Review

Restoring the Balance between People, Places, and Profits: A Psychosocial Analysis of Uneven Community Development and the Case for Placemaking Processes

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Abstract: Recent years have seen a paradigm shift from individualistic, market-based models of community development to more sustainable and human-centered approaches that emphasize inclusion and participation. Yet processes of privatization in the era of neoliberalism threaten these efforts by concentrating profits for elites while impoverishing everyday people and the environments they inhabit, resulting in profoundly uneven access to resources, inclusion, and participation. This analysis examines the psychosocial processes that produce and are produced by these unequal and segregated settings, as well as the causes and correlates of this imbalance in the context of the United States. Then, empirical literature is reviewed exploring the harmful consequences that inequality entails for individual and societal wellbeing, arguing that inequality (a) undermines opportunity by limiting access to resources and constraining upward mobility, (b) undermines community by dissolving trust and cohesion, (c) undermines ecosystems health by accelerating environmental degradation, and (d) undermines democracy by reducing the political power of the non-wealthy relative to the wealthy. Finally, four placemaking principles are proposed as a way to promote more sustainable, equitable, and inclusive community development.

Keywords: placemaking; privatization; economic inequality; community development; social inclusion; sustainability

Citation: Toolis, E.E. Restoring the Balance between People, Places, and Profits: A Psychosocial Analysis of Uneven Community Development and the Case for Placemaking Processes. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 7256. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13137256>

Academic Editor: Fernando Brandão Alves

Received: 1 April 2021
Accepted: 20 June 2021
Published: 29 June 2021

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Processes of privatization in the era of neoliberalism have contributed to growing inequality by prioritizing economic growth over social and environmental wellbeing. This imbalance is driven by top-down, exclusionary models of community development that result in concentrated wealth for elites and impoverishment for everyday people and the places they inhabit. Research is needed to understand the processes and settings that function to resist widening these gaps and instead promote healthier and more equitable, democratic communities for all.

The current paper examines the sources and consequences of exclusion and inequality in community development processes, and advances placemaking as a way to promote equitable and sustainable development. The analysis begins by examining dominant social constructions of the public and the ways in which these constructs have historically limited participation for the majority of community members, especially members of low-status social groups, with a focus on the United States. Next, empirical literature is reviewed that illuminates the harmful consequences of inequality on individual and societal wellbeing, explicating how these divides undermine sustainable development by threatening economic mobility, community, ecosystems health, and democracy. Finally, placemaking processes are proposed as a pathway to sustainable community development by promoting place attachment, community cohesion, and civic participation. The analysis concludes by presenting four principles for equitable placemaking, supported by illustrative exemplars, that reduce barriers to access and participation for historically underrepresented community members.

Psychology has an important role to play in informing community development by illuminating the processes through which individuals and environments mutually

shape one another [1]. As such, this analysis is grounded in the intellectual traditions of environmental psychology [2–4], cultural psychology [5–7], and community and liberation psychology [8–10], emphasizing a critical, social constructionist, agentic, and transactional approach to understanding the self in society.

1. Socially Constructing the Public: Implications for Participation and Equity

Participation in the public realm, and in the places and institutions that make it up, has historically been dominated by elites and limited for the majority of the public. These limits are rooted in a dominant social construction of the public that emphasizes a collection of isolated, passive spectators, characterized as fundamentally irrational, ignorant, and self-interested [11]. The distinction between elites and the “masses” is not a neutral reflection of reality, but rather a reflection of dominant ideology that serves the interests of those in positions of power—historically occupied disproportionately by white, wealthy men [11].

The social construction of historically disenfranchised groups as inferior is rooted in negative beliefs (stereotypes), attitudes (prejudice), and behaviors (discrimination) [12]. Psychological research shows that low-income groups and people of color are consistently perceived as more animal-like [13,14], stereotyped as low in competence, warmth, and morality, and more likely to be treated with disgust and contempt [15]. The construal of individuals who belong to low-status social groups as essentially distinct from elites affects access to resources in the educational realm, where low-income students are often perceived as less capable [16,17], on the job market, where employers have been found to exclude applicants of color and those with less elite backgrounds from interviews and jobs [18,19], and in the housing market, where discrimination against Section-8 voucher holders [20] and people of color is a common occurrence [21].

Social and economic inequality is also reproduced through policies governing land use and development. For example, the US Federal Housing Administration allowed banks to refuse loans and mortgages in Black neighborhoods from 1934 to 1968 in a practice called redlining, denying African Americans the ability to build equity [22]. Zoning laws have prevented the construction of affordable, multi-family rentals in well-resourced areas and more often locate subsidized housing in primarily low-income neighborhoods [23]. Anti-homeless ordinances, which are prevalent in cities across the US and prohibit sleeping, sitting, standing, congregating, and panhandling in certain public places, are yet another way in which exclusion is institutionalized [24].

