

UC Davis

UC Davis Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Liminal Placemaking: Investigating the Role of Design in Cultivating Belonging in Liminal Spaces

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4rk64818>

ISBN

9798189228421

Author

Hashemi, Maryam

Publication Date

2026-06-25

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

Liminal Placemaking:
Investigating the Role of Design in Cultivating Belonging
in Liminal Spaces

By

MARYAM HASHEMI
THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Community Development

in the

OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

DAVIS

Approved:

David de la Peña, Chair

Javier Arbona-Homar

Brett Snyder

Committee in Charge

2026

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the support, guidance, and generosity of many individuals and communities.

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my committee chair, Professor David de la Peña, whose encouragement, thoughtful feedback, and constant support guided this research from its earliest stages to its completion. His commitment to community-engaged design and social justice has been a continual source of inspiration.

I am equally grateful to my committee members, Professor Javier Arbona-Homar and Professor Brett Snyder, for their valuable insights and constructive critiques throughout this process. Their perspectives strengthened this work in meaningful ways.

I would also like to acknowledge Professor Michael Rios, whose mentorship during the early development of this research helped shape many of the ideas that eventually became central to this thesis. His guidance encouraged me to pursue questions about belonging, place, and design with curiosity and rigor.

My sincere thanks go to all of the designers, artists, and practitioners who generously shared their time, experiences, and reflections through interviews. Their work and perspectives form the heart of this study. I am especially grateful to the organizations and communities represented in the case studies, whose efforts to create more inclusive and meaningful public spaces continue to inspire new possibilities for design practice.

I would like to thank the faculty, staff, and fellow students of the Community Development Graduate Group at the University of California, Davis. The interdisciplinary nature of the program provided an environment that encouraged exploration and critical thinking. I am particularly grateful to those who offered feedback and encouragement throughout this journey.

To my family, thank you for your endless love, patience, and belief in me. Your support sustained me through every challenge and achievement. Although distance often separated us, your encouragement was always present.

Finally, I would like to thank everyone who has been part of my academic and personal journey over the past several years. This thesis is not only the culmination of a graduate degree but also a reflection of the many conversations, relationships, and shared experiences that have shaped my understanding of community, belonging, and the transformative potential of design.

This work is dedicated to all those who continue to imagine, create, and care for places where people can feel seen, valued, and at home.

Abstract

Contemporary cities are characterized by spatial inequalities, contested territories, and transitional urban environments that challenge conventional understandings of place and belonging. While creative placemaking has been widely recognized for its potential to activate public spaces through arts, culture, and community participation, limited attention has been given to the role of liminal spaces; those in-between, uncertain, and transitional environments that exist outside fixed spatial and social orders. This study introduces liminal placemaking as a distinct conceptual and practical framework for understanding how socially engaged design can cultivate belonging within such spaces.

Grounded in postcolonial and poststructuralist spatial theory, this research draws on the work of Homi Bhabha, Michel Foucault, Doreen Massey, Edward Soja, and Kim Dovey to conceptualize liminality as both a cultural and spatial condition characterized by hybridity, negotiation, and becoming. Using a qualitative case study methodology, the study examines six creative placemaking projects across the United States and incorporates seven semi-structured interviews with nine designers, artists, and placemaking practitioners. Data were analyzed through inductive thematic content analysis to identify recurring patterns in design processes, community engagement, and experiences of belonging.

The findings suggest that liminal placemaking cultivates belonging through four interconnected stages: material disruption, embodied engagement, co-authorship and shared meaning, and emergent relational belonging. Across the cases, designers acted less as authors of space and

more as facilitators of community agency, enabling residents to participate in the production, interpretation, and stewardship of place. The study highlights how temporary interventions can transform overlooked and contested spaces into sites of attachment, and ownership.

By positioning liminal placemaking as a subset of creative placemaking, this research contributes a new theoretical lens for understanding the relationship between design, belonging, and spatial transformation. It further offers practical insights for designers, planners, and policymakers seeking to foster more inclusive and community-driven approaches to public space in liminal urban contexts.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	ii
Abstract.....	iv
Setting the Stage: An Introduction	1
1.1 Context and Problem Statement	2
1.2 Research Aims and Questions.....	3
1.3 Significance of Study	5
1.4 Overview of Chapters.....	5
List of Characters: Conceptualizing Liminal Placemaking.....	7
2.1 Introduction	8
2.2 Literature Review	8
2.2.1 Liminality.....	9
2.2.2 Placemaking	12
2.2.3 Belonging	15
2.3 Theoretical Frameworks	17
2.3.1 Postcolonial Liminality: Homi Bhabha	17
2.3.2 Poststructuralist Spatial Theory	18
2.3.3 Bridging the Two Traditions.....	20
2.4 Creative Placemaking: Potentials and Pitfalls.....	21
2.5 Towards Liminal Placemaking.....	24
The Setting: Research Design and Methodology	26
3.1 Qualitative Research Approach	27
3.1.1 Research Design: Case Study and Interviews.....	27
3.1.2 Case Study Selection and Inclusion Criteria	28
3.1.3 Methods of Data Collection	29
3.1.4 Data Analysis	30
3.1.5 Validity and Trustworthiness	31
3.1.6 Ethical Considerations.....	32
The Story Unfolds: Case Studies and Interviews	33
4.1 Introduction	34
4.1.1 Small Center: Parasite Skate Park	35

4.1.2	Design Jones LLC: Claiborne Cultural Innovation District	43
4.1.3	Gehl Architects: Dance into the Sunset	51
4.1.4	Better Block: Detroit G7	58
4.1.5	Public Matters: Good Mischief	65
4.1.6	Studio One Eleven: The Long Beach Festival	71
4.2	Key Themes and Findings.....	75
The Acts: Discussion.....		82
5.1	Synthesis of Themes and Theory	83
5.1.1	Stage 1: Material Disruption in Liminal Space	83
5.1.2	Stage 2: Embodied Engagement	84
5.1.3	Stage 3: Co-authorship and Shared Meaning.....	85
5.1.4	Stage 4: Emergence of Relational Belonging.....	86
Epilogue: Conclusion and Implications.....		88
6.1	Contributions to theory	89
6.2	Policy and design recommendations	89
6.3	Directions for future research and limitations	90
Bibliography.....		91
Appendix A: Interview Protocol		96

Table of Figures

Figure 1. Maps of the emerging urbanisms (Natividade et al., 2021)	14
Figure 2. The entry and stormwater garden, the "peanut pool," an area for street-style skating, and bays offering ramps for transitional skating. Photos by Michael Wong (Wener, 2020).....	42
Figure 3. Bounded bays and integrated stormwater garden (Wener, 2020)	43
Figure 4. Claiborne Cultural Innovation District (Design Jones LLC, n.d.)	51
Figure 5. Gyorgy Papp Photography. Photo courtesy: The City of West Palm Beach, Office of Public Life (Gehl, n.d.)	58
Figure 6. Better Block Detroit G7 (Better Block, 2024).....	65
Figure 7. Good Mischief. Public art installations (Public Matters, n.d.)	70
Figure 8. Good Mischief. Destroying Pollution Monster Piñatas (Public Matters, n.d.).....	70
Figure 9. Booth where people could add comments (Studio One Eleven, n.d.).....	74
Figure 10. Getty Celebrates Long Beach (CARS, n.d.)	74

1

Setting the Stage: An Introduction

1.1 Context and Problem Statement

Contemporary cities are shaped not only by buildings and infrastructure but by invisible boundaries (social, cultural, and spatial) that include some and exclude others. In the face of increasing spatial inequality and displacement, there is a pressing need to reimagine places of belonging, and to rethink who has the power to realize this vision. This research is driven by the quest to reframe the responsibility of design in addressing sociocultural issues, with a focus on facilitating a sense of belonging in public space. It highlights the importance of moving from top-down designers toward “revealers” of visions developed in active collaboration with community members.

Public spaces, as bearers of everyday life, are continually shaped by dialectic processes of reclamation, where users’ daily practices or “tactics” as de Certeau (Certeau, 1984) articulates, subvert top-down controls. While some urban areas are strictly defined, regulated, and programmed, there are patches of the urban fabric that are characterized by a sense of anticipation and uncertainty. These *liminal* spaces are in-between sites marked by an absence of identity and a suspension of fixed purpose, existing in states of transition that hold the potential to enrich the social life of a public space (Mick, 2025; Turner, 1977). Yet when neglected or inactive, such spaces can exclude or repel, reinforcing boundaries that complicate their status as liminal (Balduk, 2008). As such, liminal urban spaces have become crucial zones of appropriation and transformation, where narratives are negotiated, activities improvised, and potential futures remain open (Bhabha, 2012).

Liminality, understood as a space of dialectical interaction rather than binary conflict, has been used to describe the in-between territories of the city, peripheries, interstices, and *terrain vagues*, where indeterminacy and openness prevail (Sieverts, 2003; Franck, 2014; Clément, 2004). These spaces often fall outside traditional logics of ownership and regulation, becoming fertile grounds for spontaneous appropriation, experimental uses, and the hybridization of social and cultural practices (Bhabha, 2012; Pittaluga, 2020; Soja, 1996). Their blurred status makes them propitious sites for subversion and empowerment, offering resources for rethinking how cities accommodate diversity and belonging.

While theoretical perspectives on liminality emphasize hybridity and appropriation, the field of creative placemaking provides a practical framework through which these qualities can be tested in public space. Prior research in creative placemaking has demonstrated how arts- and culture-based interventions can activate public space, foster civic engagement, and strengthen connections between people and place (Crisman, 2022). However, less attention has been given to the role of liminal spaces, the in-between, transitional, or ambiguous zones, and how their unique characteristics may affect belonging. While such spaces offer opportunities for anticipation, transformation, and social interaction, they can also reinforce exclusion by acting as boundaries that divide inside and outside (Mick, 2025).

1.2 Research Aims and Questions

This research addresses a gap in the literature by introducing *liminal placemaking* as a distinct subset of creative placemaking. Creative placemaking has been praised for using arts and

culture to bring meaning to spaces (Nursesey-Bray, 2020; Webb, 2014) and for supporting participation and policy change (Arroyo, 2017). At the same time, it has been criticized for driving gentrification and displacement when focused on attracting outside investment rather than serving local communities (Zitcer, 2020). *Liminal placemaking* shifts the focus to uncertain, overlooked sites and engages with their transitional and transformative potential. It frames how creative practices can support new forms of social interaction, identity negotiation, and a sense of belonging in contexts marked by otherness and marginality. In this research, *liminal placemaking* is defined as the activation of liminal urban spaces through creative practices that foreground hybridity, co-evolution, and belonging.

According to Loh et al. (Loh et al., 2024), creative placemaking is characterized by ‘material interventions’ into the urban environments that seek to foster a sense of place and belonging. Guided by this understanding, this study aims to explore the role of socially-engaged design in creating a sense of belonging in liminal urban spaces, investigating strategies that engage with power dynamics, cultural narratives, and social identities in order to redefine such spaces.

Accordingly, the central research question is framed as:

How can liminal placemaking cultivate a sense of belonging in transitional urban spaces?

This question leads to three sub-questions to address different aspects of liminal placemaking:

- To what extent do creative placemaking interventions in liminal spaces enhance place attachment and foster a sense of belonging?
- How do the transitional qualities of public space shape design strategies for fostering belonging?

- How can such design strategies be integrated into broader cultural planning frameworks to support long-term attachment in liminal spaces?

By posing these questions, the study aims to clarify the potential of liminal placemaking as both a theoretical lens and a practical design approach.

1.3 Significance of Study

This research contributes to the body of literature on creative placemaking by introducing *liminal placemaking* as a distinct conceptual and practical framework. By focusing on liminal urban spaces, the study highlights how design strategies can foster belonging in contexts of uncertainty and indeterminacy. The findings will offer designers, artists, and practitioners frameworks to better understand and engage with the social, cultural, and spatial dynamics of underutilized or contested spaces. For design practice, this study emphasizes strategies that work with uncertainty and in-betweenness as productive conditions rather than problems to be resolved. The outcomes may inform more inclusive approaches to public space design, cultural planning, and community development. In doing so, the study also addresses broader urban challenges of inequality and displacement, offering alternative strategies for cultivating belonging in spaces often overlooked by conventional planning.

1.4 Overview of Chapters

The thesis is organized into six main chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the problem of belonging in contexts of inequality and exclusion and positions *liminal placemaking* as the conceptual

contribution. Chapter 2 develops the conceptual framework by defining liminality, placemaking, and belonging and situating them within poststructuralist and postcolonial spatial theory. Chapter 3 outlines the research design and qualitative methodology, including case selection and methods of data collection. Chapter 4 presents the case studies and interview analysis, while Chapter 5 discusses the findings through a synthesis of themes and reflections. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes with key insights, contributions to theory and practice, policy and design recommendations, and directions for future research.

2

List of Characters:

Conceptualizing Liminal Placemaking

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to develop the conceptual and theoretical foundation for the term *liminal placemaking*. It begins by a clear articulation of the three key concepts upon which this study is situated: placemaking, liminality, and belonging. Building on these definitions, the discussion then turns to postcolonial and poststructuralist scholars whose work provides critical insights into the cultural and spatial dynamics of liminal spaces. Postcolonial theory, particularly through Homi Bhabha, frames liminality as a cultural and social condition of hybridity and negotiation, while poststructuralist spatial theory extends this lens to the material and spatial dimensions of urban life. Together, these perspectives form the basis for a framework capable of explaining the complex processes that unfold in liminal urban contexts.

The chapter further synthesizes the body of literature on creative placemaking, highlighting both its successes in activating public spaces and fostering civic life, as well as its critiques for exclusionary impacts such as gentrification and displacement. Identifying this gap, the chapter advances liminal placemaking as an alternative framework; one that underscores the overlooked potential of uncertain and marginal spaces to be claimed, appropriated, and reimagined as sites of belonging.

2.2 Literature Review

To ensure conceptual coherence, this section specifies how *liminality*, *placemaking* and *belonging* are conceptualized within the scope of this study. Rather than articulating their full

disciplinary histories, the discussion highlights the dimensions most relevant to understanding the spatial and relational aspects of each term, establishing the parameters through which liminal placemaking is examined.

2.2.1 Liminality

Liminality was originally defined by Arnold van Gennep through a three-phased model of rites of passage (ritual passages), separation, *transition*, and incorporation, conceptualizing the liminal as an intermediate stage between structured social states (Van Gennep et al., 1961).

Victor Turner extended the concept beyond rituals, drawing parallels with “modern” societies and their broader ‘processes’ of transformation towards a temporary anti-structural community (Horvath et al., 2015). He highlighted the importance of liminality for understanding human behavior in liminal experiences, arguing that they can shape identities, promote a sense of agency and produce embodied forms of experience.

Horvath, Thomassen, and Wydra (Horvath et al., 2022) expand the political and social implications of liminality, arguing that it can provide a theoretical lens to explain the uncertainties of the globalized world and to understand crisis, transformation, and ‘dissolution of order’. By introducing the idea of “permanent liminality”, they suggest that contemporary societies may take on a more permanent character due to prolonged in-between states (e.g. globalization, decolonization or migration), which is in contradiction with unstructured and bounded transitions.

