



A photograph of a city street covered in a dense canopy of pink balloons, with people walking underneath. The balloons are suspended from overhead wires, creating a vibrant, celebratory atmosphere. The street is lined with trees and buildings, and the sky is clear and blue.

INSPIRATIONAL IDEAS FOR BOSTON'S PUBLIC REALM

RELEVANT EXAMPLES OF PLACEMAKING FROM AROUND THE WORLD



TOW AREA



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A Better City is a diverse group of business leaders united around a common goal—to enhance Boston and the region's economic health, competitiveness, vibrancy, sustainability and quality of life. By amplifying the voice of the business community through collaboration and consensus across a broad range of stakeholders, A Better City develops solutions and influences policy in three critical areas central to the Boston region's economic competitiveness and growth: transportation and infrastructure, land use and development, and energy and environment.

CONCEPTS

WHAT IS THE PUBLIC REALM?

The public realm includes visible and accessible spaces between privately owned buildings or property. This may include any streets, sidewalks, pathways, right-of-ways, parks, open spaces and public or civic facilities. In an urban environment like Boston, the public realm is often simply the space between the exterior facades of buildings.

WHAT IS PLACEMAKING?

Placemaking is a people-focused approach to planning and design of public space that focuses on elements that enhance the experience of living, working and playing in a place, and often begins with small-scale, strategic improvements. Public space projects inspired by placemaking do more than express local culture, brand a neighborhood and make the city more fun; they also bring diverse groups of people together who may have never otherwise interacted.

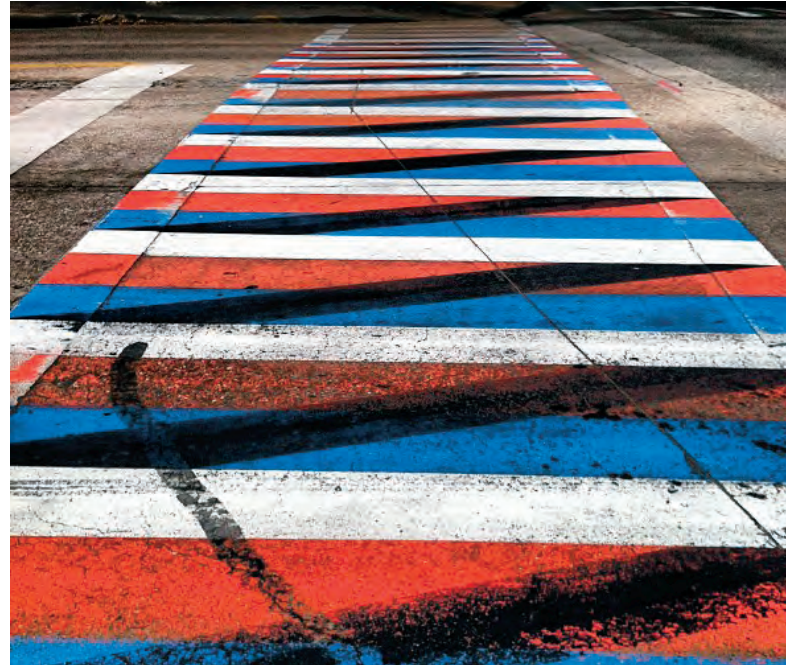
WHAT IS TACTICAL URBANISM?

Tactical urbanism describes a set of low-cost, temporary and quickly implementable interventions to the public realm aimed to improve the quality of physical space and user experience in neighborhoods and public spaces. This approach is often used to test strategies that can lead to more permanent changes.

