

Placemaking

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About the placemaking report

Metropolitan Chicago residents enjoy many vibrant spaces that create a unique welcoming experience to visitors, residents, and employees. The region is also home to an effective transportation system that connects people to different neighborhoods, natural resources, and recreational activities. This shared connectivity allows residents to fluidly navigate those unique spaces and activities, to build greater connections between people, and foster healthier, more social, and economically viable communities.

Placemaking creates a sense of welcoming and helps support meaningful social interaction. It improves feelings of comfort and safety, increases the visibility of vibrant community spaces, and enhances local identity and communication. When done well, placemaking attracts local investment and generates a sense of pride, helping to increase community engagement and participation. Though difficult to quantify, this sense of connection between people and the spaces they inhabit creates a region of vibrant communities.

GO TO 2040, the region's current long-range comprehensive plan, identifies the need to create livable communities that are safe, walkable, and healthy. The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) Local Technical Assistance (LTA) program offers resources that help municipalities revitalize community spaces. Creating a strong sense of place increases the public value of our shared spaces and promotes economic prosperity. This report highlights local case studies in the Chicago metropolitan region and offers practical and feasible strategies to help communities activate spaces through placemaking.

ON TO 2050, the region's next comprehensive plan now in development, takes a regional-scale approach, but also recognizes the importance of local-scale details that create a sense of place and quality of life. By showcasing key examples of architectural quality, historic preservation, streetscaping, public art, retail mix, and others, the case studies in this report show how creative projects can maximize our shared spaces.

This report is divided into four sections. The first section defines placemaking as it relates to a metropolitan planning organization. The second section delves into successful placemaking examples in the Chicago region. Section three summarizes lessons learned from these case studies. The final section details how CMAP will continue to promote placemaking in ON TO 2050.



Placemaking framework

CMAP has contributed to placemaking efforts in the region through the framework of “livability.” GO TO 2040 discusses the key role livability plays in creating healthy, safe, and walkable communities. Likewise, the LTA program promotes placemaking through recommendations that help realize GO TO 2040’s livability goals. One example of an LTA project that promotes placemaking is the [Arts and Culture Planning: A Toolkit for Communities](#). The toolkit helps municipalities incorporate arts and culture into their communities, enhance livability by improving quality of life, and become more attractive places to live, work, and play.

The nature of placemaking is interdisciplinary and relatively abstract, making it difficult to establish a universal definition. Generally speaking, definitions of placemaking focus on creating high-quality public spaces that capitalize on the unique assets of a community to promote livability and strengthen quality of life. Other common terms with similar implications but different approaches include “tactical urbanism” or “urban acupuncture” and “ReUrbanism.”^{1,2} These are all urban interventions of a sort –low-cost, easily implemented, and often temporary projects that aim to make a place better. For the purposes of this report, we define placemaking as:

A multi-faceted approach to the planning, design, programming, and management of community spaces that seeks to capitalize on local assets in an effort to improve quality of life. This includes spaces both public and private and devotes attention to elements that contribute to a sense of place including architecture, historic preservation, public art, street life, and others.

This definition draws upon existing definitions by Metropolitan Planning Council, Project for Public Spaces, Urban Land Institute, and Congress for the New Urbanism. The goal of this definition is to encompass all aspects of placemaking, including programming and permanent management of spaces after their implementation. Further, this memo acknowledges that, while all placemaking initiatives should be accessible to the public, the spaces themselves are often privately managed or leverage critical involvement from private actors. Based on this definition, this memo identifies the following key elements of successful placemaking initiatives:

- **Open space.** Parks, green space, recreation areas, community gardens, and other natural or undeveloped spaces that contribute to community character. These spaces can include opportunities for passive or active recreation, or simply provide a gathering space for

¹ Project for Public Spaces defines “Tactical urbanism” as “lighter, quicker, cheaper,” bottom-up small scale implementation projects.

² The National Trust for Historic Preservation defines “ReUrbanism” as the mix of old and new buildings, working together to fashion dense, walkable, and thriving streets, that helps us achieve a more prosperous, sustainable, and healthier future. <https://savingplaces.org/reurbanism>.



programming, events, or as a complement to other community anchors and meeting spaces.