Scholars across disciplines have raised critiques of top-down, exclusionary community development practices [25,26]. Making decisions and designing interventions to address community problems are often made by formal experts and officials without adequate representation or input from impacted stakeholders. As an example, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), proposed by the United Nations in 2000, outlined an ambitious global vision to address humanity’s most pressing problems yet were formulated by a select group of experts (largely from the global north) without consultation from groups most directly affected by poverty, hunger, disease, resource depletion, and pollution. Outcomes were defined largely in economic terms, with less attention given to social and environmental considerations, and were prescribed to “developing” countries with aid from “developed” countries. This approach neglected to acknowledge a history of practices and policies enacted by affluent individuals and nations to commodify the land and labor of a marginalized majority for their private enrichment, resulting in unsustainable and vastly divergent outcomes [27].

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), implemented in 2016 to succeed the MDGs, attempted to address these critiques by seeking participation from multiple working groups and large-scale surveys on policy preferences administered to the public [28]. Unlike their predecessors, these goals went beyond a narrow focus on per capita GDP [28]. The updated goals articulated the centrality of sustainability and the critical role of reducing social and economic inequality, although how effectively this vision will be put into practice remains to be seen [29].

In sum, the exclusion of impacted stakeholders, and especially those from marginalized groups, from participating in decisions about how community spaces are designed and used has profound implications for the distribution of power and wealth. Inequitable policies and practices by institutions of power, including international bodies, government agencies, financial institutions, schools, and housing authorities, contribute to a two-tiered society that undermines equitable development.

2. Privatization and the Eclipse of the Public Realm: Implications for Settings and Selves

Although elite private interests have overshadowed the common good since the founding of the US, the transfer of resources from the public to the private sector, or privatization, has become even more acute in recent decades [30,31]. Processes of privatization accelerated with the rise of neoliberal political economic ideas and practices in the 1970s, which touted free market competition and deregulation as the key to progress [32,33]. The prioritization of economic growth above all else, including the common good, has contributed to the disintegration of the public realm [34,35], or what historian Tony Judt has called “collective impoverishment” [34], and has greatly reduced the quantity and quality of services and institutions dedicated to social and environmental concerns. Tax cuts and subsidies for wealthy individuals and corporations coupled with disinvestment in public infrastructure and the dismantling of social welfare reflected and maintained the dominant belief that redistribution interfered with the free market and was antithetical to growth. The rolling back of public programs continued with cuts to the Environmental Protection Agency, food assistance, income assistance, housing assistance, college assistance, social security disability insurance and supplemental security income, and Medicaid, in addition to work requirements, and “public charge” regulations (which prevent undocumented immigrants from accessing public assistance) issued by the Trump administration [36–38]. These cuts raised barriers to meeting basic needs and exacerbated social and economic divides.

What kind of settings are produced by processes of privatization? Research shows that disinvestment in public infrastructure disproportionately affects neighborhoods where people of color and low-income people live, paving the way for profitable re-investment and, subsequently, gentrification, displacing marginalized residents and creating more segregated, homogenous settings [30,39,40]. Other scholars have connected privatization to the construction of “defensible” architecture and “filtered” spaces, which may employ gates, security guards, surveillance cameras, or spikes to limit access for members of the public who are deemed unwanted or unsafe [40–43]. As one example, some U.S. cities have installed “mosquito boxes,” which emit a high-pitched sound intended to cause headaches, under bridges to deter unhoused individuals from lingering [44]. In addition, the decrease in government support for public spaces necessitates a greater reliance on private funds, producing settings that are more consumer-oriented, catering to wealthier patrons and prioritizing profitability over civic participation [45]. Overall, these findings illustrate how neoliberal ideology produces and is a product of segregated, market-centered settings.

What does this mean for the selves who occupy these increasingly private settings? As captured by the concept of mutual constitution in cultural psychology [7] and transactionalism in ecological psychology [46], culture, settings, and selves are understood to make each other up. Individuals are not isolated minds, but embodied actors embedded within a cultural and ecological system [47,48]. Engagement in neoliberal settings tends to construct the self as an isolated individual, competitor, and passive consumer. These selves are driven by self-promotion and enhancement. The origins of Western values of individualism and autonomy can be traced to a separation from context that accompanies wealth accumulation, extracted from a disenfranchised majority [5,49,50]. In this view, freedom is defined as independence from material and social constraints—an escape from the bonds to place and relationship to fellow humans [51]. Achieving this freedom is only possible for a few at the expense of the rest, requiring the production of an alienated, docile majority to exploit, as well as settings that will promote individualism and passivity to make this possible.

Research suggests that selves in highly individualistic societies experience increasing levels of loneliness and social alienation [52], believed to pose a greater threat to public health than obesity and tobacco [53,54]. Market-oriented settings construct selves whose participation is limited to passive consumption [55], and isolation has been found to inhibit collective action and participatory governance [56]. Taken together, research from across the social sciences suggests that privatized settings, and the neoliberal cultural values they inscribe, co-constitute isolated and passive selves, leading to the erosion of power for everyday people.