Downey, Kinane, and Parker (Downey et al., 2016) define liminality as freedom from structure which creates a potential for reorganization, resistance, and creative becoming. This is a politically charged state tied to transformation. Drawing on Yi-Fu Tuan and Doreen Massey, Downey et al. frame liminal spaces as both space and place at the same time, rendering them dynamic and socially constructed. In *Revisiting Liminality: The Danger of Empty Spaces*, Thomassen (Thomassen, 2012) criticizes the post-colonial uses of liminality as inherently a positive space of difference, and highlights its potential instability and sense of alienation.

Moving from anthropology to geography, several scholars reinterpret liminality as a spatial condition. Wood (Wood, 2016) applies this concept to youth geographies, arguing that liminality moves beyond the binaries of inclusion and exclusion, and instead occupies a position negotiated within “fuzzy border spaces.” Similarly, *The Border as Liminal Space* (Fourny, 2013) conceptualizes geopolitical borders as zones characterized by hybridity, negotiation, and heterotopian a-territoriality. Banfield (Banfield, 2022) advances this argument by analyzing how liminality is spatially constituted. The author illustrates that liminality is not one simple in-between condition. Instead, it takes various spatial forms (nested, staggered, or mobile) depending on context and power relations. *The Liminality of Open Space* (Sletto & Palmer, 2017) examines the open urban spaces in Monrovia being actively structured by the rhythms of everyday use and negotiation.

A distinct body of literature addresses liminality through abandoned, residual, or indeterminate urban spaces. De Sola-Morales (Franck, 2014) frames vacant urban sites as undefined and expectant spaces; areas existing outside the productive logic of capitalist cities yet charged with possibilities. As noted by Gilles Clément (Clément, 2004), leftover land which he calls the “third

landscape,” embodies indeterminacy and serves as refuge areas for biodiversity. *Isn’t All Public Space Terrain Vague?* (Franck, 2014) illustrates that indeterminacy and fluctuating use are defining conditions of “terrains vagues”, while Azhar et al. (Azhar & Gjerde, 2016) discuss the potential of urban marginalized sites to accommodate spontaneous acts and experimentation.

Spatial liminality is also theorized through hybridity and dialectical spatial production. Edward Soja’s *Thirdspace* (Soja, 1996) draws from Lefebvre to argue that Thirdspace is socially produced through a trialectic between material (Firstspace) and imagined (Secondspace) dimensions. Pittaluga (Pittaluga, 2020) highlights the potential of urban residual spaces to prompt processes of appropriation and co-authorship by users, emphasizing how their transient character enables alternative uses, hybrid governance and transformative practices. Similarly, Davis Bivens (Davis Bivens et al., 2024) traces the evolving politics of streets as liminal spaces, demonstrating how they become contested spaces of social change and negotiation.

Sletto & Palmer, Mick, and Naja et al. (Sletto & Palmer, 2017; Mick, 2025; Naja et al., 2024) expand liminality beyond spatial analysis by foregrounding mobility and ‘lived experience’. The Monrovia study emphasizes rhythms, mobility, and everyday practices that continuously reconstitute urban liminal spaces. Similarly, in *Designing Ecotones*, Mick introduces ecological thresholds as liminal zones that mediate between ecosystems, promoting movement, connection and interaction across the permeable layers of use. Naja et al. investigate affective responses (comfort, isolation, indifference) triggered by transitional environments, arguing that liminal spaces are experientially charged.

Finally, several authors argue that liminal spaces become opportunities for intervention, encouraging a move to tactical urbanism and strategic design. As noted by Pittaluga (Pittaluga, 2020), transitional spaces call for a process-oriented design practice that prioritizes user experience and collective agency. In such liminal conditions, designer's role shifts from author of fixed objects to facilitators of empowerment and co-evolution. Liminal spaces hold both neutrality and tension, which creates an opportunity to design them in ways that strengthen physical and social connections (Mick, 2025).

Across anthropology, geography, and urban theory, liminality evolves from a bounded transitional phase within ritual processes to a spatial, political, and experiential condition in contemporary social life that is characterized by indeterminacy and contested transformation.

2.2.2 Placemaking

Placemaking is widely recognized as an evolving concept that has expanded across disciplines while remaining theoretically vague. As Istoriou and Pozoukidou (Istoriou & Pozoukidou, 2025) argue, despite its widespread application in spatial planning, placemaking lacks a universally accepted definition. Their analysis demonstrates that placemaking primarily centers on public space, process-oriented planning, and community participation. Historically, placemaking emerged as a reaction to modernist planning in the mid-20th century, with an emphasis on human-oriented urbanism and participation in planning (Istoriou & Pozoukidou, 2025). Over time, it evolved into a policy framework, especially as cities adopted creative strategies that emphasized arts and social impact.

Creative placemaking in U.S. became institutionalized within cultural policy through agencies such as the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) (Zitcer, 2020), with the goal of integrating arts and culture into community revitalization efforts, positioning participants as “creative placemakers” alongside the artists and developers. Zitcer also argues that the struggle to define creative placemaking reflects tensions between top-down, economically driven interventions and the needs of low-income communities.

The white paper on creative placemaking by Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010) foregrounded the role of collaboration and building partnerships, arguing that projects are most successful when they build on local expertise and reinforce the distinctive cultural and spatial characteristics of place.

One of the central themes across the literature is the role of community participation.

Placemaking is consistently framed as a collaborative and community-based process. Tarigan and Lubis (Tarigan & Lubis, 2025) define placemaking as a “community-centered strategy for revitalizing public spaces”, claiming that this method embodies a collaborative process of leveraging local assets and cultural identity to reinforce people-place connections. Their framework for Medan Labuhan includes participatory mapping, field observation, and community interviews as methods for incorporating local knowledge into planning processes. Similarly, Istoridou and Pozoukidou (Istoridou & Pozoukidou, 2025) contend that placemaking is frequently associated with certain qualities including community participation, iterative processes, and a strong connection to public spaces and local context.

A synthesis of articulations offered by Nursey-Bray et al. (Nursey-Bray, 2020), Debra Webb (Webb, 2014), Loh et al. (Loh et al., 2024), and Project for Public Spaces (Project for Public

Spaces, 2021) collectively emphasize the role of arts and cultural practices in shaping a sense of place through meaning-making, material interventions, and the integration of identities into everyday spatial experiences. Creative placemaking involves saturating spaces with meaning through arts and cultural expression, leveraging a community's visions and values (Nursey-Bray, 2020; Webb, 2014). According to Loh et al. (Loh et al., 2024), creative placemaking is characterized by 'material interventions' into the urban environments that aim to develop a sense of place and belonging among the users. Similarly, Project for Public Spaces (Project for Public Spaces, 2021) emphasizes the multiple identities (physical, cultural and social) that define a place, advocating for their creative integration into people's everyday use of space. In *The Morphology of Placemaking* (Natividade et al., 2021), the authors develop a framework to map urban interventions along axes of formal-informal processes, designed vs non-designed practices, and expert-led vs community-led initiatives. While they demonstrate how placemaking has become increasingly institutionalized, they argue that it remains largely limited to the street scale, underscoring the need to situate placemaking within broader regional contexts.

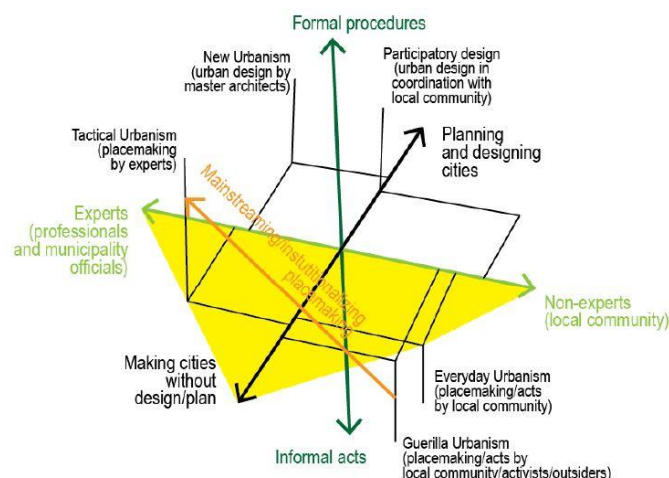


Figure 1. Maps of the emerging urbanisms (Natividade et al., 2021)

Guerrilla urbanism represents bottom-up spatial interventions that resist formal planning and challenge dominant power dynamics (Hou, 2020). These practices often emerge from unsanctioned grassroots activities and community improvisation, emphasizing short-term, low-cost, and experimental interventions.

2.2.3 Belonging

A central theme across the literature on belonging is the distinction between place attachment and place belongingness. Yousef and Khattab (Yousef & Khattab, 2023) conceptualize belonging through two dimensions: place-belongingness (the personal feeling of being “at home”) and the politics of belonging. Tomaney similarly argues that belonging concerns both feeling “at home” and feeling safe, and that it operates across scales, ranging from local to national (Tomaney, 2015). He rejects the binary opposition between cosmopolitanism and local attachment, instead suggesting that attachments are multiple and dynamic.

Place attachment is defined as people’s positive emotional connection to specific locations, shaped by personal experience, social interaction, and environmental features (Kamani Fard & Paydar, 2024). Kamani Fard and Paydar adopt the person-process-place (PPP) model, emphasizing that attachment emerges from interactions between individuals, psychological processes, and the physical and social characteristics of place. Thus, belonging is not merely symbolic identification; it is rooted in material, social, and psychological relationships with specific environments.

Yuval-Davis distinguishes between belonging (emotional attachment) and the politics of belonging (boundary-making practices that define inclusion and exclusion) (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

The politics of belonging concern access to rights, recognition, and participation that is determined by legal status and citizenship (Yousef & Khattab, 2023). Yousef and Khattab show how migrants construct a sense of belonging beyond their temporary legal classification, yet remain constrained by the rigid citizenship structure that shapes inclusion and exclusion. Thus, legal status becomes a determining factor in shaping both perceived and negotiated belonging. Similarly, belonging is mediated by institutional cultures and racialized power dynamics. Le Roux and Groenewald (Le Roux & Groenewald, 2021) demonstrate how social positioning along axes of race, language, and gender shapes students' inclusion or alienation.

According to Asikainen and McAreavey (Asikainen & McAreavey, 2025), belonging intersects with ethnicity and rural imaginaries. Despite acts of hospitality, rural spaces can reproduce exclusionary narratives tied to whiteness and national identity.

Segers et al. (Segers et al., 2021) conceptualize belonging through embodied place attachment, arguing that feelings of home are generated through relational resonance: attachment, co-creation, and co-regulation. In the Mount Murals project, co-creative art practices fostered embodied connections to place and community, demonstrating that belonging is produced through sensory, relational, and creative engagement. The authors claim contend that place memory is neurologically embedded which means experiences of place are stored and reactivated, developing attachment over time. Belonging emerges relationally through shared embodied practices. Therefore, belonging is not abstract; it is performed through bodies in space.

Belonging is co-constructed within communities and institutions. Shared values foster intra-group cohesion, however, institutional power hierarchies complicate cross-group belonging (Le

Roux & Groenewald, 2021). Deconstructing barriers of difference is essential for holistic embeddedness. Tomaney (Tomaney, 2015) argues that belonging involves attachment, loyalty, solidarity, and affinity within socio-territorial collectives, while Kamani Fard and Paydar illustrate that higher levels of place attachment correlate with civic engagement and social trust, linking belonging to collective participation (Kamani Fard & Paydar, 2024).

Belonging is neither static nor singular. It is a dynamic negotiation between emotional attachment and structural recognition. Belonging is not merely cultivated through permanence, but through relational practices, embodied engagement, and negotiated inclusion within contested socio-spatial terrains.

2.3 Theoretical Frameworks

This research is grounded in a poststructuralist theoretical framework that understands space as relational, constructed, dynamic, and politically contested. Rather than conceiving space as a neutral container, this study draws on postcolonial and poststructuralist spatial theory to frame liminal spaces as sites of negotiation, hybridity, and becoming.

Specifically, this framework engages three interrelated dimensions: 1. Homi Bhabha's theory of postcolonial liminality and the "Third Space" of enunciation, 2. Poststructuralist spatial theory as developed by Foucault, Massey, Soja, and Deleuzian assemblage thinking, and 3. A synthesis that bridges cultural liminality and spatial production.

2.3.1 Postcolonial Liminality: Homi Bhabha

Homi Bhabha's work provides the foundation for understanding liminality as a site of cultural negotiation rather than mere transition. In *The Location of Culture* (Bhabha, 2012), Bhabha introduces the concept of the "Third Space" as a middle site where cultural meaning and identity are produced through processes of translation and negotiation.

According to the author, identity is not fixed or pure but is constantly negotiated in the present moment, especially in hybrid, liminal cultural spaces that resist rigid binaries and exclusionary politics. For Bhabha, liminality does not refer simply to a temporary in-between phase but to a structural condition of hybridity. Cultural identities are not fixed or essential; rather, they emerge in the ambivalent space between colonizer and colonized, self and other (Bhabha, 2012). This intermediate "in-between" destabilizes binary oppositions and renders identity as performative and contingent.

The Third Space disrupts claims to cultural purity or authenticity. Meaning is not transmitted intact from origin to representation; instead, it is produced through acts of enunciation within unequal power relations. As Bhabha contends, liminality, thus, becomes a generative site where authority is both exercised and subverted. Bernhard Giesen (Giesen, 2022) extends this understanding by situating liminality beyond ritual transition into broader socio-cultural transformations, emphasizing its role in challenging established structures and enabling new configurations of identity and power.

2.3.2 Poststructuralist Spatial Theory

This research draws on poststructuralist spatial theory to reconceptualize space not as a fixed or bounded territory, but as relational, contingent, and continuously produced through power, representation, and practice. Across poststructuralist perspectives, space is understood as constituted through relations rather than as a pre-given backdrop for social life.

Foucault's theoretical contribution is foundational in undermining the notion of space as neutral. In *Of Other Spaces* (Foucault, 1986), he argues that spatial arrangements are embedded in relations of power, and that "other spaces" (heterotopias) bring together incompatible sites, unsettling normative spatial order. Space, in this sense, is not simply material form but a relational configuration through which bodies are organized, regulated, and differentiated. Power is not centralized but diffused across micro-practices (everyday practices) (Dovey, 2023).

Doreen Massey extends this relational ontology by rejecting essentialist conceptions of place as internally coherent. In *For Space* (Massey, 2005), she conceptualizes space as "the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity," emphasizing that space is constituted through interrelations and is always under construction (Dovey, 2020). Places are not sealed containers of identity but articulated moments within wider networks of trajectories, flows, and encounters (Massey, 2005). This understanding foregrounds simultaneity meaning multiple histories and social positions coexisting without resolving into a unified whole. Space is, thus, open-ended, future-oriented, and characterized by ongoing negotiation.

Edward Soja (Soja, 1996) builds upon this relational framework through his concept of *Thirdspace*, which disrupts binary distinctions between material space and conceived space.

Thirdspace integrates lived experience, representation, and materiality into a trialectical understanding of spatial production. It is a space of hybridity and alternative possibility, where dominant spatial logics can be contested.

Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, Dovey conceptualizes place as an assemblage, a dynamic network of heterogeneous elements including material forms, social practices, and affective forces (Dovey, 2023). Assemblages are characterized by processes of territorialization and deterritorialization, negotiating states of stability and transformation. Urban public space must be understood through the interconnections of morphology and meaning, avoiding purely phenomenological and purely discursive reductions.

