

Guidelines for the practice of participatory placemaking

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A. The challenge for placemaking

The terms 'placemaking' and 'place making' are today used more often and widely in discussions about urban development. Sometimes it even ends up as a 'policy objective' in planning documents. Often it is used to just communicate a desire or ambition for a place in a city to become better or more attractive; and sometimes there is even a set of actions described to achieve a placemaking objective.

There is however a problem. Who are the 'placemaker/s' and who decides what should be done to improve or change a place? It is clear that the question is political. Not party-political, but at the heart of how a local democracy works or should work.

First a snippet of history. In the 1960s in Manhattan, New York City, the city's Planning Commissioner, Robert Moses, who had a status similar to Baron Hausmann in Paris, decided to build express motorways across Manhattan and one in particular through Greenwich Village. A public space, Washington Square, was to be demolished for this purpose. Local communities were upset that it would affect their daily living patterns and organised public meetings with the help of an urban activist who lived in the area, Jane Jacobs, author of one of the influential books on urban development, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961). They formed a civic action group who eventually persuaded the New York City Council to cancel the building of the expressway in 1964. From this process public awareness increased of the importance of public spaces in our daily lives and for growing a sense of attachment to our neighbourhoods.



Jane Jacobs showing the petition lists during the Lower Manhattan expressway protest

In 1975 the Project for Public Spaces (PPS) was established in New York City to further promote the appreciation, development and range of uses of public spaces. Through working with thousands of communities and neighbourhoods across the US and later worldwide, PPS developed a method for such communities to assess and improve the design, features and activities in public spaces. The method was called placemaking.

The essence of placemaking is action at a hyperlocal level. It is not simply a variant of urban design. The design and planning professions prefer to use the term 'place making', with a general understanding that it is a statement of the desired outcome of their endeavours. In 'placemaking' however the role of experts and professionals is to support communities and local active citizens in a process of understanding the uses and potential of existing public spaces and to acknowledge their agency to make changes and improvements. The emphasis on a community-led process therefore means that besides design inputs, the art of placemaking entails several tools to facilitate community participation, social inclusion, place analysis and experimentation (i.e. try-out of ideas to improve a public space) as well as animation of a place (e.g. events and activities of people to creatively use the public space).

Public spaces range from the large public squares in city centres to off-cuts or left-overs of land after the completion of buildings or new roads, to parks and beaches. It also includes our streets and urban natural environments (e.g. woodlands and riverbanks). More and more the use of these spaces is an indicator of the wellbeing of cities. These are not only functional spaces with specified uses for example playgrounds, public seating or bike stands, but are the areas where people linger and connect with each other intentionally or by happenstance.

The challenge is to make public spaces into places which people enjoy using regularly and with a range of activities and amenity that enhance the quality of life in a neighbourhood. This is the mission of placemaking and of the people who initiate actions to bring spaces to their full potential.



A People's Cinema event in a city square in Split. Courtesy of Jere Kuzmanić.

This often involves a contestation of what are appropriate uses of public spaces or more to the point, what freedoms people should have to use public spaces. It challenges the notion that bureaucracy or design professionals know best for the area and spaces. It requires a level of active citizenship which seeks to build partnerships with stakeholders in the interest of sustaining public spaces as commons and creating pacts of joint responsibility for developing and maintaining such spaces.

This understanding of placemaking fits well into the URBACT approach and method for integrated sustainable urban development. Many URBACT transnational networks have used placemaking as a community and stakeholder activation tool and as a means to experiment and demonstrate change in their cities and to promote attachment to place among target groups. Examples include the SURE Project, the Placemaking4Cities Project, the Vital Cities Project, the RetailLink Project and the City Centre Doctor Project.

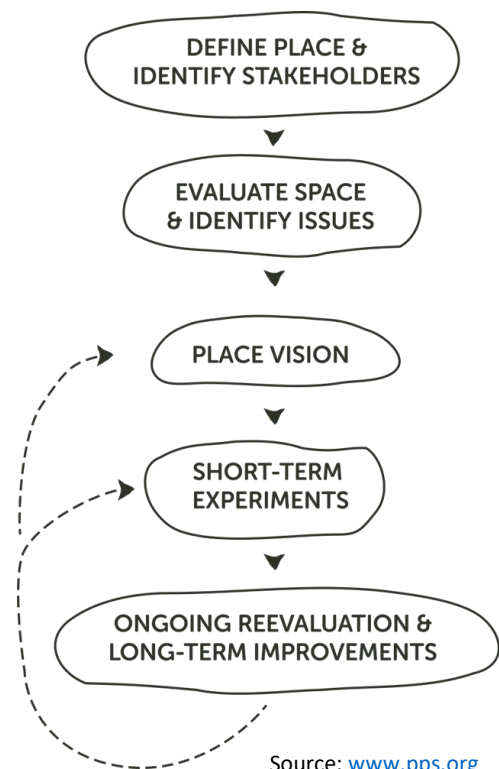
To avoid semantic confusion, it is best to refer to **participatory placemaking**. Here is a definition that the Placemaking Europe Network agreed in Stockholm in 2018:

