Place Borders in Urban Planning: Experiences from Wedding, Berlin

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Introduction

Place-making has become a central feature of the contemporary urban planning toolbox worldwide. Furthermore, I will suggest in this paper that the development and/or promotion of a sense of place is very much related to place borders created by citizens in everyday situations. This paper thus explores the nexus between borders and place and how they are co-constitutive of the creation of meaning and specifically, meaning in the social interpretation of urban environments. Inspiration for this practical approach to place-making comes from contemporary borders studies: not only is there a multiplicity of borders within society but I understand borders as being central to the forging of group and individual identities (see Andersen and Aubry 2022, Malpas 2012, Scott 2020, Sohn 2016). "Ontological" concerns related to borders reflect on the one hand the sense of security that boundedness – a knowing what lies within and without a specific space – conveys. Just as significant on the other hand are meaning-making processes that, for example, allow a "place" to be perceived as something socially significant. Indeed, place exists only to the extent that it resonates as a measure of how individuals and communities relate to their living environments. Places, understood for example as "comfort zones", are routinised and familiarised spatial references that give sense and orientation, a sense of "being somewhere". Understood in this way, socio-spatial borders function as markers of place through processes of intersubjective meaning-making, whereby the meaning that emerges is not static but subject to constant change (Scott 2021). The intriguing but often daunting task of understanding how a sense of place emerges, develops and evolves has been a subject of interdisciplinary study that links the social sciences, humanities and more recently, cognitive sciences (Cresswelll 2013, Maricchiolo et. al 2021, Rajala, Sorice and Thomas 2020, Scannel and Gifford 2017, Tuan 2001). Consequently, I define place-making in terms of socio-spatial border-making and thus as a product of continuous processes and countless activities that intersubjectively imbue an area with specific qualities.

The investigation of place as a socio-spatial element of urban life and conviviality has experienced a renaissance of sorts, not only in the social sciences and humanities but also in planning practice (see Ujang and Zakariya 2015). Place-making is an established practice of creatively developing public spaces through art and performative uses (see Courage and McKeown 2018). However, these forms of place-making are largely based on multiactor policy partnerships and rarely emerge from communities themselves. Alternatively, *participatory place-making* specifically targets citizen involvement and co-ownership of development policies; it involves, moreover, community-building and community-strengthening practices. Furthermore, place highlights concerns for spatial justice and social cohesion, directing attention as to how different needs and demands associated with place can be equitably met (Burrowes 2019).

In a broader sense, place-making can be defined as an active process of imbuing a specific space with meaning and a degree of uniqueness, in other words, far from being merely a development project, it is the product of everyday practices, uses, appropriations and narrations of "hereness." It is self-evident that these processes involve border making, otherwise a sense of place distinction within wider spatial contexts would be impossible. As I will demonstrate, participatory place-making sheds light on the ontological - the sense and meaning-making - aspects of socio-spatial borders. The ontological approach also reveals transformative aspects of border-making, for example through the creation of spaces of belonging and identification in diverse neighbourhood contexts.

Building on our previous research, as well as insights from participatory place-making projects that have been carried out in the Wedding neighbourhood of Berlin, this paper will indicate how border-making is implicated in urban development processes and, as a result, can be interpreted as an important urban planning resource. Based on evidence from the Berlin district of Wedding I will briefly document how *place border narratives*, i.e. the social communication of neighbourhood distinction, relationality and transformation, represent vital knowledges of place reveal themselves in different forms of participatory place-making. These narratives simultaneously reveal the creation of new spaces of encounter and identification as well as tensions and contestations related to perceived disruptions of place coherence and familiarity.

Perhaps most importantly in terms of planning, the salience of urban borders lies in broadening understanding of how and why places function - or fail to function - as communities. As a development tool place-making requires the integration of citizen knowledge of place, place borders and, as a result, social equity concerns. To quote Bahanur (Urban Civic Education Lab 2021:17): place-making is "a process of creating places with meaning for its users" often involving "the transformation of a public space, to address or accommodate citizens' needs." These knowledges reflect embodied experiences of place as well as contestations and tensions that characterise place development processes.

