EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Places in the Making:
How placemaking builds places and communities
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About DUSP
Since its founding 80 years ago, the Department of Urban Studies and Planning (DUSP) at MIT has consistently been rated the premier planning school in the world. We are home to the largest urban planning faculty in the United States and enjoy the advantage of operating within the context of MIT’s culture of innovation and interdisciplinary knowledge creation. Our mission is to educate students while advancing theory and practice in areas of scholarship that will best serve the nation and the world in the twenty-first century. The department fosters a culture of learning by doing, while also supporting the development of influential theories in the areas of urban planning and design, economic development, and environmental policymaking.

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Rebecca Disbrow
Rebecca Disbrow’s MIT graduate thesis, on the economic viability of micro units, won DUSP’s outstanding thesis award for 2013. Prior to attending MIT, Rebecca worked for Bryant Park Corporation and the 34th Street Partnership as an Operations Analyst and in their Capital Projects department.

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Aaron Naparstek is the founder of Streetsblog, an online publication providing daily coverage of transportation, land use and environmental issues. Most recently, Aaron co-founded two new organizations that are working to transform New York’s political landscape, StreetsPAC.org and ReinventAlbany.org. He was a Harvard Graduate School of Design Loeb Fellow in 2012 and is now a Visiting Scholar at MIT.
The practice of placemaking concerns the deliberate shaping of an environment to facilitate social interaction, create high-quality public space, and improve a community’s quality of life. The idea of making great, social, human-scale places is not new, and in the long history of human settlement public places have reflected the needs and cultures of community. But by the end of the 19th century, this link between public places and people had fractured. The industrial age’s focus on machine efficiency, and 20th century suburbanization and auto-centric planning zoned out diversity and a mix of walkable uses in communities. Land use decisions by “experts” and federal programs that came with fiscal incentives for highway construction, urban renewal, and suburban home ownership drove state and municipal policy making. The resulting “top-down” shaping of our built environment stripped familiar and well-worn public places from our landscape and took the place of local governance by the people. Beginning in the 1960s, scholars and urban sociologists responded to the systematic destruction of human-friendly and community-centric spaces by questioning how public space was appropriated and for what (and by whom) it was used. Urban thinkers like Jane Jacobs, Kevin Lynch and William Whyte espoused a new way to understand, design and program public spaces by putting people and communities ahead of efficiency and aesthetics. Their philosophies, considered groundbreaking at the time, were in a way reassertions of the centuries-old people-centered town planning principles that were lost when communities were rendered powerless in the shadows of experts to shape their physical surroundings. Placemaking was born. Early placemaking efforts focused on the physical qualities of spaces and many of the design attributes of great public places have been well documented and well theorized. However, the tendency to focus on the physical characteristics of place ignores the ways in which the practice of placemaking has grown in half a century to include concerns about healthy living, social justice, community capacity building, economic revitalization, childhood development, and a host of other issues facing residents, workers, and visitors in towns and cities large and small. The intense focus on the physical attributes of public places has also created a framework for practicing, advocating for, and funding placemak-
that does a disservice to the ways the placemaking process nurtures our communities and feeds our social lives. The importance of the placemaking process itself is a key factor that has often been overlooked. Today, the most successful placemaking initiatives transcend the “place” to forefront the “making.”

This “making” provides opportunities for people to collaborate, deliberate, disagree, and act—providing a host of benefits to communities and offering a critical arena in which people can lay claim to their “right to the city.” As philosopher David Harvey writes, “The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to re-shape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.”

The fact that placemaking happens in public spaces, not corporate or domestic domains, is a key component to its impact on cities and communities. Communities exercise their “right to the city” in public places. Urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg describes these public places as “third places” which are neither home nor work and he stresses the importance of this “neutral ground upon which people may gather—in which none are required to play host, and in which all feel at home and comfortable.” The “making” process and interaction found in public places also provides what urban sociologist Richard Sennett terms “social friction,” which is the interaction between different groups of people who would otherwise not meet. Social friction supports civic discourse, social equity, and healthy societies.

