ENGAGEMENT AS THEORY: ARCHITECTURE, PLANNING, AND PLACEMAKING IN THE TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY CITY

Michael Carriere, Associate Professor, carriere@msoe.edu
Milwaukee School of Engineering, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA

David Schalliol, Associate Professor, dcs@stolaf.edu
St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota, USA

ABSTRACT

Our recent book, *The City Creative: The Rise of Urban Placemaking in Contemporary America* (University of Chicago Press, 2021), details how participatory design and community engagement can lead to democratically planned, inclusive urban communities. After visiting more than two hundred projects in more than forty cities, we have come to understand that planning, policy, and architectural design should be oriented by local communities and deep engagement with intervention sites. Of course, we are not the first to reach such a conclusion. In many ways, our work builds off contributions made by individuals, including Jane Jacobs, Kevin Lynch, and Christopher Alexander, and such movements as Team 10 and the advocacy architecture movement of the 1960s. Nevertheless, we need to broaden this significant conversation.

Importantly, our classroom work has allowed us to better understand how histories often left out of such discussions can inform this new approach. To that end, we have developed community-student partnerships in underserved neighborhoods in cities like Milwaukee and Detroit. Through these connections and their related design-build projects, we have seen how the civil rights movement, immigration narratives, hip-hop culture, and alternative redevelopment histories, such as in urban agriculture, can inform the theory and practice of design. We want to bring these perspectives into dialogue with the mainstream approach to development and design.

How does this look and work? Using a case study from the Milwaukee School of Engineering (MSOE) University Scholars Honors Program curriculum, we highlight the redevelopment of Milwaukee's Fondy Park, an effort to create community-centered spaces and programming in an underserved African American community. Lessons include those essential for pedagogy and education, as well as for how these issues are theorized and professionally practiced, with implications for institutions, programs, and individuals.

Keywords: Creative Placemaking, Design-Build Projects, History, Inequality, Pedagogy, Urban Agriculture

1. INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL MOTIVATION

The projects and approach we discuss in this paper are motivated by the rise of creative placemaking as an economic redevelopment strategy across the United States. Attempting

to woo the "Creative Class"—or the educated, affluent workers of the knowledge-based, postindustrial economy—these efforts employ arts and culture to attract newcomers to urban cities, often at the expense of current residents. In these instances, gentrification can quickly lead to the displacement of both people and culture. In *The City Creative: The Rise of Urban Placemaking in Contemporary America* (Carriere and Schalliol 2021), we respond to this dynamic through two contributions: first, we provide a thorough account of the conceptual development of creative placemaking as an urban redevelopment strategy in the United States, one that leads to the inequalities briefly noted above. Second, we propose an alternative approach to creative placemaking anchored in community-driven projects that build social connections while producing and redistributing resources. We arrived at these intentions through a decade-long study of do-it-yourself (DIY) attempts to address local social problems in more than forty US cities through archival research, documentary photography, interviews, participant observation, and site visits. Below, we provide an overview of these points to describe the motivations for our pedagogical approach to undergraduate-based design-build projects, such as those employed in Fondy Park in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

First, a key definition: The mainstream understanding of creative placemaking may be summarized by the definition advanced by Markusen and Gadwa in their 2010 report for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA):

> Creative placemaking animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired. In turn, these creative locales foster entrepreneurs and cultural industries that generate jobs and income. (Markusen and Gadwa 2010, 3)

There is, of course, a history behind this concept. A closer look at the bibliographies of reports authored by scholars like Markusen and Gadwa find multiple citations of works by the likes of Jane Jacobs, William H. Whyte, Kevin Lynch, Richard Florida, and professionals associated with the New Urbanist movement, among others. And organizations that fund place-based arts work, including the NEA and ArtPlace America—the latter a collection of foundations, financial institutions, and federal agencies that supported placemaking projects from 2011 to 2020—have also used this intellectual trajectory to inform their funding decisions.

Yet it is our contention that this mainstream approach to placemaking misses much. Most broadly, this practice privileges a newly arrived "Creative Class" at the expense of populations who have called these cities home for generations. Mainstream creative placemaking thus overlooks the histories of such populations, while concentrating resources in predominantly white downtown corridors and away from neighborhoods of color that desperately need such investment. At the same time, the focus of such placemaking work tends to be on passive consumption; for example, one does little more than enjoy most murals, and their presence often marks an area as safe for the "Creative Class." With *The City Creative*, we sought projects that challenged this understanding of placemaking by highlighting a commitment to certain types of production (of actual things like manufactured goods and fresh food). This emphasis on production initiates real conversations on the redistribution of certain resources, from jobs to land itself. Drawing from a broad mix of theorists and histories, we came to see that such projects draw from essential architecture

and design practices that should be central in discussions of the future of architecture and related pedagogy.

