

CULTURAL GLUE: THE SECRET TO MAKING GREAT PLACES

text

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[PUBLIC]

The public realm – the streets, parks and open spaces of our cities – provides us with the physical space to move, to make connections and to build relationships. Psychologically it supports the development of a city's identity and can influence the way that we feel in our day-to-day lives. Cities with a rich and layered public realm distinguished by beauty, activity, safety and diversity are greatly admired and aspired to. For the others, the struggle to realise an authentic public realm has become central to city planning efforts. Unfortunately, like most design problems, the subjective quality of the task ensures that there are as many approaches put forth as there are parks and open spaces.

Place making, both an ancient endeavour and an emerging profession, supports authentic responses to place-based issues and opportunities; its practices and processes are being developed in the field by practitioners rather than in academia. It has its roots in the work of Jane Jacobs and William H Whyte who, in the 1960s, provided some of the earliest critical analysis of the quality of public space, not just in terms of design but in relationship to its surroundings and users. What made their work innovative was the import they placed on the creation and maintenance of vibrant neighbourhoods and public spaces that encouraged people to use them.

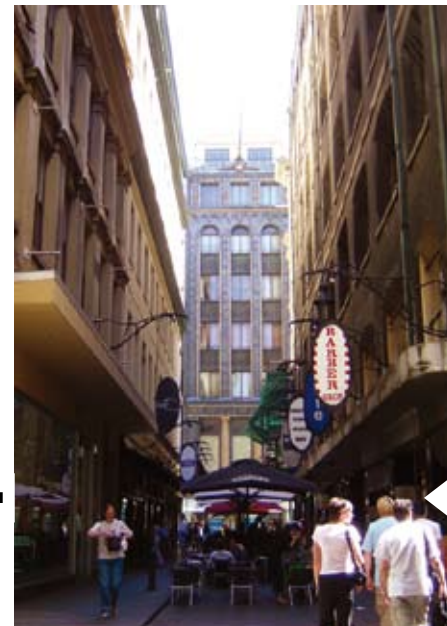
Cities need public spaces, they also need those places to work – that is, to attract people. Popular public spaces are easy to define: they are convenient to get to, attractive, safe and appear friendly. They are also active for most of the time. Their value to the city is clear. They help define its identity, can benefit the city economically as a business and tourist attractor, reduce



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environmental effects and provide settings for cultural activities. We are surrounded, however, by places that aren't working well. As Whyte said, "It is difficult to design a space that will not attract people. What is remarkable is how often this has been accomplished."¹

Place making emerged as a response to the acknowledgment of these poorly designed and managed public spaces. Places that were unattractive, uninviting and, at their worst, dangerous. Project for Public Spaces (PPS), a New York place making practice, was founded in 1975 and its first project, advising the Real Estate Marketing Department of Rockefeller Centre on how to improve the centre's public spaces, was done in return for free office space. This seminal place making project changed the perception of the value of attracting people to open spaces



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and was the catalyst for Rockefeller's 30-year evolution into the US's symbolic heart.

So what is place making and how does it fit with the traditional built environment professions? Urban designers will look at the principles contained in Allan Jacobs' *Great Streets*, of nodes, enclosure and vistas; planners will look to land use zoning to deliver mixed-use precincts; architects will deliver exciting forms and surfaces to create diversity and beauty; social planners will integrate community uses... and yet public places still fail.

The principal difference between place making and these professions is that the physical attributes of the place, while important to creating the identity or personality of a place, are not considered the critical measurement of success in its own right. Place making is not just design, it

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One of Village Well's earlier place making projects, Desgraves Lane in Melbourne, before (1.) and after (2.) place making principles were applied.

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The Rockefeller Centre in New York, before (3.) and after (4.) the place making treatment. This early work by Project for Public Spaces was the catalyst for the Centre becoming the symbolic heart of the United States, and also represented the birth of the place making approach to urban design.



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– William H Whyte

is about building active relationships between the physical environment, the land use or retail mix, the people, programming, marketing, governance and the natural world. It is a strategic approach to a collaborative system of relationships, triple top line² thinking that integrates the social, environmental and the economic to deliver environments that nurture their natural assets, inspire and welcome their communities and strengthen local economies. It is the cultural glue that provides an authentic foundation for any project, the mechanism that allows the visions of all the contributing professionals on a project to become unified through a common vision of the unique culture of each place. Place making draws together community engagement, urban design, local economic development and cultural planning into an inspirational framework that stewards the development process. It is an approach to the development of communities and the public realm that responds to the effects of global trends on the local in a way that reflects the needs and aspirations of the community and the unique story of the location.

