

The Essentials of Placemaking

Session report

Description

This session held in Amsterdam kicked-off the Cities in Placemaking programme, and consisted of a three-day peer-to-peer learning experience to provide a comprehensive introduction to placemaking, its application in the context of urban governance, and its implications for long-term systemic change. It was also an opportunity to get to know each other as a team, and align expectations towards the long-term.

Organising Partners

Placemaking Europe, Creative Bureaucracy Festival, International Society for Urban Health, Intercultural Cities by Council of Europe

Participant cities

Bergen (NO), Bradford (UK), Cork (IE), Helsingborg (SE), Helsinki (FI), Kavala (EL), Reggio nell'Emilia (IT), Rotterdam (NL), The Hague (NL), Trencin (SK), Vila Nova de Famalicão (PT), Vinnytsia (UA), Wrocław (PL).

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Resources:

[Booklet of Partner Cities](#)

[Programme and Presentations of the Event](#)

Why Cities in Placemaking?

What is “Cities in Placemaking”?

Cities in Placemaking is a continuous peer-to-peer learning programme for municipal public administrations, organised and led by Placemaking Europe, in collaboration with the Creative Bureaucracy Festival, International Society for Urban Health, and the Intercultural Cities Programme of the Council of Europe. The programme aims to build awareness and practical knowledge on placemaking; a comprehensive, flexible, hands-on approach for creating healthy, inclusive and lovable communities around places. With communities at its core, placemaking is well equipped to address the complex challenges that European cities face today, like climate adaptation, intercultural integration, social inequality, and many more. Through the programme, we will develop a roadmap to implementing placemaking as a city-wide strategy, equipping cities with the capacities to lead long-lasting systemic change.

Why are we bringing cities together?

Placemaking is a movement and approach that has emerged from the bottom-up, through the work of grass-roots and community organisations, and place-activists around the world, but these efforts can only lead to sustainable and long-term change if they are supported by decision-makers and local governments. In the last decade, the placemaking approach has gained ground in public administrations, being progressively integrated into processes of local urban development and planning. Through our launch event, we saw how different cities are using placemaking to improve the quality of life of their communities. For example, some cities leverage a placemaking approach by involving the local communities in their projects, or by using tactical interventions to test new activities or to revitalise public spaces. But what does it mean to *fully* embrace placemaking as an approach to future development from within a municipal public administration?

Currently, there is no common framework of reference to define placemaking from this perspective, nor to guide the strategic implementation of this approach to city-wide governance processes. This is why we have formulated the Cities in Placemaking. Cities in Placemaking aims to achieve this by bringing together diverse knowledge perspectives and practical experiences into an environment of mutual learning to share challenges and find common strategies. Through a collaborative effort, we aim to achieve a comprehensive and well-rounded learning experience that can be used for practical implementation of placemaking at a city-wide level.

Places and Placemaking

From Spaces to Places

Great places are spaces of collective use (whether public or private) where all people feel welcome and that create a sense of belonging. They promote health, trust, inclusion and the well-being of the community. Great places are created through human experience, they are spaces that people have made meaningful or have become attached to in some way (Crosswell, 2004). Great places feel like home– they provide a feeling of intimacy where you can feel comfortable to, for example, take off your shoes and to be affectionate. They measure success as how well they are about providing people with a feeling of warmth and

happiness, not simply on how many people pass through the space. With placemaking, we look instead at how many groups gather somewhere, and more importantly how much they enjoy being there. In his book, [City at The Eye Level](#), [Hans Karssenber](#), founding partner at [STIPO](#), and board member of Placemaking Europe, provides us with 5 key-lessons for making great places from the book [City at The Eye Level](#):

1. Public spaces are the backbone for urban development, they stay longer than buildings. If they are well set and thought-through, they have the power to create and regenerate urban areas over time. However, even if they are not well thought-through, they will still stay there for long, so better invest in them and think them through from the beginning.
2. Great public space is 3D. The ground floor determines 80% of the street experience - it includes not only the streets, but also the plinths and facades of buildings.
3. Consider the Maslow Hierarchy of needs: spaces fulfil only basic needs, but great places fulfil the psychological and self-actualisation needs too: social, fun, creative, inspiring.
4. Public space is not only the infrastructure or the physical space (hardware), it includes the social use and activities (software), and ownership and management of place (orgware).
5. Great public spaces should be incomplete, open to co-creation/co-production, and progressive development.

