



A THRIVING FUTURE OF PLACES:

PLACEMAKING AS THE NEW URBAN AGENDA

By **Ethan Kent**, Senior Vice President, Project for Public Spaces

The current trajectory of urbanization and city-building is not going to get us where we need to go. In fact, if you google “The Future of Cities,” the images that come up reflect a dominant vision, and a caricatured extrapolation of what is currently being built in the “most developed” human settlements. This was Peter Elmlund’s motivation for developing the “**Future of Places**” program—a partnership with UN-Habitat and Project for Public Spaces which Elmlund runs at Sweden’s Ax:son Johnson Foundation.

The goal of the **4-year program** of successive conferences (the last of which **occurred recently**) which has hosted over 1,400 public space leaders from over 80 countries, has been to advance the focus of public space, **streets as public spaces**, and **Placemaking** in the New Urban Agenda and Habitat III. But even more boldly, as Peter put it, our aim has been to shift our city-building future “from objects to places.”

We recently succeeded in getting a UN Habitat **issue paper on public space**, which includes a strong definition of Placemaking and encompasses many of the principles advanced by Future of Places. But the still larger goal is to focus on how place and Placemaking can help reframe how we can work together to shape our world.



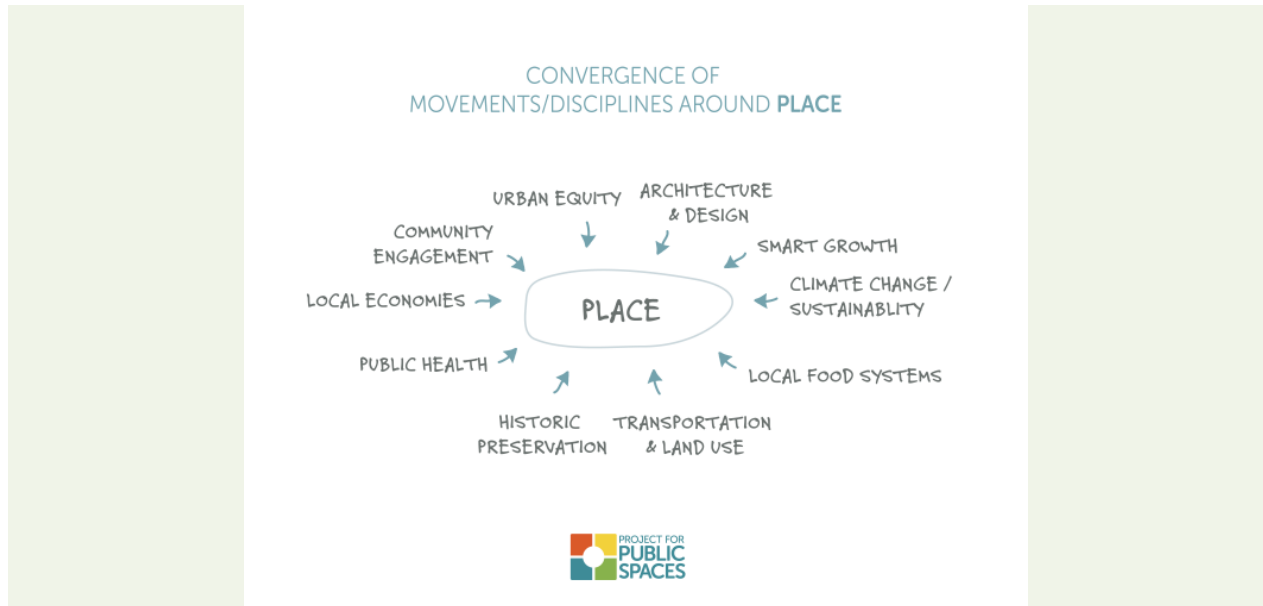
The first image that comes up if you google “The Future of Cities” embodies many of the continually failing patterns of cities. | Image by **Philip Straub**

The current vision of “the future of cities” is void of people, difference, chaos, street life, and interaction – the very qualities that make cities valuable and viable. While depicting the misdirected urban goals of **mobility**, **icon**, and open space, these images of the future ignore the qualities that great cities can produce: access, sociability, use, comfort, and identity – **the ingredients of place**.

The cause of public space and place has fallen between the cracks of disparate disciplines and social movements. More than a competing cause, a focus on place can be a means through which we coalesce, and more fundamentally address, otherwise disparate causes. A shared focus on

our relationships to place can shift our human relationships, our patterns of urbanization, and our collective capacity to address challenges on multiple scales.

Many disciplines, corporations, and movements are approaching global problems with innovations that relate only to their own independent interests and solutions. Naturally, each discipline believes its own cause or solution to be the most important. However, from economic disparity to public health, landscape urbanism to smart cities, the most prominent movements for shaping our world are working only from within their own fields and skill sets, and barely addressing their own cause in the process, let alone that of others.



Many movements and causes are starting to converge around place as a way to generate innovative solutions and achieve multiple outcomes at once.

The communities that each of these isolated causes are meant to serve are as removed as ever from the solutions. The heart of global crises, whether sustainability, poverty or military conflict, is a crisis of participation, and more and more the shaping of our world has been turned over to siloed disciplines and the passive consumption of their products. Unfortunately, these disciplines are playing to a narrow audience, and they are also connected to a culture and structure of government that is not set up to create successful places or build the capacity of communities to do so.

