

# Placemaking comes to Vancouver

## The grass-roots movement that creates inviting public spaces is a hit in Portland

BY YVONNE ZACHARIAS, VANCOUVER SUN   APRIL 29, 2014 10:42 AM



The Gather Round at 10th Avenue and St George Street.

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People tend to be lonely in the big city.

Urban designer Mark Lakeman has seen the power of community placemaking, or the reclamation of public space as social gathering points, as a powerful antidote to this phenomenon. Today, he is in Vancouver to spread the gospel of placemaking and dish out a few helpful tips on how it is done.

In 1996, neighbours in his native city of Portland, Ore., transformed a prosaic intersection in a residential neighbourhood into a mini-utopia. They painted a mural on the pavement, installed a children's play area and a 24-hour tea station that neighbours supply with hot water and tea, a sharing bookshelf, a community cob oven, benches, a community bulletin board and chalkboard and a food-sharing stand. Standing as a beacon of hope that cost only \$65 to create, Share-It Square has become a hub of social activity.

From those humble beginnings, a mini revolution was started in Portland, inspiring something like 350 smaller versions of the piazza in Italy or the public square in England in communities scattered throughout the city.

A kind of power-to-the-people movement, placemaking can involve everything from re-painting local intersections and turning them into micro-parks to creating mini outdoor libraries, community gardens, benches and planters, and cob ovens built out of sand, clay and straw for communal dinners. Projects percolate from the ground up rather than being imposed from above by planners, developers and politicians.

The concept is certainly not new or unique to Portland. Some trace its roots back to the 1960s when visionaries like Jane Jacobs and William H. Whyte offered groundbreaking ideas about designing cities that catered to people, not just to cars and shopping centres. Their work focused on the importance of lively neighbourhoods and inviting public spaces.

In 1975, the non-profit Project for Public Spaces was founded in New York City to spur on the placemaking movement. Since then, it has completed projects in over 3,000 communities and 43 countries.

In recent years, a fledgling placemaking movement has started to take root in Vancouver with projects like a roundabout at St. George Street and 10th Avenue that has been transformed into a micropark complete with lawn chairs; a cob oven construction in Hastings-Sunrise; garden bed and bench building in Mount Pleasant; a community garden repair and shed-building project in Cedar Cottage; and an open-air educational theatre in the Southlands area.

In the old-fashioned tradition of barn-raising and work bees, some of the work on these projects was done when volunteers came together during the first "city commons" project last July, a four-day event patterned after Portland's 10-day village building convergence that launches as many as 50 placemaking projects in a celebratory atmosphere, complete with workshops and entertainment.

Placemaking in Vancouver is expected to gain new impetus when Lakeman, a driving force behind the movement on the West Coast, comes to Vancouver to offer a series of workshops, starting today, that are designed to give people the tools to envisage projects, to design them and steer them through the labyrinth of bureaucracy and regulations.

Jordan Bober, an activist with the Village Vancouver Transition Society, which is heavily involved in the campaign here, sees the city as a huge blank slate just waiting to be filled with spots of local colour.

If there is any doubt about the need, he recalls a study produced in 2012 by the Vancouver Foundation that found a city wallowing in feelings of loneliness, isolation and alienation.

Governments usually seek public input in varying degrees into the creation of parks and other public spaces. And cities customarily have popular gathering spots like art galleries, but they are almost always centrally located. Placemaking is different from either in that the idea originates with neighbours and the projects are right in their neighbourhoods.

"The project itself becomes a means to build community," Lakeman explained. "I think that is the magic of it. It's kind of an ancient village notion."

When citizens are engaged, especially young people, you tend to see positive results like reduced vandalism, he said, because they have a vested interest in their surroundings.

Also, people on the ground tend to have a better idea of what works in their community than developers or city planners. By getting everyone involved at the start, you tend to make fewer mistakes and to get way less resistance later, Lakeman said.

Any project usually involves a series of potluck dinners, a simple design process and sometimes fundraising or scrounging around in basements, garages and backyards for spare materials, a process that brings neighbours together even before the first nail is hammered or paint can opened.

Addressing local problems with local solutions is seen as another way of addressing climate change, resource scarcity and encouraging sustainability.

Toss a stone into almost any neighbourhood and you will find that it is deficient in non-commercial, community-oriented gathering places, Lakeman said.

Yet if you look around your neighbourhood, he points out, you will often see plenty of unused or under-utilized public space.

Eileen Mosca, who co-founded a mini-library at Lakewood and Charles in Vancouver, experienced first-hand the joys of creating a common gathering point in a residential community.

It is prime example of how these projects come together. Because it sits on a small patch of city-owned land, she and neighbours Susan Lockhart and Mike Chrunik had to jump through hoops with the city of Vancouver to ensure the book

box wouldn't become a hazard or become an eyesore.

Ensuring proper consultation, they had to deliver a letter to the roughly 40 households located right around the site. They got only one objection back, from a homeowner who feared the box would attract graffiti. That has happened only once and in a very minor way.

