I’m going to talk to you today about a typology of placemaking I created as part of my PhD research, a typology that looks at placemaking through the prism of arts practice and degrees of public participation in the process.

I will focus on case studies of a particular type of placemaking – that which uses socially engaged art – and that I came to term social practice placemaking, which aligns closely to what we might think of as ordinary placemaking.
First things first – a definition of social practice placemaking.

Social practice placemaking is an inclusive placemaking anchored in community-led development and uses social practice arts in place. The arts activities range from community storytelling, gardening and cooking to avant garde performances, they are located in everyday places – streets, housing estates, supermarkets...

It uses arts processes to intentionally gather around social issues and to question the given urban form and function. As this is a placemaking practice, and not just an arts one, it also has a material concern – it works with place, gets hands on with place, and more often than not, aims to improve the lived experience of place.

Because its informed by socially engaged arts practice, a practice that doesn’t put the artist on a pedestal and place them above the public when it comes to working in the community setting, rather, the artist is recognised as having those expert artist skills, the planner theirs, the architect theirs...
And crucially the public is recognised as being the expert in being the community.

What social practice placemaking is really comes alive when you see it in action, and I’ll turn now to examples of social practice placemaking seen in projects in Dublin, London and Indianapolis.
In London, The Drawing Shed is an artists group that works out of three garage lockups on the Atlee Estate in Walthamstow.

The estates are notorious in the area, rightly or wrongly, for gun and drug related crimes, high levels of unemployment and high levels of first and second generation immigrants.

The Drawing Shed have been ‘resident non-residents’ as one artist puts it, on the estate for around six years now, and their work has been slowly made a sense, or for some, a re-sense, of community on the estate.

They have done this through a writing group, art interventions and activities out of the lock ups and around the estate, and from just being there so often, getting to know people.

The images here are of a lunch on the estate where everyone brought a meal from wherever they called home, and made a Mexican meal with Mexican artist, Pablo Perazzerate, and talked about their own immigration stories.
What I found with The Drawing Shed was the nub of social practice placemaking – it used the arts to form and cultivate connections between people, place and community.

whilst social practice arts doesn’t necessarily have an object in it, as this is a placemaking, there are objects, the process of making an object – in this instance making go-karts on the estate as had been done when it was first inhabited - is where the conversations start, where the issues that people coalesce over come from.
Secondly, Art Tunnel Smithfield in Dublin

Art Tunnel was a strip of land left over from the building of the Luas tram line in north Dublin in the impoverished but regenerating area of Smithfield, city-wide in Dublin there are over 300 such vacant spaces and it has been a major issue of urban blight.

Here, the land was turned into a community garden and art space. There were visual arts and architecture commissions, a live and performance art programme and community events.
Spaces like Art Tunnel can be seen all over Dublin.

and these projects have had quite an effect;

for the public passing them by as it’s such a different thing to see on the street, injects some green into the grey, and this beautification was seen as so important against Dublin’s impoverished cityscape;

To those participating, as this may be the first time they have been involved in an urban project; and for many the first time they have spoken to their neighbours, which might sound a trite thing to say or an easy throwaway comment, but it was of no small import to the people there;

for artists, as they are exercising a very visible and forceful presence;

and it functioned massively as ‘social horticulture’, the constant weeding and planting that the space needed was a means for locals to gather and get to know each other, it created a focal community meeting point where issues could be raised, debated and seeds of actions planted
So what I found here was that being involved in social practice placemaking creates an attachment to place, they begin to take part in place-caring activities...

and they become more aware of the politics of that place...and they become more civically minded, and for some, civically active.

In Dublin this lead some from the Art Tunnel to begin a second project, Mary’s Abbey, just along from the Art Tunnel, and petition Dublin City Council for its financial and legal support in securing the land and turning it into a community garden...
...and its also led Dublin City Council to take note of this groundswell of activity, as its happening all over the city, and it to move towards generative planning processes...

DCC Beta
With Big Car in Indianapolis, I was able to see how social practice was putting the artist in the lead and ownership of regeneration in the city.
This is one of the two warehouses and one of the ten vacant houses that Big Car in Indy has bought up in an area on the south side of the city, Garfield Park.