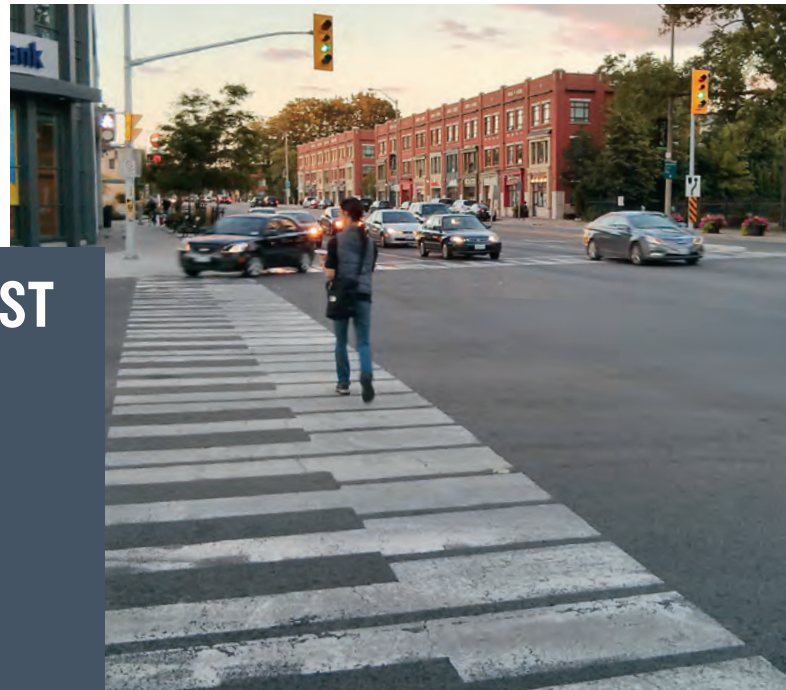
EXAMPLES OF PLACEMAKING FROM AROUND THE WORLD

In East Town, Milwaukee, there is a crosswalk painted to look like piano keys, transforming this otherwise mundane piece of pedestrian infrastructure into a celebration of the neighborhood's rich culture of jazz music. Similarly, Baltimore has a "zipper" crosswalk and Miami has a rainbow crosswalk. Boston is one of the most walkable American cities and boasts the highest rate of pedestrian commuters in the entire country, providing an ideal environment for innovative crosswalk design.

Boston has a proud legacy of investing in its public realm (the Boston Common, the Charles River Esplanade, Quincy Market), but we still have lessons to learn from other cities about creative ways to make the public spaces between buildings more safe, inviting, socially interactive, culturally expressive and accessible. Boston is continuing its legacy, working to transform its underutilized public spaces into thriving places through new creative initiatives, and is poised to enter a new era of public place. As we do, we should look to the successful creative placemaking efforts that have been accomplished around the world. These lessons are already coming from our own residents and neighborhoods, but other cities that face similar opportunities and challenges as Boston have also accomplished innovative and inspiring projects from which Boston could learn.



An artful crosswalk in Houston, TX.



A piano key crosswalk in in Mississauga, Canada.

“BOSTON BOASTS THE HIGHEST RATE OF PEDESTRIAN COMMUTERS IN THE ENTIRE COUNTRY, PROVIDING AN IDEAL ENVIRONMENT FOR INNOVATIVE CROSSWALK DESIGN.”



An rainbow intersection in Vancouver.



Color Jam in Chicago features painted crosswalks, light poles and building facades that bring attention to a key intersection.

Our peer cities, places like New York, Seattle, San Francisco, and Chicago, cities whose commitment to quality of life we share and with whom we compete most directly for talent and investment, should be a primary source for inspiration. Like Boston, these cities are experiencing significant growth compared to decades past. These cities are working to capture talent, attract residents and stay on the cutting edge of innovation. And like Boston, many of these cities are also experiencing tension as they become increasingly segregated and the disparity between economic groups accelerates.

At a time when public funds are dwindling across the board, many cities have found innovative ways to mitigate these tensions through “placemaking” efforts that foster a sense shared ownership of the public realm and build community through social interaction in public spaces. Placemaking is a people-focused approach to planning and design of public space that focuses on elements that enhance the experience of living, working and playing in a place, and often begins with small-scale, strategic improvements. Public space projects inspired by placemaking do more than express local culture, brand a neighborhood and make the city more fun; they also bring diverse groups of people together who may have never otherwise interacted.