3. Consequences of Privatization: Inequality, Fragmentation, and Disengagement

3.1. *A Society Divided*

The decades following the introduction of neoliberal economic political practices have witnessed a rapid growth in economic inequality [57]. Wealth and income are distributed highly unevenly across the U.S. population, with the wealthiest 10% earning half of the nation's income, owning 78% of its wealth, and controlling 84–94% of business equity, stocks, mutual funds, and trusts [58–60]. The top 1% alone earned 24% of the nation's total income and owned 40% of its wealth [60]. Meanwhile, the wealth owned by the bottom 20% has a negative net worth, with their debt outweighing their combined assets [59]. With the concentration of wealth at its highest point in decades, the US ranks as one of the most unequal countries amongst industrialized nations [59,61].

The gap between the rich and poor—having reached record levels—is growing wider [62]. In the past three decades, the economy has grown, but only the wealthiest have seen their incomes increase while growth for middle and low-income families has stagnated [60,63]. The ratio of wealth for the 90th percentile to that of the 50th percentile tripled between 1962 to 2013 [59]. During the same period, the ratio of wealth for the 50th percentile to that of the 25th percentile grew tenfold due to the drop in the bottom quartile's net worth [59]. The racial wealth gap also tripled in the last three decades [64]. African Americans own less than eight cents and Latinos own less than ten cents for every dollar owned by whites [64]. This research demonstrates the divergence in wealth and income between the affluent (and especially affluent whites) and the rest in recent decades.

Wealth concentration in the U.S. is more severe than what most members of the population estimate it to be or believe is ideal. In a survey conducted with a large, nationally representative sample of Americans, participants were asked to estimate the distribution of wealth owned by each of the five quintiles and to construct their preferred distribution of wealth [65]. Across all demographic groups, the vast majority significantly underestimated the level of inequality in the U.S. [65]. These findings reflect very low levels of equality and upward mobility for a country that claims to hold these values in high regard [66].

3.2. *Harms of Inequality for Individual and Societal Wellbeing*

Research demonstrates that inequality undermines sustainable development in four key ways: (a) inequality erodes opportunity by limiting access to resources and constraining upward mobility, (b) inequality undermines community by dissolving trust and cohesion, (c) inequality undermines ecosystems health by driving consumption and waste production, and (d) inequality undermines democracy by reducing the political power of the non-wealthy relative to the wealthy.

3.2.1. Inequality as a Threat to Economic Mobility

High levels of inequality, coupled with economic and racial segregation, reduce low-income individuals' control over and access to enriching resources and environments that support opportunities to be healthy, happy, and able to achieve one's definition of prosperity and success. First, income inequality is a proven cause of health problems [67]. It is well-documented that low-income individuals suffer disproportionately from poor health, have diminished access to quality healthcare, and live shorter lives on average than the rich [68]. Research analyzing tax records and mortality data collected from Social

Security Administration death records discovered that the top 1% of income earners live longer by 15 years for men and 10 years for women on average than the bottom 1% [68]. Moreover, this life expectancy gap is rising. In just a little over a decade, between 2001 and 2014, the wealthiest 5% of the population gained an extra three years in life expectancy, while the bottom 5% gained none [68].

An abundance of research also highlights the negative impact that inequality has for psychological wellbeing [69]. Research shows that low-income individuals report higher levels of stress, pain, worry, sadness, anger, and chronic suffering than wealthy individuals [70]. In addition to these findings, an analysis of responses from the General Social Survey between 1974 and 2012 revealed a “gross happiness gap,” showing that middle and low-income individuals reported lower levels of happiness in 2015 than in the 1970s whereas the happiness levels of affluent and upper-middle-income individuals have stayed constant [71]. Although perceptions of happiness are subjective and dependent on various cultural and psychological factors, these studies suggest that income is increasingly linked to wellbeing.

The widening of economic and racial divides also undermines academic achievement for low-income youth and youth of color [72]. Research suggests that educational outcomes are increasingly tied to a family’s access to private wealth [72]. Whereas middle and low-income families more often must rely on increasingly defunded public resources for their educational enrichment, high-income families can use private resources to access educational products and services such as computers, books, summer camps, private schools, lessons, and travel. In fact, in the midst of cuts to public spending, the gap between what high and low-income families paid for educational goods and services tripled between the mid-1970s and mid-2000s, such that in the mid-2000s, bottom quintile families spent \$1315 per child on educational enrichment expenditures on average over the course of a year, compared to almost \$9000 per child spent by top quintile families [73,74]. As education is thought to be the great equalizer and path to upward mobility, these gaps warrant attention.

Although marginalized populations are harmed most by inequality, it is important to note that these disparities also result in broader social ills. In a powerful study conducted by Wilkinson and Pickett [69], internationally comparable data were collected from dozens of rich countries to create an index of health and social problems, finding that across the population, high rates of inequality are strongly correlated with infant mortality, obesity, teen births, mental illness, drug and alcohol abuse, life expectancy, children’s educational performance, imprisonment rates, and social mobility. As inequality reinforces the spatial divides that separate people of different races and incomes, everyone pays the price. Taken together, these findings demonstrate the detrimental effects that racial and economic exclusion have for life chances, as well as psychological and physical health.

