

# antropologia e teatro

ARTICOLO

## Reclaiming Cultural Heritage Through Residents' Creative Engagement. Placemaking and Arts-Based Research in the Šnipiškės Neighbourhood Jekaterina Lavrinec

**Abstract – ITA**

Mirate a modellare spazi comunitari, luoghi pubblici e percorsi culturali, le pratiche di placemaking possono contribuire significativamente all'identità del luogo e al senso di appartenenza, soprattutto se radicate nelle storie e narrazioni locali. Questo articolo colloca le iniziative creative partecipative – come interventi di co-design dal basso – come pratiche su piccola scala ma politicamente rilevanti per ricucire reti locali di fiducia, sostegno reciproco e apprendimento situato nei quartieri. Richiamandosi alla nozione di R. Sennett (2013) di “cooperazione come arte”, l'articolo sostiene che le iniziative di placemaking in corso rivitalizzano la cooperazione come abilità sociale e che il processo di co-creazione ne favorisce lo sviluppo. Basandosi su un progetto di ricerca partecipativa basata sulle arti condotto nel quartiere storico di Šnipiškės (Vilnius) tra il 2012 e il 2020, l'articolo discute anche le premesse metodologiche della ricerca artistica in contesti urbani storici, evidenziandone il potenziale di amplificare voci poco rappresentate e di supportare la co-creazione della vita culturale – in linea con i principi della Convenzione UNESCO 2005 sulla Diversità delle Espressioni Culturali.

**Abstract – ENG**

Aimed at shaping community spaces, public places, and cultural routes, placemaking practices can meaningfully contribute to place identity and a sense of belonging, particularly when they are grounded in the local histories and narratives of place. This paper positions participatory creative initiatives – such as bottom-up co-design interventions – as small-scale yet politically potent practices for reweaving local networks of trust, mutual support and situated learning within neighbourhoods. By referring to R. Sennett's (2013) notion of “cooperation as a craft”, this paper argues that ongoing placemaking initiatives revive cooperation as a social skill and that the process of co-creation supports this skill. Drawing on findings from an arts-based participatory research project conducted in the historic neighbourhood of Šnipiškės (Vilnius) in 2012-2020, this paper also discusses the methodological premises of arts-based research in historic urban contexts, highlighting its potential to amplify underrepresented voices and to support the co-creation of cultural life – in accordance with the principles of the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Diversity of

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## Reclaiming Cultural Heritage Through Residents' Creative Engagement. Placemaking and Arts-Based Research in the Šnipiškės Neighbourhood

Jekaterina Lavrinec

### *Introduction*

As a researcher, when you come to the neighbourhood, it is essential to connect with people and their experiences. In the paradigm of arts-based research, the study of the place relies on a variety of performative and participatory art forms that engage with the urban environment, its communities, local narratives, and layered histories. Applied in urban studies, arts-based research relies upon cooperation through place-oriented creative practices. This approach is essential in challenged urban contexts, as it can foster a sense of ownership among residents of all ages while contributing to the improvement of the neighbourhood. While applied in the context of cultural heritage, the arts-based approach becomes particularly valuable, as it engages residents not only in preserving material traces of the past but also in reactivating intangible traditions, stories, and everyday practices that give meaning to a place. Through participatory creative processes, residents become co-authors of heritage interpretation, ensuring that it remains a living and evolving resource rather than a static relic. Drawing on my arts-based research of the historic Šnipiškės neighbourhood in Vilnius (2012-2020), conducted as a member of the Laboratory of Urban Games and Research (Laimikis 2020), I will examine how the cooperative creative process enables residents to reclaim the cultural heritage, not as a fixed monument of the past, but as a living, shared practice. Through creative engagement, residents reinterpret and reactivate the meanings of their neighbourhood, transforming everyday spaces into places of belonging and collective memory. Also, I will briefly discuss how by centring expression, interpretation, and collective creation, placemaking as the arts-based research approach contributes to the decolonisation of knowledge production. It is also essential that the value of arts-based research lies in its grounding in lived contexts, material conditions, and situated experiences, rather than in purely expressive artistic forms (Sullivan 2005).