What is Placemaking

Placemaking is a place-led approach for creating healthy, inclusive, and lovable communities. This hands-on approach inspires people to collectively reimagine and reinvent public spaces as the heart of every community, and facilitates creative patterns of use with particular attention to the physical, cultural, and social identities that define a place and support its ongoing evolution. Placemaking pays close attention to the myriad ways in which the physical, social, ecological, cultural, and even spiritual qualities of a place are intimately intertwined ([PPS](#)). Placemaking combines top-down planning with bottom-up initiatives and people's empowerment into a democratic and inclusive 'middle-up-down' approach that brings municipalities outside their offices to meet and engage with residents in person.

[Hans Karssenber](#): [The secret of great places](#)

[Additional resources](#)

Strategies with placemaking at their heart

A placemaking approach often challenges traditional processes of city administrations. From the way we engage with citizens, collaborate with colleagues or partners, to how we monitor the process and measure success, embracing placemaking requires a different approach.

[Ramon Marrades](#), director of Placemaking Europe, summarised 10 key findings to consider when setting a placemaking strategy:

1. From tactical to strategic: Placemaking is NOT linear, it is an iterative process.
2. 3D's: Through placemaking, bring together Data, Demands, and Dreams to address people's needs but also to fulfil their dreams and aspirations.
3. The city for whom?: Always ask "who is missing?" and "for whom is the city?"
4. Make change visible: To build support and gain momentum, showcase how you are instantly improving the public spaces through placemaking.

5. Join wider alliances: Placemaking emerges for different reasons (e.g. political, social, environmental) and across different sectors. Look at other organisations with the same aspiration - you are not alone (e.g. the New European Bauhaus, the 15-minute city).
6. Create conditions for good things to happen: As policymakers, it is onto us to create conditions that support citizen- and place-led initiatives and enable them to flourish.
7. Infiltrate your organisations, innovate from inside: actively seek opportunities to drive positive change and to introduce new and innovative ideas from within.
8. Reconcile centrality and proximity: Balancing centrality and proximity is crucial for creating sustainable and equitable places and enhancing the livability of urban spaces.
9. An engagement strategy is a development strategy: Development strategies that prioritise engagement lead to more responsive outcomes that benefit everyone.
10. Locals first, visitors will follow: Prioritising the needs of local residents is crucial for creating vibrant and authentic places that will be attractive also for visitors.

[Ramon Marrades: Theoretical approaches to Placemaking](#)

Placemaking in the practice: Process and Tools

An inclusive process with the community

Throughout the various sessions that occurred during the event, we saw diverse approaches to how to organise a placemaking project. As placemaking is a flexible approach, the specific steps may vary to respond to specific contexts, but overall, it is an inclusive and iterative process set with a strategic vision, and is tactical in its application (based on [PPS](#)):

1. Define Place and Identify the Community.
2. Evaluate Space and Identify Issues
3. Set a Shared Place Vision
4. Short Term Experiments
5. Ongoing Reevaluation and Long-term Improvements

[Vivian Doumpa](#) (STIPO, Placemaking Europe) emphasised the importance of identifying and involving the community, which determines the communication, outcome, impact and sustainability of the process. This requires that we understand their characteristics, needs, desires, potential and challenges. In this process, it is important to be empathetic, considering not only what people say, but also observing what they do and how they feel, to better understand their thoughts. And to involve not only those who hold political, financial, social or cultural stakes, but also all whose 'just daily-lives' are impacted by the project.

[Vivian Doumpa: Engage your community](#)

Tools for Placemaking

In placemaking, the community is the expert. So, for a project to succeed, we must move from designing **for them** to designing **with them**. But, how can we create better cities together? how to engage the community? or start a co-creative process? Placemaking is not a one-size fits-all solution. The answers will depend on factors like the local context, project objectives, stakeholders involved, or budget available. However, we do not have to start from scratch. With our community, we have put together a [toolbox](#) with a selection of practical and useful tools to inspire you in creating your tailored process with a placemaking approach,

considering the why, what, when, who and how of your project. Here you can find a selection of tools that we shared during the event to get you started:

- [Place Game](#): A simple, flexible, and effective tool to improve the sense of place and involvement in the community.
- [15' City Mapping](#): Apply the 15'-city to address neighbourhoods' quality of life in the everyday. A co-design tool to invite citizens to be active and analytic
- [The Spiel Mobile](#): a playful approach to participation and setting semi-permanent objectives through inclusive recreational actions in public space.
- [Street Art](#) (Tunnel Tool): Transform unsafe spaces that lack 'into colourful and compelling works of art.
- [Pop-Up Cafe](#): an easy and fun way to engage with your local community, bring life onto the streets with a temporary activity to address social cohesion.
- [Plant and Seed Swap Market](#): explore sharing economy and increase social cohesion in the neighbourhood. A tool for great impact in reaching out to people.

