

# Power of Placemaking

Evidence and stories on the wellbeing benefits of  
community-led placemaking



**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 of 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.

# Placemaking has the power to...

- Spark social connections
- Improve physical and mental health
- Strengthen belonging and inclusion
- Boost a vibrant local economy
- Increase safety and comfort
- Grow resilience and climate action

Placemaking has been embraced as a unifying force in urban and rural settings across Canada. If you're interested in placemaking, this document is for you!

From Tuktoyaktuk to Dawson City, and from Vancouver to Montreal—discover the power of placemaking through research and stories on the following pages.



# About this document

Placemaking is an opportunity to shape the places 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). While HCI funding has 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 increasingly evident.

The Power of Placemaking explores these impacts. The research snapshots and stories presented in this document show how relatively small amounts of funding can go a long way in strengthening social ties and collective wellbeing. We invite you to use and share these pages to support your own placemaking efforts!

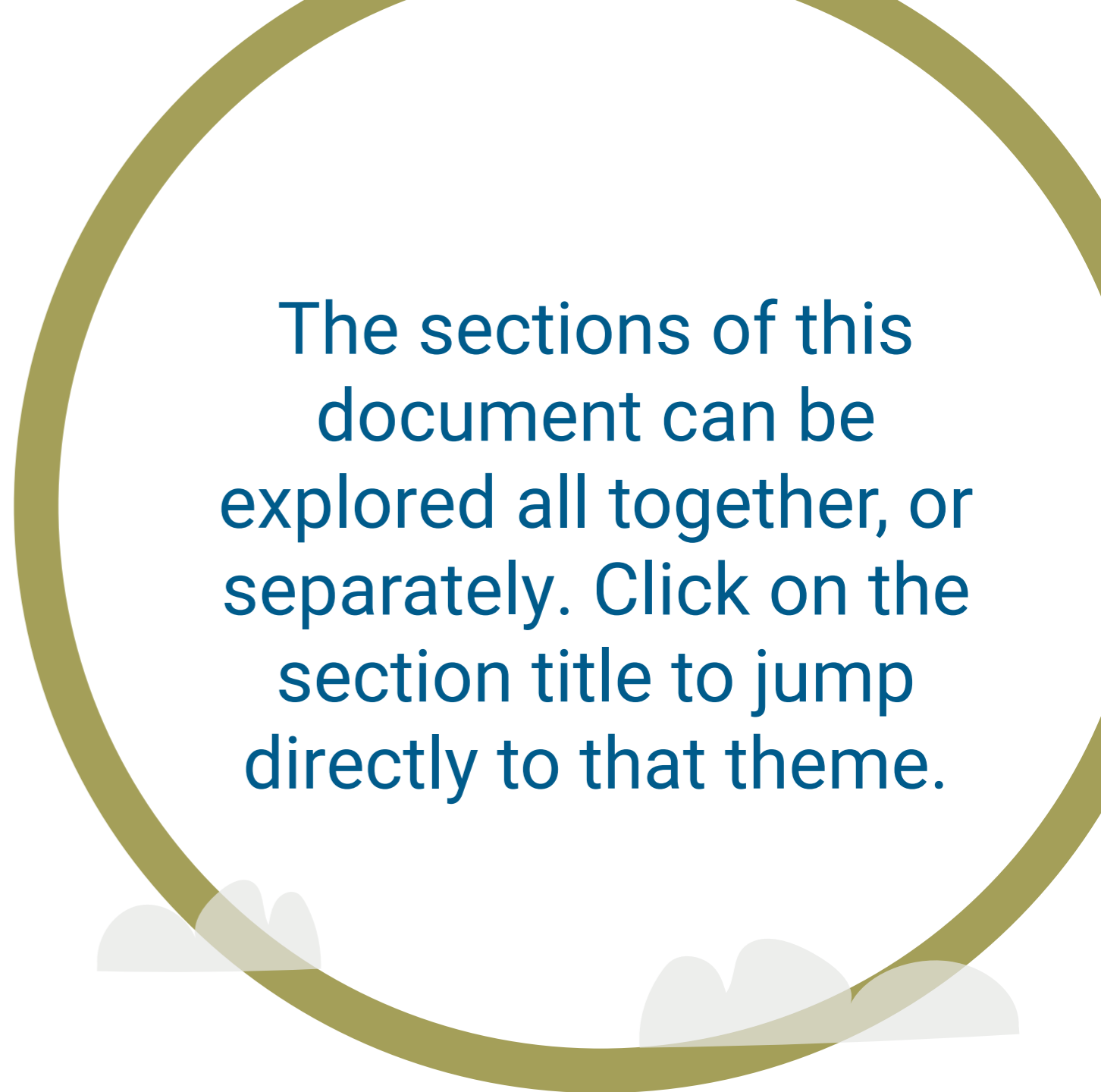
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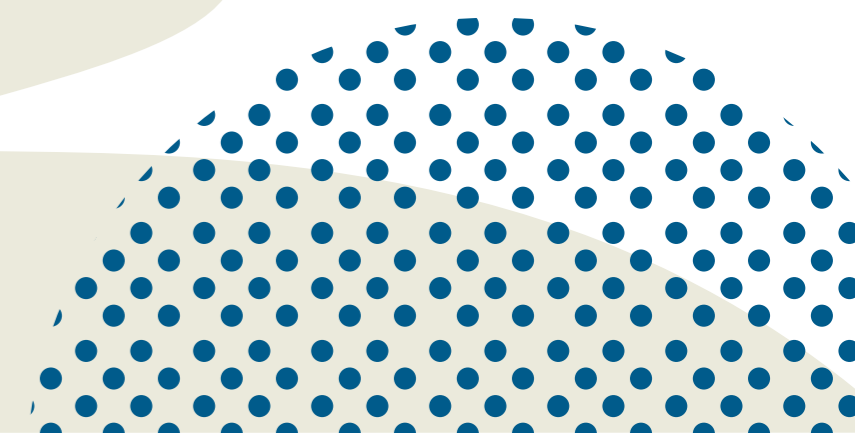
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The sections of this document can be explored all together, or separately. Click on the section title to jump directly to that theme.



# What is placemaking?

Placemaking refers to community-led or -supported initiatives that aim to improve a place. These projects may take the form of murals, benches, community gardens, open streets, a variety of programs and activities, and much more.

## **Anyone can be a placemaker.**

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

For more information, visit: [placemakingcommunity.ca/power-of-placemaking/](https://placemakingcommunity.ca/power-of-placemaking/)

## **Placemaking can:**

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



# Placemaking for who?

Placemaking projects should be created by and for the communities they serve, while considering local context and available resources. In all projects, it's key to ask critical questions, such as: Who is this project for? Who are the decision-makers on this project? Whose voices are—or are not—in the room?

For more information, visit:  
[placemakingcommunity.ca/power-of-placemaking/](https://placemakingcommunity.ca/power-of-placemaking/)



# What do we mean by wellbeing?

Wellbeing encompasses our psychological and physical health, as well as perceptions of our own health and happiness.

This research explores the benefits of placemaking on six themes related to individual and community wellbeing. These themes are interconnected and naturally overlap with one another.





# Placemaking sparks social connections.

People with strong social relationships are happier, healthier, and live 15 years longer on average than those who feel lonely and isolated.

Placemaking can initiate conversations among strangers and strengthen community connections.

For more information, visit: [placemakingcommunity.ca/power-of-placemaking/](https://placemakingcommunity.ca/power-of-placemaking/)



# Streets connect neighbours.

Through its Pavement-to-Plaza program, Vancouver transforms underused road space into places for neighbours to sit, play, and socialize. A 2019 study by Happy Cities found that people hanging out at the plazas were 33% more likely to agree with the statement, “This is the kind of place I would like to meet new people” compared to people on regular street blocks nearby.