An optic, in which cultural heritage is inseparable from the lived environments and the diversity of the everyday practices and creative activities that shape it, is supported by the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005). By emphasising “the vital role of

cultural interaction and creativity” and recognising cultural expressions as “an important factor that allows individuals and peoples to express and to share with others their ideas and values”, the Convention provides a framework for understanding place-oriented creative cooperative actions as forms of safeguarding and revitalising intangible and tangible heritage. It thus aligns with contemporary anthropological approaches to placemaking (Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003; Dovey 2010), where the meaning of a place emerges through collective agency, embodied practice, and the situated use of space. These ideas are rooted in and resonate with phenomenological and critical perspectives on urban space as continually shaped and socially produced through everyday practices and interactions (Certeau 1984; Lefebvre 2004). In a closely related trajectory, design-oriented traditions such as New Urbanism and human-centred approaches to public space emphasise the creation of environments that foster social interaction and community life (Jacobs 1961; Whyte 1980; Gehl 2010). Together, these approaches laid much of the conceptual and practical groundwork for what later became known as placemaking, linking spatial design with social experience and civic engagement. They share the Convention’s concern with creating environments that enable participation, foster social connections, and promote a sense of belonging.

Notably, placemaking inherently engages questions of equity and inclusion, seeking to ensure that the creation and experience of place are shared among all members of a community. The framework of critical placemaking (Toolis 2017) develops this perspective further, foregrounding social justice in the co-production of space and thus aligning with the UNESCO Convention (2005), which emphasises the need “to create an environment which encourages individuals and social groups ... to create, produce, disseminate, distribute and have access to their own cultural expressions” (Article 7).

Within this optic, local creative and participatory practices in public places in challenged neighbourhoods (such as those developed in the Šnipiškės neighbourhood, Vilnius), enact the UNESCO Convention (2005) by ensuring that the creation and enjoyment of cultural expressions remain accessible to residents regardless of their economic or social circumstances. In disadvantaged neighbourhoods, creative practices that strengthen social ties and enhance the livability of the place are a vital resource, activated through collective acts of making and re-making. Cooperation and sharing (skills, knowledge stories, time, space, materials) lie at the heart of placemaking activities.

To draw a sketchy portrait of the historic Šnipiškės neighbourhood in Vilnius, this suburb was first mentioned in the 16th century. It became widely known in the 17th and 18th centuries for its workshops and craftsmanship. The territory was rich with clay and gravel, so bricks, roof tiles, and elements for smoking pipes

(Čivilytė - Kvizikevičius - Sarcevičius 2005) were produced here. Just a decade ago, workshops for fixing clocks, shoes, clothes, and even musical instruments could still be found here. The district experienced dramatic depopulation during and after World War II. Two waves of modernisation and urbanisation in the latter half of the 20th century and the early 21st century placed significant redevelopment pressure on the historic area; during the most recent phase of urbanisation, much of the historic area was replaced by high-rise glass office buildings. Today, a small part of the district still retains its suburban character, with wooden houses (built between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), small gardens, and a slower pace of life. Many of these houses are shared between multiple families, resulting in visible variations in textures, colours, and architectural elements on the facades. Maintaining these wooden houses remains a persistent challenge. Much of the district's history and identity, particularly its connection to local crafts, has been forgotten. At the same time, the area itself has acquired a negative image in the press, which has affected its residents (Lavrinec 2018b). Also, the historic part of the district lacked public places for residents to gather. This became the starting point for the arts-based research and placemaking activities conducted in the neighbourhood starting from 2012.

