

Power of Placemaking Engagement Summary Report

Prepared for the Healthy Communities Initiative and the
Canadian Urban Institute

October 2023



**CANADA HEALTHY
COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE**



Land acknowledgement

The Healthy Communities Initiative and Happy Cities acknowledge all the Indigenous Peoples of Canada and recognize the ancestral territories of the Inuit, Métis, and First Nations people from coast to coast to coast. We acknowledge our collective and individual responsibility to recognize historical patterns of exclusion and abuse, to build our understanding of Indigenous peoples and cultures, and to commit to the ongoing process of truth and reconciliation.

The work done on this report and the remarkable stories shared took place across Turtle Island. Indigenous Peoples have stewarded and cared for these places since time immemorial. We are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land. Further, we are cognizant that many community planning practices reinforce racist and exclusionary practices of colonialism.

Through this project, we heard stories about how placemaking offers opportunities for Indigenous communities to (re)connect with their lands, cultures, and communities—for example, through spaces for gathering and healing. Placemaking today must confront the legacies of the past and search for new approaches that centre equity, inclusion, and diverse ways of knowing—making communities for, and with, everyone.



Contents

Power of placemaking overview	4
Making sense of placemaking across Canada	5
What is placemaking	6
What we heard	7
Wellbeing benefits of placemaking	8
Meaning and belonging	9
Place-based positive impacts	10
Additional positive impacts	11
Rewriting stories of place	12
Insights on digital placemaking	13
Insights in small towns and rural settings	14
Insights from city staff	15
Insights from funders	16
Improving the placemaking process	17
Involving the community	18
Key insights for equitable placemaking	19
Conclusion	20
An ongoing conversation	21

Power of placemaking overview

Placemaking is an opportunity to shape and care for the places and communities where we live and spend time. The importance of local, high-quality, public spaces was underlined during the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, the Government of Canada supported community-led placemaking initiatives across the country through the Healthy Communities Initiative (HCI). This emergency-response funding underlined the value and importance of placemaking nationwide. While HCI funding has now closed, the momentum generated through its investment carries forward. The desire for community-driven change is stronger than ever. And, the impacts of placemaking are becoming increasingly evident.

Public spaces are the glue to our communities. They can enable feelings of meaning and belonging, strengthen social cohesion, and encourage a sense of collective identity. During the pandemic, people's access to and use of public spaces was simultaneously constrained and re-imagined.

Furthermore, the impacts of the pandemic have been uneven, exposing existing inequalities across communities and disproportionately impacting those who were already vulnerable due to systemic inequalities. In the face of these challenges, communities have been extraordinarily resourceful and resilient in improvising both temporary and long-lasting solutions. Many are undertaking work for immediate needs but also thinking about creating long-term and adaptable spaces.

This project, the Power of Placemaking, explores the role that community-led and supported placemaking interventions can play in supporting social connection and wellbeing. This *Power of Placemaking: Engagement Summary Report* shares the insights of over 100 placemakers who took part in eight discussion sessions during summer 2023 (more details on page 6). It is accompanied by the *Power of Placemaking: Snapshots*, a slide deck that shares evidence and stories to help people make the case for placemaking and motivate change in their communities.

What is the Healthy Communities Initiative?

HCI is a \$60 million investment from the Government of Canada to support community-led placemaking initiatives. HCI is funded by the Government of Canada and is run by Community Foundations of Canada in partnership with the Canadian Urban Institute. Between 2021 and 2023, HCI provided grants to over 1,000 organizations, including local government, city planners, nonprofits and charities, and community members. These projects have taken many shapes, each aiming to promote social equity through creative, context-specific solutions.

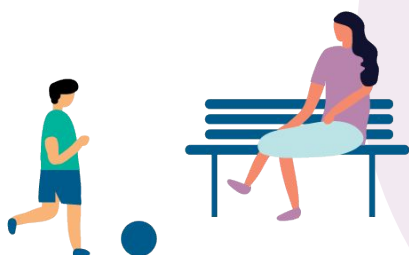
Making sense of placemaking across Canada

This summary report summarizes learnings from practitioners and community members across Canada, with a focus on how placemaking projects support community wellbeing. Drawing on the insights of these placemakers, we sought to understand the value of community-led solutions funded by HCI. Ultimately, the goal of this report is to build the case for why placemaking is valuable to communities across Canada.