3.2.2. Inequality as a Threat to Community

Neoliberal approaches to development have been critiqued as sacrificing social capital in the narrow pursuit of economic capital, often narrowly defined in terms of gross domestic product (GDP). Increases in economic and spatial divides limit social interaction between diverse groups, undermining community by eroding social trust and cohesion [69]. Thus, not only does inequality detract from physical and mental health, it also increases alienation and hostility between groups.

Robert Putnam’s seminal work on social capital, defined as the formal and informal social networks, norms, and relationships that link people together and facilitate cooperation, reciprocity, and trust within and between groups, suggests a decline in social interaction and overall community participation [75]. Moreover, Americans are less trusting of their neighbors than in the past. According to analyses of data from a large nationally representative U.S. sample collected from the General Social Survey, the share of respondents who reported that most people can be trusted dropped from almost half (46%) in 1972 to just a third (33%) in 2012 [76]. Higher rates of inequality are also known to be associated with

an increase in violence and homicides [69]. These rates are particularly high in the U.S. compared to other industrialized democratic nations, though it is important to note that differences in gun control laws and social welfare also likely play a role. Such a decline in social cohesion has a corrosive effect on community and is associated with higher levels of intergroup conflict and poorer economic, health, and wellbeing outcomes for all [77,78].

American society has also lost common ground in the realm of political ideology. A national telephone survey of over 10,000 adults conducted by the Pew Research Center [79] found that political and ideological polarization and partisan antipathy are higher now than at any point in the last two decades. The vast majority of both Democrats and Republicans hold unfavorable views of the opposing party (79% and 82%, respectively), with many even holding deeply unfavorable views (38% and 43%, respectively), percentages that have risen in recent decades [79]. Almost a third of adults (36% of Republicans and 27% of Democrats) view the other party as a threat to the nation's wellbeing [79]. Research shows that members of the public are more likely to isolate themselves in ideological "echo chambers" where they avoid interaction with people who do not share their views [77,79].

Research also points to a waning in trust in the U.S. government. According to a report by the Pew Research Center, very few members of the public feel that they could trust the federal government always or most of the time (19%) in 2021, compared to about three-quarters (77%) in 1964 [80]. Another report found that less than half of respondents reported trusting Congress (13%), the Supreme Court (40%), or the Presidency (39%) a great deal or quite a lot [81]. Research also shows that a large majority of adults believe that most elected officials are dishonest (71%) and put their own interests ahead of the country's (72%) [66]. Confidence in other central U.S. institutions is also quite low, with less than half of respondents reporting a great deal or quite a lot of trust in newspapers (24%), television news (18%), banks (38%), the police (48%), and the criminal justice system (24%) [81].

A strong civic fabric is grounded in a sense of shared values and shared fate. Yet evidence suggests that neoliberal values of individualism and competition can detract from community and collective civic principles [82]. Unrestrained self-interest on the part of a wealthy few can have an adverse effect on the good of the many. Tax avoidance, for example, practiced by wealthy individuals increases the tax burden on the rest by an estimated 8% [83]. Numerous studies find that higher income individuals display lower recognition of suffering and feelings of empathy for others [84,85], and are less likely to engage in prosocial or charitable behavior toward others than their lower-income peers [86]. As the wealthy self-segregate, they become detached from the problems of the rest of society (that their practices largely helped to create) and the existence of inequality itself become less visible.

For the non-wealthy, a growing sense of scarcity and malaise diminishes motivation to participate in a society that has largely exploited and abandoned them [58,87]. Highlighting this point, belief in the American Dream is at 64%: its lowest point in two decades [88]. In addition, inequality stokes intergroup conflict along class lines. According to a Pew Research Center survey of American adults, a full two-thirds of the public believe there are "very strong" or "strong" conflicts between the rich and poor [89].

Trust is necessary for shared social, civic, and economic flourishing. Trust is correlated with decreased crime, increased civic participation, work productivity, and increased health and happiness [58,90]. Yet rising inequality has considerably weakened the ties that bind Americans together [58].

3.2.3. Inequality as a Threat to Ecosystems Health

Research suggests that equality is a precondition for sustainability, providing a sense of shared responsibility and collective action necessary for maintaining environments that support the health and wellbeing of all [78]. Higher levels of income inequality, on the other hand, are associated with increased levels of resource consumption (such as water, meat, and gasoline) [91], waste generation, greenhouse gas emissions [91,92], and decreased environmental quality, including biodiversity loss [93]. Residents of unequal

societies practice lower rates of pro-environmental behaviors such as recycling, while business leaders in these contexts are less likely to comply with international environmental agreements and tend to promote policies that maximize consumer and producer surplus, leading to more waste [78,92]. A report on wealthy nations' progress in meeting the 17 Sustainable Development Goals found that of all the wealthy nations, the US had one of the highest rates of poverty and inequality between the rich and poor, as well as one of the highest rates of municipal waste generated and production-based greenhouse gas emissions per capita [28].