**33%**  
more likely to  
want to meet new  
people



# Shared outdoor spaces reduce loneliness.

Community spaces offer opportunities to bring people together. A multi-city European study in Barcelona, Kaunas, Doetinchem, and Stoke-on-Trent found that loneliness decreases with each additional hour that people spend visiting green spaces—places with street trees, parks, water, and other natural features.

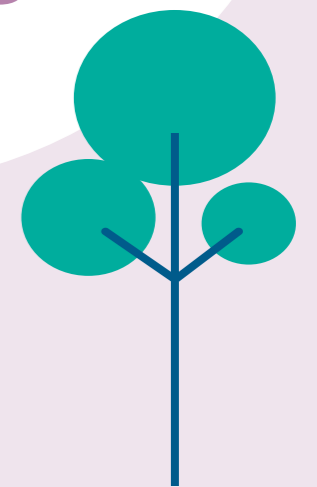
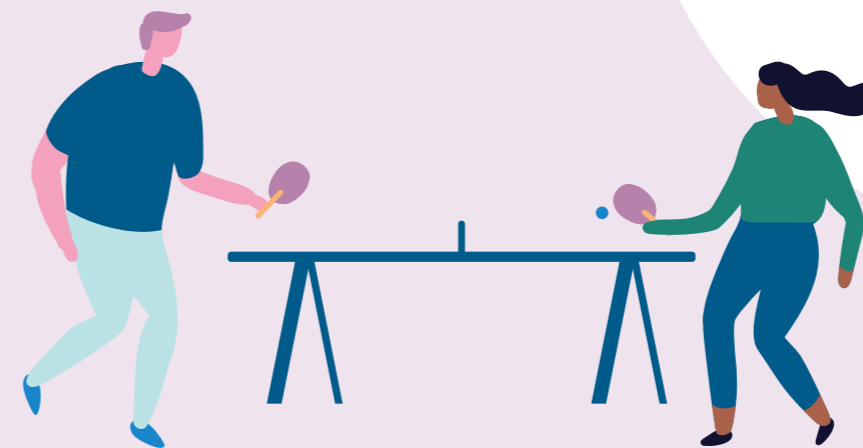


# People are attracted to vibrant, active spaces.

Lively spaces increase casual social encounters, create opportunities to meet strangers, and build relationships with familiar faces. A Toronto Metropolitan University study found that people are:

- 50% more likely to spend time in places with art, play equipment, and seating.
- 63% more likely to feel positively towards these places.
- 77% more likely to tell other people to visit.

**50%**  
More likely to  
linger in vibrant  
spaces



# HCI spotlight: Grey Highlands outdoor library

The **Grey Highlands Public Library** provides essential services, such as WiFi and access to resources. During the pandemic, people sat outside on the steps of the building, on the grass, and on the sidewalk, to access the internet.

With the support of a grant from the Healthy Communities Initiatives (HCI), the Library installed seating to help create a comfortable, outdoor space where people could socialize and access services. The furniture also invigorated their new outdoor gazebo, transforming it into a comfortable space where people enjoyed spending time, socializing, and animating the space through their own activities.

Flesherton,  
ON



# HCI spotlight: Creating networks for new parents

*"We created a space, and now [the families] are teaching us how we can constantly evolve the space to meet their needs."*

In Dawson City, a northern community with many Indigenous residents, **Healthy Families Healthy Babies** helps new parents create support networks. Funding from the Healthy Communities Initiative (HCI) helped create a small community centre. The space hosts a variety of services, programs, and classes, including childcare, cultural activities, and programs on pre- and post-natal care, sewing, moccasin making, local herbal remedies, food processing, and more. The space allows new parents to connect for hours daily, share resources and stories, and build relationships that transcend the program itself.

In a setting where the majority of community members don't have family in the area—and with hardships around extreme climates, short winter days, and limited access to resources and entertainment—these social connections play a key role in community wellbeing, especially at a stage in life that can be isolating, like early parenthood.



Dawson  
City, YT

# Story spotlight: Community lawn chairs

With a \$1,000 grant and support from local Home Depot stores, the **Shawnee-Evergreen Community Association (SECA)** in Calgary placed 60 plastic chairs on pathways, in parks, on condo patios, and next to little free libraries around the community.

Organically, residents have organized the chairs to create social nooks. For example, SECA discovered several chairs re-arranged in a circle under the shade of nearby trees. The chairs also have stickers with QR codes to visit SECA's website and learn about activities in the community. SECA recruited 19 chair observers to take notes a few times a week in September 2023, to see who is using the chairs, and how. The data will inform future placemaking projects. The chairs have raised awareness for the organization and helped create a friendly community.

Calgary,  
AB



# References and resources on the connection between placemaking and social ties

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## Additional resources:

Well-Being Assessment: Pavement-to-Plaza Program, [www.happycities.com/projects/pavement-to-plaza](http://www.happycities.com/projects/pavement-to-plaza)

A Recipe for Urban Happiness, [www.happycities.com/blog/a-recipe-for-urban-happiness](http://www.happycities.com/blog/a-recipe-for-urban-happiness)

New NAR Survey Finds Americans Prefer Walkable Communities, [www.nar.realtor/newsroom/new-nar-survey-finds-americans-prefer-walkable-communities](http://www.nar.realtor/newsroom/new-nar-survey-finds-americans-prefer-walkable-communities)

For more information, visit: [placemakingcommunity.ca/power-of-placemaking/](http://placemakingcommunity.ca/power-of-placemaking/)



Placemaking encourages walking, rolling, biking, play, and new social connections—all contributing to a healthy lifestyle.

Physical activity not only boosts our physical health—but mental, too.

For more information, visit: [placemakingcommunity.ca/power-of-placemaking/](https://placemakingcommunity.ca/power-of-placemaking/)

**Placemaking improves  
physical and mental health.**

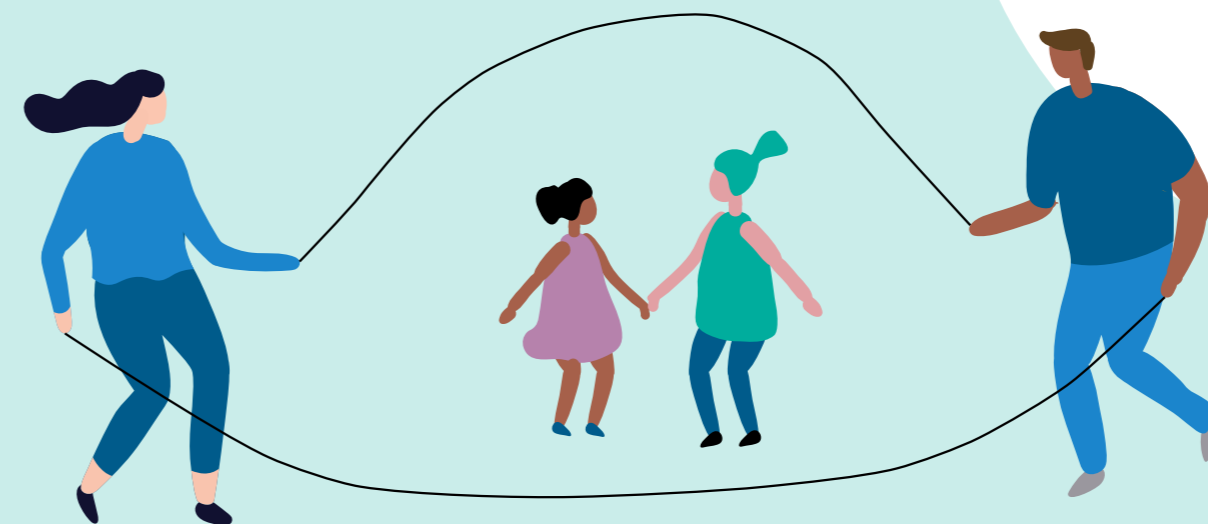


# Playful streets encourage an active lifestyle for kids.

For over two decades, Belgian cities have closed a number of neighbourhood streets to cars for part of the day during summer vacations to give children space to play. Many of these streets are supervised and equipped with activity areas. A 2013 study of these Play Streets in Ghent found that street closures led kids to sit 64 minutes less per day, and spend 14 more minutes in vigorous play.

