

What is “Creative Placemaking”?



The term “creative placemaking” is used commonly in community development and city/urban planning. But what does it really mean? How will you know it when you see it?

Creative Placemaking is generally understood as the **use of arts and culture** by **diverse partners** to strategically **shape** the physical and social character of **a place** in order **to spur** economic development, **promote** enduring social change **and improve** the physical environment.¹

1. Use of arts and culture.

This could involve a painter, musician, sculptor, historian, architect – or any other expression of “arts and culture”. The project could be many things including a mural, a street carnival, busker musicians on a street corner, or a public art sculpture about the place’s history. Artists are involved in the planning, execution and activity.

2. Diverse partners.

Contributors to projects might include neighborhood residents, businesses, non-profits, churches, government agencies, etc. Diverse partners who invest time, talent and/or financial support will strengthen the project and take greater ownership in its maintenance and stewardship long-term.

3. Shape a place.

The combination of arts, culture, and diverse partners can convert an under-utilized place and make it something useful, safe, beautiful and vibrant.

4. To spur, promote and improve.

Whether the project is big or small, low-budget or very expensive, successful creative placemaking projects attract people. People want to be near other people. Places that attract people also attract new business, housing, schools and other amenities. This becomes the catalyst for other improvements.

How will you know it when you see it?

Some examples of creative placemaking are:

- an abandoned building becomes artist studios and gallery space
- an abandoned parking lot becomes an inner-city soccer field, basketball court and outdoor drive-in movie venue
- an overgrown park becomes a place for little-lending-libraries, garden clubs, chess games, live music and public art

For more information, see the attached articles:

“Principles of Creative Placemaking” by ArtPlace America

“Creative Placemaking Questions by The Kresge Foundation”

“Placemaking and vibrancy: a few thoughts” by Big Car Executive Director Jim Walker

¹ Markusen, Ann and Anne Gadwa. 2010. *Creative Placemaking*. National Endowment for the Arts. Washington, D.C., Nowak, Jeremy. 2007. *The Power of Placemaking: A Summary of Creativity and Neighborhood Development Strategies for Community Investing*. The Reinvestment Fund. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Principles of Creative Placemaking by [ArtPlace America](#)

Successful creative placemaking...

...places artists and art at the center of planning, execution and activity.

...leverages the creative potential already present in a place. All places have creative potential just waiting to bubble up. Even while drawing on resources from beyond the community, leveraging local artistic and organizational talent and assets increases the value in a community and the commitment to it, while nurturing an enduring sense of place.

...creates opportunities for people of all income levels and backgrounds to thrive in place. As its value increases, a place that is intentionally inclusive and connected is more likely to spur economic opportunity and allow people to succeed where they are.

...supports economic diversity in the community, providing multiple points of entry and interaction for people of all incomes. The more economically integrated a community is, the more access to opportunity exists for all.

...creates interesting places that capitalize on distinctiveness. A creative approach improves the aesthetics of a place, whether it is the look, feel, sound or even smell. The difference sets that place apart as more interesting than others. A place that expresses its distinctiveness and resists commodification and sameness is more likely to have long-term appeal.

...creates a place where people want to go and linger. Successful places attract people beyond those required to be there. People lingering is an investment of time in a place and is apt to lead to additional investments.

...contributes to a mix of uses and people that makes places more diverse, more interesting and more active, thus making spontaneous interaction more likely. Intensifying and mixing activities creates the promise that visitors can stumble onto the fun, mingle with other people, or happen upon opportunity.

...fosters connections among people and across cultures. The relationships built among diverse groups of people create safer, more open places that create more opportunity and foster a sense that everyone is welcome.

...is always presenting itself to the public and encouraging pedestrian activity. Whether open or closed, a place that is a consistently interesting and active presence to the street promotes more pedestrian activity and creates the public perception that the place is safer and more animated. More pedestrians mean more prospective customers on the street to support more small businesses.

...creates a place where business wants to be. As a place becomes more active, commerce is likely to respond, thus giving people even more reasons to be there. ...convinces people that a place can have a different and better future.

Creative Placemaking Questions by The Kresge Foundation

People

- Are people more involved in sustained creative activity that positively shapes community? How?
- Are people more proud of where they live/work? How? In what way?
- Are people more committed to their neighborhood? How? In what way?
- Do long-time and new residents see opportunity for investment and development that sustains the community's cultural vitality? How? In what way?
- Do artists, along with others, play leadership roles in community revitalization? How? In what way?

Place

- Are civic and open spaces improved? How? In what way?
- Did re-use of opportunities for environmentally sustainable projects increase? How? In what way?
- Were blighted areas eradicated? How? In what way?

