

Creating the City of the Future through Placemaking

“Placemaking is both an overarching idea and a hands-on tool for improving a neighborhood, city or region. It has the potential to be one of the most transformative ideas of this century.”

-Metropolitan Planning Council, Chicago

Great cities are known by the communities and the public places that define them. Plazas, parks, markets, boulevards, streets, and waterfront promenades all generate and support local economic, cultural, social and leisure activities. These places are often sacred to a citizenry, enriching people’s lives and bringing them together. To visitors, the culture, character and identity of a city is transmitted through these special places.

People and places -- and promoting civic life --should be the building blocks of great cities. Instead, they are often afterthoughts in the way cities are planned and built today. Indeed, great amounts of funds are invested in “projects” only to create public spaces and places that are monotonous, predictable, and devoid of character. As a result, the quality and quantity of public spaces is diminishing in many cities, and in disadvantaged and under-resourced communities, these trends are often even more acute. Alternatively, Placemaking is an inclusive, comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach that business and governmental leaders can easily embrace and that NGO’s and citizens can support and participate in.

Most cities can brag about at least one success story where determined citizens, guided by the idea we call Placemaking, made a difference in the place they call home. These remarkable turn-around stories were made possible through the creativity of people who thought imaginatively and applied broad skills to transform their communities into great places.

Project for Public Spaces (PPS) is a nonprofit planning, design and educational organization dedicated to helping people create and sustain public spaces that build stronger communities. We have pioneered Placemaking as an approach to help citizens transform their public spaces into vital places that highlight local assets, spur rejuvenation and serve common needs. Since our founding in 1975, we have completed projects in over 3000 communities in 43 countries and all 50 US states.

Having been brought in to apply Placemaking in a broad range of contexts – and repeatedly having to overcome bureaucratic and other obstacles -- an increasing focus of our work is in training and capacity building of city government, community organizations, and private sector leaders. Our goal is simple: to provide a stronger foundation for Placemaking to flourish in cities around the world.

Placemaking Principles

PPS's Placemaking approach strives to create places where people want to be: parks, squares and streets should feel comfortable and offer a wealth of amenities; waterfronts should provide access to an abundance of water-related and other activities; and cultural attractions should contribute to a place's unique identity. Equally important is how these destinations connect and interplay.

A few common sense ideas underlie our work:

- **The Power of Ten.** A framework to elevate Placemaking to a neighborhood, city or regional level. Our experience of physical environment is most defined and enhanced by great places and the things we do in them, yet we seldom focus on creating great places and defining them around uses. A great place typically has at least 10 things to do in it; a great neighborhood or district has at least 10 great places; and a great city or region has at least 10 of these great districts, plus other major destinations. By having people think about their special places and greatest opportunity places, a community can quickly determine its strengths and prioritize a path forward. This simple, common sense idea can be transformative for evaluating and strategically improving an entire city or region.
- **The Community is the Expert.** Placemaking has its greatest impact when applied through the people who know a place best—the local community. Despite their intimate knowledge of a community's assets and needs, the local stakeholders are rarely empowered to formulate their own transformative agenda for their communities. Too often professionals are engaged to impose solutions rather than facilitating a community vision. Moving beyond narrowly defined disciplines, Placemaking cultivates a collaborative campaign grounded in the community's aspirations.
- **Comfort and Happiness.** One knows immediately whether a space is warm and welcoming or not. When a place provides a sense of comfort, patrons naturally relax, become part of their surroundings and feel free to be affectionate and at ease with others. It is this goal of creating happiness that has been all but forgotten in shaping the public realm for communities on all levels of the economic scale.
- **Zealous Nuts.** Almost every great place is the product of the passionate work of a zealous nut, or a group of them. Zealous nuts can take many forms—community residents, shop owners, school officials, librarians, police officers – the Placemaking process invites these vital stakeholders to take a leadership role in injecting the soul into a place.
- **Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper.** A low-cost, high-impact incremental framework for improving a community in short order. These short-term projects often have the added advantage of being “experimental” enabling projects that might otherwise involve lengthy planning or approvals processes to be tried on an interim basis.

