



Creating a Common Agenda for Placemaking: The View from Detroit

The freewheeling and engaging discussion at the inaugural meeting of the Placemaking Leadership Council in Detroit on April 11-12, 2013, has enabled us to get a good start on achieving a common understanding of the issues and challenges facing Placemaking – and our goals and opportunities for the future.

About the Meeting

On each day, following a morning of speakers from Detroit and internationally, participants divided into different Working Groups focused on advancing specific Placemaking agendas and crosscutting issues that impact all of the agendas.

Placemaking Agendas:

1. Architecture of Place: Taking Design Practice to the Next Level to Support Better Places
2. Transportation: Leveraging Transportation Investments to Build Stronger Communities
3. Entrepreneurial Places: Markets, Main Streets and Beyond
4. Multi Use Destinations

Crosscutting Issues:

5. Place Capital: Capturing the Benefits of Placemaking
6. Healthy Places: Using Placemaking to Address Today's Health Challenges
7. Place Governance: Restructuring Government and Civic Engagement Around Placemaking
8. Placemaking in Low-Income Communities

At each of these sessions, participants focused on challenges, best practices, and opportunities to advance each of these topics. Then we charged groups to think more broadly about developing messages that can change how people think; defining the roles of the Leadership Council; and making personal and organizational commitments to action. After both sessions, participants reported back to the full group.

Some common ways that Leadership Council members said that they want to be involved include:

- Taking what they learned in Detroit home to their communities, catalyzing local change, and sharing lessons learned with other PLC members
- Helping advance a specific Placemaking Agenda – such as transportation – by partnering with other PLC advocates
- Building a broad based Placemaking Campaign at a national and global level but rooted in successes at the local level

We prepare this short document as our colleagues and compatriots are assembling at The Future of Places conference in Stockholm. This is the first of three international conferences, and we hope that our goals and strategies can be augmented and expanded by a global audience who is attending.



Goals

PPS has not attempted to uncover the magic bullet or to distill all the ways we can advance Placemaking as a movement. Rather, based on the reports of the Working Groups, we have tried to articulate the broad challenges of Placemaking and to identify joint goals for addressing these challenges.

Goal 1: Clearly frame the value and “language” of Placemaking, and develop a collective messaging plan.

Issues

- Difficulty in defining aspects of Placemaking (place capital, place governance, etc.)
- Lack of a consistent, sensitive vocabulary for describing different kinds of communities
- Lack of understanding of the benefits of Placemaking
- Lack of a common media strategy for communicating our work

Opportunities

We need to clearly define and articulate the benefits of Placemaking so that Placemakers can reach out to community members, developers, city officials, and the media in a coherent and persuasive manner. Placemaking is about building community by fostering emotional, personal connections to places—and using that connection to place as a way of strengthening relationships.

We should broadly define place as “where community happens” and that even institutions like schools or employment centers can be places of community. We need to connect Placemaking to broader outcomes, such as health and entrepreneurship. It’s the big umbrella that provides a shared framework to inform and guide the work of “specialists” in our communities, whether they are architects or transportation engineers.

Our language must be clear, simple, and coherent. We must use not only words and numbers to tell the Placemaking story but also videos, images, and other visual tools. There are many ways to make the idea of Placemaking accessible and exciting.

With a critical mass of active Placemakers today, we need to develop a collective messaging plan to make sure we continue getting the word out about Placemaking. We need to capture this moment—and plant our seeds in a fertile ground.

Strategies

- Develop a common Placemaking lexicon that employs a recognized, local vernacular that best describes this work so stakeholders can understand it and advance the cause
- Create a media and messaging that everyone can tailor their individual efforts around
 - Create strong visual messages for discussion (photographs, diagrams, infographics)
 - Collect stories/testimonials (video is impactful)
 - Propose unlikely partners who can incorporate Placemaking in their work (e.g., the entertainment industry), and develop an outreach strategy



Goal 2: Develop a common set of standards and indicators, and measure the good work we are already doing.

Issues

- Measurement of the success of places is uneven and inconsistent
- Lack of effective measurement impedes our growth as a movement

Opportunities

We need to draw on the skills of PPS staff, researchers, and members of the PLC to create a set of “common indicators” for the success of places and Placemaking. These indicators can vary by geography, neighborhood type, city size, etc. With agreed upon standards, we can consistently measure the strengths and weaknesses of places and the benefits of Placemaking.

Shared standards and active, consistent measurement will allow all of us to better communicate about Placemaking and to understand how to improve our work. However, we must also make sure that metrics and standards do not transform Placemaking into a fixed, isolated process.

Strategies

- Determine the right metrics to use to measure success and failure (Every PLC agenda group could develop key qualitative and quantitative indicators)
 - Economic indicators
 - Place capital indicators
 - Social indicators
 - Health indicators
- Collect data and quantify benefits of Placemaking using common metrics
- Celebrate failure and learn from it. Encourage experimentation.
- Create an interactive Placemaking app that allows you to record and share information about places
- Create an open forum for others’ data collection

Goal 3: Build the capacity of local leaders to make change and keep Placemaking inclusive.

