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# Revealing the Community's Interpretation of Place: Integrated Digital Support to Embed Photovoice Into Placemaking Processes

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## Abstract

Rising the quality of life through improving existing living environments remains one of the critical tasks of contemporary urban design. The quality of life is, in part, a subjective matter and shall thus be approached not only through professional measures but must also include participatory inputs. The techniques for including the residents' points of view are various and greatly depend on the broader context of each case. However, using new ICT and other digitally supported tools is an ongoing trend and can be traced in various places and stages of the process. This article addresses the issue of the participatory reading of characteristics in existing living environments as they are assessed through residents' eyes. It reviews and analyses two case studies, a Slovenian and a Spanish one, that used the photovoice approach with photography and related supplementary materials to get to know residents' perceptions towards cultural and natural values that enhance their quality of life. The cases illustrate two different contexts, the urban and the rural one. In both cases, the processes were supported by a digital approach to achieve broader participation in the process, to offer residents an additional channel of expression, to analyse the input data, to disseminate the results, and to encourage a wider community and stakeholder dialogue. The case studies reflect the added value of using digital support in terms of the level of the integration of residents' voices into the placemaking process. It concludes that the photovoice supported by digital tools can importantly enhance community-oriented urban planning processes.

## Keywords

collaborative planning; historic city; interpretation of place; photovoice; placemaking; suburban environments

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Developing Communities' Interpretation of Place

Following Zabielskis' (2008, pp. 288, 289) argument, collaborative planning offers an "inclusive, dialogic approach to shaping social space" while addressing contemporary issues such as "reduced certainties and predictabilities." Moreover, new forms of governance recognise the need for multi-stakeholder involvement and the temporary usage of specific urban settings. Still, it mainly happens in singular and differentiated spaces (as opposed to formal spaces) and is perhaps exacerbated in a context of unclear planning processes that oversee power distribution (García-Esparza & Altaba, 2022).

The complex interaction between locals and administrations and their influence on the design and redesign of spaces is evident in the iterative nature of community planning. The success of temporary uses in reshaping particular areas or neighbourhoods can be an opportunity for transition. However, this arrangement can involve dealing with the legacies of temporary activities, particularly the trendy image of a place, while coping with citizens' consent. Ethically informed processes and tools between stakeholders and their interests may make the process robust (García-Esparza, Altaba, & Huerta, 2023).

Starting with Jacobs' (1961) groundbreaking work, placemaking has evolved into a collaborative approach to urban planning and design, as highlighted by Gehl and Gemzøe (2001). Its goal is to create vibrant, inclusive public spaces that enhance community well-being and foster social interaction. Appleyard's (1981) seminal work *Livable Streets* also emphasised the importance of prioritising pedestrians and cyclists in street and neighbourhood design, showcasing how well-designed streets can improve mobility and cultivate a sense of community and belonging. Over time, the significance of placemaking has grown. De Carlo's (2013) contributions underscored the critical role of involving local communities in decision-making and design processes for their neighbourhoods, reinforcing the understanding that active participation and co-creation result in environments better suited to residents' needs, aspirations, and, thus, their quality of life. This consideration takes on heightened importance within economically marginalised communities, where the level of contentment with the residential milieu directly intertwines with the overall quality of life experienced (Ismail et al., 2015).

Placemaking is a process of ethics. The extent to which communities are subjected to direct or indirect forms of oppressive governance policies, eventually including displacement, may have systematically uprooted and dispersed communities, homes, and places of business, leisure, and worship. This issue is not only about appropriation and integration but also about the ethics of placemaking. An example of this might be the ethical concerns that arise today in the internal movements of citizens in a city for reasons that are not obvious (heritage, climate, etc.; Drake, 2003; Groth & Corijn, 2005). Building temporary strategic alliances can be recognised as a foundational step in shaping contested places, a concept extensively explored by various scholars. These alliances prompt an essential question about how territorial rules and power dynamics contribute to defining what is deemed "appropriately" placed in a given context. Hou and Rios (2003) have emphasised the significance of such alliances in bottom-up redevelopment processes, shedding light on the intricate relationship between placemaking and participation.

At its core, placemaking involves a critical examination of the intricate relationship between power, needs, and place. Fredheim and Khalaf (2016) exploring how grassroots community organisations are reshaping the design and development of public spaces have stressed the importance of understanding the ethical dimensions of placemaking by carefully considering stakeholders' demands and the dynamics of the site. Indeed, placemaking has evolved beyond its traditional focus on purely physical aspects to encompass a holistic approach that considers economic, social, cultural, spatial, and organisational outcomes. This emphasises the need for a community-driven approach that considers social mobilisation and political negotiation as essential components in the creation of public spaces, challenging the limitations of traditional participatory design models that mainly focus on designer–user interactions. Thus, placemaking entails a set of intentional practices that span different disciplines and target different needs. As it is exposed through cases, recognising all interests compels placemakers to build relationships of solidarity and promote justice with those in vulnerable positions within the place.

The concept of placemaking has been gaining traction in Slovenia, particularly in urban areas where there is a growing need for inclusive and collaborative approaches to shaping social space (Svirčić Gotovac et al., 2021). Collaborative planning processes have been seen as a way to address the challenges presented by the reduced certainties and predictabilities of contemporary urban life. In Slovenia, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of multi-stakeholder involvement in the (re)design of urban spaces. This has led to the emergence of experimentation with new forms of governance that prioritise community participation and temporary uses. However, these initiatives have been largely concentrated in singular spaces, and there is still a need for clearer planning processes that oversee power distribution. The Slovenian case presents a case from the suburban environments constructed in the socialist times and nowadays considered an important urbanistic heritage due to its comprehensive layout.