Such an examination of this alternative approach to creative placemaking calls for a reorientation. To create this new framework we worked to revisit—and, in some cases, resuscitate—individuals, organizations, and movements often overlooked in both broad accounts of American architecture and urban planning and in more specific histories of mainstream creative placemaking. On the one hand, this has meant a closer, more critical reading of the likes of Jane Jacobs. But it has also led us to take a closer look at movements like Team 10, historic preservation, advocacy architecture, and the radical roots of postmodernism. Additionally, it has oriented us toward the relationship between the built environment and DIY subcultures, as well as urban redevelopment projects that use production to redistribute resources in an effort to heal the economic, social, and environmental damage wrought by earlier attempts to renew the city.

So what does this look like? What can one take from such disparate sources to craft a more inclusive definition of placemaking? We can begin a counterhistory with the humane brand of modernism practiced by the Team 10 movement. The Dutch architect and Team 10 member Aldo van Eyck highlighted the group's intention: "Whatever space and time mean, place and occasion mean more." Architecture should therefore be conceived as creating a "Built Homecoming" based on the human needs of its inhabitants, starting with shelter. This focus on the people within "the built artifact" led van Eyck to conclude that he "defined space simply as the appreciation of it, thus excluding all frozen properties attributed to it academically whilst including what should never be excluded: man appreciating it!" (Smithson 1968, 41).

Such an appreciation of the human element convinced the group of the need to reevaluate some of the crucial tenets of architectural modernism. Convinced that the one-size-fits-all model of design robbed individuals of their creativity and freedom of expression, van Eyck argued for a brand of architecture that didn't overlook the tastes of the people it was trying to accommodate. This led van Eyck to reconsider the role of vernacular architecture and the role of ornamentation in design. He asked: "In what way are people to participate in fashioning their own immediate surroundings within a conceived overall framework? You see, when one says 'city' one implies the 'people' in it, not just 'population'" (ibid., 31).

Such a philosophy toward architecture also led van Eyck to become highly critical of modernist urban planning. In planners' race to tear down the old and put up the new, they neglected "all sense of place." Even more, these individuals, fearful of "the unpremeditated event, the spontaneous act . . . made a flat surface of everything so that no microbes can survive the civic vacuum cleaner." The modern attention to cleanliness and order had literally bled the city of its life's blood (ibid., 44).

By the mid-1960s, American architects were developing similar lines of thought. At Columbia University, James Marston Fitch argued for an architecture that had to "proceed from the bottom up" and drop the belief in "absolute and universal" standards. Fitch urged his fellow architects and planners to pay attention to the particular over the general and accept differences and a form of aesthetic pluralism. Most importantly, Fitch argued for a smaller-scale, more humanistic understanding of architecture and urban planning that takes seriously the experiences and tastes of the city dweller, whatever her background. While modernist models of urban plans were often made based on "decisions affecting 68 in. people made from an altitude of 3500 ft!" Fitch firmly believed that the profession had to

take on the street-level perspective of the pedestrian. This, Fitch concluded, was how an authentic version of architecture and planning could emerge that acknowledged the importance of history, context, and experience while fostering community (1965, 4, 5).

Such ideas informed Fitch's decision to found Columbia University's historic preservation program in 1965. For Fitch, the "idea of such a program . . . represented my own dismay at the widening environmental disasters of the post–World War II years—especially as the real consequences of the urban renewal programs became apparent." At the same time, Fitch was also influenced by his friendship with Jane Jacobs, whose *Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) allowed Fitch "to look at cities as living organisms, not inert tissue which architects and planners could manipulate at will, each according to his own private standards of good design" (Fitch 1981, 235). Based on such influences and sentiments, Fitch was motivated by the environment of the 1960s and the desire to save aspects of the urban that people still used and appreciated.

In the same year Fitch established Columbia's historic preservation department, the urban planner Paul Davidoff published his essential essay "Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning." For Davidoff, who would come to be seen as the founder of advocacy planning, "The prospect for future planning is that of a practice which openly invites political and social values to be examined and debated." In the pursuit of true "urban democracy," planners would have to drop their fanatic devotion to concepts of expertise and objectivity. "*Appropriate planning action cannot be prescribed from a position of value neutrality,*" Davidoff strongly asserted, and a planner should in fact "be an advocate for what he deems proper" (1965, 331, 332).

