

Creative Placemaking

Introduction

Today we are going to talk about the current state of creative placemaking in the United States. I need to confess something. I am not an expert on this. I am a willing and happy participant, just like ya'll, but I am not a funder or a scholar or a policy maker. What I do know is that I have been watching this phenomenon called placemaking grow and change and yes, even overshadow some aspects of arts and culture over the past few years. It is both exciting and alarming and at the very least, fascinating.

So first I will attempt to define creative placemaking. Then I am going to take us through a little history. Next I will outline some trends and give some examples. Then I will offer up some critical thinking about creative placemaking. And finally, we are going to have time for discussion.

Definition

Creative placemaking is a term invented by officials at the National Endowment for the Arts. Rocco Landsmann, the past NEA chairman, did what a good former Broadway producer does best and surveyed folks, found other "producers" in the private and public sector, and put together as large a production as he could muster. From this effort came NEA's Our Town and the consortium called ArtPlace, probably the two most influential funding programs in creative placemaking.

Every few decades, architecture, city planning and the arts become captivated with a movement and a catchy name. The current one is creative *placemaking*. The notion is that slowly evolving places (i.e. Greenwich Village, old town squares, the historic quarter in Kyoto, La Candelaria in Bogotá, Colombia) can be captured and replicated in newly created places. The idea is to learn what has made successful, lively places and apply those lessons to new and reinvigorated locations.

The struggle for authenticity and idealism in places has been around for a very long time. It is not new, but merely has been repackaged into language that can attract attention from clients, funders, politicians, and the general public. Terminology like *placemaking* comes and goes with fashion and failure. (Spell check does not even recognize it as a word).

In their paper, aptly titled *Creative Placemaking*, Marjusen and Gadwa say, "In creative placemaking, partners from public, private, nonprofit and community sector strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, city or region around arts and cultural activities. Creative placemaking animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves business visibility and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire and be inspired"

Project for Public Spaces uses this definition. "Placemaking is a multi-faceted approach to planning, design and management of public spaces. Put simply, it involves looking at,

listening to, and asking questions of the people who live, work and play in a particular space, to discover their needs and aspirations. The information is then used to create a common vision for that place.”

“Artplace believes that art, culture and creativity expressed powerfully through place can create vibrant communities, thus increasing the desire and the economic opportunity for people to thrive in that place. It is all about the local.”

Artspace, the artist housing, multi-use developers out of Minneapolis simply say placemaking is “the leveraging of cultural assets to strengthen the social fabric of a community”

Artscape, a creative space designer and builder in Canada, says, “Creative placemaking is an evolving field of practice that intentionally leverages the power of the arts, culture and creativity to serve a community’s interest while driving a broader agenda for change, growth and transformation in a way that builds the character and quality of place.”

I confess that I am not sure which definition is the best but I cannot offer up anything any better. But from this last definition I think we get the key word - evolving. Practitioners and funders are making it up as they go along. The truth is that this is a time of experimentation – trial and error – with a lot of resources being leveraged to figure it out.

History

Placemaking has been around since the beginning of human settlement. If one observes the design and cultural activities associated with prehistoric cave painting, public murals, village centers, town squares and zocalos, plazas, and public parks, you realize that creative placemaking is not a new concept.

In the late 18th and 19th century, many countries experienced sweeping social, economic and political revolutions that eliminated a privileged class from having exclusive or primary access to places of beauty and respite. Many of the gardens and parks that today are enjoyed by anyone, were once the exclusive preserve for monarchs or nobility, and ordinary people were barred from experiencing them. With the revolutionary changes came the notion that there is a collective, shared public realm that all people should be able to enjoy, regardless of wealth, education or power. Examples in the United States include the Boston Commons and Central Park – both spaces that had stunning effect in their access for the general public. It is also not a coincidence that these spaces were conceived at a time of massive immigration and the development of vast urban slums, with only streets and saloons as relief from overcrowding. Central Park and other spaces were seen as the “lungs” for an increasingly dense city.

These efforts in major cities were echoed in smaller cities and towns across the US as they realized they could also provide parks, greenbelts, and public spaces for the citizenry. These were formative years in community building in response to rapid immigration,

industrialization and urbanization. Parks and public spaces, much like schools, became agents of democratization in addition to avenues for reducing crime and overcrowding.

By the beginning of the 20th century, the notion of designed and thoughtful public spaces was firmly set in the minds and actions of civic leaders in cities and towns of all sizes. New ideas of zoning, public health and public transportation took hold. It is ironic that many of the urban neighborhoods, the small town squares and public places invented from this era are the very ones being reclaimed by placemaking today. We rediscover the great bones and delights of spaces planned one hundred years ago.