Social Borders, Place Borders

As part of its broadening research perspectives, contemporary borders research has experienced an ontological turn in which the intersubjective nature and social meanings of borders have received considerable attention (Di Paola and de Jaegher 2015, Marsico and Varzi 2016). One of the motivations behind the greater focus on borders, identity and meaning is the desire for a "politics of hope" that allows for alternatives beyond static binaries of "us" versus "them" as, for example, reproduced in national identity narratives (Brambilla 2021). At the same time, despite the reification of state borders, and their physical, virtual or discursive iterations, a greater appreciation of the role of place and socio-spatial borders has emerged. This has provided potential for a better understanding of why borders within society are created and how they reveal themselves. Moreover, the constant production of social-cultural place boundaries offers potential for opening up new spaces that reflect intersections, encounters and new affinities which emerge as a part of social life (Hafeda, 2016; Váradi and Virág 2017). For example, in elaborating the case of "welcome cultures" in response to anti-refugee politics, Andersen and Aubry (2022: 11) argue that the ad hoc creation of spaces of inclusion

reflect an "ontological politics whereby Europe is identified in (…) non-linear, multilayered creative and disjunctive processes involving a vast number of actors, practices and forces." What is expressed here is a space of possibility beyond the institutional violence of exclusive (state-centric and securitised) borders.

As part of an ontological perspective on border studies, I assume that borders emerge in the embodied creation of social space and that they serve as a means to interpret the environment and stabilise ways of knowing the wider world (Malpas 2012, Scott and Sohn 2018, Scott 2021). This is also suggested by Rosch's (2017) elaborations on participatory sense-making which support the idea that borders (for example, within society and cities) emerge in the interaction between imagined and experienced space. Along similar lines urban borders can be interpreted are a nexus between everyday practices of differentiating social space, the instrumentality of place-making, for example, as a project of urban development, and the ontological need for a sense of rootedness in place. Urban borders are defined "externally" for example, through stigmatisation or other forms of representation, but also created from within place by its residents - these borders are essentially about the character and qualities of a place that distinguish it from other places. To an extent, these are not revolutionary ideas. For example, since Kevin Lynch's (1962) and Jack Nasar's (1990) classic studies of urban images and mental maps, borders within cities have been either directly or indirectly referenced as markers of place identities. However, analysis of political and socio-cultural borders has paid relatively little attention to processes of place-making. On the other hand, the ontological perspective on socio-spatial borders invites us to investigate continuous processes of place appropriation in social, cultural and political terms.

Linking Place-Making to Borders – the Example of Place Narratives

Let us now relate the ontological borders perspective to place-making. As mentioned above, our understanding of place-making is inclusive and can involve instrumental iterations as well as everyday spatial practices in the sense of Bachelard (1954) and de Certeau (1980). To be sure, as Berglund and Gregory (2019) argue, place-making as something purely instrumental is problematic - it can in fact entail a form of cultural production based on falsified or whitewashed local histories and simulacra of authenticity. However, this understanding transcends place-making as something "imposed" on a specific site; I argue that at its most basic place-making is a practice of creating place distinction that are of an organic, everyday and spontaneous nature. The pioneering work of Tateo and Marsico (2019) has indicated how (urban) environments are selectively created depending on our abilities to interact with the world; in their interpretation, borders are co-constitutive of emotion and affect. Based on autoethnographies of urban borders, Tateo and Marsico describe how joy, fear, anxiety, enthusiasm, awe, admiration and curiosity are among the sentiments that are evoked in the (embodied) experience of socio-spatial transition – e.g. by moving from one space (room, neighbourhood, city, country) to another. Place-making can therefore involve the creation of spaces of individuality and familiarity that can also be mutually shared with a wider community – the welcoming cultures mapped by Andersen and Aubry (2021) and performative spaces of refugee inclusion on Lampedusa that Brambilla (2015) has documented are both good examples of this. Moreover, if we understand place as comprising a wider community, place-making also involves narrations of place identity and spatial practices that are intersubjectively communicated.