These public realm improvements can range from top-down, government funded infrastructure projects to bottom-up, neighborhood-driven art projects. The projects can either be temporary or permanent, and may begin with low-cost interventions (like rainbow crosswalks) that lead to higher-cost investments with enduring impacts (like new curbs and sidewalks).

Projects can be passive improvements or interactive installations, but always create an inviting public space that people want to stop and enjoy. These projects attract cultural investment and build a sense of ownership over places, and they can lead to financial investment by private interests seeking to attract urban residents. Ultimately, placemaking is about providing space for people to connect to each other in an otherwise underutilized segment of urban space.

As we compete with peer cities to foster a high quality of life and a thriving social and cultural city, we should look to these—and other cities that Boston may have never thought to look to for inspiration—for examples of projects that could directly relate to our environment and that we might be able to do even better.

The following presents a small sample of innovative efforts taking place in cities around the world to enhance the experience of their public realms. This collection and commentary is intended to generate ideas for



People flock to Lyndale Avenue for an Open Streets event in Minneapolis, MN.

Boston, not to present a comprehensive list of the best placemaking projects.

TRANSFORMING PAVEMENT TO PUBLIC PLACE

The mantra “Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper” has been adopted by urbanists worldwide who are working to build new public places in budget-strapped environments.

Growing in popularity, “tactical urbanism” refers to a set of low-cost, temporary and quickly implementable interventions to the public realm aimed to improve the quality of physical space and user experience in neighborhoods and public spaces. This approach is often used to test strategies that can lead to more permanent changes. By focusing specifically on the elements that truly make a space people-friendly (simple things like seating and shade) and strategically placing them in areas that lack amenities, this approach to design can result in attractive, fun, vibrant and sustainable places with a much lower price tag than traditional infrastructure investment. These kinds of tactical urbanist projects include

social events, interactive public art, temporary “reclaiming” of parking lots or roads as pedestrian spaces, and the use of seating, paint and planters to create places where people would want to stop and rest. They focus on enriching spaces that already exist. Even if these interventions are temporary (and may likely be removed during Boston’s winter), they can bring people together for new social, cultural or civic experiences.

OPEN STREETS

One straightforward way to temporarily create public space is simply to shut down a city street to car traffic and host an event in the roadway. The city of Boston is no stranger to this kind of “open street” initiative. From 2012 to 2014, a coalition of advocacy and nonprofit groups hosted Circle the City in different locations around the city, such as on Blue Hill Avenue, Green Street and Avenue of the Arts.¹ The Sunday event featured sport games, music, street vendors and dance. The initiative was successful and well received by members of the Boston community, but other cities have taken the open streets concept further. Somerville’s “SomerStreets” more recently hosted four events in 2015.²

Minneapolis' Open Streets program has run every summer since 2011 and plans to host eight events in 2016.³ This program goes a step further by linking the Sunday events to a business development and community building agenda. The summer series takes place in targeted commercial corridors that either border segregated neighborhoods or are struggling economically, and the location of the event changes for each iteration. The participating corridors experience a temporary influx of pedestrians looking to shop, eat, dance, play and socialize with their community. This brings business to storefronts and groups of people together at the borders of neighborhoods that they may not have otherwise visited.

The initiative is overseen by Minneapolis Bicycle Coalition in partnership with the City of Minneapolis and private partners. Boston clearly has the experience, capacity and desire to continue hosting these kinds of events, and the City of Boston is already working to streamline its permitting processes for public events. Boston's neighborhoods have many retail corridors that could benefit from this type of attention, and advocacy groups should continue to partner with the City to host more open streets events.

CONVERTING ROADS TO PARKS AND PLAZAS

Another initiative that temporarily transforms underutilized public space involves the conversion of on-street parking spaces into miniature parks known as "parklets." Parklets can be temporary or permanent, and often require the host to pay for the parking space used. Parklets range from the simple use of lawn chairs and potted plants to complex sculptural designs, but are always confined to the parking space they inhabit.

