Reclaiming Placemaking for an Alternative Politics of Legitimacy and Community in Homelessness

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Abstract
This study is about the struggle for legitimacy in place among a group of people often assumed to have neither. It examines the roll of informal placemaking and community building in struggles for settlement among people experiencing homelessness. It does so through ethnographic observation, photo-documentation, and participatory action research at three sites in Oakland, California, on which unhoused people (and some housed members of the surrounding community) have demonstrated bold forms of grassroots placemaking on public land. The first site, which came to be known as Housing and Dignity Village, was a small intentionally organized community of unhoused women and families that existed for 41 politically charged days in a low-income residential neighborhood before being cleared by authorities in 2018. The second, a highly visible piece of desirable city-owned land, has been occupied by unhoused people to varying degrees since 2016 while being considered for various housing development proposals. The third is the Wood Street Encampment, Oakland’s largest encampment and one of its longest standing, which has survived numerous partial evictions and a web of jurisdictional authority to become home to an extensive and innovative informal community-building effort. Despite their differences, each offers a powerful case of place-based bottom-up community organizing among unhoused people, in which placemaking becomes part of a subtle politics of visibility, being, and legitimacy. The study argues that these instances and others not only demonstrate a different sort of placemaking, but demand that we reconsider and reclaim the concept itself.

Keywords Community · Homelessness · Informal settlement · Informality · Placemaking · Unhoused
Over the past two decades, “placemaking” has become an exceedingly popular trend in contemporary urban design, planning, and economic development. Although used in various ways, as a design intervention the term essentially describes efforts—usually by cities and/or local development interests, sometimes with community involvement—to create more inviting, distinctive, and human-scale streets and public spaces, often achieved through urban design elements like lighting, plantings, art installations, interactive furniture, and permanent or temporary street closures (see Fleming, 2007; Madden, 2011; Lydon & Garcia, 2015; Thomas, 2016, among many others). Often motivated by an interest in generating pedestrian activity, economic development, and community and cultural life in an area, placemaking is a goal behind decisions to fill empty lots with food trucks, farmers markets, or pop-up shops in shipping containers, or to enliven urban streets in any number of similar ways ranging from public events to landscape design. (Placemaking has had a particular moment in the sun in many cities’ responses to the Covid-19 pandemic.) The term is especially prominent in the context of “creative placemaking” efforts, which use public art and a variety of other playful, colorful, interactive design elements to “activate” a dull or underperforming area, or to make communities “more livable” by fostering economic and creative activity, local character, and “quality of life” (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010).

With or without the “creative” in front, placemaking as an urban design and development strategy has the same basic intention: taking spaces that ostensibly somehow lack for a “sense of place” (in practice, usually a lack of uses and features deemed proper or desirable) and then using the tools and elements of urban design to make them into “places.” Doing so has become almost on par with priorities like sustainability or traffic management as something that planners strive for, a shared goal for real estate developers, transit agencies, small business owners, and local residents alike (see, e.g., Schaller, 2019).

Yet where does this leave those outside of the growth coalition? What does it mean that official placemaking efforts seldom consider—and sometimes outright exclude—those, like people experiencing homelessness, whose very presence conflicts with dominant visions of vibrant local character and quality of life? Indeed, the physical presence of the poor is so stigmatized that a common theme across many efforts to address homelessness and even to produce affordable housing is simply the erasure of visible poverty from physical space (on public space and homelessness in particular, see Mitchell, 2020). As Dovey and King (2011) point out, cities may be most obsessed by the need to remove slums out of aesthetic concerns. Such observations go back to the early urban ethnography of Frederick Engels (1845), who noted even then how slum areas tended to be hidden from view. Throughout the twentieth century, the very planning, design, and regulation of public space seem to have as often as not been concerned with limiting its uses and excluding “undesirables” in order to produce a safe, stable, orderly landscape for capital production and investment (Davis, 1990; Mair, 1986; Mitchell, 2003; Sorkin, 1992). Today, urban policies concerning homelessness in the USA are driven largely by criminalization through “public nuisance” and other regulations (Herring, 2019); where encampments have been allowed to exist for any period of time, it has generally been away from formal residential areas and under countless
time and use limitations (Herring, 2014; Mitchell, 2020). Whether locking public toilets and forbidding sleeping in public spaces or evicting entire tent cities, our efforts to address homelessness in urban space have largely been about unmaking the places where unhoused people live.

This study looks at work being done on the other side, by those trying to address housing and homelessness through the making of place and community. It is about the struggle for legitimacy in place among a group of people often assumed to have neither. I draw here on my (ongoing) field-based documentary and participatory action research on the socio-spatial conditions of unhoused people in the San Francisco Bay Area. With a particular emphasis on the places, architectures, and community building efforts of large encampments, since 2018 I have been photographing and diagramming physical sites, talking with and getting to know residents, and participating in both policy-oriented advocacy and on-site volunteer work. The data include thousands of photographs and field notes from many dozens of hours spent on the streets and in large encampments, especially in Oakland, as well as research via policy documents, media coverage, and conversations with city staff, non-profit outreach and advocacy leaders, and other community members.