Over the summer of 2023, HCI worked in partnership with Happy Cities to explore the power of placemaking. Our aims were to:

- 1) Explore the role that placemaking plays in our individual and collective wellbeing;
- 2) Understand new possibilities that emerge through community-led and place-based solutions;
- 3) Identify knowledge gaps around placemaking;
- 4) Learn more about barriers to placemaking; and,
- 5) Show how individual projects are part of a broader network of placemaking work being done across Canada.

This summary report shares findings from eight online discussion sessions, held from June to September 2023. Participants included a range of practitioners and community members involved in placemaking projects. These included city staff, funders, community organizations, and people of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities—many of whom had received funding from HCI. In total, the sessions connected over 100 participants to share their experiences and lessons learned, and explore the impact of placemaking projects. Qualitative experiences and stories were collected from each session and synthesized, the findings of which are shared in this summary report. While certain sessions were themed by topic (such as placemaking with city staff and placemaking in rural settings), the overarching goal of the sessions was to gain insight into the interwoven relationships between place, community, and wellbeing.



Who is Happy Cities?

This work was conducted in partnership with Happy Cities. Happy Cities is an urban planning consultancy that specializes in placemaking, engagement and the wellbeing impacts of the built environment—turning evidence into action for happier, healthier, and more inclusive communities. For more information, visit www.happycities.com.

What is placemaking?

Placemaking refers to community-led or -supported projects that aim to improve places and the connection between the people who share them. These projects may take the form of murals, community gardens, street parties, a variety of programs and activities, and much more. The collaborative process of placemaking is as important as the outcome.

Placemaking projects may aim to:

- Create safe, inclusive, and vibrant public spaces
- Improve mobility and accessibility
- Foster (cross)cultural connections
- Enhance resilience and connections to nature
- Build community capacity
- And much more!

Anyone can be a placemaker.

Placemakers are municipalities, local businesses, community organizations, and people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds.



Photo: Centre-ville de Saint-Félicien

For example, one participant from Saint-Félicien, Quebec shared how they helped to organize a temporary market, which had a positive impact on an elderly woman who sold soaps. The market provided her with an opportunity to be around other people, which was important for her social wellbeing. In addition, the market had a drumming area that families used, fostering community engagement and inclusivity.

In Elliot Lake, Ontario, another project, Digital Creator North (a low-barrier drop-in space for youth) which moved its program online during the pandemic, allowing youth to use technology to access digital media and art tools. Although it was initially challenging to get people online due to screen fatigue, the physical launch of the space connected youth together online and, later, in person—fostering positive interactions.

What we heard

Through the sessions, we heard that placemaking is instrumental in transforming communities: It can spark creativity, build capacity, encourage engagement, and strengthen a sense of pride. Community-led projects can improve access to services, build skills and capacity, and revitalize underused spaces—all of which make neighbourhoods more vibrant and inclusive.

Placemaking projects can have a profound impact on the social fabric of communities. We heard that placemaking projects contribute to wellbeing in a variety of ways, including:

- **Social connection:** Placemaking initiatives often promote social connection and positive interactions. When people talk to one another, engage with businesses, and participate in activities, it creates a stronger sense of community and sociability, which positively affects mental and emotional wellbeing.
- **Physical and mental health:** Placemaking encourages activity—including walking, dancing, biking, and play—all contributing to a healthy lifestyle. These are essential factors for overall wellbeing that improve both our physical and mental health.
- **Safety and comfort:** Placemaking can contribute to a sense of safety in public spaces by making them more accessible and engaging. A well-designed and activated public space can help individuals feel safer, supporting individual and community wellbeing.
- **Inclusion and belonging:** Placemaking often includes cultural, social, and historical elements that promote inclusion. By involving people from all backgrounds, ages, and abilities—as decision makers within their communities—these initiatives can support a sense of belonging, pride in place, and ensure that spaces and programs meet residents’ diverse needs.
- **Resilience and climate action:** In many cases, placemaking can directly address climate action, such as by enhancing natural spaces and supporting food security. Furthermore, when people participate in community initiatives, they build social ties that strengthen resilience and the capacity to create solutions that are specific to their local context.



*“Fundamentally,
placemaking is about
strengthening the connections
between people.”*

Comment from session participant

Wellbeing benefits of placemaking

During each session, participants were asked to rank the wellbeing benefits of placemaking that they noticed in their work. Almost three quarters of all participants shared that, in their experience, placemaking created more social connections and helped strengthen community inclusion.