The case highlights the complex interactions between residents and the planning institutions in reshaping a particular neighbourhood with an opportunity for inclusive transition. It shows that inclusive and ethically informed processes and tools between stakeholders and their interests may make the process more robust and inclusive. It shows that placemaking can become an ethical issue, particularly considering the ways in which communities have been made active players and subjected to direct or indirect interpretations of the quality of suburban life. It shows that building temporary strategic alliances may be a fundamental step in shaping the common vision of the contested places to holistic economic, social, cultural, spatial, and organisational outcomes. Placemakers in Slovenia must recognise all interests and build relationships of solidarity to promote justice for those in vulnerable positions within the place.

The case of Spain deepens in the heritage field, where placemaking can be seen more clearly as an action rooted in the politics of space and time. The case documents the hidden expectations of heritage-makers (neighbours) and the overstretching of their capacities in their role. Historical places are actively engaged by people and reshaped by local administration through temporary or permanent material practices. Cultural events and transformations emerge through directed or collaborative ingenious adaptations that inherently rely on the time and politics they live in.

In the historical setting, collective activities can promote social inclusion but simultaneously be used as a form of social control. Yet culture and heritage are often negotiated in a one-sided way concerning the practical dimensions of urban spatial politics and the instabilities, risks, and uncertainties of cultural visibility

and promotion. Such culture-based practices are not always complicit in urban revitalisation efforts. Sometimes culture-led initiatives centred on mass-tourism displace and exclude inhabitants by the simple fact of nonattending vital necessities as a prerequisite for the promotion of cultural and economic assets (Altaba et al., 2022; García-Esparza, Pardo, et al., 2023).

In historical areas, temporary uses can be translated into fictional communal placemaking at the spatial level due to a contested political process in which power and control over space and time are unequally distributed between stakeholders. Neighbours are often less involved when the terms of placemaking are already established. Thus, the ability to stagger community participation and set the conditions for transformative place engagement is rarely shared. Instead, it is one-sided and often ruled with a bit of adjustment to the local distinctiveness and influenced by trends and needs alien to the inhabited space boundaries.

## 1.2. Scope of the Research

From the aforementioned precondition, the authors felt that complementary types of cultural appropriation may foster the growth of governance institutions that support the materialisation of a full range of local social values, making local actors active participants in the process. In the face of city development processes and the eventual social and urban imbalances they cause, governments could set up effective governance systems. Establishing and encouraging alternative and transversal approaches, like the ones presented here, for adequate or perhaps more ethical management of the living environments pursue new directions for planners and placemakers in contexts of governance where contemporary digital tools may help boost integration at the community level.

In recent years, placemaking has become a widely institutionalised strategy for public policies and an approach to the management of public places in many European cities (Carmona et al., 2008). In the particular cases that the authors bring forward, placemaking is not yet sufficiently recognised as a tool of urban development or cultural policy in particular. This means that not only city public spaces as such, but cultural heritage sites as an integral layer of the city landscape and identity face the challenges of being on the agenda within these discourses. In this context, the recognition of potential artistic, archaeological, conservation, and planning practices in harnessing cultural heritage for placemaking in the city becomes a crucial task for the transversal approach to the diversity of related policy areas, instruments, and stakeholders. The places under study are of cultural interest and contain an essential component of localism and identity, but still have coexistence issues in terms of getting attention in policy discourses. Under such a context, it becomes essential to understand how locals' interests are connected and identified in potential artistic, archaeological, conservation, and planning practices and yet exposed as cultural resources.

The case study in Slovenia and the one in Spain have been chosen for comparative research due to their alignment with the scope and objectives of the study. The Slovenian case, situated in a post-socialist context, offers valuable insights into the challenges of centralised planning and governance, particularly in large housing estates, where weakly developed active citizenship in urban design requires exploration of how cultural appropriation can foster local participation. Here, the concept of active citizenship in urban design remains weakly developed, underscoring the need to explore how cultural appropriation can serve as a catalyst for encouraging local participation and engagement. Understanding the dynamics at play can shed

light on the potential growth of governance institutions that embrace a full spectrum of local social values, paving the way for the active involvement of community stakeholders in shaping their living spaces.

Meanwhile, the Spanish case developed in 10 nearby villages in the Penyagolosa mountain area exemplifies rural areas unattended by regional administrations, where heritage holds significant value, represented by religious and civil landmarks like cathedrals, monasteries, hermitages, and other minor architecture (García-Esparza, 2010). In these rural settings, inhabitants have developed unique practices that contribute to liveability and heritage-making, yet they are not adequately recognised. With one of the lowest population densities in the country, the region hosts fascinating heritage assets that deserve better acknowledgement and representation. By studying both contexts, the research aims to uncover the potential of complementary cultural appropriation to empower local actors, enhance governance systems, and foster more inclusive and ethical management of living environments, while also promoting the recognition of valuable heritage practices in rural areas.

