The Art of Place

Growing communities through Placemaking

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So… what is it that makes a place great? A place that you feel connected to, engaged with and safe in… a place where you *love* to live?

It's actually a number of factors, including but not limited to:
1) Good urban design and 2) Great third places:

- In community building, the third place is the social surroundings separate from the two usual social environments of home (first place) and the workplace (second place). Examples of third places would be environments such as churches, cafes, clubs, public libraries, or parks.

But for me at the core of it is the human scale and the people… the community.

If you're anything like me, when you go to places like Bangalow in the Byron Shire, Leura in the Blue Mountains, the little villages that make up the Southern Highlands or Berry in the Shoalhaven, you are struck with a charming village atmosphere that makes you want to linger longer. It's the unique retail opportunities; the cafes; galleries; the walkability; the slow, relaxed pace and the sense of community as you see the locals interact with each other.

Much of this can be attributed to the human scale of these places. You are not overshadowed by towering skycrapers, you don't have to walk around huge uninviting city blocks with loud traffic metres away, you are not met with vast expanses of minimalist paved public squares.

Thanks to the insights and ground-breaking work of people like Jane Jacobs (and many more since her), we know that even the largest most bustling cities can offer that sense of place, a place that people are connected to, engaged with, feel safe in and love to live in. By implementing good urban design that offers the right human scale, assets that can be used as third places and building community through Placemaking.

Placemaking can be described in many different ways – one of which is to build community, where everyone has a sense of place. Of course doing that is why we're all here – from providing services, making sure the community is inclusive, providing facilities, providing economic opportunities as well as providing engagement through activities and events. But what we also need to be doing is empowering the community to do things for themselves. This is of particular interest to me because I have seen this, been involved with this personally, so I know it can work.

When I was living in Swansea Heads (East Lake Macquarie), one of my neighbours was approached by the sustainability department of Lake Macquarie City Council to see if she would be interested in gathering a group of locals to participate in a pilot program called Sustainable Neighbourhood Groups. One day when I was out in the front garden she approached me to see if I would be interested in getting involved, based on what she saw in my garden and my property – that I looked like I was interested in sustainability – and she was right.

I won't delve deeply into the Sustainable Neighbourhoods initiative but essentially the program supports communities to plan and make changes that will reduce their ecological footprint, protect the natural environment, and increase community wellbeing and pride in their local area. The key

message here is that what Council recognised was the untapped resource within a neighbourhood – the skill set of the residents was vast and this allowed the group to function with very little involvement from Council after the initial stage. The pilot proved very successful and now there are over 15 local Sustainable Neighbourhood Groups operating in Lake Macquarie.

To best illustrate this I'll reference Cormac Russell, a social explorer and Director of Asset-Based Community Development in Europe and the USA. In 2017 he did the rounds with his 'Rebooting Democracy National Tour' The focus of the tour was **Shifting from government-centric to citizen-centric: implications for LG** - What is 'Rebooting Democracy' all about?

Citizens are at the heart of functioning democracies. In a democracy, effective central and local government(s) function as an extension of civic life and protectors of it. When a government begins to replace civic life (doing things to/for citizens that they can do themselves, or with each other) it shifts from a democratic to a technocratic way of governing.

Technocratic governing relegates citizens to second place as clients and consumers of government services, and positions "experts" and "officials" in a superior position in relation to the people they serve. Over time, five unintended consequences of this arrangement become evident:

1. People who need support become defined as a problem to be fixed, not as people with assets and capacities that are critical to addressing their challenges

2. A significant portion of resources intended to support those who require services and income supplements, goes to paid professionals; not low income people

3. Active citizenship begins to retreat in the face of ever-growing professionalism and expertise. People become increasingly dependent on institutional services to do what previously was done in community life

4. Low-income communities begin to internalise a map that defines them as hopeless places. The people who live there come to believe that the only way things will get better is if someone with resources and expertise from outside come in "top-down" to make it better

5. Citizens begin to believe that a good life is not to be found in interdependent relationships at the centre of community, but in dependable services and programmes at the edge of their communities.

These consequences join together to erode the social and political fabric of everyday life and democracy. This adds up to a creeping crisis that few have named and even fewer are aware of: disconnection and loneliness.

Today, the most pressing challenge facing government is to reverse the trend of the last 50 years which has turned active citizens into satisfied or dissatisfied customers/clients/tax payers, and to address the historically low trust people have in government and other institutions. Reversing these trends towards people acting as citizens in a democracy and the primary producers of a sustainable future, is at the heart of the democratic challenge. While this is a perennial task, the urgency of rebooting local government could not be greater.