- **Programming.** Initiatives focused on structured events or programs that generate civic engagement and community involvement. While the specific sites that host programming events may not contribute significantly to a sense of place, the events and programs they host contribute to placemaking efforts. Farmers markets, movie screenings, and 5K walk/runs are examples of programming events that contribute to a sense of place independent of the space itself.
- **Historic preservation.** The image and identity of a community are often shaped by its history. Placemaking projects that leverage historic preservation seek to create unique destinations by highlighting and promoting significant events from the past. These initiatives often involve creatively repurposing historic structures.
- **Public art.** Murals, sculptures, performances, and other creative expressions featured in public spaces to be accessed by all members of a community. Generally, the strategic placement of these art forms serve as anchor points for establishing a sense of place.
- **Street life.** Placemaking strategies that contribute to a vibrant street life are typically those that enhance streetscapes and make them friendlier, safer spaces for residents to visit. These projects are not typically focused on one specific destination, but rather establish a welcoming environment in an area that benefits multiple community partners.
- **Architecture.** Historical structures often anchor neighborhoods and community gathering places, but carefully designed modern architecture projects can also create strong places. This category recognizes how significant architectural projects can contribute to a sense of place by creating a unique destination.



Case studies

The following case studies are a diverse collection of placemaking initiatives that highlight best practices throughout the Chicago region in communities with varying levels of capacity. The case studies detail differing uses, outcomes, and implementation methods, but each draw on elements described in the placemaking framework.

Chicago: Sembrando Bajo el Sol

Located in the Little Village neighborhood on the West Side of Chicago, Sembrando Bajo el Sol is a community anchor with multiple uses. Formerly a vacant concrete lot, Sembrando Bajo el Sol was repurposed into a community garden and pocket park. As an allotment garden, each raised bed is tended to by a specific family, individual, or organization. The pocket park features playground elements, a rain garden, and community theater space in front of a large mural installed by local artists.



Source: NeighborSpace

Community organizing for the garden began in 2008, and was reinforced by strong organizing and funding support from many nonprofit groups include Enlace Chicago, NeighborSpace, Positive Space, and the Midwest Ecological Landscaping Association. In addition to providing healthy food production and youth recreation, the space also features gardening courses, volunteer days, and community events facilitated by Enlace Chicago.





Source: NeighborSpace

Sembrando Bajo el Sol is a vibrant community space in large part because of significant funding, programming, and management support from local nonprofit organizations. Partner involvement helped build initial support for repurposing the space and continued programming efforts have kept residents involved and engaged. Because of their backing, Sembrando Bajo el Sol is a successful repurposing project costing community members very little.

For more information: <http://neighbor-space.org/2012/06/23/6062trees-sembrando-bajo-el-sol/>



Crystal Lake: Three Oaks Recreation Area

The Three Oaks Recreation Area is a large-scale development aimed at creating a major outdoor attraction through creative reuse of a former industrial site. Located in a former gravel quarry near Crystal Lake, the area now features man-made lakes and has become a strong generator of revenue and economic development. The recreation area's watersports, beaches, hiking trails, restaurants, and concession stands have generated more than 100 part-time jobs. While attendance is strongest in warm weather, many of the quarry's gravel mounds now serve as repurposed sledding hills, helping to attract visitors year-round.



Source: City of Crystal Lake

Negotiations between the former tenant, Vulcan Materials, and the Crystal Lake City Council began in the early 1990s as the quarry's productivity began to subside. The City eventually acquired the land in 2008, with construction beginning in 2009. At \$14.37 million, the development was large in both scale and cost, requiring creative funding techniques to achieve implementation. As a home rule community, Crystal Lake was able to pair a \$0.75 sales tax increase with a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) district, generating funding revenue and attracting developers to the site. Since opening, Three Oaks continues to expand, with amenities



such as restaurants and a cable-operated wake park added in recent years.