Creating A Placemaking Campaign

A successful transformation of place requires a holistic campaign. It starts by developing a vision and opening lines of communication. Impediments must be acknowledged and strategies to overcome these challenges must be determined. Through this initial process a strong team can emerge to attack complacency and produce short term wins, then move on to bigger challenges, all while keeping the vision grounded in and driven by the community.

Transforming Local Governance around Place

Local governance, on every scale, is usually not set up to create great places. Indeed, the current culture and structure of local government and civic infrastructure may actually be the greatest obstacle to successful Placemaking -- more than money, ideas, talent, and even capital investment. Departments of transportation, parks and recreation, sanitation, public safety, and economic development need to see that the creation or maintenance of public spaces that are vibrant, safe, clean, and attractive to residents, businesses, and visitors benefits each of their primary objectives. In fact, reconsidering just what an agency's primary objective is could itself be groundbreaking—should a department of transportation's priority be to move people through a city as quickly as possible? What if instead its stated goal was to consider streets as public commons that should be leveraged to create the greatest possible benefits for those that live and work along them?

Building Placemaking Capacity in Communities

To catalyze the power of Placemaking, cities and communities need to make fundamental changes in the way they are governed and planned. To help achieve this ambitious goal, PPS convenes local city leaders with core staff and stakeholders to start a conversation about how to plan for better outcomes. We then unfold that conversation to neighborhood leaders and develop advocates who become the partners in demonstration projects that create dynamic, active places on the ground in the short and long term. Many cities opt to start with a single component, even just a single day leadership session, but then grow it over time to encompass all three of the following:

- **Leadership Training** – PPS can work in collaboration with local governments, planning and transportation departments, developers and other key community leaders to assess the barriers and opportunities to building an enduring climate of institutional, policy and financial support for Placemaking.
- **Grassroots Capacity Building** – We can facilitate the community vision and enhance the capacity of leaders at the neighborhood level to create and sustain successful public spaces. PPS believes a true Placemaking Campaign requires buy in and leg work from all levels.
- **Demonstration Projects** – Whether it is a major civic square or a simple “Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper” intervention in a neighborhood, PPS finds its training programs have the deepest impact when followed by projects through which the trainees implement the lessons learned.

1. Leadership Training

PPS is most effective when we help a community put the idea of Place ahead of the individual agendas of different departments or disciplines. Elected officials, agency heads, and community organizations and foundations all benefit from joint training in the principles and practices of Placemaking. This dialogue usually becomes the catalyst for a new type of collaboration among these stakeholders around a common purpose for improving the health, sustainability, livability and economy of the community. Our training seminars provide both practical information as well as inspiration. They are a first step towards empowering local officials, staff, cultural and community organizations, and many, many more local partners to engage each other and their constituencies to jointly identify barriers and opportunities to creating a better sense of place in the downtown.

Training Content

Trainings may be targeted to specific departments, or it may be a more general audience, or both. Our leadership training often begins with a 2-hour keynote type event to inspire an audience to think creatively about Places, followed by more in-depth training sessions that last from one to three days. Content can include principles and tools of Placemaking, examples and case studies from around the world, and a focus on specific Placemaking “Transformative Agendas” (as applicable):

- *Toward an Architecture of Place:* How public institutions such as cultural institutions, museums, government buildings and libraries will become important anchors for civic activity that host a broader range of activities.
- *Building Community through Transportation:* The planning and design of transportation networks and streets, as well as transit stops, as Places for activity not just thoroughfares for vehicles.
- *Public Markets and Local Economies:* Building local economic opportunities and urban rural linkages through public markets and farmers markets, while bringing fresh, healthy food to low-income neighborhoods.
- *Creating Public Multi-Use Destinations:* Great cities are becoming defined more and more by great multi-use destinations—an anchor attraction that may be at its core a destination square or park, waterfront, commercial street, market, or a combination of all of these.
- *Building Healthy Communities:* How Placemaking can be a tool for public health advocates, increasing active living while enhancing access to fresh foods.
- *Creative Communities:* Building the creativity of communities to work collaboratively with artists to rejuvenate places, integrating the arts into a holistic Placemaking process.