It is turning these spaces into arts and community spaces: the warehouse is an arts gallery, maker space and event space, and the houses on a horseshoe of streets around it, are being bought by Big Car as a social landlord, and turning them into artists homes and residency spaces.

When I say ‘arts-led regeneration’ I mean artists taking into their own hands the means of production, assets of development – the land and buildings – and keeping them for creative and community use, keeping the community in place and using the gentrifying multipliers of the arts to community benefit –

As Jim from Big Car says, the gentrification to this area is coming, regardless, so we might as well be ahead of it and in control of it.
This is what the factory looks like now.

Big Car is now working with the community on a three-year transit project – to bring buses to the area, to improve the condition of the roads and sidewalks, and to make the place walkable. Its doing this all through a socially engaged arts practice approach to place.
On the face of it, these projects may look to be a form of creative placemaking, as defined first and here by NEA in 2010 – they are creative projects involved in the making of place no doubt, but their intent and processes, when held up against the definition of creative placemaking – they show some key differences, most keenly perhaps, the lack of the fiscal imperative.

Even for Big Car, of all the examples here, the one with the closest link to a fiscal concern to its work, this is not about driving up house prices, or creating a new strip mall, its about keeping the mom and pop stores going.

The work I saw with all of the groups also wasn’t about creating shiny downtown or city centre plazas or public squares of multiple F+B offers and a closely curated public realm and programme – it was about working in those ‘ordinary’ places of the housing estate, the suburb or the rougher parts of town.

This got me to seeing there being many different types of placemaking – all of them creative to some degree, and all of them concerned with the users of a space, but in different ways.
My professional background is in arts in the public realm, so I first mapped types of placemaking against types of public realm arts.

Left to right we move from public art with a capital P and A – think Angel of the North – through to more participative art forms – think a community festival or MORE - to socially engaged arts.

We move from a top down approach to art in the public realm to a bottom up one, from people being the receivers and consumers of art, to being the co-producers of art.

Through that, the artist moves from being the sole author of the work, to being one of many with the community and place becomes ever more prescient in the practice.
I then created a typology of placemakings...

At the top, three modes – strategic, tactical and opportunistic.

At the bottom, four practices, public realm, creative, participatory, and social practice.
So a strategic public realm placemaking
might be the Crossrail artist commissions going through its main London stations...
Opportunistic and participatory placemaking
could be a guerrilla gardening project, taking over a patch of left over land with its locals to create a green space
Tactical and creative placemaking
might be a pop up intervention, such as Art in Odd Places, that takes live art onto the streets...
...and then tactical social practice, which Art Tunnel Smithfield and The Drawing Shed are examples of, and Big Car with the Tube, a strategic social practice placemaking
In a social practice placemaking project:
• The artist, other professionals and the community join in an assemblage, where everyone funds that assemblage from their own expert positions

• The role of the arts process is to draw attention to issues and encourage reflexive reassessment via new thinking and then doing

• This acts as a catalyst for social change through community coalition building, and going on to foster a sense of place stewardship and civic participation
Thus, social practice placemaking challenges the binary and linear notion of authorship and audience found in more normative placemaking that co-opts arts into its processes.

It has problem with the culturisation of city life and form that has created a homogenised public culture of identity and citizenship and privatised and alienated public space that ‘transcends’, ‘crowds out’ localised urban cultures, that destroys the ‘urban terroir’, of placemaking that brands a neighbourhood identity or is implicated in processes of gentrification.
Place-based creativity at the grassroots in the city positions itself conversely as a site of resistance to culturisation.

It is relational, an artform that is concerned with human interactions and social context, acting at a social interstice of the everyday, negotiating the personal, social and political of the individual and the collective in place.
It works to find, create and maintain sites of different cultural value through new city visualisations, an arts-based mechanism for urban dwellers to meet their social, cultural and material needs at a localised scale in the city, with an accompanying interest in how place is made in the city, who is making it.

This image is from the Homebaked community bakery, in the shadow of Liverpool football stadium, an arts-based community-led social, cultural and economic regeneration initiative.
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Arts in Place: The Arts, the Urban and Social Practice
Routledge 2017