Essentially, we need to build capacity for the community to find solutions themselves.

To quote Margaret Wheatley (American writer and management consultant who studies organisational behaviour):

There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about.

While the following people have worked on different projects, programs, issues, opportunities, etc., I have honed in on the common thread of mobilising the community to drive the change:
Peter Smith (CEO, City of Port Phillip) in speaking about '*Public Sector Leadership: Creating New Value for Cities*' new forms of city and public sector leadership are required to build the community's

capacity to co-create and find collaborative solutions that capitalise on the opportunities that change brings at a city, neighbourhood and place level.

- Policies – tell you what you *can't* do rather than what you *can* do
- How do we move away from traditional service provider to a new type?
- Red tape stifles creative ideas and community champions from achieving their goals
- Move away from 'risk' culture to 'opportunity' culture
- We need strategic relationships
  - Property owners
  - Customers / citizens

Fae Ballingall (Strategic Planner – Banyule City Council) and **Sam Walsh** (Director – Chatterbox Projects) in speaking about '*Placemaking: Identity & Pride: How a suburban shopping centre pop-up park reconnected a community*' – they had to let go of our own agenda / vision to enable the community to take ownership. For their project to be successful it was imperative the community took ownership of it. A Community Working Group was formed and the park was designed and programmed within three months.

Lucinda Hartley (CEO and Co-Founder – CoDesign Studio) stated a couple of years ago that in Australia, we are unaccustomed to enabling community leadership, leaning instead towards an environment of council-controlled placemaking. The Tactical Urbanism Guide: Australia and New Zealand highlights more than 30 case studies of temporary placemaking activities including main streets, local economic renewal, streets and public spaces. While all of the projects demonstrated strong community participation, few were community-led. This is in stark contrast to similar studies in the USA and Latin America, where the majority of projects were run by citizens.

- The power of community changes everything
- We all shape cities differently
- It's not just about design – it may look great on paper but it doesn't always deliver – you need citizen participation!
- Authentic places are created by local people

So, just how do we empower the community to 'do it for themselves'? One way is by making it easy to do business.

Robyn Hobbs OAM – NSW Small Business Commissioner is one woman that is pro-actively making significant change by eliminating that stifling red tape. She believes if you *Cut the red tape the benefits for communities will keep flowing*' in speaking about simple initiatives like outdoor dining and markets that bring life and vibrancy to town centres creating benefits for the community and local economy, she said government policies, procedures and regulations make it so difficult for these activities to occur.

- Previously if you wanted to open a café, restaurant or bar you faced:
  - 75 different regulations
  - 48 forms to complete
  - 30 different phone numbers to call
  - 13 different agencies to deal with
- Easy To Do Business runs through Service NSW and now means:
  - It takes 57 hours less of red tape
  - Only 90 days instead of 18 months to open
  - Greater certainty

Mike Lydon (Principal – The Street Plans Collaboration, Miami USA) in speaking about '*Tactical Urbanism: A Community changemakers guide to collaboration in the 21ˢᵗ Century City*'

- 80% of plans are never implemented because of red tape
- We're always planning long-term big projects
- Tactical Urbanism relates to small-scale actions > puts 'making' into placemaking
- Just start! Test portions of larger projects that are in the planning stage
- Citizens want to know what you *can* do not what you *can't* do!

Lucinda Hartley (CEO and Co-Founder – CoDesign Studio) asks '*Is it worth the effort? Honest perspectives on placemaking, tactical urbanism and community-led approaches to building urban resilience*' The Neighbourhood Project, an initiative of CoDesign Studio, tackled this problem with new approaches to citizen-led placemaking. This program worked with councils to cut red tape to enable local action while managing risk, while at the same time it supporting and strengthening local leadership. So sometimes it can be beneficial to bring in specialists in the field, if budgets allow it.

Siu Chan (Unit Manager Arts Culture and Venues - City of Yarra) and **Amanda Stone** (Mayor - City of Yarra)*.* In speaking about '*Building creative infrastructure to maintain cultural capital*' – the focus was on how local government can play a leadership role in developing innovative programs when faced with complex challenges, demonstrating its ability to others and the importance of ensuring local businesses and residents have the opportunity to support their local creative industry – in this situation the City of Yarra, known for its creativity and bohemian feel and how significant increases in land value and redevelopment of former industrial and commercial buildings into mixed and residential dwellings have put pressure on affordable creative spaces.
- Creative people are key but they don't make a lot of money. They are the ones that move in and make neighbourhoods great!
- Creative pursuits are an integral part of experience > how do you keep them there with escalating rents and commercial leases?
- How do you help?
  - Provide creative spaces
  - Give money > Grants
  - Creative infrastructure – by making land available enables creatives to stay
  - Artist-in-residence programs
- [Room to Create fund](#)

The other way in which we can empower the community to 'do it for themselves' is branding.

