

Creative Placemaking

Heritage meets the creative industries

“New ideas need old buildings.” This well-known adage from urban author and visionary Jane Jacobs sums up much of the logic of creative placemaking.

Most of the work in cultural mapping and cultural planning operates at the “macro level” of community or city-wide plans. However, many of the same principles and methods of cultural planning can be applied at the level of neighbourhoods and districts. Coming from an urban planning background, the idea of placemaking as an approach to the planning, design, and management of public spaces is not new. In this context, placemaking is focused on improvements to the public realm through interventions including landscaping, urban design, public art, among others.

Creative placemaking embodies many of these ideas but with a higher cultural “quotient.” Like cultural planning, creative placemaking combines the goals and methods of community development, cultural development, and economic development with a place-based and asset-based orientation.

Success of Artscape Initiatives

The Toronto-based not-for-profit organization Artscape has developed an international reputation for its work in city building through the arts and culture-led regeneration. Seven or eight years ago, the organization was searching for fresh language to describe their work and articulated the idea of

creative placemaking. Since that time, Artscape has been a leader in advancing the thinking and practice in creative placemaking. The organization has led a series of award-winning projects, bringing together a range of community partners to develop new spaces frequently involving the adaptive re-use of significant heritage buildings and connecting them with the needs of artists and creative enterprises. Most famously, Artscape played a major role in the redevelopment of Toronto’s Distillery District.

More than a decade after its demise as a distillery, private developers purchased the former Gooderham & Worts Distillery in late 2001. Previous attempts to redevelop this national heritage site had failed to attract enough commercial artists and financing to be viable. Artscape assisted in working with the new owners to negotiate a 20-year lease, initially for just two buildings on this large, World Heritage Site comprised of a total of 47 buildings. The organization helped raise awareness within the arts community and other creative entrepreneurs to the potential of the site and within a year 440,000 square feet of space had been leased. Today, some 40 of the buildings on the site have been developed for a range of tenants including creative enterprises, retail, restaurants and bars, and the nationally-renowned Souleppper Theatre Company. More recently, Artscape led creative placemaking initiatives includ-

ing Wychwood Barns and the Regent Parks Art and Culture in two other Toronto neighbourhoods.

Other Examples Abound

While a number of these projects have been ambitious, large-scale projects involving significant capital investments in new facilities, many creative placemaking initiatives operate at a more modest, often neighbourhood scale. In the United States, numerous inspiring examples of creative placemaking have been undertaken, many in some of the country’s most challenged cities and neighbourhoods. The National Endowment for the Arts in the United States has prepared a major report entitled Creative Place-



LAUREN MILLIER, BES, MCIP RPP is a founding Partner with Millier Dickinson Blais with more than 25 years of experience in planning and economic development for public and private sector clients in Canada and internationally. Lauren can be reached at <lmillier@millierdickinsonblais.com>.



GREG BAEKER, PhD is a frequent contributor to *Municipal World* and Director of the Cultural Development Division of Millier Dickinson Blais. He is author of *Rediscovering the Wealth of Places: A Municipal Cultural Planning Handbook for Canadian Communities* (Municipal World). He can be reached at <gbaeker@millierdickinsonblais.com>.

making¹ that provides both “how-to” advice and a rich library of leading practices in that country.

One inspiring example of creative placemaking in the United States focused on the re-invention of Minneapolis’s oldest street, Hennepin Avenue, in a project led by the Hennepin Theatre Trust.² The vision for the avenue is as a walkable and unified cultural corridor. The community engagement process invited residents to participate in a cultural mapping process to identify a wide range of cultural resources in the corridor. It also invited them to envision all dimensions of a revitalized Hennepin Avenue – its sights, sounds, even its smells! The project was a partnership between the Theatre Trust, the City of Minneapolis, and several of the city’s leading cultural institutions and agencies.

Another success story in Canada is Liberty Village, located on the western edge of downtown Toronto. The district is home to one of the highest concentrations of creative cultural enterprises in Canada. The character of the area is

shaped by a wide range of abandoned manufacturing buildings providing ideal spaces for artists and small creative enterprises. Liberty Village stands as a symbol of global economic restructuring; as manufacturers moved out, the cultural economy moved in. Today, the area houses 20,000 mostly young residents and a work force of almost 8,000 largely concentrated in the cultural industries including digital media, music, and publishing. Liberty Village is also seen as a hot bed of innovation and creativity in the City of Toronto. A master plan for the district is currently being developed to help fully realize the area’s potential. A major issue in developing the master plan is that much of the area’s value is undermined by a large expanse of surface parking lots. A partnership of planning, urban design, and creative economy development firms are working

together to enhance the spatial environment integrating valued heritage buildings with vibrant public spaces to create an environment that supports and facilitates the human connections and interaction that are the catalysts for creativity and cultural development.

Conclusion

So, Jane Jacobs was right. Today we are observing a powerful synergy emerging between a city’s cultural heritage assets and a creative economy in which cultural enterprises play an increasingly important role in communities large and small.

Evidence has demonstrated that creative placemaking has resulted in a wide range of positive outcomes, including job creation, strengthening networks, and building social capital and community capacity, among others. Success requires the engagement of both local government (with its resources and planning tools) and community members through robust community engagement processes. **MW**

1 <www.nea.gov/pub/CreativePlacemaking-Paper.pdf>.

2 <www.hennepintheatrettrust.org/plan-it-hennepin>.

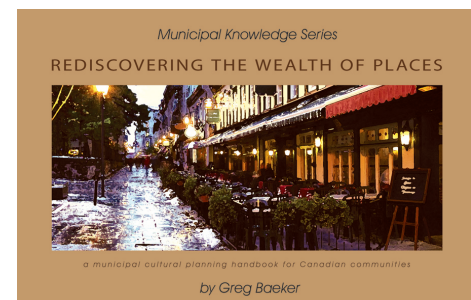
Rediscovering the Wealth of Places

by Dr. Greg Baeker

Recognizing the new economic realities facing them, a growing number of municipalities across Canada are turning to municipal cultural planning as a powerful tool to support economic development and community building. These represent municipalities of all sizes and circumstances – from large urban centres to mid-size cities to rural areas and small towns.

Rediscovering the Wealth of Places is a practical introduction to core planning concepts and tools. This includes a methodology for cultural mapping and the systematic identification of a wide range of local cultural assets. A strong focus is placed on the effective integration of culture in planning across municipal departments, and with a look at some leading practices from Canada and around the world.

This important work includes chapters from Elena Bird, David T. Brown, Susan M. Gardner, Jeannette Hanna, Gord Hume, Colin Mercer, Jennifer Keesmaat, Mark Kuznicki, and Kevin Stolarick.



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