

BOOK REVIEW

The Art of Placemaking: Interpreting Community Through Public Art and Urban Design

By Ronald Lee Fleming, Merrell, 2007, 384 pp.

Review by Christopher Steinmeier, University of Pennsylvania

Ronald Lee Fleming's *The Art of Placemaking* is a book crafted largely on the premise of connections – between people and cultures, between eras in history, between materialism and mythology, and between disciplines. It is also a book that emphasizes the strength of the connections which in turn determine the resonance and sustainability of a given place. The book is divided into two major sections: the first section offers case studies of various places along with descriptions of the design processes and their impact, while the second details the design process in general, including the questions one should ask of a place and potential designs. Within the case studies, there are numerous narratives about conflict, confrontation, and resolution, such as tensions between the artists' work and the political desire to avoid controversy.. The beauty of Fleming's work can be appreciated because he directs our attention to the tensions that exist within the decisions that allow public art to be brought into open urban areas.

Fleming's first section, case studies, combines dazzling photographs with descriptions of design, process, and impact to illustrate his understanding of the four principles of urban design: orientation, connection, direction, and animation. His narratives chart a trajectory for each project, from the initial concept to the finished product's place in the community. He emphasizes the give and take crucial to the establishment of vital public art. What makes this section extraordinary is Fleming's attention to the kinds of places, from train stations and federal buildings, where visitors have to spend significant amount of time in the uncomfortable limbo of waiting. It is

significantly less challenging to craft a place where people already want to be, and far more difficult to create a meaningful experience in the locales that seem saturated with bureaucratic ennui and numbing facelessness.

A good portion of the book deals with transit, or transition, whether in the literal sense of transport or in the more subtle notions of ecological or interpersonal change. One significant example of this is the Stuyvesant High School project, *Mnemonics*, in which the history of the school and community is told via artifacts placed randomly throughout the building, in small glass cubes. Unlike other public works, where visitors follow a linear narrative through a space, *Mnemonics* unfolds more gradually and in ways that are different for each person. As students progress through the four years of high school, they come into contact with different artifacts at different times and become entwined with the history of the school. As a final gesture, each graduating class leaves an artifact of its own, which fosters both a connection to the place and a sense of responsibility to it; the place is constantly being made and remade, and students who were once part of the process become part of the product.

Although Fleming's work is commendable, he has included a few case studies that cause me to question his choices. One of these "places" is *Artifact Fence*, in Denver, Colorado. It is a winding trail of discarded or antiquated farming implements meant to tell the tale(s) of Rocky Mountain agriculture before the Denver International Airport, and indeed modern America, encroached on its territory, and it seems to fall short of Fleming's high

standards for placemaking. It is difficult for me to understand why Fleming included this piece, unless as a warning – a place cannot simply speak to its past, but must also reach into the future. But if this is a warning, it is left to the reader's implicit understanding and therefore is inadequate in its offering.

The second half of the book serves both as a call to action and a manual for the design process, discussing often overlooked components such as maintenance, conservation, and the rights of the artist. These pages map out specific steps to ensure that the artist's vision is integrated as fully as possible into the space, and that the artist's vision also reflects the diversity and the will of the public for whom the art is intended. Fleming does an effective job of balancing the skill, creativity, and ingenuity of the artist with the budgetary and political constraints of the various departments overseeing the construction. In many ways these are the gems of the book. While the first section draws the reader in with pictures and endearing stories, this section encourages the readers to commit to 'making' places in their own town or city.

As part of this section, Fleming offers some questions to ask of a space, in order to best coax the space into a *place*. These questions allow me to ponder the potential of bridging the gap between sport and art. Throughout much of the book, public spaces – "places" – seem to be almost subordinated by the artwork, as if to say that people congregating in the space must be given topics for conversation or safe havens from urban sprawl. But what about spaces where people already gather, where the culture of the space may not be intrinsically aesthetic, such as playgrounds

or sports courts? These spaces often have close ties to the community as those lauded by Fleming, if not more so, and they offer an opportunity to introduce visitors to the community or the history of the community. In South Philadelphia there is a basketball court that shares land with a “sprayground”, which is essentially a playground with sprinklers built in. Children can run around and enjoy themselves without overheating in the city’s harsh summer heat. The area is beautifully landscaped and colorful, and it offers something for people of all ages, including shaded areas for conversation. There is also Rucker Park in New York City, which is a Mecca for basketball players and fans. The courts are a living piece of New York and American history, a gathering place for current players and living legends, with events and artwork to celebrate the past and the future, all of which make it a prime example of Fleming’s four keys to making a place.

The *Art of Placemaking* succeeds in

many ways, not the least of which is in giving readers a list of destinations, of places to see and to create, and does a masterful job of pairing what has been done with what remains to be done to recover from the Modernist Era (Fleming’s refrain throughout). Aside from a few minor miscues and moments of self-promotion, this is a good read and a powerful elixir against the slow creep of corporate sprawl and generic suburban planning. By emphasizing connection and connectedness, by placing function alongside aesthetics, and by focusing on the stories told about and around the artwork, Fleming has set a high standard for making places. By focusing only on those places where the commissioned artist intersects with the public will, Fleming may inadvertently sever the very connections he has worked hard to draw out. While I do agree with his idea that areas where people convene are not automatically deserving of the term “places”, I am convinced, both by some of the examples

in the book and by my own experiences, that the converse is also true: places do not have to be designed to be ‘made.’

Christopher Steinmeier is an EdD student in Educational Leadership at Penn GSE. He is currently studying online homeschool networks through social network analysis and virtual experiences in informal educational settings. Chris has also begun to think about complex systems theory and how it can be applied to educational and organizational reform.

REFERENCES

- Fleming, R. (2007). *The Art of Placemaking: Interpreting community through public art and urban design*. London: Merrell.