These urban theorists, as well as others, laid the foundation for complex thinking about placemaking. While the place is important, the “making” builds connections, creates civic engagement, and empowers citizens—in short, it builds social capital. In his seminal 2001 book, Bowling Alone, Robert Putnam defined social capital as “the connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.” The field has grown and these changes are a reflection of our increasingly complex times. The goals of building social capital, increasing civic engagement and advocating for the right to the city are as central to contemporary placemaking as are the creation of beautiful parks and vibrant squares.

Leading placemakers around the country have known this for some time and the importance of process over product in today’s placemaking is a key point that cannot be overstated—even it is pushing the practice to a broader audience and widening its potential impact. The recent resurgence of temporary, event-based, and tactical initiatives celebrates community process, deliberative discussion and civic collaboration with a lesser focus on the production of space. “Placemaking empowers community through the “making” process; the iterative actions and collaborations inherent in the making of places nourish communities and empower people.”

This mutual stewardship of place and community is what we call the virtuous cycle of placemaking. In this mutual relationship, communities transform places, which in turn transform communities, and so on. At the most basic level, the act of advocating for change, questioning regulations, finding funding, and mobilizing others to contribute their voices engages communities—and in engaging, leaves these communities better for it. This increased importance of process over product is highlighted by the major trends found in today’s placemaking efforts:

**Programming:** The making is never finished. While the mainstream of placemaking never advocated for a “design it and leave it” approach, the practice in the past has

**The new collaborators:** public/private partnerships.

Another challenge to the top-down, product-focused placemaking of the past is the growing prevalence of public/private partnerships in the practice. These partnerships can be built on a number of different models that mix regulatory power and public ownership with private resources and efficient management to create and maintain well-run places that would not otherwise be possible. The placemaking field has expanded to include the private sector, as well as public agencies, nonprofits, foundations, and individuals.
The Virtuous Cycle of Placemaking

- Organize
- Deliberate
- Design
- Fund
- Program
- Maintain
- Build/host event
- Evaluate
- Reflect
- Share

Entry point for engagement—community, funders, partners, advocates, city officials, etc.

The Placemaking universe is expanding: Think more broadly about the potential benefits of place and community. It’s time for placemakers to speak of the benefits of the process in equal terms as those of the place itself. Definitions and explanations of the field have been too narrowly defined in the past, so we can cast the community net wide, the field will become more inclusive, and our processes and places better.

Strategies and tactics used by placemakers have expanded and more than one tactic may be used in the life of a project. This model recognizes that placemaking is fluid, can involve multiple points of entry for different collaborators, and that community must be actively involved as a maker, not just a recipient, of a place.

Moving the Practice Forward: Building on Common Elements of Success

The very definition of placemaking has expanded far beyond its roots to encompass a vast arena of physical scales, from town green to district; processes, initiators, and partners. The gradual turn from “what makes a good place?” to “what—and who—makes a good placemaking process?” indicates that an increasingly nuanced understanding of community, political power, and social capital is beginning to permeate the field. Recommendations for framing conversation and action toward greater positive impact within this new framework for practice include:

- Enlarge the welcome mat—there is room for many types of “communities”
- Look far and wide for placemaking tools that might work
- Playborhood, Menlo Park, CA
- Bryant Park, New York City, NY
- The Placemaking universe is expanding: Think more broadly about the potential benefits of place and community.
- Moving the Practice Forward: Building on Common Elements of Success
- Bryant Park, New York City, NY
- Photo courtesy of Mike Lanza
- Photo courtesy of Rebecca Disbrow
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Figure 1

Playborhood, Menlo Park, CA

Bryant Park, New York City, NY

Photo courtesy of Mike Lanza
Project...reinforcing the power of the placemaking cycle and exploiting the multiple entry points available for community, funders, and actions.

Give equal attention to process and outcomes in planning, research, and media.

Judging placemaking only on its physical result misses half of the story. We need to take into account the relationships built, social capital earned, and lessons learned in the process. Making clear that placemaking is working beyond the physical can help increase support from communities, government leaders, and funders.

