

# PUBLIC SPACE MANAGEMENT AND THE NITTY GRITTY OF INCLUSIVE PLACEMAKING

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EQUITY & INCLUSION

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*This article is the fourth article in our four-part series, [A Playbook for Inclusive Placemaking](#), produced in collaboration with [Emily Manz](#) of EMI Strategy. Read the first article on community process [here](#), the second article on programming [here](#), and the third article on design [here](#).*

Great public spaces are not simply made once. Even beyond the more tangible arts of public space [design](#) and [programming](#), public spaces are made and remade again and again in the everyday management decisions made around maintenance, public safety, social services, programming, furnishings, and so much more.

Because the nearly invisible nuts and bolts of public space management has such a profound effect on the success of placemaking efforts, public space managers should see every little decision about how they use their budget, who they hire, and how they make decisions in the first place as an opportunity for inclusion or exclusion. So, how does an inclusive public space operate?

Public space management must be guided by an understanding of the unequal nature of our modern social and economic landscape, and take into account the vast array of life stories brought to a place by each of its visitors. This requires a dynamic management approach that both draws on and continues to seek the insight gained during robust [community outreach](#). To continuously assure alignment with the vision of the community, and course correct as that vision continues to evolve, is the foundation of inclusive public space management.

This vision should infuse the many mundane but vital processes that shape a public space, from hiring and procurement practices to rule-making and decision-making to law enforcement.



Maintenance staff keep Bryant Park in New York City, NY, USA, clean and in good repair, as well as conducting regular counts of people using the park. | Photo by Katherine Peinhardt.

## 1. START WITH STAFFING.

A public space can only be as diverse as those who keep it running. Beyond simply implementing widely accepted diverse hiring practices, it is important to make available the types of fulfilling careers that will attract and retain employees of differing backgrounds, abilities, skills, and knowledge.

*“There is a solid case to be made that the training and recruitment of such professionals [municipal planners, parks managers, urban and landscape designers, and others] should more fully reflect the makeup of our cities of difference.” —Julian Agyeman, “Interculturally Inclusive Spaces as Just Environments”*

Diverse hiring also starts long before you post a job; identifying and strengthening a diverse talent pipeline is also crucial. To a certain extent, public space managers can build a pipeline locally by making authentic connections with schools and organizations led by people from communities that are currently underrepresented or underserved in your public space or place management organization. One downside of placemaking as an interdisciplinary, inter-sectoral practice, however, is that we do not—and probably should not—have a formal professional trade organization to promote a conversation about the diversity of practitioners. While problems related to diversity persist in planning and architecture, for example, the American Institute of Architects and the American Planning Association have committees, research, and policies, to address past shortcomings regarding people who have been historically marginalized, including women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ people.

One casual observation from Project for Public Spaces' own audience and attendance at our recent 3rd International Placemaking Week is that young, white women tend to be the largest demographic group. But what does this tell us? Certainly, the whiteness of the field should be a point of concern, given that *everyone* uses public space in our cities and towns. But should the fact that women play a leading role only be taken as a point of pride, or should we also see it as a warning sign that placemaking has become “pink collar” work—people-oriented labor that is undervalued compared to other related work in public space, like the design professions? Similar gendered divisions of labor exist in the museum world, where women dominated departments, like education, HR, and development, tend to be devalued compared to male-dominated curatorial work. And what about other less visible demographic factors, such as ability, gender identity, immigration status, and so on?

Leading national and international placemaking organizations, including Project for Public Spaces, must come together to answer these questions by producing data about placemaking practitioners and to initiate a conversation about who the field excludes, ignores, mistreats, and devalues.



Through its Public Projects program, [The Steel Yard](#) in Providence, RI, USA, has worked with local artists and [Weld to Work](#) students to produce hundreds of bike racks, trash receptacles, tree guards, benches, planters and fences throughout the state of Rhode Island. | Image Courtesy of The Steel Yard.

## 2. BUY LOCAL—AND DIVERSE.

Every line item on a public space manager's expense budget is an opportunity to broaden the economic benefit of a public space, and keep money recirculating locally instead of leaving the community. Whenever you have needs regarding food and beverage, security, audio/visual services, photography, videography, graphic design, artists and performers, maintenance, landscaping, or furnishings and amenities, start by looking for businesses in your community that are owned by women or people of color—and not just the ones that have an expensive, official certifications. Much like with hiring, it is important to start building relationships with diverse local suppliers before you need them. Depending on the scale of your public space or events, local suppliers may need some time or assistance building their capacity to meet your needs.