Both cases hold their distinct challenges and opportunities, yet they converge in their call for more inclusive and ethical management of living environments. By exploring the dynamics of cultural appropriation in these disparate settings, the research seeks to illuminate pathways towards effective governance systems that resonate with the diverse values of local communities. Moreover, it aims to foster a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of heritage, identity, and placemaking, transcending the boundaries of urban and rural landscapes. It also aspires to sketch a comprehensive framework that policymakers and planners can embrace, encompassing contemporary digital tools to promote integration, recognise cultural resources, and celebrate the uniqueness of diverse communities within their urban and rural contexts.

Stakeholders use digitisation, particularly maps and mapping, to comprehend spatial contexts, environmental changes, official settings of cultural interest, and other alternative forms of cultural representation. This placemaking case explores spatial and cultural features thanks to recent advances in digital participation and GIS-based support, which includes digital databases. There are not many geospatial research techniques or tools available today to analyse and portray locations, social interactions, and cultural practices. It means the use of a variety of both conventional and cutting-edge tools that have been customised for the local environment. Hence, historical geospatial mapping aids in our understanding of how the built environment is perceived according to the social, political, economic, and cultural focus (García-Esparza, 2022; García-Esparza, Altaba, & Huerta, 2023).

Following Houghton et al. (2015), ICT tools offer a great potential to share knowledge, build a more creative community, and provide better-informed spaces capable of adapting to new social, cultural, and environmental requirements. In the same line of thought, Allam (2020) stresses the relevance of ICT when helping urban dimensions to be recalibrated, so that they include dimensions of liveability and contribute to building safer, more inclusive, and sustainable living spaces.

The ICT in participatory planning practice improve harmonisation among local administration, specialists, and inhabitants occasioning a higher degree of cooperation (Henman, 2010). Essentially, the goal of digitisation was to make interactions between the government and its customers easier while also increasing service efficiency (Lindgren et al., 2019). Although certain public e-services are intended to be analogue or "traditional" in nature, there are now more digital tools available for collaborative planning and engagement. Examples

include augmented reality, virtual reality, and applications. They assist stakeholders who are not professionals in having a better understanding of the urban design or urban plan.

## 2. Methodology

This article presents two European case studies from Slovenia and Spain which can both be described as heritage sites. While in the Slovenian case, the heritage relates to the urbanistic approach of developing new living environments from the scratch in 1970s when the city was rapidly growing to accommodate a new working force, the Spanish case relates to a historic, organically grown environment. In both cases, photography has served as a basic means to reveal the assets of the studied places.

The Slovenian case employs an innovative, digitally supported photovoice method, redefining urban regeneration. Through a dedicated online platform, residents contribute crowdsourced photos and captions that are geo-located, authentically capturing the neighbourhood's essence. The geolocation of the crowdsourced data is important for its direct integration into GIS datasets used in regular planning procedures, thus informing the planners of the otherwise hidden residents' notions of places within the neighbourhood. This approach taps into residents' unique insights, unveiling challenges, assets, and transformation possibilities (Nikšič, 2021). The method facilitates the exploration of key urban regeneration themes, from community bonds and public spaces to local heritage, infrastructure needs, and more. Besides the images themselves, the captions attached to them within the digital platform, offer deeper insights into residents' notions on their living environments. This crowdsourced grassroots perspective enriches traditional planning, offering a holistic understanding of neighbourhood dynamics. Central to photovoice's role is fostering resident-planner collaboration through a digital platform, bridging experiential gaps. It empowers residents with visual voices, nurturing inclusive urban renewal dialogues. Moreover, photovoice uncovers latent neighbourhood potentials. Overlooked assets and growth prospects surface through resident-captured imagery and narratives, inspiring responsive regeneration tactics.

The case in Spain makes use of digital photo-elicitation, in-person and online interviews, and GIS and voice recordings. The various options to describe the historical settlements are assessed through GIS. The experimental study examines the qualities and ideals of the built environment in 10 villages to create cohesive and inclusive activities in some minor historical settings. The first-stage photo-elicitation workshop provided images of locations representative of the values of the area to highlight their importance (García-Esparza & Altaba, 2018). Through it, researchers understood the ties people had with their everyday environment. Photo-elicitation inspires the informants' capability to express practical experience through the attribution and association of significances. Through a later interview, participants provide specific information to explain their perceptions of specific places, elements and the values they attribute to them. Afterwards, historical settings were catalogued to create thematic maps and routes with the assistance of participants' voice recordings. This integrated digital support is accessible through QR codes in panels located at the beginning of the routes. The codes are linked to the project website (https://caminsdepenyagolosa.dipcas.es/es/caminos.html).

Particularities of the methodology utilised in each case are placed in the next section to explain the results.

## 3. Cases

In the Slovenian case, the interpretation of urbanistic heritage in suburban neighbourhoods is approached by revealing the shared values of the residents. The assets of planned socialist neighbourhoods are viewed from different perspectives and through the eyes of the residents. The relevance of the built (architectural) environment, the natural elements, as well as amenities and activities in shaping the suburban neighbourhood's identity is evident. The residents' embracement of alternative elements of the built environments that would usually not be made part of the professional considerations to express their sense of belonging and identity is clearly visible. As these elements may not be officially recognised by planning policies and measures, highlighting the need for critical review and accommodation of untold interpretations of the past and contemporary architectural and anthropological informalities is a key element of this case.

