *build from what is available*. One example of the resource in action was how the NGO did the planning and organization for the realization of the placemaking project. In order to make it feasible, promoting an environment where participants could experience being in the community and learning together, local families were connected by the NGO to host participants in their own houses during these two days, offering bed and breakfast. Furthermore, the NGO set up a temporary restaurant where lunch and dinner were offered during the two days of work, having people from the NGO cooking for everyone.

## **(2) Co-Creating by Experimenting**

According to social construction, co-creation is central in the meaning-making process, being an emergent property of social systems in which we exist (Camargo-Borges & Rasera, 2013). When we talk about *co-creating by experimenting* we are addressing the creative processes that have been designed and facilitated, generating new meanings, new ideas, and solutions. We use the verb experiment in the sense of trying something out, to test what works and what might not. This emphasizes that it is a dynamic process, involving the creative participation and appraisal of multiple people and perspectives.

At the placemaking project in Perus we used active experimentation of places and

spaces to see what could be co-created from there. By going into the trails we could learn by doing, co-creating meanings by experimenting together, helping Quilombaque to choose directions to invest further. The experimentation generated some ideas that were openly shared. One idea that emerged from the students was about the translation of the stories shared (from Portuguese to English). The students experienced the long translations as tiring and disengaging and as a result they recommended the creation of performed stories in which not everything needed to be expressed in verbal language. They suggested the sharing of stories through acts of performances, which is very close to what the NGO already does. This way, participants from other languages that come to experience the trails can understand the message and connect better with the place. In order to further use the resource *co-creating by experimenting*, design tools from placemaking can be used, offering creative and imaginative ways to engage people to co-create new meanings, new scenarios.

## **(3) Collaborative Practices to Strengthen the Community**

One of the core principles of placemaking is doing *with* people and not *for* people. Following this principle, the whole system is invited to participate and to share stories creating collaborative practices. According to Ketonen-Oksi and Valkokari (2019) collaboration focuses on participatory processes that happen in real life, increasing the potential to innovate. From a constructionist approach, collaborative practices refer to the attention given to the quality of the intervention/interaction, and are coherent with local values, beliefs, and practices. Through these processes, collaboration contributes to a dialogic, relationally sensitive opportunity for equal participation in community issues. These collaborative dialogues create a strong sense of relational connection, participation,

and belonging among themselves as well as to the broader community (McNamee & Shotter, 2004).

The participation of professors, researchers and students from the universities of Breda and UFSCar, contributed a great deal in this direction. By having these people visiting the community, residents became curious and many joined the trails. That was a great excuse to help the guides with directions as well as with new stories, invigorating their relationships. Having their stories, experiences, community traditions, and local space seen as valuable and interesting to academics also encouraged people in Perus and Quilombaue to see themselves in new ways, and to understand their own history in a wider context. For the universities, it was also a valuable experience, allowing for deeper and more contextual understandings of placemaking issues that may have been more abstract in the academic environment.

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

As a result of our placemaking project, we are left with an interesting question: How can we interweave placemaking, social construction, and epistemologies of the South as a valuable combination for new understandings and practices of community building? We are confident that the combination can help to embrace the epistemological diversity that the world needs (Santos, 2009), bringing a more creative and innovative approach to community development as well as new ways of knowing, embracing knowledge as plural and holistic. The partnership between universities and local communities, such as the collaboration between Breda University of Applied Sciences, UFSCar and Quilombaue, created the opportunity to combine and apply academic knowledge with local wisdom, a fundamental combination in creating more democratic societies by generating more horizontal relationships and

critical consciousness in all levels (Freire, 2013). Furthermore, these partnerships in co-creation of new ideas and projects are crucial for tapping into socially complex issues and very much related to the approach of social construction. Basing the knowledge production on the social and local experience, an ecology of knowledge (Santos, 2009) can emerge as an acknowledgment of the plurality of knowledge.

The epistemology of the South challenges the traditional theory of knowledge, which is based on a more foundational approach to knowing and truth (Santos, 2018). Instead it highlights the richness of worldviews and the plurality and diversity of being in the world (Tavares, Santos, & Meneses, 2009). The epistemology of the South proposes a line of connection between lived experiences and knowledge production, generating an ecology of knowledge that can overcome the abyss between the knowledge produced by the northern and southern hemispheres (geographic and metaphorical).

Quilombaue is exercising effective participation through leisure and tourism, creating a responsive cultural movement that empowers and invites people to collectively decide what matters and what should be brought up in the community, allowing them to affect the outcomes. It considers all stakeholders within the locality as legitimate participants in the process of community-based tourism, generating inclusiveness and thriving neighborhoods (Heller & Adams, 2009). The knowledge presented here originated in the global South, and shows the emergence of what can be called a 'tourism of resistance', which is framed by a Southern epistemology, and informed by a confluence of local, contextual, and historical forces. Such an approach seems to be the result of practices of community with a continuous focus on strengthening connections among people, places, and spaces. It also shows the developments of a placemaking intervention from a social constructionist perspective. It can offer some insights and suggest lessons for

community-based tourism elsewhere, helping other communities struggling with political, social, and economic matters to learn different ways of approaching and re-creating themselves.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the NGO Quilombaque for partnering with us in this placemaking project as well as the colleagues from Breda University and the Federal University of São Carlos. Furthermore, we are grateful for Mauricio Mendes Belmonte for his critical reflection on the paper, especially related to epistemologies of the South and the ecology of knowledge.

## Notes

- 1 In this specific illustration the Breda University of Applied Sciences, the Netherlands, and the Federal University of São Carlos, Brazil.
- 2 A noun invented from the verb 'se virar' which in Portuguese means to actively act in situations where adversity is high, making an effort to solve a problem with your own resources.

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