

Placemaking 101

Paul vanMeter and Leah Murphy 18 May 2012

Great, vital Places—capitalization intended—are imperative for cultivating creative and cultural life. That said, placemaking is critical to supporting the arts and culture, especially as culture impacts community. People need more great places, and they're out there for the finding and the recognizing, not only the inventing. As the needs of arts and cultural communities change, venues that support them must also evolve.

First, what is it about a Place that earns it a capital "P"? For the purposes of discussion, let's simply say that a Place can't be replicated—it has a distinctive identity and an integral connection to its physical, sociocultural and historical context. A Place belongs where it is. One Place could never be confused with another.

Who makes a Place? Sometimes a single individual does. Say, Alfred Barnes or Henry Mercer, for a pair of local examples who had visions for creating places like no other and the capacity to make them. "Invented" places infused with the idiosyncratic personalities of their makers. Alternatively, it's a lubberly bureaucratic tangle of "agents of change"—political players, consultants, public agencies, nonprofits, lawyers, developers, financiers—often with multiple agendas, jockeying to fit them into one vision. With a vast range of professionals educated in

various disciplines involved in the practice of placemaking, how does our society teach the theories and practices of placemaking? Perhaps the real question is, do our educational institutions teach the theories and practices of placemaking to those future agents of change at all?

How does the theoretical “Professor of Placemaking” address the problem of subjectivity of values inherent in the process of placemaking, that the ideals that make a Place valuable or vibrant—what it should feel like and look like—are no more than personal opinions? Of course, when it’s Alfred Barnes or a Henry Mercer doing his thing with his own property, the values of the individual can freely express themselves through the place. But, as most “Places” discussed in the context of “placemaking” are shared, collectively produced, and individually distinctive [if successful], there are no normative ideals—no North Star to navigate through treacherous waters of contention towards consensus. There are no right answers. However, we propose an approach to effective placemaking using a few illustrative cases to further the discussion.

Nov. 1.2011. *“The architect Robert A.M. Stern has been selected to design the American Revolution Center (ARC) museum just steps from Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia’s historic area, the center announced...”*

May 19.2012. *“the Barnes in Philadelphia opens its doors*

to members, friends, and the community....a 10-day series of special events culminates in 60 hours of round-the-clock free public access to the Philadelphia campus over Memorial Day weekend."

These two expensive and hard-fought invented places demonstrate the desirability and importance of creating and honing places. In both cases, an understanding of Place—respect for context and history and a visual literacy of landscape—came late to the game and, when it did, it brought confusion, controversy and cost.

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How ARC or a new Barnes campus will improve the lives of Philadelphians remains to be seen. Those schooled in urban redevelopment and economic/fiscal impact analysis will ask "who pays the costs and who benefits?" and come up with numbers. Many who opposed uprooting the Barnes collection from Merion to a new building on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway did so on the basis of monetary cost—that it would have required far less taxpayer money and institutional resources to simply restore the original building. But, for many, the most dear and less quantifiable cost of moving the Barnes, a cost that far outweighed any potential benefits, was that the connection between a presence and a specific Place—a connection so strong that the two elements came to mutually define one another--was being destroyed. It's a great loss of the very cohesiveness of Place that

placemakers aspire to create, but is so difficult to achieve. For the Barnes, it's the relationship of the architecture to the world-class collection of Impressionist works; the collection to Paul Cret's building; the garden views from the gallery rooms. A rare and vital *gesamtkunstwerk*—a design synthesis of built forms, their functions and landscape—was routed.

Effective placemaking is sometimes also about “placekeeping.” Effective placemakers must get to the heart of the Genius of a Place—understand what it is about a specific locale that defines it and use this understanding to drive change or keep it in check. Many urban planning and design students will study the intellectual foundations for this imperative: John Stilgoe's works on seeing and learning from the built environment might be first on the placemaking syllabus; Dolores Hayden's *Power of Place* proposes utilizing urban landscapes to preserve and celebrate the social histories embedded in them; a wealth of scholarship on notions of “authenticity” tackle that slippery concept by asking how and when “invented” places become integral to the identity of the bigger Place. Such thinking is critical to the student of placemaking to form an understanding of the complex relationships and connections between people and Place.

