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Youth in Placemaking: Barriers and Benefits.
Lessons from Cuenca, Bandung, and Envigado

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Abstract
Youth well-being and development are shaped by their physical environments, yet youth presence in public space is declining globally. Placemaking offers a promising strategy for re-engagement, though its benefits have been mostly studied in the Global North. This paper examines youth-led placemaking in Ecuador, Indonesia, and Colombia through interviews, focus groups, and secondary data. Findings reveal barriers related to cumbersome collaboration with other stakeholders, persisting stigma towards youth, and linguistic challenges. Nonetheless, shared benefits emerged across contexts, including increased use of space, skills development, place attachment, safety, connectedness, and youth agency.

Keywords: placemaking, youth, participation, public space

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1. Introduction

Public space is essential for youth development, offering opportunities for safety, recreation, and the formation of social connections. The built environment enables young people to engage in accessible, age-appropriate activities and interact with others, fostering a sense of belonging and wellbeing (Ferguson et al., 2013; Owens, 2020; Gray, 2020). Yet, the use of public space by youth has declined globally (Owens, 2020; Witten et al., 2013). This trend is attributed to multiple factors, including digitalisation (Witten et al., 2013, Owens, 2020), safety concerns and insecurity (Andrade, 2005; Malone, 2002), traffic and urban sprawl (Warner and Rukus, 2013), and the exclusion of young people based on their perceived appearance, behaviours, or modes of interaction (Owens, 2002; McEvoy-Levy, 2012), as well as the assumption that they need constant adult supervision (Gillespie, 2013).

An important aspect of youth development is the ability to create and reinterpret spaces they can call their own (McEvoy-Levy, 2012; Witten et al., 2019). During adolescence, identity formation is central, and young people often seek out places that offer freedom and a sense of belonging, areas where they can relax without feeling observed or judged (Low, 2023). Meaningful participation in shaping such environments not only supports personal development but also fosters essential skills and a sense of responsibility needed for active citizenship (Frank, 2006). Young people themselves recognise agency and participation as pillars of their wellbeing (Woolcock, Gleeson and Randolph, 2010). Therefore, finding effective ways to enhance youth agency in urban planning is imperative (Chawla and van Vliet—, 2020).

Placemaking has been proposed as one alternative to traditional planning processes (Villanueva et al., 2016; Little, 2020b) with cost-effective, place-based interventions and pop-up activities that have proven to be beneficial for young people's well-being (McGlone, 2016; Cordero-Vinueza et al., 2023). Nevertheless, placemaking has its own set of limitations, such as conflicting understandings of the term (Horan et al., 2023), especially in non-English speaking contexts. Furthermore, placemaking research predominantly focuses on the Global North, thereby presenting a gap in understanding how the concept is perceived, interpreted, and applied in the Global South (Strydom et al., 2018).

Youth participation in urban planning also remains challenging due to specific, practical and institutional, limitations (Derr & Tarantini, 2016). For instance, young people often lack official 'placemaking authority' (McEvoy-Levy, 2012, p. 3), i.e. the given power to decide how to transform "space" to "place" (Donofrio, 2010), or to decide over contested uses.

This paper contributes to youth development and urban studies by examining how placemaking can benefit young people (aged 15–24) in urbanised areas, particularly in the Global South. The aim is to explore the key benefits and barriers to their inclusion in placemaking. This study adopts a case study approach to analyse placemaking initiatives in three intermediate cities in the Global South: Cuenca (Ecuador), Bandung (Indonesia), and Envigado (Colombia). These cases stem from the Safe and Sound Cities (S^2Cities) programme, a global initiative aimed at enhancing youth safety and well-being through urban placemaking.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Youth in the city

By 2030 youth population aged 15–24 will reach 1.3 billion, 7% more than today, a growing trend mostly observed in low-income countries (United Nations, n.d.). With an increasingly young population and a rising rate of urbanisation in the Global South, youth engagement in urban spaces and in the mechanisms that shape them is becoming more important.

This research focuses on people between the ages of 15 and 24, using the terms "youth" and "young people" interchangeably according to the UN Secretariat's definition. This age range is rarely studied separately in existing literature. Instead, it is included in broader categories such as "children" (0–18 years old), "teens" or "adolescents" (12–18 years old), or other definitions of "young people" (up to 35 years old). Therefore, we might use these broader terms when overlaps occur.

2.2 Young people's participation in public space

For young people to develop their capacities and integrate into society, interaction with and presence in public space is essential. Through social experiences, they cultivate self-reflection, learn to manage their free time, build social relationships, and develop social responsibility (Owens, 2020). This sense of responsibility often emerges through participation in decision-making, shaping their environments, and forming place attachments (Benson et al., 1998). As Beza et al. (2018, p. 11) note, "place is a concept used to describe one's connection (or not) with a space. A social or emotional attachment is the key distinguishing factor between place and space."

Unlike adults, young people undergo rapid psychosocial development, which can amplify the impact of participatory processes (Frank, 2006). Youth participants often gain direct benefits such as learning opportunities, creative engagement, and social connections through involvement in planning. They value having a voice in public affairs and develop a stronger sense of belonging to their communities (Woolcock, Gleeson and Randolph, 2010). When young people contribute to shaping their environments, they build deeper attachments to place and are more likely to grow into active, engaged citizens (Woolcock and Steele, 2008).

