

Place Making Around the World

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The past 50 years have seen the unprecedented spread of American ideas about design and development to cities throughout the world—and not necessarily with positive results. Influences that are labeled “modern,” “contemporary,” “cutting edge,” “brash,” and “innovative” are all too often being used to impose a one-dimensional view of how cities should work. What is being exported from the United States is an overarching emphasis on accommodating automobiles at every turn and a zealous devotion to novel, iconic architecture that often functions better as a symbol that journalists report on in breathless tones than as an actual building. Is this progress, or is it a step backward from what cities need: more humane, sustainable cities for the 21st century?

The place-making approach—with a participatory, community-led process—has proved attractive as a method to build a spirit of civic engagement in central and eastern Europe. At the same time, the United States is incubating another growing trend that holds great promise for how people across the planet will live in the future. But this trend gets far less media attention. At the heart of this movement is place making—a set of ideas about creating cities in ways that result in high-quality spaces where people naturally want to live, work, and play.

This is a bold departure from the prevailing view of new urban development as a series of disconnected, isolated projects where the only criteria of success are attracting attention or myopically focusing on economic return. Place making emphasizes the appealing qualities of a place and then builds on these qualities to create not only a successful project, but also a successful community. The following examples show just how far reaching these ideas have become.

Paris, France

Like American cities, Paris over the course of the 20th century fell victim to the ever-growing dominance of the automobile. Paris has embarked on a major campaign to turn the tide. The Greater Paris region’s transportation master plan pursues a three-pronged goal of reducing car traffic, improving public transit, and encouraging walking and biking.

Thanks in large part to the leadership of Bertrand Delanoë, mayor since 2001, some of the most progressive urban transportation initiatives in the world are being implemented in Paris. Delanoë maintains that reducing traffic is the most important quality-of-life issue facing the city today. Bumper-to-bumper congestion, cars parked every which way, buses traveling at a glacial pace, and perilous conditions for cyclists and pedestrians have tarnished the traditional beauty and comfort—and therefore the competitive edge—of the City of Light. The idea is that if Paris wants to remain one of the world capitals for business and culture, it must provide a high quality of life for its residents, workers, and visitors.

To this end, across Paris, sidewalks have been widened, bike lanes created, and trees planted. A new light-rail line has been constructed around the periphery of the city, linking a dozen subway and express train lines. Delanoë is also consciously making it less appealing for people to drive in Paris. The city’s “red axes”—dedicated in the 1980s for high-speed traffic on one-way boulevards with no on-street parking—are slowly being turned back into narrower, safer, quieter two-way streets with bike lanes. Several Paris Respire, or “Paris Breathes,” zones have been designated where driving is not allowed on Sundays or holidays.

One of the most recent examples of the city's approach is the public bicycle system called Vélib'—short for vélo libre, or “free bike.” Under the program, Paris provides bicycles that people can pick up at many points around the city, ride to wherever they want to go, and then leave at another bike loading station. More than 15,000 of the bicycles currently are in service, and the fleet will have up to 20,000 cycles by the end of the year.

Another example of the city's approach is the Paris Plage. Every summer, the expressway on the Right Bank of the Seine is closed to vehicles and transformed into a public “beach.” While the focus is on children, people of all ages come to the area to enjoy sunbathing, dance lessons, climbing walls, petanque matches, and swimming in temporary pools. Amenities include beach chairs, cafés, misting fountains, palm trees, and a branch of the public library located in a small tent. Paris's unique “beach,” originally conceived as an alternative for people who could not leave town during the heat of the summer, has become an innovative public space.

The Netherlands

For many years, the Netherlands experienced little immigration. However, recent years have seen an influx of immigrants attracted by the country's reputation for tolerance toward a variety of cultures and practices. Despite the country's overarching acceptance policy, officials and citizens have been challenged to understand, as well as accommodate, the new populations. Many in the Dutch government are trying to understand and work with cultures they essentially are unfamiliar with. The idea of regenerating public spaces through place making, including seeking community input from both older and newer citizens, has been at the forefront of some of the most progressive efforts in the country's urban neighborhoods.

In addition, CROW, a Dutch nonprofit organization involved in planning, design, construction, management, and maintenance of public spaces, partnered last year with the New York City–based Project for Public Spaces to begin incorporating place making into its work with transportation officials and city agencies as a step toward creating more livable cities.

“Our position as a design-based organization allows for a uniquely influential interpretation and application of the principles of place making,” says Harro Verhoeven, project manager of CROW, the Dutch acronym for the National Information and Technology Platform for Transport, Infrastructure, and Public Space. “We have big plans to continue moving forward with these ideas in the near future.” This November, CROW will be serving as host of the National Congress on Public Space, which will officially launch the place making movement in the Netherlands.

Canada

In provinces throughout Canada—from British Columbia and Saskatchewan to Ontario and Nova Scotia—librarians are redefining their profession in ways unparalleled in any other profession today. Facing an unknown future with an increasing number of immigrants moving to Canada from all over the world, library administrators envision the library of the future as a public square where all members of the community—people of different cultures, ages, languages, and educational levels—can come together to learn about each other, their community, and the world.

In addition to programming inside libraries, librarians are incorporating new activities in the public spaces around the structures, providing additional services for the surrounding community. For example, the Pictou-Antigonish Regional Library in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, now includes an outdoor “library patio” offering seating and shade for locals. It is seen as a

breakthrough for the library in reaching out to the community and in introducing the principles of place making in the Pictou-Antigonish region.

Plans are in the works to develop a neighborhood café on the patio. An expansion of the library building will provide more community gathering spaces and allow for more resources within the library, plus create an opportunity to create a better-defined outdoor connection with the park adjacent to the library.