Though larger in scope than traditional placemaking initiatives, Three Oaks is an example of a repurposed development that contributes to an all-inclusive sense of place. Through coordinated planning, creative reuse, and strategic investment, Crystal Lake established a tourist destination and catalytic economic development. This shows the potential when stakeholders think beyond the limits of a site's former use to establish a creative vision for a new community anchor.



Source: City of Crystal Lake

For more information: www.crystallake.org/residents/three-oaks-recreation-area



Harvard: Starline Factory

Starline Factory, located in Downtown Harvard near Metra's Union Pacific Northwest line, is a historic preservation project that became a significant catalyst for economic development. Upon construction in 1888 by Hunt, Helm, Ferris & Company, the factory first specialized in manufacturing agricultural tools to support local farmers. Over the next century the factory served a number of industrial purposes to support the region's changing manufacturing economy, eventually operating as a metal coating facility for Chromalloy American until its closure in 1994.

After sitting vacant for many years, the property was purchased by Orrin Kinney, a former employee of Chromalloy America. He then spent more than a decade renovating the historic building. Today, with the assistance of an incubator-style business investment program launched by the city, the 278,000-square-foot Starline Factory houses a number of private entrepreneurs and serves as a picturesque event space. Currently the property has more than 25 private tenants including a local radio station, artist studios, a pub and restaurant, private businesses, and office space. Starline Factory also provides space for community events and programming initiatives including art workshops, galleries, and "4th Fridays," a monthly art event featuring exhibits, contests, and vendors.



Source: Starline Factory & Felix and Fingers



Targeted private investment, accessible location, and reuse of a historic asset transformed Starline Factory from a vacant factory into an active community hub. The concentration of many businesses and events in one place benefits both residents and entrepreneurs, ultimately establishing a unique regional destination.



Source: Starline Factory & Felix and Fingers

For more information: <http://www.starlinefactory.com>



Plainfield: Downtown Plainfield Historic District

The Downtown Plainfield Historic District showcases unique architecture, historic preservation, and inviting streetscape design that work together to create a distinguished and unique feel reminiscent of turn-of-the-nineteenth century Main Street. Spanning four blocks along Lockport Street between Illinois Route 59 and James Street, the district consists of the historic commercial and civic core of the village and runs along the Lincoln Highway. The corridor features the Village Center, historic churches, and a number of businesses constructed in a wide variety of architecture styles ranging from the mid-nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century including Greek Revival, Italiante, Richardsonian Romanesque, Queen Anne, and the International Style. In 2009, a complete streetscape renovation installed new concrete sidewalks, parkway areas with multi-colored brick pavers, pedestrian crossings, planting beds with stones walls, period gas-light-style street lamps, and street furniture. The Village also implemented a Façade Matching Grant Program to help property owners maintain building exteriors as well-kept and inviting spaces.



Source: Village of Plainfield & National Park Service

The Downtown Plainfield Historic District was officially added to the National Register of Historic Places Program in 2013. The program helps protect historic properties and makes them eligible for federal tax credits programs for rehabilitation costs. In addition to the many businesses and institutions that occupy the district's historic buildings, a number of community events, such as holiday festivals year-round, parades, and 5K walk/runs, attract visitors to the Downtown. Village officials have also made exploring the district easier. Historic walking tours guide patrons through the corridor, and each building features a QRC code that displays historic information when scanned with a smartphone.

The Downtown Plainfield Historic District has leveraged its storied history to contribute to a unique sense of place on a broad scale. The Downtown's comfortable pedestrian streetscape



and convenient educational resources make the both the corridor and its unique history accessible and engaging. Moreover, the entire district benefits from preservation efforts, and the wide variety of businesses, institutions, and community events draw visitors for myriad different reasons.