Taken together, these perspectives converge on several principles central to this research. First, space is relational and constituted through interconnections rather than bounded by fixed borders (Massey, 2005). Second, spatial arrangements are inseparable from power, as they structure visibility, movement, and access. Third, lived, imagined, and material dimensions of space are intertwined rather than separable domains. Finally, places are emergent assemblages shaped by processes of becoming.

2.3.3 Bridging the Two Traditions

Bringing together Bhabha's postcolonial liminality and poststructuralist spatial theory enables this study to situate liminality not only as a cultural condition but as a spatial process. While Bhabha foregrounds the "Third Space" as a site where identities are negotiated and meanings are produced through cultural translation (Bhabha, 2012), poststructuralist spatial theorists

emphasize that space itself is relational, produced, and politically charged (Foucault, 1986; Massey, 2005; Soja, 1996). This research argues that liminality unfolds at the intersection of these two domains: it is simultaneously a negotiation of cultural identity and a negotiation of spatial territory. Liminal urban spaces are, therefore, not passive voids or transitional leftovers, but active sites where subjects and spaces are co-produced.

In this synthesis, liminality is understood as operating along a spectrum. On one hand, it manifests as cultural hybridity and identity formation; on the other hand, it manifests as spatial reconfiguration. These dimensions are not separate; rather, they are mutually constitutive. Negotiating space is also negotiating identity, and vice versa. As spatial assemblages shift, the possibilities for belonging, exclusion, and agency also transform.

By bridging these traditions, this framework conceptualizes liminality as a constant process of ‘becoming’: becoming somewhere and becoming someone. Liminal spaces are not simply “in-between” states. They are dynamic fields where cultural meanings and spatial forms are continuously rearticulated. In such spaces, subjects renegotiate who they are while simultaneously reshaping where they are. Liminality thus emerges as both a socio-cultural and spatial condition, characterized by ongoing negotiation, instability, and potential transformation. This integrated perspective allows the thesis to examine liminal urban sites as politically charged terrains where identity, power, and material space co-evolve.

2.4 Creative Placemaking: Potentials and Pitfalls

Across the literature, placemaking is described as both a participatory process of meaning-making and a policy instrument for economic development, particularly when mobilized through arts and culture. At the same time, scholars increasingly caution against its unintended consequences, including displacement, cultural commodification, state-led gentrification, and uneven access to public space. The following review synthesizes these central potentials and pitfalls of placemaking.

Placemaking aims to create “quality places” that people want to live, work, and gather in, seeking to restore human-scale environments, mixed-use vitality, and sociability (Loh et al., 2024). Municipal arts and cultural plans frequently adopt placemaking strategies to increase foot traffic, improve aesthetics, and attract investment.

Temporary urbanism literature similarly highlights the potential of tactical, short-term interventions to foster social resilience and civic engagement. Khonsari (Khonsari, 2018) argues that temporary spatial objects and architectures can act as “disobedient objects” that create arenas for democratic participation, collective learning, and grassroots agency in contested urban environments. Such interventions enable communities to claim space and experiment with new forms of civic practice outside dominant development logics. Moreover, placemaking in public space contributes to wellbeing and identity reconstruction. Te Lintelo et al. (Te Lintelo et al., 2024) show that displaced populations use public space placemaking practices to build belonging, regenerate identity, and pursue everyday wellbeing.

Yang and Chang (Yang & Chang, 2025) demonstrate how state-led creative placemaking in Shenzhen transformed rural villages into an artist cluster, aligning cultural production with

global city branding ambitions. However, this economic orientation often reveals tensions between growth and equity. While placemaking promises vibrancy and revitalization, it is frequently involved with pro-growth urban agendas (Loh et al., 2024).

A recurring promise of placemaking is grassroots participation. Project for Public Spaces (Project for Public Spaces, 2021) and related frameworks emphasize that placemaking should be resident-led and community-driven. Tactical placemaking can create spaces for agonistic democracy and collective knowledge production, using visibility and invisibility strategically to negotiate access to public space (Khonsari, 2018; Te Lintelo et al., 2024). However, participation is uneven when placemaking is adopted rhetorically without engaging deeper equity concerns. Placemaking's benefits are celebrated without critically addressing who benefits or how displacement might occur (Loh et al., 2024).

A central critique across the literature is the relationship between placemaking and gentrification. While framed as creative revitalization, placemaking projects may produce social upgrading, landscape transformation, and displacement, which are the core elements of gentrification (Yang & Chang, 2025). Stevens and Dovey's *Temporary and Tactical Urbanism* (Stevens & Dovey, 2022) show how such interventions act as testing grounds for alternative urban futures while at the same time being entangled with neoliberal urban governance: their agility and informality can align with austerity policies, privatization, and processes of gentrification. Rather than inherently subversive, temporary interventions may reinforce deregulated planning systems, mask state retreat, or contribute to displacement by adding symbolic and economic value to space.

Khonsari (Khonsari, 2018) argues that temporary spatial objects allow experimentation and create platforms for community agency, contributing to the development of alternative public spheres. However, their ephemerality also raises questions: do temporary projects produce lasting structural change, or do they become aesthetic gestures within larger development logics?

Thus, placemaking emerges not as emancipatory but as politically ambivalent; capable of fostering grassroots agency and spatial experimentation while simultaneously being co-opted into market-driven urban development (Stevens & Dovey, 2022).

2.5 Towards Liminal Placemaking

The preceding review reveals a conceptual gap in the literature. While creative placemaking scholarship focuses on arts-based activation and community participation, and liminality scholarship theorizes indeterminacy, hybridity, and contested transformation, little attention has been given to how placemaking interventions operate specifically within liminal urban spaces. This absence motivates the introduction of liminal placemaking.

By liminal placemaking, this research refers to transformative processes of creating place that enable space reclamation, temporary ownership, and emergent forms of governance within transitional or marginal urban sites. Positioned as a distinct subset of placemaking, liminal placemaking extends beyond the general shaping of meaningful spaces through arts and culture. Instead, it emphasizes the transitional and transformative potential of threshold zones.

It leverages the in-betweenness of liminal spaces to foster new forms of social interaction, belonging, and identity negotiation.

Unlike conventional placemaking, which often assumes relatively stable sites of intervention, liminal placemaking operates within interstitial and residual spaces characterized by ambiguity and contested authority. These are not empty voids awaiting development, but relational assemblages where spatial and social orders remain unsettled. In such contexts, placemaking does not simply beautify or activate space; it becomes a process of renegotiating access, recognition, and territorial claim.

Liminal placemaking, therefore, reframes transitional spaces as generative arenas of possibility. Rather than stabilizing uncertainty, it works within it. In doing so, it foregrounds how the negotiation of spatial territory and the negotiation of cultural identity unfold together. This approach addresses a missing dimension in the literature by situating placemaking within liminal conditions and examining how processes of belonging, ownership, and governance emerge in spaces of indeterminacy.

3

The Setting: Research Design and Methodology

This chapter outlines the qualitative research approach, research design, data collection methods, data analysis procedures, case selection criteria, and ethical considerations guiding this study. The methodology is grounded in established principles of qualitative inquiry as articulated by Creswell (Creswell, 2009).

3.1 Qualitative Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore how designers and artists cultivate belonging through liminal placemaking practices. Qualitative research is defined as an approach for “exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem,” involving emergent questions, data collected in participants’ settings, inductive analysis, and interpretive meaning-making (Creswell, 2009).

Consistent with Creswell’s framework, this study adopts an inductive style of inquiry, focuses on participants’ experiences and interpretations, and seeks to render the complexity of socially engaged design processes. Rather than testing predefined hypotheses, the study explores how designers leverage liminality, temporality, and co-creation within specific projects to create a sense of belonging. The research design reflects what Creswell describes as “the intersection of philosophical assumptions, strategies of inquiry, and specific methods” (Creswell, 2009).

3.1.1 Research Design: Case Study and Interviews

The methodological strategy combines qualitative case study and semi-structured interviews. Creswell (Creswell, 2009) identifies case study as a qualitative strategy in which research

questions address “a description of the case and the themes that emerge from studying it”. This study follows that orientation by examining selected creative placemaking projects as bounded cases while also engaging the designers involved in them.

The cases are analyzed as potential manifestations of liminal placemaking practices, examined in relation to the conceptual framework developed in Chapter 2. Interviews with designers and design practitioners provide insight into intentions, processes, challenges, and interpretations surrounding each project. The integration of project documentation and practitioner narratives enables an in-depth understanding of both the material and conceptual dimensions of the cases.

The qualitative design remains flexible and emergent, consistent with Creswell’s (Creswell, 2009) emphasis on evolving questions and interpretive analysis. While informed by the literature review on liminality and belonging, the study allows themes to develop inductively from the data.

3.1.2 Case Study Selection and Inclusion Criteria

The study employs purposive selection of cases and participants. Drawing from anthropological and spatial theories of liminality (Horvath et al., 2015, 2022; Van Gennep et al., 1961), cases were selected based on their engagement with transitional, indeterminate, or contested urban contexts. Selected projects demonstrate one or more of the following qualities:

- Engagement with negotiated or “fuzzy” in-between spaces (Fourny, 2013; Wood, 2016)

- Spatial indeterminacy, residuality, or terrain vague conditions (Azhar & Gjerde, 2016; Clément, 2004; Franck, 2014)
- Processes of appropriation, hybrid governance, or co-authorship (Davis Bivens et al., 2024; Pittaluga, 2020)
- Lived, affective, and rhythmic dimensions shaped by everyday practice and mobility (Mick, 2025; Naja et al., 2024; Sletto & Palmer, 2017)

These cases were selected to facilitate interviews with the designers responsible for their conception and implementation. The primary aim is to understand designers' approaches to cultivating a sense of belonging within spatial contexts characterized by indeterminacy, transition, and negotiated identities.

Participants were identified based on their direct involvement in the selected projects. The unit of analysis includes both the project (as spatial-material configuration) and the designer (as meaning-making and mediating agent), enabling exploration of how belonging is fostered through interventions in liminal urban environments.

3.1.3 Methods of Data Collection

Data collection for this research consisted of two qualitative sources:

1. Semi-Structured Interviews

Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine designers, design practitioners, and artists. Two of the interviews were conducted jointly with pairs of collaborators who worked on the same project. The interview protocol was informed by

themes identified in the literature review and aligned with Creswell's guidance for qualitative research questions; broad, open-ended, and exploratory (Creswell, 2009).

Questions focused on:

- Designers' conceptualization of belonging
- Engagement with liminal or transitional spaces
- Power dynamics and cultural narratives
- Temporality and transformation
- Co-creation processes and community impact

Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent.

2. Project Documentation and Archival Materials

Additional data were collected from:

- Design firm websites
- Published articles and reports
- Publicly available documentation
- Documents shared directly by participants following interviews

This multi-source approach strengthens interpretive depth and aligns with qualitative validity strategies such as triangulation, which Creswell identifies as important for ensuring credibility (Creswell, 2009).

3.1.4 Data Analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Data were analyzed using an inductive thematic content analysis approach consistent with qualitative research design, where data analysis builds “from particulars to general themes” (Creswell, 2009).

The analytic process involved:

- Close reading of transcripts
- Initial open coding
- Development of thematic categories
- Color coding of transcripts according to emerging themes
- Memo writing to clarify code definitions and thematic relationships

To enhance reliability, codes were refined through constant comparison, ensuring consistency in meaning and application. Creswell notes that qualitative reliability involves maintaining consistency in coding procedures and definitions (Creswell, 2009). Throughout the process, conceptual frameworks on liminality, belonging, and placemaking were used interpretively to contextualize findings, while remaining open to themes emerging from participants’ perspectives.

3.1.5 Validity and Trustworthiness

Qualitative validity refers to the accuracy and credibility of findings from the standpoint of the researcher, participants, and readers (Creswell, 2009). This study enhances credibility through:

- Triangulation of interviews and project documents

- Detailed description of cases
- Transparent documentation of coding procedures
- Reflexive memo-writing during analysis

These strategies support interpretive rigor and transparency.

3.1.6 Ethical Considerations

The research protocol underwent review by the University of California, Davis Institutional Review Board (IRB) and received a determination of Exempt Category 2b under federal regulations governing human subjects research. The review determined that the study involved minimal risk to participants (IRB Protocol #2335307-1).

Participants were informed about the purpose of the research during initial meetings. Informed consent was obtained prior to interviews, and participants were given the option to request a summary of the study's findings upon completion of the research. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely to protect confidentiality.

4

The Story Unfolds: Case Studies and Interviews

4.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces six placemaking projects that are examined as examples of liminal placemaking interventions, along with the designers and practitioners involved in their conception, development, or implementation. The projects provide contextual grounding, while interviews with the designers serve as the primary source of empirical insights for the research.

The practitioners' perspectives are used to deepen and contextualize findings from both the literature and case studies, offering reflections on the intentions, processes, and strategies that shaped each intervention, as well as on how design practices may cultivate a sense of belonging and place ownership within liminal environments.

Drawing on the literature on liminality discussed in Chapter 2, the projects are examined through a set of identified liminal qualities: engagement with in-between spaces, the activation of residual or underutilized sites, processes of co-authorship and appropriation, and the lived and affective dimensions of space shaped by everyday practices. The chapter examines which of these characteristics are present in each project through a synthesis of case-study analysis and interview data, and compares how different design approaches respond to similar spatial conditions.

The chapter concludes by identifying the key themes and findings that emerge primarily from the interviews, forming the empirical basis for the conceptualization of liminal placemaking developed in the following chapter.

4.1.1 Small Center: Parisite Skate Park

Introduction

In New Orleans (2010-2015), a group of local skaters self-built a skateboard park on a disused parcel beneath the I-610 overpass. Known as *Parisite Skate Park*, it was eventually formalized as the city's first official public skatepark (Small Center for Collaborative Design, n.d.). The Small Center for Collaborative Design (Tulane University) helped the skaters with planning and fundraising, while the City of New Orleans provided permits and support.

Context

New Orleans had no official skateparks in 2010. Motivated by this gap, a group of skaters initiated an illegal DIY park at Paris Avenue and I-610 (Small Center for Collaborative Design, n.d.). This under-the-highway location was a liminal, vacant urban space, neglected by city planning and next to infrastructure. Forming partnerships with various local and state stakeholders drew public attention to the park, raising questions about its legal implications for the city. The skaters sought help from Tulane's Small Center to legalize and improve the site (Small Center for Collaborative Design, n.d.). The Small Center led capacity-building workshops and helped form the nonprofit *Transitional Spaces* to negotiate with city agencies, developing a strategic plan to continue the construction of the skatepark. Together they envisioned transforming the "Paris Site" into a safe, organized recreation area. Their work focused on vision-building, contributing design strategies that transformed the site into a more inclusive and inviting community space. The masterplan incorporated features such as gardens for

stormwater collection and filtration, a welcoming entryway, and clear signage to support the rebranding of the site as a recognized and officially sanctioned skatepark.