"Turning spaces into places that increase the presence of people in public spaces through the participation of users, the collaboration of stakeholders and by signalling shared ownership of the common urban spheres."

B. How do we turn a space into a place?

The Project for Public Spaces identified five stages to turn a space into a good public place as per the diagram. It follows a framework that is familiar to participants in URBACT networks. It starts with activating participation of key role players in a series of meetings, site visits and events to deepen understanding of the targeted space. It requires place leaders and promoters to set up meetings with local stakeholders to discuss their issues and hopes for the spaces in question.

As with most development processes the focus should be on analysis before pushing for 'solutions'. This should lead to building a shared vision among participants and communicating the vision more widely into communities and with specific target groups, which fosters inclusion and 'shared ownership' and the social capital to deliver on future projects. In this regard there are specific tools for place analysis which help to gather data on the use of a space and the blockages which should be addressed (Discussed in more detail in the next section).



The process should never start with a designer's drawings proposing changes to a space. That is more a consultation, which is usually a one-off event that marks the end of the design's 'participation element' once the designer is satisfied with the feedback received.

What is more useful is if designers support the process by pointing out problems with the space as well as potentials for the space during the place analysis phase, but even more crucially, if designers assist with the visualisation of the shared vision for the space (phase 3). The visualisation could include a number of options (i.e. different drawings of future design and uses of the space) and help stakeholders to agree on a vision.

Changing a space often has more wide-ranging implications than placemakers anticipate. Especially if it means that local people will have to adjust their daily routine. It might mean that a simple action such as moving a bench or plants could cause dissatisfaction.

Therefore, in placemaking the best actions are reversible. The ideas for actions should follow on from the communicated vision and should preferably translate into temporary 'cheap' actions or installations which should be evaluated with feedback from users and stakeholders to inform adjustments or to close the action. The experimenting phase also helps designers to test their ideas, for example to build a scale model proposing new features for the space and to organise workshops/charettes gaining local inputs and support.



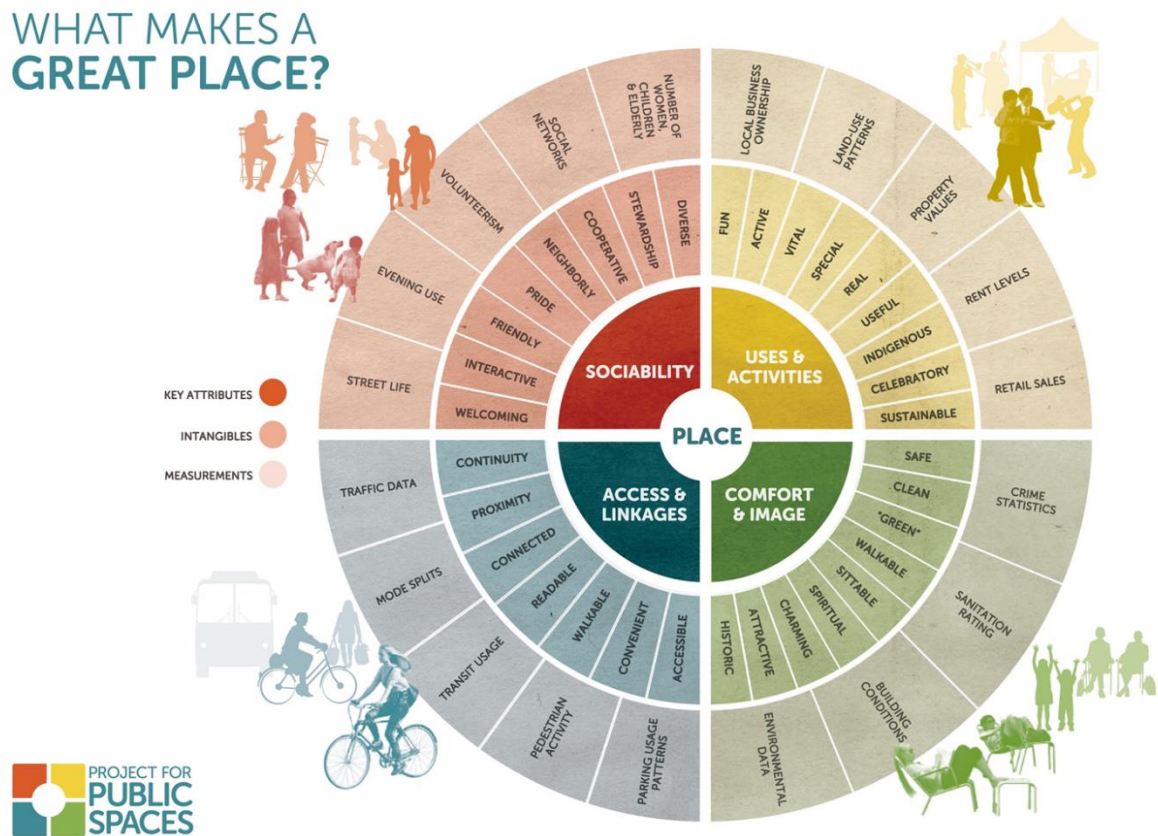
If temporary uses or beta actions are having the impact in accordance with the vision, then the next step is to prepare technical long-term interventions (i.e. giving designers some free reign). The process up to this point should provide information on at least the social impacts to justify costs and make the 'business case' for securing project funding.