Once they persuaded the city, they applied to the Vancouver Foundation for a neighbourhood small grant, which typically range between \$50 and \$500. They got \$350.

Estimating the cost at closer to \$900, Mosca said she and her neighbours made up the difference with Chrunik lending his excellent carpentry skills.

Since the grand opening in the summer of 2011, the compact book-bearing box with a shingle roof shielding it from rain and Plexiglas doors has become much more than an architectural curiosity or a free book exchange.

It has become a magnet for dog walkers, kids from a nearby elementary school, cyclists and perfect strangers who gather here to share insights into their reading habits.

Neighbours are still warmed by the experience of gathering in December for the second annual Christmas carolling at the book box, complete with mulled wine, snacks and a guitar player.

"What has happened is amazing," said Mosca. "The thing has taken on a life of its own."

As so often happens with these projects, a couple of locals step up to become unofficial stewards. In this case, it was Mosca and Lockhart, who have posted a little sign with their email addresses in case anyone needs to reach them.

They have heard from people as far away as England who want to share their joy in visiting the book box.

Community activist and construction worker Julien Thomas also experienced the joys of placemaking when he initiated the gather-round micropark in the traffic circle at 10th and St. George.

With \$800 in grant money from the Vancouver Foundation, he began gardening at the spot and approached Matchstick, a local coffee shop, to supply free coffee, which he personally served every Sunday for four months two summers ago.

People loved the novelty, he said. "We got tons of smiles, thumbs up and great comments from people."

Some residents had concerns that it would be unsafe to create a micro-park in a traffic circle in the middle of the street but Thomas found the new installation slows traffic "because people don't see the traffic circle as something to get around. They see it as a destination."

Lidia Kemeny, director of granting and community initiatives for the Vancouver Foundation, said her organization has found that people's satisfaction in their community often has to do with "having a sense of ownership or a feeling like they are part of a geographic area."

To encourage this feeling of belonging, the Vancouver Foundation doles out hundreds of neighbourhood small grants every year for everything from micro-parks to origami and cheesemaking workshops and tapestry-weaving projects.

While some of these might stretch the boundaries of what placemaking pioneers envisage, Kemeny said they all encourage neighbours to come together on common ground.

"Every neighbourhood project is a placemaking project because it requires a place to start from."

Not that these projects have been hassle-free. One problem cited by Lakeman, Bober and Thomas is the concept appears to land in a legislative grey zone, intersecting with city engineering, fire, planning, parks and transportation departments.

Lakeman has found, however, that once these authorities get a handle on the concept, they tend to embrace it.

Transportation officials, for example, "are so unfamiliar with this level of creativity that it gives a whole new level of meaning to their work. I think it's really transformative for their engineering culture."

Far from discouraging placemaking, he feels city authorities should encourage it because it engages citizens, improves neighbourhoods and costs taxpayers very little or nothing.

Bober gets the impression the city of Vancouver can't really figure out where it sits with regard to placemaking, although there appears to be a willingness to support greener city initiatives. The city of Vancouver media relations department didn't provide a spokesman to comment on the subject.

Although cob ovens exist in many cities, including Toronto, Portland and in places along the Sunshine Coast, the one constructed in the Hastings-Sunrise area rests on a palette and has no permanent home because the local fire department won't allow it, said Bober.

Also, the city dictated that the paint used at the intersection of St. George Street and 10th Avenue washed out quickly, which means it is quite faded today, he added. He is hoping to be able to work with the city to find precedents for these projects in other jurisdictions and to update policies and bylaws so they don't fall into a "strange legal limbo."

Thomas is so frustrated by his dealings with the city, he is planning to relocate to Amsterdam, which has a public-space co-ordinator and where there appears to be a much more openness to such projects.

One of the problems, he explained, is that while streets and sidewalks are considered public spaces, they are not run by the parks department, but by the city's engineering department, "which has a very narrow definition of how these spaces can be used."

He was particularly frustrated to receive an email recently from the city's green street co-ordinator requesting that he refrain from encouraging any social activity in the roundabout at 10th and St. George because of safety concerns.

While he sees this concern as having no basis, he said he is too tired to continue fighting with the city and will move to more friendly placemaking territory instead.

Mosca's mini-library also ran into a snag when the city demanded an engineering survey which would have been far too expensive.

Instead, the city finally accepted their plans after they were able to demonstrate that the structure was rock solid. In the end, she said the city's stringent standards were beneficial in that they ensured a sound structure and the formation of plans that have been adopted elsewhere.

In the words of the late Pete Seeger, a better world will be built with small steps. Placemaking is an over-arching vision that usually begins with the smallest steps. As with any small steps, there is bound to be the occasional setback.

Placemaking involves citizens looking at their communities with fresh eyes, spotting barren patches, rolling up their shirt sleeves and turning them into bright spots of paradise.

"It's kind of an exciting place to be," said Bober.

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