Timeline of Key Events

- **Early 2010s:** A group of young skaters informally builds a skate park on unused industrial land owned by Norfolk Southern Railroad. Shortly after, the railroad company demolishes the DIY skate park, citing liability concerns. Following the demolition, the skaters begin constructing a new skate park on residual land beneath a federal interstate, owned by the state and leased by the City of New Orleans. However, the city issues a cease-and-desist order, threatening to demolish the park due to lack of permits.
- **2013-2014:** The skaters approach the Tulane Small Center. Engineers, designers, and the skater organization Transitional Spaces work together to develop a master plan and secure approvals. Phase 1 of *Parisite Skate Park* is constructed through a student-led design-build process.
- **Feb 28, 2015:** *Parisite Skate Park* opens officially. A ribbon-cutting ceremony with Mayor Mitch Landrieu and City Council takes place (Small Center for Collaborative Design, n.d.).
- **Post-2015:** Transitional Spaces runs regular events (contests, community skate nights). The City of New Orleans reactivated the site which is managed and maintained by the skaters (Wener, 2020). The Small Center remains involved as an advisor for future phases.

Community Partners

- **Transitional Spaces LLC:** Founded by the original skaters, this grassroots nonprofit implemented the project. Its team (students and local youth) operated the park.

- **Small Center for Collaborative Design:** Provided technical expertise, master planning, and helped navigate city approvals (Small Center for Collaborative Design, n.d.).
- **City of New Orleans:** Mayor Landrieu, City Council, and NORDC funded and legitimized the park. They collaborated on permits and the official opening (Wener, 2020).
- **Red Bull/Spohn Ranch:** Red Bull donated ramps (made by skatepark builder Spohn Ranch), which were installed through the Small Center's effort.
- **Local Community:** Surrounding neighbors and young skaters, both beneficiaries and ongoing users of the park.

Key Interview Insights: Liminality in Practice

The primary interview for this case study was conducted with Emilie Taylor Welty, the architect of record for Parise Skate Park project. She led the design-build process and taught a Tulane University studio in which students participated in the design and construction of the project.

Welty defines placemaking as a participatory process in which local residents shape the design of spaces through their knowledge and experiences. She understands placemaking as embedding local identity and history into the design process, “and by doing so, have a little bit of the local flavor and expertise and understanding and nuance baked into a particular project...more of the local peculiarities and particularities that make a place feel like a specific place in time and space”. Welty argues that belonging, in turn, emerges when spaces reflect this local specificity and “make people feel seen and welcome”. She suggests that belonging is fostered not only through direct engagement but also through the creation of spaces that prioritize community needs over market-driven agendas.

Welty frames Parasite Skate Park as a liminal space because it emerged in a “leftover” and overlooked urban site that existed outside formal planning systems. She emphasizes the project's “transgressive nature” as skaters informally occupied and transformed underused land underneath a federal interstate. After the original skate park was demolished, the community adapted by relocating and pursuing formal approval processes, demonstrating a condition of transition, uncertainty, and resistance.

As Welty states, belonging emerges through inclusive participation and collaborative design. She explains that the project sought partners who were “open to engagement and collaboration” and used a wide range of activities including focus groups and community meetings, Play-Doh modeling exercises, and on-site workshops, in order to involve skaters, children, parents, and neighbors in shaping the park. The team created opportunities for users to contribute ideas and articulate their needs and aspirations for the space. She also highlights how observing everyday use of the space informed design decisions.

Another key insight from this interview is that Welty views power dynamics as conditions that must be actively recognized and rebalanced in design and planning. Through “power mapping,” the team identified a common inequity in placemaking processes: those with the greatest influence over decisions often have the least direct relationship to the space, while everyday users have limited formal power: “The mayor can give their blessing and make a project happen, but is probably never going to be skiing at the skate park. Meanwhile, the people that are using the space today may not have a lot of power in making things happen, but may need a much more outsized voice.” In the case of Parasite Skate Park, the project began as a conflict

between skaters and city authorities, with the city threatening to bulldoze the park. Rather than replacing community leadership with professional expertise, the Small Center used its institutional credibility to “hold space” for the skaters' vision and help them navigate formal permitting processes. A particularly significant outcome was the transformation of the relationship between the city and the skaters, as the city shifted from being an “enemy” to becoming an ally and supporter of the project. Welty highlights empowerment and capacity-building as central strategies, as the design process was conducted “hand-in-hand” with the skaters so they could continue future phases independently, “without us having to be at the center of it all.” This reflects a shift from expert-led design toward community self-determination and authorship: “We don’t want it to fail without us.”

This interview illustrates how liminal placemaking emerges through conflict, negotiation, and mediation. The skate park existed in a condition between informality and erasure, where unsanctioned practices were repeatedly threatened by the city. Through the deliberate use of institutional “standing”, designers acted as intermediaries who made inequities visible, transferring agency back to the skaters.

Welty notes the park's diversity in terms of age, gender, race, and socioeconomic background, emphasizing that it was intentionally not a typical “bro space.” Through programming such as “Girls Skate Night” and a culture that ensured people were not “bullied or chased out or made to feel lesser than,” the project fostered inclusion across different user groups. Rather than focusing on diverse cultural identities, the shared identity of being skaters became the main common ground for community building. According to Welty, community bonding emerges

through ongoing negotiation and building relationships. Design strategies such as providing seating, gathering spaces, and sheltered areas encouraged people to spend time together. However, she emphasizes that creating belonging also required addressing conflicts and concerns from neighboring stakeholders. Welty suggests that belonging is cultivated through both spatial design and “interpersonal communication”, where “you can just show people that you hear them and you care.”

Welty situates liminality within broader structural inequalities, arguing that many of the communities she works with “live day-to-day in these contested spaces” shaped by issues of land ownership, legality, and unequal access to resources. As she notes, belonging did not come only from the final physical design but through the collaborative “processes” of participation and co-creation that enabled the skaters to shape the space according to their own values.

In terms of temporality, the project intentionally left portions of the site open for experimentation, creating a “try it out and see how they like it zone.” Welty argues that this malleability is central to the park's success because it allows users to continually modify, test, and reshape the environment, reinforcing a sense of agency and ongoing ownership. Many of the meaningful additions to the park emerged after the formal design process ended, such as the skaters' creation of “skateable art” through a funded public art project. This example suggests that belonging can be enabled by intentional incompleteness embedded into design.

Reflecting on the designer's role, Welty describes designers as “conveners and synthesizers of a vision.” She argues that designers bring valuable technical knowledge, but that this expertise should not “trump or overrule other versions of expertise,” particularly the “lived experiences”

of community members. Instead, the designer's role is to help build a "shared vision of a space" and create pathways for communities to realize their own goals.

Welty also reflects on the broader impact of participatory design processes, suggesting that they can expand people's awareness of "their own ability to shape their spaces." As she states, "Building spaces in our community bring people together towards some common purpose that builds connections and builds bonds, and creates the fabric of community, or maybe reinforces the fabric of community." Her example of former skaters pursuing landscape architecture after participating in the project illustrates how engagement can empower participants to see themselves as future designers and advocates.

Welty's reflections reveal a belief that placemaking's most significant impact lies in strengthening social bonds and collective action. Drawing on experiences after Hurricane Katrina and the community mobilization to defend Grow Dat Youth Farm program, she argues that "process matters, and outcome matters, and place matters." For Welty, belonging is reflected in a community's willingness to organize, advocate for, and protect places that they collectively helped create.

Parisite Skate Park exemplifies residual/terrain-vague liminality (an obsolete under-highway lot reclaimed) and co-authored appropriation. The site's "between" state under I-610 and its grassroots takeover fit the literature's idea of "vacant urban sites... charged with possibilities". Its transformation from unregulated to city-run space also shows hybrid governance: users (skaters) and authorities jointly negotiated the place's meaning. Over time it acquired a routine

and affective dimension, e.g. rituals of group skating, consistent with liminal spaces being “reconstituted by everyday practice” (Sletto & Palmer, 2017) rather than fixed.



Figure 2. The entry and stormwater garden, the "peanut pool," an area for street-style skating, and bays offering ramps for transitional skating. Photos by Michael Wong (Wener, 2020)



Figure 3. Bounded bays and integrated stormwater garden (Wener, 2020)

4.1.2 Design Jones LLC: Claiborne Cultural Innovation District

Introduction

The Claiborne Cultural Innovation District project reclaims 19 blocks beneath the I-10 overpass on Claiborne Avenue in New Orleans. Initiated by the nonprofit Ujamaa Economic Development Corp and designed by Design Jones LLC, the *Claiborne Cultural Innovation District (CCID)* is a community-driven redevelopment. It turns a neglected highway corridor into a linear park, marketplace and cultural hub (City of New Orleans, 2024; Design Jones LLC, n.d.).

Context

The Claiborne Avenue corridor was historically a vibrant African American commercial district before I-10 sliced through it in the 1960s. Decades later, the community retains a vision to

rebuild there. The CCID aims to create a “world-class market” of local vendors and cultural attractions, transforming 19 blocks of vacant space underneath the elevated N. Claiborne Avenue expressway into a vibrant community hub. According to Design Jones, the CCID will include green infrastructure, classrooms, exhibition space and youth programs for the diverse communities along the Claiborne Corridor (Design Jones LLC, n.d.). Ujamaa’s mission is “equitable redevelopment of the Claiborne Corridor” (*Claiborne Corridor Cultural Innovation District*, n.d.), emphasizing resident leadership and equitable community-building through the cultural assets of the local culture bearers. The project explicitly honors the neighborhood’s legacy and cultural identity.

CCID aims to empower the residents through self-governance and self-organization, facilitating the path to business development and ownership. Four of the 19 blocks have been developed during the Back-A-Town phase, serving as a pilot program that demonstrates the potential for community capacity building.

Timeline of Key Events

- **Pre-1960s:** Claiborne Avenue in the Tremé neighborhood functions as a thriving cultural and commercial center of the Black community, lined with a double allée of live oak trees and used for gatherings, parades, and second-line processions.
- **1960s-1970s:** Construction of I-10 through Tremé removes the oak trees and disrupts the neighborhood, leading to displacement, economic decline, and fragmentation of the historic corridor.

- **Late 1970s:** The architecture firm Perkins & James proposes one of the first redevelopment plans, suggesting activating the space beneath the freeway with shops and structures.
- **2013:** A federally funded HUD-DOT Livable Communities planning study examines multiple scenarios for the corridor, including freeway removal and partial redesign. Diane Jones Allen participates as a local sub-consultant.
- **2010s:** Additional proposals, including one by the Congress for the New Urbanism, suggest replacing the freeway with a boulevard, sparking debate over cultural use, displacement, and gentrification.
- **2018:** The grassroots organization Ujamaa Economic Development Corporation secures federal funding to activate the space beneath the freeway and establish the Claiborne Cultural Innovation District (CCID).
- **2019-2023:** Ujamaa and the design team led by Design Jones LLC develop a master plan (Design Jones LLC, n.d.), introducing pilot installations, public art, pop-up markets, lighting, and stormwater rain gardens while reinforcing existing cultural uses of the space.
- **April 17, 2024:** Phase I completed. In a press event, City and Ujamaa officially open the initial market plaza (City of New Orleans, 2024).

Community Partners

- **Ujamaa Economic Development Corp:** Local community development organization. Founder Nyree Ramsey leads outreach and governance. Ujamaa is the client and driving force behind the district (*Claiborne Corridor Cultural Innovation District*, n.d.)
- **Design Jones LLC:** Landscape architecture firm hired to design the CCID (Design Jones LLC, n.d.). They crafted the concept of an indigenous entrepreneur-led marketplace with green infrastructure.
- **City of New Orleans:** Mayor Cantrell and city agencies co-sponsored the opening. They allocate funding and incorporate the project into city planning (City of New Orleans, 2024)
- **State/Federal Funders:** U.S. Commerce Department, state programs, and philanthropic donors provided the capital.
- **Local Residents/Business Owners:** Community members (including formerly displaced vendors) participate in planning and now operate stalls in the new plaza. Their history and needs shape the design.

Key Interview Insights: Liminality in Practice

The primary interview for this case study was conducted with Diane Jones Allen, Principal Landscape Architect at Design Jones and professor and Director of Landscape Architecture at the University of Texas at Arlington. She led the landscape design of 19-block masterplan for the Claiborne Cultural Innovation District and developed the construction documents for the first four blocks.

Allen defines placemaking as either reinforcing existing patterns of use or creating conditions that “attract public use”, distinguishing between designing around how people already occupy a space and introducing infrastructure that encourages public life where little activity exists. For Allen, a space becomes a place when people actively use it. She also defines belonging through stewardship, arguing that people care for places when they feel connected to them and see their culture and values represented there: “Belonging means that I feel that I’m connected to it [the place] in some way. It represents my culture or my ideas.” In her view, belonging is reflected in a community’s willingness to maintain and protect a place.

Regarding liminality, Allen suggests that the Claiborne underpass exemplifies how communities can transform marginal and overlooked spaces into meaningful places: “As African Americans have done in this country forever, they say, you give us heck, and we make beauty.” Although the freeway created what might be considered a liminal space, residents continued to gather there, organizing markets, celebrations, and everyday activities. As she explains, people “claimed it [and] as soon as it went up, they took the liminal space and made it a place.” This highlights the agency of local communities in transforming in-between spaces through everyday use. Allen criticizes design that ignores lived experiences, arguing that it can erase people just as effectively as highways did.

Allen views belonging as emerging from recognizing and reinforcing existing community practices rather than imposing new uses on a space. She argues that Claiborne “was not a blank slate”; people had already claimed the space through markets, celebrations, concerts. As a result, the design process focused on observation and engagement to validate how residents

already used the site. In her words, belonging comes from “acknowledging that it already belonged to them” and supporting “what they're doing and how they see the future of the space.”

Another key insight from the interview is the complexity of power dynamics. Allen describes tensions between community members, businesses, planners, freeway removal advocates, and homeless populations, highlighting that different groups held competing visions and interests for the site. Her discussion of homelessness, post-Katrina displacement, and debates over whether to invest in the space or remove the freeway highlights how liminal placemaking is deeply intertwined with social, political, and economic forces: “So yeah, there’s been politics.”

Another key insight from the interview is that Allen views community identity as multiple and overlapping rather than singular, emphasizing that “there is no THE community” but rather “many communities” and “sub-communities.” This understanding shaped the design process, which tried to reflect diverse cultural histories through themed spaces and inclusive engagement: “trying to understand the multiplicity and the depth and the intricacy of any community.” She also highlights that belonging is complex and socially negotiated, as shown by debates over who is considered a “real” New Orleanian.

As Allen notes, social interaction is an intentional design objective, supported through physical spaces and also the engagement process itself. Food, music, poetry, and cultural activities were incorporated into outreach events to create a welcoming atmosphere where people felt “comfortable to open up and share their differences.” Allen also highlights flexibility and temporality as pragmatic design strategies in a context where the future of the freeway

remains uncertain. The project balanced permanence and adaptability through movable shipping containers and flexible infrastructure that could change if the freeway is removed.

Allen's example of the youth play area demonstrates the importance of spontaneity and community-led adaptation. Observing how a local organizer brought young children into the engagement process revealed an overlooked user group and directly changed the design. This reflects Allen's broader approach of allowing community behaviors to inform design decisions rather than imposing ideas about how a space should be used. The project progressed through observation and responsiveness to unexpected forms of participation, suggesting that belonging emerges through iterative processes of interaction and adaptation.