Placemaking is an ongoing or circular process and should always be responsive to the needs of people. It is therefore understood that there should be periodic evaluations where stakeholders are engaged and where new challenges are scoped and assessed which could mean changes to the vision after a thorough place analysis, new beta actions and new uses. Well used public spaces tend to have a wide range of activities suitable for many sections of communities and often require less physical improvement and more creative animation. In this way placemaking is actually community building.

C. What makes a great public place?

The Project for Public Spaces also developed a range of tools to help communities, active citizens and stakeholders become placemakers.

One that is used widely is the Place Diagram as a tool to help with place analysis and the identification of gaps and opportunities for improvement. It starts from an idealised result namely all the features and activities that make a public space a great place. This allows an understanding of what aspects to look for during the place analysis stage and to formulate specific questions which can be answered through place observations.



The diagram shows four key attributes that are applicable to all public spaces namely its *sociability*, its *uses & activities*, the *comfort & image* of the place; and *access & linkages* to the place. To measure each attribute the diagram shows a set of indicators in the outer ring. For example, in the case of *access & linkages*, traffic data (e.g. number of cars going through or around the public space per hour over a 24 hour cycle); transport modal splits (e.g. the percentage of space users who travel to the space as motorists vs

cyclists vs train commuters vs walkers vs e-scooteristas); public transport availability and usage (e.g. the number of bus routes and bus stops as well as train/tram/metro routes and stops that are within a 5 minute walk from the public space); pedestrian activity (e.g. counts of the number of people walking into the public space at what hour of the day on different days of the week); and parking usage patterns (e.g. the number of parking spaces for cars and bicycles within a 5 minute walk from the public space and the frequency of use at different hours of the day and night). If you are able to collect all the data described with these indicators¹, you will be able to make an evidence-based analysis of the key attribute of *access & linkages* to the targeted public space².

It might of course not be practical to always get sources for all the data required to measure and analyse the public space according to the indicators stated in the place diagram. It is possible to use what is called the 'intangibles' in the diagram, that are also descriptors of the experiences and perceptions of users of the public space, to describe the key attributes. It is thus possible to create a questionnaire which placemakers can use to reengage with users on site and record their perceptions and experiences while making observations of the physical qualities and functions of the space.

A few projects in URBACT developed such a questionnaire based on the guidance from the PPS tools. It became a tool used in the Placemaking4Cities Project and during the City Centre Doctor Project, the partner cities further refined the tool. See the place observation sheet in the Appendix.

The following 'core questions' are useful to help get a sense of the perception and experience of users related to each key attribute:

Sociability

- Is this a place where you would choose to meet your friends?
- Do people make eye contact with each other in this space?
- Do people use the place regularly and by choice?

¹ There is also the opportunity to use mobile technology where public space users record and send their observations and experiences to placemakers creating an efficient data source. Over-reliance on such technology or crowd-sourcing information via mobile technology might skew results keeping in mind that many users of public spaces might not be reached or reachable via such technology. The most reliable source is still conventional data counts which is often carried out by public authorities.