A place making vision, known as the 'place essence' guides not only the macro, but also the micro. It can help determine the overall feel and look of a place while providing a practical checkpoint for a range of detailed decisions ranging from street furniture to community activities and the appropriate retail mix. This is place making's strength and one that has been used widely on both small and large retail, residential and commercial projects around Australia and New Zealand. This upfront visioning process builds a strong platform for collaboration with clear guiding principles born out of an understanding of the unique qualities of the



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location, its people, environment and history. It is equally as relevant for greenfield sites as it is for revitalisation projects, for retail, commercial or residential. And while it is a powerful upfront framework for project delivery, place making is also a powerful tool to support change, growth, community development and retail revitalisation in existing places.

Most recently my employer, Melbourne Place Makers Village Well, has been leading the revitalisation of the Dubai Creek city centre in Dubai, UAE; not only testing the flexibility of our place making model, but also engaging in the first community consultation to ever be conducted in that country. The 36-hectare development, nestled alongside both sides of the river leading from the Arabian Gulf to Al Maktoum Bridge, presented the developers with the unique opportunity to work with the community to deliver a development that is driven by a desire to revitalise the culture of the city through an understanding of the history of the Creek and its people.

Commissioned by Sama Dubai, a subsidiary of Dubai Holdings, the Village Well team lived on-site for three months, getting to know the area intimately – its culture, local economies, people, climate and environment. The resultant place making strategy built on the client's project drivers to preserve heritage, promote creativity and foster diversity, and challenged the concept master plan's ability to deliver these intentions. The strategy has defined the place essences, the place making principles, key roles and functions, future audiences and guiding recommendations for the five distinct precincts. Importantly, it brings together Village Well's five Ps of place making: planet, place, product, program and people, allowing an integrated approach to design, leasing, environmental and marketing strategies. The work has spurred the developers to investigate alternative solutions for the project as a whole and in its components, inspiring innovation and creativity in the team as they respond to the identified challenges.

For a project still in the master planning stage, the research and recommendations have already delivered great benefits. The uncovering of plans of the earlier town layout in Al Shindagha, and their subsequent analysis, revealed the historic tradition of passive solar design at the urban scale, wind management and its exploitation as a cooling device. The Village Well environmental recommendations provided clear grounds for the integration of both passive and active environmental systems as an authentic response to the cultural heritage of the place, a great story for the marketing team and a cost saving for operations. In addition, mapping of current movement paths, remnant vegetation and cultural artefacts have all now been taken into account and integrated into the master plan.

At a corporate level, the strong place story has built the company's reputation as leaders in the city centre's revitalisation. Marketing recommendations have been enthusiastically embraced at all levels of government and are providing a benchmark for the de-branding of city sites. Perhaps one of the most important successes of the project to date, in light of the community's overwhelming connection to the authentic heritage of this place, is the potential for the area to again become known by its Arabic name 'Al Khor', a move away from modern Dubai's obsession with the grandiose and a vital link to the rich culture and history of the place.

From a social point of view, the project presented the community in Dubai with one of the first opportunities to engage in a major revitalisation project, one affecting significant areas of the public realm with strong cultural and historic associations. This groundbreaking aspect of the project enabled the team to build on what was a very poor foundation in terms of available social research and for the project team to respond to the community's needs and aspirations in the master plan. Sama Dubai has now also committed to a social impact assessment.

The next stage of the project will see Village Well producing a detailed place making overlay for the reconsidered vision master plan, looking at the public realm across the site and providing multidisciplinary briefs that will guide the work of the architects and landscape architects. The overlays will incorporate recommendations for the design, retail mix, programming, sustainable initiatives and community development activities that will activate the place essence in each location, creating a series of unique and authentic places along the water's edge.

In a city where new developments have people holding their breaths waiting to see what crazy project is up next, the place making approach to the Dubai Creek revitalisation should bring a big sigh of relief. ar

footnotes

1. WH Whyte, *Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, Washington DC, The Conservation Foundation, 1980.
2. William McDonough and Michael Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*, North Point Press, 2002.