Drawing on this research, I examine here the evolution of three sites in Oakland on which unhoused people (sometimes along with housed members of the surrounding community) have demonstrated bold forms of grassroots placemaking. The first site, known as Housing and Dignity Village, was a small and intentionally organized living space for unhoused women and families. Imbued with identity and purpose, it existed for just 41 politically charged days on a carefully selected corner lot in a low-income residential neighborhood in 2018. The second, a piece of city-owned land known as the East 12th Street Remainder Parcel, has been occupied by unhoused people to varying degrees since 2016. It is quite visible, and the site has received considerable attention for potential housing development and community organizing around homelessness and affordable housing. Despite ups and downs and various changes to the site itself, unhoused people continue to live there as of 2021. The third site is the Wood Street Encampment, Oakland’s largest informal settlement and one of its longest standing. The sprawling site located under a freeway interchange has survived numerous partial evictions and a complex web of jurisdictional authority to become home to an exceptionally extensive and innovative informal community-building effort called Cob on Wood.

Despite their great differences in form and persistence, each offers a powerful case of place-based bottom-up organizing among people and in places that are deeply stigmatized, where placemaking becomes part of a subtle politics of visibility, being, and legitimacy. I argue that these instances demonstrate a different sort of placemaking, and demand that we reconsider and reclaim the concept as we work to understand the conditions of the unhoused members of our community and the places that they live. In this way, the article contributes to the idea of “critical placemaking” as suggested by Toolis (2017) or what urban designer Emanuel Pratt has called “regenerative placemaking” in underserved communities (see, e.g., Smart Museum of Art, 2018). More fundamentally, I argue that this placemaking can help foster community and function politically to demonstrate legitimacy (if not necessarily to successfully resist displacement).
In what follows, I begin by exploring the concept of place itself in some depth, interrogating the trend of placemaking in mainstream urban planning and development, and reviewing some alternative conceptualizations. I then describe the cases of the three Oakland encampments sites—which I argue we should begin to recognize really as informal settlements—considering the physical organizations of the spaces, their relationships with surrounding communities, and the way they have been dealt with by authorities. I work throughout to use these cases and others to think productively about how place and placemaking are used culturally and politically, and how we might reassert their meaning as a tool for destigmatizing extreme poverty.

The Irony and the Potential of Placemaking

Place is an everyday sort of word, yet one that is thick, fraught, and still contentiously defined and employed in the social sciences. While deeply explored in geography and in certain strands of social theory (e.g., Lefebvre, 1973, 1974, 2009, 1979; Harvey, 2000, 2006; Massey, 1994, 2005), the concept is also an essential one for how we think about urban policy, planning, development, and community life. And I believe it is essential for understanding the politics of contemporary homelessness and informal settlement in the USA.

To begin with, place can be understood in relation to its more abstract foundational form, space. There are multiple understandings of space, dating back to Greek geometry and philosophy, ranging from something analogous to an empty container to a powerful contextualizing force more akin to the setting of a play.1 As Mazúr and Urbánek (1983) have urged, a more contemporary understanding describes space as neither empty abstraction nor individual deterministic contexts but as the basic building block of the physical and human geography of our world, interconnected by numerous spatial conditions and defined in relation to human experience. Or, as Massey (2002: 25) writes, “space is concrete and embedded too. It is no more than the sum of all our relations and connections.”

It is in this context that place can be defined as those spaces that are given human meaning and value. This prominent understanding, which is crucial for a politics of place in actually existing social worlds, comes from the humanistic geography of Yi-Fu Tuan and Edward Relph, among others. For them, space and place are defined phenomenologically in terms of human experience and interaction, and the fundamental point of distinction between space and place is in the relationship to people and to cultural meaning. If, for Tuan (1977), space is an area or location understood at a distance, without specific value or social connections, then intimacy with it

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1 Classically, space was viewed as essentially an empty featureless container for things, given definition only by what occupies it. (Perhaps this understanding still undergirds the all-too-prevalent “blank canvass” attitude in urban planning and design.) Over time, space has also been understood in terms of the relative significance of many differentiated spaces, as like contexts, which have effects on the things happening in or upon them. (At its extreme, this perspective may be the basis of an equally problematic sort of geographical determinism.) See Mazúr and Urbánek (1983) for a foundational discussion.
gives it social meaning and makes it a non-abstract—a place. For Relph (1976), to understand a place is to understand the intensity of attachment, involvement, concern, and “insideness” that people have for it. But space and place are also “dialectically structured in human environmental experience, since our understanding of space is related to the places we inhabit, which in turn derive meaning from their spatial context” (Seamon & Sowers, 2008: 44, after Relph, 1976).