Building on this experience in Nova Scotia, place-making training was recently offered to librarians in British Columbia and Saskatchewan to give them the tools to turn their libraries into community places that serve as civic anchors and destinations. The goal of the training is to encourage the programming of outdoor public spaces near libraries that subsequently act as extensions of the facilities themselves. These kinds of changes are already helping enliven the public realm in city centers around Canada.

Central and Eastern Europe

The place making concept has turned out to be a powerful democracy-building tool in eastern Europe that enables citizens and nongovernment organizations (NGOs) to work effectively with local governments to restore public life and public spaces. In 1994, the Czech Republic began to instill place-making principles into efforts aimed at reinvigorating traditional squares and other public spaces that had been neglected under communist rule. The authoritarian regimes of that era also built many severely restricting new public spaces that minimized opportunities for people to gather freely and comfortably. Citizens groups are now applying the idea of place making to transform these places all over the country into community assets.

As democracy emerges throughout central and eastern Europe—and the pitfalls of Western-style development become more apparent—widespread suspicion toward planning still remains from the Soviet era. This is why the place-making approach—with a participatory, community-led process—has proved attractive as a method to build a spirit of civic engagement. The Czech Environmental Partnership, an NGO, supports projects that involve citizens in decision making and provides technical assistance to communities seeking to become more sustainable.

The place making philosophy has also proved valuable in healing wounds stemming from war and ethnic strife in the Balkans, with the concept being brought to a dozen communities in Serbia, Montenegro, and Croatia. Meanwhile, the Czech Environmental Partnership has become a model for groups—also called environmental partnerships—seeking to address public space needs in Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania. This past spring, a consortium of these groups received a large grant from the European Union to expand their work on improving public spaces. While the programs that will benefit from this funding are currently being developed, initiatives supported include creating an extensive network of cycling paths and nature trails, mobilizing volunteers, and insulating public buildings.

Hong Kong

The central story in Hong Kong for 150 years has been continual growth and development. But the city now faces formidable challenges such as an overbuilt urban landscape, worsening air pollution, a woeful lack of public space, out-of-control automobile traffic, and the ongoing destruction of the precious culture that gives the city its unique identity.

Nowhere is this conflict played out more clearly than in the Graham Street Market, where a redevelopment project threatens a way of life that has characterized the city for a century. The good news is that members of the Hong Kong business community are stepping up to find solutions to these challenges. They, along with city residents, realize that to maintain a

competitive edge on other leading cities around the world, a paradigm shift needs to occur—from focusing on facilitating growth to fostering a more livable environment.

There is a growing understanding in Hong Kong that infrastructure and buildings should be sensitive to their context and be integrated into their surroundings. Locals have advocated a narrowed boulevard alternative to the planned 130-foot- (40-m-) wide Central Waterfront road known as P1. The local community also has responded to the Urban Renewal Authority's plans to clear the Graham Street Market to make way for business and residential towers by putting forth a sensitive solution that will allow the towers and market hawkers to coexist. It is through community engagement and visioning efforts that such actions continue to grow.

In fact, planning advocacy is booming. The alternative proposal for the Graham Street Market submitted to the city's planning department for consideration has received a higher level of resident support than any other planning application. In addition, at a recent urban forum organized by local activists, the community has called for an overhaul of the way in which public space is conceived, valued, and planned. Change is clearly underway, but the key question is whether it will happen soon enough to save a global treasure like the Graham Street Market.

United Arab Emirates

Cities in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are quickly becoming some of the most dynamic, diverse, and successful in the world. However, these cities have been criticized over the past several years for adopting fantastical architecture and formerly unheard-of concepts for malls and other shopping areas, and for making major investments in private development. With projects designed for the upper class including planned space where many residents do not feel welcomed or comfortable, there is growing recognition that development in the UAE is not yet being leveraged to create a successful public realm. The lack of great public spaces and public activity constitutes a major factor limiting social cohesion and true nation building, but also presents major opportunities. When all residents are given a say in which amenities become publicly available to them, they begin to take ownership and pride in their neighborhood, region, and nation.

Ample opportunity exists to leverage the attention, investment, and success that these major business and tourist attractions now receive to create public spaces. These streets, boulevards, transit systems, squares, parks, public markets, public buildings, and the like build a great public realm with access for everyone. For example, the government of Dubai is currently embarking on a multibillion-dollar project to rejuvenate the city's Old Town, making it a more welcoming and comfortable destination for visitors and locals alike.

The most basic principle of place making, one that offers common sense but nonetheless marks a radical change, is that the best ideas for the future come from the bottom up rather than the top down—that the community is the most knowledgeable expert in creating a vision for the future of any particular place. If this simple wisdom were applied to every development and redevelopment project, communities would look and feel different and function differently than they do now.

Developers worldwide could play a major role in defining a new vision—especially if they begin to share experiences and ideas across borders. In the United States, for example, many enlightened developers are focusing on creating authentic places with projects that are rooted in the identity of a particular location. Many are also engaging the communities to work with them to define the vision and play a part in the future of those developments.

Most communities in other countries are not being engaged in this way. For example, in Europe, an environmental ideology supports the continuation of the historic dense urban form, minimizes

sprawl, and has resulted in new developments that are much less dependent on the automobile. Europeans are leading the way in providing alternatives through the creation of walkable, transit-oriented communities.

Asking the right questions of a community will be one of the most difficult aspects of shifting to a place-making perspective in development projects. This is because finding and using practical information is a skill that until now has not been rewarded in the development and design fields—professions in which people have been trained for several generations to be experts who give direction, not ask questions.

But the results now beginning to appear around the world—from Paris to Melbourne to New Jersey—prove that the extra care and thought involved in the place-making process can pay off. They provide examples of the way to create truly great cities in the 21st century that meet the needs and desires of people.

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