Spain's project approach highlights the relevance of the idealistic historical rural scenarios. The study processes data about cultural placemaking practices, particularly, about the cultural appropriation of informal or alternative elements that compose the built environment. In doing so, it critically reviews how historical values can accommodate different practices, perhaps untold pasts and contemporary architectural and anthropological informalities that provide identity and a sense of belonging but are not officially recognised by cultural policy.

### 3.1. First Case: Russian Tsar Neighbourhood in Ljubljana, Slovenia

#### 3.1.1. Presentation

The suburban living environments are a common phenomenon of the Slovenian urban centres which grew rapidly after the Second World War as part of the wider industrialisation process. Ljubljana's development plan aimed to elevate the quality of life by incorporating regulated green spaces and accessible amenities such as stores, kindergartens, and schools (Ljubljana Urban Planning Institute, 1965). Public transport connected such units with the city centre. The plan succeeded in providing equitable access to services and green areas. However, these environments are aged up and in need of comprehensive regeneration. They are also high-density areas that, coupled with rising motorised mobility since the 1990s (MOL, 2017), exert significant pressure on open public spaces. Furthermore, the emergence of big motorway ring road malls led to the shutdown of small local shops and services throughout the neighbourhoods. These circumstances generate increased interest in the urban design profession and generate the development of new, inclusive approaches to urban regeneration (Ehrlich, 2012; Nikšič et al., 2018).

In this particular setting, our intention was to develop new methodologies for placemaking that would help develop the co-created regeneration strategies following the concept of citizen knowledge production. The pilot area was the neighbourhood of the Russian Tsar (Figure 1) that was constructed in the 1970s. About 3,500 inhabitants live in the neighbourhood which is mainly set up by the long rows of up to 15-storey blocks of flats (Figure 2).

The approach was built along the understanding that the residents are the local experts with the best insights into the spatial-functional dynamics and assets as well as problems of the neighbourhood.

**Figure 1.** The peripheral location of the Russian Tsar neighbourhood outside the northern section of Ljubljana Ring Road. The city centre is about 4 km away. Source: Urbinfo.
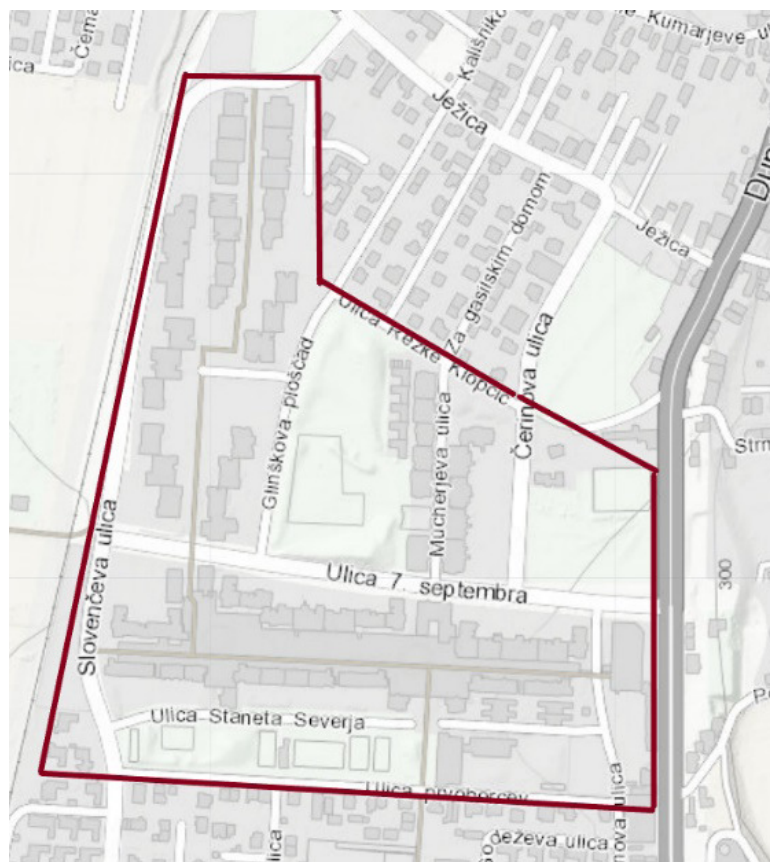


**Figure 2.** Neighbourhood layout extends from Dunajska city road in the east to Kamnik rails in the west, bordered by open rural landscapes to the west. The central public space, Bratovševa Ploščad, lies along the southern east–west axis. Source: Urbinfo.

### 3.1.2. Placemaking

The placemaking activities were carried out in two phases. In phase one, in-person activities took place to develop residents' common visions for the improved public space. These activities were concentrated in the central open public space—a long, street-like linear square of Bratovševa Ploščad (Figure 3). The process started with warming-up tools, such as resident-led neighbourhood walks and round tables, which attracted a limited number of engaged citizens. Later on, more sociable events were organised, such as a neighbours' picnic and street workshops. The aim was to get the residents involved in the regeneration processes. However, as the process unfolded, a pattern emerged: The same individuals consistently participated in these in-person gatherings. Consequently, a strategic choice was made to create a supplementary digitally supported tool which would cater to residents who preferred not to attend physical events, ensuring broader engagement.



**Figure 3.** The central open space of Bratovševa ploščad where participatory experiments took place. Source: Courtesy of Blaž Jamšek (Urban Planning Institute of the Republic of Slovenia, 2016).