Melcher (2020) identifies three impact categories of youth participation: individual communal, and physical. Individually, young people experience enjoyable activities, skill development, self-growth, increased self-esteem, confidence, and empowerment. Physically, their involvement enhances affordability, adaptability, safety, and crime reduction, fostering a stronger emotional connection and sense of ownership. Socially, it strengthens community bonds, increases capacities, and enhances a sense of belonging, as young people contribute enthusiasm and the ability to undertake additional projects. Thus, the benefits of the process are reciprocal: young people gain individually from participating and the community gains from their involvement (Melcher, 2020).

2.3. Barriers for participation

Despite the growing evidence on the benefits of youth participation, young people are often marginalised from planning processes and remain "as a class without power, which

is disenfranchised economically, politically, and socially" (Gurstein, Lovato and Ross, 2003, p. 252). Moreover, the prevailing assumption that they need adult supervision disregards how historically children and young people have occupied spaces independently and diminishes their capacity to exercise their rights (Gillespie, 2013, Malone, 2015).

Costa (2023) also mentions that "only small efforts have been made to give voices to young people in the designing and decision-making about their environment." For instance, many countries have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recognises young people's rights to play, participate in cultural and recreational activities, engage in decision-making, belong to a community, and freely express their views (UNCRC, Articles 12 to 17). But cities are responsible for creating the material conditions that reflect these rights in the physical environment (Cordero-Vinueza et al., 2025; Woolcock & Steele, 2008).

Yet, implementing meaningful participation remains a challenge. Derr, Chawla and Mintzer (2018) explain that effective youth participation in planning needs to be place-based, transparent, inclusive, relevant, educational, sustainable, voluntary, and playful. These criteria are not easily achieved within the standard planning practices. Additionally, youth engagement has other limitations: working with a vulnerable group, requiring ethical considerations, trained facilitators, and permissions from guardians; managing logistical challenges such as time constraints; facilitating their voice through trust-building, engaging decision-makers, and shifting attitudes; and maintaining engagement through diverse communication methods and clear goals, particularly when striving for participant diversity (Little, 2020a; Mintzer and Chawla, 2020; Matthews, 2003).

A common way of youth involvement is through youth councils, alongside other formats such as young people's hearings, street-corner councils, and peer-support groups. It is a starting point to a dialogue, but still far from integration in conception and decision-making (Matthews, 2003). These formats are criticised for only involving a small number of people, not representing the group's diversity, having schedule constraints, and lacking independence and agency (Matthews, 2001).

Moreover, youth are often excluded not only from the space creation process but from also the space use. Outdoor playtime has declined due to reduced safe open spaces in contemporary urban forms, and independent mobility is restricted by both a lack of opportunities and increasing parental control (Torres, 2020).

Studies show that youth perceive safety as one of the core needs for public space (Costa et al., 2023). In addition to youth not feeling safe, often they are seen as unwelcome and threatening. They are presumed to be a nuisance to public tranquillity, suspected of engaging in delinquent activities, or judged by their appearance and attitudes (Owens, 2002; Owens, 2020; McEvoy-Levy, 2012). Thus, urban environments are often designed to avoid youth-oriented activities (Owens, 2002). Teenagers desire safe and inclusive public spaces that accommodate diverse age ranges, abilities, ethnic backgrounds, and interests (Derr, Chawla and Mintzer, 2018) and that they can use without supervision or judgement (Low, 2023).

Despite the lack of formal political authority, young people often take ownership of spaces through alternative means, like graffiti, music, or other social practices that may

be viewed negatively. The exclusion of such practices exacerbates challenges in integrating youth in planning processes (McEvoy-Levy, 2012). However, exercising youth's right to the city through participation has shown to have positive effects not only on the final product, but also to the process and the participants themselves (Loebach, J., 2020; Owens, 2020). These benefits extend to various collective and individual aspects such as health, well-being, self-esteem, and identity formation (McEvoy-Levy, 2012; Melcher, 2020).

2.3 Placemaking as alternative youth participation

Research into placemaking suggests that some of these barriers could be avoided through innovative, collaborative, and more informal processes, by involving a larger and variable number of participants, reducing bureaucracy (Laven et al., 2019), increasing engagement with hands-on experience, and allowing capacity building (Derr and Tarantini, 2016; Melcher, 2020). Placemaking as a process can shift young people's role from passive users or consumers to active creators (van Vliet and Karsten, 2015), reduce stigma, and become an opportunity to increase the benefits of their participation (Melcher, 2020).

Placemaking as a dynamic and continuous public space transformation process supports communities in changing physical spaces into meaningful and engaging "places" by attributing meaning through various activities, designs, and interactions (Kent, 2019; Arefi, 2016). This involves considering not only the physical aspects of a location but also the social, economic, ecological, and political dimensions, with a strong focus on participatory approaches, community engagement, and intentional efforts to foster positive relationships between individuals and their environment (Mateo-Babiano & Lee, 2020; PPS, 2018). Moreover, in placemaking, the community is the expert (Kent, 2019), which provides young people the opportunity to express their identity beyond the instructions of planners or other professionals.