San Francisco's "Pavement to Parks" program tests the possibility of quickly and inexpensively converting on-street parking and underused parts of its public right-of-way into pedestrian areas.⁴ The program is an effort between San Francisco's Planning Department, Department of Public Works and Municipal Transportation Agency, who partner with non-profits to fund and build the prototype spaces.

Boston established its own parklet program in 2013 as part of the Complete Streets Guidelines. The program currently provides permits to designers and businesses, though a limited number of parklets have been installed in just a handful of neighborhoods. Boston has no shortage of neither artists and designers eager to work, nor storefronts that

could benefit from a pedestrian attraction and expanded "patio" space. The city already has the kind of interagency capacity needed to expand this program (especially with newly minted positions like the Chief of Streets who oversees the Department of Transportation as well as the Department of Public Works). With the right partnerships and support, Boston could develop a thriving network of parklets, and use the implementation of these spaces as an opportunity for locals to be directly involved in the transformation of their streetscape.

New York City also gets plenty of attention for its commitment to adapting old infrastructure into new public spaces, creating world-famous attractions like the High Line. But in addition to lofty projects with high price tags, NYC has also taken a more straightforward approach to pavement-to-place and simply turned large areas of roadway into public plazas. Like San Francisco's Pavement to Parks program, NYC Department of Transportation's Plaza Program works with competitively selected nonprofits to permanently create neighborhood plazas out of underused streets, turning them into public social spaces. Initially controversial for reclaiming street space from cars and potentially causing traffic problems, the plaza program has been widely hailed as a success by community members, business leaders and visitors from other cities. The temporary conversion of Times Square to a pedestrian plaza resulted in significantly increased revenues for nearby businesses (71% over several years, by one account⁵) and later led to its permanent redesign and reconstruction. "People just right away use new spaces, they don't question them," says Janette Sadik-Khan, then NYCDOT's commissioner of the program. "There is such a hunger for open spaces in New York. We want to sate it as much as possible."⁶

Boston has its own hunger for new open spaces, perhaps demonstrated by the popularity of "The Lawn on D" park in the Seaport District. The NYC Plaza Program illustrates how paint, potted plants and seating can delineate new spaces that people find safe and inviting, even in the middle of the road. It can also be a strategy to briefly test in which places deeper investment may be worthwhile.

International cities have followed a similar path. Projects in Salzburg, Paris, London and more have reclaimed roads as pedestrian promenades, waterfronts and markets. Boston has its own open-air, European-style pedestrian streets like those around Downtown Crossing and Quincy Market, but Boston's infamously complex road network provides many



San Francisco's Pavement to Parks program converts areas like parking spots into new kinds of public space that serve peoplewalking, bicycling, and taking transit.



Closing a street and providing seating turned a roadway into Corona Plaza in Queens, New York City.



Parklets can become storefront extensions of businesses, providing visibility and additional seating.

more opportunities for pedestrian spaces. Boston's Transportation Department is already reclaiming roadway as public space with projects like the redesign of East Boston's Central Square Park, part of its Complete Streets initiative, but it could more swiftly convert excess road space like triangular corners at intersections, short one-way streets and extra-wide streets into plazas simply by using paint, planters and seating.

CREATING INTERACTIVE CITIES

Besides transforming pavement into something more, placemaking is also about innovation, interaction and *fun*. Technology increasingly provides curious and intuitive ways for people to experience the city, and tech hubs like Boston should draw from talent of city to create new ways to bring people together.

Like Boston, the Twin Cities in Minnesota endure long and cold winters. Minneapolis and Saint Paul have adapted to the cold in many ways, including the simple use of outdoor heaters in the winter. These heaters can keep the outdoor patios of restaurants alive long past the peak of summer, and Metro Transit (the Twin Cities' MBTA equivalent) has installed them in every single one of its 37 outdoor light rail train platforms.⁷ Activated temporarily by pushing a button ("PUSH FOR HEAT"), heat lamps at transit stops take the bite out of the cold of winter and bring passengers together to share the same space in civic commiseration. The heaters are not cheap (costing from \$10,000 to \$60,000 each⁸), but as Metro Transit expands its system it is pursuing additional federal funding to install heat in more

waiting areas, including its most heavily used bus shelters.