[Lisette van Rhijn and Milena Ivković: Placemaking tools](#)

Layers of Placemaking

Placemaking is a flexible and comprehensive approach that can be tailored to address diverse and complex urban challenges in many fields, some examples include:

Innovation of Public Administration: Charles Landry ([Creative Bureaucracy Festival](#))

[Charles](#) talked about the importance of creativity in the context of public sector innovation. Based on the idea of [Creative City](#) developed through his books, Charles proposed that as there is artistic, social or business creativity, there is a bureaucratic creativity, necessary to deal with the challenges of cities that need an integrative approach. 'Creative bureaucracy' may sound like an oxymoron, with bureaucracy focusing on fixed rules and creativity on dynamism. But for Charles embracing creativity in the public sector means accepting that changes are inevitable, and that it is better to address them with a positive attitude to change things, than to conform with bureaucracy being a barrier. Through placemaking, the neighbourhood becomes a powerful scale of work capable of generating multiple 'sparks' simultaneously to build to a critical mass that can enable systemic change.

Urban Health: Giselle Sebag and Lia Brum ([International Society for Urban Health](#))

[Giselle](#) and [Lia](#) presented three main determinants of urban health: Genetics, Behaviour, and Environment. While cities cannot do much about the first; luckily, genetics is also the factor with the least impact. The other two are closely related to one another, as the way our environment is designed enables or hinders behaviours that can be positive or negative for health. Place matters so much that place of residence is a better predictor of urban health than even income. This is further enhanced by the way social issues like segregation, exclusion and inequality express spatially, creating uneven living conditions across the city. Fortunately, placemaking is well equipped to address these issues, in fact, major practical contributions to urban health have been made not by medics, or scientists in the medicine field, but by activists, leaders, and even real-estate developers who often create the conditions in the built-environment and promote healthier lifestyles in the population.

[Giselle Sebag: Placemaking for Urban Health](#)

Interculturality: Ivana d'Alessandro (Intercultural Cities Programme)

Ivana walked us through her experience as a citizen in four European cities, her struggles in establishing meaningful connections to the place and society, and how public spaces and the cultural norms that they express influenced her experiences of place. First, from Napoli, Italy, she reflected on how the environment, built and natural, shapes cultural identity, but also how bad public spaces can inhibit this relationship. From Paris and Strasbourg, France, she reflected on how the socio-cultural norms can restrict spontaneous use of the space, hindering authentic appropriation of place. Finally, in Madrid, Spain, she described how pedestrian streets, in a country where people spend much more time on the streets, made her experience as a young woman better, by feeling safer in public spaces. Today, migration and diversity in European cities are a big challenge for Cities, where public spaces can play a pivotal role in integrating diverse communities, and forging shared identities.

Active Recreation: Laska Nenova (Placemaking Europe, BG Be Active)

[Laska](#) shared her experience with placemaking as a vehicle to create healthier communities through active recreation. Sedentarism is one of the greatest diseases of our time, killing more people than smoking. Through creating conditions and encouraging physical activity in public space, placemaking can help address many non-communicable diseases. Laska identified that in Bulgaria, despite millions in investment addressed to events for physical activity, inactivity kept growing. Through her work, Laska demonstrates that it is easy to be physically active, and that public space can be the playground for an active lifestyle.

[Laska Nenova: Placemaking for Active Recreation](#)

Policy Recommendations in [Placemaking for Active Recreation kit](#)

Urban Regeneration: Levente Polyak (Placemaking Europe, Eutropian)

For [Levente](#), the potential of placemaking in urban regeneration lies in its capacity to connect people, stakeholders, and to build coalitions around places. When done horizontally, it can enhance democracy and participation. In projects for urban regeneration, we have to look at the vulnerable, but also at the opportunities presented by the different activities and players involved in the use of these areas. By creating places together, many synergies can arise and social cohesion is enhanced. Placemaking is about social innovation, creating spaces for new constellations of stakeholders to connect, and setting the ground for new institutions to emerge. But also by introducing new uses to the space, creating opportunities for the development of new skills and capacities, that can later lead to creating workplaces.

