Defining place-keeping: The long-term management of public spaces

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ABSTRACT

There has long been a focus in urban landscape planning and design on the creation of highquality public spaces, or place-making. Large amounts of capital continue to be spent on creating such spaces without adequate thought or resources for their long-term maintenance and management of public spaces, or place-keeping.

While there may be continued policy rhetoric about the importance of place-keeping, particularly as public spaces are recognised for their important contribution to health, wellbeing, biodiversity and also their economic value, this has not however been supported in practice. There are examples in many cities where public spaces are subject to poor management and maintenance practices. This is clearly visible where vandalism, litter and damage to facilities and equipment occur, and people no longer feel safe or comfortable.

This paper argues that this uneven focus on place-keeping is not only due to a lack of resources but also a lack of understanding of the concept, its complexity and the wide implications it has for users, practitioners and policymakers. The paper aims to address this gap in knowledge by providing a detailed exploration and definition of place-keeping within the urban context. Place-keeping is not simply about the physical environment, its design and maintenance, but also encompasses the interrelated and non-physical dimensions of partnerships, governance, funding, policy and evaluation.

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Introduction

Place-making has long taken centre stage in urban planning and design, where capital funding is spent on the *shaping* and *making* of high-profile places in towns and cities all over the world (Roberts, 2009). Such places encompass a wide range of areas including parks, civic squares, waterways and open/green spaces in housing estates, both publicly and privately owned and managed. Through place-making, the resultant high-quality public spaces are argued to be economically and socially beneficial for local communities and contribute positively to residents' quality of life and wellbeing. In light of these benefits, it is perhaps unsurprising that large-scale capital is spent on creating such places. However, what is surprising is the lack of priority given to the *place-keeping*, or long-term management of such spaces, once *place-making* has occurred. This paper will show that in the planning and design process, inadequate thought is given to place-keeping, often manifested as an insufficient pool of resources made available for the long-term maintenance and management of such places. Without place-keeping, public spaces can fall into a downward spiral of damage, disrepair and inadequate maintenance. This can potentially lead to

manifestations of the 'broken window syndrome' where even 'cosmetic damage can invite more serious anti-social or even criminal behaviour' (Wilson and Kelling, 1982, cited in Nash and Christie, 2003, p. 47). This can lead to residents feeling unsafe in places which become unused in favour of others. Trying to restore such places to their former 'glory' can be a costly exercise, not just in financial terms, but also socially to regain users' confidence to use the place safely and comfortably.

This paper argues that this lack of focus on place-keeping is not only due to a lack of resources but also a lack of understanding of the concept, its complexity and the wide implications it has for users, practitioners and policymakers. The paper aims to address this gap in knowledge by providing:

- an outline of the research and policy context within which place-keeping sits;
- an in-depth and critical review of the concept of place-keeping within the urban context;
- a detailed definition of place-keeping as a combination of physical and non-physical dimensions; and,
- recommendations for further research.

The wider context of place, place-making and place-keeping

In Europe it can be argued that there is an ongoing policy shift back towards the aims of the mid-19th and 20th century social

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reformers who fought for good-quality living environments for all residents which included the provision of publicly accessible green space. Place continues to be an important part of the discourse on urban social life, constituting a renewed interest in the concept (Roberts, 2009). While today's context may be very different politically, environmentally, economically and socially, there is growing consensus in theory and policy that open and green spaces are vital to urban life because of their significant contribution to urban dwellers' wellbeing (e.g. Newton, 2007). This perspective acknowledges that public open spaces 'provide a range of social, aesthetic, environmental and economic benefits' (Caspersen et al., 2006, p. 7). These benefits emerge from the perceived value that public space has for everyday quality of life, serving as 'a stage for urban publicness, sport, art, and cultural activities, etc. for all members of society when they go about their daily business' (BMVBS UND BBR, 2008).

The profile of place-making as a means of creating good-quality environments has been raised considerably since the late 1990s when area-based initiatives were adopted to address concerns with local and neighbourhood-scale social problems in deprived neighbourhoods throughout Europe (Carpenter, 2006). Put simply, it was claimed that urban regeneration in a deprived area can combat urban poverty, the ensuing environmental degradation, and promote economic growth (Urban Task Force, 1999). Belief in such claims continues today within the broad context of sustainability: in 2005 all EU-member countries endorsed the Bristol Accord and agreed to create more attractive places – or '"sustainable communities" – where people want to live and work, both now and in the future' (ODPM, 2006, p. 9). Part of this focus on the quality of the environment is the liveability agenda adopted in cities around the world which endorses the provision of clean, safe and green public spaces and streets (Carmona, 2007; Jonas and McCarthy, 2009). In the UK for example, there is a plethora of prescriptive urban design guidance on 'the art of making places for people' (CABE Space, 2005a; Urban Task Force, 2006; Homes and Communities Agency, 2007).