2.3.1 What is placemaking?

Having a rigorous definition of placemaking is challenging as the term covers not only the hands-on approach to public space transformation, but also the overarching idea behind the larger movement (PPS, 2007). In practice, the process of placemaking is often defined by its goals (e.g. the Power of 10+ concept, from Project for Public Spaces (PPS, 2018)), its components (e.g. the 5P framework, from Mateo-Babiano and Lee (2020, p.16)) or its characteristics (PPS, 2007), whereas in theoretical approaches the definitions greatly vary depending on the academic discipline (Streatfield et al., 2023). As for the overarching ideas behind the practice, Kent (2019) refers to placemaking as a global movement, whereas Courage (2020) proposes to look at it as a community of practice. Indeed, looking at placemaking from only the academic perspective would neglect the numerous rapidly evolving contributions produced by practitioners.

Since the 1960s, thinkers like Jane Jacobs and William H. Whyte laid the foundation for placemaking, a concept that has since evolved across disciplines and trends (Streatfield et al., 2023; Strydom et al., 2018). Despite its growing use, placemaking remains loosely defined, with scholars noting its conceptual ambiguity and inconsistent spelling (Ellery et

al., 2021; Hes et al., 2020). While this lack of clarity complicates academic theorisation and research, it offers practical advantages—such as inclusivity, flexibility, and broader appeal—by encouraging action over rigid definitions (Courage, 2020).

Various frameworks emphasise human experience as central to the concept of placemaking (Mateo-Babiano & Lee, 2020). Ellery et al. (2021) and similarly highlight that, despite differing definitions, a shared focus lies in fostering place attachment—understood as the emotional bonds between people and places that allow individuals to feel safe, comfortable and belong in certain places (Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001). Core values identified by Courage (2020) include community attachment, inclusive relationships, diversity, co-creation, ownership, and empowerment.

Considering the varied definitions and practices of placemaking, this paper does not attempt to compare or evaluate them. It adopts the one-word spelling "placemaking" to refer to community-led space transformation, distinguishing it from the hyphenated "place-making," which also references other processes of place creation, including top-down approaches (e.g. Akbar & Edelenbos, 2021). The S^2Cities programme defines it as "a democratic process that facilitates the interventions necessary to turn a space into a place" (S^2Cities & BUUR n.d., p. 6). This paper uses the programme definition, focusing more particularly on the bottom-up youth-led processes.

3. Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach, analysing selected case studies with a grounded theory methodology (Van Thiel, 2014). The goal of the study is descriptive and illustrative, through the context-specific cases, rather than aiming to produce predictive theories or universals (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Therefore, the cases are not compared with one another; instead, the findings from the different stages of data collection are juxtaposed with existing academic literature. The study incorporates literature scoping, document analysis, in-depth stakeholder interviews, focus group interviews, and stepwise-deductive induction as data analysis methods.

3.1 Case studies

The Safe and Sound Cities (S^2Cities) programme is a global initiative led by Global Infrastructure Basel that supports youth safety and well-being through placemaking in urban environments. The programme selects local experts (Local Grantees) to implement youth-led place-based projects. The local implementation follows four stages: youth exploring the urban environments and defining their needs and interests, capacity building for youth and local government officials, developing and piloting innovative youth initiatives, and finally scaling the initiatives and findings to a global audience. Despite these global guidelines, the programme allows flexible approaches and interpretations of placemaking according to expertise and context.

The first phase of the project (2021-2024) focused on medium-sized cities in the Global South. This study follows three cities from this phase: Bandung (Indonesia), Envigado (Colombia), and Cuenca (Ecuador). They have been selected for the study, as at the time only these 3 cities (out of the 6 participating) had advanced sufficiently for any

results to be analysed. All three represent a similar context of intermediate cities in upper-middle-income developing countries, and the pre-implementation reports from the cities illustrate similar challenges that youth experience in public spaces: social exclusion, stigma, feelings of unsafety, as well as low interest in and ownership of these spaces (S^2Cities, 2022; S^2Cities 2023a).

3.2 Methods

The data collection and analysis followed a multi-step iterative process. A scoping review of academic and grey literature (Munn et al., 2018) was first conducted to explore the concepts of placemaking and youth in the selected contexts. This informed the development of interview protocols for local grantees (see Appendix 2) and youth participants (see Appendix 3), and enabled cross-examination of findings (Yazan, 2015).

Three (3) semi-structured interviews were conducted with the local grantees (1 to 2 individuals) in each of the cities, specifically the directors of the implementing teams- local technical partners selected through a request for proposals- who know most about the process and outcomes of the program in their cities. The interview guide was developed following a stepwise framework, including method evaluation, literature analysis, theme elaboration, and testing (Kallio et al., 2016). The interviews were conducted in English via online video conferencing and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes each. To ensure respondent confidentiality, the paper does not specify the cities associated with individual participants and citations used.

All personal identifiers were removed from the transcripts, which were analysed and thematically coded through a stepwise-deductive induction (Tjora, 2018) using MS Excel software. The interview data was triangulated with secondary data from the S^2Cities programme annual progress reports produced by the extended project teams, based on experiences and local participant surveys and micronarratives. The analysis is based on two parts of these reports: the Output Indicators section, which reports statistical information, and the Strategic Learning section, which provides a narrative report of the programme.

