

COMMUNITY CHANGE

Transforming Your City with Placemaking: *An Interview with Ethan Kent*

Senior VP of Project for Public Spaces
New York City, New York, USA
ekent@pps.org

The placemaking movement has gained traction in the Western world since the sixties, and the Project for Public Spaces has been in its forefront. Senior VP of the PPS, Ethan Kent, spoke in October 2016 at the Institute for Policy and Governance's "Community Voices" with Vanessa Guerra, a doctoral student in Environmental Design and Planning, Vera Smirnova, a doctoral student in Urban Affairs and Planning, and Heather Lyne, a Master's student in the Public and International Affairs program, all from Virginia Tech.¹

VG: *Can you walk us through the placemaking process?*

EK: So the Project for Public Spaces (PPS) is a not for profit, we've been around for over forty years now and we were set up to sort of put into practice the work of William White and Jane Jacobs and really develop ways of applying the theories of William and Jane Jacobs in one way about how cities and neighborhoods work in public spaces and so a lot of our work initially was doing a lot of user-centered design, studying how people behave in public spaces and making recommendations accordingly, and in the last twenty years, as we sort of developed a placemaking as a process. It's been around building the capacity of communities, trying to get wisdom and knowledge from them to inform the visioning process and to build management capacity and governance capacity in communities to implement projects. So we were lucky to get invited in all different types of contexts around the world, but equally all sectors. It's always by people that are looking to do things differently, that are looking to overcome certain obstacles, innovate in placemaking. We've had some experiences with the nonprofit sector bringing us in and often helping to set up small not for profits in different parts of the world that do our work on a more permanent basis in those regions. Whoever brings us in, our job is to make sure it's more multisector, so if it is just government that brings us in, we try to get philanthropic and private sector involved and likewise with any other sector.

HL: *Leading off of the right to the city, I know that PPS now has a relationship with the UN Habitat agency, based off that right to the city resolution. What sort of vision and process are you developing with the UN Habitat agency on such a huge scale?*

¹ This is a shortened version of the full interview transcript. Transcribers cleaned this document, removing unnecessary words like "um," "sort of," and "like" and lightly edited it for clarity. If you would like to hear the unedited version, please refer to <https://soundcloud.com/andy-morikawa/ethan-kent-twb-interview>

EK: With UN Habitat, they've really developed a robust public space program in collaboration with us over the last several years and I've developed some tool kits that have recently been released, lots of case studies of how cities are leading in many different contexts from informal communities to more formal ones. With public spaces there's a lot of principles and tools that are being developed and we've done some demonstration projects with them in places like Nairobi, but the larger goal has been to just get public space to be a cause. There hasn't been a network of NGOs, of foundations, of government leaders that have seen public spaces as a cause. That's been our role in this, building a network to support public spaces in urbanization, but UN Habitat and their director Dr. Clos, who is the former mayor of Barcelona, had been very articulate on this need and it's a big paradigm shift in how urbanization is understood and so forth.

HL: How has the PPS been able to convince communities that people living in the slums or homeless people, have a right to be there? What's the dialogue like around that?

EK: There's this movement called "The Right to the City", which is making the case that everyone should be able to afford the city, should be able to be in public space, and we certainly support that. There are certainly tensions around anyone privatizing space and preventing it from having public benefit and sometimes slums, informal communities, sometimes even vending does privatize and control space for others, so our focus though is not only do people have the right to a good place to live, not just the right to the city, the right to live in good places we think, but also the right to help shape their places. So, we think placemaking is a way to organize and facilitate all these populations to make places that really work for them and actually avoid the privatizing or the negative impacts of some informal or formally managed spaces in cities.

HL: Do you see placemaking as a tool for democratization on a global scale?

EK: Yeah, so we see public spaces, and the process of shaping them, into places as really fundamental to democratization of our cities to increasing the shared value that's available to everybody, increasing the way the power people have in shaping the cities, literally increasing democracy as people see themselves as citizens and involved in governance on a very local scale, but we also see them as a way to shift culture and bridge differences between people. We've done workshops and projects in communities with refugees and immigrants. They're often seen by their existing communities, the hosting communities in a fearful way, perhaps, but simply engaging those people and asking them what they can contribute to public spaces and how they want to participate in spaces often leads to really good dialogues and actually making spaces more interesting and fun for everybody.