Then there developed new thinking around urban planning and the use of new and more mass-produced building materials. This led to buildings made of concrete, steel and plate glass instead of masonry and stone. There was a notion that the old could be replaced with clean, modern repetitive Spartan structures and spaces. You can see how this thinking translated into the later development of suburbs – with repetitive boxes that stamped a relentless uniformity across the landscape that could be replicated in any location. This trend was precisely what emerged after WWII.

During this time, zoning laws became popular. These separated the use of spaces – industrial from residential from commercial from institutional, sidewalks narrowed, streets widened and this resulted in the virtual inability to create unique and intimate spaces in communities for decades. Roadways became separators instead of connectors and communities and neighborhoods became containers and corridors.

Simultaneously, urban renewal led to gridded streets and towered housing in park-like settings. This trend also led to the destruction and abandonment of many historic neighborhoods and this was replicated in small cities and towns across the US. People left the center of community life and moved to the outskirts, which was more often than not separated from commerce and culture.

Then during the 1960's there was a groundswell of interest in the voice of people in government and city life. Residents became interested in land use, public investments and opposed the relentless expansion of freeways. People figured out how to organize, protest and file lawsuits mirroring the general social unrest. At the same time, the historic preservation movement emerged. People became advocates for place as an important record of history. Then by the 1970's, the disinvestment in city centers was becoming starkly evident and the wholesale destruction of neighborhoods largely subsided.

So there are a couple of trends in the last 30 years that have influenced contemporary creative placemaking:

Neotraditionalism is the trend to turn back to older models of design, materials and construction in architecture and urban design. This also is the notion that the models used a century ago in city planning and development can be translated to contemporary times.

New Urbanism – People are moving back into the center of towns and cities. They are not just returning but demanding an end to separate use. Folks want mixed-use neighborhoods and town centers that harken back to another time. This combined with the revitalization of old neighborhoods in central locations have led to a resurgence of urban life, including those in smaller cities and towns.

Transit Development – Streetcars, bike paths, and light rail are transit trends. This, in addition to enormous pedestrian concerns, have led to greener, more environmentally conscious transit and less reliance on the automobile.

Current practices

So where is creative placemaking today?

The current trends seem to value connected communities with greenbelts, natural preserves, waterfronts that are publically accessible, recreational trails, and transit that can allow people to experience different neighborhoods and different cultures. Single-purpose neighborhoods, gated communities and exclusive subdivisions are on the wane while places that are more open, fluid and flexible are on the rise.

Public spaces have made a huge comeback. Towns and cities are rediscovering the role of public places in defining and allowing community life to flourish – the arts, open-air markets, food trucks, events, celebrations, gatherings and recreation. There does seem to be a deeper appreciation of one of our oldest traditions – that of providing public places to foster community. And please remember this is by no means all about design and aesthetics, although these are vitally important, it is also about programming, maintenance, use and participation.

In this difficult era of the Great Recession, creative placemaking has paradoxically expanded at a rapid rate. Arts stakeholders are now eligible for new resources, and that momentum seems to be growing. Over the past few years, ArtPlace, a consortium of now over a dozen major funders, has opened up \$26.9 million for creative placemaking, most of it labeled as new resources. NEA has spearheaded policy change, cross-departmental federal collaborations and its own Our Town initiative. Local governments are thinking about arts and cultural activities in new ways.

What are the benefits of Creative Placemaking?

Creative placemaking serves livability, diversity and economic development goals. Livability outcomes include heightened public safety, community identity, environmental quality, increased affordable housing and workplace options for creative workers, more beautiful and reliable transportation choices, and increased collaboration between civic, nonprofit, and for-profit partners.

Placemaking capitalizes in a local community's assets, inspiration, and potential, ultimately creating good public spaces that promote people's health, happiness and well-being. A

great public space cannot be measured simply by physical attributes: it serves people as a vital place where function is put ahead of form.

Economic development quickens because arts and cultural investments help a locality capture a higher share of expenditures from local income. Creative locales foster entrepreneurs and cultural industries that generate jobs and income, spin off new products and services, and attract and retain unrelated businesses and skilled workers.

Successful culture-based revitalization efforts are appropriate to local circumstances, not a replica of what other cities and towns are doing. The best projects nurture distinctive qualities and resources that already exist in the community and can be celebrated to serve community members while drawing in visitors and new businesses.

Here are the *Principles of Creative Placemaking* as defined by ArtPlace. This entity is by no means the only one working on the issue but I would argue it is the most influential one.

Successful creative placemaking...

- Places artists and art at the center of planning, execution and activity.
- Leverages the creative potential already present in a place.
- Creates opportunities for people of all income levels and backgrounds to thrive in a place.
- Supports economic diversity in the community, providing multiple points of entry and interaction for people of all incomes.
- Creates interesting places that capitalize on distinctiveness thus enhancing its long-term appeal.
- Creates a place where people want to go and linger.
- Contributes to a mix of uses and people that makes places more diverse, more interesting and more active.
- Fosters connections among people and across cultures.
- Is always presenting itself to the public and encouraging pedestrian activity.
- Creates a place where businesses want to be.
- Convinces people that a place can have a different and better future.

