

The Power of Place: Institutional Models and Methods for Collaborative Placemaking

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Place Matters: Place is about geography — but also about memory and imagination. People make places even as places change people. Places are secured by individual and collective struggle and spirit. Place is where culture is made, where traditions and histories are kept and lost, where identities are created, tested, and reshaped over time.

—Wall text from National Museum of African American History and Culture

Inspired by Place: CUMU in Baltimore

The 2025 conference of the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities was held from October 26-29th in Baltimore, Maryland, focused on the theme *The Power of Place*. Nearly 500 leaders from across the U.S. and internationally came together to critically reflect on the fundamental interconnectedness of our campuses with our broader social setting and its diverse ecosystem of communities. The presentations, experiences, and conversations of those days explored meaningful and impactful ways in which we build ethical relationships and collaborations rooted in interconnectedness. Together, they engage the complex questions and challenges of our metropolitan settings and, in so doing, reimagine those structures, stories, and settings and activate new solutions for equitable and vibrant futures. Our home campus, University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), was proud to join other local institutions (University of Maryland, Baltimore; University of Baltimore, Towson University, and Coppin State University) as sponsors of the conference in our home city of Baltimore. Of course, no exploration of *The Power of Place* should be confined to conversations in hotel conference rooms. In this spirit of cultivating an experiential *sense of place*, CUMU participants took the opportunity to join one of several options to get out for a morning of place-based learning.

Our UMBC-led experience explored university-community collaborations centering values of community and economic equity and inclusion in both the central downtown and adjacent neighborhoods of west Baltimore. Baltimore's downtown and surrounding areas are in a moment of transformational change at a scale that hasn't been seen in over 50 years; a crucible moment, testing our will and moral courage. Can restorative and inclusive values, and authentic community engagement be brought to bear upon the dramatic social and economic redevelopment that is being set in motion? [Reimagining the Harbor as a Hub](#), an initiative of UMBC's [Shriver Center](#) (Shriver) led by the author along with colleague Sally Scott, and Reimagining Baltimore Fellow, Terrell Brown, envisions a thriving public center energizing and reconnecting our city in inclusive and courageous ways. Hosted by our partners at [Living Classrooms](#), a dynamic "learning by doing" organization, participants learned about collaborative efforts with our [Choice Program](#) to engage and center Baltimore youth in a space where a longtime tourism frame has not always welcomed them. Executive Director of Baltimore's Historic Ships, Steve Bountress, joined us to describe our shared efforts to tell the deeper truths and forgotten stories of our waterfront promenade in ways that promote reflection, empathy, and restoration. He led us to a view from atop the historic sloop, the USS Constellation. Built in 1854, she served a liberatory mission as the flagship of the Africa Squadron, where her crew actively intercepted and captured vessels engaged in the illegal slave trade. Standing upon her top deck is a powerful place-based experience, transporting us imaginatively into the deep stories of a divided city that was simultaneously deeply engaged in enslavement and in the domestic slave trade, while also home to the largest free black community of any city in the United States of that time. Such powerful reflections inspire understanding and compel our action in the present. Our partners at [Waterfront Partnership of Baltimore](#) have engaged this reimagining challenge by launching [Baltimore by Baltimore](#) (BxB) in 2022. BxB is a hyperlocal music and makers festival that centers and celebrates our diverse riches of homegrown talent. The genius of the festival series is that it identifies remarkable community leaders to be "Producers" and then steps aside, supporting them to envision, curate, and host a day-long festival that is fully sourced and led by people from within their own communities and networks. Over the course of its first five years, BxB has given the center stage to hundreds of community and cultural leaders and collectively spotlighting a vast talent-shed representing our entire city. BxB is a social change movement activated as a festival showcasing an authentic and co-created Baltimore.