Source: Village of Plainfield & National Park Service

For more information: https://www.plainfield-il.org/pages/hp_districts.php



Aurora: First Friday Program

First Friday-Aurora is a multi-pronged approach that invites people to enjoy the diverse art and cultural opportunities in Downtown Aurora. Occurring on the First Friday of each month, excluding January and July, these events are a night of art, fun, music, dance, and community all taking place at local businesses and venues in downtown Aurora. Programming activities like First Friday-Aurora give downtowns a unique welcoming sense of place and help to support meaningful social interaction. While arts and culture are sometimes marginalized or seen as superfluous, they are necessary ingredients for making communities attractive and vibrant places to live and work, helping to increase tax revenues, property values, retail activity, and job creation.



Source: Aurora Downtown

The continued success of First Friday is due in large part to partnerships between the City of Aurora, Invest Aurora, and Aurora Downtown. These stakeholders help facilitate collaborations, leverages resources, and build upon the historic heritage of the downtown. Moreover, these events are effective in promoting businesses and encouraging creative minds to help enhance the look and feel of public spaces to improve feelings of safety and comfort. Programming activities like First Friday-Aurora built upon the connections of mutually supportive activities and functions and the overall ease with which people can fluidly navigate those activities.





Source: Aurora Downtown

Block parties, street fairs and festivals, and community gardens can all help bring different groups together and help everyone feel more integrated. These efforts provide an engaging atmosphere for the users of the downtown, which can help businesses as well as support an active civic community. Collaborative relationships can develop between arts and culture activities and local businesses, as well as aid in the attraction of tourist dollars.

For more information: <http://www.auroradowntown.org/first-fridays-in-downtown-aurora/>



Evanston: Art Under Glass

Many municipalities struggle to reactivate vacant storefronts. The City of Evanston collaborated with the Evanston Art Center, local artists, and the business community to inaugurate “Art Under Glass,” a vacant windows project that allows local artists to install art in vacant storefronts. Using photographs, paintings, ceramics, and glass works, Art Under Glass enlivens vacant spaces and adds excitement to downtown Evanston.



Source: David Klobucar, Chicago New Cooperative

Vacant buildings present challenges to communities, and can create a negative perception of an area’s potential for retail or restaurant success. Along with reframing the image of an underutilized corridor, the installation of public art helps attract people to downtown and keep storefronts attractive and inviting. The initiative also complements other placemaking efforts in Downtown Evanston such as ongoing concert series, block parties, and sidewalk sales.

Art Under Glass is one example of how communities can work with nonprofit groups to reinvigorate vacant spaces. Window art installations are a low cost and a versatile reinvestment approach cities, business authorities, and community groups can use to address vacancy and maintain a positive image of a commercial corridor. It helps draw positive attention to an empty



retail space and allows artists to exhibit their work, attracting interest in how a space may be use while creating a sense of comfort and safety. Ongoing communication and coordination with the City, local business support groups, and property owners and business owners helps identify barriers and find ways to pool resources to solve challenges that affect multiple businesses.

For more information: <https://www.evanstonartcenter.org/community>



Suburban Cook: Complete Streets Pop-Up Projects

In the summer and fall of 2016, Active Transportation Alliance (ATA) coordinated temporary demonstrations that highlighted the value of providing communities with safer, more engaging streets. Through their Complete Streets Initiative, pop-up projects in six suburban communities were set up to educate residents about the recreational and transit-related benefits that complete streets infrastructure could provide to their communities. Willow Springs, Steger, Midlothian, Richton Park, Skokie, and South Chicago Heights partnered with ATA to develop and implement pop-up projects in their communities. The demonstrations were well received by residents, and in more than one instance, remained longer than intended as a result of their popularity.



Source: Active Transportation Alliance

Low-cost, temporary changes, often referred to as tactical urbanism, are effective ways to explore the potential of what a site could be in the future. When used to promote education, community engagement, and safety, interventions such as these can lead to community improvements. In concert with encouraging walking and biking for all age groups and levels of mobility, complete streets encourage partnerships with local organizations and promotes community building.

ATA was successful in initiating dialogue between residents and community groups, local police departments, park district, and school districts to promote safety for pedestrians, cyclists, and motorists. These conversations help shape a shared vision for the future of space and are useful first steps in creating an inclusive sense of place.