Allen's concluding reflections underscores her understanding of the designer as a listener, collaborator, and facilitator rather than an expert who imposes solutions. She argues that communities already understand the problems they live with, and the designer's role is not to "decipher" those problems but to observe, listen, and translate community needs into physical form. This requires, in her words, "checking your ego" and treating design as "real, true collaboration." Her practice evolved through recognizing the limitations of designer-centered approaches. She recalls an early project that was eventually removed because she prioritized her own analysis over understanding how people actually used the space. This experience highlighted the importance of observing everyday practices and engaging directly with the community members.

Finally, she emphasizes the value of continuous learning and expanding engagement methods. Her example of a community archaeology event demonstrates how belonging can be

strengthened by connecting people to the history of a place in tangible ways. More broadly, Allen suggests that meaningful placemaking requires humility, interdisciplinary collaboration, and an openness to new ways of understanding place, history, and community: “being able to reach out to other experts and being able to continue to reshape the way you engage with people...”

The Claiborne project is framed as a hybrid liminal site where identity, culture, and use are continuously negotiated. The stretch under I-10 was physically between highway infrastructure and neighborhoods, making it a fuzzy borderland (Fourny, 2013). Its years of underuse align with the “terrain vague” described by (Franck, 2014). The CCID exemplifies appropriation and hybrid governance: Ujamaa (a community NGO) partnered with the city to co-govern these in-between lands, fitting Pittaluga’s (Pittaluga, 2020) idea of transitional spaces enabling co-authorship. The newly activated district is still in flux, merging old and new identities. In this transitional urban zone, routines are being established (night markets, festivals), embodying the “rhythmic” production of space (Sletto & Palmer, 2017). Thus, the Claiborne case demonstrates liminality in place, converting a neglected corridor into a site of emergent cultural identity and contested spatial order.



Figure 4. Claiborne Cultural Innovation District (Design Jones LLC, n.d.)

4.1.3 Gehl Architects: Dance into the Sunset

Introduction

“Dance into the Sunset” is the name of a pop-up public space in West Palm Beach, created in 2018. It includes a converted shipping container library and events space. Gehl Architects (with the City’s Office of Public Life) designed this activation to engage youth and connect adjacent neighborhoods.

Context

Prolonged economic disinvestment and neglect had left the Historic Northwest neighborhood dotted with a lot of vacant lots and underutilized public spaces. A vacant block at 600 4th Street in West Palm Beach’s Historic Northwest had long sat unused. In 2018, the city enlisted Gehl to pilot an interim public space there, involving the local community members in shaping a new public space. The community’s goal was to bridge the historically Black neighborhood and downtown arts district. In July 2018, a pilot site was chosen with input from the local

stakeholders. Then a survey helped identify what the community prefers to see on the site among a range of potential activities. Gehl implemented the project in three phases, incorporating portable containers and modular multi-functional elements: a small free library (container), a food container, a pop-up stage, seating and lighting (Gehl, n.d.). The project was named “Dance into the Sunset”, referencing the Sunset Lounge (a local cultural landmark).

The site officially launched in October 2018 and quickly became a lively community gathering place, encouraging the local residents to engage in organizing and hosting the programs. A micro-grant funded by the Knight Foundation and Community Foundation for Palm Beach and Martin Counties supported grass-roots programming, fostering a sense of community ownership and bottom-up activations. This initiative exemplifies how reimagining vacant land through strengthening social connections can foster community ownership and cohesion.

Timeline of Key Events

- **2016-2017:** Public Realm Action Plan. Gehl conducts a six-month planning process for downtown West Palm Beach, including a Public Space-Public Life study and community engagement. The plan proposes several temporary pilot projects to test long-term public realm improvements. A pilot project is recommended to activate an empty lot in the Historic Northwest neighborhood, addressing inequities in public realm investment. The city establishes an Office of Public Life (OPL) to coordinate public realm initiatives.
- **July 2018:** Gehl holds a community workshop. Stakeholders (residents, city officials) identify needs and a site.

- **October 2018:** Pilot space launches. “Dance into the Sunset” became the first pilot project implemented by the new office. Gehl constructs phases of activation (adding a small library container, etc). The first events include movie nights, a jazz concert, and football game broadcasts on the outdoor screen (Gehl, n.d.).
- **2019:** The space continues to host events and social gatherings, contributing to community ownership and connection. A follow-up project is initiated to translate lessons from the pilot into permanent street and public space improvements.
- **2020:** The permanent redesign project was cancelled due to COVID-19 budget constraints.

Community Partners

- **City of West Palm Beach, Office of Public Life:** Project sponsor; provided site and coordination.
- **Gehl Architects:** Led design and implementation of the modular activation.
- **Taylor Moxey Foundation (Youth Nonprofit):** Built and operates the pop-up library; emphasizes literacy and empowerment.
- **Local Community Groups:** Residents of Northwest West Palm Beach participated in planning and use of the space.

Key Interview Insights: Liminality in Practice

The primary interview for this case study was conducted with Adriana Akers, a Senior Project Manager at Gehl, with a background in urban planning. She was involved in the development of the Downtown West Palm Beach Public Realm Action Plan, which included public life studies

and community engagement processes, and later contributed to the implementation of the North Rosemary Avenue pilot project.

The North Rosemary Avenue project was considered a temporary pilot intervention to address spatial inequities and test long-term public realm improvements. Emerging from Gehl's Public Realm Action Plan, the project tried to create a gathering space in a historically underserved African American neighborhood, improve pedestrian comfort, activate vacant land, and strengthen connections to the culturally significant Sunset Lounge. Adriana also emphasizes the value of pilot projects as tools for experimentation, community engagement, and demonstrating possibilities before committing to permanent investments.

As Akers states, belonging is fundamentally about inclusion and equitable access to public space. She argues that public spaces may be formally open to everyone yet still feel more welcoming to some groups than others due to design, imagery, programming, or social norms. For her, belonging requires understanding who feels comfortable and welcome in a place, particularly among historically marginalized groups, so that public spaces can become “truly public.”

Her definition of placemaking emphasizes creating places that are unique to and reflective of the communities they serve. At the same time, she acknowledges debates around placemaking and gentrification, aligning herself with the idea that placemaking should prioritize existing residents rather than attracting new populations. She remarks: “They see them [pop-up installations, and movable seats and chairs, and string lights] as harbingers of gentrification, because often they have been used in neighborhoods that are undergoing demographic

transition.” This perspective aligns placemaking with stewardship and “placekeeping”, supporting and strengthening community identity rather than transforming it for a different set of people that want to be invited in.

Regarding liminality, Akers identifies the project site as a transitional and underutilized space situated between downtown and the Historic Northwest neighborhood. The vacant lot lacked a clear purpose and was largely unused, making it a space with potential for activation.

A key insight from the interview is that Akers views belonging as inseparable from trust-building and inclusive engagement. Recognizing the neighborhood's history of disinvestment and distrust toward government institutions, the project team intentionally designed engagement processes that reached beyond typical public meetings. By conducting door-to-door outreach with local community members, incorporating resident feedback into programming decisions, and hosting block parties with food and music, the project created opportunities for participation and fostered a sense of “ownership over the space.” Furthermore, Akers emphasizes community-defined needs: “We didn’t want to presuppose what those needs were.”

Recognizing the lack of quality public spaces and concerns about safety in the neighborhood, the project team organized social events and block parties with food and music to encourage residents to spend time in the space and interact with each other. These events created opportunities to observe “how people were using the space” and gather community input that informed design decisions.

As mentioned by Akers, temporality is a strength rather than a limitation. She argues that temporary interventions create opportunities for adaptation, allowing communities to “change it or adapt it based on what the community wants” before permanent decisions are made. Pilot projects make participation more “tangible” because residents can see their input translated into changes within a month. In this sense, temporality becomes a strategy for building both trust and belonging by giving people a meaningful role to “impact the space.”

Another important insight concerns spontaneity as an indicator of “ownership and sense of belonging of the space.” Akers highlights how residents unexpectedly volunteered to watch over and care for the free library on site, demonstrating a level of stewardship that was not planned. These actions arose organically as community members took responsibility for maintaining the space, suggesting that belonging can be observed through spontaneous acts of care, where residents move beyond being users of a space to becoming its stewards.

Several overarching insights emerge from Akers' final reflections. First, she associates belonging with a sense of ownership and influence, arguing that people are more likely to feel connected to a place when they have opportunities to shape it. Second, she highlights the ethical tensions surrounding placemaking and gentrification. She acknowledges the contradiction that public space improvements can enhance quality of life while also contributing to rising property values and displacement. Her main argument about designer's responsibility is that they should “listen to marginalized voices” and prioritize the needs of communities most vulnerable to exclusion and displacement.

Drawing on the example of Folkets Park in Copenhagen, she demonstrates that different user groups may have different needs and perceptions of safety, challenging universal assumptions about good design. For Akers, successful placemaking requires moving beyond generalized community preferences and understanding the specific experiences of diverse user groups through “deep engagement.” She notes: “The conventional wisdom in urban design is lighting makes you feel safe, and eyes on the street, and that’s what makes people feel safe....But the unhoused population who lived in the park, they wanted darkness, actually, so that they could sleep at night, and that was actually what made them feel safe, because they didn’t feel exposed.”

Finally, Akers reflects on the limitations of temporary interventions in marginalized neighborhoods. While she views pilot projects as valuable tools for experimentation and engagement, she notes that they do not always result in the long-term investment needed to address structural inequities, highlighting an existing tension between temporary activation and “permanent change.”

“Dance into the Sunset” occupies a prototypical liminal spot: a vacant infill lot awaiting permanent programming. Its temporary infrastructure and events create an “anti-structure” within the city fabric. The space explicitly fosters social co-creation (Downey et al., 2016): the community defined its purpose and Gehl Architects facilitated the transformation. In liminality terms, this project manifests spatial indeterminacy (an empty site turned active) and co-authorship. The pop-up nature echoes the idea of the space-as-process: it is in constant flux with modules added (so it is “mobile” or transitional). It also engages residents’ daily

experiences: people read, dance, or simply pass through, creating rhythms of use. Thus, it captures the essence of liminal placemaking by using an interim city space to enable emergent community interaction.



Figure 5. Gyorgy Papp Photography. Photo courtesy: The City of West Palm Beach, Office of Public Life (Gehl, n.d.)

4.1.4 Better Block: Detroit G7

Introduction

In Spring 2024, the Better Block Foundation led “*Better Block Detroit G7*” under the city’s Gratiot/7-Mile Framework. This placemaking initiative temporarily transformed vacant lots along the Gratiot/McNichols commercial corridor into an activated community block (Better Block, 2024).

Context

The Gratiot/7-Mile area is a high-traffic yet underdeveloped corridor in Detroit. As part of a broader neighborhood plan, Detroit partnered with the Better Block Foundation (a placemaking non-profit) to demonstrate the corridor’s potential. Better Block’s mission is to empower communities to “reshape and reactivate built environments” (Better Block, n.d.). This project turned blighted lots and empty storefronts into interim parks, retail pop-ups, and bike/pedestrian improvements, akin to a festival block.

In May 2024, this placemaking initiative activated three vacant, city-owned lots within the Gratiot/McNichols micro-district. These sites were selected to be transformed into a welcoming community space, highlighting the site’s potential to support both social connection and economic growth. The temporary installation, Better Block Detroit G7, was a one-day event designed to let the community experience the space during both daytime and evening hours, helping them envision future activities for the site beyond its current vacancy. Better Block Detroit G7 took advantage of the momentum created by other ongoing initiatives in the neighborhood to attract and gather people not just on the intervention day, but during the days leading up to it.

Timeline of Key Events

- **Early 2024:** Planning and outreach with local stakeholders. Better Block partners with the city of Detroit Planning Department and the Matrix Center.
- **Kickoff meeting:** A public kickoff meeting invites residents, local organizations, and partners to introduce the project and begin community participation.

- **Collaborative design process:** Community members contribute ideas for the space, while the Better Block team help translate these ideas into design elements.
- **May 2024:** Better Block Detroit G7 event. Multiple blocks on Gratiot and McNichols are temporarily revitalized: creating seating and gathering space, painting sidewalks, and hosting vendors (Better Block, 2024).
- **Post-event:** Community feedback is collected; city monitors interest in permanent redevelopment.

Community Partners

- **City of Detroit:** Project sponsor and funding partner.
- **Better Block Foundation:** Nonprofit implementer; provided expertise, volunteers, and materials.
- **Invest Detroit & Fifth Third Bank:** Financial sponsors (Better Block, n.d.).
- **Local Residents and Businesses:** Community members attended events and later advocated for improvements based on this demonstration.

Key Interview Insights: Liminality in Practice

The primary interview for this case study was conducted with Azael Alvarez, the Productions Manager at Better Block. His role involves building up the projects, coordinating with the community members and partner organizations, developing relationships with city officials, and looking over permitting processes. Overall, Alvarez conceptualizes placemaking as a process of designing environments that facilitate human connection. Physical interventions are important because they create opportunities for people to interact and build “relationships.” According to

him, places become meaningful when they serve as settings for significant social encounters and shared memories. These meaningful social experiences would lead to an emotional attachment to place which he defines as belonging.

Alvarez describes situations where residents experience a lack of collective identity. He recalls community members who “couldn’t imagine anything in the space” and who lacked a sense of “what their community meant.” A particularly important insight appears when he discusses communities seeking to move beyond negative histories. Alvarez notes that some neighborhoods may reject identities associated with past harms and instead aspire to create new narratives that reflect more positive values. Here, liminality becomes a process of identity renegotiation where communities collectively change an inherited identity into a more desirable one.

Alvarez understands belonging as a product of participation and shared decision-making, explaining that Better Block begins projects with a community kickoff meeting that brings together residents, organizations, and other stakeholders. The team invites participants to contribute ideas, providing facilitation and helping residents visualize possibilities. Alvarez acknowledges the tensions that often arise between institutional agendas and community desires. He notes that cities may have predetermined plans for a site, while residents may envision entirely different futures for their neighborhood. In this context, Better Block serves as the mediator, negotiating competing interests and advocating for community priorities.

As Alvarez notes, power dynamics emerge not only through conflicts between communities and institutions but also through constraints embedded within regulatory systems. One example

was the removal of a shade structure despite its popularity among residents, demonstrating a tension between community needs and permitting regulations, where institutional processes can limit the long-term continuation of beneficial community amenities. At the same time, the interviewee suggests that temporary interventions can help surface community needs and provide evidence for more permanent investments.

A second example reveals a more complex and hidden form of power dynamic. In Hazelwood, the creation of a new public space increased visibility in an area where informal community activities were already taking place. Alvarez notes that making a space more public can sometimes disrupt existing social arrangements, particularly when certain groups benefit from remaining less visible: “There are some people in the community that don’t want eyes on operations that are happening.” This example highlights how placemaking interventions can unintentionally change local power relations and expose underlying tensions within a community.

Alvarez highlights the importance of inclusion, trust-building, and cultural responsiveness in Better Block's approach to placemaking. He describes efforts to engage diverse cultural groups through multilingual communication, accessible participation formats, and community leadership opportunities. However, he notes that many communities initially distrust engagement processes due to a history of being over-surveyed without seeing tangible results. To address this, Better Block emphasizes rapid implementation and invites residents to join volunteer teams, shifting participation from consultation toward active collaboration.

Alvarez explains that past narratives are sometimes incorporated through physical elements such as murals that reference demolished buildings or former uses of a site. However, not all histories are embraced by communities, highlighting the importance of allowing residents to decide which narratives should be preserved or left behind.