#### *Arts-based Research as Cooperation, Co-creation and Trustmaking*

Traditionally, social research methods in urban studies have relied on qualitative techniques such as interviews, focus groups, community surveys, and observation. These methods are instrumental for gathering insights into residents' experiences, social relations, and the structural dynamics of place. They allow researchers to gain a partial understanding of how people use and perceive their urban environments. However, the phenomenological approach as well as critical debates in human geography and feminist theory on the production of knowledge have opened space for research tactics and methods, foregrounding embodiment, sensory experience, and emotion as essential dimensions of understanding social life (Massey 2005; Rose 1993; Rose 1997). This shift provided a critical foundation for arts-based and participatory approaches, which embrace non-verbal, affective, and collaborative ways of engaging with place.

Arts-based research offers situated and participatory means of inquiry. As Shaun McNiff puts it, "Arts-based research can be defined as the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies" (McNiff 2007: 29). Arts-based research utilises the creative practices (visual art, performance, storytelling, design, etc.), applying them as a tool for in-depth

understanding of how individuals and groups experience, construct, and negotiate meaning in place; it can be used in all aspects of social research, from cultivating data to analysis. Researchers like Sarah Pink (2015) and Maggie O'Neill (2012) have demonstrated how arts-based and sensory methods can evoke relational, emotional, and tacit aspects of place that are often difficult to grasp using conventional interviews or surveys. Arts-based approach enables researchers to access affective, multisensory, and situated knowledges that are frequently overlooked in traditional methodologies (Leavy 2015; McNiff 2007; Springgay & Truman 2018). It encourages an embodied, emotionally engaged presence of the researcher in the field, where personal sensorial and emotional experiences become integral to the process of knowledge creation and interpretation. These principles highlight the performative aspect of the research process, which can be seen as a series of visible actions through which the researcher connects with others and engages with their experiences. The physical presence of the researcher in public places offers opportunities for many social gestures and interactions, and opens possibilities for further cooperation. In the arts-based research, bodily language and non-verbal contact are a vital part of the research process. This corresponds to Richard Sennett's (2013) conceptualisation of cooperation as a social craft, woven through gestures, shared rituals, social rhythms, making and repairing things.

Importantly, participatory arts-based research methods enable researchers to co-create knowledge with participants, rather than extract it from them. In this regard, arts-based research aligns with the ideas of collaborative ethnography, which emphasises co-authorship, reciprocity, and the joint construction of meaning between researchers and participants. As Luke Eric Lassiter (2005) stresses, collaborative ethnography shifts the emphasis from "studying" others to "working with" them, treating interlocutors as co-authors and co-interpreters of cultural meaning. This approach not only opens the research process to active participation but also strengthens ethical accountability in the research endeavour, as the resulting narratives are co-constructed in dialogue with those whose lives they represent. Some researchers (Menezes & Costa 2024) discuss collaborative ethnography as "a valuable contribution to spatial research and placemaking", defining the latter as "the collective re-imagination and reinvention of spaces". Both arts-based research and collaborative ethnography bridge the gap between academic research and public engagement, aiming to make the research process meaningful for the residents involved.

Also, the participatory and co-creative dimension of arts-based research resonates with the pleasures and rhythms of fieldwork described by Sennett, who emphasises the value of engaging with others and the everyday flow of social interaction: "Certainly for me, this is the pleasure which comes from ethnographic

fieldwork: you get out and about, meeting people unlike yourself. The pleasures of relaxed chat, of casual conversation, like a stroll down an unfamiliar street, encourage the ethnographer in everyone” (Sennett 2013: 23).

