

VIEWPOINT

**Leading urban change with people powered public spaces.
The history, and new directions, of the
Placemaking movement**

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Abstract

Successful urban development is usually anchored by vital public spaces where people naturally want to gather: a crossroads or a main street, third place business, public market, waterfront wharf, library, railway station, campus, agora, piazza, or civic square. These spaces become truly magnetic places when they provide purpose and meaning for the broad groups of people they serve.

Public places are most dynamic—and most enduring—when they showcase and boost a community's unique public life, economy, and culture. This is especially true when the people using them are involved in their creation, continual re-creation, management, and governance. This is the essence of placemaking.

Great public spaces happen through community-driven placemaking and place-led governance. These great places are the foundation of great communities, which in turn are the building blocks of a prosperous, equitable, and resilient society.

Keywords: placemaking, lighter quicker cheaper, communities, Project for Public Spaces

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Planning Out Of Place

For many decades, city-building professions have generally overlooked the role of public space as the fulcrum of great cities. To a large extent, individuals working within these professions have been trained to adopt a narrow view of cities, focusing primarily on buildings, businesses, roadways, monolithic infrastructure, and rigid zoning. Professions ranging from traffic engineers to economic development specialists have retreated into silos, a mentality that often blinds them to the overall needs of cities and their citizens. Each specific field perpetuates myopic, unsustainable goals that add up to far less than the sum of their parts.

While progressive practitioners within each discipline have become more sensitive in recent years to the importance of places, people, and public life in fostering strong communities, they still usually speak to their own crowd: ignoring and dismissing the capacity that other disciplines, sectors, and indeed communities themselves have to collaborate in the process of bettering a community.

While public spaces and a sense of place have fallen between the cracks of professions, placemaking and place governance have emerged out of those cracks to offer an innovative and more successful way to achieve collective impact in community building.

The Roots of the Placemaking Movement

[Jane Jacobs](#) and [William H. Whyte](#) were the first to call out the wrong-headed ideas that still dominate how we shape our cities. In 1956 Whyte, then Managing Editor of *Fortune Magazine*, encouraged Jacobs to write a feature entitled “[Downtown is For People](#)” which was to become one of the first major critiques outlining the failure of mega-scaled urban renewal and redevelopment projects. Two years later Whyte sounded the alarm about the consequences of suburban sprawl in the introduction to his anthology *The Exploding Metropolis*. Both of them continued to document the ill effects of top-down decision making on the quality of life in American communities and articulated the importance of small-scale planning that enhances human interaction. Together, they laid a strong foundation for what later became the placemaking movement.

In the early 1970s, William Whyte’s Street Life Project pioneered tools for observing and analysing comfort and sociability in public spaces. [Fred Kent](#) joined the Street Life Project following his work founding the Street Academy for Black and Latin Education in 1968 (with funding from Michael Bloomberg); organising the first Earth Day in New York City in 1970; running Mayor John Lindsay’s Council on the Environment; and co-founding the activist group Transportation Alternatives.

The Founding of Project for Public Spaces

In 1975, [Fred](#) founded [Project for Public Spaces](#) (PPS) as a non-profit organisation to popularise Whyte’s ideas and put his tools into practice around the country with a grant from the Rockefeller Family Foundation. During its first two decades, the group successfully focused on fixing dysfunctional public spaces and developing place management plans, and reversing patterns of disinvestment and hostile architecture in American downtowns. Iconic early projects like the [Rockefeller Center](#), [Bryant Park](#), and New Haven’s [Chapel Street](#), helped set new standards for downtown public space design and management.



Figure 1. Finally, a place to sit at the Rockefeller Center thanks to PPS. Image circa early 1980s.

Building on the success of these approaches, the 1990s saw PPS develop placemaking into a public space planning process to support communities in “getting it right” throughout the process. PPS increasingly applied this process from the start as exemplified by projects like Detroit’s Campus Martius and broader downtown, Houston’s Discovery Green, and the transformation of New York City’s streets.