Alvarez explains that, during project activations, activities such as workshops, performances, yoga sessions, and community events create opportunities for residents to meet new people, strengthen social ties, and engage across cultural differences: “You can’t buy culture, you gotta introduce it.” He views these interactions as essential to exposing residents to the diverse cultures represented within their neighborhoods.

The interview also reveals that Alvarez understands belonging less as a physical condition and more as a product of positive experiences and memories created in a space. He argues that people develop attachment to places through everyday activities. Particularly significant is his reflection on “no loitering” and similar exclusionary signs, which he suggests communicate that people are unwelcome and do not belong. In contrast, Better Block's recommendation for affirmative “yes” signs seeks to signal permission and inclusion.

According to Alvarez, temporary interventions allow communities to physically experience possibilities before committing significant resources. He argues that temporary activations can challenge established assumptions about how spaces should function. For example, they can transform a street from a space primarily for cars into a place for social gathering. As he notes, “but it [the street] was originally meant for people.” Alvarez emphasizes that successful

placemaking leaves room for improvisation and user agency, allowing residents to shape the space through their own practices.

In terms of design strategies, Alvarez identifies shade, seating, and lighting as the most consistently successful elements for fostering belonging. Rather than focusing on symbolic interventions, he emphasizes everyday amenities that support comfort, encourage people to stay longer, and create opportunities for social interaction.

Reflecting on the long-term impacts of temporary interventions, Alvarez points to increased community engagement, confidence, and hope. Rather than relying solely on external organizations, community members took an active role in advocating for and carrying out the project themselves.

Alvarez describes the designer not as the primary author of community but as a facilitator of social connection. He emphasizes the importance of creating spaces that encourage everyday encounters between residents, arguing that placemaking should provide opportunities for people of different ages and backgrounds to meet and develop relationships. From this perspective, the designer's role is not simply to shape the physical environment but to create conditions in which people feel recognized, included, and able to connect with one another. As Alvarez states, public spaces should communicate that “you belong here” and “I see you.”

This project engages a “terrain vague” of vacant lots (Franck, 2014) and fabricates a pop-up block of activity. It embodies hybrid governance: the non-profit Better Block and city co-operated to creatively claim abandoned land temporarily. The installation was by nature

ephemeral (120 days, per Better Block’s model (Better Block, n.d.)), highlighting the “intermediate” state between underutilization and formal development. This liminality allowed residents to experience an alternate reality for the space, aligning with the idea that such transitional interventions can prompt creative becoming (Downey et al., 2016).



Figure 6. Better Block Detroit G7 (Better Block, 2024)

4.1.5 Public Matters: Good Mischief

Introduction

In 2023-2024, Public Matters (a design justice collective) implemented “*Good Mischief*” in City Terrace, East LA. This socially-engaged public art project empowers a marginalized neighborhood to address environmental justice issues via playful installations and community-produced “toolkits” (Public Matters, n.d.).

Context

City Terrace, bisected by freeways, experiences poor air and noise quality. It is inhabited largely by long-term, lower-income Latino families. Public Matters has a history of using art to foster social action. The “Good Mischief Toolkit” is described as a “multifaceted social practice public artwork” co-created with local Visión City Terrace (VCT) group (Public Matters, n.d.). Its aim was to build residents’ capacity for advocacy around pollution and infrastructure issues, making civic engagement joyful (hence “mischief”) rather than burdensome (Shannon et al., 2024).

The project addressed the deep-rooted environmental injustices caused by industrial encroachment, freeway noise, and government neglect. The area is physically and socially fractured, split by the 10 Freeway with no soundwall, bounded by industry, and marked by unequal infrastructure. The liminality of City Terrace, caught between residential and industrial, agency and neglect, makes it a critical site for intervention.

Public Matters brought artistic ingenuity, strategic planning, and facilitation tools to guide local group Visión City Terrace and residents toward meaningful action. They designed immersive experiences like neighborhood-led tours, sensory “smell workshops,” and interactive events with symbolic gestures such as the destruction of towering Pollution Monster Piñatas, that made abstract issues like air and noise pollution feel immediate. They offered resources and design support to create materials such as visual messaging campaigns (“Pollution is not an act of love”), air fresheners with activist slogans, and a community-wide StoryMap that reframed environmental injustice as a story of love, resistance, and belonging. Rather than simply

documenting suffering, Public Matters positioned community members as storytellers, knowledge holders, and creative agents of change.

Public Matters developed an "engagement ecosystem" that connected residents, artists, schools, local businesses, and environmental groups, enabling collaborative organizing. The result was not just greater civic participation, but a cultural shift in how the community sees itself and its power. The legacy of Good Mischief lies in these enduring capacities; strategies, relationships, and reawakened agency that Public Matters helped foster in one of Los Angeles's most environmentally burdened yet culturally vibrant neighborhoods.

Timeline of Key Events

- **2010s:** Public Matters begins working in East Los Angeles and develops relationships with local groups, including the grassroots volunteer organization Vizion City Terrace (VCT).
- **Community organizing phase:** VCT forms as a resident-led volunteer group, initially organizing neighborhood cleanups and advocacy in response to dumping, pollution, and long-term disinvestment.
- **2023:** Public Matters partners with VCT to co-develop and launch the Good Mischief Toolkit for Neighborhood Self-Determination, a series of modules (installations, games, workshops).
- **2023-2024:** Activations roll out in City Terrace: e.g. interactive art pieces, community mapping events, pop-up performances implemented to address environmental injustice

while strengthening neighborhood stewardship and identity. A companion storymap was produced to document local history.

Community Partners

- **Public Matters:** Lead project designers and facilitators, using their signature creative framework (Public Matters, n.d.).
- **Visión City Terrace (VCT):** Grassroots volunteer coalition of residents, partnering on planning and execution.
- **Local Schools, businesses and Community Groups:** They participated in workshops and campaigns.

Key Interview Insights: Liminality in Practice

The primary interview for this case study was conducted with Reanne Estrada and Mike Blockstein, co-founders and co-principals of Public Matters. For the Good Mischief project, both served as co-leads, with Estrada acting as one of the lead artists. Their roles involved developing and implementing the project while facilitating community participation.

According to the interviewees, City Terrace represents a form of environmental liminality, where residents exist between the industrial infrastructure and everyday community life, caught between environmental neglect and attachment to place. Despite significant environmental injustices, interviewees emphasize a strong sense of belonging rooted in “radical love” and intergenerational connections to place. The project's framing indicates that

placemaking begins with recognizing these lived realities and supporting community self-determination within a context of environmental inequity.

Estrada frames belonging through stewardship and mutual care, arguing that residents not only care for the physical environment but also “look out for each other” and work to preserve the “culture and spirit of the place.” She emphasizes belonging as a form of collective resilience that has emerged in response to historic disinvestment and ongoing gentrification challenges. In her view, people “belong to each other” through shared struggles and a mutual support.

Blockstein focuses more strongly on place identity and long-term commitment. He mentions Vision City Terrace's volunteer-led cleanups and organizing efforts as evidence of a strong sense of belonging, where residents continue investing time and labor into the neighborhood despite difficult environmental and social conditions. His preference for “placekeeping” over placemaking reflects a belief that City Terrace already possesses a rich identity and culture that should be supported and sustained rather than remade through external interventions.

City Terrace itself is a borderland (separated by 10 Freeway), illustrating a “fuzzy border space” (Wood, 2016). The Good Mischief project turned this contested margin into a site of creative autonomy. It embraced transformation under uncertainty; by working in an area affected by crisis (pollution), it treated everyday streets and parks as malleable stages for civic action (Soja, 1996). The community co-production fits Pittaluga’s (Pittaluga, 2020) idea of liminal spaces enabling appropriation and hybrid governance as users design space. The playful, non-fixed installations create ephemeral thresholds of engagement. Residents move through toxic

environmental conditions but co-create convivial moments within this project, a clear blend of the physical and experiential dimensions of liminality (Mick, 2025; Naja et al., 2024).



Figure 7. Good Mischief. Public art installations (Public Matters, n.d.)



Figure 8. Good Mischief. Destroying Pollution Monster Piñatas (Public Matters, n.d.)

4.1.6 Studio One Eleven: The Long Beach Festival

Introduction

As part of the Getty Museum's 25th anniversary celebration (Summer 2022), Studio One Eleven co-organized a community arts festival in Long Beach. Held at Houghton Park in June 2022, *"Getty 25 Celebrates Long Beach"* was a free two-day event featuring music, dance, art workshops and markets (CARS, n.d.; Studio One Eleven, n.d.).

Context

The Getty's initiative aimed to bring art to the city. Long Beach, noted for its diversity, hosted the third of ten festivals. Studio One Eleven partnered with the Long Beach Creative Coalition (including Creative Class Collective) and local cultural institutions (e.g. Arts Council LB, Museum of Latin American Art) to emphasize grassroots talent. By highlighting North Long Beach artists, the festival acted as a post-pandemic community booster.

Timeline of Key Events

- **Planning (2021-2022):** The Getty Museum initiates the Getty 25 celebration, aiming to reconnect with communities across Los Angeles and reach areas where the institution had limited engagement.
- **Project initiation:** The Getty works with CARS (Community Arts Resources) to identify 10 communities across Los Angeles County for local cultural festivals. Long Beach is selected as one of the sites. Studio One Eleven and Intertrend are brought together to

organize the Long Beach program and begin assembling a local consortium of cultural partners.

- **Programming development:** Local institutions including ArtsLB, the Museum of Latin American Art, Long Beach Museum of Art, and others join the collaboration to design a festival reflective of Long Beach's diverse communities (Studio One Eleven, n.d.).
- **June, 2022:** Festival Days. A two-day public festival featuring performances, visual art, workshops, and community activities is organized through collaboration among local organizations and coordinated with the Getty 25 initiative.

Community Partners

- **Studio One Eleven:** Lead organizer, coordinating logistics and partnerships.
- **Getty Museum (CARS):** Funded the project and provided overarching programming (Studio One Eleven, n.d.).
- **Creative Class Collective:** Co-organizer and promoter of Long Beach's cultural scene.
- **Local Community Organizations:** Arts Council LB, The African American Cultural Center of Long Beach, United Cambodian Community, and others sponsored stages or art installations.
- **Performers/Artists:** Local bands, dance troupes, and artisans (e.g. Jordan High School Marching Band, Cambodian dance groups) performed or exhibited.

Key Interview Insights: Liminality in Practice

The primary interview for this case study was conducted with Sinead Finnerty-Pyne, Director of Marketing and Special Projects at Studio One Eleven, and Tanya Raukko, Chief Strategy and

Investment Officer at Intertrend and leader of the nonprofit Creative Class Collective. Both played key leadership roles in the Long Beach Festival project, working with partner organizations to develop and implement the event.

A key insight from the project context is that placemaking was approached as a process of relationship-building, representation, and coalition formation rather than physical design alone. The initiative emerged from efforts to reconnect communities after COVID and to build stronger ties between cultural institutions and historically underrepresented communities. Both interviewees emphasize the importance of creating a festival that genuinely reflected Long Beach's diversity through partnerships and shared decision-making. The discussion also highlights the importance of local ownership and trust, as organizers worked to address skepticism toward external institutions by ensuring that the project remained community-driven and representative of local identities.

While Houghton Park is an established urban green space, the festival temporarily redefined its use. By transforming a normal park into an immersive cultural event, the project created a ritual liminal period distinguished from ordinary time. This aligns with Turner's (Turner, 1977) view of communal festivities as "liminal experiences." The park became a fluid social space where street becomes stage (a Thirdspace), blurring boundaries between everyday and celebration. Although not "forgotten" like vacant land, the site's temporary closure and transformation illustrate how even regular public places can acquire a liminal character through collective activity.



Figure 9. Booth where people could add comments (Studio One Eleven, n.d.)



Figure 10. Getty Celebrates Long Beach (CARS, n.d.)

4.2 Key Themes and Findings

Across interviews, a common thread is that designers act as facilitators, empowering communities to shape place rather than imposing their own vision. Projects emerge from specific local contexts of disinvestment or cultural need, and planners navigate complex power dynamics by collaborating with existing community institutions. Placemaking is framed as activating latent community ownership and belonging through participatory, often temporary, design strategies. Tensions arise around structural inequities and the liminal nature of sites, which many projects confront by celebrating local narratives and incorporating playfulness to engage residents. The resulting synthesis shows convergence on core principles of empowerment and experimentation, with some divergence in emphasis on permanence vs. temporality or collective vs. individual identity.

Theme 1: Socio-spatial Context

All projects arise in neglected or transitional urban settings. Several interviews highlight city- or nonprofit-led initiatives (Detroit G7, Dance into the Sunset, Long Beach Festival, Claiborne Cultural District) that purposely target under-resourced neighborhoods or leftover land (e.g. cleared highway corridors, vacant lots). Others began through grassroots action (Parasite Skate Park, Good Mischief clean-ups) where community members first “claimed” space due to need. In each case, the context of disinvestment or exclusion (poor infrastructure, racism, youth neglect) is the catalyst. Interviewees emphasize working with existing social networks embedded in these contexts. The divergences lie in scale and initiation: some projects were top-down (Long Beach

Festival planning by city agencies), others bottom-up (skaters self-organizing), but both share a response to local conditions.

Theme 2: Designer's Role & Positionality

A unifying theme is that designers do not dictate placemaking. Instead, across projects they facilitate, listen, and provide tools and resources. Azael from Better Block explicitly states, “we... provide the tools [so residents] can build their own space.” Mike/Reanne from Public Matters say they “create conditions” for community-led action. Across interviews, designers emphasize humility and partnership, often working “invisibly” behind the scenes. Strategies implied include: conducting community-led workshops (Dance into the Sunset), co-creating models with users (Parasite Skatepark), and orchestrating events but delegating content to locals (Long Beach Festival). The main divergence is nuance of approach: some took an activist stance (Public Matters pushing boundaries), others a technical support role (Gehl Architects). But all agree design was about enabling others, not showcasing professional vision.

Theme 3: Placemaking

In all cases, placemaking meant activating space through events and installations, rather than purely designing physical infrastructure. Better Block and Public Matters used pop-up interventions (parklets, tree plantings, block parties) as catalysts. Across projects, placemaking is also celebratory: skaters playing in an underpass, neighbors dining on a closed street, art performances in a park. The underlying belief is that experiencing a space together generates belonging. Strategies include nights-and-weekends DIY builds (Parasite Park), curated open-street festivals (Detroit G7, Long Beach), and incremental park prototyping (Dance into the Sunset). Some divergence arises in scale: Detroit and New Orleans efforts are hyper-local (one block or

park), while Long Beach Festival coordinates citywide activations. But all converge on engaging the community in place life rather than imposing static design.

Theme 4: Liminality and In-betweenness

Projects leverage in-between spaces and times. Abandoned lots, underpasses, and parking areas are ripe “liminal” opportunities. Each team used temporality as a strategy: pop-ups, one-day events, and experimental parklets. Designers describe these moments as “in-betweenness” where normal social order is suspended (“conspiratorial joy” of Good Mischief). All the interviewees see power in fleeting interventions to envision alternate futures. Divergence emerges in what happens after: Better Block and Public Matters speak of leveraging liminal events into ongoing momentum (block clubs, toolkits), whereas the West Palm Beach team highlighted the difficulty of converting pilots to permanent change. Still, the dominant theme is liminal interventions as experimental prototypes that allow communities to renegotiate space ownership without requiring immediate permanence.