Creative Placemaking Core Competencies:

- Connects arts and culture to larger community revitalization initiatives
- Engages in cross-discipline, cross-sector activities
- Possesses strong leadership and vision that has an outward orientation
- Advances a shared community vision
- Extends benefits to all stakeholders, especially low-income people
- Demonstrates an explicit commitment to sustained engagement and participation of all residents
- Honors community distinctiveness
- Avoids displacement

Based on Kresge's definition of creative placemaking, what does not fit into this creative placemaking?

Stand-alone arts and cultural projects that benefit one organization, are tangential to a broader community revitalization project, or can have limited regard for place, such as:

- Arts education and outreach activities
- One time community arts projects (e.g. murals and festivals)
- One time beautification projects (e.g. landscaping or infrastructure)
- Capital campaigns for cultural facilities or outdoor venues disconnected from a comprehensive community revitalization project (including planning, pre-development, or construction costs)
- Community Development projects without consideration to history, character of the place and integration of the arts
- Neighborhood branding projects (e.g. naming cultural districts)
- Projects where resident input is consultative, or participation is limited to attendance
- Social justice and engagement projects with limited creativity and sensitivity to the place

Placemaking & vibrancy: a few thoughts by [Jim Walker](#), Big Car executive director

Lots of people are talking and writing about [placemaking](#) — and the relatively new idea of artist-led [creative placemaking](#) — as approaches to improving cities and communities by better using the spaces and places people share.

This, of course, has been central to our work at Big Car since we formed in 2004 — even if some of the terminology didn't exist then. Our original mission and the work that furthered it was about bringing vibrancy to the then-neglected Indianapolis neighborhood called Fountain Square. Even before we opened our gallery and performance space, we organized an annual event that brought artists and vendors into the streets, that turned a parking lot into a temporary public square (it is now a permanent public square). Later, in summers, we managed an outdoor movie series that turned yet another parking lot in the neighborhood into a place to gather and enjoy films. We supported a neighborhood-wide mural project, the idea of a Fountain Square resident who was then a member of our collective. Meanwhile, we brought what is now a strong and economically powerful tradition to the neighborhood — celebrating the first Friday of each month with art openings and parties. And, the energy we helped create prompted [Fountain Square](#) to get connected to [The Cultural Trail](#), ensuring its ongoing success. This is how creative placemaking can turn a place around.

Prior to 2000, Fountain Square was not very vibrant. Many of the commercial buildings stood abandoned or poorly utilized. Nearby homes rotted. Public spaces were parking lots. Sidewalks were neglected and shrunk to make more lanes for cars that sped through the area. But the neighborhood had character. It had a funky refurbished theater. It had artists. It seemed poised to be something they have in other cities. And the Murphy Art Center — an artist-led creative placemaking project if there ever was one — became the tipping point for the area. Phil Campbell, a painter and gallery owner, took a vacant and water damaged block-long former dime store and transformed it into a home for artists and creative businesses. It took about 10 years and the steady support of groups like Big Car, but, by 2013 — when the Cultural Trail celebrated its completion — Fountain Square was truly vibrant. It had arrived.

So what is meant by vibrancy? As [Project for Public Spaces](#) says, vibrancy is people. If somebody completes what they say are placemaking or creative placemaking projects and they don't have pictures with people in them, what they've likely done is beautification, or creative decoration projects. Placemaking is about setting the table for making things happen for humans, it is about making places to do things. It isn't about making the physical location passively artsy or pretty. It isn't about involving artists to put a little icing on the cake. Adding some decorative elements to a vacant lot or old building and then walking away will make things nicer for those who pass by. But this does not create true vibrancy. A placemaking project isn't successful if it can be enjoyed in just one way — with the eyes for example. Big Car loves murals, work on them often, and we see how powerful they can be. But we understand that murals are only one part of a creative placemaking project. And, if vibrancy is the goal, other aspects of placemaking — spaces made for people — need to be connected to murals.

Ultimately, placemaking is about making a shared place right, comfortable and welcoming for people. This is hard to do without spending some time and money. But the investment is worth it as successful placemaking projects accomplish multiple things. The projects that really work make places for people who have been part of the idea and contributed to the design of it, places where people can socialize, learn something, connect with the location or neighborhood and understand it better, support the area's economy, and contribute creatively in engaging ways. When placemaking succeeds, we get people sharing spaces in positive and creative cultural and social ways. In other words, we get vibrancy. And true vibrancy — as we've seen in Fountain Square — helps people, neighborhoods, and cities succeed in tangible and lasting ways.