² At the time when the place diagram was developed, access for people with disabilities to public spaces were not sufficiently emphasised. The suggestion is that a separate indicator should be included measuring facilities available to assist people with disabilities to access and use the public space.

Uses & Activities

- Are people using the space? Are there different types of activities occurring?
- Are there choices of things to do? Is it used by people of different ages?
- Which parts of the space are used, and which are not?

Comfort & Image

- Does the place make a good first impression? Are people taking pictures?
- Are there enough places to sit and are seats conveniently located?
- Are spaces clean and free of litter? Does the area feel safe?

Access & Linkages

- Can people easily walk to the place?
- Is there a good connection between the space and the adjacent buildings? Are there obstructions?
- Does the space function for people with special needs?

These questions can also be used during the initial workshops with key stakeholders to get a deeper understanding of the gaps and potentials of the space.

D. Which (beta) actions will create momentum for the process?

The experimental phase of a placemaking process (phase 4 in the diagram on page 3) can sometimes follow quickly after completion of the place analysis and even while the shared vision is still being formalised. This is especially the case where getting buy-in for the vision from the different stakeholders is time consuming because it is a political process which implies a level of volatility.

The Project for Public Spaces has identified a number of actions which are “lighter, quicker and cheaper” which enable placemakers to create momentum for the process. Examples include:

Actions to physically improve amenities

- New flexible seating with benches or loose chairs
- Planters and other means to green and give colour to a public space
- Rotating public art artefacts and exhibitions

- Play objects made of recycled materials
- Book or games kiosks
- Signage and in particular street painting such as a colourful pedestrian crossing

Installations

- Temporary structures that provide alternatives to capital-intensive construction such as shipping containers or wooden sheds
- Permitting vending carts – especially for food, non-alcoholic drinks and ice-cream
- Giving existing buildings a facelift or a mural

Programming

- Regular events that build momentum, showcase local talent, and create new community-based partnerships
- One-off events that help to inspire and test new ideas for use of public spaces

In the URBACT City Centre Doctor Project³ each partner city organised their own beta actions to enliven public spaces in their city centre. Here are some examples:

Heerlen, Netherlands



The 'Park Urbana' was first created in 2016 to transform the large hard surfaced square in front of the theatre into a summertime space for the family to relax. The placemakers used recycled pallets for decking and planters and added cheap and colourful loose deck chairs.

³ The City Centre Doctor Project (September 2015 to May 2018) consisted of ten partner cities, namely San Dona Di Piave, Italy (lead partner); Amarante, Portugal; Heerlen, Netherlands; Idrija, Slovenia; Medina del Campo, Spain; Naas, Ireland; Nort-sur-Erdre, France; Petrinja, Croatia; Radlin, Poland; and Valmez, Czech Republic. The aim of the project was for each partner to develop a set of actions that will significantly contribute to the revitalisation of the city centre. These actions included placemaking to improve and enliven public spaces in their city centres.

The action lasted three months and afterwards the trees and plants were planted in green areas of the city. During the evaluation of the first beta action the public and especially the local community wanted the activity to be repeated and extended to other parts of the city. Today similar activities happen in all the city squares of Heerlen.

San Dona di Piave, Italy



This square behind the library in the city centre came alive when artists painted the steps of the amphitheatre and also added a painted pedestrian path to the nearby residential buildings. It fits into the city's vision and initiatives that the city centre will be a place that is welcoming for young people with the ability to host a range of events.

Radlin, Poland

The URBACT Local Group (ULG) of Radlin spent a lot of time consulting with young people and children about what will make the city centre a better place for them. The result is this temporary outdoor games park that was created in the public space next to cultural centre. Participants (youth groups) and their parents funded the equipment and decorations.



Petrinja, Croatia



The city of Petrinja have many NGOs that organise different activities with target groups in local communities. The city is still in a recovery period after the War of Independence. The main public space in the city centre is a beautiful park next to the restored St Laurence Church.

The ULG brought all the NGOs together and planned a series of events in the park where each NGO will organise an activity for public participation and also will provide a stall with information on their aims and programmes.

Valmez, Czech Republic

The ULG worked with one of the specialist lighting factories in the city, Roby, to organise a lighting festival in the main square. The ULG was inspired by the activities of the partner city Medina del Campo in Spain where video mapping is used as a technology to project lighting on buildings showing the art and stories of local people.



The success of the first year of this lighting festival has now been formalised with an annual event. In the latest event in 2019 more than 25,000 people attended that is more than the population of the city!