While tastes and habits have clearly changed dramatically since the advent of the public park in the mid-eighteenth century, particularly in the last half-century in terms of leisure pursuits, publicly accessible public space continues to play an important part in people's everyday lives. Recent research and policy focus on encouraging people, particularly children and teenagers, to do more exercise and to do it outdoors. Urban green and open space is considered a means of combating obesity, getting fresh air and using green space more passively as a restorative environment in which to 'unwind' and cope with everyday stress and mental illness (Pretty et al., 2005; Mitchell and Popham, 2008; Abraham et al., 2010). A growing body of research from around Europe shows that encouraging people to spend time in local green spaces can be help improve mental health problems such as depression and work-related stress (Ulrich, 1979; Hansmann et al., 2007; Newton, 2007). Studies show that the closer people live to green space, the more likely they are to use it (Schipperijn et al., 2010) while other social benefits relate to sense of place, identity and spirituality with green space (Irvine and Warber, 2002; Konijnendijk, 2008). Further social benefits of open spaces include the opportunities for social interaction and engagement with people who might not be encountered elsewhere (Whyte, 1980; Gehl, 2001). Considerable literature focuses on the importance of spaces that all members of society can use with equal rights (Amin, 2008). There are also claims that urban open spaces can contribute positively to civic pride, sense of community and sense of place (McIndoe et al., 2005). The belief in such a relationship partly informed the creation of the public parks in the 19th–20th centuries around Europe as healthy places for all residents to spend time in and be proud of (Conway, 2000) alongside the long-standing premise, supported by recent empirical research, that urban open space can provide residents with respite from the daily pressures (Barbosa et al., 2007). Such benefits are however achieved only if people use the spaces: and key determinants behind use include the safety and comfort of all potential users (Luymes and Tamminga, 1995).

Green spaces have also been identified as providing critical habitats for biodiversity and form an important part of the ecosystem in urban areas (Gaston et al., 2005; Barbosa et al., 2007). Trees and green spaces provide shade and cooling (CABE Space, 2005b; Davies et al., 2006) which, in light of growing concerns about environmental change, explains why urban green space is highlighted as an important asset for climate change mitigation and adaptation. There is consensus that natural environments can contribute to aspects such as good air and water quality which bring environmental, social and economic benefits (ODPM, 2004). Empirical research findings by Irvine et al. (2009) on soundscapes in green spaces suggest that opportunities to access quiet, natural places in urban areas (highlighted above to be a benefit for mental health) can be enhanced by improving the ecological quality of urban green spaces. In this way, it is argued that ecological environments in a range of settings – urban, peri-urban, suburban and rural – must be provided, protected and maintained (Haughton and Hunter, 1994). However, conflicting demands on these settings – including pressure to create more housing and commercial development and with it the encroaching urban infrastructure – can endanger the existence and quality of such environments and have detrimental effects on biodiversity and habitats (Barber, 2005).

An obvious question emerges from the discussion above: if the importance of open and green space for urban social life is clearly shown in a growing body of evidence, why are some places left to deteriorate through lack of maintenance and investment in place-keeping? There is a disproportionately large body of urban design and planning guidance which focuses on the importance of place-making. Such guidance encourages well-designed, safe and inclusive places which are well-connected, environmentally sensitive and built to last (McIndoe et al., 2005; Burton and Mitchell, 2006; DCLG, 2006b). Such 'assets' should be managed 'effectively and appropriately' but guidance is often lacking in providing evidence of how this can be achieved in practice beyond having 'the right skills and resources in place to manage. . .for the foreseeable future' (Homes and Communities Agency, 2007, p. 180). This is due to a paucity of empirical research testing the effectiveness of place-keeping approaches. It can be argued that this prescriptive design guidance tends to do two things when considering place-keeping. Firstly, place-keeping is often discussed as a postscript of place-making, which is underpinned by, secondly, an unsubstantiated assumption that effective place-keeping will simply happen which in practice is not always feasible or realistic, particularly when funding is limited. This reflects the prevailing view that the creation of places in the place-making stage of the design and planning process is, while perhaps not simply considered to be *more important* than long-term management, place-keeping as part of this process is certainly *less well understood*.

Examples of this lack of understanding and clarity are often found in practice relating to funding: the costs of maintenance of new or refurbished public spaces become apparent to local authorities only once a scheme had been implemented (Carmona et al., 2004b), a phenomenon encountered around Europe (Gallacher, 2005). There is also a disparity in practice, but invariably not highlighted in the literature, between the need to spend monies allocated for place-making (and any associated place-keeping) within a limited time-period, which hinders a long-term approach to place-keeping. In practice, this is manifested as an over-emphasis on the capital funds that often accompany place-making which, for accounting reasons, cannot be allocated against long-term care and maintenance. There are exceptions: for example, in Wellington, New Zealand, ongoing maintenance budgets are separated from