

# HOW TO BE A CITIZEN PLACEMAKER: THINK LIGHTER, QUICKER, CHEAPER

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DOWNTOWNS & DISTRICTS PLACE GOVERNANCE LIGHTER QUICKER CHEAPER

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*This is the third of a three-part series on transformative Placemaking. To read part one, [click here](#). To read part two, [click here](#).*



With some temporary materials, a roadway can become a bocce ball court, and a street can become a great place / Photo: PPS

Imagine that you live in a truly vibrant place: the bustling neighborhood of every Placemaker's dreams. Picture the streets, the local square, the waterfront, the public

market. Think about the colors, sights, smells, and sounds; imagine the sidewalk ballet in full swing, with children playing, activity spilling out of storefronts and workspaces, vendors selling food, neighborhood cultural events and festivals taking place out in the open air. Take a minute, right now. Close your eyes, and *really* picture it.

Now, here's the million dollar question: in that vision, *what are you doing to add to that bustle?*

If vibrancy is people, and citizenship is creative, it follows that the more that citizens feel they are able to contribute to their public spaces, the more vibrant their communities will be. The core function of place, as a shared asset, is to facilitate participation in public life by as many individuals as possible. Ultimately the true sense of a place comes from how it makes the people who use it feel about themselves, and about their ability to engage with each other in the ways that they feel most comfortable.

"There is an undeniable thing that each resident brings to the table," says Katherine Loflin, who led Knight Foundation's Soul of the Community study. "It has to do with the openness and feeling of the place; it's not something that you construct, physically, it's something that you feel. And it is us as humans that convey that feeling to each other—or not!"



"There is an undeniable thing that each resident brings to the table...It has to do with the openness and feeling of the place." / Photo: PPS

### **Getting Started: How You Can Make a Place Great Right Away**

As [Sustainable South Bronx](#) founder and advocate [Majora Carter](#) famously put it, "You don't have to move out of your neighborhood to live in a better one." Each of us can participate, *right now*, in creating the city that we want to live in. If you think of enlivening a place as a monumental task, remember that great places are not the result of any one person's actions, but the actions of many individuals layered on top of one another. It may take years to turn a grassy lot into a great square, but you can start today by simply mowing the lawn and inviting your neighbors out for a picnic.

In an essay for *The Atlantic* back in 1966, then-Vice President Hubert Humphrey [touched on this](#) when he wrote about his father's public spirit, and his active participation in the life of the small town of Doland, South Dakota, where the family lived. Hubert Sr. was a pharmacist, and he strove to make his pharmacy into a community hub, a place where neighbors came to meet and discuss the issues of the day. "Undoubtedly, he was a romantic," writes Hubert Jr. of his father, "and when friends would josh him about his talk

about world politics, the good society, and learning, he would say, 'Before the fact is the dream.'

When you think about making your neighborhood a better place, think Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper (LQC). In public space design, the LQC strategy is framed as a way for communities to experiment with a place and learn how people want to use it before making more permanent changes. That experimental attitude can be adopted by anyone. Just ask yourself: what's one thing I already enjoy doing that I could bring out into the public realm?

### **Make it Public: Bringing Existing Activity Out Into the Streets**

For some of us, there may be opportunities to take the work that we do in our professional lives and turn it into a way to engage with our neighbors. Perhaps there's a certain activity we perform that could be moved to a nearby park, or a skill that we could teach at a local library. One graphic design firm in Cape Town, South Africa, has taken the idea of public work to a delightful extreme through their Holding Public Office initiative, where they move their office out into a different public space for one day each month and interact with curious passersby. "It keeps us on our toes," says Lourina Botha, one of the firm's co-directors. "It forces us to be aware of our role as designers and is a fairly stark reminder that what we design has a real effect on the world."

In other words, this project illustrates how taking a LQC approach to work enriches not just the public space where the intervention takes place, but the work that the firm does, as well. This kind of activity blurs the line between private and public, and re-frames work as a mechanism for building social capital. According to Harry Boyte, director of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at Augsburg College, "We need professionals to think about themselves not narrowly disciplinary professionals, whose work is to simply solve a narrow disciplinary problem, but as citizen professionals working to contribute to the civic health and well-being of the community."



"Holding Public Office" brings co-workers out into the streets, re-framing work as a mechanism for building social capital / Photo: Lisa Burnell, Graphic Studio Shelf

Many people may not have any particular job function that can become more public, for whatever reason, but there are still plenty of activities that mostly take place in private that can be used to enliven public space. Active citizenship needn't be all work and no play, after all. "Any kind of community [that is supportive of engagement] is not just going to be about the problems that residents want to solve," explains Matt Leighninger, the director of the [Deliberative Democracy Consortium](#). "It also has to be about celebrating what they've done, through socializing, music, food."

