

## Rethinking Accessibility: Toward a Participatory Placemaking Model

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**Abstract:** Public space accessibility is commonly framed through infrastructure provision and land-use planning. While these approaches improve physical access, they often overlook individual, social, and institutional barriers that shape how people participate in, experiment within, and relate to public spaces. This paper addresses this gap by proposing a participatory placemaking model that conceptualizes accessibility as meaningful contact — the collective capacity to engage with, shape, and imagine public spaces grounded in lived experiences and tacit knowledge. The model is explored through REBLOC, an experimental platform using urban games, collaborative making, and temporary pop-up interventions to create situated encounters to foster micropublics. Through hands-on engagement, participants reveal values, negotiate spatial possibilities, and develop confidence in collective action. Findings suggest that temporary participatory platforms can expand meaningful opportunities for engagement, allowing accessibility to emerge through collective and situated practices.

### 1. Problem framing

Public space is widely recognized as a complex and dynamic construct, with accessibility understood as one of its defining characteristics. UN-Habitat (2015) emphasizes that public spaces must remain open to all, free of profit-driven restrictions. Scholars similarly argue that accessibility enables coexistence, social encounters, and diverse activities (Franck & Huang, 2023), reinforcing the democratic role of public space in urban life (Kohn, 2004; Parkinson, 2012).

Urban accessibility is typically analyzed through two dominant dimensions: infrastructure, the availability and connectivity of transport networks; and land use, the spatial distribution of people and destinations (Pereira & Herszenhut, 2023; Vandecasteele et al., 2019). This dominant spatial framing overlooks a third and less examined dimension: capabilities, which—drawing on Sen’s Capability Approach—can be understood as the real freedoms that enable people to pursue what they value doing and being (Sen, 1985, 1999). Infrastructure-oriented approaches often overlook sociocultural barriers that constrain capabilities, shaping everyday practices and influencing how people engage with public spaces. Such barriers are frequently reinforced by broader structural conditions, including privatization, corporate management, and governance practices (Kohn, 2004; Mitchell, 2003; Zukin, 1995).

The research addresses the gap in understanding how collective capabilities and the sociocultural constraints shape accessibility through a Participatory Placemaking Model, which conceptualizes accessibility as meaningful contact. Contact becomes meaningful when it transforms values and extends beyond a single moment to foster a broader ethic of respect for others, rather than mere tolerance (Valentine, 2008). This refers to the collective capacity to engage with, shape, and imagine

public spaces that reflect lived experiences and tacit knowledge. By emphasizing agency, co-creation, and hands-on engagement, this model enables individuals and communities to exercise their capabilities through temporary interactions—such as urban games, collaborative craft activities, or interactive knowledge exchange—that surface their values and aspirations.

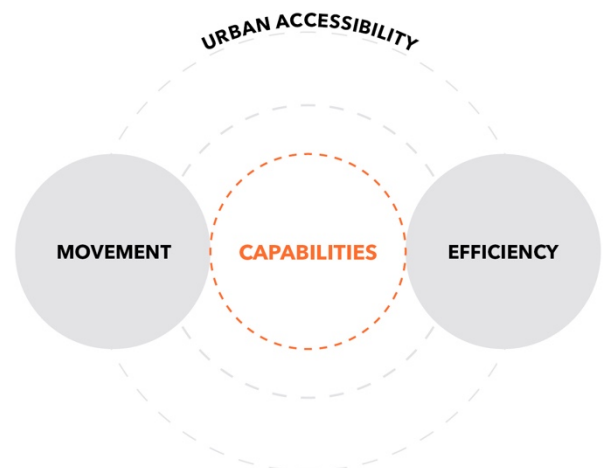


Figure 1: Research gap diagram

### 2. Conceptual framework

Placemaking, as a community-driven approach that positions individuals as active agents in shaping their environments, forms the foundation of the participatory placemaking model. Across its evolution, placemaking has been informed by several complementary perspectives that contribute to both the conceptualization and implementation of this research: human-

centered urbanism focused on everyday experiences and social interaction (Jacobs, 1961; Whyte, 1980; Gehl, 2010); critical discussions on power dynamics, spatial justice, and market forces (Lefebvre, 1968; Harvey, 2009; Soja, 2009); the temporal dimension of urban life through temporary and tactical urbanism (Bishop & Williams, 2012; Lydon & Garcia, 2015; Dovey, 2018); and the integration of arts, culture, and community collaboration to foster local identity and empowerment (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010; Courage, 2017). Together, these perspectives position placemaking as both a human-centered design approach and a strategic framework for democratizing access to public space.

