

CREATING PLACES

THE JOURNEY OF A COMMUNITY

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Throughout the world, governments, organizations, and private citizens have begun to look for ways to reinvent their communities around the simple idea of “place.” In fact, many are considering this approach the new economic development agenda for communities, and perhaps the only way forward.

As communities face a variety of challenges in their efforts to be competitive, sustainable, and livable in the 21st century, those communities that are focused around creating active, public destinations – like civic squares or waterfronts as the central gathering places for their citizens – are proving to be poised for the greatest success. By reclaiming streets for people, making transit more viable than the private vehicle, and creating flexible, well-programmed spaces, urban innovators are giving people reasons to visit, live, and linger in true community places that have been absent in the past few decades of project-based planning.

This approach, which we call “placemaking,” is a transformative agenda that is beginning to take hold

in cities throughout the world and across Canada. Yet, the on-the-ground applications of this important agenda are not equal to the potential that exists. Although there is broad-based interest by local leaders, business improvement districts, economic development agencies, and community activists, the tremendous potential to actually build successful places remains untapped.

Placemaking in Canada

The following preliminary application of placemaking in Canada represents attempts to transform communities around the idea of place:

- ▶ Like the United States, Canada has followed the demand-driven approach to transportation planning. Yet, Edmonton is challenging this assumption with a new Walkable Edmonton program that prioritizes the pedestrian by diagnosing the barriers to walkability and proactively encouraging pedestrian-friendly streets.
- ▶ The privatization of waterfronts is undermining vitality and precluding local residents from one of their greatest assets in cities throughout the world. Vancouver and Toronto are now recognizing this liability to future growth, and are conceiving their waterfront development patterns for public good.

Kathy Madden is Senior Vice President and Fred Kent is President of Project for Public Spaces, Inc. PPS is a non-profit organization dedicated to creating and sustaining public places that build communities. PPS has been evaluating public spaces and working with communities across the globe since 1975, and has worked in over 2500 communities and 26 countries.

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- ▶ The concept of the civic square is being rethought in Toronto and Vancouver. Many people realize that Vancouver's downtown needs destinations and there is an attempt underway to revitalize Robson Square to create one. Toronto residents are also seeking to expand the role of Nathan Phillips Square as a key public space within the government centre.
- ▶ In Surrey, the department of planning has developed Placemaking Development and Design Guidelines to provide a framework for developers, designers, retailers, city staff, and public officials. The guidelines recognize that great public places are fundamental to the creation of denser, more walkable, and more livable neighbourhoods.
- ▶ One of the best destinations in Canada, Granville Island, has re-

cently completed a redevelopment plan to further enhance the variety of activities offered and expand its revenue stream through small-scale developments that maintain the character of the island as a destination for residents and visitors.

Simple Principles for Success

These efforts can achieve immediate and long-lasting transformations if they are based on several simple, but important ideas. Start by empowering citizens to define their own desires for their communities through a "placemaking vision" that identifies and improves the communities' most important places, rather than seeing new projects as the path to revitalization. Then, the visioning process is followed by short-term experiments to catalyse a momentum for transformation and allow evaluation of the changes that are made before signifi-

cant development expenses are incurred. All of this suggests that communities need to do more than *planning* – it involves *doing*.

The challenge in *doing* is that placemaking and the creation of "places" is that local governments are often unaccustomed to using this process to improve their communities. In fact, it may be that the approach is almost too simple. And, it often runs right up against the professions and government agencies that generally rely on discipline-driven professionals to solve "problems" – rather than a place- or community-driven process that results in better places and better cities. In the future, governments that are proactive in seeking and empowering local, and sometimes atypical, partners to overcome initial obstacles will be the ones that succeed.

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