

What is Community Placemaking?

“The Wauwatosa Papers #1”

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Background

The concepts and methods of *community placemaking* is quickly becoming more familiar in the practice of community development, urban design, and planning. Public and private sector practice have recognize the importance of developing community plans based on a high level of public involvement in order to create unique places of meaning. In order to avoid confusion and to clarify purpose, it may be helpful to review the existing literature to develop a shared understanding of what is meant by community placemaking.

On July 27, 2017, University of Wisconsin Professor Emeritus Steven H. Grabow and University of Wisconsin-River Falls Specialist Todd W. Johnson met in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin with the purpose to draft a formal and a working definition of community placemaking grounded in the fields of urban design, community development, and planning.

Method

Grabow and Johnson conducted a literature review that included academic foundational research in urban design, community development, and planning; trending publications that have been widely accepted as placemaking resources; as well as past and current applied research being

conducted by the University of Wisconsin-Extension's Community Vitality + Placemaking research team (CVP Team). The starting point used research-based definitions contained in Principles and Practice of Community Placemaking (Grabow, 2016). Outcomes of the literature review were organized into common themes to inform the development of draft definitions. The final outputs of the process resulted in two definitions, a *formal version* and a *layperson version*.

In addition, a proposed purpose or mission for community placemaking was developed to provide context for the definitions. Lastly, the CVP Team's definition of *community vitality* is provided to distinguish it apart from and clarify its relationship to community placemaking.

Further details about the process can be found in the Appendix.

Definition of Community Placemaking

The following definitions were developed after a thorough literature review of noted experts in the fields of urban design, community development, and placemaking.

Formal Version

People coming together to discover and express the unique and desired characteristics of their community setting.

Layperson Version

Bringing people together to make their community special.

Acknowledging the different needs of informed and layperson audiences, two definitions are provided. The first, or "Formal Version" is intended for informed audiences seeking intellectual reference point. The second, or "Layperson Version" is intended for those in which the topic of placemaking at its intertwining fields of urban design, community development, and planning maybe unfamiliar.

In the "Formal Version", the term "express" refers to both creating the form as well as carrying out the functions or process. Community setting is the context in which the form is created and the function is carried out (Small and Supple, 2001. In Hinds, 2008). Form includes the physical layout of buildings, streets, paths, parks and natural areas, as well as supporting infrastructures. Functions or processes include planning and design, evaluation, research, operating and supervising, learning, self-preservation, and leisure (Nadler, 1981).

Purpose or Mission of Community Placemaking

In addition to defining community placemaking, understanding the purpose or mission of community placemaking is equally important. After developing the two definitions for community placemaking, Grabow and Johnson attempted to place the definitions within the context of community change processes and outcomes.

Purpose or Mission

To mobilize people and create community vitality.

Mobilizing people involves building community capacity and other actions related to community development (both the development of the community and development in the community---Hinds, 2008). The development of community tries to enhance the social realm and relationships between people (Summer, 1986. In Hinds, 2008). Development in community is viewed as enhancing an existing entity with physical and tangible outcomes (Hinds, 2008). A goal of placemaking is to strengthen the relationships between people and between people and their place (Schneekloth & Robert, 1995).

Definition of Community Vitality

In 2014, the University of Wisconsin-Extension was challenged with developing a definition for community vitality to be used as a point of departure for applied research involving community change based largely on concepts of economic and community development. After a thorough literature review, the following definition was developed.

Definition

Community Vitality is defined as the community's collective capacity to respond to change with an enhanced level of participation (process or pursuit of) with aspirations for a healthy and productive community (an outcome or shared vision of success).

Shortly speaking, community vitality is the people's pursuit of a shared vision of a place, or CV=P3 (CVP Team, 2014).



Appendix: Process Artifacts & Resources

This appendix provides insight as to the process steps that led to the development of the two community placemaking definitions as well as the purpose or mission statement. These artifacts include the thought process for generating draft definitions as well as key concepts.