San Francisco may not have the winters of Boston or Minneapolis, but it is adding interactive features to its bus stops in a different way. The tech hub has partnered with Yahoo! to create prototype "interactive bus stops." These stops each feature "Bus Stop Derby", a digital game on large touch screens on which people can race cars against strangers waiting at 20 other bus stations in town.⁹ These games not only reduce the amount of boredom potentially involved with waiting for the bus, but they connect riders to each other and make the public space of the city feel like the same kind of 21st century connected digital playground that many people have come to expect in their own private space.

Using technology to entertain people while they wait can have safety benefits as well. Pedestrians can be as bold as drivers, not always waiting for the "walk" signal to appear before venturing across the street. A group of design students and traffic experts in Hildesheim, Germany, invented a way to encourage pedestrians to wait for the signal: "Streetpong 2.0" is a small interactive touch screen attached to the pedestrian signal button at heavily used crosswalk. While waiting for the light to change, pedestrians can play the classic game of Pong against a person on the other side of the street, scoring as many points as possible before time is up and the "walk" signal appears.

Even cities that don't show up on the innovation and technology radar are being creative. Bucharest, Romania, recently converted one of its primary train stations into a digital "library" by pasting posters of bookshelves throughout the station and allowing riders to scan QR codes on the "spines" of the books to download them to their phone.

"BESIDES TRANSFORMING PAVEMENT INTO SOMETHING MORE, PLACEMAKING IS ALSO ABOUT INNOVATION, INTERACTION AND FUN."



Yahoo-sponsored digital game screens connect transit users across San Francisco.

Home to technology startups and giants alike, Boston certainly has the talent (and private advertising sponsorship capacity) to pull off projects similar to these. Tech companies that call Boston home are already connecting people to other cities (TripAdvisor), to food and drink (Foodler, Drizly), and to virtual worlds through games, but most of our “civic” apps that connect people to their environment are developed by the City (BOS:311, ParkBoston, Citizen Connect). Boston is well-equipped to explore private-public partnerships that deploy game-changing technology into the public realm, using the interactivity that people have come to expect in their social and economic lives to connect them to the places they live, work and play.



STAYING SOCIAL DURING WINTER

Boston's long, cold, snowy winters present unique challenges to placemaking; when an outdoor public space is blanketed by three feet of snow and temperatures drop to below-freezing, incentives for people to enjoy the space may dwindle. Bostonians are brave and strong in the face of winter. We have also found creative (if zany) ways to embrace snow as a material to build community. In the depth of the 2015 blizzards, for instance, a Jamaica Plain couple built a snow fort that they turned into an outdoor bar, serving drinks to their neighbors.

Other cities in northern latitudes have similarly embraced the winter and celebrate it through annual events that could further inspire Bostonians. The Twin Cities host several winter festivals and events that turn the frozen, icy parks and lakes of the city into winter playgrounds. Minneapolis' annual "Loppet" is a cross-country ski race around its lakes that includes a family friendly "Luminary Loppet" at night during which skiers follow trails of candle-lit ice-sculpture luminaires throughout the city's parks, including closed roadways.¹⁰ "Crashed Ice" is an

international extreme sporting event during which athletes race down a temporary, elaborate downhill ice-skating course constructed in Saint Paul, and it draws impressive crowds.¹¹ Twin Cities neighborhoods host their own smaller events, including an annual "art sled" race and an "art shanty" village that is built on a frozen lake. A downtown park in Saint Paul attracts more visitors during its Winter Carnival and ice sculpture competition than any other time during the year.

Harbin, China attracts visitors with its winter festivities as well, hosting the largest annual International Ice and Snow Sculpture Festival in the world. Munich and other northern European cities host winter-long outdoor markets that bring street vendors, performers and crowds of people to city squares, even on the coldest days.