As Davidoff argued in a 1967 piece for *Perspecta* magazine, such an approach would bring real democracy to a process too often carried out in "relative isolation," removed from any connection to pressing social, political, economic, or cultural concerns. As Davidoff concluded, "Planning should be made a plural process, a process in which a number of competing plans are presented to the public" (1967, 158).

Such a quotation is indicative of Davidoff's understanding of advocacy planning. First and foremost, one sees Davidoff's commitment to a plurality of plans made available to the citizens affected by development. Yet more importantly, Davidoff sees citizens as playing an active role in the formulation of these plans. Finally, there remains a role for the trained professional. They are there to provide necessary support for the community, to help them navigate through—and negotiate with—the planning process itself. Such a model would come to influence many young architecture and planning students.

Some of those influenced by the likes of Davidoff would become early practitioners of postmodern architecture. Yet counter to the brand of postmodernism that came to dominate the practice during the 1980s, early advocates for this approach, including Charles Jencks, believed that "Post-Modernism" called for an architecture of inclusion, one that found great value in "extending the language of architecture in many different ways—into the vernacular, towards tradition and the commercial slang of the street." Importantly, Jencks also stressed the "active, valuative aspect" of city life. At the same time, postmodern planners took aim at the secretive nature of modern urban planning and proposed to make planning decisions within a "democratic, political context where his values can be made explicit and debated." All of this would set the stage for the "return to an old and never perfect institution, the public realm." Here was a true place where people could live, gather, and "assert their communality" (Jencks 1977, 108).

In the late 1970s, people were already asserting their communality in DIY urban cultures. In the South Bronx, the hip-hop pioneer DJ Kool Herc turned an underutilized rec room at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue into a makeshift club. When those early hip-hop concerts attracted too many people, Herc and others appropriated nearby Cedar Playground (Chang 2005). Throughout the United States, the rise of punk rock illustrated how DIY culture could transform urban buildings. Punk rock venues like ABC No Rio (founded in New York City in 1980), 924 Gilman (Berkeley, CA, 1986), and Trumbullplex (Detroit, MI, 1993) all transformed previously vacant structures into epicenters of artistic creation.

Yet what was produced in such spaces looked and sounded little like the arts being produced in mainstream placemaking endeavors. These are the roots of an alternative understanding of production. Another set of such origins can be seen in the literal roots of agriculturally based projects. Such projects occurred during World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II, but a more inclusive version rises following the deindustrialization and economic upheaval of the 1970s. In Milwaukee, one sees the arc of this federally funded but locally administered Shoots 'n' Roots urban agriculture program in the 1970s and 1980s, which provided garden development support for African American families who arrived during the Great Migration. In the 1990s, partly inspired by the program, the urban farming pioneer Will Allen began his legendary Growing Power urban farm near the city's largest public housing project to provide healthy food, a connection with the environment, and community support. In the 2000s, Sharon and Larry Adams built on Allen's work by organizing their neighbors to establish Walnut Way Conservation Corp., an urban agriculture-centered community development group focused on their racially and economically segregated neighborhood. In each, urban farming was positioned as one piece of an inclusive brand of placemaking that stressed equitable development and environmentalism focused on neighborhoods of color, those often most damaged by industrial expansion and collapse. Importantly, Walnut Way has been able to purchase the land on which they farm, interrupting the process of gentrification by keeping property ownership within the community while simultaneously providing space for residents to make money through the production of healthy food.

1.1   AN EMERGING NATIONWIDE NETWORK

While *The City Creative* tracks the work of activists from all professions, two contemporary examples may help demonstrate the direct connection between architecture and redistributive and productive placemaking. In Chicago, the Sweet Water Foundation, led by the trained architect Emmanuel Pratt, has transformed the site of a demolished Chicago public school in the city's African American Washington Park neighborhood. The once-derelict site is now a city-block-sized garden and community center that provides urban agriculture education, job training, and low-cost food to neighborhood residents. The visual centerpiece of the site is the Thought Barn, a timber-frame building constructed through a barn-raising ceremony during the 2017 Chicago Architecture Biennial, which has become the site's visual signature and the heart of its public work (Figure 1). Elsewhere in the city, the architect and designer Iker Gil's MAS Studio has partnered with groups like Architecture for Humanity and artists like Luftwerk to create community-driven installations in underserved neighborhoods. Among the guiding principles of this work is attention to low-cost and flexible designs, especially in the production of much-requested street furniture on the site of derelict lots in such places as the Mexican American Little Village neighborhood (Figure 2).