HL: How would you respond to resistance saying that your organization and the broader placemaking movement could be categorized as western or neocolonial?

EK: Yeah. Well, certainly the culture of the people in our office is somewhat western. We have people from all over the world but, and certainly we, this movement is emerged, the name of it has emerged from the western world. Though in a sense it's because we've been doing such a bad job of it in the western world [laughter]. And we're exporting a lot of neocolonial ideas and patterns or organizations we find are not working in the U.S. And we think that the biggest, the tragedy is that we're, that the rest of the world is sometimes copying these ideas thinking that they did work here and they haven't. We've destroyed our local food systems, our farmers markets, our streets, our walkability, the sociability of

our culture because of our patterns of urbanization. And we've gotten rid of the informal life of our streets. So, a lot of our message is actually when we go to, I've been to India or the markets in China, we're telling people not to destroy these market streets, this informality. They're building some version of what they think is modern and developed. So a lot of our impact is simply actually preventing that from happening. But also placemaking, we see it as allowing more informality, more local decision making, more local dialogue, education in the process of planning and one that builds resilience to these global trends, global economy in general, and is ultimately about people deciding their own future in their own terms.

VS: In recent decades of globalized neoliberalization and economic pressures that have been put on cities, how do you keep placemaking methods from becoming a commodity?

EK: There's always this sort of tension to co-opt placemaking and formalize it. Some of the aspects of placemaking are, some of the solutions do become a little rote. And it is showing to have real economic impacts. It took us a long time to show that. And we did need to commodify it actually a bit to get some momentum around public spaces, to get people investing in public spaces again. But certainly, one of the threats to it is who is benefiting? And now that we have proven it creates economic bottom line, it's just the people adjacent to these spaces that are benefiting and people that own property. So, we do need to make sure that these spaces are not just sort of commercialized aesthetic, pristine kinds of places. A lot of our work has been in some of the lowest income neighborhoods of the U.S. and in the global south where we're showing the more these spaces connect these people, these communities actually can create good places that meet their needs and reflect their values very inexpensively. There are lots of other outcomes, not just economic ones, but economic ones too. Those places are defining for cities and this place attachment that people can create in those communities is actually, it's really a key. And this idea of place attachment and sort of the lovable city, and lovability is perhaps a more primary goal than the sort of livability. Because I think livability as a goal is—I mean we all deserve this—but has perpetuated a commodification of cities and has correlated with the most expensive cities to live in. The most livable cities are the most expensive. And just providing facilities and focusing on quality, the quality of the environment, is a very expensive focus. Where focusing on the human, cultural, sociability of an environment is sometimes more affordable. The sort of lighter, cheaper, quicker approaches we promote to public spaces is not huge investments in beautification of environment. But, more about the human use and the economic activity in the spaces. This is more democratizing and more affordable.

VS: Have you ever had to deal with situations where big businesses, big corporations, or even governments were interested in placemaking as a way of obtaining profits for themselves? So, they were essentially using the image of community engagement?

EK: Yeah, well, I mean on one level we want to show how placemaking has benefits for everybody. And we want to make sure it's not defined by one sector or that no one alone is benefitting. We want to democratize the value sharing of great places and define value more broadly than just money as well. Certainly, there's always going to be pressures and we have to be very vigilant that corporations aren't the only ones that are benefiting from this and there are a lot of corporations that are now realizing that public spaces are valuable and trying to do product launches and trying to do sponsorships in public spaces. You do

start to cross some of these lines of privatization. But, there's also a lot of corporations that are realizing this is a great way for them to be philanthropic, to be civic partners, to give money in ways that, to do advertising and promotion in ways that give back a lot more than some of the more negative ways that they are doing advertising and promotion. So, we're trying to facilitate a good role for corporate citizenship and for philanthropy as well to facilitate placemaking and we actually have a great partnership with Southwest Airlines who came to us, who's been a really good, a great partner. They've been a leader in the conversation, but also in demonstrating how philanthropy in general, not just corporate philanthropy, can be structured to have a really big impact with relatively small grants and not only support the product but the process and the capacity of communities to sustain their own places.

VS: When you put place in the center of policy and governance-making, you immediately engage with issues and questions of land and land tenure, security of land tenure and privatization. So how do you deal in your group with this complexity of different overlapping interests that are involved in appropriation of land at some level?

