

# *Places, not Projects* Creating connected communities

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# *Places, not projects*

Placemaking is what underpins the development of our communities, our society, the world in which we live. Creating places where we can thrive as a community requires a foundation of strong urban principles and strategies – considering the arrangement, appearance and function of our cities.

Traditionally, urban renewal has been approached on a ‘project-by-project basis’ (for example, a hospital project followed by a transport project followed by a residential project). However we are now accepting that projects should be integrated in a meaningful, deliberate and complementary way, so that the whole will be greater than the sum of its parts, thereby creating a dynamic and evolving ‘**place**’.

The role of placemaking is to improve the quality of the public and urban spaces around us, which subsequently improves the lives of the community. What is intrinsic to the placemaking practice is the community – what are their needs? What will enrich their lives? How do we connect and bring the community together? And this is a cyclical process – the needs of the community driving the uses, facilities, places and the places providing opportunities for new innovation, interactions and activities.

## *People– the priority stakeholder*

The people that actually inhabit places are increasingly acting as collective problem-solvers and active delivery partners rather than passive recipients of new developments. Each individual will be living, working and playing in these spaces and their needs as well as the needs of future residents are to be at the forefront of the process. Appropriately, the placemaking approach is an avenue for empowering the community, building their confidence and collaborative skills, allowing for them to self-organise and giving them the tools to solve the problems in the areas where they live and work.

As the key stakeholder in the placemaking process, the community needs to be engaged at all stages and levels, however the approach and success of this is a broadly debated topic. The more successful community engagements have been those which target all user groups through various media and modes of interaction, while ensuring the process is ongoing rather than having a single moment of input and feedback. Importantly, the social need and distinctive character of a community is to stand as the foundation for the engagement process.

Once we are able to establish the vision and focus based on an understanding of the local context, the physicality of each precinct or site can be considered.

What already distinguishes this community and how can this be celebrated? How are the community using existing spaces and what new infrastructure, facilities and services are needed? How can the new development best support local potential? What about the community of the future? How will the local soul be retained even with increases in population?



## *Transcending the site*

Redevelopment and renewal projects in established urban areas can be encouraged to think beyond the immediate development site and envision how the project impacts the entire neighbourhood. The Denver development known as TAXI is an example of a developer-led placemaking project, renewing a 20-acre brownfield site for mixed uses and building a new community. The developers, Mikey and Kyle Zeppelin, thought foremost to the target audience and their needs – creative entrepreneur, designers and tech companies, comprising of young families and professionals. They required flexible, non-hierarchical work spaces, natural light and air, attention to design, active-living amenities and a high standard of environmental sustainability. The mixed use neighbourhood needed to extend into night trading – creating a place beyond a business park. In attracting these people and qualities, the effects of TAXI continue to extend into the surrounding districts. And this has flowed onto significant investment in decaying infrastructure within the development area and wider districts.

*“TAXI demonstrates how a single developer with a signature project and vision can catalyze a district-wide revitalization and build and nurture community through careful design, strategic economic investment, and advocacy... TAXI focuses simultaneously on creating a highly-branded experience on a private parcel with transportation advocacy and planning on a district-wide scale.”<sup>1</sup>*

## *Anchor institutions in precinct planning*

A precinct place-based approach can be adopted for urban renewal within our established cities, through identification of the current drivers of that precinct and how growth can be achieved – both in social and economic terms. It is common for anchor institutions or infrastructure to be present within precincts either where significant growth is already occurring, or where opportunities for growth are present.

The Westmead Health and Education Precinct in Western Sydney experiences both current economic productivity and the potential for significant growth, dependent on the future strategic direction for the area. The Westmead Hospital and Westmead Children’s Hospital are two well-established healthcare facilities within this precinct, providing an invaluable service to the community, the wider Western Sydney area and providing direct economic output for NSW. But while they service the community directly through healthcare, the precinct is also able to thrive through flow-on services and impacts. Those utilising the hospital, both staff and visitors, are in need of services, community spaces, homes and transport, within immediate proximity. And the more immediate the proximity, the more efficient and healthy the community can become. This has a positive economic impact in the creation of jobs, and the attraction of global talent in terms of individuals and businesses wanting to locate there.

A nurse employed by Westmead Hospital should be afforded the ability to live within the precinct, at an affordable rent or purchase price, with the ability to walk, cycle or a hop on a lightrail to work, with their childcare facilities close to home, the local supermarket on the way to or from the hospital, with public facilities and pleasant open spaces for their recreation, with friends and colleagues within their neighbourhood. Their wellbeing is nurtured, their times with the family is maximised, the community benefits, and the highest quality service professional are enticed to work and live in the area, benefitting all who receive their services.

The Westmead precinct is an established area, however its potential is yet to be realised. What would it look like for the precinct to establish a large university presence, with a bustling student presence; with bars, cafes and public spaces vibrant and thriving with a mixed demographic? What would it look like to see innovative start-ups and creative industries colliding in the precinct centre, sharing knowledge and ideas? What would it look like if streets were converted to activated, pedestrian-only thoroughfares, with the lightrail connecting each end of the precinct and to the wider Sydney area?

The hospitals are certainly the anchor and vital to the precinct, however if they are also considered the **catalyser**, the precinct can really begin to transform.

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<sup>1</sup> Massachusetts Institute of Technology, *Places in the Making: How placemaking builds places and communities*, 2013



## *Place governance*

It is apparent across our major cities that placemaking is often hindered by the governance process. Tight planning legislation by way of zoning, land use permissibility and the onerous process of obtaining approval for changes, poses barriers to organic or community-inclusive placemaking. Creating great places, while often underpinning the urban design and architectural process, is not demonstrated as a priority within planning policy. Local development control plans are more often than not aimed at infill development, with controls relating to site planning. While adverse impacts of a development are strongly considered in the development assessment process, it is imperative that we place an emphasis on positive impacts – what can the development do for the community and wider growth? If planning policy called for compelling cases to be made for development in light of wider beneficial impacts, developers would be more incentivised to focus on these outcomes and the community would be more inclined to contribute. And to take this one step further, if the end user has the opportunity to meaningfully inform the highest and best use from their perspective they might be more inclined to support new proposals.

*“When a government organizes itself around creating successful public spaces and generating Place Capital, it is often able to accomplish a broad range of existing goals more efficiently. When performing at their best, communities organize to compete to contribute to the public realm and shared value. Indeed, the most loved places were invariably created through this often informally generated culture of governance”.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Project for Public Spaces, *Towards Place Governance: What if we reinvented civic infrastructure around placemaking?*

## ***Thriving spaces nurture innovation***

What we essentially want to see in our cities is great places. We want thriving urban spaces which nurture collaboration, activity, vibrancy, ideas and innovation. We want our children to feel safe, for everyone to feel included and for each space to enrich our lives. We want human spaces. We want to see evolving communities driving the process, with private and government support. We want integrated neighbourhoods where new developments think beyond the site and consider their role and impact in the surrounding area. We want to see essential infrastructure anchoring the neighbourhoods in which they lie and see their potential as catalysts for strong and healthy communities.



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