Both sides of the Barnes conflict have valid points, which brings us back to the question of values and pursuit of the consensus-driven vision. One side saw and valued the

Genius of Place and considered it something worth preserving; the other did not. There is no right answer. But the “normative ideal,” perhaps, is that a placemaker will not only train her eyes to read the inherent value of Places, but will also listen with open ears, considering the viewpoints of communities involved. Given the collective possession of many Places, placemaking must respect and celebrate diversity, enabling collaboration through an inclusive and transparent process. The story of the ARC provides a valuable lesson in seeing and listening for students of placemaking.

By 2004, after five years of conceptual, programmatic and design development, the proposed ARC promised to be a beautiful and exciting 130,000 square foot museum. However, as decisions evolved, the project also meant disturbing 65 of 75 acres of a historic Valley Forge site, as well as building on the location of the Continental Army's commissary that saved it from starvation during the winter of 1777-78. After over \$10 million had already been spent on the General Management Planning process, public meeting participants powerfully voiced that they value the land just as it is—with trails, opportunities for wildlife observation and a palpable sense of history. Somehow, the countless studies by noted archeologists, planners, landscape architects and historians hired to study and consult on the development and management of the site seemed to miss (or simply ignored) the fundamental fact that communities involved wanted preservation of open

space, restoration of historic buildings and interpretation of history—desires that were entirely overlooked by the process.

A similar lesson is learned in the legacy of the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876. At the close of the first World's Fair in the United States, all but two structures were removed. In 2004, Memorial Hall was successfully modified to house the popular Please Touch Museum. In 2005, a 'Centennial District' was created with a 20-year master plan to turn the area into a cultural and historical attraction with an end date of 2026—the 250th anniversary of American Independence.

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Philadelphia has long exploited its colonial and revolution-era historic assets as tourist destinations. However significant the roles of these places were in the story of our nation's coming-of-age, there are many more chapters of Philadelphia's long history that have manifested themselves in the City's fabric, often in visually striking and inspiring ways. But the majority of efforts and resources of the City, our Commonwealth, public agencies and local organizations have been expended on preserving and retelling only parts of Philadelphia's history, thereby marginalizing much of the City's historic fabric, and much of its history. It may be impossible to fully comprehend what has already been lost along the way. But what could be lost is staring us in the face. For

instance, what will Philadelphia's streetscapes feel like and skylines look like when one day the last of the City's stunning historic collection of once vital, now vacant and crumbling churches are finally gone? Showcasing the City's forgotten gems and reimagining them as venues for the arts and culture, Hidden City Philadelphia holds a quadrennial festival during which the public is invited to visit typically inaccessible heritage sites throughout the City and experience firsthand not only the power and Genius of Place, but what is at stake if no one figures out how to save these underappreciated assets. It's up to the imaginations of placemakers to recognize the need for reprogramming our City's treasures, retrofitting them to accommodate contemporary uses that will serve both to reinvent places and preserve their histories.

Consider the dramatic story of the historic Reading Terminal Market. Nearly as old as the City itself, in 1893 the market was improved and maintained by the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Company when the company relocated its terminal to 12th and Market Streets, building an elevated trainshed over the existing farmer's market there. The trainshed and Italianate headhouse, headquarters of the Reading Co., immediately took on landmark status. The market remains the oldest continuously operating farmer's market in the country and is one of Philadelphia's leading attractions.

However, for a century, the Market suffered through periods of stagnancy, a result of the same forces of

decentralization and urban disinvestment that plagued the City. It also survived a number of development and transportation infrastructure improvement projects—some implemented, some only proposed—that threatened the Market's survival and the impressive buildings themselves. In 1984, the connecting of previously separate commuter railroads resulted in Reading Terminal's closure. The market continued to operate, though with far fewer vendors. By the late 1980s, the former trainshed and headhouse suffered from neglect and were visibly deteriorating.