Creating more social connections	72%
Strengthening community inclusion	72%
Fostering a greater sense of meaning and belonging	69%
Strengthening existing social bonds	61%
Supporting a sense of safety and comfort	59%
Creating more resilient and emergency-ready communities	58%
Encouraging active lifestyles	47%
Building individual and collective capacity	45%

Session participants noted additional benefits, including:

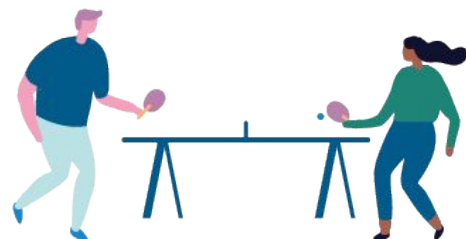
- The opportunity to explore and try new things;
- Discovery of community capacity and existing resources;
- Access and exposure to diverse knowledge holders in the community;
- Providing easier access to programs and services;
- Giving the opportunity for quieter voices in the community to be involved in decision making (including youth and seniors); and,
- Creating opportunities for intergenerational relationships and interactions.

Meaning and belonging

A common theme across every session was how placemaking initiatives are instrumental in promoting a sense of meaning and belonging in places and among communities. Participants shared how projects celebrated the stories of communities who tend to be excluded from typical civic processes, and addressed their needs. They highlighted the importance of active engagement, co-creation, and establishing a shared sense of shared ownership in this work.

A number of key placemaking outcomes were identified that relate to sense of meaning, belonging and inclusion:

- **Sense of ownership:** Involving the community in shaping and animating public spaces instills a sense of ownership and agency, and encourages ongoing stewardship.
- **Enhanced inclusion:** Placemaking enables small interventions that have significant community impacts, reflecting the diverse needs and desires of people who live there. This includes traffic safety improvements, accessible programming, and food security.
- **Diversity and representation:** Placemaking can highlight voices from different age groups and cultural backgrounds, inviting them to shape their community and connect with each other. For example, community art can celebrate previously hidden histories, while all ages programming can connect people across generations.
- **Safe and accessible:** Placemaking can be a tool for a diversity of people to draw on their strengths and experiences to shape spaces, services, and programming that meet their needs and promote a sense of security in their communities.
- **Capacity building:** Low-barrier placemaking initiatives support capacity building, as they encourage community members to join civic processes and implement solutions that identify and address community needs.
- **Public participation** Placemaking provides unique opportunities for civic participation, inviting individuals to shape their own environment or participate in programming that also solicits input on key civic projects.
- **Community gathering:** Placemaking creates spaces and activities that allow people to gather and interact. Projects provide purposeful space for community members to come together—sparking organic social interactions and leading to conversations.
- **Developing social ties:** Placemaking can support community resilience by facilitating interactions among neighbours, through programming, cooperation, and shared interests.
- **Storytelling and cultural exchange:** The act of sharing stories, traditions, and experiences constitutes a central element of placemaking. This can foster connections between generations, cultures, and neighbours.
- **Collaboration and partnerships:** Collaborative efforts between local groups, agencies, and organizations are a common strategy in placemaking. Building connections with diverse partners can enrich initiatives and spark long-lasting relationships.



Place-based positive impacts

Participants from the sessions identified an array of benefits that emerged from placemaking work that they were involved in. These include place-based benefits, advancing reconciliation, building community capacity, and more. Some were unanticipated—for example, one project initially aimed to provide educational opportunities for kids, but ultimately fostered intergenerational ties between kids, adults, and seniors. Another project started as an informal park potluck between neighbours, and snowballed into a weekly gathering of over 100 community members, with the municipality approaching the neighbours to learn how to replicate the process in other parks across the city.

Strengthening pride in place

Placemaking can boost community morale and a sense of pride in place. It can foster social connections, vulnerability, and authenticity within a community, which allows individuals to make meaningful connections. This can happen in a number of ways, including through programs and cultural celebrations like “Culture Days,” or by creating activities and spaces that cater to families and naturally draw multiple generations. Placemaking initiatives often aim to bridge divides between different communities, such as newcomers and established residents, fostering a sense of pride—regardless of background.

Improving access and inclusion

Placemaking often addresses unseen barriers, such as social isolation or accessibility issues. Placemaking can break down these barriers by making spaces more inviting, as well as by offering activities and social opportunities in people’s immediate neighbourhoods. This is particularly important for those who may not have the means to travel far for programming or were uncomfortable meeting indoors during the pandemic. Accessible and inclusive placemaking considers ways for people with different backgrounds to get involved, offers programming for an array of ages, abilities and life experiences, and accounts for barrier-free access to the initiatives—whether they are physical, or take place digitally.