Active play is key for healthy childhood development (boosting self-esteem and reducing stress) and in preventing childhood obesity.

**1 hour**  
of additional  
physical  
activity



# Safe streets support active travel—and community.

In Spring 2023, Vancouver closed several street blocks outside of six elementary and high schools across the City for 30 to 60 minutes at drop-off and pick-up times. As a result of the School Streets program:

- 23% of families reported walking more.
- 33% of secondary students reported walking more.
- 82% of people reported that the School Streets with games and play activities made them feel more connected to their community.



**33%**  
of students walk  
to school more  
often

# Slow streets work best when planned together.

Slow streets should make it easier to reach jobs, shops, and services. When the pandemic hit, Oakland closed several streets to cars to make for space for cycling and jogging.

Soon after, the City realized that the closed streets weren't meeting the needs of Black, Latino, and low-income residents—making it harder to reach in-person jobs and essential places (like schools, grocery stores, transit hubs, libraries, and clinics). So, the City made a more sincere effort to listen.

After deeper engagement with the community, Oakland pivoted to create safe zones around these essential places. The City used signs and barricades to calm traffic at key sites, while still allowing for movement—making streets safer for everyone.


**Placemaking is  
an ongoing  
conversation**



# HCI spotlight: Western Bay Boardwalk improvements

The **Western Bay Boardwalk** is a one-kilometre path that runs along the Atlantic Ocean towards a lighthouse. It is a popular walking area, where people of all ages stop to enjoy the view and chat. Many seniors visit the boardwalk, which provides a safe path without tripping hazards. But, due to a lack of funding and maintenance, it became unsafe and needed repairs.

A small group of local residents from the Western Bay Lighthouse Trails organized to complete minor repairs. However, by 2020, the repairs had become major and more work was needed. With funding from the Healthy Communities Initiative (HCI), the community was able to fix a portion of the boardwalk. The boardwalk has since returned to its place as the heart of the community, a natural gathering spot where residents and visitors can enjoy the beautiful Western Bay. The number of daily visitors has more than tripled since the repairs.



**Conception  
Bay, NL**

*Photo: Charis Cotter*



# HCI spotlight: Pedals for the People



For people in vulnerable situations, access to transportation can make all the difference in being able to earn an income, access support networks and social services, and live an active lifestyle. However, the increase in bicycle popularity has created industry shortages and inflated the prices of used bikes. To address this challenge, **Pedals for the People** provides free bikes, discounted labour, and used parts for people facing financial barriers.

At the start of the pandemic, Pedals for the People experienced a 37% decrease in clients accessing their services due to COVID-19 restrictions. In partnership with the City of Vancouver and with funding from the Healthy Communities Initiative (HCI), the organization was able to provide free and regular bicycle repair clinics at Oppenheimer Park from June 2021 to June 2022—meeting people where they are, in a safe outdoor setting. Over 900 repairs were completed and two peer workers were hired to support the program.



Photo: Pedals for People

# HCI spotlight: Friendship benches

The **Canadian Mental Health Association Windsor-Essex** (CMHA-WECB) was concerned with the mental health of its community during the pandemic. A report published by CMHA Ontario in August 2020 found that a third of Ontarians felt their mental health had declined. High levels of stress were common and 14% reported that they often felt depressed.

In partnership with Windsor-Essex Community Foundation and supported by the Healthy Communities Initiative (HCI), CMHA-WECB installed eight blue “friendship benches” to create safe, outdoor spaces where connections and conversations are encouraged. Each friendship bench has a QR code that directs people to services and resources available in the community, helping the organization reach people who may not otherwise have access to mental health care. This project was inspired by similar and successful initiatives in Zimbabwe, the United Kingdom, and New York City.



Photo: CMHA-WECB

# HCI spotlight: Bradley Park Winter Program

In Moosomin—where winter weather spans half the calendar year—skating is a popular activity and travel mode. However, with COVID-19 restrictions, the Town’s Parks & Recreation Department was unable to offer public indoor skating. As a result, the Town set out to create outdoor skating paths that would get kids (and the general population) outside and active. To do this, the Town flooded and froze almost 500 metres of the park roadway. This initiative allowed skaters the space to pass each other and skate together while remaining physically distanced.

The outdoor skating was a success, drawing over a thousand people. Thanks to Healthy Communities Initiative (HCI) funding, the Town has expanded the **Bradley Park Winter Program**, creating three more tracks and grooming 13 walking paths as cross country ski trails. As the Parks & Recreation team said, *“We knew it was imperative to find some way to get our community active... that desire shaped the project!”*



Moosomin,  
SK



Photo: Town of Moosomin Parks



# References and resources on the connection between placemaking and mental and physical health

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For more information, visit: [placemakingcommunity.ca/power-of-placemaking/](http://placemakingcommunity.ca/power-of-placemaking/)

## Additional resources:

From "streets for Traffic" to "streets for People": Can Street Experiments Transform Urban Mobility, [www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01441647.2020.1761907](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01441647.2020.1761907)

Place Making: Value and the Public Realm, [www.placemaking-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Value-of-Placemaking.pdf](http://www.placemaking-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Value-of-Placemaking.pdf)

Defensible Space: A New Physical Planning Tool for Urban Revitalization, [www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01944369508975629](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01944369508975629)

Tactical Urbanism: Short-Term Action for Long-Term Change, [www.researchgate.net/publication/303728799\\_Tactical\\_urbanism\\_Short-term\\_action\\_for\\_Long-term\\_change](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/303728799_Tactical_urbanism_Short-term_action_for_Long-term_change)

Where Words Fail: Teach Architects and Urban Designers Like Violinists, [www.happycities.com/blog/where-words-fail-teach-architects-and-urban-designers-like-violinists](http://www.happycities.com/blog/where-words-fail-teach-architects-and-urban-designers-like-violinists)

People who feel a strong sense of belonging are healthier, more productive, more trusting, and live longer. And when people are involved in shaping community spaces—such as painting a mural or organizing a block party—they are more likely to feel a sense of care for these places.

For more information, visit: [placemakingcommunity.ca/power-of-placemaking/](https://placemakingcommunity.ca/power-of-placemaking/)

**Placemaking strengthens  
belonging and inclusion.**



# Communities requires places to meet, and events to enjoy together.

A national survey in the United States found that the leading factor in whether people feel a sense of attachment to their community is if they have community events and places to meet people.

However, not all neighbourhoods have the same access to free places to gather, such as parks. This disparity is especially acute in lower-income communities.

**Community spaces foster belonging**



# Co-designed streets strengthen a sense of community.

In Portland, Oregon, City staff supported low- to moderate-income residents in designing new placemaking amenities for streets in their community. Amenities included benches, gardens, art, trellises, and more.