Reading Terminal's story of decline through the early 1990s evolved into one of spectacular revival, thanks to the dogged determination of city and state agencies to implement a number of large-scale tourism-oriented projects that included restoring and reprogramming the trainshed as part of the Pennsylvania Convention Center (1994), and retrofitting the headhouse for commercial leasing (1998). Though the small army of agents of change—the placemakers—were motivated by multiple agendas, the restoration and preservation of the historic Reading Terminal buildings reinvented a Place while respecting its roots and recognizing the value of what was already there.

Experience has shown that a collective lack of appreciation for the more recent past can become expensive. After the closing of Barcelona's International Exposition in 1929, the Mies Van Der Rohe-designed

reception pavilion was dismantled and its materials used in new constructions. In 1986, it reopened after a three-year long project to meticulously reconstruct it on its original site.

As appreciation for the beauty and rationality of mid-century modern design unfolds, will we one day look back upon the demolition of Carroll, Grisdale and Van Allen's Youth Study Center to make way for the new Barnes Foundation and consider it a regretful loss? Some already do. Many saw it as a hulking facility that met the ground offensively, turning a blind eye towards the adjacent landscape; others as a challenge ripe for reinvention rather than the wrecking ball.

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Innovative placemaking will not only celebrate the beauty and value of places as they are, but will also find creative ways to add to what already exists, even when that means working with some pretty rough material. In 1986, when Tyree Guyton started covering houses on Detroit's decaying and foreboding Heidelberg Street with polka dots, stuffed animal parts and assorted detritus, Detroit City officials took exception. Two blocks and decades on, a 2011 study by the Center for Creative Community Development reported that the Heidelberg Project's annual budget of \$400,000 and average 50,000 visitors per year creates an annual economic impact in Wayne County of \$3.4 million plus 40 jobs. A place of ruin turned

innovative resource.

In 1999, Friends of the High Line was founded by Joshua David and Robert Hammond to advocate for the preservation of the former New York Central Railroad's West Side Improvement, a 1.5 mile elevated freight railway built around 1933 to serve Manhattan, out of service since 1980. The abandoned infrastructure was viewed by many as an eyesore—a liability rather than a potential asset, and for that reason was in great danger of demolition. Thanks to the heroic efforts of Friends of the High Line, its preservation and innovative reuse as a garden/park have spurred some \$2 billion in ancillary development leveraged by a construction cost of \$150 million—a remarkable return on investment. And, of course, the unquantifiable benefits—creating a distinctive place, a recreational amenity well-loved by New Yorkers and tourists alike, a new precedent for inspiring change and design creativity across the globe—are immeasurable.

On a parallel track (so to speak), in 2010 Philadelphia's VIADUCTgreene recognized the exceptional placemaking opportunity presented by former Philadelphia and Reading rail lines that once served Reading Terminal: the 9th Street Branch, elevated above street level; and the City Branch, cut below street level but mostly open to the sky. The 501(c)(3) organization was formed to cultivate a vision for the preservation and creative transformation of this distinctive landscape infrastructure as a public garden along the soaring and submersive landscape of the rail

corridor. The linear park's grade separation would create the potential for 3 miles of continuous greenway enabling pedestrians and bicyclists to traverse the City without having to cross a single street. VIADUCTgreene envisions a greenway defined by its varied neighborhoods, its historic industrial character, and its exciting, existing spontaneous vegetation, carefully curated and managed with limited interventions. Most importantly, VIADUCTgreene envisions an open and transparent process that invites community members to take part in the placemaking alongside city agencies, advocacy groups and other decision-makers. If properly seen and valued for the what's already there, this world-class site will earn its rank among success stories in placemaking.

Learning from these cases in pursuit of normative placemaking ideals, there are a few take-aways. Effective placemaking is not just about inventing places; it's about finding, understanding and expanding the significance of the places we don't see or recognize the value in, sometimes just above our heads or beneath our feet. Placemaking must embrace and respect the existing landscape—urban fabric, natural, cultural and otherwise—on a level that requires transformational changes within education. We know there is work to be done when we take a look around us and see that our efforts to build and create too often result in uninspired, soulless places; places where there's no sense of "there" there; alien insertions lacking any relationship to context. At the same

time, we see that there is so much potential in repurposing the rusted and forgotten and revealing the unseen or ignored.

For the varied students of placemaking, learning, exploring, discovering, seeing and listening should be a continual process of self-education.

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