Throughout much of the recent past, the story of cities has been one of expensive infrastructure and the unilateral vision of the “expert.” What is often left out of this story of city-building is the importance of public space, and the perspectives of the everyday people who continue to create and use it.

Today, with a renewed interest in cities, a squeeze on municipal budgets, and a millennial-driven culture for disruptive change, a very different story is beginning to emerge. It is a story that focuses on what people do in cities, how our shared experience in cities drives both competition and collaboration, and how citizen participation is the key component in making them thrive. It is a story of emerging creativity, of cultural evolution, and growing shared value in our public realm – it is the story of **Placemaking**.

How Placemaking is helping to connect multiple causes and deepening their impacts:

- Placemaking for Urban **Equity**
- How Placemaking Drives **Resilient Cities**

- Reinigorating the **Environmental Movement** With Placemaking
- Shifting the **Transportation** Paradigm with Placemaking
- Reinventing **Government, Governance, and Participation** with Placemaking
- **Preservation** through Placemaking
- **Healthy Places** through Placemaking
- Driving Demand for Good **Design** by Putting it in its Place
- Place Capital and Placemaking as Core to **Economic Development**
- **Safer Cities** Through Placemaking and for Women and Girls
- Engaging, and Serving, **Youth** in Placemaking
- Public Markets as Anchors to Placemaking, Food Systems, and Urban Rural Linkages
- Collaborative, Creative Placemaking: Good **Public Art** Depends on Good Public Spaces
- Leveraging **Informal Vending** as a Contributor to Placemaking

Placemaking as a New Urban Agenda

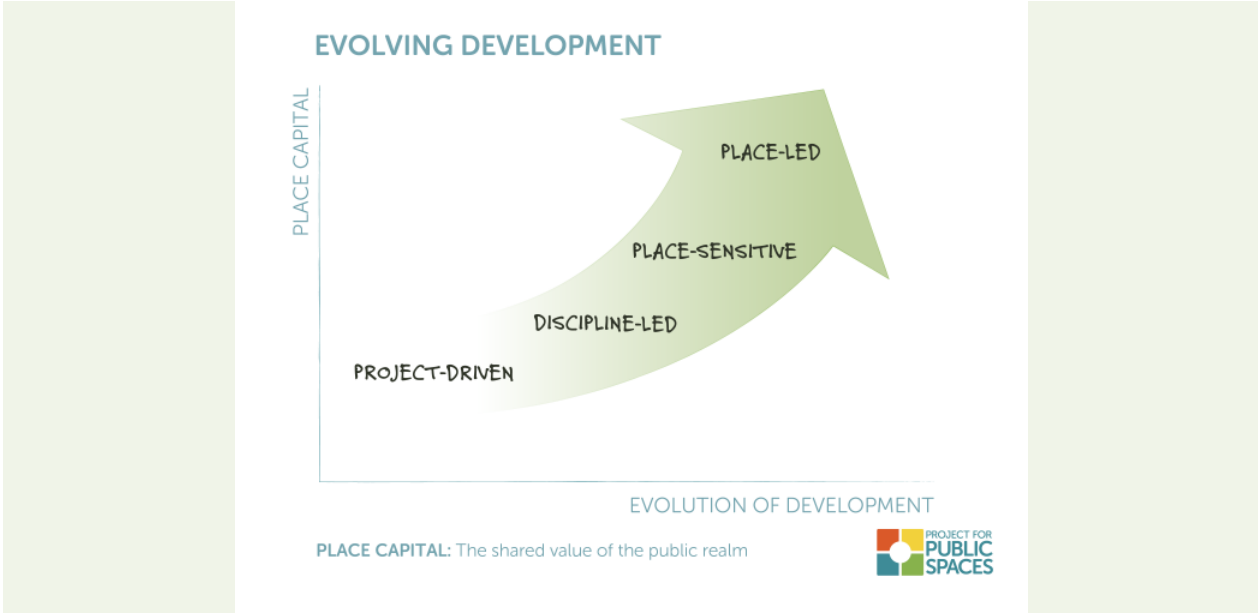
If the ultimate goal of governance, public institutions, and development is to make places thrive, then **governance culture and processes** need to change to reflect that goal. Place certainly does not represent all of the public good and value in a community, but place as an organizing focus can best help that value be preserved, shared, and leveraged.



The focus on Place Capital, or the shared wealth of communities, can often best achieve, and leverage, narrower goals.

Shifting power and responsibility for governance to communities allows for more efficient and dynamic models to emerge. More networked community relationships diversify skills and resources and support more adaptability. People in power, and professionals, no longer have to have the solutions and focus on selling them, but can instead gain power to lead change by acting as facilitators, resources, and inspirations to change.

The future of thriving and resilient cities will not be led by innovations around infrastructure and services, but by building the capacity of communities to drive their own shared value. The focus of government can be not just delivering better places to live, but building capacity for communities to preserve and create their shared wealth in the public realm. If we start to see our cities and communities as something that we can shape through **human scale, affordable, and short-term changes**, the possibility for **collective change** becomes greater and more approachable. A focus on place and Placemaking can be the grounding mechanism for change that brings together multiple incremental efforts for a broader and bolder impact.



Shifting the culture of urbanization from a focus on objects to a focus on places means more than just being *sensitive* to places and people. A “place-led” development model makes place, and our collective capacity to create it, the core goal of development.

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