After the amenities were added, 53% of residents rated their community as better than before. Residents reported:

- Stronger social ties
- Higher participation levels
- An enhanced sense of place
- A more attractive environment

**53%**  
**supported new  
amenities**

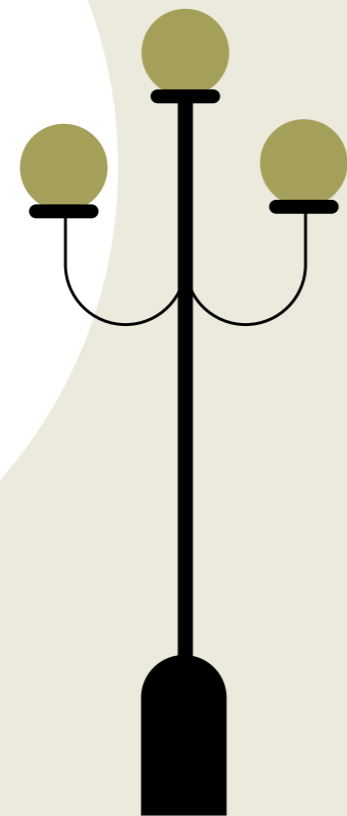


## Public plazas boost safety and trust.

An analysis of multiple public life studies by Happy Cities compared how people felt at regular city blocks to how people felt at sites that had a placemaking intervention, such as a plaza. At the plaza sites, 73% of participants agreed with the statement, “I feel people here can be trusted” (11% higher than at regular city blocks).

**25%**  
stronger  
reflection of  
community

The study also found that women were 25% more likely to agree with the statement, “This place reflects my community” in plaza locations compared to regular street blocks. In several cases, twice as many women were observed spending time in the plazas than men, suggesting these spaces are perceived as safe and comfortable for women.



# HCI spotlight: Myths and Mirrors community art

**Myths and Mirrors Community Arts** is a grassroots community organization that provides opportunities for people of all ages and backgrounds to experience and take part in the arts outside of mainstream settings. “We Keep Each Other Safe” is a community mural project, led by Franco-Ontarian artist Mique Michelle, that explores community care and mutual aid in the time of COVID-19, specifically with those experiencing poverty and homelessness.

The mural is located on an outdoor wall behind the YMCA and recognizes the important work the YMCA did with its overnight warming centre during the pandemic. This initiative, supported by the Healthy Communities Initiative (HCI), contributed to the revitalization of a shared outdoor space through art. Through collaborative design and implementation, the project provided a creative opportunity to engage downtown community members who were disproportionately affected by COVID-19.



**Sudbury,  
ON**



Photo: Gabe Abate

# HCI spotlight: Cultural park and history walk

Based in northern Alberta, the **High Level Native Friendship Centre** received funding from the Healthy Communities Initiative (HCI) to build a cultural park. At the time the park was being built, the bodies of over 200 children from residential schools were discovered in Kamloops, causing a deep reaction in the community. The Friendship Centre realized it did not have an outdoor gathering place for ceremonies and for people to grieve together.

The Friendship Centre decided to develop the cultural park with the central focus of a teepee, representing Indigenous voices and commemorating residential school survivors. And adjacent to the cultural park, in partnership with the Mackenzie Crossroads Museum, a history walk tells the story of the Town and surrounding area. The history walk trail connects the Friendship Centre to the main highway, facilitating public access and raising awareness of local Indigenous cultures.



High Level,  
AB



Photo: High Level Native  
Friendship Centre

# HCI spotlight: IdAction Mobile services

Missions Exeko is a Montreal-based organization that uses creativity to connect with people who experience, or are at risk of, social exclusion. **The IdAction Mobile** is a “cultural and philosophical caravan” that brings the organization to streets, public squares, and parks to reach people experiencing homelessness. This program meets vulnerable people where they are, creating safe spaces where social encounters and conversation become possible and resources can be shared. Since 2012, the organization has engaged more than a thousand participants, circulating 2,900 books and distributing over 700 pairs of glasses and 2,000 notebooks.

Through funding from the Healthy Communities Initiative (HCI), Missions Exeko was able to adapt in response to COVID-19 and take into account new community needs: reducing isolation, providing access to sanitation, sharing information, and more.



Montreal,  
QC



Photo: Missions Exeko



# Story spotlight: Delightful Downtown for all

During the pandemic, the **Downtown Halifax Business Commission** hosted light shows outside the library to offer a safe and free winter activity. Each light show is designed to reflect a unique community or seasonal theme. The events have been a huge success and are running for the third year in a row. The Commission has installed cameras to track visitors, seeing over 400 spectators on average and sometimes over one thousand per show.

The light shows respond to community requests, and have been planned around events such as International Women's Day, Mi'kmaq history month, and spring break shows for families and kids. Other shows have paid tribute to African Nova Scotian heritage and the 1917 Halifax explosion (a historical event that many seniors remain closely connected to and were deeply moved by). The light installations are back for winter 2023, with 17 shows scheduled.



Halifax,  
NS



Photo: Downtown Halifax

# References and resources on the connection between placemaking, belonging, and inclusion

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An, Levy, and Hero, "It's Not Just Welfare: Racial Inequality and the Local Provision of Public Goods in the United States," 857; Gilliland et al., "Environmental Equity Is Child's Play: Mapping Public Provision of Recreation Opportunities in Urban Neighbourhoods." [www.researchgate.net/publication/45588479\\_Environmental\\_Equity\\_Is\\_Child's\\_Play\\_Mapping\\_Public\\_Provision\\_of\\_Recreation\\_Opportunities\\_in\\_Urban\\_Neighbourhoods](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/45588479_Environmental_Equity_Is_Child's_Play_Mapping_Public_Provision_of_Recreation_Opportunities_in_Urban_Neighbourhoods)

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Happy Cities. (not published) Meta-analysis of public life studies.

## Additional resources:

The Hantown Street Play Project, [www.researchgate.net/publication/305507827\\_The\\_Hantown\\_Street\\_Play\\_Project](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/305507827_The_Hantown_Street_Play_Project)

Neighborhood Built Environment and Income: Examining Multiple Health Outcomes, [www.pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19232809/](http://www.pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19232809/)

Job Access and Employment among Low-Skilled Autoless Workers in US Metropolitan Areas, [www.journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1068/a35209](http://www.journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1068/a35209)

Neighborhood Attachment and Its Correlates: Exploring Neighborhood Conditions, Collective Efficacy, and Gardening, [www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0272494410000526](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0272494410000526)

For more information, visit: [placemakingcommunity.ca/power-of-placemaking/](http://placemakingcommunity.ca/power-of-placemaking/)

# Placemaking boosts a vibrant local economy.

Vibrant places draw more foot traffic, generating customers and income for businesses. Thriving local businesses contribute to a more resilient community, creating jobs and activities for residents.



For more information, visit: [placemakingcommunity.ca/power-of-placemaking/](https://placemakingcommunity.ca/power-of-placemaking/)

# Pedestrian streets boost business.

**9%**

**drop in vacant storefronts**



Each summer, Montreal pedestrianizes ten major streets across the city. On Avenue Mont-Royal, the business vacancy rate improved by 9% from 2018 to 2023 (achieving 94.4% occupancy rates along the street). Contributing to their success, the pedestrian streets are in close proximity to many resident homes, and are programmed with amenities such as art, benches, shade, and walking paths.

A study on the impacts of a placemaking program to support patios and public spaces for restaurants in Toronto found that participating restaurants saw an increase in total revenue by over 30%. Nearly \$177 million in revenue was attributed to the new patio spaces.