Building off of that last point, the organizers of [Restaurant Day](#) have turned cooking into an excuse for a carnival, giving residents of Helsinki, Finland, a chance to showcase their creativity in the kitchen and turning the city's streets into a delectable buffet in the process. Their idea to organize a one-day festival where anyone could open a restaurant anywhere (from living rooms to public plazas), started when Antti Tuomola was struggling through navigating the onerous process of starting up a brick and mortar restaurant in the city. Recalls Kirsti Tuominen, one of the friends who works with Tuomola on organizing the event, "We knew from the beginning that we wanted to do something that would be fun, easy, and social at the same time. Something positive. We didn't want to go the

protest route. That's the not-so-efficient way of trying to make a difference; it's often better to show a good example and then it's harder for the opposition."

The first Restaurant Day took place back in 2011; today, it has been celebrated in cities all over the world. The festival is a brilliant example of how a completely normal daily activity can totally transform a city's public spaces when approached in a creative way. "The street experience itself was a joy to behold," wrote *City of Sound* blogger Dan Hill after participating on one of the festivals. "It truly felt like a new kind of Helsinki. International, cosmopolitan, diverse yet uniquely Finnish...It felt like a city discovering they could use their own streets as they liked; that the streets might be their responsibility."

Tuominen echoes this in her own reflection on the event, explaining that "[Finland] is so full of regulations that people tend to see regulations even where they don't exist! That's been hindering things for a long time, but Restaurant Day has encouraged people to use their public spaces in a new way. Sometimes people just need someone to show them, or give them a gentle kick in the butt, and things will start happening."

Understanding this is key for citizens who want to take a LQC attitude toward activating their neighborhoods: public spaces have a way of amplifying individual actions. One thing from the above comments that is not uniquely Finnish is the tendency of people (particularly in the developed world) to see regulations where they don't exist. After decades of society turning its back on public life in favor of the private realm of home, office, and car, a lot of people now feel that they need permission to use public spaces the way they'd like to. We can give that permission to each other.



In a wonderful example of triangulation, jazz musicians perform for the assembled crowds near a Restaurant Day pop-up eatery in Helsinki / Photo: Karri Linnoinen via Flickr

### **Leading From the Bottom-Up: Work Fast, Work Together**

If you are a change-oriented person, we need you to lead. Whether you want to move your office outside, organize a citywide cooking festival, or start small by making a concerted effort to engage directly with your neighbors every day, know that your own actions are an essential component of your neighborhood's sense of place, by virtue of the fact that you live there. Explains Loflin: "If you don't spend at least some time thinking about the state of mind of Placemaking—every decision, behavior, everything that we do as residents in our place every day—on top of the infrastructure that's provided by the place itself, then you miss a really important part of the conversation, where everybody gets to have some of the responsibility."

Whatever you decide to do, know that there will be bumps in the road. One of our 11 core Placemaking principles is that *they'll always say it can't be done*. But keep pushing. Meet your neighbors, and find your allies. Creating great places is all about getting to know the people who you share those places with. Thinking LQC doesn't just mean experimenting with *what* you do, but with *how* you do it. Look for unconventional partners, and always be willing to consider doing things a bit differently.

In an interview for the Placemaking Blog late last year, [Team Better Block](#) co-founder Andrew Howard explained how his own LQC street transformations in cities around the US have caused his understanding of how people engage with places to evolve. "As a planner," he explained, "I always thought that, if I made the best plan, that would attract the right people to come *from somewhere else* and make that plan happen. What I've realized through Better Block is that every community already has everybody they need. They just need to activate the talented people who are already there, and shove them into one place at one time, and that place can become better really quickly."

Great places are not created in one fell swoop, but through many creative acts of citizenship: individuals taking it upon themselves to add their own ideas and talents to the life of their neighborhood's public spaces. The best news is that we seem to be living at a very special time, when people are once again realizing the importance of public life. It's something we've seen first-hand in communities where we have worked around the world, and something we've heard from many others. "I think that these are the early first steps," says Tuominen, "but I think we're heading to something that is very good, and interesting. I love this time. You can feel it, it's almost tangible: that things are happening and moving forward."

Before the fact is the dream. Just a few minutes ago, at the beginning of this very article, you conjured up a vision of a better neighborhood. Go make it real.

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