The second foundation of the research is participation. Participation has long been promoted as a pathway to empowerment, enabling communities to mobilize their own capacities and make decisions (Cernia, 1985, as cited in Duraiappah et al., 2005; Freire, 1997). Yet scholars caution that participation is not inherently equitable; when reduced to a procedural exercise, it can reproduce existing power relations (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Frediani, 2015). The capability approach reframes participation as the expansion of real opportunities for people—particularly those who are marginalized—to engage meaningfully in the transformation of public spaces (Sen, 1985, 1999, 2009; Nussbaum, 2011). This perspective ensures that participatory placemaking addresses inequities in participation—who is able to engage, how opportunities are created, and who ultimately benefits. Based on this, the research focuses on participatory capabilities (Frediani, 2015), shifting attention beyond procedural efficiencies to the freedoms, agency, and conditions that enable individuals and communities to engage meaningfully.

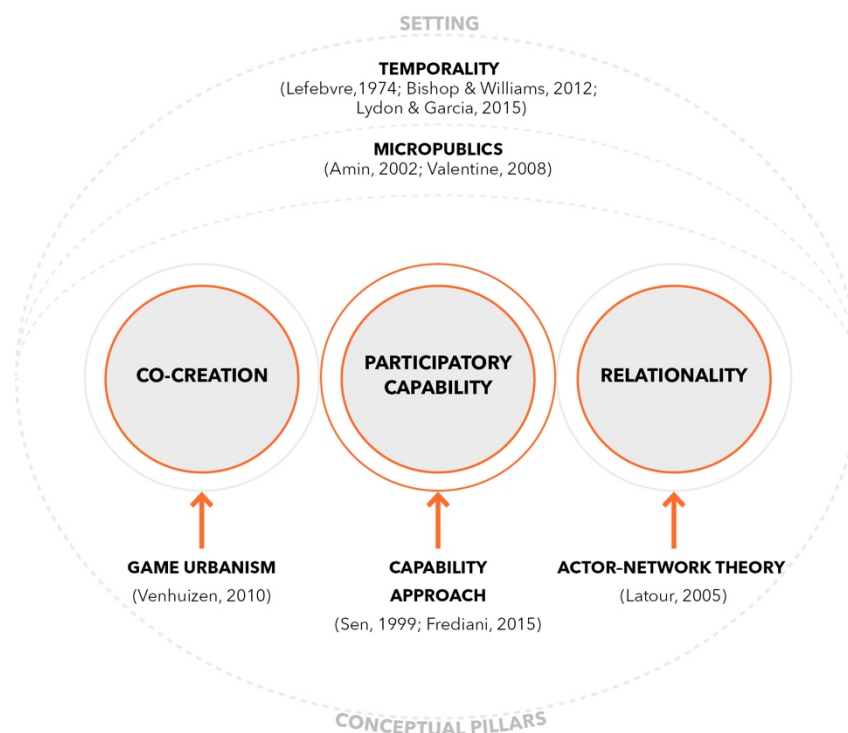
Bringing together the human-centered focus of placemaking and the opportunity-expansion lens of participatory

capabilities, the Participatory Placemaking Model is structured around three conceptual pillars:

- Co-creation, interpreted through Collective Creativity (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). and Game Urbanism (Venhuizen, 2010), emphasizes playful, collaborative, and hands-on forms of engagement that surface collective tacit knowledge and invite imaginative experimentation.
- Capability, grounded in the Capability Approach (Sen, 1999), centers the real freedoms that enable individuals and communities to participate meaningfully in public life.
- Relationality, drawing on Actor–Network Theory (Latour, 2005), highlights how networks of human and non-human actors—such as players, planners, staff, policies, tools, and spatial configurations—enable or constrain participation.