As a researcher, entering the neighbourhood, you situate yourself within its social and spatial dynamics – not only observing, but contributing to the process of place-making, cultural expression, and the reweaving of social ties. Engaging in participatory arts-based research means stepping into the field as an active participant – open to cooperation, dialogue, and the uncertainties of co-creation. This approach defines the tactics that my colleague from the Laboratory for Urban Games and Research and I apply when working with public spaces and neighbourhoods. For example, between 2013 and 2015, in cooperation with the residents, the Laboratory for Urban Games and Research co-developed the *Street Mosaic Workshop* in the Šnipiškės neighbourhood in Vilnius. This placemaking initiative aimed to symbolically restore the area’s historical connection to ceramic workshops that operated there during the 16th to 18th centuries. At the same time, this placemaking practice functions as a participatory arts-based research method, facilitating engagement with and insight into residents’ lived experiences. Conducted as a series of open-air artistic sessions, the *Street Mosaic Workshop* encouraged residents and visitors to join and co-create ceramic mosaics using available surfaces (like concrete electric poles), forming a public *Mosaic Route*. In the beginning, an essential component of this process was my physical presence in the neighbourhood – I worked on-site day by day, sitting by concrete electric poles while creating mosaics, remaining visible and approachable to passers-by. This bodily presence, combined with an ongoing and accessible creative process, encouraged curiosity, sparked conversations, and gradually led to collaboration. Frequently, I was joined by Julius Narkūnas, my colleague from the Laboratory for Urban Games and Research. In both situations – whether I was working alone or with a collaborator – residents would approach us, and the dynamics of social interaction remained similar. On the third day of making mosaics, we were joined by local children and young people. Within two weeks, an elderly woman approached us with a key to her garage located near the workshop site, inviting us to use the colourful ceramic tiles she had been storing there for years. Sharing resources is an essential part of the trust, which emerges because your actions in public places have been observed over time. In my arts-based research, being present, visible, and approachable proved to be crucial (yet it also involved making oneself vulnerable to diverse and often unpredictable situations).

Arts-based research is a time-consuming process, yet the time spent in public places fosters strong social ties within the community. A cooperative creative process in public space – open to all who approach with mutual

respect – cultivates the conditions for exchanging ideas, stories, materials, and shared meanings, while fostering micro-contacts and connections that strengthen the social fabric of place. This is the very essence of placemaking, which creates spaces for dialogue, nurtures trust among participants, and contributes to the evolving character and vitality of the place itself.

The *Street Mosaic Workshop* transformed transition areas of the neighbourhood into small temporary places for regular social contacts. Ongoing and recurring creative activities provided residents with opportunities to spend more time outdoors together, exchanging ideas and stories about the neighbourhood. Interestingly, R. Sennett argues that the development of cooperation as a social craft is tied to repeated, sustained practices: “The rhythm of skill-development becomes a ritual, if practised again and again” (Sennett 2013: 202). In the context of arts-based research, repeated, cooperative practices in public places translate into shared experience and practical knowledge – including how to create mosaics, the meanings and stories participants embedded in their work, and the stories of the ceramic objects and decorations used for mosaics. These meetings by the neighbourhood’s electric poles became a platform for mutual learning and everyday creativity – while developing mosaics, participants started generating new ideas for the neighbourhood, developing shared future perspectives.

As a placemaking initiative, the *Street Mosaic Workshop* also became a place for participants to share their social and cultural contexts and their family stories. For example, we learned that some children hid from their classmates the fact that they lived in the historic part of Šnipiškės, which had been negatively portrayed in the media. However, participation in the *Mosaic Workshop* – and the opportunity to decorate the neighbourhood – had a positive impact: children started bringing classmates to show them their work proudly. As a placemaker, I recognise that this growing sense of ownership emerges when one imprints their time, passion, skills, stories and the emerging connections into the urban environment. Collective creative practices that shape and reshape the public places not only develop social skills but also reinforce a sense of belonging, while genuinely empowering placemakers of different ages and abilities. Especially in marginalised urban contexts, placemaking can be perceived both as a practice of critical thinking and as a healing process. Even small-scale collective artistic interventions can spark alternative narratives about the historic neighbourhood, which are voiced and disseminated by participating residents. The impact of placemaking – and, more broadly, of participatory art practices – is particularly significant in neglected neighbourhoods. This dynamic directly resonates with the principles of the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of

Cultural Expressions (2005), which highlights the importance of ensuring equitable access to cultural expressions and encouraging the active participation of civil society in cultural life.