Theme 5: Sense of Belonging and Ownership

A core consensus is that belonging is produced, not given. In every case, interviewees link belonging to active involvement: people belong when they have had a hand in making or caring for place. For example, Azael highlights that building the parklet made neighbors protective (“they feel like they own that space”). Strategies include creating community traditions (block parties, tree-plantings, festivals) and explicitly handing over agency to residents (letting skaters set rules, using door-to-door surveys). Divergences are slight: some focus on cultural pride (Long Beach’s emphasis on diversity), others on grassroots rituals (Good Mischief). However, all

emphasize shared ownership, whether through collective maintenance or cultural affirmation as the foundation of belonging.

Theme 6: Community Building and Empowerment

Interviews consistently show that projects leveraged and expanded local capacity. Often, the community already had latent assets such as activist skaters in New Orleans and cultural organizations in Long Beach. The design teams' strategy was to recognize and enlist these assets. Public Matters trained locals to continue planting trees and running events. Thus, capacity-building is a central strategy, whether formal (toolkits and training) or informal (fostering neighbor leadership). A minor divergence was that Public Matters focused on climate and environmental skills, while Gehl Architects focused on civic engagement skills. Overall, the convergence is that sustainable placemaking rests on empowered communities; projects aim to leave communities stronger than they began.

Theme 7: Design Strategies for Belonging

There is a rich variety of concrete tactics to foster belonging. Common strategies include temporary public events (block parties, festivals, pop-up parks) and participation-driven activities (co-building, workshops, surveys). Many interviewees mention play and creativity as key tools; skaters build ramps, murals and music celebrate culture, and spontaneous performances introduce elements of unpredictability. Tools like Wikiblocks (modular street seating) and playful engagement (Pollution Monster Piñatas) were used to entice participation. All teams emphasize sensory and experiential methods: sharing food, painting street murals, plantings, open-street dancing. While specifics differ (Detroit used parklets; New Orleans used DIY skate ramps; Long Beach used curated art tours), they converge on making the public realm inviting,

fun, and shaped by residents. The divergence is mainly thematic: some strategies foreground environmental issues (Good Mischief), others cultural history (Claiborne), but in all cases the approach is to activate place through community-centered design.

Theme 8: Navigating Power Dynamics & Policy

Every project grapples with governance and power relations. Common strategies include working through institutions (getting permits, applying for grants, partnering with city departments) and raising community voice (story maps, power mapping, block clubs) to influence policy. Interviewees often frame their role as mediating between grassroots and bureaucracy. For instance, Better Block coordinated with city planners; Public Matters produced evidence to show officials. Divergences arise in that some took confrontational stances (e.g. grassroots skaters defying park rules, guerrilla gardening in City Terrace), while others preferred formal channels (West Palm plugging into city planning). But all highlight that power dynamics are central, from securing resources to balancing diverse community demands. The overarching theme is using design projects as political tools, building evidence for change and amplifying marginalized voices to shift policy.

Theme 9: Cultural Narratives & Diversity

Cultural identity is woven throughout each project. All teams show sensitivity to the local community's heritage. For example, in New Orleans, the Parisisite Skatepark reflects local youth culture; in Detroit, the event included Latin and African-American cultural elements. Tactics include collaborating with cultural institutions, using arts and stories that resonate locally, and ensuring events reflect the city's ethnic mix. A strong convergence is commitment to plurality of narratives rather than a single narrative through strategies such as multilingual materials (Detroit

G7), working with artists from each culture, and Native American-based exhibitions (Long Beach Festival). Little tension or divergence is noted: each community is unique, but the approach to honour that uniqueness is common. The key insight is that recognizing cultural narratives multiplies belonging; participants see “themselves” in the space.

Theme 10: Structural Inequities

All interviewees acknowledge the underlying urban inequities. Azael and Diane (CCID) speak most directly about racism and displacement. Others note neglect and uneven service provision (lack of parks, infrastructure). Each project is, implicitly or explicitly, partly motivated by correcting the existing injustices. The strategy is often to redirect resources and attention; e.g. using city grants to invest in low-income blocks, ensuring festivals are in underserved areas. Public Matters explicitly ties their work to climate justice, planting trees where they are most needed. The unanimous view is that placemaking cannot be neutral; it must address who has been excluded. There is convergence that the projects are remedies (though small) to structural gaps. The primary divergence lies in rhetorical emphasis; some foreground equity (Detroit, Claiborne) while others integrate it more quietly (Long Beach Festival).

Theme 11: Temporality & Experimentation

The concept of experimentation is integral to every case. Interviews repeatedly highlight temporary pilot projects as low-risk ways to engage residents. Whether it’s a one-day street closure (Detroit), a weekend skatepark event, or a short block party, the message is “try it and see.” All teams treat placemaking as iterative experiments. Strategies include using removable materials (seats, containers, pop-up furniture) and programming short-term events. Consensus is that temporality lowers barriers: funding, permits, and community participation are

easier when promised impermanence. Divergences are minimal: some present their interventions more as tests (Better Block explicitly frames as prototype), while others simply keep them short by default (festivals). Overall, experiments are seen as learning tools that can later be solidified if popular.

Theme 12: Playfulness & Spontaneity

Every interview highlights play as a key element. Playfulness is both a strategy and an outcome; projects frequently included games, music, and “mischief”. Placemaking is seen as a secretly transformative play. Temporary joyful interventions (dances, DJ booths, children’s activities) are used to break down barriers. Strategies include pop-up arts, performances, and interactive games to create a ‘carnival’ atmosphere. Interviewees noted that if an intervention is fun, people are more likely to participate, reflecting what Mike and Reanne (Good Mischief) described as an ethos of “conspiratorial joy” (Shannon et al., 2024). In short, play is not frivolous but a deliberate tactic to engage and empower.

5

The Acts: Discussion

5.1 Synthesis of Themes and Theory

This chapter synthesizes the empirical themes from the interviews with the theoretical framework of liminal placemaking. The proposed discussion is that temporary interventions in liminal urban sites catalyze embodied encounters that, when co-experienced and co-authored by community members, can produce relational forms of belonging. I frame this as a multi-stage process, from material disruption to emergent belonging.

5.1.1 Stage 1: Material Disruption in Liminal Space

Initially, a temporary intervention disrupts normal spatial routines and activates “leftover” urban land. In other words, it opens up liminal space for new uses (Clément, 2004; Franck, 2014).

Designers interviewed emphasize important material gestures. For instance, in Better Block Detroit G7, painting crosswalks and adding parklets transformed a street. Such acts break the status quo where a closed street becomes a pedestrian zone, a neglected underpass becomes a skate park, and an empty lot is activated with visual “yes-signs”. The result is that the site instantly feels different, signaling that the off-limits is now open for gathering.

- **Disrupt routines:** Normal traffic or empty lots are converted into people-friendly zones.
- **Activates undefined sites:** Vacant lots, barren plazas, or underpasses become parks or stages.
- **Generates encounter space:** The sudden presence of benches, planters, food stalls, or performers draws people in.

- **Opens a threshold:** The intervention signals that a normally overlooked place is now available to use.

For example, the West Palm Beach project (Dance into the Sunset) involved a series of custom seating units and a Sunset stage. Adriana Akers explained that this was intended to create a sense that the space could be reclaimed by residents. In effect, each intervention produces new social space (Soja, 1996) and temporarily upsets the existing spatial order. However, this stage does not yet create belonging; it provides the material entry point (Massey, 2005) or provisional conditions that make further steps possible.

5.1.2 Stage 2: Embodied Engagement

Once the space is opened, people begin to inhabit it physically, and belonging starts to take shape through *embodied encounter*. Through sensory and bodily experience, participants feel the space is newly theirs. Similarly, Reanne Estrada noted that her approach was, “...to connect people with their bodies and with each other, so that it became very physical and real. Because, you know, a lot of things can feel very abstract... We needed to make sure that people could feel their bodies in the conversations that we are having.” A key interview finding was that when neighbors gather, play, or simply sit together, they develop a connection to other people and to place. As one design practitioner put it, “Having a community space where all the residents... feel attached to this space and belong there” demonstrates how embodiment builds attachment. In other words, place *becomes* lived and felt, not merely conceptual.

- **Sensory and bodily presence:** People hear the music, and touch the materials; they physically occupy and modify the space.

- **Co-presence:** Neighbours see each other and share the moment in time, reinforcing social bonds.
- **Play and affect:** Playful activities (skaters building ramps, dancing, games) generate joy and emotional resonance with the place.
- **Temporal immersion:** Because these are short, intense events, people experience “liminal time” together, which strengthens the moment’s impact.

For example, at Parisite Skatepark, young adults were handed concrete blocks to assemble ramps. Emilie Taylor Welty recalled inviting kids to “*shape the skate park of your dreams*” by using Play-Doh to model their ideas on site. This embodied workshop had skaters and neighbours *co-creating* the park with their bodies and tools. Similarly, Better Block events often feature block parties that spontaneously get people moving in the new space. These examples illustrate the claim that belonging begins with shared situated experience. It matches Henri Lefebvre’s (Lefebvre et al., 1997) notion that space is produced through spatial practice; people re-produce the place by inhabiting it in new ways. The interviews make clear that without this bodily engagement (people actually showing up and feeling welcome), there can be no sense of ownership.

5.1.3 Stage 3: Co-authorship and Shared Meaning

When participants are engaged, the next step is co-authorship. Community members actively shape the meaning of the place. Because the interventions were participatory and open-ended, residents contribute their ideas, narratives, and rules, turning the site into a culturally negotiated space (Bhabha, 2012). In practice, this happens through discussions, informal

governance, and symbolic acts. For example, the Claiborne Cultural Innovation District (CCID) involved local artists in designing murals.

- **Co-created design:** Community input directly alters or adds to the installation.
- **Narrative layering:** Collective stories and art accumulate; murals, photos, and performances that reflect local identity.
- **Social negotiation:** Community members discuss how the space will be used and managed (sometimes informally governing it as a commons).
- **Plural interpretations:** Different groups actively create different meanings in the space (the space can be a skate park for youth, a movable library for adults, or a meeting spot for neighbors).

This stage exemplifies how meaning is socially constructed. One practitioner summarized: “we end up trying to create conditions... where people can manifest [their ideas] for themselves.” That is, the designers step back and let residents co-author the place. This is exactly Bhabha’s insight: the installation itself is an empty frame, but the interaction within it generates a Third Space of cultural negotiation. The placemaking, thus, becomes a dialogue. Over time, as users repeatedly appropriate the place, they weave a shared narrative. This is the point where material liminality translates into cultural liminality.

5.1.4 Stage 4: Emergence of Relational Belonging

Finally, with repeated engagement and shared authorship, relational belonging begins to emerge. Importantly, interviewees stress that this is a gradual outcome. One architect put it simply: “if you don’t have a sense of belonging, you are not going to steward [the space].” In other words, a

sense of belonging grows as people invest in care. Across cases, when interventions were sustained or repeated, residents started to call the place their own.

- **Relational attachment:** Community members feel connected through the place (as a shared asset) to each other.
- **Situational belonging:** The sense of belonging is tied to the situation and can evolve (it is “for now” rather than fixed).
- **Identity negotiation:** Residents collectively negotiate their identity and cultural meanings with respect to the place.
- **Place re-signification:** A once-empty or contested site gains a new meaning, becoming a landmark of the community and creating attachment.

Crucially, this belonging is not permanent ownership in the private sense. It is a processual, continuously forming attachment (reflecting Deleuze’s (Deleuze et al., 2011) becoming and Soja’s view of space as always in production). Over time, the simple acts of intervention and reclamation transform into a lived sense of community. In other words, belonging appears as an emergent property of the earlier stages, consistent with Massey’s claim that space is a product of interrelations.

6

Epilogue: Conclusion and Implications

6.1 Contributions to theory

This research contributes to placemaking scholarship by introducing the concept of liminal placemaking. It conceptualizes temporary or experimental interventions in transitional urban spaces that either leverage the existing liminal qualities of a site or deliberately create a liminal condition, moments of openness, that allows new social relationships to emerge.

The findings suggest that belonging does not result directly from physical design but develops through a processual sequence of interactions. Temporary interventions first disrupt routine uses of space, enabling embodied engagement and shared experiences. Through participation and co-authorship, community members begin to negotiate meanings and relationships with place, gradually producing relational forms of belonging.

By framing this movement from embodied encounter to relational meaning and cultural belonging, this study bridges spatial theory and placemaking practice. Liminal placemaking therefore highlights temporality, experimentation, and collective authorship as key mechanisms through which belonging can emerge in transitional urban environments.

6.2 Policy and design recommendations

The findings suggest several implications for planners and designers. First, placemaking processes should begin by identifying the network of actors that constantly affect a space, including residents, community organizations, and broader material and social forces.

Second, temporary interventions should be recognized as legitimate tools of urban experimentation. Pop-up installations, events, and tactical urbanism can create low-risk opportunities for communities to test new uses of space.

Third, design processes should emphasize participatory co-creation, allowing residents to shape both the physical environment and the narratives associated with it.

Finally, planners should support incremental and adaptive approaches to placemaking, where temporary experiments inform longer-term spatial strategies.

6.3 Directions for future research and limitations

One limitation of this research is that liminal placemaking is introduced as a conceptual framework, making it difficult to find empirical cases that explicitly reflect all its theoretical qualities. Time constraints in identifying projects and reaching practitioners also limited the number of cases examined.

Additionally, this study deliberately avoided highly contested liminal spaces such as borderlands, which present complex ethical and political conditions.

Future research could examine a wider range of placemaking projects to strengthen the empirical grounding of the concept. Further studies should also engage participants and users of space, in addition to designers, to better assess how placemaking interventions influence lived experiences of belonging.

Bibliography

Arroyo, K. K. (2017). Creative Policymaking: Taking the Lessons of Creative Placemaking to Scale. *Artivate*, 6(2), 58–72. <https://doi.org/10.1353/artv.2017.0000>

Asikainen, H., & McAreavey, R. (2025). ‘We are here our hearts are there’: Rurality, belonging and walking together. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 65(1), e12486. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soru.12486>

Azhar, J., & Gjerde, M. (2016, December). *Re-Thinking the role of Urban In-Between Spaces*.

Balduik, J. (2008). *On liminality: Conceptualising in ‘between-ness’* [Master Thesis of Human Geography, Radboud University]. <https://theses.uibn.ru.nl/server/api/core/bitstreams/d5630df0-6dc9-4846-a8bf-9ce4f29955c4/content>

Banfield, J. (2022). From liminal spaces to the spatialities of liminality. *Area*, 54(4), 610–617. <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12791>

Better Block. (n.d.). *Placemaking | Better Block | Dallas*. The Better Block Foundation. Retrieved March 6, 2026, from <https://www.betterblock.org>

Better Block. (2024). *After Action Report: Better Block Detroit G7* [Report]. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1bAOVh4SZpvW9ao1CY8vHDoBMTKW5LkYd/view?usp=embed_facebook

Bhabha, H. K. (2012). *The Location of Culture* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203820551>

CARS. (n.d.). *Getty 25 Celebrates Long Beach*. CARS. Retrieved March 6, 2026, from <https://carsla.net/projects/7321/getty-25-celebrates-long-beach>

Certeau, M. de. (1984). *The practice of everyday life*. University of California Press.