[Levente Polyak: Placemaking for Urban Regeneration](#)

Governance for happier cities: Fredrik Lindstal (Placemaking Europe, Glad Stad)

As former Deputy Mayor in Stockholm, Fredrik presented his vision of placemaking and its importance from a public governance perspective. For him, it is important to keep projects simple, focusing on the *place* - the space and its people, and the social interactions that take place there. He highlighted the importance of being present and connecting with the citizens. Placemaking is in essence '*showing up*' to the place, and interacting with the community to understand in the process who is being involved and who is not, and how the relationship with the community evolves over time. Successful engagement then results in relationships that extend to the long-term, and a commitment to care and maintain these places over time.

[Fredrik Lindstal: Placemaking for Happier Cities](#)

Current State of Placemaking in Participant Cities

Teams and Organisation

What is the state of placemaking in municipal organisations and work teams? Throughout the event, we identified that cities sit in very diverse stages in regard to placemaking within their organisations. In general, most participants work in Urban Planning / Development / Design offices, with placemaking seen as an approach to be integrated to the current planning and management processes. Other participants come from areas related to social development, culture and leisure, sustainability, city strategy, or ad-hoc projects (e.g. [Trencin 2026](#), Dokken 2025). Among the particular cases, the City of Cork has set up a team dedicated to placemaking, working on projects in diverse themes. Other cities are just beginning a process to set up placemaking within their organisation and procedures.

Policy and Processes

How is placemaking currently embedded in processes and policy across the participant cities? Placemaking can be found as a key lever of development in some strategic urban policies in many different ways. In some cases placemaking is seen as a strategic objective, (e.g. Cork Development Plan 2022-2028). In other cases, there is a focus on community engagement for urban development, or there is a specific commitment to the creation of inclusive places through experimentation. This last trend (e.g. Helsinki) has been further explored during the period of reduced mobility due to the COVID19 crisis, with significant interest turning onto the possibilities of transforming the public space.

In terms of processes, most cities have participation procedures in place for urban planning at the high level (e.g. masterplanning), however, at the moment, few include community engagement and co-creation in more local projects of public space or for the regeneration of areas. There is also room for improvement in terms of continued involvement of communities and other stakeholders after the phase of implementation (operation and maintenance).

Stakeholder Involvement

Apart from the city administrations, what other stakeholders are being engaged in placemaking projects? While most cities demonstrate –at varying degrees of depth– an involvement of residents in their urban development processes, there has been little reference to the involvement of other private or third sector organisations. A particular case in this regard is The Hague, whose strategy includes facilitating and supporting citizen-led initiatives such as those of their [‘stadmakers’](#) (dutch: ‘citymakers’, similar to ‘placemakers’)

Entry Points for placemaking

What type of projects are most often addressed through placemaking? Government-led placemaking projects are found in different formats. In most cities, common entry points for placemaking were found in temporary interventions, seasonal or cultural events like markets and festivals, or public space experiments. In some cities, placemaking –as co-design and participation throughout the process– is also found to be integrated into more structural or long-lasting public space projects (e.g. Rotterdam: Benthemplein).

Due to the communitary nature of placemaking and the mandate of city administrations current placemaking projects tend to address almost exclusively projects of public realm, like the pedestrianisation of streets or the improvement of public areas. Placemaking is a flexible approach capable of transforming spaces, even those which are privately owned, into vibrant places of collective use (see for example: the [broedplaatsen](#) policy of the City of Amsterdam, and the case of [NDSM](#)), which requires the mobilisation and further involvement of private stakeholders, and emergence of civil place-governance organisations.

Thematic challenges

Some urban challenges that were addressed by the cities through placemaking include: urban regeneration/revitalization, water management, climate adaptation, culture & leisure, integration, equity, urban health, community-building, inclusive places, waterfronts, among others. Find all Cities' Flagship Project presentations [here](#).

Identified Common Challenges and Opportunities for Future Learning

Related to the outcomes:

- *Equity through placemaking.* Many cities look at placemaking as an approach to address socio-spatial issues of the city such as inequality of exclusion; however, there is a need to better understand how placemaking can be used strategically to create more equitable opportunities for all. This category clusters other terms or values related to equity that were mentioned during the event, such as inclusion and equality and diversity.