Wealthy individuals are responsible for a significantly higher share of environmental degradation than low-income individuals. On a global level, the wealthiest 10% of the population generate over half of carbon emissions and have a carbon footprint that is, on average, 30 times higher than individuals in the poorest 50% [94]. Meanwhile, the carbon footprint of an individual in the wealthiest 1% of the global population is over 100 times higher than an individual in the poorest 50% [94]. Wealthy businesses also play a key role: over half of global greenhouse gas emissions can be traced to just 25 corporations [95].

These broad patterns remain consistent within the US, where individuals living in high income neighborhoods are found to generate 25% more greenhouse gases than low-income households [96]. Wealthy individuals are more likely to own larger homes, consume more, and dispose of more waste [92]. In fact, income level is a larger predictor of an individual's environmental impact than pro-environment intentions or identity [97].

While elites disproportionately contribute to pollution and climate change, the negative consequences disproportionately affect marginalized communities within and across nations. On a global level, research demonstrates that low-income countries bear the brunt of the harmful effects of climate change, including increased exposure to flooding and erosion driven by sea level rise, salinity intrusion, mudslides, drought, heatwaves, and water scarcity [98,99]. Research in the US illustrates that communities of color and low-income communities are exposed to higher levels of air, water, and soil pollution and closer proximity to treatment, storage, and disposal facilities [100,101]. Differential exposure to environmental hazards plays a key role in driving race and class-based health disparities, including increased rates of cancer, asthma, infant mortality, and premature death [100].

In rolling back environmental regulations and widening the gap between the rich and poor, neoliberal policies have allowed privileged groups to distance themselves from the settings that they pollute and retreat to clean, resource-rich environments for their private use [102,103]. These segregated, affluent settings in turn shape the inhabitants' psyches, promoting independence through "freedom from constraint and abstraction from context" ([104]; p. 198). Research demonstrates that this worldview privileges and is privileged by individuals from higher socioeconomic backgrounds [105,106]. Those in power often view competition and individual achievement as key to community development. However, this ethos neglects the role that labor and resources from marginalized communities have played in the wealthy's ability to accumulate capital, and may undermine interdependence and cohesion, further harming marginalized communities and worsening inequality [104].

3.2.4. Inequality as a Threat to Democracy

Not only does inequality undermine opportunity, fracture community, and degrade ecosystems health, it widens the gap between everyday people and the political systems and policies that shape their lives. Wealth and political power are tightly interlinked: wealth can be used to wield power in politics through lobbying and campaign financing, and power can be used to concentrate wealth [107]. As wealth becomes more concentrated, so does power.

The erosion of faith in government and political systems contributes to political disengagement by everyday members of society. An analysis of cross-national surveys conducted across wealthy, industrialized, democratic nations found that greater economic inequality is associated with lower interest in the issues being discussed by politicians, lower frequency of political discussion, and decreased voting by the non-wealthy [108]. Voter turnout in

the US lags behind most other OECD nations [109,110] and participation in elections is strongly related to income and education level [111,112]. Low-income constituents are also less likely than high-income constituents to donate to political campaigns, volunteer for campaigns, or send letters or emails to elected officials [113]. Research finds that organized interest groups and lobbyists are less likely to mobilize on the behalf of low-income voters' interests [113]. Consequently, the wealthy exert a disproportionate influence on politics, who use that influence to oppose redistribution and further concentrate wealth [109,114].

A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center [115] found that 40% of respondents believed that democracy is not working too well or not at all well. Over three-quarters (76%) believed that the government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves and only 21% believe it is run for the "benefit of all the people" [115]. Less-educated respondents are less likely to believe that voting is a way to have a say in governmental decisions [115]. A majority (61%) feel that significant changes are needed in the fundamental design and structure of the government. This percentage is highest amongst respondents who identify as Black (70%) and Hispanic (76%) [115]. The government has also received low ratings for helping people get out of poverty, ensuring access to healthcare, and ensuring access to a quality education [116].

How accurate is the belief that democracy in the U.S. is not working well? An analysis by Gilens [114] shows that when low and middle-income groups' preferences diverge from high-income groups, policy only responds to the preferences of the high-income group—yet another trend that has amplified in recent decades. These findings add to a growing body of literature showing that U.S. federal policies tend to mirror the interests of the top quintile of Americans more closely than low and middle-income citizens [117,118]. It is important to note that almost half (44%) of Congress is composed of millionaires [114].

This bias toward the interests of the top poses a problem for representational equality and results in anti-redistributive policies. Although the extremely wealthy are shown to be more liberal than low and middle-income constituents on social issues such as abortion and gay marriage, they are far more conservative on economic policies and issues of social welfare [114,117]. For the most part, everyday Americans favor a stronger public sphere in which the government plays a role in ensuring access to a living wage, quality education, health care, social security, and public infrastructure (e.g., roads) for everyone. Elites, on the other hand, advocate for a stronger private sphere with a deregulated market, lower corporate taxes, privately run health care and social security, and school vouchers [114]. Because the voices of elite individuals and corporations, aided by large donations and policies like Citizens United, speak the loudest and have the least need for shared resources, the public realm is steadily declining [119].