From a planning viewpoint, the ontological is also political because it is closely linked to processes of neighbourhood cohesion and disintegration. Place is a major point of access to socially essential resources and opportunities and it is central to a sense of citizenship, belonging and social rootedness. Paraphrasing Patsy Healey (2007:11), place can be comprehended in terms of local cultures composed of "(…) complex socio-spatial interactions through which life in urban areas is experienced." Furthermore, as Fitzgerald and Wolak (2016) have argued, identification with place can boost a sense of community in the face of centralised and majoritarian politics operating at the national level systems. As a result, place is also often linked to social movements and thematically linked networks that create politically salient identities around gender issues, sustainability, climate change, cultural expression, lifestyles, etc. This is also creating new local-level identities in terms of social/political involvement. Consequently, questions of *place openness* loom large: while borders stabilise place identities cohesion and community belonging are often challenged by social and structural barriers that reproduce patterns of exclusion. Divisive border-making processes are reflected in social norming and discursive othering that create, for example, distinctions based on tacit understandings of "authentic citizenship" in an attempt to impose a selective definition of a deserving "people" and legitimizing exclusion (Osuna 2022). At the same time, such practices contribute to social disintegration and polarisation (Szilágyi 2022).

Scott and Sohn (2018) and Scott (2021) have elaborated a narrative approach to understanding the production of urban place borders based on case studies from Berlin, Budapest and Warsaw. These represent different cases of place "re-bordering" as a result of political and social transformations since 1989 and involve neighbourhoods marked by strong visual and perceptual boundaries that distinguish them from adjacent inner-city areas. In these cases, narratives were curated from media representations that reflect insider and outsider perceptions. The case studies highlight the impacts of physical and social transformation as well as multiculturalism on the evolutions of multi-layered senses of place - as spaces of contrasts within the wide urban context. These place ideas are active appropriations by local residents who have incorporated new place ideas as part of their everyday geographies. They are also propagated by social media, commercial websites and the press. These place ideas have been socially institutionalised in the naming of concrete establishments (cafés, restaurants), in referring to it as a location for travel, accommodations, events and as spaces for creative industries. In sum, place ideas define spaces of relative difference and reflect, among others, socio-cultural change, planning interventions in the urban fabric as well as diverse and often contested perceptions of neighbourhood image.

Participatory Place-Making

As I have suggested in the theoretical approach to place-making, borders are created in the sense-making and meaning-making processes through which space is differentiated and notions of place are generated. By the same token, socio-spatial borders are rarely static; they are constantly adapted to changing environments in order to maintain their meaning-making properties. Participatory place-making implies what might be called an "ontological politics" of borders in the sense that the *active creation of place meaning is at stake*, albeit in terms of organised projects of community development. In terms of directed planning interventions, Susanna Moreira (2021) states that: "placemaking is a

process centred on people and their needs, aspirations, desires, and visions, which relies strongly on community participation." The collaborative transformation of public spaces is, for example, a major target of participatory place-making and involves reappropriating underutilised, neglected and unattractive areas in order to create spaces that are shared and invite interaction, resting and "dwelling" within a shared place.

The participatory place-making toolbox involves different possible methods, such as discovering neighbourhood through place-mapping, appropriating spaces for community use and community-building as well as actual design processes targeted at concrete neighbourhood improvement. Place-mapping is a variation on the now mainstreamed method of mental mapping; these techniques can reveal routines and regularised patterns of mobility which help give a sense of stability to being in society and are co-constitutive of what consists of a specific place – its sense of uniqueness or difference from other places (Papaioannou, Papagiannakis and Hatziprokopiou 2020). Above and beyond this, mental maps as method can reflect geographies of belonging, for example as manifested by degrees of familiarity and affinity with different aspects of the urban environment. Past criticism of mental map methodology was based on the assumption that perceptions are not only potentially deceptive but more fundamentally reflect class bias, false consciousness and "ideology" (see Gottdiener and Hutchison 1991). However, this view basically precludes any notion of agency in the face of structural determinants of social life. In terms of an ontological understanding of borders, mental maps in fact reflect the complex intertwining of social and territorial identifications (Kaisto and Wells 2021). As Papaioannou et. al (2020:22) point out "Human-centred factors, such as mental capacity, memories, emotional state, age, gender, as well as social-cultural ones, such as social media influences and prejudices, have a great significance on mental mapping."