Of course, there are many facets to branding and generally we think of branding in terms of business not place – unless the place is a tourism destination. But branding can start transforming place, it can add to the overall vision and marketing of it. Empowering the community comes from a sense of place, a sense of belonging, a sense of pride and knowing what makes them special.

Andrew Hoyne (Principal & Creative Director - Hoyne / Author & Publisher of *The Place Economy*) in speaking about '*Community pride, business investment and improved economic performance requires meaningful town & main street branding*' - branding done correctly - combining research, strategy, creativity and long-term investment - can connect directly with existing and potential residents and business owners. It can help instil a sense of community pride, increase community cohesion, attract business investment and improve economic performance. Flagging communities can use branding to reignite people's pride in a place, creating or supporting new expressions of confidence and energy in the main street and beyond:

- Brand a place by determining how a community wants to see itself

- Tap into a distinct persona and bring it to life
- Speed up the process of investment, producing results and activity sooner
- Engage an entire community - creating and maintaining momentum
- How can our main streets thrive? Places need unique identities. We need to create a place vision
- Once pride is lost, as more time goes by the harder it is to get back
- How do we set a place vision?
  - Unearth purpose and meaning
  - Find the story and create the brand > every place has a story > make it cohesive
- Place Vision > Place Brand > Place Marketing

Interesting for QPRC as we had the need to create our Place Brand thrust upon us by the Department of Premier and Cabinet as a step in the amalgamation process, so we went straight to the second step. There was however, extensive consultation both internally and with the community for the branding, so I believe it still captured the Place Vision in terms of *one heart, many parts* as the LGA has very distinctive identities in its towns and villages. With the recent release of the Draft Queanbeyan-Palerang Community Strategic Plan 2018 – 2028 Section 5 sets out 'Our Vision for the Region'. The plan in its entirety sets out the long term aspirations of the Queanbeyan-Palerang community in terms of where they see their region heading over the next 10 years and what are the things they most value about living here. A comprehensive Community Engagement process was undertaken by Council to find out from the community what their aspirations are and what they feel is important to them in terms of contributing to their quality of life within the region.

As Queanbeyan is the main focus on the horizon for our placemaking strategies then my thought processes are aligned to it in this context:

Towns and main streets need unique identities - unique characteristics, strengths, stories and specialties. It's what helps them to compete nationally and internationally. We need to create a Place Vision:

- Identify gaps
- Recognise its strengths
- Unearth what gives the community purpose and meaning
- Stand for something

Kylie Legge (Director - Place Partners and Place Score) made the following points in her presentation '*Future-proofing regional towns*'

- Identify what makes your town unique
- Connect around a common vision

Narrandera NSW – one of 20 regional towns that took part in the *Future Town* project (a Department of Industry initiative)

- Sometimes being obscure and not sexy saves the very essence of the place from being lost
- The community focused on the negative aspects of the town but soon started changing their mindset from problems to opportunities
- No one had asked them for so long what was good about their town that they forgot it themselves! [Place attraction]

I'll wrap up by quoting Peter Kageyama from his book *For the Love of Cities* [pp 7 & 8]:

'Have you ever thought about who really makes a community? About who makes the city a place that you actually want to live? Of course, the official actors (Mayors, Planners, Non-Profits, Leaders, Educators, Community Leaders and others) come to mind when we think about who makes cities. Add to that list those who perform the necessary functions of keeping the city safe and smoothly functioning. But that still does not account for what ultimately makes a community.

I believe that if you examined who really builds, contributes to and essentially 'makes' a city, you will find that those citizens who have an emotional connection with their city make the difference.

The city as a whole, is made by a relatively small number of 'co-creators' who – in their roles as entrepreneurs, activists, artists, performers, students, organisers and otherwise concerned citizens – create the experiences that most of us consume. Many of these co-creators act without authority or centralised direction, and it is from their creative efforts that the rest of us benefit. They make the experience that we delight in, and they have a disproportionate impact in the making of the city.'