Revitalizing public spaces

Placemaking initiatives have transformed unloved public spaces into vibrant and attractive areas. These transformations often include space for artistic expression and cultural experiences. Public space improvements also help people feel safe, valued, and connected. For example, seasonal patios, open streets, and temporary event spaces provide opportunities for community members to connect and enjoy their neighbourhood—contributing to a vibrant urban environment.

Changing perceptions of space

Placemaking has the power to reshape how people perceive and use public spaces—by reimagining streets for people instead of cars, or making parks welcoming for seniors and not just children. Placemaking interventions also support liveable communities, by encouraging alternative transportation methods, prompting people to connect with each other, and more.

Boosting local business

Beyond aesthetics, placemaking has a substantial economic impact. By attracting a diverse audience and amplifying local businesses, it can bolster the financial health of the community and, in turn, the individuals within it. Some placemaking initiatives specifically aim to support local businesses or are championed by a business. For example, a local shop scavenger hunt highlights neighbourhood businesses. Other events are social and draw large crowds—such as festivals on main streets, which benefit local shops and boost revenue.

Additional positive impacts

Adapting to changing circumstances

Placemaking initiatives can help communities quickly adapt to changing circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. These adaptations can result in unique and pragmatic service offerings and space improvements, like shared meals, open streets and outdoor libraries that meet the evolving needs of a community.

Reconciliation and healing

Placemaking initiatives can support reconciliation. Indigenous-led projects have created healing gardens and murals that reflect local Indigenous experiences and histories. Indigenous-led placemaking can raise visibility while centering cultural values, making them safer and more accessible for Indigenous community members. These placemaking projects also help tell an important story of place for the community at large, inviting everyone to be part of the conversation around reconciliation.

Connecting with nature

Placemaking projects can contribute to enhanced safety and access to green spaces and nature. Contact with nature increases physical and mental wellbeing.

Caring for the environment

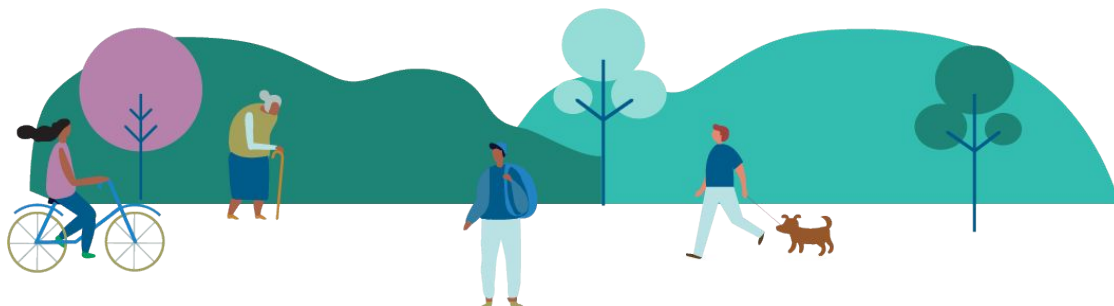
Placemaking can also address environmental concerns in the community, such as recycling or local food security. This results in safer, cleaner outdoor spaces that promote a healthier, more and sustainable community in the long term.

Enhancing digital skills and connections

With the rise of technology and internet access, placemaking approaches, projects and even the definition of placemaking itself, have adapted. Online and hybrid placemaking projects may teach new skills, combat social isolation, and provide access to critical resources—meeting people where they are. Digital and online platforms have extended the reach of these initiatives, allowing low-barrier opportunities for many individuals living with disabilities, in remote areas or who have social anxiety to participate in programs. In this way, the uptake in digital placemaking projects has expanded the reach of placemaking to support and connect many individuals with diverse needs.

Building capacity and skills

With relatively low barriers to participation, placemaking create opportunities to build capacity for community groups and individuals. Placemaking build capacity by offering tools and inspiration to help people get started, as a framework to identify and implement solutions, and as a low commitment way for people to get involved in civic processes. Learning from successful projects and applying these lessons in different locations is a fundamental aspect of placemaking initiatives. This knowledge generation and transfer allows activities to adapt and ensures that the positive impact of placemaking can be experienced by all.