Recent literature suggests that democracy in the United States and European nations is in trouble. Foa and Mounk [120] theorize about the "signs of deconsolidation," warning that democracy can unravel without sufficient support. According to their analysis of data from the World Values Survey between 1995 and 2014, there has been an increase in the proportion of the American public (along with residents of other longstanding democratic nations) who feel that the democratic political system is a bad or very bad way to run the country. Between 1995 to 2011, the percentage of those who believe it is better to have a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections rose from 24% to 32%, and the fraction of those who believe it would be a good or very good idea to have military rule rose from 6% to 17% [121]. This rise in antidemocratic viewpoints has been most marked amongst the wealthy [121]. Although some scholars in political science and economics note that longstanding democracies tend to be fairly stable and that high inequality does not necessarily predict the complete collapse of a democracy, inequality is widely agreed to be profoundly detrimental to democracy and the fulfillment of civil rights, and worthy of greater attention [122,123].

4. Placemaking as a Tool to Promote Public Participation and Inclusion

In an era of private affluence and public impoverishment [34] with escalating levels of economic inequality [59], economic segregation [124], loneliness [52], environmental degradation [103], and antidemocratic attitudes [120], attention to bottom-up community spaces is needed. Settings that facilitate community and participation are central to human development and wellbeing [125,126].

Placemaking holds potential for fostering resistance to neoliberal processes of privatization by facilitating place attachment, sense of community, civic responsibility, and civic engagement [127]. I now turn to examine how participation in public spaces and institutions that have historically been created by and for elites can be accessed and transformed by the broader public so as to better promote equity and democratic engagement.

First, in facilitating place attachment, contributing to a sense of embeddedness and bondedness to place, placemaking runs counter to processes of privatization characterized by the commodification of place. Commodification occurs when a good is constructed as an object to be sold or traded [128]. While public interests conceptualize place and its associated resources by their *use value*, or ability to meet material needs and support community values and activities, private interests conceptualize place in terms of *exchange value*, or ability to generate profit [129]. An attachment to place asserts use value over exchange value, resisting the neoliberal market logic that incentivizes environmental degradation and disinvestment in public places and programs [130].

Second, in facilitating a sense of community and civic responsibility, placemaking resists the alienation that stems from dominant neoliberal values of hyper-individualism and self-reliance. Cultivating a sense of connectedness and belonging to other individuals in a shared place and a developing a commitment to collective welfare is critical for solidarity and cooperation [131,132]. Research also suggests that social capital contributes to higher quality intergroup contact conditions and leads to more positive attitudes towards out-groups [133], paving the way for more inclusionary social structures and policies. Whereas fragmentation and segregation degrade opportunities for collective knowledge and restrict access to resources and social life for marginalized communities, sense of community and civic responsibility provide an important pathway to collective mobilization [134].

Finally, in facilitating intentions for civic engagement, placemaking processes resist the passivity and depoliticization associated with privatized settings. Scholars suggest that everyday environments are rarely designed to be responsive to the needs and interests of everyday people [41,45,135]. Instead, they are frequently designed to avoid uncertainty and minimize the possibility of encountering difference [4,43]. Public participation is reduced to passive observation and consumption, while active decision-making is left to policymakers, planners, and investors. Environmental psychologist Reed [4] argued that our environments are becoming increasingly automatic, prescribed, and pre-packaged in order to “fit people into place” for the sake of productivity and control, rather than respond to the needs and assets of their inhabitants. He writes, “In urban, rural, and suburban American, we are decreasingly capable of organizing environments that afford either a supportive surrounding for our work or a convivial surrounding for other forms of human interaction. Worse, few of us have had the experience of trying to make and shape such places; therefore, fewer and fewer of us cherish the hope that we might work toward the goal of making better places” [4] (pp. 66–67).

5. Effective Placemaking in Practice: Principles and Exemplars

While the concept of placemaking has been around since the 1970s, calls have increased in recent decades to shift from expert-led spatial design and planning to more collaborative, bottom-up placemaking processes centering local stakeholders [136]. A growing body of academic literature from diverse disciplines, spanning architectural studies, spatial planning and design disciplines, social sciences, and the arts, has begun to shed light on the mechanisms that citizens use to access and transform the places where they live and work. This empirical and theoretical research has advanced our understanding of these activities

by explicating the forces that spur placemaking (e.g., needs-based, opportunities-based, and assets-based) [137], theorizing the psychosocial processes by which placemaking can facilitate critical consciousness and empowerment [127], and detailing case studies illuminating how design professionals can work collaboratively with residents [138].