Issues

- Need for authentic citizen leadership and participation
- Lack of preparation for complexities of place management
- Lack of resources and support systems that will stimulate community and neighborhood leaders into action



Opportunities

Everyone has the right to good places—from city centers and town squares to residential blocks and parks—and fortunately, there are assets in every community to facilitate collaboration and empower all citizens to be Placemakers. Placemaking is a necessity for strong, vibrant neighborhoods and is especially important to the well being of economically challenged communities.

We need to cultivate local leaders and Place champions from all walks of life who understand the value of Place. We can help build their capacity to make change by facilitating access to seed money, tools, and trainings; developing a best practices database; and establishing a set of agreed upon standards for measurement. Empowering people at the local level will ensure that Placemaking happens throughout towns and cities, not just in the downtowns.

In particular, we need to better engage vulnerable parts of the population and to make certain that Placemaking is an inclusive process that supports all kinds of neighborhoods and communities, and that we help leverage financial and human capital for neighborhood Placemakers. We need to create an integrated, inclusive process for communities that is sustained by iterative feedback from diverse individuals and groups and informed by equity-driven principles, especially for Placemaking in low income communities.

Strategies

- Create “how to” and best practices guides
- Share lessons learned more broadly about what challenges, opportunities, and failures people have encountered; how people have learned; what resources they have used; etc.
- Enhance education and support systems for Placemaking, especially in disadvantaged communities
- Provide more resources and incentives for Placemaking
- Explore how technology can aid in this goal

Goal 4: Revamp the process and structure of governance to facilitate Placemaking.

Issues

We all face obstacles in our work that inhibit our abilities to transform communities. These obstacles often are rooted in a lack of people-centered governance to support Placemaking. By governance, we do not just mean “local government” but also any institution or organization that engages in Placemaking or whose work impacts the success of Placemaking.

Here are the categories of governance obstacles identified in Detroit:

- Laws
 - Outdated
 - Inadequate
 - Overwhelming and confusing



- Structure
 - Overwhelming and confusing bureaucracy
 - Government is isolated from public and private sectors
- Culture
 - Lack of enlightened leadership and risk-taking
 - Pressure for traditional economic development above all else, especially with today's fiscal problems
- Entrenched mindsets
 - Fragmented interests and goals within the design, development, and implementation processes
 - Lack of communication and cooperation
 - Difficulty in managing different expectations

Opportunities

Citizen engagement is the core of Placemaking, so local talent and support is imperative to successfully bring about the culture change needed to advance Placemaking. We should continue to explore ways to bring together the public and private sectors at “interdisciplinary roundtables” to allow citizens to educate each other, identify collective interests, and develop human-scaled, Placemaking solutions. We need to embrace what emerges organically from the community's use of a place, without imposing a message on it. We need to enable the community to say what the place is and let the rules grow out of the place. In order to shift stakeholders' perspectives, we must make sure we properly frame Placemaking (Goal 1), especially regarding the transformative economic benefits.

Advancing Placemaking requires culture change, a new approach to local governance. Mayors and public figures should praise risk-taking and allow failure as a way to learn how to do things better. We need to create institutions and structures for Placemaking that aren't behind closed doors and are inclusive and strongly grassroots, straddling both informal and formal relationships. Social media needs to be leveraged to expand how citizens are engaged in Placemaking.

Finally, we need to create more financial resources for Placemaking and to see how existing resources could be allocated more effectively.

Strategies

- Identify innovative strategies to change Place Governance. For example:
 - Outsourced municipal services to non-profits
 - Multi-sector SWAT teams for a particular 'place'
 - Micro-governance practices
- Compile 'how to' or 'road maps' around good Placemaking processes. Take the lessons learned from these efforts and share with the larger community
- Convene a working group on financing mechanisms and techniques for re-orienting public resources
- Create more social media tools for Placemaking, creating more options for citizen engagement
- Use Detroit to demonstrate the power of neighborhood Placemaking



Goal 5: Refine the structure, goals, and campaigns of the PLC.

Issues

- Clarity of the structure, goals, and campaigns of the PLC
- Lack of an operating definition of Placemaking that is sensitive to the Global North and South, that grapples with Creative Placemaking, and that strikes a balance between hard and soft infrastructure

Opportunities

We all need to continue to work together to figure out the structure of the Leadership Council. We need to identify the desired outcomes of the campaign, with clear targets. Given these targets, we need to clarify what role makes sense for the Project for Public Spaces within the Leadership Council. Should we have a clear set of objectives, with the understanding that the PLC may dissolve after the objectives have been met?

We also need to establish a structure for the PLC. There are a variety of ways PLC members could continue to interact at different levels. For example, we could create state and local level Council groups and establish technical advisory teams on specific topics.

We need to be completely inclusive while also identifying the leaders, fire souls, catalysts and networks who can become the spokespersons for our campaigns and who can help facilitate the culture change. We also need to facilitate and grow the network by seeking out partners who can help ensure a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach. We need to identify and invite Placemakers with experience.

Strategies

- Clarify roles and responsibilities of PPS and PLC members
- Identify key organizational partners and individuals who need to be part of the PLC – potentially create an organizational partners component to the PLC
- Identify individuals and organizations within the Leadership Council who could do take on an expanded leadership role
- Align with educational institutions to incorporate Placemaking into their curricula, creating a bridge across all disciplines (architecture, planning, real estate)