Rewriting stories of place

Placemaking includes a range of tools that can be used to enhance the identity and experience of a place. When led by diverse community members, placemaking can foster inclusivity, enabling communities to tell their own stories and rewrite the narratives associated with their surroundings. From participants at the sessions, we heard several ways that placemaking projects have helped rewrite the story of a place or tell an untold story.



Inclusivity and wellbeing

Placemaking initiatives can create spaces that promote inclusion and wellbeing. This includes addressing the needs of marginalized communities, such as the LGBTQ+ community—enhancing representation, and ensuring that spaces and activities are safe and welcoming.

Collaboration and empowerment

Placemaking takes a collaborative approach to change. This model allows individuals to see themselves as decision-makers and active protagonists within their community—even if they may not feel welcome to participate in traditional civic engagement processes.

Cultural expression

Placemaking is a means to express cultural identity. For example, initiatives can celebrate Indigenous knowledge, history, and art. Placemaking also allows for a redefinition of relationships between people and the land.

Legacy and long-term impact

Placemaking projects can have long-term impacts that continue to benefit communities for years. Projects can also build capacity in the community, which can lead to ongoing stewardship of place, support ongoing transformation and stronger community networks.

Storytelling and connection

Placemaking projects often use storytelling as a powerful tool to connect individuals within or across communities. The stories that are told—organically while the project is underway, or as an end goal—help create a sense of belonging and connection.

Creating new narratives of place

Placemaking efforts can change the narrative and perception of a place—shifting it from a negative or avoided space to one of belonging, where residents become friends and work together to advocate for improvements.

Insights on digital placemaking

One session focused on digital and hybrid placemaking projects across the country. Online placemaking initiatives brought people together in various ways—from building community connections, to fostering digital inclusion, to equipping individuals with new skills. Placemaking in an online setting is highly adaptable and welcoming. It can create unique opportunities to reach people and have long-term impact on the communities it serves.

Online initiatives aim to strengthen community bonds and connections, often within specific geographic regions. Participants reported that their projects primarily enabled community connections at the regional and provincial scale. Online skills-building and education was a significant goal that we heard: Many projects seek to enhance digital literacy, improve workplace skills, and empower participants to acquire new skills. Participants used creative approaches, such as cooking classes to teach english and math, and hard copy “how-to” guides to support digital literacy. These examples underlined how digital placemaking can make online engagement, learning and community-building fun.

Some projects focused on advocacy and empowerment, providing information and resources on workplace rights and other advocacy issues. Many initiatives served diverse populations and highlighted the importance of cultural diversity. Online projects commonly combatted social isolation during the pandemic. Other projects addressed geographic or physical isolation, making use of technology to bridge those gaps.

Hybrid placemaking projects (which offer both an online and a place-based component) are a unique opportunity to connect people across a wide geographic area. For example, one project offered digital resources to connect people with nature, expanding their audience and making it more inclusive and representative.

Participants from the session emphasized that digital placemaking can be a tool for bringing people together and making spaces more accessible. Broadly, participants highlighted:

- The importance of digital inclusion and online training opportunities;
- The potential for technology to improve access to resources (including educational and language based resources, as well as professional skills and job opportunities);
- The need to overcome assumptions and barriers around access to technology;
- Opportunities for collaboration, and both individual and collective empowerment;
- Opportunities to connect people online during the pandemic and after.

These lessons are valuable for community organizations and community members seeking to adapt to the digital age.

We found that digital and hybrid placemaking projects occurred most commonly at the regional level and then the provincial level.



Insights in small towns and rural settings

Rural and small town settings offer distinct settings for placemaking. While participants in these sessions identified a number of shared challenges and opportunities, local context can vary widely. There are variations in government presence, resources (for example, infrastructure, transportation, and internet), and culture. The rural context shapes placemaking efforts in a variety of ways. It also makes placemaking all the more valuable as a problem-solving method to consider and address hyperlocal issues.

There were a number of shared considerations explored in rural and small town settings. Many people expressed that the role of government is less prominent, and many fundamental resources are not a given (such as health care services and accessible transportation). Opportunities may be limited by lack of indoor and outdoor spaces to gather. Invitations can be difficult or expensive, with printing costs and unreliable internet. With a limited tax base, smaller communities may have fewer funding and investment opportunities—impacting the spaces and programs available to residents. In many cases, an “either/or” approach is taken to prioritizing new initiatives.