With all this in mind, sanitizing efforts to unmake the places of homelessness can be seen as especially damaging. As Fullilove (e.g., 2004) has argued, the “root shock” of displacement or forced removal can be massively traumatic to communities and individuals. And we can see why concept of placemaking, meanwhile, really ought to be one of great social and political significance. The “making of places” has potential to foster a sense of belonging, community, even power—especially perhaps for subaltern, underprivileged, excluded, or displaced people. Indeed, researchers have looked at “sense of place” among disadvantaged communities, including with regard to community empowerment, improvement, and place attachment (Bennett, 2000; Fullilove, 2013; Tester et al., 2011; Manzo, 2014). Gotham and Brumley (2002) have described how public housing residents “use space” to their advantage in different ways, including for making places more safe and secure, to organize for improvements and redevelopment, and as a source of identity and agency. Ramadan (2013) finds spatio-political significance of place among Palestinian refugees at camps in Lebanon, and other have emphasized the importance of place for immigrants and refugees in new lands (e.g., Denov & Akesson, 2013; Rishbeth, 2001).

And yet the popular concept of “placemaking,” at least in the context of Anglophone urban planning and development, has little to do with any such empowering or consequential possibilities. Indeed, as mentioned above, the idea of socially significant place, especially when applied to public space, has been carefully defined and operationalized by authorities to promote a particular vision of a safe, orderly, and investment-friendly urban landscape (see Mitchell, 2003 for an especially important exploration of this). Even setting aside the most revanchist (Smith, 1996) or sadistic (Davis, 1990) efforts to control and expunge the poor from urban space, the results of mainstream placemaking efforts are hardly the democratic, accessible, and locally relevant public spaces that we might minimally hope for (see Bedoya, 2013; Starowitz & Cole, 2015; Douglas, 2018). A typical incarnation of placemaking in North America looks like a block-long segment of public street programmed to prioritize pedestrian-oriented consumption and recreation opportunities (think brightly colored temporary seating, maybe ping pong tables), carefully designed to discourage too much participation from those with nowhere else to go. Some expression of local culture and identity is often part of the project, whether through imagery and architecture intended to reflect a prominent ethnic group or interesting history, or simply through design elements and aesthetic choices that signal to visitors what sort of (usually trendy) place they are in, but rarely does it make room for any signs of current struggle or social problems. The results often wind up being spaces of privilege and consumption, designed around white, middle-class priorities with white, middle-class aesthetics—what George Lipsitz (2007) has called “The White Spatial Imaginary.” Or, as an article entitled “How to Make your Property a Place” published in Commercial Property Executive (a real estate trade publication)
put it, “Placemakers combine location, culture, and a community structure to create occupant-centered assets” (Rosario, 2018). What’s more, these new places are often “made” right on top of what is already there, which, it should surprise no one to realize, may actually have been a place to someone already.

The actions of Oaklanders in and around the informal settlements described here help demonstrate an alternative form of placemaking that is very different from that practiced in mainstream planning or local economic development strategies. They demonstrate the significance of place for the least privileged both culturally and politically and they demonstrate the role that place and community can play in a subtle politics of self-determination among unhoused people. They do so in part by destigmatizing places of homelessness and making a case for legitimacy among the stigmatized.

Rethinking Placemaking in Oakland

The city of Oakland provides a wealth of tragic ironies in terms of place, placelessness, and displacement. A well-known piece of public art at the Berkeley–Oakland border, a large steel sculpture of the words “HERE – THERE,” is a play on the Gertrude Stein quote that “There is no there there” in Oakland, which the city has always embraced while trying to prove wrong. (Today the installation is often surrounded by a number of tents and lean-to structures where unhoused people live.) In a city with as strong a local identity and sense of itself as almost anywhere, the language of displacement, explicitly, reverberates strongly among organizers and everyday residents, as people talk about the importance of this place and the physical and emotional destruction of being forced to leave in the face of expanding inequality, gentrification, and a lack of housing affordability.

The displaced go in all directions, and find innumerable ways of making do. Many have spread to the far reaches of an expanded Northern California metropolitan region (see Schafran, 2018; Menendian & Gambhir, 2019). But for others, displacement means sleeping under a freeway, in a park, alongside railroad tracks, or in some other piece of publically-owned often legally ambiguous land, perhaps not so far from what used to be home. Indeed, homelessness has become perhaps the most visible illustration of the scale of inequality, exclusion, and displacement in the Bay Area. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, counts suggested there were more than 4,000 people experiencing homelessness in Oakland in 2019, a 47% increase over the previous two years (EveryOne Home, 2019). Among these, an increasing number of those officially described as “unsheltered” live in the groups of several or more tents, vehicles, and structures often referred to as encampments.