Thus, in the second phase, the urban design team decided to develop a temporarily installed digital tool, Photostory of Our Neighborhood (PON), a web-based platform easily reached via computer or mobile phone allowing residents to upload photos paired with concise captions (from two to three sentences). It was promoted through the neighbourhood's Facebook group, municipal e-newsletters, and emailing lists of local NGOs. By disseminating information across these platforms, a wider cross-section of residents was reached, enhancing inclusivity.

The content was thoughtfully divided into five themes (Figure 4), strategically structured to stimulate residents to envision the neighbourhood's assets and opportunities, steering the focus away from issues and inadequacies. This intentional approach is aimed at cultivating a positive perspective and fostering community pride and engagement. By centring on strengths, it encouraged residents to actively contribute to uplifting their surroundings.

**Figure 4.** The five themes of the digital placemaking PON tool.

However, for enhanced urban regeneration support, the design team aimed to grasp shared resident notions more deeply. Past instances revealed the limited utility of a synthetic interpretation of submitted materials (Nikšič et al., 2018). To gain richer insights, residents were prompted to attach predefined tags representing shared values alongside their PON submissions. These values, originating from designers' prior participatory experiences, held equal significance to the image captions. They could potentially underpin future scenario development for the neighbourhood (see Table 1).

### 3.1.3. Results and Added Value

The introduction of PON significantly expanded participation. Its digital nature attracted those who were reluctant to attend live events, thereby diversifying the sample. This digital avenue allowed a broader spectrum of residents to contribute insights, perspectives, and feedback for the urban regeneration and placemaking efforts in the Russian Tsar neighborhood, enriching the sample with varied perspectives and insights. A total of over 170 photos were collected (Urban Planning Institute of the Republic of Slovenia, 2016), with 162 entries having all attributes submitted, making them suitable for further exploration. These photos revealed fresh insights into neighbourhood vitality, dynamics, and relationships (Figure 5).

The PON database was geo-referenced via GIS and it enabled urban designers to gain insight into specific locations and their characteristics that were important to local residents. The combination of visual material and accompanying short descriptions as well as attached values was useful in understanding what respondents were trying to convey in their photographs. The first step in the analysis process involved organising the images into thematic categories and qualitatively interpreting them based on the physical infrastructures, activities, and users they depicted. Captions were used to clarify the intended meaning

**Table 1.** PON's shared values with definitions.

| Shared value | Definition |
| --- | --- |
| Well-being (60) | A state of feeling healthy and happy. It is a contribution to society through knowledge, culture, design, music, ecology, healthy food, or the renovation of public spaces. The main goal of well-being is to improve living conditions so that people can achieve better physical and mental health. |
| Leisure (48) | Free time, to be away from the demands of work and duty, when one can rest, take it easy and enjoy hobbies or sports. |
| Aesthetics (44) | A visual attribute aimed at beauty, creativity, and innovation, which provides an identity to a place. |
| Conviviality (43) | Living together and sharing ideas, activities, discussions, etc., to create a common spirit, a sense of belonging around which people can gather and that they find meaningful. |
| Imagination (42) | The ability of the mind to be creative with new images, ideas, concepts, etc. Imagination is the main source of images and dreams of new solutions to our daily problems. |
| Empathy (36) | The ability to understand and share the feelings of others, despite different backgrounds and life experiences. Empathy creates a bond between individuals that ends up becoming part of their shared identity. |
| Intimacy (33) | The possibility of feeling a sense of closeness with people, objects, or places. |
| Sensoriality (33) | The mobilisation of a person's senses, whether hearing, seeing, tasting, smelling, or touching. |
| Sustainability (32) | Sustainability is concerned with meeting the needs of the current population without compromising those of future generations. It includes environmental, social, and economic aspects. |
| Respect (30) | Respect is showing due regard to people's lives, opinions, wishes, and rights. It implies that there are no barriers or stereotypes that come between us. |
| Accessibility (25) | Being open to everyone and easily reachable. It has both a geographic and social meaning. |
| Mobility (20) | The capacity of citizens to leave their private spaces and move into public ones. |
| Solidarity (10) | Solidarity is a unity of people sharing the same interests in order to help each other. |

Note: The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of recalls by PON participants.



Spogledujeta se betonski blok in ajdovo polje
*A concrete block of flats and a field of buckwheat are flirting*
Fotografija / Photo by: Helena Lapanje

**Figure 5.** Example of participants' entries in the category "Borders of My Neighbourhood." Source: Courtesy of Helena Lapanje (Urban Planning Institute of the Republic of Slovenia, 2016).

behind each photograph. The tagged shared values helped in understanding the underlying sentiments and priorities within the community's perspective. This multifaceted digitally facilitated approach revealed an understanding of the residents' viewpoints and the potential directions for the neighborhood's development.

## 3.2. Second Case: Rural Villages in Valencia Region, Spain

### 3.2.1. Presentation

The historical centres and the cultural landscape have historically been two potentially alluring heritage resources for tourism in rural areas such as the one under investigation. With some small exceptions that have significant sociocultural significance, the historical centres have a tourist demand based on their picturesque qualities and their landmark architecture, mainly religious and defensive structures of the past. In the second instance, the natural landscape was a significant tourist attraction drawn around the turn of the 20th century because of its ecological beauty; hikers, botanists, biologists, and geologists were all interested in it. Today, scientific analyses are more focused on ethnography, anthropology, and architecture. In parallel, new leisure and sports activities have arisen as a key tourism vector: hiking, climbing, or cycling.