Pre-Existing Definitions & Concepts

- Relates to planning endeavors focused on spatial development, urban design and cityform, public realm, streetscapes and related infrastructure and the general imaging and reimaging of places. (Szold, 2000)
- The process of adding value and meaning to the public realm through community-based revitalization projects rooted in local values, history, culture and natural environment. (Zelinka and Harden, 2005)
- We see community planning as being about placemaking; that is to say that a key purpose of planning is to create, reproduce or mould the identities of places through manipulation of the activities, feelings, meanings and fabric that combine into place identity. (Hague, 2005)
- Creating a vision around the places that citizens view as important to community life and their daily experience based on community needs and aspirations. Placemaking is both an overarching idea and a hands-on tool for improving a neighborhood, city or region. It has the potential to be one of the most transformative ideas of this century. (Project for Public Spaces, 2009).
- Placemaking happens when buildings are transformed into vibrant urban spaces that offer well-being, pleasure and inspiration. Its success can be measured by improved lives, greater happiness and, when done successfully, and uplift in property values. Placemaking has many aspects, of which changes to the public realm are one of the most fundamental. Most cities devote a considerable amount of valuable land to the public realm, and many of the world's most iconic locations are public spaces. (Gehl, 2017)
- Kevin Lynch's "A Theory of Good City Form": (Lynch, 1981)
 - Sense of identity. A place as being distinctly different.
 - The ability to recognize objects is foundational for effective action. Place identity is closely linked to personal identity.
 - "The city is a vivid symbol of society's conception of itself in its setting." Identity and structure are the formal components of sense.
 - Symbolic significance can be intuitive but also illusive. This is hard stuff. Look at place and person together. It's not about physical design alone.

- Form + Familiarity
- Occasion & Place reinforce each other to create the sense of event.
- A Wisconsin Public Radio interview on January 18, 2017 with Johnson by Ferrett described the following concepts.
 - When asked about placemaking, Johnson described it as,

“When community members support, protect, enhance, and/or promote their community’s unique physical and cultural attributes for the purpose of enriching their lives.” (Johnson, T.W. 2017)
 - Ferret reframed this process and its outcomes when he titled the interview as:

“A Wisconsin effort aims to make community planning fun--and help local citizens define the things that make their communities unique.” (Ferrett, R., 2017)

Process Notes

Grabow and Johnson looked at various definitions from the literature and attempted to adapt them to a formal and working definition for use in community development practice. This section documents the thought processes that led to some recommendations for a useful definition of placemaking.

- *Relates to planning endeavors focused on spatial development, urban design and cityform. (A shorter definition provided in Grabow, 2016)*
- *The process of adding value and meaning to the public realm through community-based revitalization.*
- *Placemaking defined: Planning endeavors on spatial development, urban design and city form...and re-imagining of places.*
- *Visioning places that are important to community life and daily experience.*
- *People as they create, transform, maintain, and renovate the places in which they live.*

Core Principles of Definition

The following text documents the evolution of Grabow and Johnson’s definition of placemaking beginning with core principles.

- Placemaking (Action Implied)
 - Place = Geography + Meaning
 - Making (Planning) = Creating something new or modifying something.
 - Place identity requires people.
 - Place is defined by meaning, sentiment, and stories.

Evolution of Draft Definitions

The following is a list of draft definitions in order of evolution.

1. *“People making decisions and putting those ideas into action that help enhance, protect, and promote the unique qualities of where they live.” Johnson (WPR 2017)*
2. *People coming together (plan, ideas, decisions, actions) their community. Expressing the unique (desired and different/special) identity of your community*
3. *What makes your community special? Captures and transmits the unique physical and cultural characteristics of a community.*
4. *When people come together to express the unique and desired characteristics of the place where they live, work and play.*
5. *When people come together to express the unique and desired characteristics of their community setting.*
6. *When people come together to discover the unique and desired characteristics of their community setting in order to create something.*
7. *People discovering and expressing the unique and desired characteristics of their community setting.*
8. *People coming together to discover and express the unique and desired characteristics of their physical and cultural setting.*
9. *People coming together to discover and express the unique and desired characteristics of their community/environment/setting.*
10. ***People coming together to discover and express the unique and desired characteristics of their community setting.***
 - a. ***Bringing people together to make their community special.***

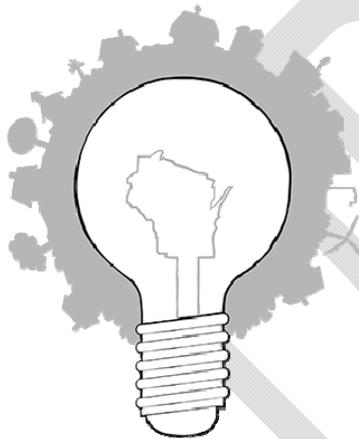
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