As has been suggested elsewhere, we may do well to begin thinking of these sites intellectually and pragmatically not as incidental manifestations of poverty, disorder, and homelessness but as something more akin to established informal settlements (e.g., Loftus-Farren, 2011; Speer, 2016; Parker, 2020; [blinded]). With that, as I argue here, we can begin to see them also as quasi-organized political communities with an intentional spatial presence, and (thus) as places. The City of Oakland itself does not have a single clear definition of encampment or any other such terms,
though a recent report does note that “[t]he term encampment has connotations of both impermanence and continuity” (Ruby et al., 2021: 17). I use the terms encampment and settlement interchangeably here to mean sites of clustered and relatively persistent living, sleeping, and shelter-construction among multiple people experiencing homelessness. They are also often sites of placemaking and community building.

In what follows, I describe three such settlements as cases of informal placemaking among unhoused Oaklanders and in relation to their surrounding communities. I visited these sites frequently between 2018 and 2022 (in the case of Housing and Dignity Village, frequently between October and December 2018), observing and documenting the conditions and speaking with unhoused residents as well as housed activists, service providers, and municipal employees including police and sanitation staff. As part of a participatory action research framework, I provided assistance on occasion in the form of small contributions (batteries, flashlights, food) or participation in trash cleanups, and I attended several anti-eviction protests, community meetings, and city council hearings. I have also been active since 2018 with a community-based organization, called Eastlake United for Justice, with which I helped organize and raise money for the appeal of a planning decision on the E12 Parcel (described below).

**Housing and Dignity Village**

In the autumn of 2018, a small group of unhoused people led by the activist Needa Bee, a prominent organizer who has struggled with homelessness herself, attempted to build something more intentional and fundamentally community-based than local encampments before it. Needa was living with her daughter in an RV but had been using a compact disc full of city maps to determine an ideal location to occupy: publicly owned, currently vacant, and zoned residential. On the morning of Saturday, October 27th, Needa and a handful of others (the total number would be 13, all women and children except for two “trusted male allies”) walked on to a small open corner lot in the Deep East Oakland neighborhood of Brookfield. Nestled in a very poor but mainly residential area near a public library, there was a metal fence around the site that they could lock with a padlock, and the ground was paved in concrete, all making for a safer and more secure location for the small group than other encampments (see Fig. 1). Soon dubbed “Housing and Dignity Village,” it was intended explicitly to provide a safe, clean, and sober space for women and families with children to live as well as to serve as a “service hub for curbside communities in the area” (The Village in Oakland, 2020).

The new inhabitants quickly cleaned garbage from the site and surrounding lots and brought in a medical tent, outdoor kitchen, and gardening supplies, along with their array of shelters ranging in size from tents and shacks to Needa’s RV. I spent time sitting on a chair there, talking to adults and children, watching folks come and go for work and play, interacting with neighbors from down the street. Working with local nonprofits and community groups, regular food distributions were soon occurring on site along with occasional medical clinics and even free wireless
internet. As such, the residents of Housing and Dignity Village were not only helping themselves, but providing services to others as well, both housed and unhoused, in the surrounding neighborhood, which has long been impoverished and underserved. What’s more, they were building a visible and dynamic place that intentionally rejected stereotypes about unhoused people and informal settlement. Organizers stated on their website:

This reclaiming of public land for public good also demonstrates the tenacity of the community to provide for one another, especially those living on the street, in a dignified and compassionate manner when the city refuses to do so. The organizers seek to engage the neighborhood surrounding the Housing and Dignity Village in developing a vision for the parcel that benefits the needs of both the housed residents and the large curbside community in the area (The Village in Oakland, 2020).

Of equal significance is the explicit political messaging of Housing and Dignity Village. As mentioned, the site was carefully chosen in light of legal and zoning considerations and aimed to serve as a benefit to the greater community. But its communications went even farther, declaring the settlement to be an explicit response to city policies and “the absence of any significant low-income housing policy” from the mayor, and identifying homelessness as a women’s issue and queer people’s issue that was being ignored. Signage installed at the site, and literature printed and made available to visitors, also included a list of policy demands, statistics and other information about homelessness, and recognition that the site (like all of Oakland) is on the traditional lands of the indigenous Chochenyo Ohlone people. Organizers made direct reference to an important statement released that same month by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing (Farha, 2018) which,
among other things, condemns “punitive and discriminatory treatment of informal settlements” (including encampments in North America explicitly), asserts that evictions should be authorized only in exceptional circumstances, and commends efforts to improve informal settlements around the world (see also United Nations Human Rights Council, 2018). In doing so, organizers positioned Housing and Dignity Village and other “curbside communities” as places of some legitimacy in line with informal settlements around the world.