This approach provides benefits on two levels. Firstly, it puts your money where your mouth is when it comes to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Placemakers sometimes fall into the trap of inviting a diversity of people to the table (on their own time and dime), but not *investing* in a diversity of people. Procurement and hiring processes

offer a concrete way to show a commitment. Secondly, showcasing the work of people from the full range of communities that use a public space can help create a sense of broad-base welcome and ownership, build a unique sense of place, and tap into the social networks of business owners or artists.



Protestors stage a “die-in” at Washington Square Park in New York, NY, USA. | Photo by Katherine Peinhardt.

### 3. RULES ARE MADE TO BE...

For every rule that is created and enforced in a public space, we must ask ourselves, *does this truly make the space better for everyone?* Many regulations in public spaces put unnecessary limits on the activities and uses of the community. In Cochituate State Park in Natick, Massachusetts, for example, park rules once required that visitors sign up for short time slots in order to use sports facilities, like courts. Many users of the park were discouraged by this rule, because their usual games lasted much longer than what the time slots provided. Once park staff became aware of this problem, this rule was changed, and spaces could be reserved for longer periods on a first-come-first-serve schedule. Public space managers should consider regularly auditing the many rules that govern your public space and eliminating those that unnecessarily limit how certain groups of people are able to access or use the space—even on a trial basis.

In the words of William H. Whyte, public space is the best stage for “controversy, soapboxing, passing of leaflets, impromptu entertaining, happenings, or eccentric behavior.” Nonetheless, many places operate under a set of rules created, either directly or indirectly, to eliminate these types of everyday interactions. The rules of great public spaces should neither threaten the joy of listening to a busker, nor undermine the crucial ability to use a space for political speech or protest. To rule out spontaneity is to kill the most human part of a public space: the impromptu interactions and moments of self-expression that make public life interesting.

Another category of rules that make public spaces more exclusionary are those that are overly broad or elaborate. Terms like “loitering” or obscure rules against charcoal grilling in a non-charcoal grilling barbecue zone leave room for uneven reporting and enforcement, which disproportionately affects groups that have historically been excluded or over-policed in public space, like people of color and teenagers. These kinds of rules often bleed into the many more informal rules that govern the way people interact within a space. One of the best ways to combat both is to observe and record how people monitor and react to the behavior or presence of others in a space, and use this data to adjust rules and counteract harmful norms as needed.

By paying attention to how formal public space rules play out, and tuning into the interactions and informal enforcement among users, public space managers can ensure that no regulation—spoken or unspoken—keeps the space from including the entire community it serves. Rules are crucial in public space, but they must be communicated clearly, enforced evenly, and examined continuously.



All too often, police are put in the role of addressing homelessness in public space. By contrast, in Atlanta's Woodruff Park, Central Atlanta Progress collaborated with the nonprofit HOPE Atlanta to hire a social worker stationed in the park, who works daily with park users facing houselessness, mental health, and addiction challenges. The park also features a game cart, where anyone can sign out board games to play, which is also staffed by a student of social work who helps build trust and connect people to the social worker.

## 4. FIND ALTERNATIVES TO OVER-POLICING.

Every person has different experiences with law enforcement, and while some may be reassured by the presence of a police officer, many others may find this presence frightening or oppressive. We know that police, even with the best of intentions, are not charged or equipped to provide the help underserved and marginal people need. We also need to acknowledge the past history and trauma many vulnerable people associate with figures of authority, and uniformed people in particular.

*“Placemaking for all is impossible to achieve with the over-policing of communities of color.” —Annette Koh, “Placemaking When Black Lives Matter”*

Much like public space rules, the presence of law enforcement in public spaces can serve to intimidate and alienate would-be visitors. Many communities of color face heightened police presence, which all too often plays out as negative interactions in public spaces. Young people especially find an overabundance of security measures to be a deterrent to

using a particular public space. To combat this exclusion, public space managers and staff must ensure that places limit the presence of law enforcement to only what is necessary and helpful for the genuine safety of public space users.

