

Affective Placemaking: Unpacking the Relational and Emotional Dynamics of Urban Coexistence

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1 Introduction

This study investigates how individuals emotionally connect to their neighborhoods and its public spaces, emphasizing the significance of feelings of belonging, attachment, detachment, and alienation. These emotional ties are central to understanding social dynamics in urban settings. To delve deeper into this, we introduce the concept of **affective placemaking**, which examines how emotions shape and circulate through people's experiences and narratives about everyday places.

Placemaking, an established concept in urban planning studies, is commonly referred as a formal, professional practice that aims to create places with an imagined identity shared by the community members ([Project for Public Spaces 2015](#), [Ellery & Ellery 2019](#), [Antonić et al. 2023](#)). However, such views often treat place as a static product shared by a homogeneous community. Drawing upon Doreen Massey's (2005, 2008) work, we argue that place should be seen as dynamic, relational, and shaped by diverse interactions. This perspective is especially relevant in contemporary cities marked by multiple diversities, differences and fragmentations. We argue that moving beyond formal approaches towards the informal placemaking enables us to deepen our understanding of the intersubjective and often contested everyday politics through which places are made.

Accordingly, we adopt an affectively nuanced understanding of placemaking that centers human experience, showing how routine interactions and embodied practices contribute to placemaking beyond formal planning. Relying on Sara Ahmed's (2005) theorisations on affects, we perceive emotions as cultural formations that both produce and are produced within power relations but also challenge the prevailing power dynamics. While drawing on both Ahmadian understanding of the circulation affects (Ahmed 2005) and Massey's (2005) visions of relationality and dynamic nature of place, we suggest that everyday encounters with diverse others and urban surroundings continuously shape affective orientations toward places and people. Affective meanings circulate through interacting bodies, which create and dissolve boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (Ahmed 2005) and form what we call the 'push and pull effects' of a place.

Our research is based in two suburban neighbourhoods in southern Stockholm—Rågsved and Farsta—often portrayed negatively and segregated in media and public debate, associated with violence and crime. Through urban ethnography and affective mapping, we explore everyday practices of belonging, avoidance, inclusion and exclusion by unpacking the spatio-temporal threads of affective placemaking. While ethnography enables gaining nuanced insights into the lived experiences that challenge dominant segregation narratives, affective maps help situate and visualise the emotions people associate with, experience and remember spaces. With this conceptual take, the study contributes to the debates in urban coexistence by exploring how push and pull effects of places are affectively and temporarily formed amid various forms of diversities, inequalities, and historically embedded stigmas. The perspective also offers a critical framework for understanding how places are continuously made through contested power relations, affective solidarities, and historical narratives that are shaped within the nexus of local, national and global dynamics.

2 Methods

Our inquiry into affective placemaking draws on the ethnographic fieldworks that we conducted in Rågsved and Farsta during May-June and October 2024. Data collection included interviews, narrative walks, mental mapping, and participant observation. We gathered insights into daily routines, urban development, security measures, and socio-political changes. The empirical material consists of thirteen individual, pair and group interviews (approximately 12 hours) and seven maps, alongside informal conversations and extensive fieldnotes.

Interviews were open-ended, guided by participants' interests, but covered themes like neighbourhood reputation, personal connections, socio-economic

changes, childhood memories, everyday routines, and lived experiences that somewhat engraved affective associations in their personal and collective histories. For the mental maps, we asked participants to draw a map of their everyday spaces; places they like to visit as well as places they dislike or avoid. Based on the flow of the conversation, the maps have taken different forms from a very comprehensive depiction of the area marked with various places, emotions and symbols (see Figure 1) to the drawing of a single location that has a specific meaning or story for the interviewee (see Figure 2). Not only did mapping enable us to get into the spatial relationships, but it also allowed us to gain an understanding of spatial agency, struggles, tensions, inclusive and harmonious actions practiced in place (Pánek 2019, Forde 2019). Together, the empirical material reveal how everyday landscapes of affects are formed through lived experiences amid historically engraved reputations, institutionalised stigmas, everyday forms of neighbourly relations, conflicts and solidarities.