The identified barriers and benefits were used to develop a semi-structured interview guide for a focus group discussion with youth participants from the three cities (seven in total). This allowed comparison between the perceptions of implementation teams and youth. Open-ended questions were posed to avoid leading responses, and the format enabled testing previous findings while observing group dynamics and diverse viewpoints (Patton, 2002). The session concluded with a short survey (see Appendix 4) to assess agreement levels and ensure balanced representation of opinions.

The findings from each of the data collection methods were cross-referenced with academic literature to identify supporting studies and new contributions (Table 1). Finally, the Discussion section revises the benefits of placemaking for youth, critically reflecting on the S^2Cities program, the roles and power-dynamics inherent to such global programmes.

4. Results

This section presents the barriers and benefits identified during the interviews with programme leaders and youth, supported by programme progress reports and academic literature. The synthesis of this analysis is collected into Table 1 while iterative findings are accessible in Appendix 1.

Table 1. Condensed version of the stepwise analysis of barriers and benefits of youth participation in placemaking in Cuenca, Bandung, and Envigado.

Youth in Placemaking: Benefits and Barriers		
	LITERATURE	FINDINGS
Barriers	Placemaking Limitations Most studies in the Global North Conceptual ambiguity and inconsistent spelling (Ellery et al., 2021)	Contextualizing Placemaking New term Term in English Different connotations about place and space
	Practical and institutional limitations (Derr & Tarantini, 2016) Ethical considerations, trained facilitators, and permissions from guardians (Little, 2020a; Mintzer and Chawla, 2020; Matthews, 2003). Lack of formal political authority (McEvoy, 2012) Limited participation in youth councils (Matthews, 2001) Stigma (Owens, 2020) "A class without power, which is disenfranchised economically, politically, and socially" (Gurstein, Lovato and Ross, 2003) Prevailing assumption that they need adult supervision (Gillespie, 2013) Presumed to be a nuisance to (Owens, 2002)	Cumbersome collaborations and stigma Varying levels of support from local governments Lack of legislation for youth Low levels of trust among young people in public servants Political interests, changes and taking credit for young people's work Stigma from adults about young people Conflict with the needs of other citizens
	Personal constraints Time constraints linked to work and domestic responsibilities among low-income youth (Derr, Chawla and Mintzer, 2018; Little, 2020b).	Personal constraints Academic responsibilities Limited time Disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds
	Safety Youth perceive safety as one of the core needs for public space (Costa et al., 2023) Safety concerns and insecurity (Andrade, 2005; Malone, 2002) Traffic and urban sprawl (Warner and Rukus, 2013)	

Benefits	Individual Benefits Self-reflection, capacity development, social relationships, social responsibility, active citizenship, place attachment, ability to undertake new projects. enjoyable activities, skill development, self-growth, self-esteem, confidence and empowerment (Melcher, 2020)	Individual Benefits Skill development Personal growth Self-esteem. Leadership skills Confidence and increased capacities Sense of responsibility Ownership (Mobility) Independence Connectedness Agency Pursue new projects, entrepreneurship
	Communal benefits Social learning, active citizenship, place attachtment, improved community bonds, sense of belonging, increased capacities (Melcher, 2020).	Communal benefits Place attachment More safe time outdoors Ownership Sense of community Collaboration and collective decision-making Improved process and outcomes Reduced antisocial behaviours Increased perception of safety
	Physical Benefits Affordability, adaptability, crime reduction, safety, emotional connection and sense of ownership (Melcher, 2020).	Physical Benefits Increased Safety Perception of safety Agency Improved spaces Accesibility Independent mobility

4.1 Barriers

Since the study focuses on placemaking, we begin by examining how the term itself can be limiting when applied across different contexts. We then present barriers related to collaboration with stakeholders—an issue most frequently emphasised by respondents. These findings highlight that the stigma surrounding youth participation remains a significant challenge, often shaped by social and political tensions. Finally, we address personal barriers such as time constraints and busy schedules, which are also well-documented in the literature.

4.1.1 Contextualising placemaking

Interviewees noted that the term "placemaking" was new for many of the participants: members of implementation teams, youth participants, municipal employees, and the public attending the activities.

> Most stakeholders learned about placemaking through our workshops and are now applying it in their fields of work (S^2Cities, 2023b).

The reception of the English term *placemaking* varied: some youths embraced it for international communication and promoted it locally, while others perceived it as architectural jargon and felt excluded. Since similar practices and vocabulary already existed, participants often used local terms such as *urbanismo social* (social urbanism) in Spanish or *pendekatan reka ruang* (spatial design approach) in Bahasa Indonesia. They also used expressions like appropriating, revitalising, taking ownership, reactivating, using public space, and right to the city to describe processes akin to placemaking, adapting their choice of terms according to the context:

> For me it depends on who I talk to about this. So, usually placemaking is a term that architects and urban planners use, so they are more familiar with the term. But for the public, I usually use "reactivating spaces", "reactivating public space", "transforming public space", or "revitalising public space" (Youth participant).