Through participatory and creative efforts to re-establish ties to place-based cultural practices, memories, and identities (that may have been obscured and undervalued), cultural heritage is revitalised as an organic part of contemporary life and neighbourhood identity. These kind of placemaking activities might become a part of what the heritage researchers define as “rhizomatic development” of continual living sites (Markevičienė 2012: 79). In the case of Šnipiškės, creative cooperative activities in public spaces provided adults with opportunities to form new social connections. It became a start for a series of pragmatic initiatives for the neighbourhood: the active residents arranged various activities, advocating for safe speed, safe sidewalks, safe winter roads, and arranged seasonal celebrations, connected to the history of the neighbourhood. Children who had participated in the Street Mosaic Workshop and other initiatives – such as neighbours’ picnics, urban games, and urban furniture workshops, initiated by the Laboratory of Urban Games and Research – started arranging community events themselves within just a few years. In this way, placemaking activities that regularly bring people together in public places reinforce community cohesion. This dynamic of learning by doing, in which one cooperative initiative sparks the next, corresponds to Richard Sennett’s idea of cooperation as a craft. While exploring the importance of informal gestures, which weave a social network, Sennett notes: “in learning, ‘show rather than tell’ is seldom entirely voiceless, [...] but showing comes before explaining” (Sennett 2013: 207).

From a placemaking perspective, the co-creation of even small objects for public use translates into the collective shaping of public space, where shared activities and rituals foster social skills, strengthen a sense of belonging, and contribute to the evolving character of the neighbourhood. Another example of creative placemaking in the historic neighbourhood, complementing the Street Mosaic case, was the Open Code Urban Furniture Workshops held in Šnipiškės in 2015. For this workshop, the Laboratory for Urban Games and Research used Tetris-inspired wooden modules, which could be arranged flexibly, according to the choices and needs of the residents (Lavrinec 2018a). This co-design workshop engaged children in a hands-on placemaking process alongside adults, encouraging them to choose the configuration of the modular furniture, construct it, and paint it. Through this creative process, the children not only shaped the design of the furniture but also developed functional uses for the pieces, transforming one element into a table for chess games. Beyond the workshops, the young participants continued to use the furniture in self-initiated events,

inventing new functions for it. In this way, participation in the placemaking activities can reinforce children's sense of ownership and agency in shaping public spaces.

### *Materiality of Place*

Materiality plays a crucial role in neighbourhood studies from a placemaking perspective. The physical features of a place – such as geological characteristics of the place, buildings, streetscapes, public furniture, and textures – do not merely provide a backdrop for social and cultural life; they actively shape how residents experience, interpret, and interact with their environment. Material elements anchor memory and identity, mediate social interaction, and enable creative practices, while also connecting tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Every historic neighbourhood carries a distinctive connection to its material environment, which both shapes and reflects local practices, skills, and identities. The importance of traditional knowledge “as a source of intangible and material wealth” and its “positive contribution to sustainable development, as well as the need for its adequate protection and promotion” is recognised in the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005). In this sense, the Convention positions traditional craftsmanship and locally embedded creative skills as essential expressions of cultural diversity and as drivers of sustainable development. Article 1(G) highlights the need to “give recognition to the distinctive nature of cultural activities, goods and services as vehicles of identity, values and meaning”. This principle affirms that local practices (such as working with wood, clay, stone, or textiles native to a particular territory) are not only aesthetic or economic activities: the craftsperson's engagement with local materials sustains both practical knowledge and the relational fabric of the community, as techniques are transmitted through shared work, observation, and mutual care. In this way, material culture becomes a medium through which cultural expressions remain living and renewable, linking people to place through the rhythms of making, maintaining, and repairing.