EK: We often find ways that the overlapping competing interests can yield something positive. And we think in a way our built environment's been shaped by people competing to take value from place and the best places everyone is competing to add value. And we've seen that happen in places that are owned privately, publicly and often it's the contested places that allow for this tension to occur and to shift. Sometimes it's the negativity and the debates that really enable a good conversation and for people to have to come up with a more creative solution. So the best places are sort of financed by a range of different sectors, not just by one sector, and those are the ones that are sustained and healthiest. So, the feeling of ownership, the literal ownership and the sense of ownership is very broad and diversified in these spaces. So, there's no real hard and fast rules. Some of the best public spaces are actually privately owned. We want to support more public ownership of public space and public access to them, but there's a whole range of public spaces and publicly accessible spaces that are valuable and important in communities. And some of the most valuable public spaces, even in rural areas and so forth, are a store or a shop, a general store, a coffee shop, those are the places that matter most to people. We can't be so dogmatic about what a public space needs to be.

VS: Speaking of Detroit and other cities from the Rustbelt region that were hit by economic crisis, do you think that place and placemaking can serve a role in eroding or promoting urban resilience to economic shocks and crisis?

EK: Yeah, so we're looking at the role of place and resilience on many different levels and how place attachment needs to be a key focus for cities, rural areas. We need to understand what it is that makes people attached to place. There was a sort of resilience, we talk about all kinds of personal disasters, terrorism, environmental disasters. Our attachment, our connection to place is at the heart of it and its social capital, social networks, that yield most of the aid after these types of disasters. In some studies, 95% of aid is rendered through social networks, the networks built through our connection to place and are sustained after a disaster because of the qualities of our attachment to place. So how we build attachment is a key. There was a study done by the Knight Foundation called the Soul of the Community that found that what led people to be attached to a place was much of the same qualities that we found make a good place. They say it's cultural openness,

opportunities for social engagement, and the aesthetics of the place. They found when there are higher rates of attachment, there is higher economic growth and higher entrepreneurship in that space so we're starting to understand how these softer sides—or they were perceived as softer sides—are really fundamental to economic growth, economic resilience and withstanding these transitions. We're moving from an era where cities thought that economic development was about attracting the next company or the next industry and this sort of ephemeral, or even just attracting talent, just competing at this zero sum game of economic development. Place is about an additive quality, about creating these virtuous cycles of people adding to places, working together, that we think actually lead to innovation, new jobs, new ideas, new cultures that keep getting fed back into the shared value of the place, the unique identity of places, that set cities apart and allow them to actually compete. So those cities that allow people to shape the place, invest in it, and are open to that, those are the ones that are going to succeed in the future. People will go where they like and invest where they like.

VG: In your vision statement, PPS hopes to be the central hub of the global placemaking movement, connecting people to ideas and expertise who share a passion to promote global connections and interactions. So, is PPS the expert or is the community?

EK: So, we're lucky, one of the first principles of placemaking is that the community is the expert. The communities know a lot about how to use a space and how to participate in it, but we also know they need to be supported in order to become the expert. They need to be facilitated. One of our roles is to help people see that and to give people the tools and resources for public spaces and to learn what works and what doesn't work, but also to network with each other in communities. A lot of our role is just connecting, facilitating at sort of a city-wide level or place or even internationally, connecting the placemaking movement. It's through networking that change can happen the fastest. Most of change has been defined around one person competing through one person's solution, or one person's problem to be more important, and we see placemaking as a place to connect people to different causes or a thing that's more shared, and think about how do we create a world that works, not just addressing climate change, or equity, or health issues alone, we're not getting that far. At a local or global level, we see a vision of creating thriving places as actually enabling the collaboration, the creativity, and most importantly, the capacity to actually challenge these former fundamental issues.

VG: Just a final question. When did you become interested in community placemaking and how do you keep the motivation going every day?

EK: In some ways, much like everybody else, we all have great memories of places growing up and traveling. I was particularly lucky to travel a lot growing up and my father had a passion for public space and placemaking and to learn from him and the people that he's connected with and attracted around the world. It's just contagious. Everyone we've talked to wants to have an impact and live their lives through participating in places, improving them, making them work, and when you have great experiences and see how places support you and support connecting with others, and the happiness that it can generate, you see how this can be contagious and it can be like a virus. We want to create a virus of great places and people helping to shape them all around the world.