Yana, Ellen Boeva, Foster
York University, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

Making Sense of Place: Research Reflections from Two Multi-sited Ethnographies

Proponents of making, particularly those in the West (Anderson 2012; Gershenfeld 2005), have been promoting a generalized idea of maker practice and education across the globe. Examples include international standards in the form of the Fab Charter and the exclusion of local maker presenters during the first editions of the Maker Faire Shenzhen in China. Such strategies work to highlight the dominant narrative of making within the cultural localities of the Silicon Valley and the East Coast of North America. But what happens, when the social, economic, and cultural conditions of the West do not apply to the making practices of other places, even in what is widely understood as the West? How are locally-based practices, traditions, and pedagogies shaping the adoption of this maker model?

In this paper, we draw on observations and analyses from our distinct ethnographic research on maker practices, makerspaces, and their communities across North America and Europe. Spanning five years and conducted in nine countries, our methods were primarily qualitative including data gathered through observation, interviews, and attendance of maker-related events. One of us has been examining the presumably disruptive qualities of "alternative" maker practices. This has resulted in explorations of makerspaces in US public libraries, feminist hacker groups, and repair collectives and their potentially emancipatory impact on marginalized communities. The other author has been charting the influence of maker practices and technologies on professional design work. This research has led to questioning the ideas of de-professionalization and deconstruction of boundaries between lay and professional practice. Our mutual point of entry into our distinct but intersecting studies, which we share with other research on maker practices and cultures (Lindtner et al. 2016; Lindtner & Li 2017), is a disapproval of the Western technosolutionism programmed into maker narratives. While some of the observed making manifests Western ideas on the surface, we have also encountered how different—even Western—makerspaces and fab labs have reintroduced culturally contingent local features to discern themselves from innovation-driven technological objectives. Examples include, for instance, slöjd traditions in the work approaches of Danish designer-makers and pedagogical techniques such as the Montessori approach in DIY care projects in Italy. This position paper shares several instances of making and makerspaces framed by local attributes and histories—and while it does not cover postcolonial sites, it still reveals that a general trope of the West is also imprecise. Thereby we hope to contribute to an ongoing rearticulation and intervention into the dominant presence of the Silicon Valley-model of maker practice (Lindtner & Lin 2017).

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