In Šnipiškės, for example, clay played a central role for several centuries (production of ceramics for stoves, roofs, pipes), while wood formed the primary material for residential houses. Each material demanded specialised knowledge and skills for construction, use, and ongoing maintenance, embedding a tangible craft heritage in everyday life. Over time, the layer of suburban architecture was overlaid with newer materials (concrete and glass) through modern development, adding new textures to the urban fabric and reshaping the material and sensory experience of the neighbourhood. Every material layer requires different maintenance skills, and each architectural layer, with its environment (suburban houses with gardens, glass

office buildings, concrete blocks of flats) is connected to a variety of everyday practices (Certeau 1984) and social rhythms (Lefebvre 2004). In his turn, R. Sennett (2013) connects the decline of practical, hands-on skills in modern societies with the decline of cooperative capacities, because both require the ability to work with materials, tools, and with others in a process that is rarely entirely predictable. Redeveloping practical skills through shared, hands-on activities thus also reintroduces and strengthens the capacity for cooperation in contemporary cities. In placemaking, the act of creating something tangible together – even if modest in scale – can generate a meaningful shift in social dynamics, as collective making fosters reciprocity (by opening opportunities for discussions, negotiations, exchange of ideas, accepting different perspectives).

In the present context, the wooden fabric of Šnipiškės sustains a slower and more embodied rhythm of life compared to the accelerated temporality of neighbouring office districts. The upkeep of wooden houses, shared gardens, and small-scale infrastructure requires practical cooperation and the circulation of local skills – painting and patching façades, repairing roofs, tending plants. These practices generate rhythms of maintenance, repair, and seasonal activities that stand in contrast to the standardised, outsourced upkeep of glass offices and concrete blocks. As Lefebvre (2004) suggests, social rhythms emerge from the entanglement of spatial forms, temporal patterns, and everyday practices. In Šnipiškės, the wooden material environment anchors a rhythm of domesticity, neighbourly exchange, and informal gatherings in courtyards and streets. Placemaking initiatives that respond to and build upon local rhythms, treating them as living practices (which embrace a special type of everyday creativity – such as decorating your garden for the pleasure of the passers-by), can foster denser social ties. Ceramic workshops, collective design activities, picnics and seasonal celebrations in Šnipiškės' public places drew upon seasonal and social rhythms of the neighbourhood. The creative activities extended existing skills of maintenance and cooperation into shared acts of exploring and reanimating the neighbourhood's history, stories, and identity. In this way, arts-based research activated residents' connections to local material culture, weaving creative collaboration into the everyday fabric of wooden Šnipiškės.

### *Conclusions*

Cooperation and co-creation are vital aspects of place-oriented arts-based research. To understand how residents experience, construct, and negotiate meaning in the place, cooperation appears to be a particularly fruitful tactic – one that not only fosters shared understanding but also enhances the quality of the place itself. Even small-scale adjustments of the materiality and configuration of the place may result in changes in social

rhythms, interactions, and scenarios of use. Residents-driven collective making in (and of) public places may not only visually mark the neighbourhood's layered memory but also become tools for informal communication and a sense of shared authorship over public space. Repetitive collective creative actions as a form of symbolic appropriation of the place establish an emotional relationship with the place, encouraging the development of responsibility for the neighbourhood, which becomes a shared space for the emerging local community. Cooperative placemaking not only cultivates a sense of belonging rooted in the neighbourhood's lived history, but also generates new shared spaces of meaning and cultural expression. Placemaking in urban settings is inherently performative, as it depends on the bodily presence of participants who enact and re-enact social relations, meanings, and uses of space through their collective practices. The presence of placemakers in public places transforms these sites by generating social interactions and bringing visibility to the narratives that shape how the places are perceived and lived. In this sense, creative co-activities in public places are a performative process in which actions such as walking, gathering, creating, or playing inscribe meanings and new stories into the urban environment. Cooperative, place-oriented artistic practices turn everyday spaces into stages of shared expression and cultural production.

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