This context is an example of the contemporary rural environment in many countries worldwide. In Spain, the case under analysis is paradigmatic of mountainous areas, particularly those characterised by processes of progressive socio-economic changes that have affected small rural communities since the mid-20th century for reasons of constant depopulation. The area under assessment is located on the east side of the Sistema Ibérico mountain range near the Mediterranean Sea in the Comunitat Valenciana and Aragón regions. The livability in these municipalities around Penyagolosa Mountain has been affected by migration to major nuclei and the contemporary scarcity of basic services. Today these villages rely on punctual agriculture and livestock systems, very few family industries, and mainly on secondary and tertiary sectors conditioned by regional tourism coming from major cities.

### 3.2.2. Placemaking

Bringing together specialists and neighbours was one of the research's preliminary objectives. Despite some conflict resulting from different perceptions of the same cultural objective in the partnerships between locals and academics, it still seems to be the best method of context appraisal. And this is not a common practice in this rural area due to the local's sense of appropriation. The opening issues were therefore jointly studied to develop shared points of departure for the notions of rural landscape-heritage relevance and protection. Even when there are differences of opinion among stakeholders, the fact that participation is culture-based fosters inclusive transversal interactions between experts and residents. This is made possible by the conscious recognition and evaluation of the local context between social, economic, and environmental factors that shape the character of the place (Dalglish & Leslie, 2016).

The project on rural heritage valuation positions local inhabitants as the main representatives of their community's heritage. The project fosters the theoretical understanding of the region and the desire to use historic centres to further inclusive and cohesive inhabitance together with touristic dynamisation strategies. The research starts with the premise that when locally experienced, that is, through getting to know and understand the local character alongside locals, unusual, and non-monumental heritage also has an inherent

interest for both, locals and visitors. This placemaking practice returns local collaboration, social cohesion, and a sense of community.

To comprehend the historical environment through a pre-established "approved" classification by experts, for the study, it was relevant to start focusing on the tangible and intangible aspects of both landmarks and visitors' unattended places. The analysis suggested by Speed et al. (2012), which contrasts and analyses the differences in the integration and assessment of heterogeneous values, was taken into account. The analysis presented here goes into detail, observes differences when assessed separately, and combines elements of the cultural past and the contemporary forms of expression that perform the built environment (Figures 6 and 7).



**Figure 6.** Images of elements of cultural significance for stakeholders. Source: García-Esparza (2020, pp. 36–52.

### 3.2.3. Results and Added Value

Meetings and interviews were organised to find out how locals valued the surroundings. To achieve this, a photo-elicitation series in different villages exposed symbolic pictures of different settings of the built environment for participants to emphasise their significance and for researchers to examine the connections
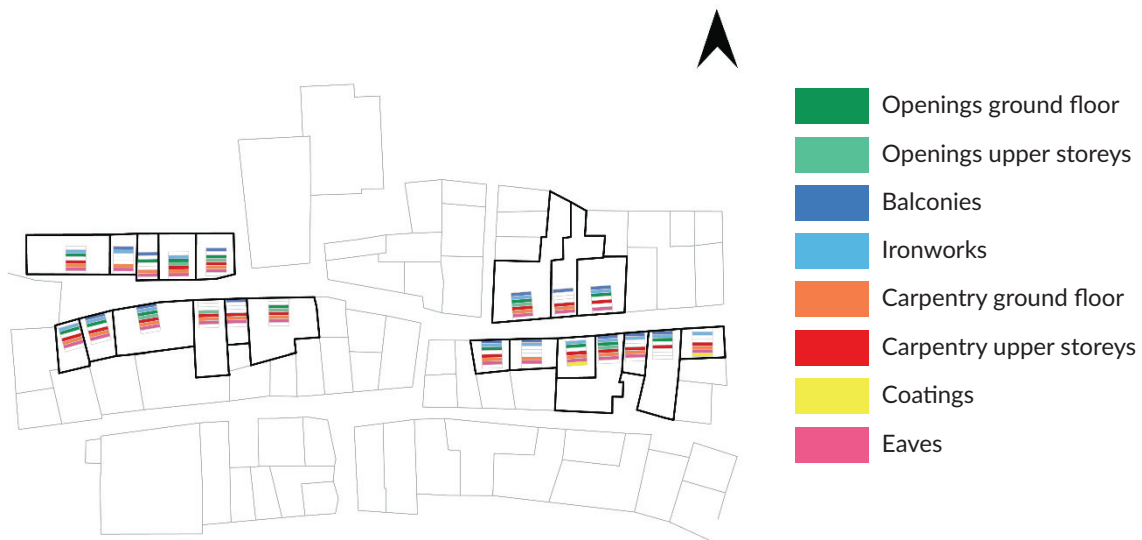
**Figure 7.** Example of a digitised map with some of the physical elements in the urban fabric. Source: García-Esparza (2020, p. 57).

individuals had with the place. These workshop series of photo-elicitation were implemented by traditional interview-based research, they were conducted to individuals who freely chose to do so. The interview added validity and depth to the analysis and helped open up new perspectives based on experiences and practices that were even previously unexplored by experts. The sequence of phases for the methodology is as follows:

- First Phase: Assemble a team of researchers and locals who are familiar with the relevant historic place and define the inspection site.
- Second Phase: Semi-structured interviews on sets of five images per cultural value (architectural, historical, and natural).
- Third Phase: Site assessment and street view analysis strolling around the streets and registering tangible and intangible elements of value.
- Fourth Phase: Manual classification and registration on-site using cadastral maps.