Descending the Constellation and leaving the harbor, we traveled to the neighborhood of Poppleton, a short journey by bus, but miles apart in lived experience. As in many cities, crossing Martin Luther King Boulevard into west Baltimore ironically marks a crossing of a historical racial and economic divide. There, we joined our UMBC colleague Nicole King, of [The Baltimore Field School](#) (BFS), and her collaborator and community leader, Curtis Eaddy, of the [Poppleton Now Community Association](#). Their work together (along with other BFS colleagues) presents a deeply considered model for non-extractive and humanistic engaged scholarship and collaboration (King et al. 2024). Curtis led our group on an extended community walk, illustrating with rich details and stories that Poppleton is a living witness to the historical slow violence of racial and economic segregation impacting Baltimore, as well as testimony to the legacy of community resistance and restoration that continues today (King, P. N., 2025). This walk cultivated a rich sense of place as we learned about unique historical and

cultural features of the community, witnessed the evidence of recent losses and encroaching developments, and celebrated places that have been preserved through creative and courageous community action. A walk in Poppleton shows the everyday joys and struggles of community life in Baltimore, which Curtis calls “the beautiful side of ugly.”

Baltimore’s history and stories are unique in their particulars and also instructive as a microcosm of our larger national story in the U.S. To stand on this ground and move about our (cobblestone) streets is to be present in a place with thousands of years of indigenous presence leading into histories of settlement colonization and indigenous erasure. It is also a place of continuing presence, and we acknowledge and honor the enduring presence of The Cedarville Band of the Piscataway Conoy, the Piscataway Indian Nation, and the Piscataway Conoy Tribe, all Algonquian Peoples, and the members of the Lumbee, Piscataway, and Cherokee tribes that call Baltimore home today. It is to stand and move in a place holding stories of African enslavement, antebellum free black flourishing, and abolitionist resistance. Baltimore is the home of Frederick Douglass’ enslavement, and his self-education and liberation; of the pioneering entrepreneur Isaac Myers and preeminent astronomer Benjamin Banneker; and of sites witnessing the incomparable Harriet Tubman’s courageous conducting of the underground railroad. It is to stand and move in a place of centuries of immigration, second in numbers to Ellis Island from the 1860s-1910s, and with ongoing waves of newcomers today. This global stream of people that have made homes and shaped places in our city defy single stories and illustrate the possibilities of rich intercultural life. It is also to stand and move and live in a place where segregationist policy and practices like city ordinances, neighborhood covenants, redlining maps, and blockbusting schemes were pioneered and refined (Pietila, 2010), and where these and other forms of human injustice met early resistance and overturning; the home of civil rights giants Thurgood Marshall and [Lillie Carroll Jackson](#), among many, many others.

Some may be surprised to find that to stand and move in Baltimore is also to be in a place with a deep, complex, and ongoing history and influence of higher education. Baltimore is home to the first public medical and dental schools in the U.S. (University of Maryland, Baltimore, 1807, 1840) and to the first research university (Johns Hopkins University, 1876). A relative newcomer, the state of Maryland established our UMBC campus in the 1960s, the only one of Maryland’s public universities founded after *Brown v. Board of Education*, and therefore open to students of all races from its start. “From the beginning, UMBC has been an experiment in “inclusive excellence,” the notion that one campus could be built to support the academic success of students of all backgrounds” (Hrabowski et al, 2021). Baltimore is also a place where universities have played significant roles in educational exclusion, economic gentrification, and extractive scholarship, and are now struggling to dismantle their embedded structural inequities, restore trust with their surrounding communities, and chart new paths of partnership and collaboration (King et al. 2024). Baltimore is home to two historically black colleges and universities, Morgan State and Coppin State; the former is the only campus in the U.S.

designated as a “national treasure” by the National Trust for Historical Preservation. Today the city is home to a dozen higher education institutions, including diverse public and private campuses ranging from community colleges to doctoral research institutions, all with their own complex histories and current stories of inhabiting and shaping place in Baltimore.

Making Place a Verb: Working Definitions for Place, Places, and Placemaking

To live, learn, teach, and work in Baltimore, and in the diverse cities that CUMU member institutions call home, is to engage in the ongoing reflective work of understanding our layered histories and leaning into the emergent challenges and opportunities of imagining and shaping our shared future. At Shriver, one tool we’ve developed and implemented to support this work is a definitional framework for cultivating a rich and engaged sense of place. As human beings and community leaders who are living, learning, and working in our Baltimore context, or anywhere for that matter, we consider “place” to be a key term for our ongoing reflection and activation. Here are working understandings of the terms place, places, and placemaking, not singular or definitive, but presented as ways of seeing our settings using an active and generative understanding of *The Power of Place*.