Most of the partner cities have reported that the beta actions stimulated more placemaking activities and interest to improve public spaces in their city centres.

E. Conclusion

Placemaking is not complicated and does not require specialist skills. There are however principles that are very important which, if followed, will enable a successful and rewarding community capacity building process.

1. Community and citizen participation are essential from the start to the end of the process.
2. Design should support the community-led place analysis and ideas generation and should play a key role in the visualisation of the vision for the public space targeted.
3. Place analysis should be evidence-based, and the place diagram will lead placemakers to identify indicators and data sources.
4. Observations of the use of the target public space over several days and at different times is critical to get a sense of the actual use and blockages.
5. Always create momentum with lighter, quicker, cheaper actions (beta) that allow for experimentation.
6. Evaluate beta actions to learn what works and what should be stopped usually no later than 6 months after implementation. To learn what is not working is as valuable as to discover what works well.
7. Funding is not the issue. Demonstrating actions (beta) that are workable and that has a positive social impact will in most cases provide the content for a successful funding proposal.
8. Continue to learn and steal ideas from other cities and other placemakers.
9. The placemaking project never stops...

In the end placemaking helps to make our neighbourhoods and city centres interesting. As Jane Jacobs sardonically noted: "Almost nobody travels willingly from sameness to sameness and repetition to repetition, even if the physical effort required is trivial."⁴
Hope to see interesting placemaking projects in your city!

Wessel Badenhorst, URBACT Expert, 17 June 2019

⁴ Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Random House, New York (1961) p129

APPENDIX A: Place Observation Sheet

Recording of observations of a public space

The purpose of this observations sheet is to record observations of the features and uses of a designated public space. This will enable the local placemaking group to do a place analysis which will inform the key stakeholders to plan actions to improve the design and uses of the public space.

Name of public space: _____

Names of the streets that form boundaries for the public space:

Date of observation: _____

Times of observation (start and end): _____

Persons involved in the observation:

Cross reference to previous observations (date and time): _____

This place observation sheet was developed by the partners of the City Centre Doctor Project together with suggestions from the RetailLink Project, both projects sponsored by URBACT, and based on the Place Diagram method of the Project for Public Spaces from New York.

Outline map of the main features of the public space

Make a map (rough drawing) of the designated public space

Describe the boundaries e.g. street names, shops, buildings

Indicate the main features of the public space. Use symbols for elements such as trees, benches, loose chairs, kiosks, playground, sports field etc.

Indicate on the map the location where people activities were observed. Include data such as number of people, age groups, type of activity, time of day, weather and length of time that activity took place.

A. Access & linkages

Is there a good connection between the space and the adjacent buildings, or is it surrounded by blank walls?

Can people easily walk to the place?

Do sidewalks/pavements lead to and from the adjacent areas?

Can people use a variety of transportation options – bus train, car, bicycle, etc. – to reach the place?

Does the space function for people with special needs/disabilities?

Where are the nearest shops and services? Are they in walking distance from the space? Is there visual contact from the public space to these shops?

Is there signage to and from adjacent places? Is the signage giving directions and/or more information about the place?

B. Comfort & Image

Does the place make a good first impression?

Are there enough places to sit? Are seats conveniently located? Do people have choices of places to sit, either in the sun or shade?

Are spaces clean and free of litter? Do people tend to pick up litter when they see it?

Does the area feel safe?

Are people taking pictures? Are there many photo opportunities available?

Do vehicles dominate pedestrian use of the space?

Does the nearest retail, products on offer and the look of the shops, show an image that is consistent and in line with the identity of the place (i.e. the space and its surroundings)?

Is the place digitalised (e.g. on Google Street maps) and Wi-Fi connected? Does the place combine an online + offline experience?

C. Uses & Activities

Are people using the space or is it empty?

Is it used by people of different ages?

How many different types of activities are occurring – e.g. people walking, eating, playing baseball, chess, relaxing, reading etc.?

Which parts of the space are used and which are not?

Are there choices of things to do?

Is there a management presence, or can you identify anyone who oversees the space?

Is there a mix of leisure and business activities in the place? Are people carrying shopping bags and/or briefcases?

Would occasional commercial activity suit the place – e.g. craft, local product, food market?

D. Sociability

Is this a place where you would choose to meet your friends? Are people meeting friends here or having discussions with neighbours/regulars?

Are people in groups? Are they talking with one another?

Do people seem to know each other by face or by name?

Are people smiling? Do people make eye contact with each other?

Do people use the place regularly and by choice?

Is there a mix of ages and ethnic groups that generally reflect the community at large?