Despite the inclusive potential of placemaking, it is important to point out that these processes are often highly contested. Critical scholars have noted the language of placemaking is easily co-opted by private interests, masking an agenda of gentrification by functioning to increase value through the attraction of wealthy consumers and residents [139]. In emphasizing a generic concept of “community,” placemaking initiatives can gloss over power imbalances and considerations of who is included and excluded from participation. This analysis advances four key principles to promote participation and inclusion in placemaking practices: (a) the need for representation and participation from local communities in planning and implementation, (b) a commitment to increase access to resources for marginalized communities, (c) advocacy for redistributive public policies, and (d) attention to environmental sustainability. Each principle is explored below, accompanied by illustrative examples.

5.1. Representation and Participation from Local Communities in Placemaking Planning and Implementation

Equitable placemaking initiatives promote representation and participation from local communities, with an emphasis on amplifying the voices of marginalized residents. Decisions are often made by experts (city officials, planners, architects, etc.) with little to no consultation from impacted stakeholders. The planning and implementation of placemaking initiatives must include a consideration of impacted stakeholders’ knowledge, needs, and assets.

One result of the exclusion of local stakeholders from shaping the places where they live and work is the erasure of the histories of marginalized communities from the public landscape. Recent years have drawn increased attention to legacies of racism in American public art, statues, and monuments [140]. Effective placemaking initiatives can draw attention to neglected figures and stories. One example is provided by Paper Monuments, a participatory New Orleans-based public art and history project with the mission of imagining new monuments for the city that highlight marginalized narratives. The team holds pop-up events and commissions and displays posters around the city to celebrate the untold stories of local activists, historians, and residents [141].

Inclusive placemaking initiatives also consider questions of property ownership and governance. While private investments can provide much needed resources for development, these efforts are subject to market fluctuations and are not necessarily accountable to the needs and wants of a community. Co-operative placemaking initiatives that provide pathways to public control of community spaces provide critical protection against co-optation by private interests [142]. Community land trusts, in which land is owned by a nonprofit organization on behalf of a community, offer one model for providing secure, affordable, collective property ownership that involves democratic, broad-based participation from local stakeholders [143]. The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, created in 1984 by residents of the Greater Boston area [144], provides an illustrative example of a placemaking initiative that has successfully utilized a community land trust to enable local communities to revitalize their neighborhood while resisting processes of gentrification. The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative has transformed abandoned spaces into parks, playgrounds, gardens, and affordable housing, while maintaining the residents’ ability to inform and control those development processes and ensuring that any capital generated benefits the community. In these ways, placemaking can play a role in strengthening the rights and voices of local communities.

5.2. Commitment to Increase Access to Resources for Marginalized Communities

Equitable placemaking initiatives should serve to increase access to resources for marginalized communities. While economic and racial segregation exclude low-income

communities and communities of color from nutritious food, clean air and water, transportation, green spaces for play and exercise, and educational resources, activities that facilitate access to and control over these resources can play a valuable role in combatting inequality. An example of a placemaking initiative seeking to increase access to green space is provided by PARK(ing) Day, which originated in San Francisco and now takes place in cities across the globe [145]. PARK(ing) Day is an annual grassroots event in which artists and activists convert metered parking spaces into temporary public parks to demonstrate the need for more public places and serve the needs of the given community, whether by offering seating, political seminars, or bike repair workshops [145].

Placemaking initiatives can also promote food justice. Community garden projects, such as Green Guerillas in New York City [146] and the Ron Finley Project in South Central Los Angeles [147], work to transform underutilized spaces in neighborhoods classified as food deserts to grow fresh, affordable produce. These community-driven, place-based transformations work to rejuvenate communities by combatting disinvestment and strengthening the health, wellbeing, and sovereignty of local residents.

Finally, placemaking initiatives can promote access to educational enrichment. Public institutions such as museums and libraries can serve as valuable platforms for these kinds of initiatives. For instance, the Uni Project works to transform streets and playgrounds in under resourced areas into pop-up reading rooms and art spaces in order to address achievement gaps between children in high- and low-income areas [148]. These examples highlight how placemaking can work to close rather than exacerbate resource disparities.

5.3. Advocacy for Redistributive Public Policies

Equitable placemaking initiatives are most effective in concert with redistributive public policies. Projects with the aim of “renewal,” “regeneration,” or “beautification” hold value in making disinvested or underutilized spaces more vibrant, safe, and livable, but can result in an influx of wealthier residents and consumers, driving up property values and ultimately paving the way for gentrification and inequality [139]. It is vital that placemaking participants advocate for measures such as strong anti-eviction laws, public housing, and rent control to protect and promote the availability of affordable housing for lower income residents and protect against the displacement of existing community members in an area undergoing redevelopment. Placemaking initiatives should also consider the law enforcement and surveillance policies that will govern the space, taking care to avoid “broken windows” policing tactics that target “quality of life” or “nuisance” crimes, which often work to filter lower income community members and people of color out of resource-rich spaces [41,42].