Winter is no excuse for not making great spaces. Boston already celebrates winter in its own ways, like its seasonal ice rinks, but Boston could channel its residents' enthusiasm for winter fun (demonstrated by people leaping out of second story windows into snow piles during 2015's blizzards) into more organized events, competitions, arts and installations.

Visitors venture out onto the frozen White Bear Lake in Minnesota to tour the biennial temporary village of "Art Shanties."



Fire performers entertain cross-country skiers at Minneapolis' annual Luminary Loppet.

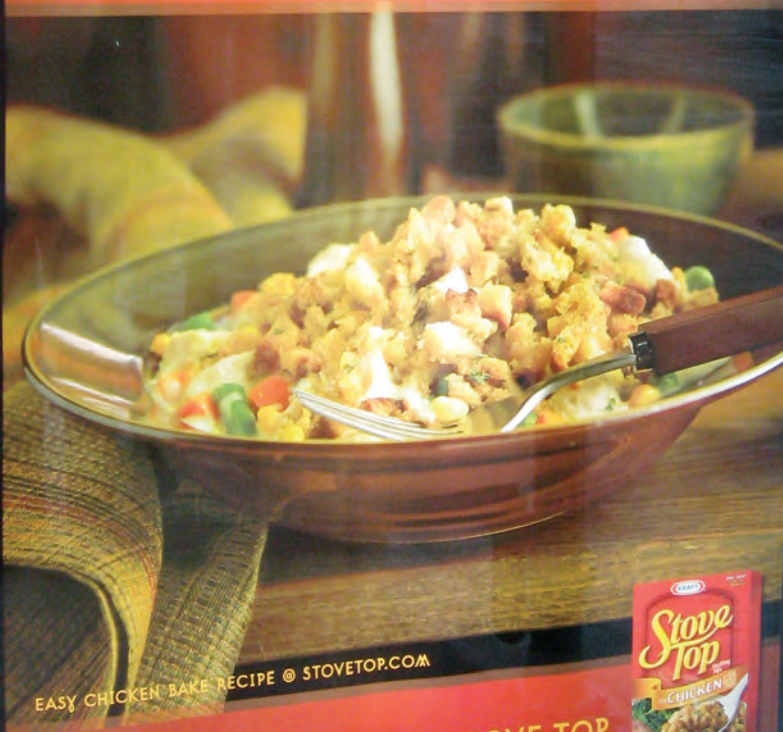


HOT SURFACE
DO NOT
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A heated bus shelter
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“Supertrees” in Singapore combine public art and sustainability into a global attraction.

“NEW RESILIENT INFRASTRUCTURE SHOULD SERVE AS MANY PURPOSES AS POSSIBLE; IT SHOULD BE MULTIFUNCTIONAL.”

MULTIFUNCTIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Reckoning with the local climate of Boston means more than just surviving winter. It also means dealing with other natural phenomena, including flooding and climate change. As the Boston Society of Architect’s recent Living with Water competition demonstrates, we are exploring new ways to build infrastructure that will make our city more sustainable and resilient to shifts like sea level rise due to climate change. In order to address weaknesses, truly resilient infrastructure will require hefty up-front investment. Infrastructure projects, though, can address several goals through one construction event, including mobility goals, sustainability goals, economic goals and placemaking goals all at the same time. This new resilient infrastructure should serve as many purposes as possible; it should be multifunctional.

For instance, the “BIG U,” a proposed seawall that would protect southern Manhattan from storm surges, has been designed to not only protect residents from floodwater but also to give different neighborhoods along the length of the wall the agency to design and use the wall in their own ways.

The vertical structure can become a playground, a park, a greenway, a canvas for art, or more, depending on its context. Cities like Seattle and Philadelphia have established robust green infrastructure programs that use vegetated stormwater management installations to not only protect nearby waterways from flooding and pollution, but also create vibrant pedestrian environments. A project in Singapore uses similarly iconic structures to demonstrate the potential of multifunctional infrastructure. Man-made “supertrees” act as vertical gardens, use solar panels to generate power and collect rainwater, demonstrating to viewers the capacity of urban infrastructure to provide the same benefits that “nature” does in the forest at the same time that it provides value as a tourist attraction.

