

Place Making: An Australian Perspective

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Abstract

Place Partners is an Australian place making consultancy that employs an interdisciplinary approach to the creation and revitalisation of great people places. Through their experience in place making around the world they seek to identify what makes a place attractive to the people who use it and to use these learnings to create places that people love to be in.

Place Making: An Australian Perspective

Place Partners is a dedicated place making consultancy based in Sydney, Australia with an interdisciplinary approach to the creation and revitalisation of great people places. This collaborative approach is founded on the belief that the best public spaces are a living system of mutually dependent activities that rely on strong working relationships between design, development, retail, marketing and social planning to deliver a whole that is more than the sum of its parts.

Place Partners facilitates this process, shaping the vision for the desired character through clear principles and activation strategies that respond to the community's needs and aspirations.

What is place and why do we want to make it?

Place is defined as a location that has meaning for the people who use it, it has a unique character that reflects the needs and aspirations of the community and the narrative of the site's history. Identifying place character is the key to our work, revealing its genius loci, the spirit of a particular location to discover what makes it a 'place'.

Place activation is defined as planning for diverse human activity in a place. When planning new places, the focus of place activation is on ensuring that the needs of all potential users are met. This will provide for the natural, organic and sustainable use of places by people as part of their daily life. In turn having a place full of people will attract more people.

Place activation can often be misunderstood as being place making. People put on events and attract people but they need to be the right events to be sustainable. In developing new places it is about making spaces for the types of activities that people will want to participate in whether sitting, people watching, window shopping

or attending a festival. In existing places we are interested in naturally occurring activity and how it can be supported and grown. Place activation is about self sustaining activity that does not need to be resourced, managing the risk of places that do not attract people organically and building a network of destinations and activities that relate to one another.

Our approach to place making

We have tried to make our approach and processes as simple as we can, in order to provide a clear foundation for each project whilst taking into account specific individual complexities. We started with defining what place making is as a profession. We considered academic and professional definitions to find the following commonalities that we have adopted as our approach.

Place Making must:

- Respond to the essential character of the place
- Be meaningful to people; emotionally and spiritually
- Involve people in the place's production
- Be attractive to people; physically and intellectually
- Provide a choice of experiences
- Be sustainable economically and environmentally

We use a number of different methods to support a strategic approach to place making. One example is diurnal mapping, which is used to consider how a particular user group will participate in the life of a place. We look at what days and times they are most likely to be in the public realm and what kinds of activities are needed to attract and retain them.

Through our work we have come to the conclusion that sustainable places are a complex system of interdependent parts, a civic ecosystem that relies on a quadruple top line strategic approach considering the relationship between the social, economic, environmental and cultural aspects of a place.

Using this approach we have begun to identify the criteria that makes places attractive to people. Being Australian, we started with what people like best in our country – the beach. Identifying the aspects and characteristics of the beach that are most attractive to people provided the framework for the first set of general criteria that we could use to consider the attractiveness of a place anywhere.

This research has been extended to create our SEEC tool that we use for both assessing an existing place or master plan as well as a tool for developing place making strategies. The SEEC tool works within the Social, Environmental, Economic and Cultural frames to identify, observe and assess specific characteristics of a place.

Our place making consultancy has a broad range of experience in different scales, from parks and small retail centres to major developments and city wide place making projects. In 2009 Place Partners was engaged to develop the Al Ain City Place Making overlay. Al Ain is an oasis city on the border with Oman in Abu Dhabi Emirate. The following key learnings were found from our work on the Al Ain City Image Management Strategy.

For this project the Place Partners team lived in Al Ain for just under 6 weeks. Our first task was to learn as much about the city and its evolution as possible, we learnt about its ancient and modern history and how it has come to its current state.

We undertook extensive site visits as part of our place audit, visiting every urban district. The purpose here was to understand the relationship between the people of Al Ain and their place through observational research.

The third component of the research was talking to the community to uncover how they felt about the city. We achieved this through an on-line and face to face survey, focus groups and one on one interviews that confirmed or challenged our first impressions.

Al Ain's identity today is closely connected to its history. It is considered a traditional place that is highly valued by both locals and visitors. However, the people are also open to change. They desire to find a way to be modern that is not western, that protects the authentic culture of the city with its active and working oases, but provides them with the amenity of a contemporary city.

Sustainability here is not so much a financial concern, and strangely even with the incredible amount of resources used, not an environmental issue either. What our findings revealed is that the highest risk was to the social and cultural fabric of the city, impacted by modern development and outside influences.

An example of this is the changes in housing typology from shabia housing which was developed to meet the needs of tribal relationships and extended families. The Government, influenced by western ideals is moving Emiratis into villa style housing with the house situated in the centre of a large enclosed walled block. This has resulted in a number of negative impacts. Firstly, the neighbourhoods are no longer walkable, which is having an impact on health and community cohesion. There is a lack of street socialisation and incidental meetings. Tribal groups are no longer able to live together and families can no longer walk to the mosque – an important socialisation ritual in their culture. This was identified as the key issues affecting the people of Al Ain. Our findings and recommendations formed the foundation for the Al Ain City Image Management Strategy, a holistic approach to balancing the needs of all stakeholders, local heritage and future aspirations for the city.

Closer to home we have been working in Newcastle, a regional city in New South Wales, Australia. As Australia's second oldest city is was once a rich and thriving working port with steel works, coal mining and manufacturing to supporting its retail heart. Over the last 50 years however it has suffered from the effects of closing industry, competitive mall shopping centre retail, decentralisation of retail and services, transportation changes and significant environmental challenges.

Over the last two years we have worked on a number of projects with the City of Newcastle Council who have wholeheartedly embraced a place making approach. One of the key projects was developing the Hunter Street Revitalisation Strategy for the 3km long main street in its central business district. We conducted a detailed Place Audit of the street in order to identify existing places that held meaning to the community and were currently attractive to people. These places provided the opportunity to be catalyst places for local investment in revitalisation and subsequent activation.

We developed a variety of 'quick win' strategies designed to improve Hunter Street in terms of its amenity, character, variety of activity and economic vitality. Each project proposal aims to be low cost and quickly achievable but also to have significant and measurable benefits.

The Place Audit revealed two key findings about Hunter Street. Firstly, we discovered that there is an active movement economy, between the major retail attractors at various locations along the street, some a fair distance from each other. This

presented an opportunity to develop strategies to activate the pedestrian paths between them, where people already were. Identifying existing movement paths is a great opportunity to build in existing street life and the current use of a place.

The second finding was the discovery of bus stops along the street as activity generators. Passing pedestrian traffic from bus use was able to support some successful economic clusters in an otherwise decaying and vacant street. These two findings provided a clear basis for a series of proposed place based catalyst projects that were low in investment dollars but provided a clear opportunity to support existing businesses and build from the existing strengths of the city rather than starting anew.

This has been a very brief summary of our approach to creating sustainable communities. A place making approach needs to be flexible enough to meet the often very different needs of different places and their communities. Place Partners has found that the strategies that deliver sustainable communities are more often than not, as unique as the place itself.