Other high-profile examples of the link between architecture and this more expansive model of creative placemaking include Project Row Houses in Houston, which uses housing destined to be demolished as the centerpiece of gallery and living spaces (Figure 3), and the Society for the Advancement of Construction Related Arts in Buffalo, New York, a novel job training program that teaches traditional skilled trades through artistic design-build projects (Figure 4). In each case, special attention to the built environment and its relationship with host community outcomes are hallmarks of the projects.

2 CONNECTING RESEARCH AND PEDAGOGY

This work has informed our pedagogy. At its most basic, we have connected students—and the public—with such organizations through visiting lectures and museum exhibitions that feature their work. We have led trips of Milwaukee School of Engineering (MSOE) students to Detroit to meet with organizers like the Green Garage, a socially and environmentally focused incubator and small business space. And we have taken St. Olaf College students to Milwaukee to visit with leaders of organizations like Walnut Way. Such classroom and site visits are motivated by the idea that students should be directly exposed to a broad range of organizational models and experiences before engaging in the student projects we discuss below.

2.1 COLLABORATIVE STUDENT PROJECTS IN MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN

Organizations like Walnut Way are indicative of a vibrant activist community on Milwaukee's African American North Side, with a particular interest and history in urban agriculture. This history goes back over forty years, but over the past decade, activists such as Will Allen, Venice Williams (Alice's Garden), and Andre Lee Ellis (We Got This) have created expansive farms in areas of the city marked by deindustrialization, depopulation, and housing loss (Figure 5). These projects are physically rebuilding derelict spaces and, in the process, repopulating communities, connecting neighbors, and producing tangible products. As they have matured, they have also become job training programs, facilitating small business development in ancillary fields such as food preparation.

Within our respective academic institutions, we have developed community-student design-build project partnerships in underserved North Side neighborhoods that are guided by these histories. Such work has allowed us to better understand how histories often left out of discussions on creative placemaking can inform a new approach to the practice. This has led MSOE students to collaborate with the architect Susan Sloan on the design and construction of a mobile farm stand to facilitate the development of a new farmers' market in the city's Harambee neighborhood. At the under-resourced Browning Elementary School on the city's North Side, another group of MSOE students transformed a vacant greenhouse into an aquaponics laboratory to produce fish and produce for students and community members alike. Outside of the greenhouse, students installed a solar food dehydrator to create healthy snacks. These projects have also been integrated into the school's curriculum in the natural and social sciences.

2.2 FONDY PARK CASE STUDY

These success stories allowed us to think bigger, as is evident in the Fondy Park project. Fondy Park is located in the North Side Milwaukee neighborhood of Lindsay Heights, one of the country's most racially and economically segregated communities, where divestment

has taken its toll on community members and the built environment. In addition to lost jobs and opportunities, pervasive derelict lots and abandoned structures create literal holes in the landscape. In 2016, one such lot adjacent to the park offered the opportunity to create a neighborhood-centered multiuse space through a community-municipal government partnership.

Working in tandem with Walnut Way, MSOE students facilitated listening sessions with Lindsay Heights residents to determine what community members wanted in their new neighborhood park. Broadly speaking, residents desired a safe space that highlighted such themes as environmental resiliency, food security, and local culture. More specifically, they stressed the need for comfortable seating, tables that featured chess boards, and a stage for outdoor performances. After making and presenting initial renderings of potential designs, MSOE students collaborated with the architect Ray Chi and carpenters Matthew Grambling and Timothy Linn to build the structures; construction was completed in September 2017 (Figure 6). To emphasize the importance of community guidance, neighborhood residents' words were carved into tables throughout the park (Figure 7).

The chess boards have proven immensely popular with neighborhood residents, as has the park's open green space: community groups now hold weekly yoga classes at Fondy Park throughout the summer. Moreover, local organizations such as Walnut Way hold their annual Harvest Day Festival in the park, and MSOE has offered student-run STEM workshops there. It is also a place where residents can simply sit, relax, and even surf the internet. A free wi-fi network was installed in the park in 2018.