Threats from the City of Oakland to evict the residents of Housing and Dignity Village and clear the site began almost immediately, in early November 2018. Needa and a group of pro bono lawyers appealed the notices in court, asserting that eviction was in violation of the Eighth Amendment by criminalizing homelessness and failing to provide adequate alternative shelter options for the unhoused people facing eviction (they noted that the city’s shelter beds do not serve women with children, people with pets, or any working person with night shifts, and are generally only available to one person for one night at a time). They won a temporary restraining order against eviction on Nov. 13th, but a full injunction was denied two weeks later. On December 6th police and sanitation workers cleared the site and its 13 occupants, as outraged activists and neighbors looked on, recorded, and jeered (see Fig. 2). Ironically, many of the residents themselves were not there to protest or even gather their belongings when the city tore it down—they were at work or school. Gone with Housing and Dignity Village was the only safe and sober housing option in Oakland explicitly for unhoused single women with children (see Dirks, 2018) and the first explicit effort by a group of unhoused people in the city to organize, plan, and build a community in place for themselves. Given that it was so intentional (and considering that it was otherwise quite safe and clean), it is hard not to

Fig. 2 Oakland police and sanitation workers dismantle a structure at Housing and Dignity Village during the eviction of the site on December 6th, 2018. Photo by the author
imagine that the organization was part of the reason that the mayor acted so quickly to remove it.

The E12 Parcel

Quite to the contrary, one of the most visible and longstanding encampment sites in Oakland is a one-acre patch of city-owned land near Downtown known officially as the East 12th Street Remainder Parcel, and more commonly simply as E12. Located on a slight hill at the southeastern edge of Lake Merritt, the land has been slated for development on and off since it was defined in the process of redesigning a nearby road in 2013. It is the last piece of undeveloped public land on the lakeshore, most of which has seen substantial gentrification in recent decades. Serious proposals for the site have come and gone (including at one point a luxury condo tower) and several city councilmembers have lost or made their political fortunes at least in part around them. Yet through it all the land has been home to a large and always evolving settlement of unhoused people (see Fig. 3).

Perhaps 40 or more people lived on the E12 Parcel at its peak—roughly late 2018 through the middle of 2019. Among them for much of the time was the prominent unhoused activist and organizer Nino Parker. During this period, the E12 Parcel exhibited numerous signs of community and political life. In addition to more than a dozen tents and small lean-tos built of tarp, wood, and found material, there were a couple of community gathering spaces with chairs and tables, used for the food that supporters from various organizations would sometimes bring, or just for hanging

Fig. 3  Tents and other shelters on the East 12th Street Remainder Parcel near Lake Merritt in September 2018. Photo by the author
out. Press events were sometimes held here, with reporters and political candidates often stopping by. For a while, a central square of sorts featured an artistic arrangement of solar-powered lights in front of a mirror-clad wardrobe standing in the field (see Fig. 4). Potted plants and seating could be found outside of individual shelters as well, along with creative installations and other displays of ephemera. An American flag flew from a flagpole and various handmade signs included slogans about housing rights and community unity. The site was active day and night, and Nino and other organizers told me it was safer than most encampments (and city shelters) because people knew each other, wanted to be there, and were mainly sober and kind.

The E12 Parcel was also the focus of some sizeable community organizing and participatory planning efforts. In particular, beginning in 2015 a group of well-organized residents of the surrounding neighborhood called “Eastlake United for Justice” worked to create and promote a “People’s Proposal” for the site (see Fig. 5). Based on brainstorming sessions with area residents, their plan for 133 below-market-rate units and a public park and community gathering space, designed by local architects in partnership with an affordable housing developer, became one of three finalists under city consideration. The People’s Proposal lost then to a plan for a larger mixed-income development (which, controversially, would put its affordable units in a separate tower from the larger number of proposed market-rate units). Activists, including unhoused residents of the parcel, revived the campaign in 2018 and raised more than $2,000 from the community to appeal a planning commission decision. Though they ultimately lost (the appeal yielded a tied vote in council, requiring the mayor to break the
deadlock in favor of the previously approved developers), the Eastlake activists drew attention to housing issues and extracted some modest concessions from the winning developers along the way—most notably a handful of units ostensibly to be offered at the “deeply affordable” level for unhoused people and funds to be allocated for public space and community building by the local councilmember in collaboration with long-time residents.

The effort demonstrated the extent to which homelessness and affordable housing are stigmatized and the limitations of traditional activist politics in promoting community preferences when the alternative is a profitable and modestly palatable development in the contemporary fashion. On a prominent site such as this, and given other existing structural and political conditions, it seems unlikely that much could be achieved through formal participatory processes beyond some limited concessions to existing neighbors and community groups. Certainly informal settlement will not be allowed to persist there. And yet so far it has.