For more information: <http://activetrans.org/pop-up-projects>



Chicago: Boxville in Bronzeville

Created in June 2015, Boxville is an urban incubator project aimed at generating commerce in Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood. The initiative was created by a group of community developers and architects who retrofitted and repurposed shipping container boxes into an open-air retail mall at the 51st Station of the CTA Green Line. Historically known as the commercial and cultural center of Chicago's African American community, Bronzeville has struggled with disinvestment and retail vacancy after stockyards and steel mills closed in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Boxville is designed to give entrepreneurs an opportunity to market their products and grow their brand without investing in a full brick and mortar retail space. Entrepreneurs can rent entire shipping containers or single tables, depending on the scope and mission of their organization. The Boxville Marketplace is currently open every Wednesday during summer months, and hosts businesses such as bicycle repair shops, street food vendors, and fashion designers. Shipping containers are arranged around a central plaza featuring seating, street art, and music, further contributing to a distinct sense of place. In addition to economic development, Boxville also provides space for community organizations and nonprofits.



Source: Chronicle Media



Boxville is an example of how a unique concept can contribute to community character and attract investment. The space is a vibrant, engaging place for residents and, with low retail rent costs and no long-term commitment, Boxville is a low-risk opportunity for entrepreneurs and incubators to grow their brand in a community hoping to build economic development.



Source: Boxville Marketplace

For more information: <https://www.boxville.org/>



Recommendations

This report uses current placemaking case studies in the region to identify ways to create livable communities with more accessible, attractive, and vibrant spaces. The following recommendations, many of which are inexpensive and involve strategic partnerships, offer concrete ways to better engage and involve community members in creative placemaking opportunities.

Use placemaking initiatives to foster inclusive public outreach processes

In many cases, the most effective way to engage residents is through community events. Block parties, street fairs and festivals, and community gardens can all help bring different groups together and help residents feel more engaged with their community. Placemaking can help elevate community engagement, particularly in areas that are typically underrepresented. CMAP and its partners should continue to investigate model practices and existing resources to help communities leverage placemaking practices to facilitate broader-based stakeholder engagement, collaborative processes, and other forms of technical assistance. For example, municipalities, with philanthropic support, could partner with a local arts group, or artist, to facilitate youth-driven projects. In many cases, the most effective way to engage residents is through community events. Developing a more formal outreach program may be helpful to increase communication and collaboration among various community groups and initiate discussions about how best to honor the identity and diversity of a community.

Involve private sector partners in the creation of public spaces

When undertaken thoughtfully, public and private infrastructure improvements can create a sense of place. While actors from the nonprofit and public sectors often spearhead efforts to improve or create useful public spaces, the private sector is increasingly playing a significant role in placemaking. Targeted investment can improve public spaces and spur economic development in surrounding areas or leverage other private or public funds. Private sector partners should be engaged to evaluate opportunities for involvement in generating a sense of place as well as developing funding mechanisms. Special Service Areas or Business Improvement Districts are examples of how private businesses can generate resources for projects and services. Community groups, units of government, and the private and nonprofit sectors should work together to increase the ability of communities to attract reinvestment through placemaking initiatives.

Encourage development of places that are inclusive and accessible to all community members

Community design and planning play a critical part in creating spaces filled with people and events that are welcoming, inclusive, and accessible to all residents and visitors. Placemaking



initiatives should be highly localized and ensure that access to shared spaces is equitable across all lines of geography, race, age, and income in a community. Identifying high and moderate need areas in a coordinated effort will help prioritize resources and identify strategic opportunities for local leaders to expand placemaking initiatives in underserved areas of their communities. CMAP will continue to identify strategies to help communities create vibrant spaces with a sense of openness and shared ownership as its core function.