**30%**

**increase in local business revenue**

# Businesses that champion placemaking see benefits.

In Scarborough, an initiative called plazaPOPs worked with local businesses, BIAs, students, and residents to temporarily convert strip mall parking lots into pop-up parks. Coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic, the project added garden boxes, flowers, seating, games, movie nights, and music performances to transform asphalt into free, publicly accessible spaces.

After the pilot, 100% of nearby business owners said they would like to see the pop-ups return. The program has since expanded into an annual initiative in several neighbourhoods across Toronto.

**100%**  
**support from  
businesses**



# HCI spotlight: The Platform on main street

In the Village of Siltou—a community of less than 100 people—there was an empty space beside the town hall on the main street. With a Healthy Communities Initiative (HCI) grant and support from the Village Council, a group of community volunteers built a large wood deck called “The Platform”, in homage to the rail system. It’s a simple space—free to use, with lighting and power outlets.

Community members are invited to take ownership of the space and attend activities. The space includes a growing art wall created by local artists, and hosts a variety of events, such as pop-up paint nights, flower shops, clothing exchanges, and a culture days weekend (with ukulele classes, screen printing, local area Indigenous sharing, and more). An annual concert series at the Platform has drawn over 400 participants each year, cementing downtown Siltou as a popular destination for the region.

Siltou,  
SK



Photo: Aileen Martin

# HCI spotlight: Tuktoyaktuk creative makerspace

Tuktoyaktuk is a community on the Arctic Ocean coastline of 1,000 people, 95% of whom are Indigenous. Over 30% of residents produce traditional arts and crafts, however there are few public spaces for residents to use. COVID-19 prevented travel across northern communities, limiting opportunities to attend workshops and courses. In response, the **Tuktoyaktuk Community Corporation** partnered with Aurora College to create a local makerspace with small-scale manufacturing equipment.

The pilot started in 2021 with a small selection of commonly used equipment and was well-received, with 40 people using the shared machinery in the first month. Through a grant from the Healthy Communities Initiative (HCI), the community brought in 3D printers and additional tools. The makerspace now provides recreational and educational opportunities, helps artists and craftspeople produce items for sale online, and provides important opportunities for skill development and business incubation.



**Tuktoyaktuk,  
NWT**



# Story spotlight: Harbord Village Fair

In Downtown Toronto's **Harbord Village**, the residents' association has run a fall fair for over 20 years. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the group decided to host an alternative event, noticing that the neighbourhood had many small, outdoor spaces that could support smaller-scale, safe social interactions.

Performers were invited to set up in these nooks—including garages, front porches, and alleyways—sharing live music and art across the neighbourhood. People were also invited to explore laneway art and participate in a local business scavenger hunt, helping support economic resilience. At a time when people had limited opportunities to connect, the event brought neighbours outside to stop for a minute, say hi to one another, and discover new shops and spaces.



Toronto,  
ON



Photo: Caroline Macfarlane



# References and resources on the connection between placemaking and a vibrant economy

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CaféTO. (2022). CaféTO Economic Impact Survey & Executive Summary. [www.torontojunction.ca/cafeto-economic-impact-survey-executive-summary](https://www.torontojunction.ca/cafeto-economic-impact-survey-executive-summary)

Stewart, B., Rotsztain, D., Landman, K., and Connor, M. (2020). Paradise Is a Parking Lot: WexPOPS Summary Report. Public Space Incubator. [www.issuu.com/plazapops/docs/paradise\\_in\\_a\\_parking\\_lot](https://www.issuu.com/plazapops/docs/paradise_in_a_parking_lot)

## Additional resources:

Place Making: Value and the Public Realm, [www.placemaking-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Value-of-Placemaking.pdf](https://www.placemaking-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Value-of-Placemaking.pdf)

Enhancing Pedestrian Safety with Tactical Urbanism, [www.repository.arizona.edu/bitstream/handle/10150/668175/SBE\\_2023\\_Capstone\\_Thesis\\_Barker-Winkworth.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y](https://www.repository.arizona.edu/bitstream/handle/10150/668175/SBE_2023_Capstone_Thesis_Barker-Winkworth.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y)

Citywide Assessment Of Parklets & Plazas: Summary Of Data Collected For Summer 2014 Public Life Study, [www.groundplaysf.org/publication/citywide-assessment-of-parklets-plazas/](https://www.groundplaysf.org/publication/citywide-assessment-of-parklets-plazas/)

The Impacts of Local Arts Agencies on Community Placemaking and Heritage Tourism, [www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1743873X.2015.1088019](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1743873X.2015.1088019)

For more information, visit: [placemakingcommunity.ca/power-of-placemaking/](https://placemakingcommunity.ca/power-of-placemaking/)

# Placemaking increases safety and comfort.

People of different genders, races, ages, and abilities have different experiences in public spaces. Co-created spaces and events help ensure that everyone's needs are met.



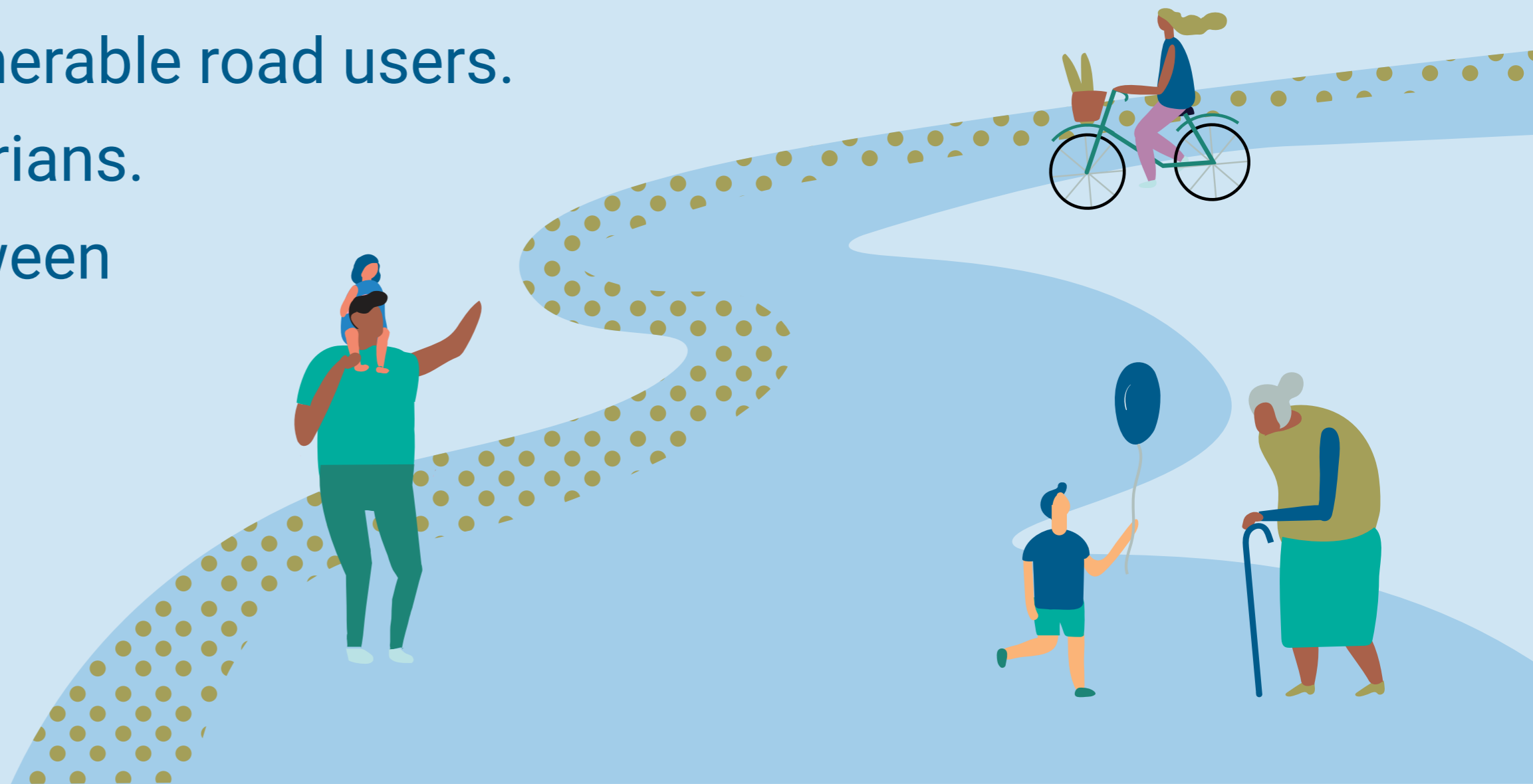
For more information, visit: [placemakingcommunity.ca/power-of-placemaking/](https://placemakingcommunity.ca/power-of-placemaking/)