As noted in community listening sessions, Lindsay Heights residents were concerned with environmental resiliency. This was not simply an ideological stance; it was a practical issue. Flooding is a significant problem in the neighborhood, particularly for the area's older housing stock. To address such concerns, Fondy Park included sustainability features to decrease the strain on the city's sewerage system. Here, such partners as the City of Milwaukee's Environmental Collaboration Office, the nonprofit organization Reflo Sustainable Water Solutions (whose executive director, Justin Hegarty, is an MSOE alumnus), and for-profit engineering firm GZA GeoEnvironmental Inc. collaborated on a rainwater catchment system that includes a 2,500-square-foot bioswale that temporarily holds water in a prairie-like area. This water then drains into a cistern that holds up to 71,000 gallons of water. Fondy Park even features a series of "street cuts," which guide water from nearby city streets into the park. Finally, the park is decorated with native perennial plantings, which absorb rainwater during storms (and are nourished by the cistern's water). All these design tools remove significant strain from the city's sewerage system, reducing flooding in the neighborhood. All these green infrastructure components are maintained by Blue Skies Landscaping, a firm run by Walnut Way that hires residents, particularly those affected by incarceration.

Yet Fondy Park's innovations help more than nearby residents. When the City of Milwaukee's sewerage system reaches its maximum capacity, it is forced to dump raw sewage into nearby Lake Michigan. Any diversion helps protect the entire region against such events, challenging the belief that environmental sustainability is more likely in white, affluent neighborhoods. In fact, after the park became solar powered in 2019, the City of Milwaukee named Lindsay Heights the first "Eco-Neighborhood," a designation meant to encourage tourism. A neighborhood previously dismissed as marginalized is now on the cutting edge of sustainability, combining environmental improvements, opportunities for social interaction, employment opportunities, and access to outside dollars.

This does not mean the project was without obstacles; issues related to representation (as seen in the voices chosen to be represented on the chess boards) and distribution of opportunity (as seen in who was awarded contracts to build the park's structures) led to heated discussions throughout the development process. Within such discussions, the presence of Walnut Way—a well-respected neighborhood-based organization—proved invaluable. By taking on a mediator role, Walnut Way created the space, both intellectual and physical, where students participated in the development of a successful park. Through collaborative visioning with residents, they learned alternative histories of architecture and urban planning, systems for local engagement in which community members actually lead, and collaborative design practices that bridge residents and tradespeople; they also developed technical skills through structural and landscape architectural work. For such students, these projects become a way to act as budding engineers and planners through hands-on, experiential learning; they are therefore an important training tool. Yet they also teach these young people the lesson that context matters and that community members are essential to successful projects. Moreover, the model is vital for MSOE itself, as it enhances its community connections while contributing solutions to the city's long-standing racial and economic problems.

3. CONCLUSION

As the case study of Fondy Park demonstrates, we are building a model that combines our approach to productive, redistributive creative placemaking that can also be a model for how academic institutions can be partners in such development while providing important learning opportunities. We see this approach as central to architecture and design pedagogy, even for students outside of architecture, design, and urban planning. Such a desire for a fresh approach has led us to (re)consider actors often left out of discussions on architecture, planning, and placemaking. This has allowed us to see the real value of community participation in such projects. Those who have called these neighborhoods home for generations have a profound understanding of what these communities lack. But, more importantly, they also understand the strengths and assets of the neighborhood, which are often overlooked in outsider accounts of these communities. It then becomes the task of the student, professor, and other professionals (including architects, urban planners, and engineers) to draw from such strengths and assets as a reciprocal relationship is formed between community and professionals.

Of course, our approach is anything but exhaustive; many ideas, potential partners, and spaces are still to be explored. In Carriere's Milwaukee, for example, are there ways to integrate the culture of the growing Hmong population into placemaking efforts? And in Schalliol's Minneapolis, how could such placemaking work begin to speak to the experiences of the Somali population? We are excited to contribute to this evolution of placemaking.