The perception of over-policing also extends beyond the presence of police officers themselves. All too often, uniforms for maintenance employees look very similar to those of law enforcement, which might be a deterrent to people who would otherwise reach out to staff with questions or problems. In the U.K., park rangers and staffers solved this dress code problem by having their uniforms redesigned to a more casual, sporty look. This made conversations with public space users more relaxed, and spaces feel less patrolled. It is of utmost importance that public space staff be aware of how they appear to and interact with people in a space, as well as in the community around them.

The easiest way to diminish the enjoyment of a public space is to allow it to be over-policed. In an era of increased concerns around public safety, the presence of law enforcement in our parks and plazas seems to grow each day. Public space managers are well-positioned to invent and adopt better ways to address exclusionary perceptions, actual safety issues, and common challenges that dovetail with safety, such as houselessness, mental health, and addiction, in order to move away from policing as the default response to any concern.





Through a collaboration with the William Davidson Foundation, Project for Public Spaces worked with mission-driven organizations to realize placemaking projects in Southeast Michigan, USA, like Dancing in the Streets Park at the Motown Museum, pictured above. | Photo by Katherine Peinhardt.

## 5. ALIGN GOVERNANCE WITH COMMUNITY VISION.

Even when the staff of place management organizations have the best interest of their community at heart, their hands can be tied by their organization's governance structures. Traditional models like Business Improvement Districts, with boards that usually either represent property owners or business owners, come with a clear set of incentives and biases that may not align with those of other community members. For example, while placemaking efforts intended to increase property values may be great for a landlord, they may not be so great for that landlord's commercial or residential tenants—not to mention others who may see their costs rise but may not have a direct relationship to the landlord.

Thankfully, today many alternative models of stewardship exist. For downtown and midtown areas, inviting mission-driven anchor organizations, like schools, universities, libraries, museums, or hospitals, into formal governance structures can help shift the balance of power. This is a common practice among innovation districts in the US, such as the Oklahoma City Innovation District, the Cortex Innovation Community in St. Louis, MO, and University City District in Philadelphia, PA. The benefit of this model is that much

like in a special assessment district, anchors often have the land, resources, and clout to get things done, but their incentives are different—though not inherently more equitable—than those of a private landlord or business owner. Motivations such as mission alignment, public relations, student or employee recruitment, attendance numbers, and donor relations can all be harnessed to invite more people to the table and to create public spaces that welcome nearby marginalized communities or the city at large. Plus, as University City District has demonstrated, public space managers can also promote and support inclusive hiring and procurement practices among district anchors, too.

Outside of the city center, a combination of public agencies, like parks and transportation departments, and grassroots “friends of” groups may be enough for many parks. One challenge with this model is that while it does not require much funding, it does require volunteers with free time, which can be as much a marker of privilege as money. However, a handful of examples, such as Kresge Innovative Projects: Detroit, are helping broaden access to this model by changing grantmaking practices to fund grassroots placemakers and by working with partners to offer technical assistance and build local capacity. City agencies could take on a similar role, but often have to overcome issues of jurisdiction between agencies, competition for limited resources, and the shifting priorities that often come after every election day.

Beyond formal governance channels, broader ongoing community engagement can help keep a place management organization accountable to the community. Public space managers must be able to dedicate time and resources to digging deeper into their community by attending nearby events and council meetings and by meeting regularly with local stakeholders, organizations, and institutions. In this way, public space managers can understand and analyze how all of these groups of people use—or don’t use—the space in question. This necessary, often emotionally taxing legwork requires long hours and flexibility on the part of the staff member, and must be recognized and properly compensated. When a concern is heard informally through this ongoing outreach, gathering more quantitative data through surveys or observations can help a public space manager back it up in a more formal governance setting.

## **YOU'RE NEVER FINISHED.**

Just like creating a successful public space, inclusion is not a static, one-time effort, but an ongoing process. It comes as a result of deliberate management choices, executed day after day. Good public space management attracts and keeps diverse staff members and suppliers, operates under a set of fair rules, limits the presence of law enforcement, and

bakes an inclusive approach into its decision-making structures. Ultimately, properly addressing these elements of public space management may address inclusion more deeply and systemically than community engagement, programming, and design combined.

***Looking for more information about equity and inclusion in public spaces? Keep reading.***