# Street art slows traffic and save lives.

Street murals do more than just create a sense of place—they can make streets safer for walking, biking, and rolling. Cities across the United States have been working with residents to install painted murals and curb bump-outs to slow traffic. A Bloomberg Philanthropies study of 17 of these intersections observed:

- A 50% decrease in crashes with vulnerable road users.
- 27% more drivers yielding to pedestrians.
- 25% fewer dangerous conflicts between drivers and pedestrians.

**50%**  
**decrease in car  
crashes**



# Community festivals increase a sense of trust and safety among strangers.

**70%**  
feel safer with  
open streets

Cities including Bogotá and San Francisco hold regular Open Street festivals, in which they close streets to traffic and open them to people. One study found that 74% of respondents in Bogotá and 70% of respondents in San Francisco said Open Streets made them feel safer in their neighbourhoods.



# Welcoming, social places improve safety and comfort for women.

Placemaking attracts more people to streets and public spaces. Lively environments can help people feel safer, by adding “eyes on the street”. Studies show that public space transformations increase feelings of safety for women in particular.

A study of 31 parks in low-income neighbourhoods in New Orleans found that park attractiveness was significantly linked to the number of females using the park. Unclean and disorderly parks had 49% fewer female users. Attractive parks—with visually appealing landscaping and amenities like benches—had 146% more female users. In contrast, park attractiveness did not significantly impact male use.

**146%**

**more women  
at parks**



# HCI spotlight: Sea School for youth

**The Nova Scotia Sea School** offers outdoor youth adventures, aimed at building capacity and new skills. But, for many years, the Sea School grappled with under-representation of minority groups in its programs. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the Sea School doubled down on its diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. Supported by a Healthy Communities Initiative (HCI) grant, the Sea School partnered with three local organizations to create the Safe For Me Outdoors program, creating opportunities for Black, Indigenous, and newcomer youth to build outdoor recreational skills.

Safe For Me Outdoors activities are tailored to the comfort levels of participants, providing new skills that may even be lifesaving. For example, the program found that not all newcomer youth knew how to swim. Already, the program has seen success. Kids are able to step outside of their comfort zone while feeling safe—having built knowledge, trusting relationships, and confidence in their abilities.



Lunenburg,  
NS



Photo: Community  
Foundations of Canada

# HCI spotlight: Pop-up community centre

North Park is a diverse, mixed-income community near Victoria's downtown core. It is the most culturally diverse neighbourhood in the region, and hosts most of the city's social services. The vibrant neighbourhood is home to 2,800 people as well as numerous businesses, services, and recreational facilities.

During the peak of the pandemic, the neighbourhood accommodated emergency tents and shelters for over a hundred people in its central park. With funding from the Healthy Communities Initiative (HCI), the **North Park Neighbourhood Association** (a not-for profit that receives support from the City of Victoria) developed a pop-up community centre. This community space offered a variety of free and low-barrier services, such as weekly grocery hampers, phone check-ins to help seniors, and informational resources. The program served over 700 people in total, including housed and precariously housed residents alike.

Victoria,  
BC

Photo: North Park  
Neighborhood Association



# HCI spotlight: Amazing Place art tour

Scarborough,  
ON

East Scarborough is one of the most diverse communities in Canada. Many people in the community face racism and discrimination that impacts their safety, wellbeing, and opportunities to grow and thrive. In spring 2022, funded by a Healthy Communities Initiative (HCI) grant, the **Community Arts Guild in Scarborough** piloted the Amazing Place—a community initiative that has become an annual tradition in the neighbourhood.

Amazing Place is a free neighbourhood art tour and scavenger hunt for all ages that features artwork, performances, and interactive activities. This event—led by a team of residents, local organizations, and professional artists—is an opportunity to learn about and celebrate what the neighbourhood has to offer and to enjoy art activities and performances. The stops on the scavenger hunt include parks, local community services and businesses, the library, and more.



Photo: Community Arts Guild



# Story spotlight: Student-led traffic calming

In 2020, a student wrote to the City of New Westminster, asking for traffic calming on the street outside her middle school. “Cars don’t yield to us while we are riding our bikes,” she wrote. “We end up having to pull over because we feel unsafe”. The City listened, and offered funding for **Happy Cities to help Glenbrook Middle School** students to design new bump-outs—curb extensions that reduce street space for cars and encourage drivers to slow down.

After a design competition organized by the school’s art teacher, the grade 6-8 students painted the winning designs on the street in August 2021, just in time for back to school. Beyond improving safety, the project increased the students’ sense of ownership and belonging in the community.

As one student said, *“I’m going to bring my kids back here in 20 years and show them how we made our street safer!”*

New  
Westminster,  
BC



Photo: Jared Korb

# References and resources on the connection between placemaking, safety, and comfort

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Knapp, M., Gustat, J., Darensbourg, R., Myers, L., and Johnson, C. (2018). The Relationships between Park Quality, Park Usage, and Levels of Physical Activity in Low-Income, African American Neighborhoods. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(1): 1-9. [www.doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16010085](http://www.doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16010085)

## Additional resources:

Paradise Is a Parking Lot: WexPOPS Summary Report, [www.issuu.com/plazapops/docs/paradise\\_in\\_a\\_parking\\_lot#:~:text=IMPACT%20ASSESSMENT%20The%20benefits%20of,local%20businesses%20along%20the%20way.](http://www.issuu.com/plazapops/docs/paradise_in_a_parking_lot#:~:text=IMPACT%20ASSESSMENT%20The%20benefits%20of,local%20businesses%20along%20the%20way.)

Effect of Remediating Blighted Vacant Land on Shootings: A Citywide Cluster Randomized Trial, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6301418/#:~:text=found%20that%20remediating%20vacant%20land,of%20gun%20violence%20in%20cities.&text=Additionally%2C%20in%20a%20citywide%20cluster,reduced%20after%20lots%20were%20treated.](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6301418/#:~:text=found%20that%20remediating%20vacant%20land,of%20gun%20violence%20in%20cities.&text=Additionally%2C%20in%20a%20citywide%20cluster,reduced%20after%20lots%20were%20treated.)

Environment and Crime in the Inner City: Does Vegetation Reduce Crime?, [www.journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0013916501333002#:~:text=Results%20indicate%20that%20although%20residents,property%20crimes%20and%20violent%20crimes.](http://www.journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0013916501333002#:~:text=Results%20indicate%20that%20although%20residents,property%20crimes%20and%20violent%20crimes.)