In 2018, I frequently saw Nino Parker at community planning meetings about plans for the site, giving interviews to the press, or speaking along with other residents during public comment at city council hearings. Several times there were explicit threats of eviction from the city that never materialized but turned out protesters just the same, and I would find myself chatting with Nino and others outside their tents, often around a cup of coffee or orange juice and some donated bagels. There was a sense that people were looking out for each other there, and that others in the neighborhood cared too and were working together. However, although construction on the site felt far from imminent, various “clean-ups” by city Streets

**Fig. 5** A rendering of the “People’s Proposal” for affordable housing and community space on the East 12th Street Remainder Parcel, created by Eric Saijo in collaboration with the E12 St. Coalition and Satellite Affordable Housing Associates. Image by Eric Saijo, Okamoto Saijo Architecture and the E12 St. Coalition. (See Okamoto Saijo, 2015)
and Sanitation workers appeared increasingly common both on and around the parcel after the last city ruling. Nino and other original residents departed, reporting an increase in violence and aggression that they attributed to newer arrivals whom I heard longtime residents describe as “crazy.” The eastern half of the site was finally closed off in late 2019, ostensibly in advance of construction. Actual progress toward the new development has been stalled (the result of a plodding and apparently fiscally irresponsible developer combined with financing and construction challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic), but the expectation that it will eventually proceed has hung over the E12 Parcel. Settlement persisted in the form of around 10 to 15 tents and lean-to structures for another couple of years, but it felt less stable spatially and socially, and I never observed the same sense of community I had seen on early visits.

In the summer of 2021, Oakland City Council President Nikki Fortunato Bas announced a plan to prepare sites for “co-governed” encampments across the city, including using the E12 Parcel (in her own district) “for an immediate compassionate care tiny home village to serve and shelter our unhoused neighbors” (Bas, 2021a; City of Oakland, 2021). The following November, “Oakland’s first large-scale tiny home community” officially opened on the E12 Parcel (Bas, 2021b). Called Lakeview Village, the site includes private single- and double-occupancy pallet shelters for 65 people, potable water, showers, and toilets, a Community Council of residents and neighbors, and services including healthcare, daily meals, mental health, substance abuse, and criminal record services, and housing assistance. Unhoused people already living at the site received priority placement into the new shelters. A more intentionally “co-governed” space is being planned in fits and starts. The site itself was initially rather sterile in appearance—at the open house, a community member remarked that the pallet shelters resembled prison cells. It may take time for a unique character to return to the place. Whether the large development approved for the site will ultimately be built there remains unclear. For now, thanks to local organizing and political will, there is at least a modicum of security and stability for the people living on this patch of land.

Cob on Wood

Wood Street runs roughly north–south for about a mile and a half in West Oakland, harangued the entire way by an elevated stretch of Interstate 880 that lurks over the low-rise industrial and residential neighborhood below. An even more imposing assemblage of overhead onramps, bridges, and connecting roads come together above the northern half of the street where several freeways meet at an interchange leading to the Bay Bridge that locals call the Maze. Right about there, sandwiched between Wood Street and the Union Pacific railroad tracks under concrete overpasses blotting out the sky, is the largest unofficial neighborhood in Oakland, the Wood Street Encampment (Fig. 6).

Some occupation of the site dates to the 2008 recession, but the number of residents has been growing rapidly since 2017 or so, initially along Wood Street itself and these days “deeper” in under the freeway. The population grew during the
summer of 2019 after a large number of people were removed from a nearby park; numerous residents describe being told by police or other city employees during this time explicitly to go to the Wood Street Encampment after being evicted from other places around town. Indeed, around this time the City of Oakland officially “sanctioned” settlement there, with the mayor conceding there was nowhere else for people to go, though this has not stopped large scale evictions and clean-ups since. Most of the encampment, which totals around 40 acres in size depending on where one draws the line, is on land owned by the California Department of Transportation, or CalTrans. Wood Street itself, which several dozen people do live along in parked vehicles and small shelters, belongs to the city. And a 4.5 acre area just west of Wood Street that was part of the original encampment is privately owned was cleared in 2020. So, although Wood Street has many long-term residents and has had a prominent reputation as one of Oakland’s largest encampments since at least 2018, the place is sprawling and under routine threat of eviction, with intentional placemaking efforts by residents spread around and not always easy to recognize.

In November of 2019 the city announced it would help clear the privately owned lot at the request of the owner, an investment company that paid for the expenses of doing so (Tadayon, 2019). A force of more than 50 police officers, as well as private security (some of whom were offering unhoused people cash payouts to leave voluntarily, according to some observers) were able to remove many of the occupants (wewtongo, 2021). The process then stalled for some time due to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. When eviction efforts for the remaining residents began again in early October, 2020, a series of moves by the city, the landowner, encampment residents, and activists played out like a game of chess over the following month and a half: With the police seemingly unwilling to physically remove people, dozens

Fig. 6 A resident walks her dog past abandoned vehicles and other refuse inside the Wood Street Encampment in West Oakland in 2021. Photo by the author.
of activists staged protests for 22 days to keep police and private contractors at bay until October 29, when the site was secured long enough for workers to install a fence; even then, some residents snuck back in and the site was not ultimately cleared. Finally, on November 16th, with a combination of county sheriff’s deputies and private security personnel facing off against dozens of protesters, a lawyer for the landowner paid each remaining resident $2500 to go and the site was cleared (wewtongo, 2021). The city then began leasing the site in order to create a “safe parking” lot for people living in vehicles.