ArtPlace has also developed a set of indicators to determine the vibrancy of a creative place. They hope to provide a nationally available and consistent set of measures, available at a

neighborhood level. They define vibrancy as “attracting people, activities and values to a place and increasing the desire and the economic opportunity to thrive in a place.”

See what you think and particularly see if these indicators feel like they pertain to your community and your work. (Also part of your packet.)

There are three broad areas – People, Activity and Value. They have only developed the indicators for people and activity at this point. Value is not part of the equation yet... go figure.

People:

1. Population density – vibrant neighborhoods contain a density of local population and increasing population is an indicator of increasing vibrancy.
2. Employment rate – vibrant neighborhoods have a high fraction of their residents of working age that are employed.
3. Percentage of workers in creative occupations – Vibrant neighborhoods have a higher than average percentage of residents who are employed in the arts, writers, performing or similar occupations.

Activity:

4. Number of indicator businesses – These are businesses that represent destinations of choice for cultural, recreational, consumption or social activity. High concentrations of these businesses are indicators of vibrancy.
5. Number of jobs in the community – counts the number of jobs on the neighborhood not just the number of employed. Vibrant neighborhoods have abundant local job opportunities.
6. Walkability – Vibrant communities have many destinations within walking distance.
7. Number of mixed-use blocks – Vibrant neighborhoods contain a mix of jobs and residences.
8. Cell phone activity – captures the level of cell phone activity in an area on nights and weekends. Vibrant neighborhoods have relatively high cell phone use after normal working hours.
9. Percentage of independent businesses – Vibrant neighborhoods have more locally-owned businesses.
10. Number of creative industry jobs – Vibrant neighborhoods have higher than average concentration of workers employed in businesses that involve information, media, arts and creative endeavors.

Vibrancy indicators (although not exactly all these same ones) were used by ArtPlace to create a list of 47 “America’s Top ArtPlaces 2013” defined as “neighborhoods where arts are central to creating the kinds of places where people want to be.” There is not a single one from New Mexico and not a single small town or rural area. Also, I believe that there has not been an ArtPlace grant to a locale in your state.

There are a couple of related trends in arts and culture.

The first is the notion of community engagement in the arts. This is where arts activities engage citizenry, no matter what their skill. I will connect this to my work, that of the creation and touring of new performances in the United States. No longer is it enough to come to a location, large or small, and just perform on a stage. The trend is to also have related arts activities that activate community members and give them a different entry into the work. This is not just audience development, but is seen as another way for people to have meaningful experiences. (We will deal with this in more depth in the workshop this afternoon and relate it directly to creative placemaking)

The second is cultural tourism. As you are probably well aware, tourism has evolved over the past few decades and one of the fastest growing areas is tourism that is connected to the authenticity and uniqueness of a location. In other words, people are becoming more and more interested in experiencing the true nature of a locale – its history, architecture, culture, food, people, environment and activities and not just going to “attractions.”

Finally there is community-driven design, where citizens, through a variety of participatory practices, are part of space planning. While this can include design and aesthetics, more importantly they help determine public use and programming.

Examples

Pine Lake, population 748, is the smallest city in DeKalb County, Georgia, United States. It is completely surrounded by metro Atlanta. Pine Lake is one of the most eclectic cities in the state, including among its residents a number of locally, regionally and nationally known artists. Its current mayor is a theater artist.

Pine Lake's has a beautiful lake that is the center of many of the city's activities. So as part of their efforts in flood control, environmental improvements and cultural development, Pine Lake has embarked on a multi-year effort to create a natural and built environment that will include an artist residency compound, ongoing cultural activities, the revitalization of a commercial zone and serve as a site for their annual festival, all by the side of the lake.

Folklore Field School in Tuscon, AZ is not a physical space but helps community members think about place. It provides workshops to train adult learners in the methods, ethics and significance of folklife, community asset mapping and digital photographic documentation of cultural traditions. It provides community members with the training on how to observe, reflect, document, and write about cultural practices that allow memories, cultural histories, and special relationships to create a sense of belonging. Field School gives community, who are often the subject of research themselves (i.e. the Native American Yaqui community in Tucson), the tools to be their own researchers in that DIY citizen movement of participatory democracy that transforms social landscape.

St. Claude Main Street is a community and economic development organization focused on St. Claude Avenue in New Orleans' 8th and 9th Wards. It was one of the early urban Main Street projects focused on a particular neighborhood within a larger metropolitan

area. St. Claude Avenue is a traditionally African American business thoroughfare that fell into disuse over the past several decades. Currently it is a dividing line between a rapidly gentrifying area spearheaded by white artists after Katrina because of its historical nature and inexpensive real estate, and predominantly poor and working class African American neighborhoods that have fallen into severe disrepair, particularly after the storm.