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For more information, visit: [placemakingcommunity.ca/power-of-placemaking/](http://placemakingcommunity.ca/power-of-placemaking/)

# Placemaking grows resilience and climate action.

Placemaking can directly address climate action, for example through emergency preparedness or gardening projects.

When people participate, they build social ties that strengthen resilience—day-to-day and in a crisis. And, they consider solutions that work for their local community.

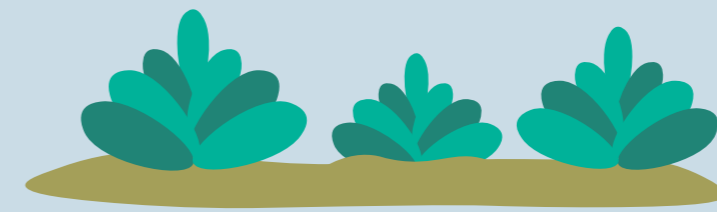
For more information, visit: [placemakingcommunity.ca/the-case-for-placemaking/](https://placemakingcommunity.ca/the-case-for-placemaking/)



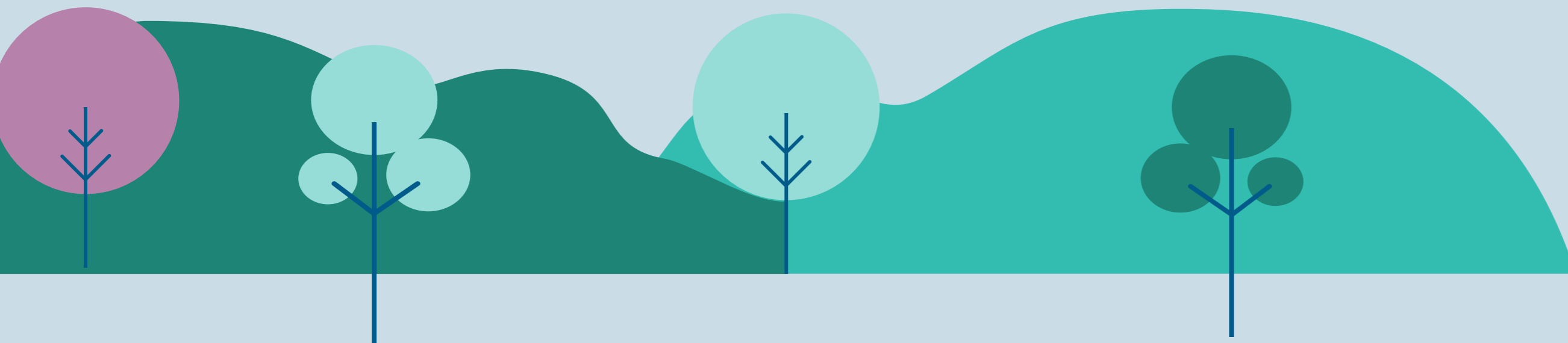
# Nature protects us.

Trees and gardens help mitigate against extreme heat and flooding. But green space is not always evenly distributed.

In the United States, low-income blocks have on average 15% less tree cover and are up to 4°C warmer than high-income blocks within the same city.



**15%**  
**tree coverage**  
**equivalent to**  
**4°C**



# Re-greening spaces is a natural next step.

**35%**  
reduction in air  
pollution

A permanent street closure in Seoul, Korea cut air pollution by 35% when an overpass was replaced with the Cheonggyecheon River Park, simultaneously providing protection against extreme flooding.

The 2023 Canadian City Parks Report surveyed city residents across Canada and found that 77% would like to see more streets pedestrianized or converted to parks.



# HCI spotlight: Forest Glen Connection garden

Challenges with food security and social isolation were exacerbated by COVID-19. In response, Ecosource led and involved local residents in redeveloping a community garden: the **Forest Glen Connection** project. With funding from the Healthy Communities Initiative (HCI), Ecosource engaged a team of diverse community members to share local needs, collaborate on the new design, and implement the project. The new garden created 3.5 times more growing space, 41 new garden beds, eight rain barrels, and enhanced biodiversity.

The collaborative process ensured that the garden met residents' needs. Upgrades included accessible pathways, shaded seating, a pollinator garden with native plants, and water access. Over 220 residents were engaged in 50+ workshops and stewardship sessions, including youth-led Indigenous gardening demonstrations. A survey found the garden supports social connection, healthy food, physical activity, and connection to nature—a particularly meaningful experience for youth.



Mississauga,  
ON



Photo: Monika Bianco

# People with stronger social ties are more resilient during crises.

In disaster scenarios, communities rely on their social ties just as heavily as they rely on physical infrastructure. In many cases, neighbours are the first to help each other, before first responders are able to be on the scene.

In the aftermath of the 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown in Japan, communities with higher levels of trust and positive social interactions experienced lower mortality levels. Residents from these communities were better able to care for family, friends, and neighbours alike—particularly by providing support to vulnerable community members. For example, many residents offered to physically help elderly neighbours move to higher ground in the 40 minutes between the earthquake and the tsunami that followed.

**Neighbours support one another during times of crisis**



# HCI spotlight: Common Ground for food security

Red Deer,  
AB

During COVID-19, concerned Red Deer residents convened to discuss food security, with statistics showing that 5,000 local households were experiencing food insecurity. Children in particular were impacted, with 3,300 kids and teenagers living in food-insecure households. Available donated food was often canned (with a long shelf life, but lacking nutrition).

Partnering with the City of Red Deer, Rethink Red Deer redeveloped an unused industrial site into a community garden called **Common Ground**. The project—supported by the Healthy Communities Initiative (HCI)—offers activities including summer camps, harvest suppers, and traditional medicine teachings. The garden shares produce with the food bank, donating over 2,200 pounds of fresh food in 2023. Common Ground increases food security, encourages social enterprises, and strengthens social connections. The project also offers a platform for community education to explore nutrition, urban gardens, composting, and rainwater harvesting—creating a more sustainable, healthy, and resilient community.





# HCI spotlight: Riverwood Conservancy

Along the Credit River in Mississauga, the **Riverwood Conservancy** aims to protect 150 acres of woodlands, meadows, ravines, and gardens, and connect people of all backgrounds to nature through education, gardening, and volunteering. Funded by the Healthy Communities Initiative (HCI), Riverwood adapted a number of programs to ensure safe and inclusive access to nature, including nature-based education and wellness programs for kids, youth, older adults, and people living with disabilities. Riverwood's enabling garden programs engaged over 300 participants with diverse needs through meaningful workshops and horticultural therapy programming. Additional programs include Healing with Nature (for seniors), The Land as a Healer (with the Indigenous Network), and many more.

In 2022, the floodplains along Riverwood experienced extreme flooding—taking down trees, destroying trails, disrupting local ecosystems, and depositing garbage. Program participants were inspired to volunteer, restoring the area, planting trees and shrubs, and providing support to wildlife.