The much larger encampment—essentially surrounding the private property on three sides—has remained and grown. A planned eviction by the California Department of Transportation in June of 2020 was “indefinitely postponed.” What may have been more than 100 people on some nights prior to the pandemic swelled to as many as 200 to 300 people by 2021 (Dineen, 2021). Critically, beginning in late 2020, the level of placemaking at the site swelled too. Most dramatic has been the birth of “Cob on Wood,” an innovative community hearth for the encampment built mainly using the ancient building technique known as cob (a mixture of earth and straw or wood). Constructed by a mix of residents and outside volunteers with connections to urban agriculture, food, and health, the project broke ground in December 2020 and by the following spring it included a community kitchen, a clinic, a “sewing station,” a “free store” full of clothes, toiletries, and other household products, a toilet and showers with hot water, a landscaped garden, several different communal seating and gathering areas, and a stage. There are also little shelters—“cobbins”—for people to live in, built by residents themselves (see Fig. 7).

Fig. 7 The community kitchen, compost toilet, and community clinic on the landscaped courtyard of the Cob on Wood project, inside the Wood Street Encampment, seen in 2021. Photo by the author
In the sprawling, garbage-filled, and frankly often eerie settlement under the freeway, the gathering place at Cob on Wood feels safe and welcoming. Although it was initiated by organizers who live offsite, they have worked to engage unhoused residents, emphasizing the things they really want, need, and have the capacity to help build and maintain—“moving slowly” as one volunteer put it. The people who live there and the housed volunteers who come to help are visibly proud of the space—“make sure you see the kitchen!” one man living in his truck encouraged me on my first visit. I have seen many locals getting food and using the facilities provided, some just hanging out enjoying the space. One resident even hosts an open mic night on the stage, and an Earth Day celebration there in April 2021 attracted positive attention from the mainstream press. What’s more, as residents and volunteers alike noted to me, the very existence of Cob on Wood seems to resist eviction by resisting stigma, demonstrating that there is something real and positive going on at the site. There is even a sense—a rumor—among those working on the effort that if they can come up with a plan for living, cooking, sanitation, safety, and garbage disposal at the site, CalTrans might actually let them be for a while. Despite on and off threats of eviction, as of early 2022 the transportation agency had not removed the cob structures. Placemaking efforts continue across the Wood Street Encampment site, from communal garbage cleanups and parties to the creation of new cob structures, art installations, and community spaces (see Fig. 8).

What lessons should be taken from the 41-day existence of Housing and Dignity Village, the inspiring but ineffective People’s Proposal for the E12 Parcel, or
the decade-long persistence of settlement at Wood Street, finally growing a village center with the help of outsiders? There are many, but they are not here lessons of grassroots political strategy outright. Housing and Dignity Village had been arguably better planned than any informal settlement in Oakland. Residents used considered arguments, both legal and rhetorical, to defend its legitimacy. It seemed objectively less problematic than others in terms of health, sanitation, or even size and visibility concerns. Yet it was removed by authorities in a matter of weeks. Informal settlement on the E12 Parcel persisted for years in spite of significant attention and competing development schemes, and the site today contains an officially established tiny home village championed by a city councilmember. It makes for a remarkable case of grassroots organizing and local politics engaging at scale on housing development, if also perhaps their limitations. The Wood Street Encampment, which would seem to have little inherently working in favor of its longevity—much of the site resembles a post-apocalyptic wasteland, the threat of evictions is constant—has existed and grown for well over a decade. Within it are many tiny moments of community and place, especially the village within a village at Cob on Wood, working to provide things nobody else has been willing to provide.

None of these cases quite represent successful politics, much less best practices for housing the unsheltered. What each of the cases do, however, is demonstrate the extent to which attentiveness to informal placemaking and intentional community building nonetheless play a key role in the daily negotiation of housing and homelessness in Oakland. In particular, placemaking can be central to unhoused people’s own presentations of self, community, and legitimacy. Whether successful or not, such efforts help make the argument that the displaced and unhoused are not placeless, that they are citizens and claimants of their right to the city. With Housing and Community Village, the degree of spatio-political organizing may even have attracted a level of attention that led in part to the site being so quickly cleared. At the E12 parcel, slow movement toward private development left the site a prime opportunity for political organizing and the creation of a large amount of formal (if still temporary) shelter. It will be interesting to see what community develops in Lakeview Village, and whether the fight for permanently affordable housing on the parcel could ultimately triumph. At Wood Street, residents and community organizers have begun working together to demonstrate that place and community can and do exist in a sprawling informal settlement long considered little more than a slum and a dumping ground, with hopes that doing so will enable them to stay. In other words, we see a subtle politics of homelessness predicated on the construction of place. Other sites and the activism around them seem to have recognized this too, from Needa Bee’s subsequent efforts to build a new “Right to Remain Curbside Community” in East Oakland to the struggle to defend People’s Park in Berkeley with place-based arguments. A question is whether any of this can lead to shifts in how authorities and the rest of us understand these members of our communities.
Place and Persistence

Housing has become widely understood as a “crisis” in the Bay Area, and in many major cities. So too, equally undeniably, is homelessness. Like any large scale urban challenges, they must be tackled systemically and regionally. Yet at the same time, the crisis of homelessness will inevitably be addressed locally, lot by lot, as questions of land use and zoning, local politics, and of the people and places themselves. Unfortunately, a fundamental point of impasse—of logical incommensurability one might even say—is that those in power fail to recognize the significance of the places that unhoused people are building. As a result, even in the face of these crises, we may be unmaking places more quickly than we are making them.