Establish management practices for entire lifecycle of spaces and community events

The long-term success of a public space or community event depends on continued support and management. Along with sustained funding sources and volunteer resources, commitments from community organizations, nonprofit groups, and private partners is essential for sustained success. Implementation plans that look no further than initial startup efforts fail to address the sustainability of a permanent space. Successful placemaking initiatives should establish detailed management and programming responsibilities for the life of a placemaking project, which must include identifying funding sources for continued management and programming. An initial step should be to determine the lifespan of the space, frequency, and duration of community events. Determining whether to create a long-term permanent installation is not always possible or desirable for every project. Often short-term “pop-up” projects are useful intermediary steps to transition an underutilized space into a successful, long-term development. Part of this step is to identify all major parties and determine their levels of commitment. Management responsibilities should include all invested partners and actors, including those utilizing the space to provide community programming.

Design spaces for year-round uses

Flexible spaces open numerous possibilities for year-round activities. Utilizing shared spaces for multiple uses can broaden support and strengthen investment. When spaces have a variety of involved stakeholders, they are more likely to succeed and attract additional developments that further contribute to a sense of place. For example, adding community programming events to public gardens or plazas can build a broader base of support. Community trainings or education programs are examples of open space programming initiatives that can supplement shared spaces. Understanding that some places may lack a strong management presence or a variety of activities, which could make it difficult to attract people year-round, seasonal strategies, like holiday markets, parades and recreational activities, should be explored to keep spaces activated during all times of year.

Encourage reinvestment through placemaking

When people do not feel engaged, a space will remain empty. Reinvigorating vacant storefronts through pop-up art and events could help encourage reinvestment in existing structures and attract new developments. Communities across the region are partnering with creative entrepreneurs to address vacant storefronts through “vacant windows projects.” Even



temporary uses will help others to see the possibilities for existing vacant structures, leading efforts to prioritize existing and historic buildings as well as spark interests for new developments.

Improve street safety through placemaking activities

Streets and sidewalks provide the space for civic and community engagement as well as transportation and commerce. Providing an inviting and engaging atmosphere for all travel users can help businesses as well as support an active civic community. CMAP and local communities should explore strategies to enhance the look and feel of streets to improve safety and comfort. Tactical urbanism is a growing and popular concept that helps explore a space full potential before investing in new infrastructure improvements and amenities.³ Tactical urbanism could help facilitate the permanent development of visual improvements along major corridors, including streetscape enhancements, gateway identity, and wayfinding and signage to facilitate and promote the coexistence of all travel modes.

³ Mike Lyndon and Anthony Garcia, *Tactical Urbanism: Short-term Action for Long-term Change* (Washington: Island Press, 2015), 2-3.



Next steps

Creating a sense of place increases the public value of shared spaces. The strategies in this memo aim to augment local-scale details with creative projects that maximize our shared spaces by showcasing architectural quality, historic preservation, streetscaping, public art, retail mix, and many others. Implementing these strategies will create unique destinations that structure the image and identity of a community. Though difficult to quantify, this sense of connection is an important contributor to a sustainable, thriving region. When done well, these projects develop community pride, drive local investment, and help increase community engagement and public participation.

ON TO 2050 will further encourage and support placemaking. The CMAP LTA program offers resources that help municipalities to develop policies that support the goals of GO TO 2040. CMAP will continue to develop and disseminate resources to provide municipalities and local partners with the tools and practices to implement effective placemaking practices. Moving forward, CMAP will continue to work toward creating memorable and attractive spaces filled with people and events to craft livable communities where people want to be.



Appendix A: Stakeholder input

To evaluate the potential for placemaking strategies to benefit the Chicago region and to initiate a broader conversation about the best ways to achieve those ends in ON TO 2050, CMAP convened an advisory group of subject matter experts. These experts represent organizations who contribute to placemaking through public art, streetscaping, historic preservation, and open space. Additionally, the report was brought before the CMAP Land Use Working Committee at project midpoint and completion for feedback and approval.

Advisory Group

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The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) is our region's comprehensive planning organization. The agency and its partners are developing ON TO 2050, a new comprehensive regional plan to help the seven counties and 284 communities of northeastern Illinois implement strategies that address transportation, housing, economic development, open space, the environment, and other quality-of-life issues. See www.cmap.illinois.gov for more information.

ON TO 2050 reports will define further research needs as the plan is being developed prior to adoption in October 2018.