However, we heard just as many opportunities, strengths, and success stories around placemaking in small and rural communities across Canada. In many cases, placemaking projects were able to address essential needs—for example, early infant care, eating disorders, skills development, and more. Another strength is that small towns and rural settings can have a strong sense of pride, and tight knit connections. This can facilitate the celebration of diverse cultures (e.g., Indigenous or newcomer).

In these settings, risks and success look different than in urban areas. A new initiative takes time to become established, then may grow organically as people learn what is happening around town. Trust takes time to build—sometimes months or years—as activities and new connections are built. Projects can be successful even with low participation numbers (that still reach a notable percentage of the population), especially where placemaking seeks to involve vulnerable community members.

In some cases, invitations may be difficult if new connections and trust need to be built. In other cases, rural settings have a huge benefit through word of mouth, online groups, or the installation of just a few posters around town.

Commonly, we heard that a shared space was foundational to the success of community-led projects (such as rooms, facilities, or centres). Spaces that are flexible and open to the community can amplify diverse voices and meet a range of needs—for example, allowing people to host educational programs, health resources, skill classes, and social events.

Outdoor spaces (such as parks, plazas, gazebos or stages) can bring people together naturally, offering both formal and informal activities. Indoor spaces had other benefits, especially for year-round use. And access to low-barrier space lets different community voices take initiative in their own ways.

Participants shared a wide range of success stories. In particular, there has been a lot of success around main street activations in small town settings. Activations such as festivals and street closures bring activity and vibrancy to the downtown core—attracting people from the region and supporting local businesses.



Insights from city staff

Municipal staff reported a variety of reasons for supporting placemaking initiatives. In many cases, placemaking can achieve specific municipal goals—notably, fostering social connection and advancing sustainability; as well as enhancing safety, comfort, and vibrancy in community settings. However, the aim and framing of placemaking shifts regularly along with local government politics and strategic priorities. In turn, municipal funding for placemaking is not consistent in many communities, which risks hindering community and capacity and trust building efforts.

Across Canada, municipalities have had success particularly with temporary and seasonal placemaking interventions and events. Examples included winter festivals, art installations, seasonal patios, open streets, games in civic spaces, and bicycling events. These projects are often low-cost and low-barrier for a city to initially undertake, as they do not require infrastructure investments.

In many cases, the community ends up taking ownership of these projects. It was noted that the most successful projects have a community group or business on the ground to spearhead support and ongoing operation. These temporary interventions can quickly become well-loved, permanent features of the community.

City staff identified a number of barriers to placemaking in their work. A top barrier is municipal organizational structure and capacity, especially when decision makers and planners do not consult the staff that are responsible for implementing and maintaining the project. This communication is key to sustain the project goals and vision, address any issues that may arise with implementation, and ensure upkeep of the project into the future. Participants emphasized the importance of engaging maintenance and operations staff in physical intervention projects, as they are responsible for maintaining them once in place.

While placemaking may be relevant to (and considered beneficial) across multiple departments, placemaking projects are not always managed by the most interested, relevant, or well-resourced department. In other cases, cities contract out work and may lose the opportunity to build relationships of trust with their communities.

Another barrier is limited access to ongoing funding, as placemaking is often excluded from common grants and infrastructure budgets (even though placemaking projects and maintenance are low-cost in comparison to other city budget items). To access funding, staff often require support from Council and management—which may vary between years.



“Depending on who’s in charge, you have to sell your projects in different ways. For some, it’ll be a focus on benefitting local business and, for others, supporting active transportation. One of the more challenging aspects of this work is constantly reevaluating while trying to accomplish things.”

Comment from city staff participant

Insights from funders

Many projects depend on external funding to begin or expand their work. With limited consistent funding from levels of government, funders play a vital role in placemaking.

When deciding to support a placemaking project, funders consider a number of factors. A top consideration for funders is the level of community involvement in the planning and implementation of a project—both around the numbers of individuals to be involved, as well as potential opportunities for capacity building. Related to this, funders were interested in who projects served and how they addressed specific needs of these communities. They reported a particular focus on funding projects to build capacity in BIPOC communities, and among other marginalized groups. Finally, value alignment between the proposed project and funding organization was key.