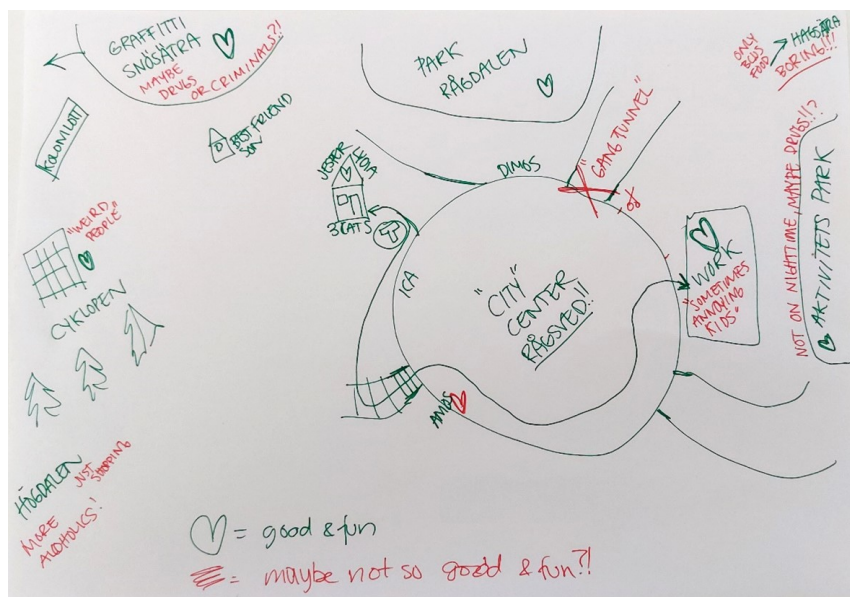


Figure 1

While doing the analysis, we used affective-discursive reading (Wetherell 2012), which enabled us paying attention to affectively tuned expressions, such as tropes (metaphors, irony), word choices, emphasis of words, comparisons, and the use of emotional words (love, hate, etc.) (Ojala et al. 2019). At first, we read and reread the interviews, paying attention especially to the ways the interviewees described different relationships between their affective orientations and

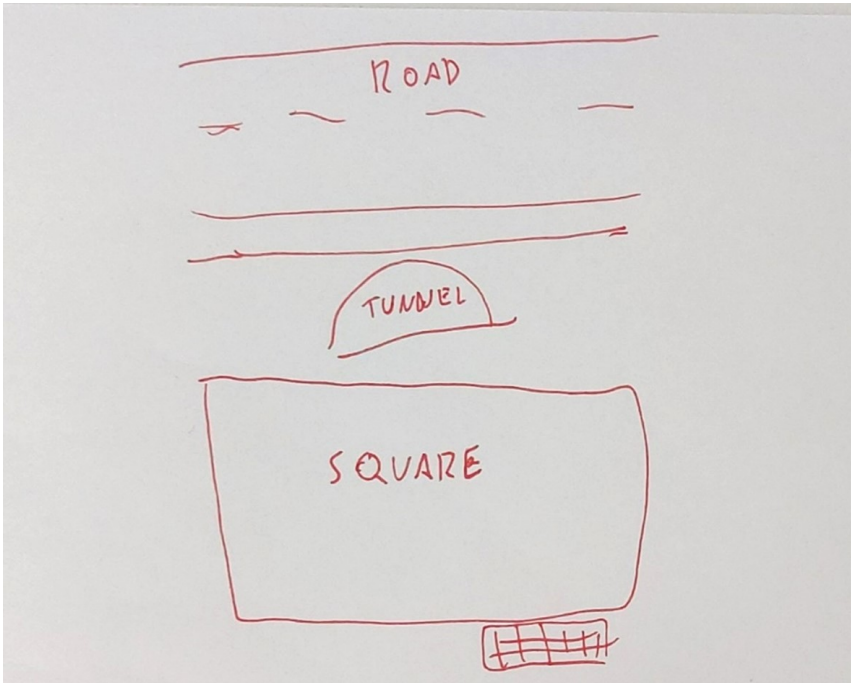


Figure 2

different entities, such as certain places, the neighbourhood as a whole, the state, global and local scales as well as different actors, like local authorities, police and different groups that were mentioned. Following Massey's (2005) relational approach to place, we examined how these entities interrelatedly impact people's affective orientations in space. We found that affective intensities varied in intensity and duration, ranging from deeply embodied emotions to more mundane, ephemeral feelings.