Findings suggest that the introduction of the English term "placemaking" can be challenging in non-English speaking contexts, especially in settings of socio-cultural diversity. The choice of language and terminology plays a crucial role in facilitating inclusive communication and ensuring meaningful engagement.

> In our context it's not widely used either, because the term itself is in English (…) I think here we talk more about the use of public space or appropriation of public space (Youth participant).

In Spanish, the literal translations for place ("lugar") and space ("espacio") do not have the same connotations as in English; they are often used interchangeably, without the implication—commonly made in academic literature—that *place* signifies emotional attachment while *space* does not. Thus, claiming that "placemaking is a process to turn a space into a place" (Safe and Sound Cities, p. 6) runs the risk of being misunderstood by Spanish speaking participants, since space and place are not necessarily different in their understanding.

However, respondents recognised the benefits of using a globally acknowledged term that connects them with peers:

> I think I use the word placemaking a lot and I try to teach it to my friends or other groups of people that I meet so we are talking about the same topic of public space (Youth participant).

They acknowledged the term's usefulness in dissemination and finding resources, while noting that sometimes similar processes are happening without being labelled as placemaking:

> When I started this project, I didn't know what placemaking was, but I realised I have been doing it before, several times (Programme leader).

While understandings of placemaking varied slightly across projects, common values emerged: activating public spaces, fostering ownership and inclusivity, and emphasising co-creation.

4.1.2 Cumbersome collaborations and stigma

The S^2Cities programme involves local governments in the placemaking process, yet interviewees noted varying levels of support from these formal entities.

Respondents reported public servants actively working together with youth in the idea-generating phases. However, in some cases, this support halted during the implementation due to the lack of the proposal's alignment with local legislation or official vision. While understanding the complexity of the local governments, they noted that the motivation of youth declined significantly after encountering bureaucratic challenges. This was especially true if the local government had already participated in the ideation process, as this decreased the trust levels of young people in public servants. This resulted in some projects being abandoned, redesigned, delayed, or piloted without government authorisation.

Young people stated that their main barrier to project implementation was the municipality and political bureaucracy. Particularly discouraging were the politicians' demands to take credit for the youth's work or asking for political backing in exchange for permits or other support. A participant remarked that while they like working on improving public spaces, they "have to be careful not to end up doing the work that the administration should be doing and taking over state responsibilities" (Youth participant).

The lack of trust and stigma from public servants towards youth was equally demotivating. The administration's insistence on control over the projects emphasised the lack of trust in youth's abilities and commitment. Moreover, they mentioned that if the programme was not in place, mediating for young people, the municipality would not listen to them:

> If we don't have the Safe and Sound Cities as a programme, like a connection between the municipality and the youth, most of the programmes or activities, or ideas that came from the young people would not be listened from the municipality (Youth participant).

Interviewees acknowledged that youth-led projects sometimes conflict with the needs of other citizens, diminishing the youth's credibility. Mistrust can also come from community members who mistrust young people and manage to stop the projects, as they have more political power. This created tensions between the government and the community and discouraged young people, especially when they had already invested their time and effort.

> The adults want to take charge, and they think that the youngsters don't understand things. So yeah, that also crushed our spirit (Youth participant).
>
> The community's closed nature has made it difficult to involve surrounding residents in project activities, limiting the potential for broader community impact and inclusivity (S^2Cities, 2024a).

While some cities reported an improvement in the relationships between public servants and young people, they pointed out that the trust can be lost with political shifts. Personnel changes often require restarting the trust-building process, as previously established relationships do not automatically transfer to new individuals. This shows that youth participation is not sufficiently institutionalised, which is also reflected in insufficient investment for these processes, and requires sustained efforts across different administrations through policy.

> However, the challenge this year has been greater because of the transition to the new government. To date, it hasn't been easy to get them involved in the project, except for a few specific people who came from the previous government (S^{2}Cities, 2024a).

> In many cases there are no policies on young people. They talk about young people all the time, but they are not even part of the planning of the local government (Programme leader).

Programme leaders indicate that dedicated time and advocacy work with the city government can improve the relationships and have an impact on power dynamics. In some instances, public sector officials have shown adaptation capacities, becoming more open to youth ideas and investing in implementing these public space enhancements. This, in return, increased the youth's trust in local authorities.

> The relationship between young people and the local administration showed a positive change in the youth imaginary towards those who work in it. (..) This change is also evident in the local administration, which increasingly believes in and recognises young people and their projects (S^{2}Cities, 2024a).

4.1.3 Personal constraints

Programme reports highlight that young people often face personal constraints that limit their involvement. Academic responsibilities, limited time, and the need to prioritise employment, especially among those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds and lack of resources (like limited internet) can reduce their capacity to fully engage.

> Young people prioritise their studies and the lack of time would not allow them to finish this project in the programme's timeline if working on their own (S^{2}Cities, 2023b).

> Challenges in mobilising youth participation, where lower socioeconomic levels correlate with a higher priority placed on employment over engagement in project activities. This reality presents a substantial hurdle in involving this demographic, as their focus is primarily on earning a livelihood rather than participating in community development initiatives (S^{2}Cities, 2024a).