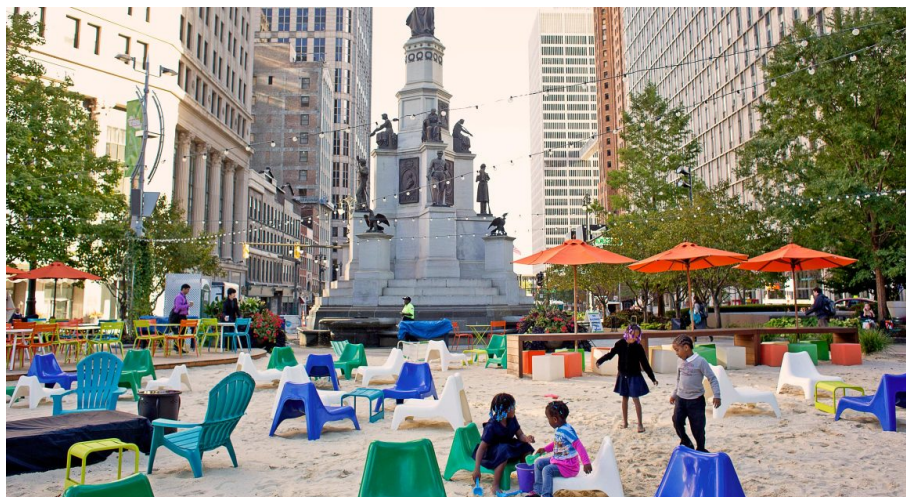


Figure 2. The development of a temporary beach in the week that Detroit declared bankruptcy helped the city bounce back.

Through its study of what makes great places, the organisation discovered that many of the best public spaces have a self-organised and self-managed quality: people gathering there unconsciously contribute to everyone else’s experience. To achieve this level of interaction, of course, usually requires lots of carefully coordinated organising and management behind the scenes—in other words, proactive placemaking.

The Pioneering of Placemaking

Around the year 1997 PPS started using the term “placemaking” to describe this new approach. Central to this concept is the idea that planning public spaces is not just about doing something *for* the people who will use it, but *with, or by actively engaging* those people. The primary driving principle behind the approach is that “The Community is the Expert” on places in their own backyard. By 2003, PPS started thinking and talking about community-driven placemaking as a movement, which led to placemaking conferences in the Pacific Northwest to explore the possibilities. By 2006 the word “placemaking” was entering popular language, and the idea of placemaking as a movement was starting to gain traction globally.

Trying it “Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper”

The placemaking process always emphasised starting with short-term, low-cost experiments with design, programming, and management. In 2010 PPS launched a campaign, geared at people that don’t yet consider themselves urbanists, around mainstreaming this focus, calling it “Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper”. The campaign highlighted a broad range of such projects from the do-it-yourself street reclamations to the interim development markets, with a database and strategies from around the world.

Launching a Movement

With the grass roots of the organisation in place and growing global interest, the time came to launch placemaking as a global movement. To highlight and support the movement PPS debuted the Placemaking Leadership Council at a Placemaking Leadership Forum in Detroit in 2013. In the same year, to help build momentum around the movement for placemaking and public space in global development, we also kicked-off our Future of Places program with UN-Habitat and the Ax:son Johnson Foundation based in Sweden. This “quiet movement” soon began to take root. In 2016 the placemaking movement truly went global with the first International Placemaking Week in Vancouver, BC, Canada, and our participation in the UN’s Habitat III Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development in Quito, Ecuador.



Figure 3. Many global placemaking conferences (including people from over 100 countries) have informed, strengthened, and amplified the movement.

After “[getting organised](#)” in a series of international meetings and regional conferences, 2018 was the year that the placemaking movement started to self-organise, with global networks growing organically around regional leaders and locally defined sub-networks. The year kicked off with the first World Urban Forum (WUF9 in Kuala Lumpur); the UN’s Habitat III conference placed public space and placemaking principles central to the goals of the New Urban Agenda. [Placemaking was featured in WUF9](#) as an organising principle for facilitating the New Urban Agenda’s implementation.



Figure 4. Recent, and upcoming, placemaking conferences guiding regional networks, and the global movement.

The year continued with a number of dynamic placemaking conferences across six continents:

- [Cities for All](#), European Placemaking Network, Stockholm
- [Crowdsourcing the City](#), New Cities Foundation, London
- [Place Week Victoria](#), Placemaking Leadership Council, Melbourne, Australia
- [Humanizing Cities Conference](#), Medina, Saudi Arabia
- [Placemaking](#), Strelka Institute, Moscow, Russia
- [WeMakeTheCity](#) summits on [Making Places](#) and [Co-Creating the City](#), Amsterdam
- [Walk Bike Places](#), New Orleans, Louisiana
- [Art of City Building](#), Placemaking Canada, Halifax, Canada
- [New Zealand Placemaking Week](#), [Auckland](#), Palmerston North, and Christchurch, New Zealand
- [Nairobi Placemaking Week](#), Nairobi, Kenya
- [Bass Center for Transformative Placemaking](#), Brookings Launch Event, Washington, DC
- [Placemaking Week Israel](#), Jerusalem.

The year culminated with Placemaking Latinoamerica in Mexico, and Placemaking Week Wuhan in China in partnership with UN-Habitat and the International Society of City and Regional Planners (ISOCARP). The Wuhan conference welcomed placemaking experts from 41 countries and launched a Chinese placemaking network and a strong placemaking declaration.



Figure 5. Wuhan Placemaking Week 2018, Wuhan, China | Photo: Katherine Peinhardt, Project for Public Spaces.



Figure 6. Placemaking Week Nairobi has experimented with temporary street designed that are informing permanent changes.