3 Results

Our analysis identified three different compositions that capture affective intensities, temporal frameworks, and meanings attached to places; whether they are small spots of hang out, large public sites where strangers are 'throwntogether' (Massey 2005), administrative spaces or imagined places that do not necessarily conform to a physical, geographical location. We call these compositions as 'threads of affective placemaking' through which we explore personal or collective narratives, establishing connections between material dimensions and re-

relationships. By this we argue that all threads can simultaneously be present in people's everyday lives. These threads emerge from the lived experiences that take various forms and lengths, evoking different affective intensities. They are culturally and historically scripted as well as shaped by social, economic and political structures that govern everyday life.

The first thread '**Scenes of shock and sticking affect**' unpacks the affective intensities in certain point-form moments where the urban flow gets disrupted by sudden events. These moments—charged with fear or anxiety—become sticky, as Ahmed (2010) suggests, attached to particular neighbourhoods, and shape the ways how they are felt and remembered. Over time, such affects circulate through media representations, reinforcing negative reputations and accumulating emotional associations in place.

The second thread '**Everyday choreographies, accumulating intensities, and (making of) symbolic places**' untangles the stories about places that have longer term symbolic meanings for dwellers, involving struggles and claims over places and spatial rights. Global markets of drug trade, local histories as well as personal experiences and collective actions intertwine and formulate affective orientations that are localised in certain places and embed symbolic meanings. Different than sudden incidents and shocking scenes that evoke affective responses as a reflex and accumulate mostly in personal memories, symbolic places gain their meanings through strong sense of ownership and agency that heavily materialize through collective actions (Awan et al. 2013: p. 31).

Finally, the third thread '**Loving and living amid diversity and stigma**' focuses on the wider discourses on diversity and (contested) narratives about neighbourhood and how the residents negotiate them in their everyday lives. In the context of stigmatised neighbourhoods, negativity is not restricted only to the place but also labels people living there (Tonkiss 2005, Wacquant et al. 2014). People in these areas tend to internalize the stigma, which makes them feel shame, guilt and willingness to distance themselves from other inhabitants to uplift their own moral worth (Wacquant 2007). At the same time, a strong sense of attachment, ownership and communal ties in stigmatised areas are found heavily prevalent (e.g., Junnilainen 2019).

The empirical data however illustrated that these narratives are neither fixed, homogenous nor stable. Socio-economic inequalities, certain privileges and disadvantages that situate individuals in different societal positions shape how people make sense of their everyday interactions and living environments in which they coexist with diverse others. The focus on affects has crucially demonstrated that the push and pull effects of place are relationally formed and

oftentimes reveal contested conceptions, even in one's own account, as regards both individually and collectively shared histories, embodied practices and local and global dynamics that intertwine and materialize in the everyday.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

The affective threads of placemaking have shown that places gain their meanings through embodied social interactions, historically embedded narratives, temporal dynamics, and local, national and global changes that evoke and accumulate affective intensities in everyday spaces of coexistence. Together, these three interwoven compositions demonstrate that affective placemaking is not a linear or uniform process, but a dynamic interplay of emotions, memories, and spatial practices. They offer a critical framework for understanding how places are made through everyday encounters, contested narratives, and emotional solidarities—always in flux, always in the making. Capturing how people relate to and orient in everyday places through different affective intensities, the threads also unpack the temporal creation of push and pull effects based on lived experiences and changing positionalities.

The examples highlight that places cannot be approached as fixed entities perceived and experienced in the same way by the members of an imagined, homogeneous community. Places become emotionally charged, symbolically meaningful, and socially negotiated through lived experiences and constant encounters with diverse others. Affective orientations toward people and places, or the push and pull effects as we call them, play a significant role in building communal ties, sense of belonging and place attachment as well as detachment, alienation and exclusion that are emotionally charged and historically scripted. This approach challenges the notion of placemaking in urban planning as a neutral, objective endeavour. In understanding of how people make sense of their interactions with others as well as negotiate the living together in cities, where multiplicity of people, politics and practices shape the dynamics of coexistence interrelatedly, we argue that planning must recognize the emotional geographies of place and engage with the everyday lived experiences of people. To build socially sustainable neighbourhoods, urban planning therefore must move beyond formal interventions and incorporate everyday practices of affective meaning-making into the decision-making processes. In doing so, visual methodologies, such as mental mapping, offer valuable tools for capturing these emotional landscapes and recognising residents' spatial agency.

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