

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Christie JOHNSON COFFIN, Jenny YOUNG,**  
*Making Places for People:*  
*12 Questions Every Designer Should Ask,*  
Routledge, New York/London 2017, 226 pages

Cities and towns increasingly make use of placemaking to design places where people feel at ease. Just think of neighbourhoods where professionals involve residents to develop ‘tiny forests’ in order to make public space more attractive and climate-proof. Since its emergence in New York in the 1970s, placemaking has become both a philosophy and a method of developing physical environments in co-operation with its main users. Also, in academic circles placemaking has been receiving more and more attention. Classic books like those by Jane Jacobs, Kevin Lynch, and Jan Gehl are reread, while there is a growing interest in environmental behaviour studies by psychologists, planners, and architects.

A few years ago, the geography department in Nijmegen asked me to teach a course on placemaking. I was immediately excited, since from earlier experiences I knew that most students love the topic, not least because of its practical applicability. But how to make the course also academically sound? While looking for appropriate and recent literature, I encountered the book *Making Places for People: 12 Questions Every Designer Should Ask* by Johnson Coffin and Young, two American professors of architecture. The goal of their concise and well-illustrated book is to provide an overview of environmental design and provoke thinking about the relationship between people and places. The term ‘place’ can be nearly anything in the built environment: houses, libraries, streets, neighbourhoods, campuses or even whole cities. In dealing with the topic, the authors present twelve ‘wicked’ questions – questions with no straightforward answers – every designer should ask when developing a place. Each chapter in the book is devoted to one of these questions.

The first four chapters (1–4) deal with some basic features of places. The following questions are addressed: what is the story of a place? whose place is

it? where is it and how big is it? The authors explore those issues by providing theoretical insights, empirical findings and case examples from places across the world, as varied as the Taj Mahal, the housing project Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis, the Chernobyl-area and the design of Italian public squares. Although the chapters deal with only a selection of the available theories and results, they stimulate readers to think, look for additional material and reflect on places in their own contexts. This is fair enough, because placemaking is highly location specific. Thus, the chapters act as a kind of compass for navigating the vast terrain of placemaking.

Chapters 5 until 9 analyse some of the functions and goals of places: their logic, the community-privacy balance, and usefulness, as well as the ways in which places are able to support health and sustainability. Again, the studies and examples come from all parts of the world, varying from architect Peter Zumthor's thermal baths at Vals (Switzerland) to the Hospital Healing Garden in Shenzhen (China). Among those chapters, I particularly liked chapter 6 on the balance between community and privacy. There, the authors expand on the distinction made by Humphry Osmond, a psychiatrist, between 'sociopetal' and 'sociofugal' places, i.e. places that foster or discourage communities. It is a case in point that the book integrates research from a range of disciplines, even psychiatry.

The last three chapters of the book (10–12) deal with some really trick questions that place designers should ask: who likes a place? is there evidence that it works? and, last but not least: does the place foster social equity? Highlighting the importance of personal, social and cultural contexts, Johnson Coffin and Young demonstrate how challenging it is to make places that every person will like in every circumstance. The authors also show how spotty and imperfect design research evidence often is. For example, the popular study by Roger Ulrich on the value of windows overlooking natural landscapes for hospital patients can be criticised on many grounds. There are a lot of pitfalls for researchers, making 'evidence-based design' a challenging task. Finally, the authors discuss the importance of inclusive design, while also recognising that it is hard to achieve in today's complex society.

Over the last two academic years, I have used the book by Johnson Coffin and Young as one of the basic study materials in my course on placemaking. My experiences with the book are quite positive and my impression is that students do agree with that. Thanks to its crystal-clear structure in twelve intriguing questions, the book offers an excellent base for lecturing. During each lecture, I have dealt with one or two chapters in combination with academic papers related to the topic. For example, chapter 7 on the health effects of places was an excellent starting point for discussing recent findings in the geography of health.

In summary, I highly recommend *Making Places for People*, not only to colleagues who teach in the field of placemaking. The book will be valuable and relevant also to researchers and professionals. For the latter, the twelve questions can

even function as a tool for assessing whether a place they work on meets human needs. From my own course, I know that the function of the book as a ‘checklist’ works well: my students have produced useful reports when I asked them to analyse real places from a placemaking perspective. Therefore, I hope that Johnson Coffin and Young’s book will find its way in the professional community as well, thus contributing to making better places for people.

Gert-Jan HOSPERS

*Radboud University & University of Twente (The Netherlands)*