There are several ways that communities can pursue opportunities to protect vulnerable populations and places. One strategy is to advocate for planning authorities to adopt measures that recognize and retain important local sites. For example, in recognition that LGBTQI+ venues were central to the fabric of the city and under threat of decline due to redevelopment, the city of Westminster in the U.K. formulated the “Soho Special Policy Area” in their 2019–2040 city plan to preserve the character and history of LGBTQI+ sites [149].

Community murals represent another place-based mechanism for drawing attention to local concerns and advocating for social change. For instance, in 2016 the New York City Housing Authority partnered with Groundswell, a community arts organization in Brooklyn, to work with residential youth to create murals at five housing projects, focusing on social issues such as over-policing in communities of color [150]. This initiative provided jobs to local youth, improved the quality of the physical environment, and drew public attention to policy issues that need to be addressed in the community.

5.4. Attention to Environmental Sustainability

Equitable placemaking initiatives must center considerations of environmental sustainability. Placemaking processes facilitate bonds between people and their environments, cultivating a sense of pride and investment in local places as well as a deepened awareness

of the interdependence between communities and their ecological context. Placemaking initiatives can help to build more environmentally sustainable communities by improving public transportation as well as greenways for pedestrians and cyclists, protecting green spaces, creating parks, and incorporating environmentally friendly materials and renewable energy sources into spatial design. For example, the City Repair Project, based in Portland, Oregon, brings together community members to promote sustainability through installing permaculture-based ecological landscaping elements throughout the city, such as pollinator habitats and community gardens, as well as building benches and other structures from natural, renewable materials [151]. Eco-communities, such as Christie Walk, a residential community in Adelaide, Australia, founded in 1999, exemplify a commitment to environmental sustainability in their design, materials, and construction [152]. Christie Walk minimized its ecological footprint through the use of recycled and nontoxic building materials, energy and water efficient appliances, the use of solar power, and the construction of gardens [152].

Taken together, these principles and examples highlight the role that placemaking can play in facilitating participatory, inclusive processes and outcomes that work to reduce inequality and promote social and ecological wellbeing.

6. Placemaking Limits and Challenges

Despite the benefits outlined here, placemaking processes are not without limits and obstacles. Increasing representation and participation from marginalized communities can be challenging when such community members face barriers such as economic precarity, long work hours, and isolation. The erosion of trust between marginalized communities and public institutions and officials, fueled by legacies of state-sanctioned violence, government inaction, and mismanagement of resources, can undermine opportunities for collaborative partnerships [153]. A lack of cohesion, which can result from power inequalities, spatial segregation, and cultural and language divides, can complicate cooperation between stakeholders, who may often hold different and sometimes even opposing interests, needs, and values. It is also the case that conflict can arise within communities, which are themselves never monolithic but heterogeneous.

It is important to note that placemaking efforts are often nested within broader municipal, state, federal, and international contexts in which undemocratic, anti-redistributive policies may be operating, which can suppress or co-opt participatory efforts. In addition, placemaking initiatives must often confront bureaucratic rules and regulations in addition to challenges in accessing funding, especially in the wake of federal, state, and local budget cuts [153]. Finally, tensions can emerge between social, environmental, and economic priorities (e.g., between development and conservation). Confronting these challenges requires a commitment to partnerships, long-term planning, and ongoing communication, reflection, and evaluation [153].

7. Conclusions

The privileging of private elite interests over investment in public places and resources has contributed to increasingly unequal, segregated, consumer-oriented, polluted settings, inhabited by increasingly alienated, passive, and discontented selves. Research is needed to better understand and address the growing divides that erode opportunity, community, ecosystems health, and democratic participation, especially for low-income individuals and people of color who have shouldered a disproportionate share of the burden.

I have argued that the exclusion of the majority of the public from authentic participation has historically been justified by a social construction of the public as untrustworthy and incapable of making informed decisions about their own lives. The hierarchical distinction between the “masses” and “elites” has served to disenfranchise people of color and low-income people to prevent redistribution, so that wealth and decision-making—and, consequently, opportunities for wellbeing—are not shared in common across the population but concentrated in highly uneven ways [69,114].

In contrast, the concept of placemaking conceives of everyday community members as experts with valuable knowledge and lived experience who have a right to access and transform the places they inhabit [153,154]. This conception resists the dominant construction of the public as incapable, ignorant, and in need of control, and enables the possibility for residents to practice active participation. Placemaking can pay the way for resisting privatization, amplifying the input of community members who have been historically underrepresented in decision-making, and considering the value of public institutions and spaces for civic life. To advance equity, effective placemaking must incorporate the expertise and input of local stakeholders, increase access to resources for marginalized communities, advocate for redistributive policies, and center considerations of environmental sustainability. These processes illustrate the potential of local, experiential, bottom-up, community-oriented settings to constitute more rooted, dialogic, socially responsible, active members of the public, who can in turn shape those settings to be more responsive to their needs and interests.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: The author would like to thank Phillip Hammack, Heather Bullock, and Gina Langhout for their feedback on an earlier version of this paper.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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