Such mapping involves highly salient socio-political and cultural elements, particularly when highly diverse cities are the centre of attention. In terms of identifying the challenges and opportunities of diversity the ontological borders approach resonates with Piekut and Valentine's (2016) theoretical perspective that links diversity to perceptions, that is: how diversity is lived and experienced within a community. According to this interpretation, diversity exists in the different ways that it is subjectively recognised and can be characterised by the positive and negative sentiments it evokes. Perceptions of diversity are conditioned by a number of factors - demographic factors, cultural and socio-historical backgrounds as well as the socio-ethnic composition of urban places. The relationship between place openness and diversity is key, particularly given stigmatising and largely externally generated stories of diverse neighbourhoods as "problem areas."

The Case of Berlin-Wedding: Insights from Place-Making Approaches

I will now focus attention on two complementary projects that reveal connections between socio-spatial borders and place identities in Berlin's highly diverse district of Wedding.[1] One of the rationales

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behind this research has been a significant increase in community-driven initiatives targeted at social regeneration, community-building and sustainability. Working with the District Council and projects of social integration, for example, non-governmental organisations have been important actors in attempts to strengthen a sense of place cohesion in ethnically and socio-economically diverse areas. The first of these projects, Voicitys (2018-2019), collected stories about neighbourhood belonging from local residents while the second, Kieztraum (2019-2020), was focused on participatory place-making. The two projects operated from the assumption that the social, cultural and political borders inherent in diversity are in fact potential spaces of encounter and dialogue (Keresztély and Trowbridge 2019). Moreover, a sense of urgency informed both projects given destructive, anti-urban political forces that would create divisions and thus create or resurrect hard social (and perhaps political) boundaries between ethnic groups and social classes.

Wedding Place Narratives; Diverse yet Cohesive

Wedding is part of the Mitte District (Bezirk Mitte) of Berlin and is a traditional working-class area and former industrial centre that remains one of the city's poorest areas. Wedding is also one of the most diverse areas of Berlin with foreign-born residents making up almost 60 % of the population. While Wedding has maintained much of its traditional working-class character, multiculturalism is also highly visible in the types of shops and services flourishing in the area. The Voicitys project collected stories of Wedding from local residents representing a cross-section of highly varied personal experiences of living in a diverse community (Comparative Research Network 2020). At the same time, local stories were contrasted with media reports and often negative "external" perceptions. As part of curating these various accounts of life in the neighbourhood, the Voicitys project allowed for the identification of place narratives that distinguish, and thus in our interpretation border Wedding from the rest of Berlin. Among the central place border narratives revealed in local stories is that of Wedding as an exceptional area representing both continuity and change. Unlike other inner-city areas of Berlin, Wedding has escaped many of the socio-economic and cultural impacts of gentrification and has retained traditional working class neighbourhood elements. Moreover, thile retaining a sense of Berlin-specific "authenticity", in socio-cultural terms Wedding it is a place that epitomises multicultural diversity.

Despite the heterogeneity of the participants in Voicitys, their stories indicated that difference is seen as a positive local characteristic and a relative strength in comparison to other parts of the city. According to one person quoted in the project report (Comparative Research Network 2020: 32-33): "*people here behave peacefully and with no violence because they all got the idea since they came that our diversity builds a stronger community.*" What seemed to be valued about Wedding is not just the visual appeal of its historic public spaces and buildings, but the ways in which the spaces allow for interactions between people - as one interviewee explained. Indeed, several of the stories related by locals convey the idea that diversity makes for a cohesive society and that Wedding could be a role model in this case, despite some of frictions or perceived external threats of gentrification and systemic racism. As one person stated (Comparative Research Network 2020: 115): "*Wedding is changing perceptions on tolerance, especially people from Saxonian villages should come and live here to see what diversity is.*" Similarly, Wedding's image as a multicultural place has been narrated in social media in terms such as:

"(..), Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Atheists, Lower Saxonians, Swabians, and other refugees live here quite peacefully together. Might this be a model for all Germany's future? Decision-makers at least should have a closer look at the people here." [2]