During the focus group, young people identified time as a barrier—primarily due to bureaucracy rather than personal availability. Some noted their own privilege in being able to participate, unlike peers from disadvantaged backgrounds who must prioritise work or other obligations.

> Something that we must recognise - we are very special to be selected and have the time to do the projects. How many young people cannot do some kind of

> things because they have to first survive in the city? They have to eat, to sleep, to take care of their brothers, sisters, grandmothers, grandparents. So, we also recognise that we have this privilege to be part of making the city (Youth participant).

The barriers to youth participation identified in this study reflect those noted in the literature, particularly time constraints linked to work and domestic responsibilities among low-income youth (Derr, Chawla and Mintzer, 2018; Little, 2020b). While safety is often cited as a key obstacle to youth engagement in public space, participants in this study described placemaking as enhancing their sense of safety and improving community-wide perceptions of security. Accordingly, safety is addressed in the next section as a benefit rather than a barrier.

4.2 Benefits

The identified benefits are framed by Melcher's (2020) three categories: individual, physical, communal. Interviews with project directors highlight individual benefits observed in participants, many of which were echoed by the youth themselves. The findings also suggest communal benefits, both from the participatory process and the outcomes of placemaking. Finally, physical improvements to public space were recognised as meaningful gains. However, these categories are not mutually exclusive; rather, the benefits are interdependent and often emerge through their interaction within the broader placemaking process.

4.2.1 Individual benefits

Interviewees reported a range of individual benefits for youth, particularly in skill development, personal growth, and self-esteem. Leadership skills were often mentioned as demonstrated in various ways, such as presenting their projects to broad audiences, collaborating to scale up their initiatives, gaining confidence in public speaking, sharing their knowledge, initiating conversations about the city, and effectively working in teams. These development of skills and increased agency have allowed youth to pursue these and new projects independently, as many have formed companies, clubs, and NGOs of local, regional, and international following.

> Tejiendo Historias (Weaving Stories) impacted more than 500 people and continues working with the Fundación Cultural El Hormiguero in artistic interventions in three cities (S^2Cities, 2024a).

However, young people themselves did not mention leadership, instead talking about responsibility and power. Power—to not only use but also transform public space—allowed them to influence the local municipal agenda and reduce stigma by showing what they can do for the whole community. Empowerment, along with using public spaces and making friends, was the most often mentioned benefit by youth participants.

> I want to emphasise in cities, power must rest with citizens, and we must constantly work to ensure that remains true. Reclaiming and appropriating public spaces is one of the ways we exercise both our citizenship and our sovereignty over the city (Youth participant).

> One important benefit is wellness, being able to express themselves outside of their homes and being able to decide about the city they want, or they need. (…) Empowerment is important and I think that is one of the main results of the project (Programme leader).

Interview respondents also highlighted that developing ownership of public spaces led to increased confidence and independence. Various factors had contributed to youth feeling unsafe in public spaces, including the lack of dedicated activities and spaces, post-pandemic perceptions, parental restrictions, media influences, and concerns about crime, harassment, and vandalism. The youth projects played a significant role in creating awareness about the importance and benefits of outdoor public spaces and their right to use them.

> Because I met placemaking, I spend more time in public space. (Youth participant)

Most youth participants mentioned a sense of connectedness as a key benefit. They shared stories of making new friends and meeting others with similar interests, which in some cases led to collaborative projects. A stronger connection to the broader community, including intergenerational relationships, was also highlighted. This theme is echoed in reports and interviews, indicating that social bonds enhance young people's engagement and performance in their activities.

> Thanks to that experience, I encountered a new friend and now we have this small social cycling project where we are trying to take all these learnings from placemaking and use our experiences in that aspect (Youth participant).
>
> Teams formed through friendships tend to perform better compared to those united by shared interests alone (S^2Cities, 2024a).

Overall, participants expressed having spent enjoyable and productive time during the placemaking activities, with the experienced hurdles being outweighed by positive benefits.

4.2.2 Communal benefits

Results support the idea that placemaking activities are beneficial to place attachment and ownership, which encourages youth to spend more time outdoors in safe and healthy ways. While programme leaders did not explicitly mention place attachment, themes of ownership, community, collaboration, and collective decision-making were recurrent. Young people, however, described attachment as a key benefit. The creation of a sense of responsibility within the community supports project sustainability, as residents are more likely to care for spaces they helped create:

> After the placemaking process, young people around have an attachment towards the space (Youth participant).
>
> Because of placemaking people are more interested in coming to these spaces because they are designed by the inputs that are coming from the people (Youth participant).

Programme leaders note that involving young people in placemaking improved both the process and the outcomes. They commended the fresh perspectives, innovative ideas, and creativity that young people bring to the table, alongside their willingness to participate, passion, and honesty. Additionally, the respondents highlighted the

opportunity to understand youth's interests, needs, and behaviours, as well as being able to reach a wider audience through the youth:

> we're not only impacting young people, but their teachers, their families, their communities (Programme leader).

As a benefit on both a personal and societal level, findings indicate reduced possibilities for antisocial behaviours or delinquency of the participants and other users of the space. This is promoted by forming friendships around positive and productive activities, increased personal capacities, and spending time in safer spaces with appropriate affordances.

> We're giving them [young people in the neighbourhood] a new tool, showing them that there are other ways to do things. And this is happening in neighbourhoods with serious issues, like high levels of substance use or criminal activity. So, it's like taking one kid, one soul in the making, away from crime and setting them on a path toward art (Youth participant).

4.2.3 Physical benefits

By transforming abandoned spaces and adding urban amenities, the projects aimed to increase safety and wellbeing for all users. Projects included the creation of art and murals, the installation of public lights, cycling lines, pedestrian areas, and urban furniture, as well as adding greenery and the presence of nature to the urban landscape. Despite some conflicts over these transformations, most participants indicate that projects improved the public spaces for all society groups: "these initiatives impacted approximately 150 people, including children, young people, adults, and decision-makers in the municipality" (S^2Cities, 2024a). These changes allowed to consider more vulnerable groups and work on inclusivity and accessibility.

Both youth and programme leaders recognise that the interventions have a connection to physical safety and the perception of it. Notably, one case indicated a positive impact on perceived safety among participants even before physical implementations occurred, due to agency gained by exploring the city and meeting with stakeholders.

> There are spaces that feel or give the appearance of being abandoned. It's happened to us with walls here, people already see it as "oh, well", as if nothing could be done about it. But the mere fact that some kids show up to graphically intervene wakes up the community, it's like, "Oh, so cool, so beautiful." (Youth participant).

> The project literally transformed the space to make it safer for the people who use it. They installed lights for pedestrians walking through the area and built proper sidewalks—before, the sidewalks were destroyed, and no one could use them. Now, even people with strollers can transit (Youth participant).

Using art in these interventions was particularly beneficial on personal, communal, and physical aspects. "There was a strong stigmatisation against graphic artists, a real persecution coming from both the community and state agents. Our work is both beautiful and important; it helps build community, brings artists closer to people, and tells the community "You're here, you belong." It invites people to take artists into

account, recognising that their work not only has an economic impact, but also shapes the visual identity of the city." (Youth participant)

Youth expressed newly gained confidence and changed perceptions of safety of public spaces, allowing them to more freely explore and "live the city". Pre-programme surveys and interviews with programme leaders indicate a pervasive sense of exclusion felt by youth in public spaces, a sentiment consistent with explored theory. Low ownership of public spaces was often attributed to the assumption that these spaces are solely controlled by the government, and that individuals and communities have little agency to implement changes.

> Personally, there was a fear of enjoying and living in the city. I only knew part of my neighbourhood and the university I go to. Everything else felt dangerous or just seemed far. But after the programme, I realised that I could enjoy the city—or if the place is not enjoyable, I realised I can make it enjoyable. That concept broke my own mental barriers (Youth participant).
>
> We [youth] are now discovering more urban or public spaces in that area, and we're doing more activities there because we've realised there are free, available, and comfortable spaces for us to gather (Youth participant).

Positive impacts on independent mobility were articulated through increased use of walking, cycling, and visiting new areas. Such positive change could lead to improved health through increased physical activity (Wridt, 2010) and to pathways of addressing mental health issues (Ortigoza et al., 2022) that were highlighted as crucial in the pre-programme surveys.

> Before I would never ever go anywhere on my bike, or take a bus, or just walk anywhere. Now, my main way of transportation is the bike. If I have time, I'm usually outside, just reading on a city bench (Youth participant).



Figure 1. Before and after: Placemaking in Cuenca. Image by Cristina Durán, Huasipichanga, 2024.



Figure 2. Before and after: Placemaking in Bandung. Image by Lakuna Kota Team (S^{2}Cities, 2024b).



Figure 3. Placemaking in Envigado. Left Image by David Alvarado, NUNA Humanista (2025). Right Image by Mateo Madrid, Trazar Parkour (2024)

5. Discussion

This article explored the specific barriers and benefits of involving youth in placemaking processes, considering that youth participation in public space is essential for both individual development and social cohesion, particularly in increasingly urbanised context. Notably, while safety is often cited as a barrier to young people's use of public space, the findings suggest that placemaking can positively shift this. The process not only increases young people's sense of safety and autonomy in navigating the city but also strengthens their connection with the community—helping reduce stigma and exclusion and thus, becoming a safer city for them. Compared to other youth participation mechanisms, placemaking stands out for offering tangible, low-cost, and high-impact outcomes in the short term—combining physical improvements with the development of individual and collective capacities.

While our findings confirmed a range of individual, communal, and physical benefits of placemaking, they also raised important questions and highlighted limitations that require further exploration.

One critical point for reflection is the divide between the Global North and Global South in placemaking research. Despite the growing international interest in

placemaking, a significant research gap persists in the Global South (Strydom et al., 2018). Although case studies from various regions are emerging (e.g., Beza and Hernández-García, 2018; Rossini, 2021), dominant theoretical frameworks remain largely shaped by scholars and institutions based in the Global North (Strydom et al., 2018). This article contributes to the expanding body of evidence from the Global South. In studying Bandung, Envigado, and Cuenca, we observed benefits similar to those reported in Global North contexts, such as individual skill development, leadership, a sense of responsibility, and communal outcomes like place attachment, ownership, and improved perceptions of safety.

However, a key insight from participants is that many were unfamiliar with the term placemaking before the project. While some noted having previously engaged in similar activities, they had never applied this specific label. Others referred to local terms they felt better captured the concept. This raises an important concern: although existing placemaking theories may appear applicable, uncritically adopting them risks overlooking the fact that such relevance may be shaped by the North-Western framing of the programme itself. While the S^2Cities initiative actively involves local implementers and allows for contextual adaptation, its conceptual foundation and structure remain rooted in Global North paradigms, which young participants are then taught and expected to apply in their own environments. This study does not claim to capture the full complexity of how place is conceptualised or enacted in the selected cities. Future research should go beyond externally introduced frameworks and engage more deeply with local epistemologies and practices.

On the other hand, research on Southern urbanism has largely focused on slums and informal settlements, often overlooking initiatives that take place in other urban areas and involve collaboration between formal institutions and community actors, as seen in these case studies. These examples offer valuable insights into the importance of embracing informality and temporary dynamics and suggest the need for greater balance between formal urban planning and informal, bottom-up processes such as placemaking—an approach already discussed in the literature by authors like de Satgé & Watson (2018), Watson (2003), and Andres et al. (2021). It is important to highlight that the innovative approaches are not meant to dismiss existing formal structures but rather provide an opportunity to test new solutions that can contribute to and improve existing systems. The benefit of such practices lies not only in granting communities greater agency over place-based transformation but also in offering practical responses to the challenges formal planning systems face in rapidly evolving urban contexts (Miraftab, 2009; Watson, 2003). Importantly, as young participants rightly emphasised, this community agency should not result in citizens taking on responsibilities that governments are accountable for, masked under the appearance of participation; the objective should be to join forces to test solutions and reach better results.

The focus on youth aims to contribute to an important gap in literature and in practice: the lack of spaces for young people and the lack of participation in the creation and planning processes. In this sense, this paper showcases important benefits for young people, highlighting findings like an increased use of public space resulting from the participation process and due to changes in safety perception. However, a systemic change in power dynamics and mental models is crucial to guarantee the inclusion of young people in the public space. The results also show that positive outcomes come

from the program serving as a medium for young people to present their ideas to the municipality and that it served as a bridge to facilitate discussions among these two actors. While this reflects positively on the program's objectives, it also underscores a deeper issue: in the absence of such structured initiatives, officials may remain unwilling to engage with young citizens, thereby perpetuating their marginalisation in urban decision-making.

Despite these limitations, placemaking offers a more effective alternative to traditional participation models such as youth councils. It allows young people to engage with the city as a canvas—not only to share ideas but to implement tangible, physical changes that impact their own and their communities' wellbeing. Placemaking shifts the dynamic from youth having to conform to adult-defined procedures within government offices to a setting where adults must engage with the real conditions of public space and the lived experiences of youth. Furthermore, while youth councils typically involve a limited number of individuals for a fixed term, placemaking provides a continuous, inclusive platform for diverse youth to express themselves, shape their environments, and participate—without needing to hold a formal role. This demonstrates placemaking's potential not only as a participatory method but also as a tool to strengthen youth agency.

Local governments should provide resources and tools for young people to initiate their own projects, while addressing the diverse conditions they face across the city. Participants acknowledged that their ability to join the program often came from a position of privilege—having time, education, or supportive environments that enabled them to envision and work toward a better city. In contrast, many young people are excluded due to structural barriers such as the need to work, experiences of violence, or lack of access to education. Despite efforts by the programme to offer resources, capacity-building, and compensation, several cities reported difficulty in reaching the most vulnerable groups, including youth outside the education system, refugees, and those from low-income backgrounds. For youth participation in city-making to be truly inclusive, it is essential that governments actively uphold the rights of all young people and take targeted action to involve those facing systemic disadvantages

The experiences of the S^2Cities programme provide potential inspiration for cities and practitioners, as they highlight the mutually beneficial nature of involving young people in placemaking. This paper contributes to the literature by adding evidence on the benefits and barriers of young people engaged in placemaking as an effective alternative for participation and increased use of public space, and it opens a pathway for discussion on North-South dynamics and the need for further research that, instead of looking for generalisations, acknowledges the diversity within the youth worldwide.

6. Conclusion

This study explored the barriers and benefits of involving youth in placemaking processes across three cities in the Global South: Cuenca, Envigado, and Bandung. The findings reaffirm the value of placemaking as a participatory approach that goes beyond consultation, enabling young people to actively shape their environments, foster community ties, and develop civic capacities. However, structural barriers such as time

constraints, socio-economic exclusion, and institutional instability persist, often limiting the inclusiveness of these processes. While placemaking offers a more tangible and impactful alternative to traditional participation models like youth councils, its implementation must be accompanied by greater efforts to reach the most vulnerable youth and to contextualize theoretical frameworks rooted in the Global North. As cities seek to meaningfully include young people in urban transformation, placemaking holds promise not only for better public spaces, but also for more inclusive, responsive, and youth-centred processes to positively impact their wellbeing.

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Appendices as Supplementary Files

Appendix 1: Results Table

Appendix 2: Interview Guide

Appendix 3: Focus group Guide

Appendix 4: Focus group Survey

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