The method did not work equally in the 10 villages, nor was it always compelling or rewarding. Nonetheless, despite photo-elicitation taking up a lot of time for both researchers and interviewees, it was used indistinctively; it provided a significant advance for the research when comparing results between settings. Furthermore, the photo-elicitation technique encouraged the informants to use identification and correlation of meanings to describe their practice-based knowledge. In such sessions, the respondents were asked to express their impressions of particular occurrences and the values they ascribe to them, in addition to providing further information in oral and written interviews.

The goal was to discover the residents' criterion for the settlement authenticity based in turn on other enactment activities, such as place visits that assisted in widening the range of awareness of the surroundings and expanding the number of people polled (400 persons). Responses to the questions posed when answering the photo-elicitation workshop were split into three categories: (a) The urban landscape

contains and preserves the historical anthropic usage, (b) the urban landscape contains the use but certain anthropic components are no longer evident owing to abandonment, and (c) the urban landscape has entirely lost all evidence of prior usage (Figure 8).



**Figure 8.** Photograph of the workshop with stakeholders in Llucena. Live audible walkings complement photo-elicitation activities.

Although the findings for choices (a) and (b) are nearly identical, it is worth highlighting the impression of the urban landscape in Towns 2 and 6. In the two villages, 75% to 85% of the neighbours respectively responded that they perceived the original anthropic use in its surroundings. The fact that the original features of the urban landscape were perceived by more than 40% of those polled in all cases except one is a positive and meaningful exercise in collective memory for the research. In a second instance, for choice (b), the results were about 50% of the total of the poll, albeit it should be noted that the results were above average in two of these towns, indicating that they were aware of the state of emergency of the historical environment. Finally, option (c) was not picked in five of the eight localities surveyed, and was below 10% in two municipalities, barely reaching 18% in one of them.

Comparing the findings of both polls reveals two distinct opposing patterns. On the one hand, abandonment is seen negatively, whereas the urban landscape is valued positively. On the other hand, two elements should be considered: the perceived scale and the previously indicated connection and identification. The first aspect evaluated was a small-scale building with which people of the village recognised as traditional ways of living could be linked back to this sort of settlement, potentially representing relationships of familiarity, belonging, or attachment. In retrospect, this might lead to a negative perspective of development, with historical, cultural, and ethnographic values becoming relics of a bygone era (Figure 9).

**Figure 9.** Image of the photo-elicitation activities in Llucena: Describing elements and values.

## 4. Discussion on Outcomes

The case studies presented in this article showcase two distinct placemaking approaches aimed at improving the quality of life in suburban neighbourhoods in Slovenia and preserving cultural heritage while promoting tourism in rural villages in Spain. Despite their differences in focus and context, both projects employ participatory approaches, involving residents in the planning and decision-making processes.

In the Slovenian case of the Russian Tsar neighbourhood in Ljubljana, the placemaking activities were carried out in two phases, with in-person and hands-on engagement methods. Neighbourhood walking tours, round table discussions, picnics, and workshops were used to initiate a broader discussion within the community about the neighbourhood's future. However, the initial in-person activities did not engage all groups of residents, necessitating the development of an online digital tool, PON. This innovative tool enabled residents to upload photos and provide short captions, uncovering valuable insights into their perceptions and values related to the neighbourhood's physical and social aspects. The PON database empowered urban designers to understand specific locations and characteristics that were important to local residents, ultimately shaping the participatory urban regeneration process.

In contrast, the Spanish case focused on preserving cultural heritage and promoting sustainable tourism in rural villages within the Valencia region. The historical centres and cultural landscapes of these villages hold significant tourism potential, but the challenge lies in striking a balance between catering to tourist demands and conserving local cultural identity. The placemaking approach in the Spanish case emphasised the importance of community empowerment and highlighted less obvious values or elements of heritage that might have been overlooked. Complementary activities, such as pedestrian visits to historical settlements, were organised, with locals taking the lead in showcasing their built environment and explaining its

significance to visitors. By involving the local community directly, the Spanish project sought to democratise the historical realm, ensuring that everyday objects and their cultural values were recognised and appreciated.

The comparison between the two case studies reveals distinct placemaking approaches driven by their respective cultural contexts. In the Slovenian context, the emphasis was on revitalising an ageing suburban neighbourhood with the help of digital technology. The PON tool allowed for more inclusive and widespread participation of residents, overcoming the initial challenge of limited engagement. This approach recognised the residents as the local experts and emphasised their knowledge and understanding of the neighbourhood's dynamics and challenges.

On the other hand, in the Spanish context, the focus was on preserving the cultural heritage of rural villages while promoting sustainable tourism. The placemaking approach revolved around empowering the local community to showcase their environment and cultural values to visitors. By valuing the less obvious aspects of heritage and involving residents in tourism-related decision-making, the Spanish project aimed to create a more sustainable and equitable tourism model that benefits both the local community and tourists.

### 4.1. Lessons Learned

Through the examination of two distinct case studies, valuable lessons emerge that shed light on effective placemaking strategies in different cultural contexts. These lessons emphasise the significance of participatory approaches, the recognition of local expertise, the delicate balance between tourism and heritage preservation, the understanding of shared values, and the need to overcome engagement challenges. Moreover, they highlight the importance of democratising inhabited spaces, incorporating multifocal perspectives, and implementing ethical data practices. These lessons serve as a guide for creating vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable environments that truly resonate with the community and benefit its inhabitants in the long term.