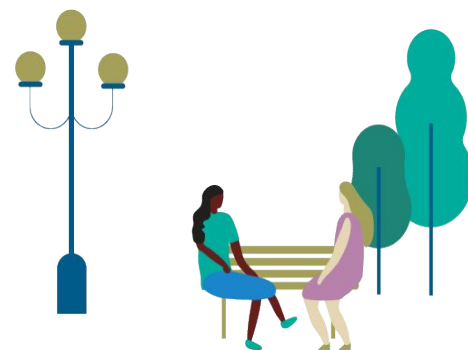
Funders expressed openness to exploring different ways to evaluate and allocate of funding in ways that met community goals and capacity. A number of questions were raised by participants, including:

- How do funders evaluate a placemaking initiative for multiple outcomes? For example, physical health, social connection, environmental impacts, and economic impacts.
- How can funders adapt the funding application process to better understand community priorities and community learnings? For example, through a one-on-one session.
- How can funders be more flexible in their requirements? For example, in the questions they ask and the responses they require from applicants.
- How can funders better identify gaps between their own requirements, and the needs of the community?

Participants identified a number of barriers in their work funding placemaking projects—from the application to the evaluation—and beyond. One notable barrier is that community processes do not always align well with funding requirements that are often rigid. For example, tight project timelines and reporting deadlines may not reflect the reality of a project that takes time to plan or requires trust-building across the community. Short timelines may allow funders to have a “snapshot” of the project and outcomes, but fail to capture the legacy of a project—for example, if its impact snowballs over the span of the following years.

Access to funding can also be transactional for community groups and funding organizations, rather than about ongoing relationships or capacity building (especially when funds are accessible one time only, and then require community autonomy). Another barrier is that funding requirements often ask for quantitative outcomes, but struggle to adequately measure qualitative outcomes—like social capital—that are equally as important.

Funders also noted the need to make the application and approval process more simple and streamlined for applicants (and several mentioned that this work is currently underway). Funding is often limited in its use and not able to cover administrative or operational costs needed to execute a project, such as paying staff wages or covering office expenses.



Improving the placemaking process

At several of the community-oriented sessions, participants were asked to identify any and all resources that would help improve their projects. Based on their experiences, the majority of participants shared that additional funding would enhance their work. Over half also expressed the desire for number of practical resources, such as communications support and connections with mentors or other practitioners.



Additional funding	85%
Communications support to better amplify and promote the project	54%
Connecting with other practitioners to brainstorm and share ideas	54%
Mentorship from a practitioner working in a similar field	54%
More time (longer project timeframes)	46%
General support	49%
Online resources	28%
Access to specific skills, training, or tools	26%

Involving the community

Through the sessions, we heard about who is often involved in placemaking projects. Placemakers are a diverse range of people—representing different backgrounds, experiences, and stages of life—each contributing their unique perspectives to create a sense of place in their communities. The following voices emerged as being regularly involved in placemaking. Missing voices—that participants would like to see more often involved in placemaking projects and conversations—include city councillors and federal funders.

Artists and creative practitioners: These individuals are actively engaged in bringing artistic and creative elements to placemaking projects. They offer programming and activities (such as spoken word or drumming) and often lead murals, digital urban screen experiences, and other artistic expressions.

Community leaders and educators: Community leaders and educators play an essential role in facilitating placemaking projects, particularly in initiatives focused on skills development and food sovereignty. These individuals—working behind the scenes or in leadership roles—can play a crucial role in coordinating activities, accessing resources like funding, and connecting diverse community members.

University and academic communities: Faculty, students, and academic institutions are often engaged in placemaking initiatives—offering resources, talent, student initiatives, and funding to support and research projects, as well as build student experience.

Local groups: Building connections and collaborating with various organizations and partners is a fundamental aspect of placemaking. This includes partnerships with community organizations, non-profits, local businesses, pride societies, and other community groups.

Community members of all ages and backgrounds: Placemaking projects can engage community members of all ages, from children as young as five to seniors up to 95 years old. Individuals of a range of backgrounds and ages may lead or co-lead placemaking projects. This inclusive approach encourages participation and a sense of connection across the community.



Not everyone uses the term “placemaking,” but anyone can be a placemaker—city staff, community organizations, non-profits, local businesses, and people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds.

Key insights for equitable placemaking

Through these sessions, and in combination with the research presented in the *Power of Placemaking: Snapshots*, we gleaned additional insights especially around funding and the allocation of resources to support placemaking.

Core needs come first: Placemaking projects can serve acute needs—and should provide solutions to local issues. However, it is critical that funding for placemaking projects does not replace funding for core services and resources. Access to these critical provisions, such as daycare and health related services, are especially important in rural communities and for vulnerable populations.