However, while local stories of Wedding's place identity paint a relatively positive picture of diversity, there is a sense that change could bring problems to the area. The stories suggest that people in Wedding are not too concerned about perceived problems of diversity or conflict between the cultures present in the area, but rather the dominant fear is one of social segregation within the area. The storytellers fear the disappearance of familiar places and specific characteristics that distinguish Wedding's neighbourhoods, above all there are fears that Wedding might lose its diversity and converted into another white, middle-class and sterile neighbourhood where shops cafés and social spaces mainly serve tourists. One key learning about what has contributed to Wedding's current identity as a diverse yet cohesive neighbourhood is the availability of spaces where people who live in the area come together and interact, thereby creating a sense of shared place. And this is despite the fact that environmental issues, rubbish in public spaces in particular, are often viewed as problematic in terms of defining the character of the neighbourhood.

At the same time, there are tensions between Wedding and the "outside world" (Institute of Community Reporters 2018, p. 43). The spectre of gentrification and rapid neighbourhood change are constant subthemes in narratives of Wedding's transformation. The internet hyping of Wedding that adds to perceived coolness is also reflected in new cultural and gastronomic attractions such as the new Silent Green 'Kulturquartier'[3] that many find alienating.[4] In this way, Wedding is also narrated as the next potential target of large-scale gentrification, a process that would threaten Wedding as a model of diversity.[5] Above and beyond this, negative representations, including stories of crime and trash and chaos, reverberate in the popular media as well as in official documents. Perhaps most damagingly, sensationalist press reports, including recent Youtube videos of Arab clan blood feuds, shootings, drug problems and desolation, tell a fearful story of Wedding as "the city's bloodiest district".[6] In addition to popular forms of stigmatisation, the inclusion of Wedding neighbourhoods in administrative geographies of "problem areas" (Problemzonen) has considerable media impact.[7] The Structural Atlas of Berlin (2022), for example, identifies Wedding as one of the poorest and more difficult areas of the city. There are fears that such negative reporting could threaten the viability of places that promote diversity. This sentiment is expanded on further with storytellers suggesting that

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[2] https://info.arte.tv/de/wedding-portraet-des-multikulti-berlins

[3] https://www.silent-green.net

[4] The issue of 'UFO' projects appropriating local public spaces was addressed in conversation with members of the Pankstrasse Neighbourhood Management team (Quartiersmanagement Pankstrasse) in March 2018.

[5] https://checkpointcharlie.cfjlab.fr/2017/02/26/gentrification-a-berlin-au-tour-de-wedding/

[6] https://www.bild.de/news/2022/news/auftragsmorde-schuesse-blutfehde-so-brutal-ist-berlins-blutigster-bezirk-78933208.bild.html

[7] https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/streifzug-durch-berlin-wedding-das-glueck-ist-rau-und-100.html

rather than focus on negative interpretations of diversity, policies should instead focus on Wedding's unique and positive place characteristics. Some of the local interviewed sensed that they are targeted because of dislike of multicultural places, e.g. among public officials, and structural racism, particularly its institutionalised forms in the police force and employment offices. It is highlighted moreover that although there is a system in place to support newcomers, the bureaucracy of the system presents a barrier to people who wish to use it.

Participatory Place-Making in Wedding

The Kieztraum project, targeted at the Pankstrasse area of Wedding, was motivated by rapid neighbourhood change partly generated by the influx of new migrant groups (e.g. from Afghanistan, Africa and Syria). As the manager of the Pankstrasse Neighbourhood Management project stated in July 2019: "The influx of new migrant groups of very different cultural backgrounds bas generated problems and seems to be creating divisions within our community, the newcomers have not yet been able to adapt and they lack identification with the area." The inevitable frictions this involves were manifested in a partial retreat from and degradation of public spaces, an increasing sense of insecurity as well as a weakening positive identifications with the neighbourhood.[8] As a result, residents of the Pankstrasse neighbourhood expressed a desire for initiatives that would enhance a sense of community by managing increasing diversity and addressing the needs of all groups. Four action areas were identified:

1. identification of positive and negative places and situations in the neighbourhood by all residents.
2. empowerment of residents who are or were already active in the area,
3. activating groups of residents not yet involved.
4. strengthening the positive identification with the area by all users and creating a positive, constructive dialogue with all groups.

