

STRONGER CITIZENS, STRONGER CITIES: CHANGING GOVERNANCE THROUGH A FOCUS ON PLACE

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DOWNTOWNS & DISTRICTS PLACE GOVERNANCE



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



"If vibrancy is people, then the only way to make a city vibrant again is to make room for more of them." /
Photo: PPS

A great place is something that everybody can create. If vibrancy is people, as we argued two weeks ago, the only way to make a city vibrant again is to make room for more of them. Today, in the first of a two-part follow up, we will explore how Placemaking, by positioning public spaces at the heart of action-oriented community dialog, makes room both physically and philosophically by re-framing citizenship as an on-going, creative collaboration between neighbors. The result is not merely vibrancy, but equity.

In equitable places, individual citizens feel (first) that they are welcome, and (second) that it is within their power to change those places through their own actions. “The huge problem with citizenship today is that people don't take it very seriously,” says Harry Boyte, director of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at Augsburg College. “The two dominant frameworks for citizenship in political theory,” he explains, “are the liberal framework, where citizens are voters and consumers of goods, and the communitarian framework, where citizens are volunteers and members of communities. In other words, for most people, citizenship is doing good deeds, or it's voting and getting things. We need to develop the idea of civic agency, where citizens are co-creators of democracy and the democratic way of life.”

It is bewildering, when you take a step back, to realize how far we've gotten away from that last statement. We have completely divorced governance from citizenship, and built thick silo walls around government by creating an opaque, discipline-driven approach to problem-solving. Busting those silo walls is imperative to creating more equitable communities. Rather than trying, haplessly, to solve transportation, housing, or health problems separately, as if they exist within a vacuum, government should be focused on building stronger place.



A new citizen-centered model has also begun to emerge, that we've come to call Place Governance." / Photo: Andy Castro via Flickr

Revitalizing citizenship through Place Governance: Why we need a Copernican revolution

As the link between bustling public spaces and economic development has grown stronger, some government officials have started advocating for change in this arena. After so many decades of top-down thinking, the learning curve is steep, and many officials are trying to solve human problems with design solutions. But a new citizen-centered model has also begun to emerge, that we've come to call Place Governance.

In Place Governance, officials endeavor to draw more people into the civic decision-making process. When dealing with a dysfunctional street, for instance, answers aren't only sought from transportation engineers—they're sought from merchants who own businesses along the street, non-profit organizations working in the surrounding community, teachers and administrators at the school where buses queue, etc. The fundamental actors in a Place Governance structure are not official agencies that deal with specific slices of the pie, but the people who use the area in question and are most intimately acquainted with its challenges. Officials who strive to implement this type of governance structure do so because they understand that the best solutions don't come

from within narrow disciplines, but from the points where people of different backgrounds come together.

One of the key strengths of Place Governance is that it meets people where they are, and makes it easier for them to engage in shaping their communities. We have seen the willingness to collaborate more and more frequently in our work with local government agencies. Speaking about a recent workshop in Pasadena, CA, PPS President Fred Kent noted that “The Mayor and City Manager there fully realize and support the idea that if the people, lead they [the government] will follow. They recognize that they need leadership coming from their citizens to create the change that will sustain and build the special qualities that give Pasadena a sense of place.”

Finding ways to help citizens lead is critical to the future of community development and Placemaking, which is exactly why we have been working to form cross-disciplinary coalitions like [Livability Solutions](#), [Community Matters](#), and, most recently, the [Placemaking Leadership Council](#). “Democracy is not a government, it's a society,” argues Boyte. “We have to develop an idea that democracy is the work of the people. It's citizen-centered democracy, not state- or government-centered democracy. That doesn't mean government doesn't play an important role, but if you think about government as the center of the universe, we need something like a Copernican revolution.”



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Attachment then engagement: Co-creating a culture of citizenship

The engagement of citizens from all walks of life is central to Place Governance, and while a great deal of Placemaking work comes from grassroots activity, we need more change agents working within existing frameworks to pull people in. As the [Knight Foundation's Soul of the Community Study](#) has shown for several years running, "soft" aspects like social offerings, openness, and aesthetics are key to creating the attachment to place that leads to economic development and community cohesion. But counter-intuitively, civic engagement and social capital are actually the *two least important factors in creating a sense of attachment*.

As it turns out, that's actually not bad news. It's all in how to read the data. When the SOTC results came out, [Katherine Loflin](#), who served as the lead consultant for Knight on the study, recalls there being a great deal of consternation at the foundation around this surprising result. But SOTC does not measure the factors that are most important to place generally; it measures the factors that are most important in regard to peoples' attachment to place. Working off of the specificity of that premise, Loflin dug deeper into the data to see if she could find an explanation for the curious lack of correlation between engagement and attachment.

"By the third year of Soul," Loflin says, "we decided to start testing different variables to see whether civic engagement has to work *with* something else to inspire attachment. We found that one thing that does seem to matter is one's feeling of self-efficacy. You need civic engagement *plus* the belief that you can make a difference in order for it to create greater attachment. We can't just provide civic engagement opportunities, we also have to create a culture of success around engagement if we want it to translate to feelings of greater attachment to a place."

Matt Leighninger, the director of the [Deliberative Democracy Consortium](#) (a Community Matters partner) echoes this need when talking about his own work in engaging communities. "The shortcoming of [a lot of community dialog] work," he says, "is that it is too often set up to address a particular issue, and then once it's over, it's *over*. You would think that people having an experience like that would lead them to seek out opportunities to do it again on other issues, but that often doesn't happen. Unless there's a

social circle or ecosystem that encourages them and honors their contributions, it's not likely that they're going to stay involved."



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How Placemaking helps citizens see what they can build together

Creating that support system is what Place Governance is all about. In addition to their capacity for creating a sense of attachment to place, great public destinations, through the interactive way in which they are developed and managed, challenge people to think more broadly about what it means to be a citizen. Place Governance relies on the Placemaking process to structure the discussion about how shared spaces should be used in a way that helps people to understand how their own specific knowledge can benefit their community more broadly. "We can set up the conversation, and help move things along," Kent says, "but once the community's got it, they're golden. Just setting the process up for *them* to perform—that's what Placemaking is."

If the dominant framework for understanding citizenship today is passive, with citizens 'receiving' government services and being 'given' rights, then we need to develop affirmative cultures around citizen action. We should also recognize that elected

representatives are citizens, just as surely as we are ourselves. We need officials to focus on creating great places with their communities rather than solving isolated problems for distant constituents. Equitable places are not given, they are made, collaboratively. Everyone has a part to play, from the top down, and from the bottom up. “The default of consumer culture,” Boyte says of this much-needed shift in thinking about citizenship, “is that people ask what they can get, rather than thinking about what they could *build*, in terms of common resources.”

Governance is social, and citizenship is creative. The only things standing between where we are and where we want to be are those big, thick silo walls.

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