Funding should match placemaking goals and timelines: Funding opportunities rarely provide certainty, especially for projects with longer implementation timelines. Longer timelines are especially necessary when working with vulnerable communities and non-profits, who do not necessarily have the structure, support, and connections needed to quickly secure funding, access resources, and connect with the populations they are serving. Seed funding to test ideas and explore proof of concepts would reduce barriers to participation, expand access and encourage and innovation within the placemaking realm. Access to ongoing and sustainable sources of funding would also make placemaking more inclusive and enable further capacity building. For both short- and long-term funding, knowledge generation and community learnings should be key goals on their own. More opportunities for learning, as well as evidence and data on what works and what doesn't can support the placemaking community of practice and allow new placemakers to learn from earlier experiences.

Equipping communities with knowledge and resources: More access points that make it easy for people to get involved or lead community initiatives will expand representation in placemaking. Potential access points include greater awareness raising and knowledge sharing, application guidance, low-barrier applications, funding, and mentorship. A central point for practitioners and community members to turn to will be helpful in disseminating resources and facilitating connections. National funding opportunities, like HCI, are well-suited to ensure equitable access to placemaking across the country. In the absence of consistent national funding, a national community of practice and best practice resources for soliciting, evaluating, supporting and sustaining could fill this gap.

Measuring impacts: A flexible and replicable evaluation approach would be valuable to measure the impacts of placemaking. A low-barrier approach to evaluation (either a low-barrier best practice or a specific evaluation tool) will allow for consistency in how city staff, funders, community groups, and individuals report the impacts of their work.



Conclusion

Place-based initiatives led by local communities play a key role in enhancing our individual and collective wellbeing—from sparking social connections and supporting community resilience to building civic capacity and boosting a vibrant local economy. Through these sessions, we expanded our collective understanding of the interwoven relationships between placemaking, community, and wellbeing. We learned that wellbeing is a mosaic of unique moments and experiences.

We saw how placemaking is able to address diverse and acute needs in communities, across urban and rural settings. Placemaking projects may take a wide array of shapes and forms—from popular murals and opens streets, to a diversity of celebrations of culture, family programs, and much more.

Through all of these types of projects, placemaking acted as a solution to a local need that was identified. In many cases, placemaking offered a multitude of overlapping and interconnected benefits. These benefits and outcomes included:

- Meaning and belonging
- Strengthening pride in place
- Improving access and inclusion
- Enhancing digital skills and connection
- Connecting with nature
- Caring for the environment
- Adapting to changing circumstances
- Revitalizing public spaces
- Supporting reconciliation and healing
- Changing perceptions of space
- Boosting local business
- Building capacity and skills

Anyone can be a placemaker, whether or not they use the term. From coast to coast, placemaking projects are open to all and led by people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds. In addition to community members, placemakers often include artists and creative practitioners, community leaders and educators, academic communities, and local organizations and businesses.

An ongoing conversation

Through the engagement sessions, we heard key learnings, challenges, opportunities and most importantly—passion and excitement from placemakers across Canada. As momentum grows around placemaking, shared learnings and funding opportunities will continue to evolve. This report reinforces the importance of continuing these conversations and sustaining momentum around the power of placemaking—and inviting diverse voices from coast to coast to be part of this process.

Placemaking is a process for community building that municipalities, funders, community organizations, and people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds can tap into to enhance social connections and wellbeing for all. It is a cost-effective way to achieve a wide variety of interconnected and overlapping benefits—whether social, environmental, economic, or all of the above.

These sessions demonstrate the value of investing in placemaking, from small, local grants to nationwide, multi-million dollar investments like HCI. The power of placemaking can be felt in communities across Canada—from rural towns to urban centres, and everywhere in between. While no two projects are exactly alike, the creativity, impact, and breadth of initiatives present placemaking as a unifying force. It is clear that the places we live in play a critical role in nurturing our individual and community wellbeing. Everyone deserves the opportunity, and an invitation, to help shape their community. Our communities are stronger for it.

For more information about this project and for additional resources, we invite you to visit placemakingcommunity.ca/power-of-placemaking/



COMMUNITY
FOUNDATIONS
OF CANADA

FONDACTIONS
COMMUNAUTAIRES
DU CANADA



CANADA HEALTHY
COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE



Canadian
Urban
Institute

Institut
Urbain du
Canada

Canada 

 Happy Cities