As elsewhere, participatory place-making in Wedding involved re-thinking how the city can be understood and organised as a highly diverse community (Urban Civic Education Lab 2021). The aim of community mapping projects organised by Kieztraum in Wedding was to nurture a feeling of positive ownership of local spaces for the citizens who live and work there, primarily through awareness of shared experiences of place and identification with different neighbourhood locations. This was achieved through collecting and sharing individual place attachments and experiences with regard to specific spaces within the Pankstrasse neighbourhood. As part of the mapping exercise, participants were asked to express their own embodied experience of place and transitions between neighbourhood places, describing smells, music and soundscapes as well as visual and other atmospheric cues. Places were collected on an online map (https://mapmehappy.com) and participants were asked to indicate the places that provided positive experiences, were accessible to all, and that could be shared with family and friends.

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[8] Kieztraum.de

The maps themselves were instrumental in promoting dialogue between residents and encouraging spontaneous conversations regarding favourite places but also areas perceived as negative. In this way, the method of community mapping served as a starting point for broader discussion about neighbourhood development scenarios, identifying unique aspects of the neighbourhood that were worth preserving, and/or in need of improvement, as well as identifying what the neighbourhood lacks in terms of amenities, services and environmental quality. The aim was to collect through neutral facilitators opinions regarding improvements to and preservation of public spaces deemed as vital to neighbourhood liveability. Through sensemaking and reflection, both online and "Futuring Labs" (Zukunftswerkstätten), mapping participants came together as a group and elaborated planning scenarios and recommendations. Moreover, critical thinking was explored through sharing place experiences and emotions in order to better understanding dissonances between local (internal) place perceptions and those external to the neighbourhood, often expressed in stigmatising media narratives. By encouraging a sense of shared space, counter-narratives were created that challenged characterisations of the area as dirty, unsafe, and unliveable.

In terms of practical outcomes, the three place-mapping exercises carried out during the project resulted in the tagging of more than 200 areas where according to residents a specific sense of neighbourhood feeling could be identified and needed to be preserved. Unsurprisingly, the most popular area in the neighbourhood was the park promenade along the Panke waterway. Mapping launched a discussion on how to keep these spots "favourites" and resulted in 12 community action plans, now in the process of implementation. Among these plans are flexible and on-demand rubbish collection in cooperation with the city, regular flea markets, circular swap meets, and other measures targeted at improving the quality of life in the neighbourhood.

Conclusions

Results from the two projects support the suggestion that place is defined by ontological borders that emerge through embodied experience with urban environments and the everyday practices of citizens. Moreover, these borders reveal themselves in narrations and other forms of place representation that express specific unique qualities, attachments as well as tensions between internal/external processes impacting life within neighbourhoods. Place borders are also defined by the contrast of local experience and self-awareness of place specificity with popular and often negative sensationalist place narratives. Significantly, the storytelling and mapping methods used in the two projects involved the mobilisation of local knowledges of place in order to co-create possible scenarios of community development, both in social and environmental terms. In order to do this, the two methods also involved inquiry into how local residents make sense of place and place borders through socio-material entanglements with their neighbourhoods.

Mapping and storytelling were employed as tools of community development in order to strengthen cohesion and a sense of local agency. The methods largely worked with positive emotions and place attachments but also encouraged critical thinking and awareness in terms of responding to stigmatising narrations of Wedding neighbourhood. Both methods are potentially valuable tools that can be used in many different settings in order to strengthen participation and place-centred activism. However,

beyond the direct application of these place-making approaches as planning tools, they also indicate how ontological borders and a sense of place are co-constitutive of each other. They also highlight tensions between lived and embodied experience of place and narrations of place that are based on idealised and often negative perceptions – for example, of Wedding as problem zone and potential gentrification frontier. Ultimately, what placemaking as method and analytical framework confirms is that at their most basic borders are complex instruments of meaning-making rather than simply divisions between societies and groups.

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