Boston is home to some of the world’s best landscape architects and designers in the country. As our city learns to reconcile its role in natural cycles like the water cycle (rainwater, tree transpiration, etc.) and to prepare to deal with the impacts of climate change, we can leverage the investments we’ll need to make in new infrastructure to also be investments in public space.

SOCIAL IMPACT PLACEMAKING

Not all tactical urbanism or placemaking projects are simply about decorating public space and creating a place to “play” in public. Interventions in the public realm can be much more political and can be a tool to drive social change, to challenge power relationships and to exercise freedom of speech. The Occupy movement brought the question of American’s freedom to protest in public spaces to the forefront of national conversation, beginning with the encampment of protestors in Zuccotti Park in New York in 2011. Their mantra “This is our country, we will occupy it; these are our streets, we will occupy them” demonstrates a desire of groups like Occupy to exert their ownership over the “public” space that they feel entitled to use as platforms for expression.

The more contemporary Black Lives Matter movement has used the public realm as a stage for events that border between protest and social programming, including “die-ins” during which participants simply lie down in public space, using their unmoving bodies to obstruct right-of-way and make their presence known.

If the public realm is where public discourse takes place, then placemaking can be just as much about social transformation and expression as it is about creating social events. Some communities have used public realm interventions not only to protest, but to proactively address community issues like safety and crime.

Midnight Basketball was a country-wide initiative in the 1990’s to curb inner city crime by hosting basketball games in public places during the night to attract youth who might otherwise be attracted to gang activity. Rick Lowe’s Project Row Houses effort used art and events to organize a neighborhood of residents in degrading row houses to volunteer to clean up the area and reclaim it from drug use and other illicit activities.

In short, placemaking can also serve as a vehicle for social change. It can provide a discussion platform to address community issues and empower communities to take control over the future development of their neighborhood.

“PLACEMAKING CAN BE JUST AS MUCH ABOUT SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION AND EXPRESSION AS IT IS ABOUT CREATING SOCIAL EVENTS.”

FUNDING AND IMPLEMENTATION

In an age of diminishing budgets for government agencies, implementing new public space projects can seem daunting for municipalities. Approaches to funding that replace earmarks and state or federal grants are emerging in many places, however, and similar creative partnerships could help Boston move its placemaking efforts forward.

“Public-private partnerships” have become a favored structure for cities to accomplish their goals by collaborating with private entities to share the delivery of services for use by the general public. Private developers seeking to attract tenants and consumers may be just as interested in making the public spaces near their project inviting and attractive to the general public as their government counterparts. Boston is of course no stranger to these kinds of arrangements, but both government agencies and private entities could benefit from specifically pursuing enhancements to the public realm.

The National Endowments of the Arts “ArtPlace” grant is one of the primary sources of funding for small “creative placemaking” projects across the country.¹² NEA’s “Our Town” grants also help communities reclaim their public amenities through creative engagement projects. Local arts organizations also support local initiatives, like Fort Point Arts Community’s seasonal competitive grants for public art in Fort Point.¹³ Local projects have also received funding from NEFA’s Creative Cities grants, Smart Growth Mass’s Placemaking Challenge, and Kaboom!’s Play Everywehre grants.

Some communities have turned to crowdfunding to support local events and projects. IOBY.com operates like Kickstarter, allowing users to contribute small amounts of money in large numbers to support local community projects. Detroit SOUP is a local crowdfunding initiative that hosts a series of fundraising dinners for small or medium-scale art installations, entrepreneurial endeavors and new urban infrastructure. The suggested entry fee to attend each event is \$5, and at the end of the night, all donations become a micro-grant given to a proposal chosen by the audience. These events typically raise \$500 to \$2,000 per night,¹⁴ often enough for the small-scale projects they are funding.