In late 2020, in the thick of the COVID-19 Pandemic, an economic recession and a visible surge in homelessness, the Oakland City Council established a new “Encampment Management Policy.” Intended to define more clearly where unhoused people could—or rather, could not—sleep, it was adopted unanimously, including by members with records of advocating for the rights of their unhoused constituents. The policy prohibits people from sleeping or otherwise occupying public space in “high sensitivity” areas, which include the vast majority of land in the city.² More than a year later it was still not clear how, or how consistently, the policy would actually be enforced, but it is interesting that it is premised on the idea that there are apparently some acceptable places for unhoused Oaklanders to be. However, other than some specifics about size and safety, the policy gives no suggestion that the character of the places or communities being managed might matter at all.

It does not have to be this way. In April of 2021, the office of the Oakland city auditor released a “performance audit” of the city’s encampment management efforts over the prior two years (Ruby et al., 2021)—a report that was widely seen as both scathing in its critique and full of weaknesses of its own (see Orenstein, 2021). The report offers no recommendations for how the city might improve on its performance, and pays little attention to any significance of “place” per se, but it does at least acknowledge that one of the reasons encampments exist is that unhoused people seek a sense of safety and community within them, in contrast to the lack thereof they find in shelters and other official options (Ruby et al., 2021). Around the same time, Council member Bas launched her campaign to pilot “co-governed” and “self-governed” encampments with city support. Interestingly, Bennett (2000), writing before placemaking’s trendiness in planning circles burdened the term, documented a whole history of official support for placemaking among public housing residents in the USA. We need this now more than ever.

Places that are authentic, positive, and meaningful to the everyday people who are part of them, in demonstrating that there is something—someplace—rather than nothing, have potential to be powerful weapons against displacement. And placemaking can even be a moderator between varying issues of social, economic, and

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² The new policy defines any location within 100 feet of a school and within 50 feet of a residence, business, protected waterway, or public park as a “high sensitivity area,” where sleeping or setting up a tent or other shelter is not allowed. See City of Oakland (2020) and Orenstein (2020) for more details.
ecological concern (not unlike architecture, see Docter, 2012: 3). So it is imperative that we embrace the multiple meanings of placemaking and enable the concept’s evolution into new and alternative forms. In Chicago and Milwaukee, Emmanuel Pratt and the Sweet Water Foundation talk about “regenerative placemaking” (see Carriere & Schalliol, 2021). Working with community members in some of the neediest parts of these cities—places where decades of disinvestment and depopulation have left whole blocks vacant and abandoned—Sweet Water has led the creation of numerous examples of locally relevant, spatially, socially and historically conscious grassroots development and placemaking efforts. Among them is a four block “Regenerative Neighborhood Development” on Chicago’s South Side called the Commonwealth, featuring an urban farm, gardens, workshop, community hub, and park, all on formerly vacant parcels, challenging images of “blight” and creating meaningful (and successful) place for the community (see Sweet Water Foundation, 2022). The actions of Oaklanders in and around the informal settlements described here help demonstrate how important this can be for those often assumed to be placeless altogether.

It is worth noting that Pratt is also a trained architect and urban designer. There is absolutely a place for urban professionals in community placemaking, and for community placemaking in urban planning and design (see also Finn, 2014; Lydon & Garcia, 2015; Douglas, 2018). When it comes to the spaces of homelessness and informal settlement, however, one trick may be figuring out how the formal and informal can work together. (Some scholars and professionals working across the urban planning and design professions are already becoming engaged in these ways, e.g., Davis, 2004; Heben, 2014; Parikh, 2019; Wilburn, 2019). Still, there is no easy answer for the questions of place and community among our unhoused neighbors. But understanding these things in the context of what our unhoused neighbors have already been building for themselves is an essential first step. Doing so will be of enormous social and cultural significance for how we interpret and respond to the crises of displacement and homelessness in our cities going forward.

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**Declarations**

**Ethical Approval** The study was approved by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board of San José State University (Protocol 20167).

**Consent to Participate** As described in the article, the author has been involved with community-based housing activism in Oakland, including some advocacy on behalf of unhoused Oaklanders and some organizing work around the E. 12th St Remainder Parcel, which is discussed herein.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

**Research Involving Human and Animal Participants** All procedures performed involving human participants (interviews and observations) were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committees and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments.
Conflict of Interest  There are no potential conflicts of interest with the findings or arguments presented in this study.

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