- Applying Placemaking in Context:
 - Power of 10 Assessment: Identifying the 10 Districts and 10 Places in each district (or selected districts) to begin the process of identifying opportunities for synergy and enhanced activity.
 - Placemaking Site Exercise. Evaluating a selected site in small teams is the best way for people to understand how Placemaking works.
 - Identifying the barriers and opportunities in the bureaucratic and planning processes, as well as the physical conditions and systems of the city.

Potential Products

- A **Strategic Plan document based on the Power of Ten**, with an evaluation of major public space issues and opportunities, with a strategy for implementing a Placemaking Campaign and targeted next steps and demonstration projects.
- **Placemaking Policy Manual**, such as a report for how to incorporate Placemaking into the day-to-day procedures of city departments and commissions and to change underlying policies. Specific manuals for planning, development and design review can also be prepared.
- **Recommendations for specific projects** under planning or development, or identifying other key local projects that need Placemaking guidance to expand their impact.

2. Grassroots Capacity Building

Once leaders and public agencies have been inspired to think about the community building potential of Placemaking, PPS can help support a local network of citizens and institutional partners who wish to work together to build a better vision for their places and streets. These networks facilitate broader public participation and communication through educational events, web sites, list serves and blogs, and special events.

We believe the community is the expert and that the most profound, long-lasting changes start at the grassroots level. That is why we need and encourage community participation in Placemaking and help align the energy of advocates, city leaders, and media in the same direction. Building community capacity can involve multiple activities:

- **Training of neighborhood groups:** can equip citizens and community organizations with the same Placemaking knowledge and language as their elected officials and leaders, while building consensus on neighborhood plans and support for projects.
- **A How-to Guidebook for neighborhood groups:** helps citizens lead initiatives that would never happen otherwise. These initiatives can be supported by the city or a local foundation with small grants, or positioned as a citizen-led advocacy movement that will support the city's long term livability efforts.

- **Digital Placemaking:** PPS has developed a series of web-based evaluation tools so that communities identify opportunities for improvements, map them, and share them on an interactive web site. A recent project with The Miami Foundation used this platform to create a public spaces “contest” where hundreds of submissions were posted.
- **Media and Messaging:** PPS can facilitate the evolution of a popular campaign for better places by providing written content and images for local newspapers, websites/bloggers, framing messages for communications, and advising on social media strategies to ensure that the campaign has the farthest, deepest reach possible.

3. *Demonstration Projects*

PPS sees demonstration projects as an integral component of translating lessons learned into practice. Demonstration projects can transform the cityscape into a laboratory for refining the community vision, experimenting with programming and providing a boost to areas in need...all with minimal upfront costs. The *lighter, cheaper, faster* “action planning” approach has the capacity to excite unlikely partners who would not typically engage in a formal planning process. This approach builds community buy-in around an energy of transformation. Ideas are implemented, assessed, then tweaked and customized based upon the community’s reception.

Drawing on the concept of the city as laboratory, develop a series of short-term, low cost projects intended to showcase creative new ways to interact with the built environment. These projects could focus on adaptive re-use of under-utilized spaces, by layering a series of amenities and programs. For example, an abandoned lot could become a significant destination if a local landscaping store loaned plants and lawn furniture, an art gallery hosted exhibitions, a school theater provided public performances, and a movie theater screened outdoor films.

PPS could also work with the local stakeholders to ensure these spaces are sufficiently programmed and managed to achieve their potential. We believe that management provides 80% of the success of public space. If creative management strategies can demonstrate the potential to transform neglected spaces in the city, a powerful ripple could occur throughout the city to revitalize opportunity areas.

Towards a “Place Led” City

Through these multiple activities, which need to grow and expand over time, capacity at the local level is enhanced to the extent that Placemaking becomes “just the way things are done.” We call this a “Place Led” city, which of course is also a “Community Led” city as well.

Joining a growing network of other cities where Placemaking is taking hold, a city can share their experiences through PPS’s Placemaking Leadership Council, a group of do-ers and deep thinkers at the forefront of the Placemaking movement. The council was formed in 2013 to strengthen Placemaking as an international movement and to support a community of practice for Placemakers working in many diverse contexts. Through the Council, and other international partnerships that are integrating Placemaking principles into a declaration for Habitat 3 in 2016, PPS is indeed helping to build a global movement that thinks and acts locally.