For attendees, the dinner parties are opportunities to meet their neighbors, engage with their community and support local initiatives. In underserved communities, this format of gathering could spur a conversation about community and serve as tool for action planning. In a city like Boston, known globally for its cold winters and great clam chowder, a bowl



An outdoor interactive installation by Maurizio Bolognini (Genoa, 2005), which everybody can modify by using a cell phone.

of soup with your neighbors during the long winter could be a great tool to build community, strengthen social fabric, fund projects and celebrate great ideas.



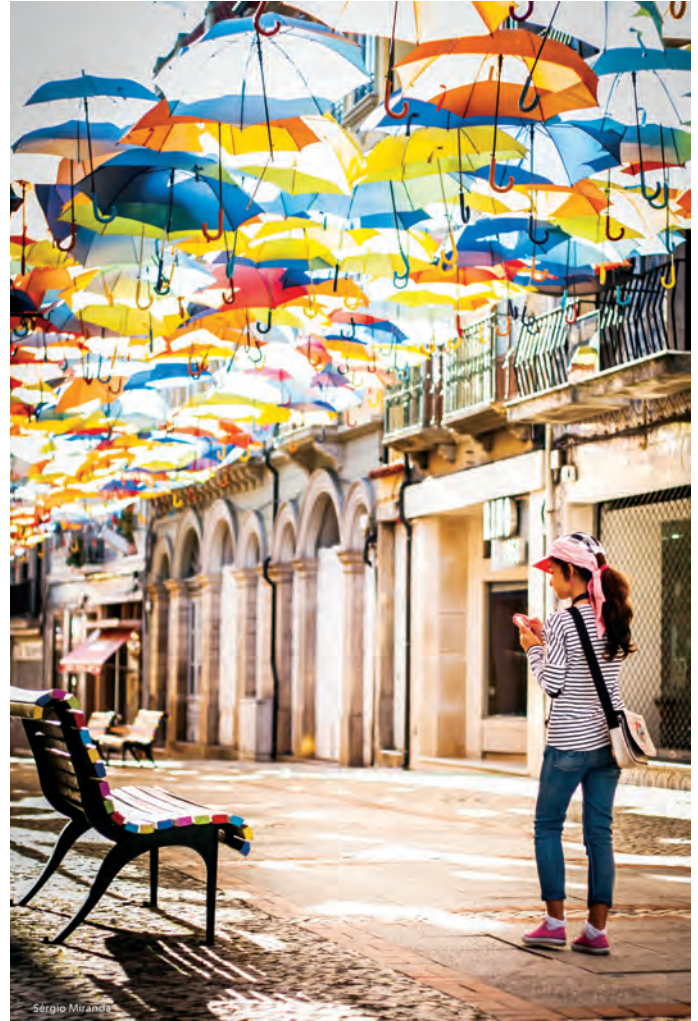
An art-bench in Traverse City, MI.

GOING FORWARD

Ultimately, the interventions that create great public places neither have to be complicated and expensive nor hi-tech. Creating a public realm that fosters community can be as simple as adding swing sets to bus stops, giant board games to the sidewalk, movable chairs to the open greens, light installations to bridges, slides to long staircases, small way finding signs to light posts, music instruments to fences or anything else that might make a person stop and interact with a stranger or see their city in a new way. Boston is evolving and needs to address new development, changing transportation needs, the effects of climate change and more. By considering every unit of both new and old public infrastructure as an opportunity to create social space, Boston can address these challenges at the same time that it builds a world-renowned public realm and a thriving diverse community.

Boston has a strong creative economy and is a capital of innovation with roots in excellence of public space. But as Boston evolves, we should take note of our peers. We can keep growing our public space legacy and create a city that encourages interaction between its diverse residents, builds community in the face of change and attracts new investment to our neighborhoods.

**“INTERVENTIONS
THAT CREATE
GREAT PUBLIC
PLACES NEITHER
HAVE TO BE
COMPLICATED
AND EXPENSIVE
NOR HI-TECH.”**



Colored umbrellas and colored benches enliven a market street.



Children dancing at an Open Streets event in North Carolina.

ENDNOTES

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NYC's Summer Streets program hosts events like a temporary 9-hole minigolf course in the city's streets and sidewalks.



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