Related to the process and the means:

- *Governing change.* The current organisational structures and risk-averse culture of the public administrations were found to often create hurdles for placemaking projects, which require more agile decision-making, and sometimes disruptive ideas to navigate uncertain conditions and quickly benefit from iteration and feedback loops.
 - *Engagement and processes of co-creation.* While many cities have processes for community engagement in their projects, there is still a need for methods to achieve more structural involvement, and engagement of diverse groups (e.g. children, minorities, etc.) to create places that can address the needs of all.
 - *Experimentation, data, and measuring.* Placemaking can be a vehicle for innovation through experimentation of temporary and lean interventions. However, there is a need to better understand how to use placemaking tactically, while maintaining a cohesive and strategic vision, and explore how to measure results and collect data that can inform decision-making and be used to communicate the impact of the projects.
 - *Funding placemaking.* Creating better places produces benefits in various dimensions, however, these returns are often not easy to evidence, making it difficult to obtain funding for projects. There is a need to better understand how to create a 'business case' around placemaking, identifying possible sources of funding (e.g. grants, revenue, fund raising), and setting up a strategy for financing and investment.
 - *Knowledge transfer.* Cities expressed their interest in further cross-learning from peer successful stories, but there is a need for better understanding how to exchange learnings and apply successful practices from other cities into their contexts.
- *Collective action.* Scaling up placemaking and achieving long-lasting impact requires the involvement of many, including civil and private parties. Challenges were found in identifying key players, managing stakeholders, and supporting the emergence of

orgware (place-governance organisations, placemaking networks), needed for long-term sustainability and city-wide reach.

- *Integration into planning and policy.* To embed placemaking into city administrations, and as a city-wide strategy, it is necessary to identify opportunities for integration of placemaking into frequent governance instruments, often used to address the 'macro' scale, such as master / spatial planning, strategy and policy making, or other governance mechanisms as for example participatory budgeting.
- *Storytelling and obtaining buy-in.* In line with the previous themes, Cities also expressed the need to provide evidence and communicate better with colleagues in order to obtain buy-in and support. Storytelling is also necessary to engage citizens, and achieve willingness for involvement, changing the predominant government-led top-down approach for a more inclusive and democratic middle-up-down.
- *Behavioural change.* Facing complex modern urban challenges requires the collaboration of citizens, and often a change in attitudes and behaviours. This theme fundamentally underpins many lines of action in the different thematic areas below.

Thematic areas of application:

- *Climate action.* Climate change is perhaps the greatest challenge of our time. In working with communities, and with public spaces, placemaking has the potential to enable 'clean' urban growth and equip citizens with capacities for climate adaptation, and promote a more sustainable lifestyles as well as build resilient communities.
- *Urban Health.* Similarly, placemaking can contribute to improving urban health at the environmental level by creating healthier places, and at the behavioural level through promoting healthier lifestyles.
- *Mobility.* To create more sustainable cities and improve urban health, cities will need to reduce motorised transportation, and enable alternative means of mobility. What interlinkages are there between mobility and placemaking (e.g. 15-minute city), and how can the latter contribute to improving the quality of urban mobility?

Next steps and future sessions

Our next milestone is in the theme of Placemaking Challenges - during our next session, which will take place in Bergen on June 26-28, we aim to identify, understand, and systematise the main challenges and obstacles in the placemaking process, and to explore potential strategies to overcome them. We will look at these challenges on three scales:

- *Macro level - challenges of placemaking on a city-scale.* What are the entry points for placemaking? What stands in the way of placemaking entering our everyday urban lives?
- *Meso level - placemaking challenges within our organisations.* How do we build the allies we need when implementing the placemaking process? How do we ensure that we co-create these processes with residents, but also with our colleagues?
- *Micro level - case study of the city of Bergen.* What are the placemaking challenges for the city of Bergen? Which of the identified challenges are universal and applicable to other cities? What lessons can we learn from Bergen and apply to our surroundings?

The next milestone will enable us to identify and categorise the key barriers that arise during the placemaking process, propose potential strategies to address the identified challenges

and evaluate their effectiveness, and also critically assess the risks and trade-offs of placemaking in order to make informed decisions based on the analysis.

Next milestones in the programme:

1. Essentials of Placemaking ✓
- 2. Challenges of Placemaking** □
3. Organisational bottlenecks
4. How to work across departments
5. From short-term to long-term
6. From project to strategy
7. Twisting rules
8. Making placemaking systemic