#### 4.1.1. Recognising Local Expertise

Both case studies emphasise the importance of involving residents as experts in the planning and decision-making processes. Residents have valuable insights into the spatial and functional dynamics, assets, and challenges of their places, neighbourhoods and villages alike.

#### 4.1.2. Utilising Participatory Approaches

The success of both projects is attributed to their participatory approaches, where residents were actively engaged in shaping the future of their communities. Participatory methods, such as in-person activities and digital tools, facilitated dialogue, collaboration, and a sense of ownership among residents.

#### 4.1.3. Balancing Tourism and Cultural Heritage

In the Spanish case, balancing tourism demands with the preservation of cultural heritage and the needs of local residents proved to be a significant challenge. Placemaking efforts in such contexts must prioritise

sustainable tourism practices that respect cultural heritage while ensuring that the benefits are shared equitably among the local community.

### 4.1.4. Understanding Shared Values

Community interpretation of place plays a vital role in placemaking. Both case studies reveal the significance of understanding shared values and perceptions among residents. By incorporating these values into the planning process, projects can resonate better with the community and create meaningful and liked environments.

### 4.1.5. Incorporating Multifocal Perspectives

Both projects emphasise the significance of incorporating heterogeneous perspectives in placemaking. Understanding dualities and involving as many diverse viewpoints as possible ensures that the resulting environments cater to the varied needs and aspirations of the community.

### 4.1.6. Emphasising Ethical Data Implementation

The use of open data-based and place-based approaches in the comparative study of morphological and functional patterns requires ethical considerations. Digitisation challenges in collecting data should prioritise representing diverse stakeholder perspectives and avoiding biased perceptions. Following the ICT experience in Spain, as part of the project, researchers released on-site and digital panels containing both visual and sonic digital sources. Digital images, maps, transects, and voice recordings were found to be relevant sources to promote the rural area among young locals and visitors. Nonetheless, the providers of information at workshops and interviews, senior local people mainly, have no knowledge and interest in this sort of digital placemaking tools.

The Slovenian case highlights that effective use of ICT and photovoice for placemaking surpasses mere technical implementation. It demands a nuanced comprehension of the community's digital behaviours, cultural milieu, and preferences. To unveil the community's diverse place interpretation, emphasis is needed on collaborative, transparent interpretation involving both residents' and designers' viewpoints. This case also underscores the pivotal role of integrated digital support in embedding photovoice within placemaking. It underscores the worth of hybrid approaches and recognises the significance of context-specific solutions, where harmonising traditional (in-person) and digital (PON) methods is key for an inclusive and successful process.

## 5. Conclusion

The case studies discussed in this article emphasise the importance of involving residents in shaping the future of their communities and recognising their values and perspectives. Approaching issues of heritability and liveability by utilising fundamental notions can aid in addressing the concerns of inhabitants in the research region. The cases have demonstrated that involving the local community in their environment requires an effort to include all groups. Therefore, when protecting a setting, one viable alternative is to focus on the individuals who interact in the setting and present as many views as possible from a human perspective. It is crucial to ensure that this approach is gradually implemented and incorporated into

governance within society and that mechanisms are adjusted to accommodate novel approaches or the revival of the operational existing ones.

One of the key findings is the importance of inclusivity in the placemaking process. Both case studies emphasised the need to include all groups within the community, ensuring that diverse perspectives and values are considered. Involving the local community not only empowers them but also enriches the decision-making process with a broader range of insights and ideas. Such a participatory approach promotes social cohesion and a sense of ownership, fostering a deeper connection between residents and their environment.

The success of these methods lies in their human-centred approach. By focusing on the individuals who interact with the environment, the cases demonstrate how fundamental notions can address the concerns and worries of the locals effectively. By understanding the human perspective, planners and researchers can identify elements of cultural significance and assess the relevance and protection of heritage. Photography combined with additional information proved to be a valuable tool in this regard, providing researchers with a deeper understanding of the residents' values and attachment to their surroundings.

However, these case studies also revealed some challenges in the implementation of participatory methodologies. In the urban context of Ljubljana's Russian Tsar neighbourhood, the transition from in-person activities to digital tools faced difficulties in engaging all residents. Efforts must be made to ensure that participatory processes reach a wider audience and that diverse voices are represented. In the rural villages of the Valencia Region, while the photo-elicitation technique provided valuable insights, it was time-consuming for both researchers and interviewees, because it required visiting the settings and planning meetings at least twice per village, depending on the number of assistants and responses. Careful consideration should be given to the resources and time required for such methods, especially in large-scale projects.

The methodologies employed in these case studies offer valuable insights applicable to other contexts and regions. The photo-based technique and the human-centred approach to placemaking can be adapted and implemented in various urban and rural settings. However, careful consideration should be given to local and ICT contexts, cultural nuances, and specific challenges when applying these methodologies in different communities and participants' ages. The presented cases emphasise the importance of listening to local communities, understanding their needs, and valuing their knowledge and expertise. As societies continue to evolve, these methodologies offer valuable lessons and insights for future urban and rural development projects, fostering sustainable, community-driven, and culturally rich places.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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