FIGURES

Figure 1: Sweet Water Foundation, Chicago, Illinois (Photograph by David Schalliol)

Figure 2: Assembly of MAS Studio's Cut. Join. Play. in Little Village, Chicago
(Photograph by David Schalliol)

Figure 3: Project Row Houses, Houston, Texas (Photograph by David Schalliol)

Figure 4: A Society for the Advancement of Construction-Related Arts project, Buffalo, New York (Photograph by David Schalliol)
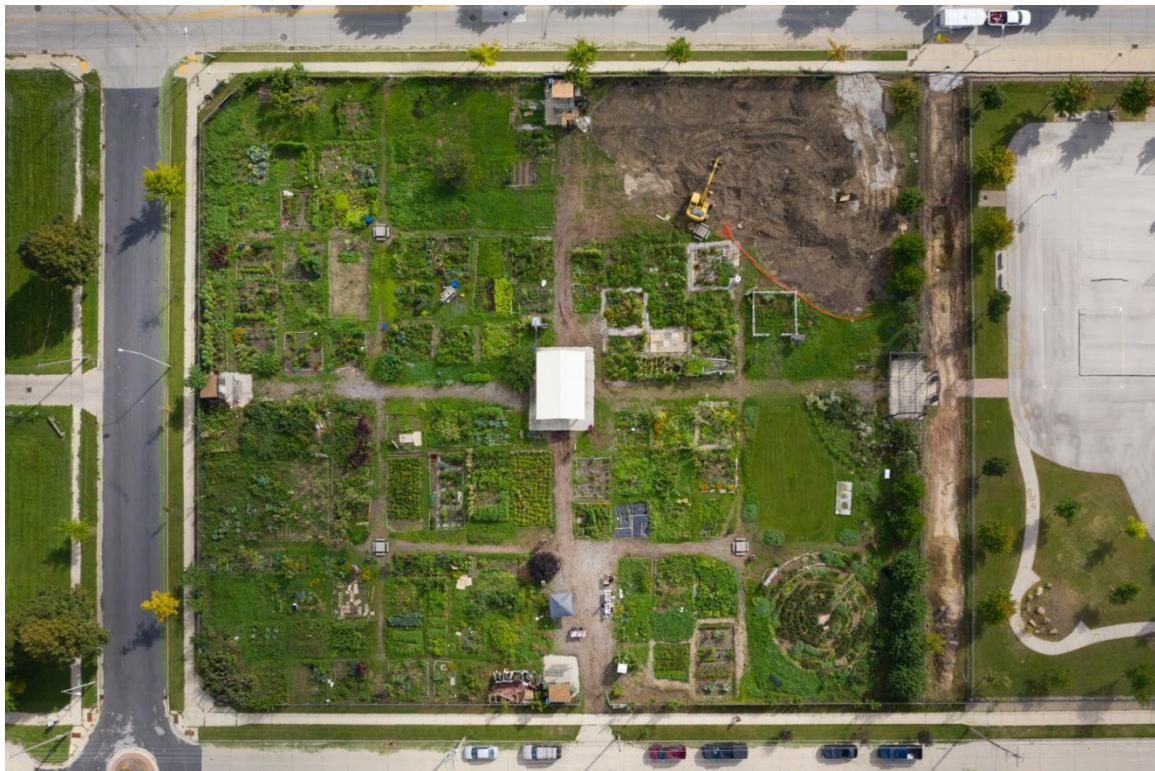
Figure 5: Alice's Garden, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (Photograph by David Schalliol)

Figure 6: Fondy Park, before (looking southwest) and after (looking northeast),
Milwaukee, Wisconsin (Photographs by Tim McCollow)

Figure 7: Fondy Park table with community member quote, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
(Photograph by Nicolas Lampert)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

REFERENCES

Carriere, Michael H., and David Schalliol. 2021. *The City Creative: The Rise of Urban Placemaking in Contemporary America.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Chang, Jeff. 2005. *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*. New York: Picador.

Davidoff, Paul. 1965. "Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning." *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 31, no. 4 (November): 331–38.

———. 1967. "Democratic Planning." *Perspecta* 11: 157–59.

Fitch, James Marston. 1965. "Goals in Urban Beauty." Paper presented at the Regional Plan Conference, New York City, November 10. James Marston Fitch Papers, "Copies for Selected Essays" folder, Avery Library, Columbia University, New York, NY.

———. 1981. "A Short History of Historic Preservation at Columbia University." In *The Making of an Architect, 1881–1991: Columbia University in the City of New York*, edited by Richard Oliver, 235-42. New York: Rizzoli.

Jacobs, Jane. 1961. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Random House.

Jencks, Charles. 1977. *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*. New York: Rizzoli.

Markusen, Ann, and Anne Gadwa. 2010. "Creative Placemaking." A white paper for the Mayors' Institute on City Design. Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts.

Smithson, Alison, ed. 1968. *Team 10 Primer*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.