These pillars frame accessibility as an emergent property of co-created, capable, and relational practices, extending it beyond mobility to include agency, expression, and influence.

The spatial context for this model is constituted by places that allow micropublics to emerge: local, everyday settings where diverse groups engage in and negotiate shared practices (Amin, 2002). These encounters are enabled by spatial conditions that provide a context for capability activation and meaningful contact (Valentine, 2008). In this study, micropublics are fostered within regulated public spaces such as libraries, whose institutional and spatial qualities allow such encounters to arise, and where co-creation, capability activation, and relational processes become observable and measurable.



**Figure 2:** Theoretical framework diagram

### 3. Case study

REBLOC is a board game designed to explore the idea of accessibility as a meaningful constant opportunity within participatory placemaking practices. The game translates real urban challenges into collaborative problem-solving activities, immersing participants in downtown Calgary’s planning challenges and opportunities — such as climate adaptation, mobility conflicts, cultural preservation, local economic resilience, social inclusion, and the activation of public space through art. Through tangible actions such as rolling dice, selecting narrative cards, and placing physical elements on a shared board, participants experiment with spatial decision-making and collectively negotiate alternative urban futures without requiring prior technical expertise.

The game was first prototyped with SAPL students and faculty before being deployed in public settings. Its official launch took place in August 2025 at the Calgary Central Library, a regulated public environment that provided conditions to foster micropublics, which were also represented within the game

itself. Across twelve facilitated sessions, forty-nine participants from varied backgrounds — ranging from children to seniors and from recent arrivals to longtime residents — engaged in collaborative redesign scenarios. Subsequent iterations across Calgary’s public library network created temporary participatory settings where individuals could share experiences, test ideas, and reflect on their relationships to the city. Following the library play sessions, a large-scale “pop-up” version of REBLOC was developed to extend and test the game in a broader public setting. While simplified in terms of game mechanics, this iteration expanded public engagement during Calgary’s 2025 Parking Day events, demonstrating the scalability of participatory placemaking initiatives.

Using ethnographic observation and gameboard-evolution mapping, the study documents how tacit knowledge and imaginative practices emerge through hands-on engagement. These observations reveal how participants activate and expand participatory capabilities within regulated public spaces, providing empirical grounding for understanding accessibility as a situated and lived process.

**Figure 3:** Participants engaging with the REBLOC board game during public sessions at Calgary Central Library



### 3. Contribution

Across REBLOC sessions conducted in civic libraries and neighborhood community settings, game-based interventions generated temporary encounters in which diverse participants — including children, adults, and seniors— engaged in collaborative urban planning scenarios. Observations showed how hands-on interaction enabled participants to translate personal experiences, spatial memories, and imaginative aspirations into tangible proposals. Recurring patterns included the development of interconnected park systems, mixed-use clusters, community hubs, and cultural infrastructures, alongside critical reflections on perceived gaps such as limited shade, greenery, and social amenities in downtown Calgary.

These encounters illustrate how participatory placemaking activates participatory capabilities by creating situated opportunities for dialogue, negotiation, and experimentation. Differences in engagement across governance contexts and levels of familiarity with the city further revealed how accessibility is shaped not only by physical provision but also by institutional conditions, social interactions, and relational dynamics. Taken together, the findings advance a capability-

oriented understanding of participatory placemaking, positioning accessibility as a relational and co-creative process that emerges through temporal encounters, playful mediation, and inclusive civic interaction.

Through play, REBLOC not only opens discussions about real-world urban problems but also fosters a sense of belonging by valuing contributions from participants of all backgrounds. The evolving collective board becomes both a tool for learning and a model for participatory planning, demonstrating how board games can bridge disciplinary knowledge, democratize planning discourse, and cultivate a shared imagination for more inclusive urban futures.

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