Show that it is working—or that it isn’t. And then do something about it! Many placemaking projects don’t include any plan to measure success, and this is a fundamental mistake. Before the project even begins leaders need to ask both what specifically do we hope to achieve with this project? and how will we know when we have been successful?

Embrace the benefits of open-source placemaking: support a national/international placemaking community. Placemaking is moving toward an open-source model that can benefit from a mainstream platform of support, funding, and advocacy. Project leaders should do all they can to foster a sense of collaboration, not competition, with other placemakers and should include the creation of open communication channels between placemakers and public policymakers about how policy can best support placemaking.

Knowledge of Project Context

Even in a networked, technology-enabled world, placemaking can’t escape “place,” and while many lessons and tactics might translate across projects, individual project context remains elemental. The nuances of this context—culture, political milieu, demographics, community resources, climate and environment, and public will—offer rich information to set up a pathway to success.

A Leader who is a connector and salesman

Successful project leaders are a special breed. A commonality of many projects is the prominence of a single-minded, tireless, passionate advocate for the project who is also a great connector.

The right kind of community engagement

The projects that are most successful at engaging their communities are the ones that treat this engagement as an ongoing process, rather than a single required step of initial input or feedback. Further, effective engagement is sensitive to each community’s individual social context.

Recognition of the virtuous cycle

The best forms of community engagement, and in fact the best forms of placemaking, are those that recognize and exploit the virtuous cycle of mutual stewardship between community and place. The recognition that placemaking is never done helps the place in the long term. As a project’s community expands with ongoing programming, maintenance, and funding needs, so does its universe of potential funders, advocates and political allies. Success at identifying those ongoing “making” activities and engagement in the civic processes that support them, creates the mutual relationship between community and place that lifts these placemaking projects above a simple sum of the parts.

Conclusion

What separates the projects we brag about from the disappointments? It clearly isn’t the “type” of project; case studies highlighted in the paper range from volunteer and community-driven temporary events to large urban parks with multi-million dollar budgets and big-name funders. Rather, the most successful projects seem to be those that can combine tactics that historically would have been kept separate. And in these projects, recurring themes emerge:

1. Making the case for placemaking is harder than it should be

The creation of new public spaces is often treated as a luxury in a time of scarcity, or a single issue in a crowded political environment. Project initiators and allies face a major challenge in communicating the immense potential for placemaking process, as well as the place itself, to improve and empower communities in the long term.

2. “Making” takes time in a “here and now” culture

The placemaking process is often chaotic and slow—however this very messiness that can be infuriating and daunting also enables community building. Impatience, and the expectation of instant gratification, are great enemies of many placemaking projects.

3. Expertise is a scarce resource

Placemaking projects too often fail because of a knowledge gap. Most often the missing element is knowledge of context; placemakers need to know their audience inside and out for their project to succeed.

4. It’s hard to know who to involve—and when and how to involve them

Those most likely to volunteer their input in a placemaking process are often not representative of the larger community. It can also be a major challenge to build trust to the point where the community is willing to work together to help the project succeed beyond the initial “making” phase.

5. Placemaking exists in a world of rules and regulations

Policymakers are often required to take a risk on an unknown outcome. Even if placemakers can point to successful precedents in other cities, they are often met with a litany of reasons why “that would never work here.”

6. Reliable funding sources are scarcer than ever

Reliable funding is necessary at each major stage of placemaking, from organizing and community engagement through to implementation, long-term maintenance, programming, and operations. Ongoing support relies on an iterative process on placemaking that may be lacking in traditional funding sources.

7. There’s no glory in the post-mortem

The current tendency to focus on fuzzy, unmeasurable goals creates inertia in assessment efforts that hobbles shared learning and is detrimental to the field as a whole, as valuable insights are left undiscovered, and the same mistakes are made over and over again. Pressure for placemaking projects to succeed (pressure which can be reinforced by funders and political allies) also encourages vague assessments (or none at all).

Placemaking Projects: Common Challenges

Endnotes

1. Henri Lefebvre was a sociologist and philosopher who introduced the concept of the “right to the city” and later explored its implications in Projects of Space. Blackwell Publishers, 1991 (English translation of 1974 publication by Donald Nicholson-Smith).