City of New Orleans. (2024). *Claiborne Corridor Innovation District*. NOLA.Gov. <https://nola.gov/next/mayors-office/news/articles/april-2024/2024-04-19-claiborne-corridor-innovation-district/>

Claiborne Corridor Cultural Innovation District. (n.d.). Retrieved March 5, 2026, from <https://www.cidnolaonline.com/>

Clément, G. (2004). *Manifesto of the third landscape*. Trans Europe Halles.

Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (3. ed., [Nachdr.]). SAGE Publ.

Crisman, J. J. (2022). Evaluating values in creative placemaking: The arts as community development in the NEA’s Our Town program. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 44(4–5), 708–726. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2021.1890607>

Davis Bivens, N., Miller, D. S., & Mills, J. T. (2024). Who’s streets, our streets: The evolution of street asphalt art and the transformation of liminal spaces for social change. *Journal of Urbanism: International*

Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability, 17(2), 237–252.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17549175.2024.2354878>

Deleuze, G., Guattari, F., Massumi, B., & Deleuze, G. (2011). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (Ed. 2004, Repr. 2011). Continuum.

Design Jones LLC. (n.d.). *Claiborne Cultural Innovation District I New Orleans, LA*. Design Jones LLC A Landscape Architecture Firm. Retrieved March 5, 2026, from
<https://www.designjonesllc.com/projects/claiborne-cultural-innovation-district>

Dovey, K. (2020). Place as assemblage. In T. Edensor, A. Kalandides, & U. Kothari (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Place* (1st ed., pp. 21–31). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429453267-1>

Dovey, K. (2023). From place to assemblage. In H. Kamalipour, P. Aelbrecht, & N. Peimani, *The Routledge Handbook of Urban Design Research Methods* (1st ed., pp. 215–223). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003168621-24>

Downey, D., Kinane, I., & Parker, E. (2016). *Landscapes of Liminality: Between Space and Place* (1st ed.). Rowman & Littlefield International, Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9798881812584>

Foucault, M. (1986). Of Other Spaces (J. Miskowiec, Trans.). *Diacritics*, 16(1), 22.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/464648>

Fourny, M.-C. (2013). The border as liminal space: A proposal for analyzing the emergence of a concept of the mobile border in the context of the Alps. *Revue de Géographie Alpine*, (101–2).
<https://doi.org/10.4000/rga.2120>

Franck, K. A. (2014). Isn't All Public Space Terrain Vague? In M. Mariani & P. Barron (Eds.), *Terrain vague: Interstices at the edge of the pale* (1st ed., pp. 118–123). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203552172>

Gehl. (n.d.). *Rebuilding community trust in West Palm Beach*. Gehlpeople. Retrieved March 6, 2026, from <https://www.gehlpeople.com/projects/north-rosemary-ave-pilot-project/>

Giesen, B. (2022). Inbetweenness and Ambivalence. In A. Horvath, B. Thomassen, & H. Wydra (Eds.), *Breaking Boundaries* (pp. 61–71). Berghahn Books. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781782387671-005>

Horvath, A., Thomassen, B., & Wydra, H. (Eds.). (2015). *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality* (1st ed.). Berghahn Books. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt9qcxbg>

Horvath, A., Thomassen, B., & Wydra, H. (2022). Introduction: Liminality and the Search for Boundaries. In A. Horvath, B. Thomassen, & H. Wydra (Eds.), *Breaking Boundaries* (pp. 1–8). Berghahn Books.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9781782387671-002>

Hou, J. (2020). Guerrilla urbanism: Urban design and the practices of resistance. *URBAN DESIGN International*, 25(2), 117–125. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41289-020-00118-6>

Istoriou, T., & Pozoukidou, G. (2025). Understanding placemaking in spatial planning using a text analysis tool. *Discover Cities*, 2(1), 57. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44327-025-00097-9>

- Kamani Fard, A., & Paydar, M. (2024). Place Attachment and Related Aspects in the Urban Setting. *Urban Science*, 8(3), 135. <https://doi.org/10.3390/urbansci8030135>
- Khonsari, T. (2018). Temporary spatial object/architecture as a typology for placemaking. In C. Courage & A. McKeown (Eds.), *Creative Placemaking: Research, Theory and Practice* (1st Edition). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315104607>
- Le Roux, A., & Groenewald, E. (2021). The elusiveness of a sense of place-belonging: One student's struggle on a diverse south African campus. *Issues in Educational Research*, 31(3), 854–870.
- Lefebvre, H., Nicholson-Smith, D., Lefebvre, H., & Lefebvre, H. (1997). *The production of space* (Reprinted). Blackwell.
- Loh, C. G., Ashley, A. J., Kim, R., Durham, L., & Bubb, K. (2024). Placemaking in Practice: Municipal Arts and Cultural Plans' Approaches to Placemaking and Creative Placemaking. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 44(3), 1679–1690. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X221100503>
- Massey, D. B. (2005). *For space*. SAGE.
- Mick, M. (2025). Designing Ecotones: Engaging Liminal Space in the Built Environment. *Ekistics and The New Habitat*, 84(2), 45–55. <https://doi.org/10.53910/26531313-E2024842731>
- Naja, M. F., Kuswanto, I. R., Purnama, A., Fathurraziqin, H., & Wardhani, M. K. (2024). Exploring Experience and First Impression in The Liminal Spaces (Case Studies: Corridors and Stairs in Campus Environment). *Journal of Architectural Design and Urbanism*, 6(1), 12–22. <https://doi.org/10.14710/jadu.v6i1.18709>
- Natividade, V., Rivas, A., Büttner, B., & Stojanovski, T. (2021). *The morphology of placemaking – from urban guerrilla and formal street experiments to mobility and metropolitan regions*.
- Nurse-Bray, M. (2020). The ART of Engagement Placemaking for Nature and People in Cities. In D. Hes & C. Hernandez-Santin (Eds.), *Placemaking Fundamentals for the Built Environment* (pp. 305–326). Springer Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-32-9624-4_14
- Pittaluga, P. (2020). Pioneering urban practices in transition spaces. *City, Territory and Architecture*, 7(1), 18. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40410-020-00127-6>
- Project for Public Spaces. (2021). *What is Placemaking?* <https://www.pps.org/article/what-is-placemaking>
- Public Matters. (n.d.). *A Good Mischief Toolkit for Neighborhood Self-Determination*. Public Matters Group. Retrieved March 6, 2026, from <https://publicmattersgroup.com/projects/goodmischief/>
- Segers, R., Hannes, K., Heylighen, A., & Van Den Broeck, P. (2021). Exploring Embodied Place Attachment Through Co-Creative Art Trajectories: The Case of Mount Murals. *Social Inclusion*, 9(4), 116–129. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v9i4.4403>
- Shannon, B., Sloane, D. C., & Bray, A. (2024). *Co-creative placekeeping in Los Angeles: Artists and communities working together*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003411918>

- Sieverts, T. (2003). *Cities Without Cities: An Interpretation of the Zwischenstadt* (0 ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203380581>
- Sletto, B., & Palmer, J. (2017). The liminality of open space and rhythms of the everyday in Jallah Town, Monrovia, Liberia. *Urban Studies*, 54(10), 2360–2375. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098016643475>
- Small Center for Collaborative Design. (n.d.). *Parisite Skate Park*. Tulane University. Retrieved March 5, 2026, from <https://small.tulane.edu/project/parisite-skate-park/>
- Soja, E. W. (1996). *Thirdspace: A journey through Los Angeles and other real-and-imagined places*. Blackwell.
- Stevens, Q., & Dovey, K. (2022). *Temporary and Tactical Urbanism: (Re)Assembling Urban Space* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003284390>
- Studio One Eleven. (n.d.). *Getty Celebrates Long Beach*. Studio One Eleven. Retrieved March 6, 2026, from <https://studio-111.com/project/getty-celebrates-lb/>
- Tarigan, T. F., & Lubis, A. S. (2025). A Framework for Community-Based Placemaking as a Revitalization Strategy for Public Spaces in Medan Labuhan. *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science*, 1452(1), 012007. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/1452/1/012007>
- Te Lintelo, D. J. H., Ip, M. A., Lappi, T. R., Lakshman, R. W. D., Hemmersam, P., Dar, A., & Tervonen, M. (2024). Urban displacement and placemaking in public space for wellbeing: A systematic review of global literature. *Environment and Urbanization*, 36(2), 358–376. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09562478241277085>
- Thomassen, B. (2012). Revisiting liminality: The danger of empty spaces. In *Liminal Landscapes: Remapping the Field* (p. p.21-35). London: Routledge.
- Tomaney, J. (2015). Region and place II: Belonging. *Progress in Human Geography*, 39(4), 507–516. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132514539210>
- Turner, V. (Ed.). (1977). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure* (7. print). Aldine Publ. Company.
- Van Gennep, A., Vizedom, M. B., & Caffee, G. L. (1961). *The Rites of Passage*. University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226027180.001.0001>
- Webb, D. (2014). Placemaking and Social Equity: Expanding the Framework of Creative Placemaking. *Artivate*, 3(1), 35–48. <https://doi.org/10.1353/artv.2014.0000>
- Wener, R. (2020). Parisite Skatepark New Orleans, Louisiana. In *Changing the Narrative The 2019 Rudy Bruner Award for Urban Excellence*. Bruner Foundation, Inc.
- Wood, B. (2016). Border Spaces: Geographies of Youth Exclusion, Inclusion, and Liminality. In K. Nairn & P. Kraftl (Eds.), *Space, Place, and Environment* (pp. 481–498). Springer Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-044-5_21
- Yang, X., & Chang, T. C. (2025). Rural idyll in a global creative city: Gentrification, cultural governance and creative placemaking. *Urban Geography*, 46(3), 548–567. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2024.2387935>

Yousef, O., & Khattab, N. (2023). The contingent home: How second-generation Arab migrants negotiate belonging in Qatar? *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 49(17), 4372–4389.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2166910>

Yuval-Davis, N. (2006). Belonging and the politics of belonging. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 40(3), 197–214.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220600769331>

Zitcer, A. (2020). Making Up Creative Placemaking. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 40(3), 278–288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X18773424>

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Title of study: Liminal Placemaking: Investigating the Role of Design in Cultivating Belonging in Liminal Spaces

Investigator: Maryam Hashemi, M.S. Student, Department of Human Ecology

Faculty Advisor: Dr. David de la Peña, Associate Professor, Department of Human Ecology, UC Davis

Interview Code: _____

Date/Time: _____

Introductory Protocol

To facilitate our note-taking, we would like to audio record our conversation today. Please review the consent form. Only the researcher and faculty advisor will have access to the recordings, which will be securely stored and permanently deleted after they are transcribed.

Your participation is voluntary, and you may stop the interview at any time if you feel uncomfortable. The consent form also confirms that (1) your responses will remain confidential, (2) you may decline to answer any question or withdraw at any time, and (3) no harm is intended through your participation.

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview. We've planned this session to last no longer than 60 minutes. During this time, I have a series of open-ended questions to guide our conversation. If time begins to run short, I may gently move us forward to make sure we cover the full scope of the interview.

Introduction

You have been invited to participate in this study because you have been identified as someone with meaningful experience in community-centered design or creative placemaking, particularly in transitional or “liminal” urban spaces.

This research project explores how socially-engaged design can help foster a sense of belonging in places of transition or uncertainty. My goal is to understand the strategies, challenges, and reflections of designers or design practitioners like yourself in shaping how people connect to place, especially in environments that are often overlooked, underutilized, or lack a fixed identity. This is not an evaluation of your practice. Rather, the goal is to learn from your experience and insights to better understand how design can support belonging in liminal urban contexts.

Interview Questions

Introduction and Role (5-7 mins)

Question 1. Could you please briefly introduce yourself and your role in the placemaking project [project’s name]?

- *Prompt:* Could you tell me about the context of the project, including the type of community you were working with?

Question 2. How would you personally define *placemaking* and *belonging* in the context of your work?

- *Prompt:* Ask what "belonging" looks or feels like to them in a public space.
- *Note:* After this question, share your research's working definition of *liminal spaces*; spaces of transition, ambiguity, or in-betweenness that may lack a clear identity but hold potential for transformation and social connection. Liminal spaces are hybrid sites where identities are restructured and renegotiated through interactions that resist the dominant norms.
- With that in mind, I'm curious whether you see [project's name] as engaging with this kind of liminal quality, and if so, in what ways?

Theme 1. Sense of Belonging and Power Dynamics (10 mins)

Question 3. What strategies have you used to design for a sense of belonging in this project, particularly among the communities you work with?

- *Prompt:* Ask about emotional connections, cultural references, or invitations to participate.

Question 4. Have you witnessed challenging power dynamics or tensions in your projects?

- *Follow-up:* How did you deal with that situation?
- *Prompt:* Were there moments of tension or disagreement over priorities, narratives, or design direction? How were those handled?

Theme 2. Cultural Narratives and Representation (8-10 mins)

Question 5. Are there diverse cultural groups that are part of the community or the project?

- *Follow-up:* How are their stories or narratives weaved into the project?

- *Prompt:* Where do these narratives come from, and how are they translated into design elements?

Question 6. How does the history or memory of a place shape your design strategies?

- *Prompt:* Ask how past uses, stories, or meanings are preserved.

Theme 3. Fluid Identities and Belonging (10-12 mins)

Question 7. Do you explicitly set out to encourage social interaction or community bonding in your projects?

- *Follow-up 1:* Does that extend across lines of race, culture or background?

- *Follow-up 2:* What are the strategies and design elements that help accomplish this?

- *Prompt:* Ask about strategies that acknowledge racial or cultural dynamics.

Question 8. As I mentioned before, liminal spaces often lack a singular social identity. Going back to liminal spaces, have you worked in spaces like this, perhaps where there may be overlapping or shifting identities, or contested histories, or uncertain uses?

- *Follow-up:* How did you respond to that elusive and transforming context? And how did that influence the way you framed belonging?

- *Prompt:* How did your team decide what or whom to prioritize or represent in the space?

Theme 4. Temporality, Participation and Play (7-8 mins)

Question 9. What role do temporary or flexible interventions play in your work?

- *Prompt:* Is impermanence a constraint or an opportunity when it comes to creating a sense of belonging?

Question 10. Can you share a moment when spontaneity, improvisation, or playfulness helped foster community connection or shifted how a space was used?

Theme 5. Reflection and Impact (8-10 mins)

Question 11. Looking back, what design strategies do you think were most successful in fostering a lasting sense of belonging or attachment to place in a liminal space?

- *Prompt:* Ask about changes they've noticed in community presence, use, or care.

Question 12. Can you recall a moment in your practice that reshaped how you think about placemaking and the role of design and designers in fostering belonging?

Wrap-Up (2-3 mins)

Question 13. Before we wrap up, is there anything else you'd like to add that we didn't cover?

Question 14. Would you be open to sharing sketches, visuals, or any materials related to the project that might support the research?

Interview Sections Covered:

☐ Introduction & Role

☐ Belonging and Power Dynamics

☐ Cultural Narratives and Representation

☐ Fluid Identities and Belonging

☐ Temporality, Participation and Play

☐ Reflection and Impact

Other Topics Discussed:

Documents or Materials Received (photos, project links, sketches, etc.):

Post-Interview Comments / Leads (follow-ups, referrals, insights):