St. Claude Main Street was recently awarded a \$275,000 grant from ArtPlace to support and promote the burgeoning St. Claude-area arts community. The grant has four components: 1) to help the St. Claude-area arts organizations and artists build organizational and personal capacity; 2) to develop community engagement programming that will allow for a deeper dialogue between the arts community and the local community at-large; 3) to promote the St. Claude arts community in order for local artists prosper and more effectively reach the wider, global art world; and 4) to build parkettes on St. Claude Avenue where community organizations collaborate with property owners, the municipality, and residents to build small, public greenspaces along commercial corridors. In addition, the arts participants in the programs, who are predominately white, are receiving intensive, anti-racist training.

Analysis and critique

What are some of the problems associated with Creative Placemaking?

So over the past several years, a lot of money has been expended on Creative Placemaking in a short amount of time, although many would argue it is a drop in the bucket compared to the investment that is needed to do it right. However, typically this capital is for start-up or immediate transformation and there is no long-term investment. There is not a clear focus on capacity or on sustainability. The St. Claude Main Street does not have the resources to retain the two full-time staff members they hired thanks to the ArtPlace funding after the one year grant period is over.

Alongside the new resources and opportunities for creative placemaking is the demand to substantiate return on investment. Is it reasonable to expect that a modest, one-year Our Town grant will make lasting and profound change? What are the evaluation measures? One-size fits all indicators prove inadequate. In addition, there are no current measures to really address the causal relationships between creative placemaking and the outcomes that many say it causes – public safety, quality of life, jobs, environmental rehabilitation, to name a few.

Some believe the vibrancy outcomes are focused on consumption, land use intensification and real estate. The artists are the catalysts, but there is no long-term strategy for developing and preserving artists, disciplines, and the production function in places targeted for “improvement.”

The emphasis on economic development is difficult. The effect of the arts is more like the weather than economics – the system is so complex that it is difficult to determine causality

between an input and an output. The focus maybe shouldn't be primarily on economic development and increased tourism, but rather on increased social capital and increased sense of place, but try and sell that to most public officials.

Then there is the issue of gentrification. People want to see neighborhoods and places get "better" but the definition of "better" is often circumscribed by certain sets of prejudices that make it nearly impossible to actually make large institutions responsive to communities. Displacement of poor and working class residents, artists and entrepreneurs is a real and ever present danger. But maybe most disturbing is the loss of history and tradition that accompany gentrification.

Is this notion of creative placemaking less about community-building and more about funders brand building? The pressure to demonstrate public "value" can lead down the path of social intervention and redevelopment. There can be a perceived "social practice" that can either be missionary, a white knight activity or even be seen as social experimentation on very real, very rooted and vital communities. Can communities, neighborhoods and small towns serve as Petri dishes?

Finally there is the notion of belonging. I take almost all of the thinking about this issue from writings and presentations by Roberto Bedoya, director of the Tucson/Pima Arts Council.

Creative placemaking practices place an emphasis on the built environment. But before you can have places of belonging, you must feel that you belong. Before there is the vibrant street, one needs an understanding of the social dynamics on that street. A troubling tenor of the creative placemaking discourse is the avoidance of addressing social and racial injustices at work in society and how they intersect with these efforts. One only needs to reflect in the history of the US and its troubling legacy of placemaking as manifested in acts of displacement, removal and containment – the forced movement of American Indians, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the internment of Japanese Americans during WWII, and the urban renewal movement in the 60's and 70's that destroyed working poor and ethnic neighborhoods across American cities.

Placemaking can enact identity and activity that allows personal memories, cultural histories, imagination, and feelings to enliven the sense of belonging through human and spatial relationships. If Creative Placemaking activities support the politics of dis-belonging through acts of gentrification, discrimination, real estate speculation, all the in the name of neighborhood revitalization, then it betrays the democratic ideal of having an equitable and just civil society.

Creative Placemaking activities need to be mindful of what is authentic. Authenticity invokes belonging. Creative placemaking cannot just be a development strategy but should be a series of actions that build spatial justice, healthy communities and sites of imagination.

Discussion

So I would like us to have a conversation with the time left. I want to start it by asking you to respond to several questions.

- What is the relevance of Creative Placemaking to your work and your region, particularly in light of NM's rural make-up?
- Where does it resonate for you and where do you feel left out of the conversation?
- What are issues that you are facing that are not covered by current thinking about Creative Placemaking?

Bibliography

This presentation borrowed heavily from many sources. The following is the list of articles and websites that were used as source material for the paper.

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