Along with regional campaigns, placemaking continues to drive change on many scales, including city-wide campaigns in communities around the world, like Madrid, Spain; Brisbane, Australia; Monterrey, Mexico; Singapore; and Auckland, New Zealand.

The placemaking movement's founder [Fred Kent](#) also marked an important milestone in 2018, with a long-planned transition from the organisation he founded and led as president for 43 years. Early PPS hires [Stephen Davies](#) and [Kathy Madden](#), who are now recognised as co-founders, also stepped down. This leadership team left PPS in [strong shape](#), securing a multi-million dollar grant from the Anne T. and Robert M. Bass Foundation for PPS's role in a partnership they developed with the [Brookings Institution](#) and [National Main Street](#), plus generous support for the transition and a beautiful new office space, with former long-time PPSer [Phil Myrick](#) taking over as CEO. They also published [a second edition of *How to Turn a Place Around*](#), the book that kicked off the placemaking movement almost 20 years earlier.

The founders now work to support the broader placemaking movement—and the network of placemaking organisations that are leading the movement—through the creation of The Placemaking Fund and its program PlacemakingX, a network to accelerate placemaking for global impact.

What's next for the placemaking movement?

With increasing organisational capacity, interest, and support, Project for Public Spaces and the many leaders and organisations making up the placemaking movement continue to grow stronger than ever. Just as it takes a place to create a community and a community to create a place, it takes a placemaking movement to support placemaking organisations, and many placemaking organisations to support a movement.

There is now leadership and collaboration from every corner of the globe. In 2019, locally organised placemaking conferences will occur on all six inhabited continents including [Stockholm](#), [Melbourne](#), [London](#), [Valencia](#), [Lima](#), [Perth](#), [Kuala Lumpur](#), [Halifax](#), [Auckland](#), and a PPS Placemaking Week in [Chattanooga](#), TN, USA. Each conference will be part of regional and city-wide networks and campaigns for systemic change and on-the-ground impact. We look forward to further growing support for leaders and organisations around the world to keep building the potential, inclusiveness, and capacity of placemaking.

Theories, practices, and patterns of urbanisation have been shifting greatly, from a focus on the housing unit, to the building and block, and most recently to the street and the public space. It is time now to reinvent the shaping of cities from the place up. The movement is demonstrating how to turn the shaping of cities upside down by starting with places, and in the process, invent crucial new scalable models for governing, financing, and designing our cities. As leadership towards this goal emerges globally, Project for Public Spaces and PlacemakingX will work together to highlight, connect, and support these people, their ideas, and their projects. It is now these leaders that are poised to further define, defend, and amplify the cause of public spaces and placemaking.

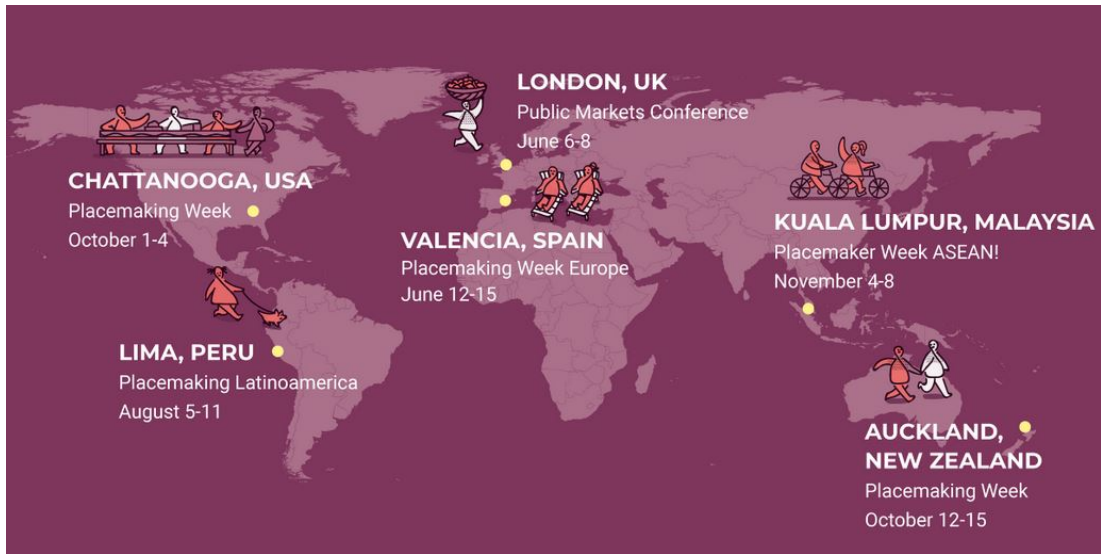


Figure 7. 2019 placemaking conferences cover many regions.

WHAT MAKES A GREAT PLACE?

