

Placemaking, a stress relief tool for deliverables in GCC smart cities

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The public space was often defined as the smart city's interface. So, smart cities need to generate and maintain a welcoming, healthy, livable, vibrant public space to have a reason to be. The scope of smart cities is to create a space first, the infrastructure to strengthen the connections among people and between people to the place. Placemaking is a process centered on people and their needs, aspirations, desires, and visions, which relies strongly on community participation ([Moreira, 2021](#)). First theorized as part of the New Urbanism by [Jane Jacobs](#) in the 1960s, placemaking considers cities as living, interconnected ecosystems to be supported by a bottom-up community planning, relying on the wisdom of the inhabitants. On the formal aspect, the placemaking required well-designed dense urbanism and rehabilitation of the existing buildings where possible ([Adhya, 2016](#)). Urban space, as social connectors, plays an important role in letting the communities interact and exchange data and experience. The concept of creating active neighborhoods, welcoming public spaces, and cities that meet the needs of their inhabitants on different levels started to be applied from the 80s. Strengthening the connection between people and the setting they coexist in, placemaking refers to a collaborative process by which we can shape our public realm to maximize shared value. More than just promoting better urban design, placemaking facilitates creative use patterns, paying particular attention to the physical, cultural, and social identities that define a place and support its ongoing evolution. With community-based participation at its center, an effective placemaking process capitalizes on a local community's assets, inspiration, and potential, and it results in the creation of quality public spaces that contribute to people's health, happiness, and well-being ([PPS, 2018](#)).

Designing the public space has been identified by eleven key principles for placemaking, which could be summarized as considering the knowledge of the community, and direct observation and interaction with the site, creating space more than design, and keeping design always function-based, creating a network, having a vision, having the bravery of fast, light experiments, considering the city as an ongoing construction site. According to these principles, the community gets created before the physical space and contributes to generating it, as a manifestation of the collective intelligence into adaptable and inclusive visions, finding site-specific, dynamic and trans-disciplinary solutions, activate collaborative scenarios focusing on creating destinations and the best path connecting those.

Following the ITC metaphor, the interface “public space” needs a hardware to get manifested, which is the physical design of the space; this is engaging, guiding, and allowing citizens to make experience of the public realm. Cities worldwide must respond to a growing and diverse population, ever-shifting economic conditions, new technologies, and a changing climate in the twenty-first century. Short-term, community-based projects became a powerful and adaptable new tool of urban activists, planners, and policy-makers seeking to drive lasting improvements in their cities and beyond. These quick, often low-cost, and creative projects are the essence of the Tactical Urbanism movement. Whether creating vibrant plazas seemingly overnight or re-imagining parking spaces as neighborhood gathering places, they offer a way to gain public and government support for investing in permanent projects, inspiring residents and civic leaders to experience and shape urban spaces in a new way. What tactical urbanism can offer is some stress relief and a consistent help toward informed and comprehensive decision-making, anticipating the timeline of public engagement and public private people partnership (PPPP) investment, starting before the final restructuring of inadequate social and physical infrastructures starts ([Lydon et al., 2015](#)).

Similarly, the more recent theory of the fluid city paradigm ([Carta, Ronsivalle, 2016](#)) confirms very similar principles with several case studies worldwide, highlighting the possibility of working on a metonymic approach of urban portions, which can ignite a much wider regenerative process. The terms come from

the re-discovery of the waterfronts as an added value to the urban landscape of several main cities worldwide. Waterfront is a linear and marginal element in the urban texture, so the same concept can be applied to any marginal or specific focal point in the urban pattern, and the water metaphor gives a great idea of the city as a continuously evolving being, where projects can move smoothly and informally within interstitial spaces, mixing functions and old with new, while developing the new public promenade becomes a series of activated public spaces. The key here is a multidisciplinary layering and comprehensive vision of the public space and the whole urban structure by integrating urban design, landscape design, and architecture to analyze and engage the layers of place.

The city around the place is how the traditional Arab towns were designed and built, where mixed uses and then further residential settlements were generated by volumetric addition around the empty space beside the mosque, the collective space for the whole community. Therefore, a mosque served the purpose of offering prayers and informing different kinds of context used by the community: formative, recreational, security, ritual, and directional context, all complementary and related to each other. Mosques were used for social gatherings, like courts of law, funeral prayers, wedding ceremonies, and other religious ceremonies and gatherings (Radwan, 2021). As a flexible and multifaceted complex of facilities, the mosque served as a multifunctional and adaptive public space in the city. Going back to the original sense of collective and urban space for GCC-cities could enhance belonging and activate awareness and collective intelligence in co-generating smart urban and social growth.

Some kick-start is certainly needed, first in terms of communication, to re-establish the sense of community, which got lost. It is the community that creates the space, the software of intangible actions gets implemented before the hardware of the urban shape, activating the potential of inhabitants and listening to their stories and visions for the city's future. A very effective format is that of Paesaggi Umani (Urban Landscapes), connecting a group of people to explore a territory without apparent spatial-temporal linearity. The result is a multi-stakeholder narrative. The format, applied to different types of places and cities for over 20 years, lends itself very well to activating awareness of the known places to look at them with new eyes. Moreover, the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) can establish a digital library and database as a foundation for future projects (Petrucci, 2013). In this process of elaborating a possible imaginary for small towns or urban districts, "without which practical actions and real architectures will never follow, it is essential that the people who live around the elaboration of the architectural project - entrepreneurs, national politicians, administrators - also participate. Locals, artists - helping to build this future, first in the expectations, then in the possible concrete figurations" (Flora et al., 2013).

The kick-starting points of the placemaking process, linear in case of promenades or waterfronts, punctual in case of social buildings, parks, or squares, became main destinations, activating a chain effect of further smooth, fluid regenerative developments. Time Square became the attractor to take back the center of the city for New Yorkers, becoming a cultural hub, which garnered international attention, developed cultural partnerships, generated a substantial return on investment for the stakeholders, and catalyzed the greater New York City arts, design, and architecture communities to use the place as a global platform for experimentation. Activating action might simultaneously be contributing to both the stakeholders' and communities' strategic objectives for the place (Dobbin, 2020). A community and process actors' training on strategies and implementing mechanisms makes reiterating the experience possible while increasing the local human capital. The same approach can be applied on a regional level; if you apply what a square represents to a metropolitan city to a village as attractor of a whole regional area, destination and catalyst of further regeneration all around.

GCC existing cities in their process of becoming smart, resilient and sustainable, could apply a beneficial stress relief strategy by moving from quantitative performance indicators. By enjoying a qualitative process, those would reduce financial exposure and improve citizens' quality of life. It is possible to focus on bottom-up investments to minimize risks and maximize their effectivity in strengthen the community. It could be defined as a top-down-bottom-up approach. The institution could subsidize, strategize, and direct an inducted growth and development without risking urban financial struggles and activating instead self-regenerative and self-funded communities, spaces, and cities. GCC traditional cities were, after all, sustainable communities based on collective effort and intelligence.

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