What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value... its emotional tone, social meaning, and generative potential.

--Yi Fu Tuan (Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience, 1977, 6)

Place: One way to think about “Place” is as space that is charged with human meanings. It refers to sites, terrains, locations, contexts, and environments that, through our human activities, have been given historical and cultural significance and power. Place is a conceptual tool, and like all concepts, place is a human construct. In this case, place is a useful lens for seeing and interpreting the world we’ve created and shaped.

Like Love or Imagination, Place makes a poor abstraction. Separated from its materializations, it has little meaning. No one lives in the world in general...Everybody lives in some confined and limited stretch of it—the world around here.

--Clifford Geertz (Afterword, Senses of Place, Field and Basso, 1996)

Places: As a conceptual tool, place is an abstraction until it is applied to cultivate our “sense of place” with mindful attention, perception, and curiosity in specific places: Places, then, are spaces that are charged with their own diverse historical and cultural significance, though their unique stories and struggles may be interconnected with those of other places. What happened here? What meaning has been, or is currently being made here? What could it become? Are there multiple understandings or competing interpretations here? Why does it matter, and for whom? Understanding the places deeply engages our historical, social, and moral imaginations.

When we create beloved community, environments that are anti-racist and inclusive....What matters is that should difference enter the world of beloved community, it can find a place of welcome, a place to belong.

— bell hooks (Belonging: A Culture of Place 2009)

Placemaking: If “place” is a conceptual tool, and “places” are the particular sites where we apply that tool to cultivate richer understanding and informed interpretation of what they mean and why they matter, then “placemaking” is a verb that describes that process of moving from space to place. Place is not static, but constituted by movement and activity (Cresswell, 2004). Placemaking (or making place a verb) engages the ongoing human discourse that adds new layers of meaning to places; often challenging existing meanings with alternate perspectives and counter narratives. When we put on our “place” glasses to understand specific “places,” we are looking for signs and stories of interaction and agency: What happened, or is happening, here? When and how was meaning established or expanded or challenged here? To understand the power of place is to realize that placemaking involves direct participation in the political economy of significance. As students, scholars, citizens, neighbors, human beings, we’re immersed in a placemaking discourse every day. It is the quality with which we engage in that activity that shapes our placemaking agency and ethics (i.e., our adverbs matter!). Can we show up and lean in to our efforts to champion vibrant communities and create places of hope: inclusively, collaboratively, compassionately, equitably, authentically, skillfully, creatively, powerfully, intelligently, sustainably, and courageously?

What does it look like to take these definitions off the page and put them to work as a pedagogy and practice of place? Here are a few examples. For over three decades we’ve incorporated what we informally call “untours” of the city. These are place-based outings with the goal of bringing people’s histories and unmarked hidden stories alive and into our awareness— following themes like housing and its role in structuring inequity or opportunity, or sites of local civil rights actions or other social movements. “Being there” matters in place, so we include community walk and talks with local leaders, and build in on-site reflection. We include placemaking acts like *in situ* readings and storytelling. For example, in Fells Point we follow the footsteps of young Fred Bailey, an enslaved boy who, when chastened from learning at home or school, cleverly bartered bread for reading lessons from white kids down on Baltimore’s wharf. As we stand together on this (sacred) ground 200 years later, and read aloud poignant scenes from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (yes, that is who our young Fred would become), we recharge this place with the energy of *literacy as liberation*.

Alternatively, we often climb the stairs to Federal Hill Park and enjoy a beautiful downtown view of Baltimore’s Inner Harbor. In the spirit of urban geographer David Harvey’s classic “A View from Federal Hill” (Baltimore Book, 1991) we linger to look beyond the glamour and glitz to also see the disinvested neighborhoods just blocks away and ask ourselves: Who was this

downtown built for? Who benefits and belongs here? We look for clues of social friction, exclusion, or borders revealing inequities. Envisioning futures, we can consider what new social relations, structures, or values would support more inclusive and vibrant social life. Cultivating a strong sense of place in these settings requires exercising our imaginations. We use our historical imaginations to visualize previous moments, our social imaginations to see hidden qualities and multiple perspectives in the present, and our moral imaginations to envision futures with new social hope. Acts of imagination are central to a praxis of place.

In addition to guided activities, we support students on their own experiential journeys. In our Peacemaker Program, alongside texts like Jane Jacobs' *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, we assign an "urban anthropology essay" loosely guided by the anthropologist's adage to "make the strange familiar, and the familiar strange." Students pick a place that they want to explore—a park bench, a coffee shop, their rowhouse stoop, or a moving place like a bus route—and they visit that place multiple times at different times of day across time. Exercising their historical, social, and moral imaginations, they attend to and interpret the situated layers of happenings and meanings that move their location from neutral space to activated place.

Finally, we offer a project-based example from a "Place and Placemaking" course in our Community Leadership program. Amidst a context of seminar discussions and outings like those described above, students identify a place of their own interest and create a placemaking project plan. The product deliverable is wide open, and creativity is actively encouraged. They might design and lead a walking tour, create an interpretive map, create a design for a park or public space, or create a sign or artwork marking a hidden story. They could even outline a place-based community organizing effort or strategic plan. We hope these examples animate your imagination for activating a sense of place in your own settings.

A Community of Practice: Engaged Scholarship Emerging from the CUMU Conference

Convenings like CUMU's annual conference and the reflective engaged scholarship represented in this *Metropolitan Universities* journal issue are supporting higher education leaders to critically and creatively reflect upon our role and positionality in this emergent moment. These scholarly opportunities ask and illustrate how we as people and institutions can collaboratively and constructively engage in more equitable, inclusive, and vibrant futures. Perhaps generated by the theme *The Power of Place* and by this crucible moment for our institutions, cities, and broader social reality, this conference gathering resulted in a record number of submissions to the *Metropolitan Universities* journal. The articles were in such number and quality that the editorial team decided to dedicate the next two issues of the journal, this summer 2026 issue and the subsequent fall 2026 issue, to scholarship emerging from the fall 2025 conference. The thematic focus of this issue revolves around institutional models, strategies, and methodologies

for place-based and relationship-centered university-community partnerships. The subsequent fall issue will include articles themed around higher education/K-12 partnerships and educational models of engaged pedagogy, professional training, and development.

Within the overarching theme of *The Power of Place*, the articles that follow can be loosely grouped into scholarship and case studies of institutional anchor strategies and system change approaches, methods and methodologies for ethical and relationship-centered partnerships and evaluation, and place-based approaches to community and economic development and well-being. As I share the articles featured in this issue, I am intentionally naming the list of co-authors and the place to elevate the context and power of place in this scholarship.

Institutional Strategies and Systemic Change: Several articles in this issue focus on how universities use their core institutional levers—such as hiring, sustainability policies, and regional networks—to deepen and activate their anchor missions. An article, "Large-Scale Faculty Hiring and Anchor Mission Transformation" by Laura Baecher, David Birdsell, and Mariam Ali of Kean University in New Jersey, examines how a deliberate, large-scale tenure-track hiring initiative serves as a strategic opportunity to transform an institution's scholarly capacity and its commitment to the local region. Ruth Carbonette Yow of Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta and Caroline Presley Burkholder of Temple University in Philly come together in their article "Becoming Catalysts for Climate Action," which explores the intersection of sustainability and anchor missions, making the case that universities can activate their anchor missions and networks to become "solutions accelerators" for climate action. "Empowering Place" by Peter Slee, Anastasia Konstantopoulou, Lebene Soga, George Lodorfos, Martel Reynolds, and Costas Gabrielatos of Leeds Beckett University in the UK apply anchor institution theory and entrepreneurial ecosystem theory to show how universities can function as connective nodes that address systemic gender inequality. They explore holistic supports for women's leadership as a key driver of regional development. Rounding out this themed group is a piece by Deveral Capps, Rachel Dunn, Jo Wardle, Peter Slee of Leeds Beckett University, "Maximising Access to Justice and Legal Education Through University Law Clinics" which identifies a significant gap in local legal services in Leeds, UK, and describes how their university law school developed community partnerships that identified specific local needs where their pro bono legal services could make a significant difference, while also giving their students significant professional and personal learning experiences.

Methodologies of Community Engagement: A trio of articles forms a second thematic group focusing on processes of engagement, emphasizing non-extractive methodologies that prioritize community voice and relationship-building. Mindi Levin, Tyler Derreth, La'Tonya Bryant, and Jayson J. Green, a group of university and community partners based in Baltimore, Maryland, introduce a community-led storytelling methodology. Their piece "Reframing Impact Through Storytelling" captures relational and transformative impacts that quantitative metrics often

overlook. Practitioners Charisse Iglesias, Emily Finley, Paige Castro-Reyes, Kunga Denzongpa, Alexis Hill, and Al Richmond of Community-Campus Partnerships for Health discuss the importance of organizations operating in third spaces distinct from the university-community partners. From this place they are situated to facilitate open and honest feedback loops to manage power dynamics and co-design health resources that authentically meet community needs. Shifting from health partnerships to place-based historical collaborations, Thomas Jennings, Angela Storey, Codi Goodwyn, Kathryn Marklein, and Ashley Smallwood of University of Louisville in Kentucky describe how family stories and oral histories intersect with digitized historical records. In “Establishing community priorities for descendants of Louisville’s intentionally overburied historic Eastern Cemetery,” they explore the possibility of reparative work and truth-telling in partnership with marginalized descendant communities.

Place-Based Models for Community Well-being and Workforce Resilience: A final group of three articles provides case studies of specific, long-term initiatives that target health disparities and economic mobility in different urban settings. In "Scaling Meaningful Impact Through Relational, Purpose-Driven Approaches," Rebecca Zill-Miller, Lisa Ripper, and Jennifer Padden Elliott of Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, present a replicable, place-based community health model, “Bridges to Health.” Their project prioritizes the building of shared values as the foundation for effective multi-sector partnerships. Iris DiMaio, Bryan Murdock, Pariwish Abbasi, and Celia Hernandez of Montclair State University apply a place-based community engagement framework to the revitalization of the Paterson community in New Jersey. Their work described in "Advancing Collective Impact through Place-Based Community Engagement" features a university-assisted community school model. Last in this trio of pieces, Alyssa Provencio, Cami Cooper, Trevor Cox, Charlotte Simmons, and Todd Lamb of the University of Central Oklahoma, and David Castillo of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in Edmond, Oklahoma, team up to trace the evolution of their decade-long partnership into a culturally responsive micro-credentialing initiative for Hispanic entrepreneurs, emphasizing economic mobility and institutional mission. Read about this work in their article "Building Bridges with Badges."

Finally, we’re delighted to open this issue of MUJ with an invited essay from Kathleen Clark of Augsburg University in Minneapolis, Minnesota, CUMU’s 2025 Barbara A. Holland Scholar-Administrator Awardee. Katie’s “Reflections of a Scholar-Administrator in a World of Extremes” integrates community-engaged scholarship with leadership practice, and offers a place-based approach centering values of hospitality and accompaniment.

Thanks to all who joined us in our city of Baltimore to explore *The Power of Place*, to all our contributing authors for this issue, and to the CUMU team for creating the real and virtual “places” that facilitate community within our coalition. Voila, that’s placemaking!

We hope you'll find points of connection, insights, and inspiration in these pages, and we'll leave you with a charge from the great explorer of cities, Jane Jacobs, who 65 years ago in her "Illustrations" note to *Death and Life of Great American Cities* reminded us:

"The scenes that illustrate this book are all about us. For illustrations, please look closely at real cities. While you are looking, you might as well also listen, linger, and think about what you see."

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