Photo: Riverwood Conservancy

# References and resources on the connection between placemaking, resilience, and climate action

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McDonald, R.I., Biswas, T., Sachar, C., Housman, I., Boucher, T.M., Balk, D., et al. (2021). The tree cover and temperature disparity in US urbanized areas: Quantifying the association with income across 5,723 communities. PLoS ONE 16(4): e0249715.  
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Aldrich, Daniel P. (2017, October 13). Social Ties, Not Just Sandbags, Help Communities Bounce Back. UN Volunteers.  
[www.unv.org/Success-stories/social-ties-not-just-sandbags-help-communities-bounce-back](http://www.unv.org/Success-stories/social-ties-not-just-sandbags-help-communities-bounce-back)

## Additional resources:

To build resilient communities, start with social connection,  
[www.happycities.com/blog/to-build-resilience-communities-start-with-social-connection](http://www.happycities.com/blog/to-build-resilience-communities-start-with-social-connection)

Building resilience and emergency preparedness through social connections,  
[www.heyneighbourcollective.ca/2023/02/building-resilience-and-emergency-preparedness-through-social-connections-video/](http://www.heyneighbourcollective.ca/2023/02/building-resilience-and-emergency-preparedness-through-social-connections-video/)

Health Canada. “The Urban Heat Island Effect: Causes, Health Impacts and Mitigation Strategies”.  
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# An ongoing conversation

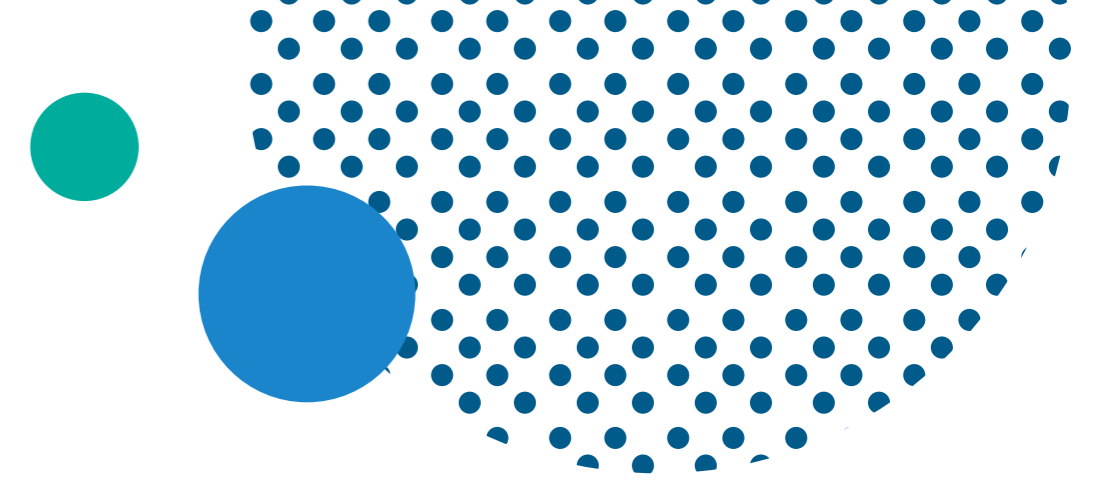


We acknowledge that many perspectives have not yet been captured, and further research is needed. New opportunities for placemaking are emerging across the country, and the placemaking movement is building momentum. In many ways, our work is just beginning, and we hope you'll be able to join us in this ongoing conversation. We invite you to:

- Craft your own placemaking story to show how placemaking is transforming your community
- Use the evidence and stories to advocate for placemaking
- Share these snapshots with your network or online (tag us on Instagram @placemaking.community)
- Share your story of placemaking with [healthycommunities@canurb.org](mailto:healthycommunities@canurb.org) or tag us on Instagram @placemaking.community
- Connect with Canada's Placemaking Community—joining peer learning activities, signing up for the monthly newsletter, sharing a story, contributing to a community toolbox of resources, or submitting or viewing upcoming events!

For more information, visit: [placemakingcommunity.ca/power-of-placemaking/](https://placemakingcommunity.ca/power-of-placemaking/)

# About this participatory research



The Healthy Communities Initiative (HCI) is a \$60 million investment from the Government of Canada to transform public spaces in response to COVID-19. HCI provided over 1,000 grants ranging from \$5,000 to \$150,000; 75% of the projects funded were carried out by registered non-profits. HCI offers ongoing support to placemakers through its community of practice—Canada’s Placemaking Community.

Over the summer of 2023, Happy Cities and HCI worked together to conduct research on 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 about barriers to placemaking, and 5) showcase how each project is part of a network of placemaking across Canada.

The evidence presented here has been collected through a review of placemaking research and projects. Eight online discussions were also hosted as part of this work, connecting the project team with over 100 placemakers, including residents, community groups, city staff, and funders. A summary report sharing detailed findings from these sessions is available at the link below.

For more information, visit: [placemakingcommunity.ca/power-of-placemaking/](https://placemakingcommunity.ca/power-of-placemaking/)

# Acknowledgments

This document was prepared by Happy Cities for the Healthy Communities Initiative (HCI). HCI is funded by the Government of Canada and is run by Community Foundations of Canada in partnership with the Canadian Urban Institute. The insights shared in this document have been reviewed by the HCI technical partners, who have provided their support and input throughout the research process.



Canada 



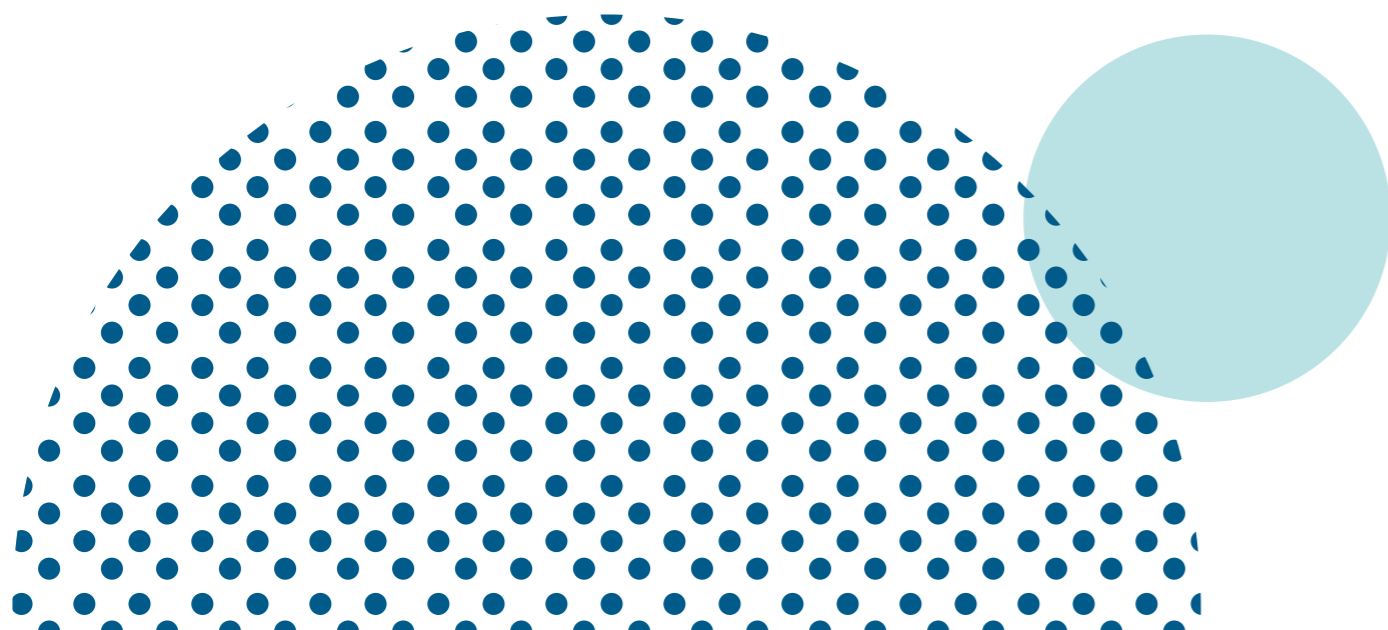
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FOUNDATIONS  
OF CANADA

FONDATIONS  
COMMUNAUTAIRES  
DU CANADA



# Power of Placemaking

Evidence and stories on the wellbeing benefits of  
community-led placemaking



**CANADA HEALTHY  
COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE**