

**When we
step outside,
what place
are we
looking for?**



**OUTDOOR
ARTS
PORTUGAL**



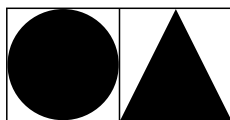
BÚSSOLA

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**Art in public space
and placemaking**

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Outdoor Arts Portugal is an interdisciplinary platform promoted by Bússola, dedicated to artistic creation in public space and contemporary circus in Portugal. Aimed at professionals in creation, management, and production, it seeks to strengthen the conditions for the sustainable development of this sector. Its work focuses on the capacity building of cultural agents, audience development, national and international promotion of arts in public space, and research into sectoral practices and dynamics. By valuing new artistic languages and innovative dramaturgies, it positions itself as a strategic project for innovation and knowledge sharing.



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She Changes, by Janet Echelman
Matosinhos, Portugal (2005), © Enrique Diaz

Foreword

**The
art of
placemaking.**

Charles Landry

“What are the most memorable or powerful experiences you have had in your life”? Often for me it is something I witnessed or saw in a public space and many times it involves the arts. Is that the same for you? Of course, falling in love, the birth of children or an achievement in sport or hearing about a catastrophe come up too.

The experience

A highlight might be loud and emotional where you get directly involved dancing to the music and singing along. It could be staring at an interactive artwork projected onto a building or quietly contemplating a memorial of a tragic event. It might be standing in the forecourt of a cultural venue you’ve always wanted to visit or looking with awe at a circus act in the open. It might be a busker or escapologist unwinding themselves to great applause or a comforting bell with its regular chimes giving you the sense that you are anchored in this place. Those feelings uplift, but it could be a demonstration about something you fervently believe in where you with many others have painted shrill screaming banners and where the procession feels like a collective artwork. All these activities help shape and make a place. Indeed I cannot imagine thinking about great placemaking without the arts crossing my mind.

Casting my mind back, almost at random, examples come to the fore and they cover every art form. The giant mechanical elephant with 50 people atop that every day prances around the Île de Nantes. The Les Machines de l’île street theatre company create astounding craft works. Not only the elephant but also the little girl giant, the spider, the bulldog, the deep sea diver and they travel abroad sometimes with a million people lining the streets. Another is Jaume Plensa’s Crown Fountain in Millennium Park Chicago where 1,000 faces of Chicagoans are shown in an irregular rotation. It is a gathering point where the faces unannounced squirt water and children shriek with delight. Next to it is Anish Kapoor’s Cloud Gate where 168 massive stainless-steel plates, weighing over 100 tons, were welded together like a puzzle into a seamless bean shape. It reflects in innumerable distorting ways and people congregate taking photos of themselves misshapen into bizarre figures.

Differently impressive is Olafur Eliasson’s Ice Watch installations of icebergs imported from Greenland, which melted in public spaces of Copenhagen (2014), Paris (2015), and London (2018) during critical conferences on climate change. Viscerally it brought home to the viewer the climate emergency. In Bilbao a powerful event in 2010 was when about 100 almost naked anti-bullfighting campaigners lay down outside the Guggenheim Museum as if lifeless in the shape of a bull, their bodies smeared with black or red paint to simulate blood. The Basque banned bullfighting shortly afterwards.

On a lighter note as part of the Ruhr area's European Capital of Culture year in 2010 two million people joined "Still Life in the Ruhr's Fast Lane" for a 60 kilometre party on one Germany's busiest autobahns. It featured the world's longest picnic table made up of 20.000 beer garden tables and 40.000 benches. 7.000 different groups entertained those who turned up chosen through a lottery to be allowed to perform. Some 50.000 helpers were involved in organizing the event.

Performing theatre outdoors has a long history and one of the most notable and inspiring is in the old village of Monticchiello in Italy where since 1967 the Teatro Povero (Poor Theatre) has an annual season of its own "autodrama". Its reputation has spread widely across the region. Here the village starting in the winter begins rehearsals to reflect on itself rather like collective psychotherapy and then present the play in the summer. The setting and staging is created by local carpenters and the show itself involves local villagers.

On the grander scale there is the Fête de la Musique, initiated in Paris, which takes place across the world in now 100 countries on June 21, mainly in the evening and night until the following morning. This popular largely outdoor celebration under the slogan Make Music! encourages amateur musicians to perform voluntarily in the streets and public spaces. Often it has a carnivalesque atmosphere. Starting in Paris too there is Nuit blanche that too has spread across countries, and that given the weather has a different flavour largely keeping cultural entities and museums open all night.

There is carnival with its flamboyant costumes and makeup, extravagant parades and floats sends messages that challenge norms and rules. This is the essence of carnival celebrated before the abstinence of Lent. Perhaps the oldest is Venice from the 12th century but also Cologne from the 13th, but Rio de Janeiro is the most famous. It is a model of the festive occupation of the streets taking the masked ball out into public space. Rio blends its African origins as seen in their proudly presented hand made exotic costumes created with bones, feathers, and sequins, and then there is the samba. There are more than 50 carnivals spread across the Caribbean and many more far further afield, such as in the German speaking world called, for instance, Fasching in Munich. More recent ones are Notting Hill Carnival inspired by Caribbeans in London founded in 1966.

Dancing in the streets evolved outside of dance studios, during the 1970s in the Bronx New York, in any available open space be it a block party, a park or school yards. The street dance movement popularized dance styles that became social events with a touch of competitiveness and it continues until this day. Afficionados make subtle distinctions like hip hop is dancing and break dancing acrobatics. But all are part of an original cultural movement to use free outdoor space for expression. It includes rapping, whose emotional

delivery highlighting rhyme, rhythmic speech, and street language later defined many music genres. It is different from classic spoken word poetry. DJing is part of this overall cluster and has evolved into an art form involving high levels of technical knowledge and mixing techniques. Using DJs can be a cheap way of entertaining an outdoor audience.

Graffiti has played an increasingly dominant global role in outdoor art emerging again from New York in the 1970s especially among the young and under privileged looking for ways to express themselves in a free public gallery. Think here of Jean-Michel Basquiat or Keith Haring. Clearly there were motivations by others who had a need to deface walls out of boredom, impulsiveness, rebellion or marking territory, yet the best graffiti is artful and to the point in particular when using words. Banksy, is perhaps the best known protagonist. Surrounded by intrigue his work is socially significant with its acerbic, ironic, yet humorous commentary on topics of the day. Other newer figures like Priest or Lefty Out There are pushing new boundaries too.

The Wynwood Walls in Miami started in 2008 is perhaps the largest assemblage of curated street art and is in effect an outdoor museum. It made Wynwood one of the most celebrated urban revitalization projects. Yet it started with graffiti and now with the influx of art galleries and upscale restaurants the cutting edge has probably declined. Many cities now have street art festivals, such as Bristol, Montreal and Brisbane.

Urban music events or festivals are too numerous to count as practically every city at some point in the year has one. Yet soundscapes can be interesting artistic creations. Clearly Delhi sounds differently from Vancouver or Johannesburg and mostly this the persistent drone and occasional horn of cars. Murray Schafer's work in 1975 led the way by putting the issue on the radar. Increasingly artists are creating soundscapes or even sound identities for cities based on sound maps. One interesting example is the sound of the Partisan Cemetery in Mostar, Bosnia Herzegovina, this divided city. Another is the way musicians create soothing soundscapes like flowing water to counteract stress levels in cities given that constant noise pollution leads to anxiety and decreased productivity. There are even the International Sound Awards, which they dub as the "Oscars of Sound".

Public pianos are another music intervention in public space from railway stations to semi-public foyers. The British TV series *The Piano* is immensely successful with viewing figures over 2,5 million. Lang Lang and Mika hidden behind screens move to stations across the country and choose an amateur pianist who goes to the final and is given chances to progress even as a career.

In 2002 in Krakow poet Michał Zabłocki projected an entire volume of changing poetry everyday of the year onto the façade of the building in the centre of Krakow, and another in Warsaw. Led

by the Poemat Foundation it has been such a success that poetry has been ever present on the façade of the building at the corner of the Main Square and Bracka Street.

This is just a snapshot and collectively we could mention a thousand examples from every artistic discipline where their creativity has enhanced what places look and feel like. In some cases people are just a passive receivers and in others active participants. The latter generates a more transformative effect as directly engaging with the arts helps people feel their senses. People stretch themselves.

The public stage

“The city is more than a space in place it is a drama in time” so said more than 100 years ago the biologist and one of the first urban planners Patrick Geddes. And more recently Brian Eno said: “artists are to cities, what worms are to the soil”.

Public space is **the stage** upon which the urban spectacle or drama can unfold and where urbanists at their best try to create places where people want to be. At times that canvas engenders openness, pleasure, comfort and desire and at others we feel at tinge of uncertainty, vulnerability or even menace in the air, where you become watchful and alert or even scared.

The art of placemaking's aim is to **orchestrate** the experiences that make rewarding, enriching, less shallow and more profound, places where you are safe to express yourself. Streets, squares, parks, courtyards, house frontages, even roundabouts or transitional spaces, such as when a shopping centre atrium opens out into the public arena provide the **canvas** upon which daily life happens.

Here we can trigger our imagination and develop methods and processes to do things well, yet it is not an easy task as placemaking is complex. There are many variables. Yet what can help that placemaking process is for all urban professions to consider **thinking like artists, planning like generals and acting like impresarios**, but in unison. First, what is special about good generals? They understand well logistics, operations, coordination, management as well as obstacles. They know the difference between strategy and tactics. What about impresarios? They can produce programmes and organize the activities and find funding too. So where do the arts come in? What can singing, acting, dancing or performing music do for a place or how can sculptures, paintings, designs, drawing and even writing contribute to turning spaces into places.

The **use of imagination** present in the arts is perhaps the most valuable thing the arts can offer other disciplines such as planning, engineering, transport, social services or to the business community. They suggest to us to think afresh and remind us too who we are in our good and bad light, and also what we could become.

Observe spaces closely and what do you see and feel. Mostly there are routines — people walking and some meandering, regular cleaning, making repairs to pavements, weeding and planting or building stands for special occasions. People moving to unknown destinations, some stopping to chat, others heading to the first bench or going into an office or a shop. In some places we walk fast especially those that are windswept and forlorn, in others more slowly when there is visual stimulation and distraction. In time those places build up a picture, **they make sense**. Instinctively all of us understand of how places work and what makes them lively and what barren and with little soul.

People know that the life of most places is a sequence of the **endless ordinary** and the **occasional extraordinary** largely triggered by public acts of the imagination. The best spaces become places when they are imbued with meaning. That is when they have significance.

The **meaning** of places builds up mostly over time. It can be through knowledge of its history or more likely personal experiences be that the memory of a passionate kiss before catching the tram or a tetchy misunderstanding with a stranger who thinks you are invading their space.

Collective encounters especially, be it a performance or a protest, can create something extra, perhaps a merging of my ‘me’ and our ‘we’ and with those that it is shared a deeper bonding experience. We feel then we are part of a humanity. There is a threshold, too many people can feel claustrophobic. It can oppress us. That is true too for crowded streets where nothing special is going on.

Clearly everywhere was a place before the place makers came to town, but crucially their aim is to enhance the place and its experience using its existing assets in order to make the most of them. But we want placemaking activities as too many places across the world disappoint. They feel empty and not in the sense that nothing is there, but because they are bland, perhaps a street lined with blank walls or just full of global brands so that there is no local distinctiveness. Here we feel empty too, there is something missing, they are **more negative than positive**.

The challenges

How did that come about? First, and foremost we forgot that city and place making requires a **360 approach** where the differing insights, forms of knowledge, disciplines and understanding can create a better whole. In other words, places are hardware and software and to make them work you need also good management or ‘orgware’. As social beings we need to interact and, of course, there is the car that chopped up our physical environments and this discouraged chance encounter and serendipity. Added to which the city making disciplines, from land use planning, to urban design, architecture or

social affairs and animation too often work as entrenched empires with too little cross-fertilization.

So, **placemaking at its best is radical** and a powerful idea. It addresses three difficult and contentious issues: bringing multiple partners together; dealing with the tensions that can happen in the public realm; and lastly guarding against the misuse of the concept of placemaking.

Challenging conventional ways of working creates resistance even though bringing disciplines and outside partners together is effective as does encouraging inhabitants to become shapers, makers and co-creators of their evolving environment. It is neither a top down process nor exclusively bottom up. It is **both/and** as good solutions can come from many quarters. In that sense placemaking responds to the democratic imperative. It is also flexible in that projects range from the conventional to the experiential, from pop-ups to the permanent, from the cheap and easy to the very expensive. The aim always is to help communities develop a distinctive identity and character. Seen so placemaking is a multifaceted approach and mechanism. It requires sharing a mutual respect across the disciplines. This demands a mindset shift and cultural transformation.

Second, the image of placemaking and the way it is often projected is as if it were all pleasant and convivial where varied groups of people are getting on easily. The reality is different as many types of people are **sharing space**: the young, the old, the poor, the better off, the lonely and even difficult people. They can have differing expectations. They may want incompatible things. Loud music, skateboarding and being raucous for some or being quiet and watching the world go by for others. The consultative methods that good placemaking adopts tries to mediate these differences, create common understanding, break down barriers and find workable solutions.

Lastly, placemaking has **become a buzzword** and used by many whether real estate operators creating dull developments or urban marketers. Some of these organizations dilute its core principles, their intentions are exclusively commercial or a marketing ploy and not really participative. The danger is that the term becomes meaningless.

Rounding up

The arts help cities in more ways than one. **First**, their aesthetic focus draws attention to quality, and beauty. This is expressed, unfortunately, in limited ways typically a piece of public sculpture in front of an ugly or ordinary building. Yet in principle this challenges us to ask: Is this beautiful and why is this old-fashioned word beauty important even though we can argue about how to define it. This should affect how the development community, urban design and architecture evolve. Many places we create are bland, uninspiring,

mean and drown the spirit where those that build them would probably not want to live. Instead a placemaking focus involving artistic imagination can help highlight what is unique, special or different about this place and so strengthen its identity. In turn those disciplines could and should involve artists more in conceiving and implementing initiatives.

Second, the arts challenge us to ask questions about ourselves as a place. This should lead us to ask: “What kind of place do we want to be and how should we get there”? Arts programmes can challenge decision makers by undertaking uncomfortable projects that force leaders to debate and take a stand. For example, an arts project about or with migrants might make us look at our prejudices and how together we might share public space. Arts projects can empower people who have previously not expressed their views, so artists working with communities can in effect help consult people. For example a community play, like Monticchiello, devised with a local group can tell us much more than a typical political process.

Third, a useful question to ask for place makers is: What is the problem and can a cultural approach help; can the arts help? For example, communicating across generations or mixing cultures, clearly the arts are more effective than many other initiatives.

Fourth, the best art works at a number of levels simultaneously especially participating in and making of art rather than just consuming. It triggers activity in the mind and agitates it (and even the body), it arouses the senses, these form into emotion, and then thought. It can broaden horizons, convey meaning, with immediacy and or depth, it can communicate iconically so you grasp things in one. It might nurture memory, symbolise complex ideas, help see the previously unseen or encapsulate previously scattered thoughts. It might so stun and shock us for social, moral, or thought-provoking reasons or criticise the status quo.

Finally, arts projects can simply create enjoyment, joy and even soothe the soul and promote popular morale.

A concluding thought: The spirit of place making with all of its necessary hard work and imagination is **more like improvised jazz** than a chamber music performance. There is experimentation, trial and error in the aim to make a better place where more rather than less people are involved. Done well as if opening a hidden code agreement and orchestration occurs through seemingly unwritten rules. Good placemaking requires myriad acts of persistence and courage that need to be aligned like a good piece of music. There is not just one conductor. It is co-created which is why leadership in its fullest sense is crucial when seemingly disparate parts have to be melded into a whole. In sum, connecting the arts to placemaking can anchor identity, bond people to their community, project local distinctiveness and enhance the sense of belonging to a place.

When we step outside, what place are we looking for?
Art in public space and placemaking

Charles Landry is a leading expert on the role of imagination and creativity in shaping better cities. He developed the influential Creative City concept in the late 1980s, helping urban leaders worldwide rethink how places can foster innovation, resilience, and civic engagement. Founder of Comedia, Charles has worked in over 65 countries and advised cities on strategies that balance creativity, social cohesion, and global relevance. He created tools such as the Creative City Index and the Urban Psyche Test, and his recent work explores civic urbanity and creative bureaucracy. His books include *The Creative City*, *The Art of City Making*, and *The Civic City in a Nomadic World*.





Ice Watch, by Olafur Eliasson [TS/DK]
Bankside, Tate Modern, London (2018), © Justin Sutcliffe

Editorial

**Beyond
disciplines:
placemaking,
art
in public
space,
and the
of the future
place(s).**

Bússola

As cities, towns, and rural areas across Europe grapple with accelerating environmental crises, shifting demographic patterns, and widening social inequalities, the concept of placemaking is gaining unprecedented relevance. What began as a critique of modernist urbanism has evolved into a rich, transdisciplinary field that blends design, governance, participation, and cultural expression. This publication aims to clarify, reframe, and push forward the conversation on placemaking — placing particular emphasis on the vital role that the arts, and especially outdoor arts, play in shaping places that are fair, resilient, and alive.

The texts gathered here do not present a unified theory or a single model. Instead, they reflect the polyphonic, experimental, and deeply situated nature of placemaking practice. They draw on the grounded experiences of artists, curators, urbanists, researchers, and community organisers across diverse contexts — from large-scale urban regeneration initiatives to small interventions in overlooked neighbourhoods or rural landscapes. In doing so, they offer an evolving cartography of the field — one that is shaped by creativity as much as by complexity.

One of our guiding editorial choices was to approach placemaking not as a fixed method or policy framework, but as a **cultural and political process**. This means placing equal value on the informal, the processual, and the relational — those aspects of place-shaping that often fall outside traditional planning metrics. It also means acknowledging the tensions that exist within placemaking today: between temporary and long-term change; between co-creation and top-down design; between artistic freedom and instrumentalisation; between spectacle and depth.

Placemaking, as this book demonstrates, is not a blank slate. It emerges from — and must respond to — existing ecologies of culture, memory, power, and use. It cannot afford to be extractive, decorative, or superficial. Rather, it must engage with the **lived realities of place**, recognising what already exists and what has been excluded. This is especially true in post-industrial territories, peripheral regions, and rural communities — contexts where placemaking must go beyond urban design to become a practice of repair, listening, and long-term commitment.

The arts, and especially outdoor and site-specific artistic practices, are central to this vision. Across the chapters, we see how visual and performative languages are being used to question dominant narratives, restore neglected spaces, and build new forms of community. Importantly, these are not just aesthetic gestures: they are civic acts. Whether through murals, participatory theatre, installations, or sound interventions, the arts in public space foster **emotional, symbolic, and political layers** that are essential to placemaking done well.

The first half of the book offers a solid grounding in the conceptual and historical evolution of placemaking, with particular attention to its European articulations. Drawing from thinkers such as Jane Jacobs, William H. Whyte, Charles Landry, and more recent frameworks like place-led development, the chapters challenge the idea that placemaking is simply about urban renewal or beautification. Instead, placemaking is presented as a form of democratic spatial practice — one that must navigate regulatory systems, urban policies, and public imaginaries. In the second half, attention shifts to the **intersections between the arts and placemaking**, organised around specific practices and sectors. Here, two key arguments emerge. First, visual arts in public space — particularly murals, temporary installations, and community-engaged projects — have established themselves as powerful tools for building identity, activating memory, and democratising space. Second, the role of performing arts in placemaking, while still emerging, represents a frontier of creative and social innovation. With their capacity to generate presence, co-presence, and embodied participation, performing artists bring critical value to place-shaping processes, especially when working in long-term, embedded, and co-creative ways.

This book also foregrounds several transversal challenges that cut across disciplines and geographies. The need for ecological responsibility is one of them. If placemaking is to be relevant in the age of climate breakdown, it must embed environmental ethics at every level — from the materials used in artistic production to the regeneration of neglected ecosystems. Likewise, digital transition is reshaping how public space is designed, experienced, and inhabited. We must ask not only how technology can enhance participation, but also how it may reproduce exclusions, surveillances, and extractivism if left uncritically applied. Another recurring theme is the tension between the local and the international. While placemaking must always start from local contexts, needs, and capacities, it benefits immensely from transnational collaboration and shared learning. Artistic networks such as IN SITU, *Circostrada*, and AREA (*Arts in Rural European Areas*) illustrate how mobility, dialogue, and experimentation can be structured to support context-sensitive yet globally connected practices. These networks are more than logistical infrastructures — they are cultural ecosystems that enable resilience and reciprocity.

If the future of our cities and territories demands imagination, adaptability, and care, then the convergence of placemaking and the arts is not a luxury — it is an imperative. What is required now is greater trust in artists as civic agents, more robust frameworks for community-led design, and a renewed political commitment to public space as a cultural commons. With this book, we hope to contribute to that shift — supporting a new generation of creative placemakers who act with criticality, generosity, and joy.





Impulse, by Mitchell Akiyama e Generique Design
Quartier des Spectacles, Montréal, Canada (2016). © Ulysse Lemerise

1. The art of Placemaking: and the arts.

Ramon Marrades

As cities worldwide grapple with the social, ecological, and cultural challenges of the 21st century, placemaking has emerged as an umbrella approach — a networked constellation of practices that offer both practical and imaginative ways of rethinking how urban spaces are shaped, inhabited, and made meaningful. While often associated with urban design, civic engagement, or tactical interventions, placemaking is also fundamentally a cultural process.

This chapter explores the concept of placemaking — with a particular focus on the European experience and the insights gained over eight years of work with Placemaking Europe. It examines the growing intersection between placemaking and the arts, not as two separate domains that occasionally intersect, but as mutually reinforcing layers capable of transforming how we imagine and engage with the built environment. The synergy between these layers emphasizes programming, meaning, and participation as essential components of vibrant, inclusive public life.

The convergence of placemaking and public art is not simply about beautifying spaces or organizing cultural events. It is about embedding the creative and expressive capacities of communities into the DNA of urban transformation. It's about the stories we tell through our environments, the rituals and gatherings that fill them with life, and the shared experiences that turn space into place. Through murals, performances, sculptures, participatory installations, and more, public art serves as both a mirror and a motor for community identity and imagination.

Importantly, the chapter also grapples with the origins and evolution of the term placemaking — a concept born out of American critiques of modernist planning, yet deeply rooted in European urban traditions of conviviality, public space, and human-scale design. As placemaking gains ground in Europe as an umbrella concept, it opens up new possibilities for cross-disciplinary exchange, translocal learning, and the integration of diverse urban practices — including those of the arts.

What follows is an exploration of how placemaking developed, why it matters, and how the arts not only complement but strengthen its purpose. The chapter maps the foundational ideas behind placemaking, illustrates its adaptation across European contexts, and highlights the ways in which art can activate and sustain public space. It closes with practical guidance on how to “do it right” — navigating the essential structures that support arts-led placemaking: permits, programming, and participation.

In times of social fragmentation and ecological urgency, the arts offer more than aesthetic value — they provide a language of care, critique, celebration, and possibility. And placemaking offers a framework through which this language can be spoken, shared, and anchored in the places we call home.

Why placemaking? And why this term?

Why do we use ‘placemaking’ — a term that originates from the United States — for something that should be quintessentially European? The irony is evident: placemaking emerged as an American response to urban renewal projects, which themselves were largely inspired by the modernist ideas of a European, Le Corbusier. His vision for urban planning, exemplified in projects like the Ville Radieuse (Radiant City), advocated for high-density, functional zoning, and the prioritization of cars over pedestrian-friendly environments. These principles, widely adopted in mid-20th-century America, led to large-scale urban renewal projects that razed historic neighborhoods and replaced them with monolithic high-rises, highways, and commercial developments, often at the expense of vibrant, community-driven urban life.

The backlash to these policies gave rise to the placemaking movement. Figures such as Jane Jacobs, in her seminal work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, argued for the importance of mixed-use development, pedestrian-friendly streets, and the preservation of local character. She championed the idea that cities should be designed for people rather than cars, emphasizing the role of sidewalks, public spaces, and diverse neighborhoods in fostering urban vitality. Similarly, Lewis Mumford critiqued modernist planning in *The City in History*, emphasizing the historical evolution of cities as organic, social entities rather than mechanical constructs.

Building on these ideas, the Project for Public Spaces (PPS) — founded in 1975 by Fred Kent, with key contributions from Kathy Madden and Steve Davies — became one of the leading organizations to institutionalize and promote placemaking as both a philosophy and a practical approach to urban design. Rooted in the observation-based methods of William H. Whyte, PPS emphasized the centrality of public space to community life and advocated for participatory processes in shaping public environments. Their work across cities worldwide helped codify placemaking principles that prioritize comfort, accessibility, sociability, and a strong sense of place.

The Congress for the New Urbanism, founded in the early 1990s, further developed this counter-narrative by advocating for walkable, human-scale urbanism reminiscent of pre-industrial European cities. Ray Oldenburg introduced the concept of the ‘third place’ in *The Great Good Place*, highlighting the importance of informal gathering spaces — such as cafés, parks, and public squares — as essential to social life and urban vibrancy.

Thus, while placemaking as a term emerged in the United States, its core principles are deeply rooted in European urban traditions, where historic city centers, piazzas, and communal spaces have long played a central role in civic life. The term placemaking was

embraced as a means of reclaiming human-centered urbanism in the very country that had aggressively pursued car-oriented development.

At the time placemaking was being conceptualized in the U.S., European cities were increasingly adopting Americanized urban models — shopping malls, monofunctional developments, and automobile dominance. Just as American cities began to question and resist these models, some European planners and developers were embracing them, often at the cost of local character and spatial diversity.

By the 2010s, however, placemaking began to gain traction in Europe not only as a practical approach, but also as a conceptual framework capable of bridging fragmented fields of urban practice. It evolved into an umbrella concept that unites a wide array of disciplines — urban planning, design, architecture, social development, environmental policy, arts and culture — around a common focus on people, place, and participation.

Rather than prescribing a fixed method, placemaking offers a shared language and set of principles for actors who had previously worked in silos. It invites architects, community developers, artists, policy-makers, social workers, and local activists to collaborate in creating places that reflect the needs and aspirations of the people who use them. Central to this approach is the idea of co-creation, the importance of local knowledge, and the value of iterative experimentation. This conceptual elasticity has enabled placemaking to integrate diverse methodologies and tools — such as tactical urbanism, community-led development, participatory design, and cultural programming.

The creative bureaucracy movement, initiated by renowned urbanist Charles Landry, has been especially influential in shaping contemporary placemaking thinking. Landry, which I consider a godfather of the placemaking movement in Europe, has played a key role in defining how cities can harness imagination and institutional agility to co-create better futures. As a long-standing speaker in Placemaking Week Europe festival — beginning with its inaugural gathering in Valencia in 2019 — Landry has contributed intellectual mentorship that have deeply informed the organization's ethos and direction. His involvement in numerous initiatives has helped bridge the gap between civic innovation and everyday urban practice, reinforcing the idea that transformative placemaking also requires transformative governance.

These practices — across design, policy, art, and community — share a common commitment to sustainability, equity, and wellbeing, reinforcing the belief that the most successful places are those shaped by — and with — the communities who inhabit them.

This is precisely the type of cross-disciplinary, trans-local exchange that Placemaking Europe as an organization seeks to foster. As a growing network of practitioners, researchers, city-makers, and

activists, Placemaking Europe creates a platform for learning, sharing, and co-creating tools, methodologies, and narratives that support place-based development.

What is placemaking, really?

At its core, placemaking is about putting people at the center of urban development. While that may sound straightforward, in practice it requires navigating complex social, spatial, and institutional dynamics. For placemaking to be effective, three foundational principles must be present — simultaneously and in balance. First, all citizens must have genuine agency in shaping their urban environments — an expression of the right to the city. Second, placemaking must embrace iterative, experimental, and community-led interventions — drawing from the ethos of tactical urbanism. Third, it must be anchored in a shared vision for long-term development, one that is co-created and reflects the diverse voices and lived experiences of those who inhabit a place — the idea and practice of the future as a collective construct.

Placemaking also involves balancing three interdependent dimensions. The first is hardware — the physical environment: streets, buildings, infrastructure, and public spaces that provide the spatial framework of urban life. The second is software — the social, cultural, and economic activities that animate those spaces: from markets and festivals to informal gatherings and everyday routines. The third is orgware — the systems of governance, policy, and institutional support that make sustainable transformation possible. Without a dynamic relationship between these three dimensions, placemaking efforts risk becoming temporary, disconnected, or misaligned with community needs and aspirations.

Placemaking and the arts

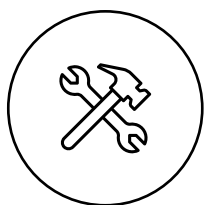
The integration of the arts into placemaking is not a decorative afterthought, but a vital force for programming, meaning-making, and place identity. Artistic interventions — murals, sculptures, performances, installations — infuse public spaces with character and emotional resonance. They reflect local histories, cultures, and values, and transform anonymous spaces into places with a story. When embedded in context, art activates space, turning it into a stage for interaction, memory, and shared experience.

Art sustains the life of a place not only through form, but through rhythm. Events, performances, and cultural activations bring public spaces into a continuous dialogue with the people who use them. From ephemeral street theatre to participatory workshops and large-scale installations, art invites diverse publics to inhabit space creatively and collectively. In this way, arts-based placemaking becomes a catalyst

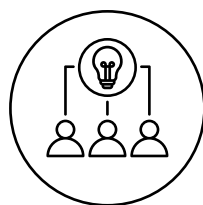
(1)
The right to the city
 Empowering people
 to shape
 their environments



(2)
Tactical urbanism
 Innovative
 community-led
 interventions



(3)
Co-design futures
 The idea of the future
 as a collective
 construct



PLACEMAKING

Fig. 1
 Principles of placemaking (Ramon Marrades)

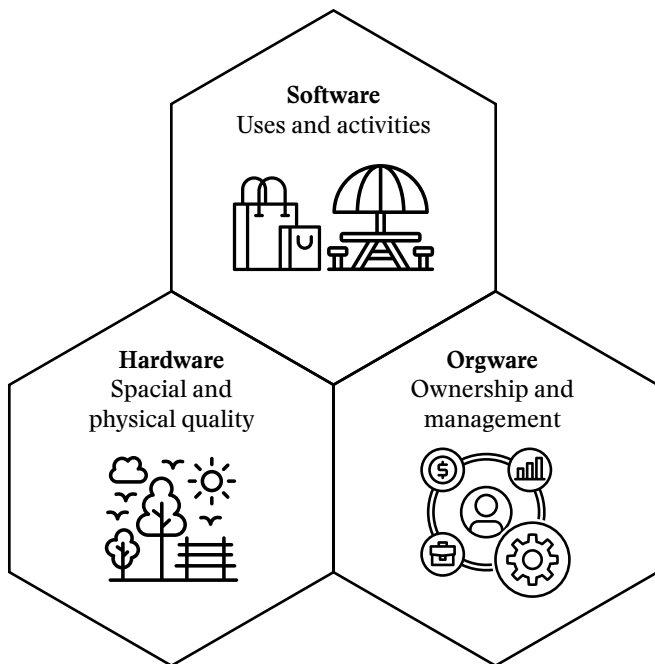


Fig. 2
 Dimensions of placemaking (Ramon Marrades, adapted from STIPO)

for belonging, inclusivity, and democratic participation, amplifying voices that are often left out of urban planning processes.

At the same time, placemaking offers the arts new ground to thrive — beyond the walls of institutions, beyond disciplinary silos, and beyond art-for-art's-sake. It provides not only space — but relevance, audience, and purpose. Public spaces become open-air studios, stages, and galleries — accessible to emerging, experimental, and underrepresented voices. This opens up new audiences and legitimizes practices that may fall outside institutional norms. Placemaking thus contributes to more inclusive and context-sensitive cultural ecosystems, expanding where and how art is made, shared, and experienced.

Moreover, placemaking encourages artistic practices that are collaborative and process-based, rather than exclusively product-focused. It allows artists to work in close proximity to everyday life — co-creating with communities, engaging with site-specific histories, and responding to real-time social dynamics. This shift broadens the role of the artist: no longer just a solitary creator, but a facilitator of dialogue, a bridge between sectors, and a civic agent. In doing so, placemaking challenges traditional hierarchies of authorship and invites a broader definition of artistic value — one rooted in relationship, relevance, and lived experience.

Placemaking also redefines how artistic production is organized and supported. It brings artists into new alliances with planners, architects, social innovators, and local institutions — creating fertile ground for interdisciplinary and cross-sector collaboration. These hybrid constellations produce experimental, place-based forms of knowledge that are often difficult to achieve within conventional art-world circuits. They also help embed culture into broader urban agendas, from sustainability to social inclusion.

After all, places are not just physical settings — they are spaces imbued with meaning. Through artistic engagement and collective authorship, placemaking turns space into place, and place into possibility. And in doing so, it helps the arts remain relevant, connected, and alive in the heart of public life.

Doing it right: permits, programming, and participation

Successfully integrating the arts into placemaking means getting the framework right — from how projects are approved to how they are sustained and who gets to shape them. It involves more than creative vision; it demands supportive systems, long-term commitment, and community-centered approaches. Below are three core pillars to doing placemaking with the arts well: permits, programming, and participation.

Permits

The first hurdle that many public art and placemaking projects encounter is bureaucratic. Too often, city regulations and permitting processes are unclear, inconsistent, or inaccessible — discouraging innovation and making it difficult for artists and communities to act. Even the most promising, visionary proposals can stall if they face opaque or overly restrictive approval procedures.

To foster creativity in public space, municipalities must streamline and clarify their processes. This means building transparent and flexible frameworks that support, rather than inhibit, artistic interventions. Cities should consider creating dedicated cultural liaisons or one-stop permit pathways for creative projects. Legal guidance, clear timelines, and support in navigating compliance issues are essential for enabling artists and communities to participate fully in shaping their environments. When handled well, permitting becomes not a barrier, but a bridge between civic goals and creative action.

Programming

Placemaking isn't a one-time event — it works in evolving cultural ecosystems. For arts-based placemaking to have lasting impact, it must be anchored in continuous and inclusive cultural programming. Single installations or performances may spark attention, but only ongoing activities ensure that public spaces stay relevant, vibrant, and engaged over time.

Programming should be diverse in both form and audience — welcoming a range of disciplines, cultures, and age groups. This includes regular events, seasonal celebrations, artist residencies, pop-up exhibitions, and hybrid cultural activities that reflect the identity and rhythm of the community. Cities should treat programming as critical public infrastructure, supporting it with resources and space that allow it to grow organically. Purpose-built spaces and adaptable venues also help accommodate evolving uses and support a rotating cast of artistic voices. Well-planned programming transforms public space from something people pass through into somewhere people stay, return to, and feel part of.

Participation

Participation is the beating heart of meaningful placemaking. Too often, community engagement is treated as a late-stage formality, rather than a core element of the process. But true participation means co-creation — where residents, artists, and stakeholders come together to imagine, design, and steward public space.

When communities are involved from the beginning, the resulting places carry deeper meaning and authenticity. Artistic placemaking becomes a platform for storytelling, memory, and identity — enabling people to see their experiences reflected in the space around them. Participatory approaches can include creative workshops, design labs, youth-led initiatives, and embedded artist collaborations. These processes build trust, ownership, and long-term connection to place.

Importantly, participation doesn't end when the artwork is unveiled — it continues in the care, use, and reinterpretation of space over time. Cities should create governance structures that empower local voices in decision-making, ensuring that public spaces reflect the diversity and aspirations of the people who use them daily.

Placemaking through the arts holds immense potential to reshape how we experience and engage with cities. But this potential can only be fully realized when we get the structure right. A good framework of permits, programming, and participation is the foundation of a thriving, inclusive, and creative public realm. When these elements align, public space becomes more than a backdrop — it becomes a stage, a forum, a canvas, and a shared cultural asset.

After all, places are not just physical—they are spaces with meaning. And when art, community, and urban life come together, that meaning can be collectively imagined, expressed, and celebrated.

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Placemaking Europe

Placemaking Europe is a collaborative network of practitioners, urbanists, city-makers, researchers, artists, and public institutions working to accelerate the impact of placemaking as a people-centred approach to urban development across Europe. Established in 2018, the network aims to shape more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable public spaces by fostering knowledge exchange, capacity-building, and policy influence at local and international levels.

The network functions as a platform for sharing best practices, co-developing tools and methodologies, and advocating for placemaking as a vital strategy in urban transformation. Key activities include the Placemaking Europe Week, local placemaking labs, thematic working groups, and collaborations with European institutions, municipalities, and community-based initiatives. With a strong emphasis on participation, culture, equity, and well-being, Placemaking Europe supports cross-sector dialogue and empowers communities to co-create the public spaces they inhabit.





The Last Ocean, by Jen Lewin Studio [USA]
Vivid Sydney, Sydney, Australia (2022). © Jen Lewin Studio

2.

**Placemaking,
to
build the
city.**

Tiago Mota Saraiva

At a time when the concept of placemaking is gaining increasing attention in Portugal, it is important to begin by acknowledging that, from an international perspective, the term is subject to considerable debate. This debate stems from its overuse, which often strips it of substance and meaning. It is therefore necessary to return to its roots. The invitation to write this text on the principles and concepts of placemaking comes at a timely moment, allowing us to organise some ideas and delve deeper into its historical foundations.

I can recall many terms applied to the city that have become the subject of such disputes and which, over the years, have been transformed into concepts emptied of real meaning. Used to describe everything, they often end up signifying nothing. By way of example, I would point to terms such as “sustainable”, “green”, or “creative”. There is hardly a real estate project that does not appropriate these terms, no matter how disastrous it may be for the public interest, the creative sector, or the economy and ecology of a territory. These are terms that tend to lose their meaning, being used to describe everything and its opposite.

Without intending to impose a rigid standard or a strait-jacket on the use of the term placemaking, and certainly not advocating for any form of certification or control over its application, I will seek to reflect on how we might reach a shared understanding regarding the principles and contexts inherent to it. In this light, this essay aims to shed some light on the foundational principles of placemaking, its context and necessity, and the urban issues it sought — and continues to seek — to address.

Let us begin by stepping back a few decades to the North American cities of the post-Second World War period. Fear of further wars and the insecurity caused by severe economic recession had emptied out urban centres. The dream home was now a detached house in the suburbs, where one could park a car at the door or in the garage. Far from the urban centres — seen as easy targets for future wars and territories marked by insecurity and precariousness.

The construction of this idea of the American dream home was widely popularised through television series produced in the USA during the 1970s and 1980s, and also contributed to shaping a certain image of success and of the American Dream disseminated worldwide. One notable example is the very popular sitcom *All in the Family* (broadcast in Portugal as *Uma Família às Direitas*), which portrayed the daily life of a working-class American family centred around the figure of a conservative, racist, and sexist patriarch — Archie Bunker. Broadcast by CBS between 1971 and 1979, it reached Portugal during the 1980s and was also a ratings success. The overwhelming majority of scenes take place inside a suburban house, invariably reached by car. A neighbouring couple features in a secondary role, but relationships with neighbours are consistently

portrayed as distant and tense. Other neighbours are treated with indifference or fear. All in the Family is merely one example of many sitcoms reflecting this suburban ideal of urbanity. Family Ties, Who's the Boss? or Alf similarly reveals, more or less, the same typology of house and suburban context. Curiously, fifty years later, in the highly popular Netflix mini-series Adolescence (2025), the family home of the main character once again reflects the same characteristics of an isolated suburban house in the periphery of a British city, with the final episode highlighting the same tense and dehumanised relationship between neighbours.

This contextualisation serves to introduce the work of one of the most important urbanists and thinkers on the city, Jane Jacobs (1916-2006), whose contributions are foundational to what we now understand as more contemporary urban planning practices — such as the 15-minute city, child-friendly urbanism, Barcelona's super-blocks, and most approaches to urban interventions through a gender perspective. Jacobs was a journalist, writer, and urbanist, born in Pennsylvania (United States of America). Her theoretical production and activism around urban issues are foundational to feminist urbanism and are inseparable from the most contemporary experiences of urbanism produced for, and with, people. Her political activity concerning the city led her to be interrogated and arrested by the FBI on several occasions. Jacobs' name was even included on the infamous McCarthy list, which denounced alleged communists or pro-Soviet sympathisers. Deeply committed to the fight against the Vietnam War and unwilling for her sons to be drafted, she was forced to emigrate with her family to Canada, where, in 1968, she became a Canadian citizen, renouncing the nationality of the country where she had been born. From Canada, she devoted herself to the defence of city sovereignty, energy and environmental protection, the public interest, and public goods, achieving enormous recognition that continued to grow following her death on 25 April 2006.

In 1958, at a time when American city centres (downtowns) were facing widespread desertification and decline, Jane Jacobs published an article entitled Downtown Is For People (1958). In the chapter The Animated Alley, she presents the case of Maiden Lane in San Francisco. A narrow street between blocks of residential and office towers, Maiden Lane had been abandoned and neglected for years until a group of shopkeepers decided to begin making the street more liveable. They planted trees along the pavements, installed wooden public benches where people could sit and linger, painted the pavements, and added sunshades during the hottest periods. Each shopkeeper was encouraged to project their business outwards into the street through their shopfront. Each business expressed itself in different ways, but all shared the aim of creating conditions that would invite people to stroll, to stop, to stay, and to

return. Jacobs described it as an oasis in San Francisco, noting the street's irresistible sense of "intimacy, gaiety, and spontaneity" — a "powerful magnet" in the downtown area.

I begin this text by referring to Jane Jacobs and to an article written long before the term placemaking took on the meaning we attribute to it today, because much of what is foundational to the concept of placemaking can be found in Jacobs' work. But let us return to her article.

In the chapter *Maps and Reality* of the same article, Jacobs identifies the street — and not the block — as the most significant unit in the construction of the city, and explains why real estate developers should not be the ones to produce the city. Developers, she writes, "see streets as dividers of areas rather than as unifying spaces" because they cannot help but rely on maps, treating them as if they represented a higher reality.

In the 1950s, the world was undergoing a process of re-configuration from the ruins left by the Second World War. The financialisation of the first major urban rehabilitation initiatives in American city centres was taking its early steps. Jacobs recognised this and stated unequivocally that the vision real estate developers had for the city amounted to little more than the production of capital for the extraction of profit and financial gains. What we now refer to as the commodification of the city and public space — a phenomenon extensively studied by some of the most important contemporary thinkers¹ — was already clear to Jacobs. She formulated these ideas before Henri Lefebvre published his *The Right to the City* (Lefebvre, 2012).

In the chapter *The Citizen*, Jacobs goes even further, asserting that city centres cannot be rehabilitated through the abstract logic of a small group of men². Such rehabilitation must be based on identifying the doubts and main questions raised by the people themselves. In her view, people are the most important experts — particularly those who move through the city with an "observant eye" — whether residents, workers, women, or children. The article concludes with a statement that could easily have been spoken or written by any twenty-first-century placemaker: designing a dream city is easy; rebuilding a living one takes imagination.

1. On issues related to the commodification and privatisation of public space, it is important to mention David Harvey — who, from a Marxist interpretative framework, demonstrates how urban spaces are privatised and transformed into financial assets —, Sharon Zukin — who analyses how culture and the arts are used to valorise and commercialise urban spaces, leading to social exclusion —, Neil Smith — through the idea that gentrification processes exclude disadvantaged classes from public spaces — and Don Mitchell — who examines how regulation and property rights have imposed a set of restrictive rules on the free use of public space.

2. The use of the term "men" is neither indifferent nor interchangeable with "people" or "human beings". Jane Jacobs is a fundamental reference in gender studies relating to public space, and her thinking is essential to what is now known as feminist urbanism. Over the years, Jacobs consistently highlighted that cities must be built by the people, extending far beyond decision-makers who, even today, are still predominantly men.

Downtown Is For People is a foundational article in the theoretical and intellectual framework of the most contemporary new practices of city-making, which recognise the central role of people, the environment, and ecology. In this article, we find some of the most important principles of what we now understand as placemaking.

However, beyond what is written, it is very interesting to note something I was unaware of before beginning the research for this essay. Jacobs' article for *Fortune*, which I identify as foundational to the idea of placemaking, was actually commissioned by William H. Whyte³ after he attended one of her lectures at Harvard University. William H. Whyte, born in Pennsylvania (like Jane Jacobs) in 1917, and who died in 1999, studied English at Princeton University but worked as a journalist and teacher, gaining renown for his work in the fields of urban sociology and organisational studies. At the time, Whyte was editor of *Fortune* and had published, two years earlier, his award-winning book *The Organization Man*, about post-war corporate culture in the United States. Jacobs often referred to Whyte as her mentor. Although the two maintained a lifelong relationship marked by deep mutual respect and shared criticism of the city produced by large corporations — a model enabled by modernist urbanism — Whyte never adopted a public or activist profile as Jane Jacobs did.

But the foundational importance of these two urbanists to placemaking is not new. Whyte and Jacobs have long been identified as the mentors behind the definition of placemaking as presented by Fred Kent, who is considered the father of the international placemaking movement and who absorbed their practices.

Fred Kent (1942) studied social sciences at Columbia University, focusing his research on the fields of anthropology and urban planning. He was born and raised in New York City, where he still lives, amid the great pacifist mobilisation against the Vietnam War — a context that led Jane Jacobs to leave the country — and he often begins his talks on placemaking with images of the street demonstrations that filled New York's streets. The large popular demonstrations in the USA during the 1970s, centred on the occupation of streets and protest, form a very important part of Kent's imaginary. Alongside pacifist motivations, particularly the widespread opposition to the Vietnam War that mobilised many young Americans, the environmental movements were also taking their first steps, especially around Earth Day, whose first major demonstration took place on 22 April 1970. Fred Kent was the coordinator of the movement surrounding the first Earth Day celebration in New York City, which

3. William H. Whyte is a figure who remains relatively little discussed or recognised within the field of urban studies. In 2022, Richard Rein sought to reposition his legacy by publishing a biographical book on his work, entitled *American Urbanist — How William H. Whyte's Unconventional Wisdom Reshaped Public Life*, published by Island Press.

closed Manhattan's 5th Avenue to cars and filled it with people.

It was through William H. Whyte's Street Life Project (SLP) that Fred Kent first began to develop his professional approach. The SLP was, at the time, a pioneering study focused on the observation and analysis of how public spaces in New York City were used, based on filming and direct observation of people's behaviour in spaces such as squares, streets, and parks. It involved detailed analyses of how people interacted with benches, trees, shade, food, and other features of the urban environment. The study revealed that the most successful public spaces were those that offered places for people to sit and flexible options that allowed for reconfiguration. The presence of food and drink increased the amount of time people spent in a space. This, in turn, created dynamism and strengthened neighbourly relations and, above all, a sense of community. Movement and proximity between people helped to create a safer, more welcoming, and more supportive environment.

It was along these lines of thinking that Fred Kent founded Project for Public Spaces (PPS)⁴ in 1975, an organisation that has been dedicated to the concept and practice of placemaking ever since. PPS is a non-profit organisation based in the United States that develops consultancy projects, technical assistance, research, and capacity-building initiatives to plan and revitalise squares, parks, streets, markets, and other urban spaces, working from the perspective of the communities and seeking to involve the people who use these spaces daily. Over the years, PPS has grown and established fruitful partnerships across the world. In collaboration with UN-Habitat, it published *Placemaking and the Future of Cities* in 2012, which reports on placemaking experiences in ten cities around the globe and presents ten methodologies:

1. Improve streets as places.
2. Create squares and parks as multi-use destinations.
3. Build local economies through markets.
4. Design buildings to support places.
5. Link a public health agenda to a public space agenda.
6. Reinvent community planning.
7. Utilize the Power of 10+.
8. Create a comprehensive public space agenda.
9. Start small and experiment, using a "lighter, quicker, cheaper" approach.
10. Restructure government to support public spaces.

In Kent's view, placemaking counters the trend towards the segmentation of knowledge operating within the city. Against the growing tendency towards specialisation and the enclosure of each discipline

4. <https://www.pps.org/>

within its own discourse, Kent proposes placemaking as the “improvisation of street performance”. It is not about disciplines or disciplinary discourses, nor about the bureaucracies constructed to legitimise them. So often, placemaking actions are expressions of freedom and humanism that exist outside the law or, in a more fitting term, beyond the law.

One of the simplest actions of placemaking is placing a chair in the middle of an urban space where there is no place for a person to stop. The moment someone sits down or pauses, placemaking is happening. It was around this simple placemaking gesture that the informal collective *Infraestrutura Pública* was founded in Lisbon. Paiva Couceiro Square, in Lisbon, has a history of popular occupation, with games and intense public use. During the pandemic period, tables and chairs were completely removed and, despite many requests for their reinstatement, no response was given by public authorities. One day, the square awoke to find three dozen chairs placed there by this collective, which were quickly occupied by local residents. The intervention lasted little more than three hours, with municipal workers arriving to remove them, as if it were an illegal operation. A few days later, under the threat of another performative action, the process of reinstalling tables and chairs was finally initiated.

Thus began this collective, and it has continued ever since. With part of Lisbon’s bus stops being granted to a private advertising company, many of the seating areas and lighting fixtures were removed from these urban structures. The *Infraestrutura Pública* collective responded by building various benches and leaving them at bus stops, sharing photographs of people sitting on them through social media.

Two very simple actions that create a place to linger and humanise the urban public space. The chair or the table can be seen as a kind of minimum unit of action, but a building can also form part of a broader placemaking strategy.

In the book that offers a “documentary, reflective and research record, intertwining the cultural actions of dozens of organisations with the local community, sociological perspectives, economic impact, and new ways of city-making” (AAVV, 2025), *Largo Residências* presents a different scale of work that it has been developing in Lisbon, in the parish of Arroios, over the past fifteen years. Always starting from a building or built complex, *Largo Residências* intervenes in the territory and its public space. It is currently managing the space known as *Jardins do Bombarda*, located in part of the former Miguel Bombarda Hospital. Behind the walls of what was once a psychiatric hospital, gardens have now been opened to the city, hosting numerous organisations from different disciplines, a vibrant daily programme of activities, a restaurant, a theatre, a

community garden, and many other initiatives emerging from either necessity or experimentation. Almost overnight, a high-security, restricted-access space was transformed into an open space for the city, offering places to sit without the obligation to consume, and where most events are free of charge. At Jardins do Bombarda, programming is designing, just as Fred Kent advocates.

In the recent documentary *The Place Man* (2024), directed and produced by Guillermo Bernal⁵, Fred Kent summarises the choice facing urban management today: "if we plan a city for more cars and traffic, we will get more cars and traffic; if we plan a city for more people and places, we will get more people and places".

In recent years, with the support and leadership of Ethan Kent (Fred Kent's son), PPS has been globalising these themes, both through its close relationship with UN-Habitat and through an umbrella organisation such as Placemaking X⁶. Around the world, national, regional, and continental placemaking organisations are emerging. In Europe, Placemaking Europe has been organising large-scale annual gatherings in different cities since 2018 and is running a training programme for municipalities focused on city-making through placemaking. Placemaking Europe brings together professionals from various disciplines related to city-making, activists, municipal officials, and policymakers, and has been playing an increasingly important role in promoting and implementing placemaking practices across many European cities.

At a time when the term placemaking is being globalised at great speed and increasingly used to describe a wide range of actions in urban space, it seems important to recentre its objectives around its historical roots, in order to formalise a set of principles and its original theoretical framework. Even though the term may be in constant reformulation and subject to debate, it is neither insignificant nor should it be overlooked that its foundations are consistently anchored in political ideals concerning city-making practices and, I would venture to add, in the pacifist and environmental movements.

At this historical moment, and in the face of the global challenges we are confronting, I have no doubt that placemaking can be an essential tool in building a different kind of city and a new approach to urban development. The foundational links of placemaking — with the movements against war and for peace, with ecology, with participation, with the humanisation of cities, with welcoming newcomers, with neighbourly relations and community-building, and with the wellbeing of all people, animals, and living beings — are decisive elements in developing responses to the issues we face, through new ways of city-making.

5. Available at: <https://www.placemakingx.org/the-place-man>

6. <https://www.placemakingx.org/>

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#sustainable
#urban
#development

Superblocks

Barcelona, Spain

Barcelona's Superblocks (Superilles) model is an innovative urban reorganisation strategy aimed at reclaiming public space for people by promoting sustainable mobility, urban health, and community life. By restricting car traffic within selected neighbourhood blocks, the city creates pedestrian-friendly zones that are reimagined as parks, public squares, urban gardens, and spaces for cultural practice. This physical transformation is paired with participatory processes involving residents, local associations, and artists in rethinking the everyday uses of space. The city thus becomes a stage for ecologically and socially rooted placemaking, where sustainable solutions are tested through lived experience.

Beyond the environmental benefits — such as reduced noise and air pollution — Superblocks encourage the creation of places with a distinct identity, through site-specific artistic interventions, co-designed urban furniture, and cultural programming in public space. Schools, artist collectives, and civic centres are often engaged in the creative development of proposals that strengthen belonging and local ownership. Replicated in other Catalan cities and internationally, this model demonstrates how tactical urbanism, artistic creation, and civic participation can be meaningfully combined to deliver inclusive, lasting, and sustainable impact in the urban realm.





Playable Art Installations, by The Urban Conga
Waterfront Park, Sarasota, Florida, USA (2023), © Christopher Brickman

**Beyond 3.
event: the
rethinking
art
in public
space
and
placemaking.**

Bruno Costa,
Daniel Vilar

Public space has long been a site for artistic expression, serving as a space of encounter, dialogue, and community-building. In contemporary contexts, public space is increasingly recognised as an essential arena for artistic intervention, offering accessibility beyond institutional frameworks and challenging traditional notions of authorship and spectatorship. As a shared domain, it holds cultural, social, and political significance, reinforcing its role as a stage for collective memory, democratic engagement, and participatory interaction (Majeবাদia, 2017).

Outdoor arts are not simply about site-specific installations or performances; it's about dynamic practices that engage with the lived experiences of communities. It can activate spaces, reclaim underutilised areas, and provoke new ways of perceiving urban environments. This interaction fosters a participatory culture where audiences are no longer passive consumers but active co-creators of meaning (Placemaking Europe Place-Led Development Working Group, 2023). Public space as a platform for artistic expression becomes even more relevant in an era where privatisation and commercial interests are reducing access to shared urban environments. This increasing scarcity of open spaces for free cultural expression highlights the necessity of sustained advocacy for the presence of outdoor arts in placemaking policies and urban development strategies. Placemaking involves a social justice type of organisation of space, aiming to create environments that are equitable and accessible. It is a question of freedom — ensuring that everyone has the right to participate in and enjoy public spaces (London, 2020).

Artistic practices are an important element of the cultural life of the cities, acting as platforms for a conscious dialogue of artists with the city in public spaces. Furthermore, art in public spaces has been used to contribute to collective memory and to the creation of meaning of the city spaces, mostly through public festivals and initiatives originating from the independent cultural scene. It has been recognized that there is a need for place-based, culturally sensitive and integrative approaches to public places through small space interventions and events, with a goal of enhancing their meaning, use, and value. Additionally, there is a need to integrate cultural heritage into the public spaces of the city as an asset to its sense of place and as a culturally sustainable form of action. Through artistic actions, the purpose and role of particular sites in historic cities are being re-actualized and animated in a specific artistic way, thus contributing to the new possible uses of public spaces. Such participatory site-specific artistic actions use architecture as scenography, by including the whole ambience of streets and buildings in the artistic installation, and also involving the local community.

If placemaking was initially linked to the aims of reviving town centres, urban villages to pedestrian-friendly environments

with the goal of kick-starting economies, in recent years its application inspires entrepreneurs, artists, and performance makers who deal with the common objective to “give life” to certain spaces lacking vibrant street activities and public life (Bieou & Faniadis, 2024). Performing arts turn ordinary places into extraordinary playgrounds for creativity and expression. Every action in the public space is a performance, whether it is a planned event or spontaneous activity. This perspective opens up the possibilities for how we view and use our public spaces, allowing them to take on new purposes and undergo temporary changes that enliven the urban landscape.

Outdoor arts encompass a range of participatory methodologies that are deeply embedded in placemaking. Many projects around the world have demonstrated the power of performing arts created with and for communities, reflecting their concerns, challenges, and aspirations. These interventions do not merely entertain but actively shape the cultural and social fabric of the places they inhabit. When designed with intention and inclusivity, outdoor arts serve as a vehicle for social transformation, amplifying the voices of underrepresented groups and fostering a deeper connection between individuals and their environment (Bieou & Faniadis, 2024). The methodologies of outdoor arts — whether visual interventions, performative acts, or interactive installations — align with the objectives of creative placemaking. As defined by the Project for Public Spaces, creative placemaking is a "collaborative process by which we can shape our public realm in order to maximize shared value". When artists work within public spaces, their interventions can redefine the function of these spaces, ensuring that they are lived, used, and valued by communities.

Street theatre, for example, transforms predictable urban environments into sites of spontaneous engagement, drawing in passersby who might not otherwise seek out cultural experiences. Large-scale visual interventions, such as murals and projections, challenge the dominant narratives of a city, reclaiming walls and façades as platforms for diverse voices. Interactive and participatory projects further embed artistic practices within the social fabric of a place, ensuring that artistic interventions resonate with the people who inhabit and use these spaces. Additionally, outdoor arts play a significant role in fostering local identities and reinterpreting heritage in contemporary contexts. Many public art projects take inspiration from a site's historical and cultural legacy, using creative methods to revitalise forgotten or marginalised narratives. Festivals and site-responsive performances, in particular, introduce temporal layers to placemaking, offering temporary yet impactful transformations of the urban landscape that leave lasting impressions on audiences and communities alike (Courage & McKeown, 2019).

Measuring impact in these cultural initiatives can be

challenging, especially in the early stages of transformative projects. These pioneering efforts in placemaking aim to reshape cultural narratives and empower communities through innovative approaches (London, 2020). As diverse practitioners are increasingly recognised in and engage with creative placemaking, the sector begins to reflect contemporary approaches to creativity that challenge or do not conform to an understanding of the arts and creative processes often held by those outside the realms of contemporary creative practices (Courage & McKeown, 2019). Opportunities for citizens to engage and co-create within creative placemaking are necessary if the sector is not to be complicit in nor perpetuate social displacement but instead contribute to an authentic and meaningful sense of place, and a sense of ownership and belonging (Courage & McKeown, 2019).

Understanding the intersection between outdoor arts and placemaking requires a broader conceptual framework. At its core, placemaking is about the transformation of spaces into meaningful places through participatory and artistic interventions. This process involves the integration of cultural narratives, the creation of socially cohesive environments, and the development of a sense of ownership among local communities. Rather than simply focusing on economic regeneration, placemaking acknowledges the intrinsic value of cultural expression in shaping our shared spaces (London, 2020). **Despite its potential, the recognition of outdoor arts as a tool for placemaking remains a sectoral challenge.** Often, urban policies prioritise commercial interests over cultural sustainability, marginalising artistic practice in public space. Additionally, while creative placemaking is increasingly acknowledged within urban planning, there is still a tendency to instrumentalise art for economic regeneration without genuine engagement with local communities (Courage & McKeown, 2019).

Another challenge is the lack of stable funding mechanisms for outdoor arts within placemaking initiatives. Many projects rely on temporary grants or festival programming, limiting their capacity for long-term impact. Developing policies that embed outdoor arts into sustainable funding structures is essential for ensuring their role in shaping public spaces remains consistent and meaningful (London, 2020). To advocate for a more integrated approach, **it is necessary to position artistic practice in public space as a legitimate and effective strategy for place development.** This requires sustained support mechanisms, cross-sector collaboration, and policy frameworks that recognise the long-term cultural and social value of such interventions (London, 2020).

Culture is discussed as a vital force in practising placemaking. In the recent era of the paradigm shift, culture is accepted as the fourth pillar that envelops the three basic pillars of Sustainable Development Goals, viz. society, environment, and economy, as

provoked in the Mexico Declaration in 1982. Placemaking is an art engaging in creating people and getting themselves interconnected through a culture where ‘engagement’ is a process and ‘cultural landscape’ is the product (Singh, Niglio & Rana, 2023).

Placemaking strategies, when successful, create environments that encourage social interaction, civic engagement, and community cohesion. These qualities, in turn, are linked to lower levels of stress, improved mental health, and an increased sense of belonging and identity (London, 2020). The **intersection between outdoor arts and placemaking presents a fertile ground for developing innovative solutions to contemporary societal challenges**. These challenges reflect the need for cultural and urban sectors to adapt to shifting social realities while ensuring that artistic practices in public space remain a powerful tool for transformation. Within this framework, key strategic approaches emerge, pointing towards how outdoor arts can actively contribute to holistic and meaningful social and community impact.

Environmental sustainability has become an inescapable axis in placemaking strategies, shaping how public spaces are designed, inhabited, and experienced. Urban environments bear the brunt of climate change, pollution, and unsustainable development, often at the expense of communal wellbeing. Outdoor arts offer a dynamic response to these issues, fostering ecological awareness and sustainable practices through artistic interventions that engage with both nature and the built environment. Increasingly, artistic projects are incorporating environmentally conscious materials and low-impact production methods, while performances and installations prompt audiences to reflect on their relationship with the planet. Some site-responsive initiatives go beyond symbolism, actively regenerating neglected areas by transforming abandoned urban landscapes into vibrant cultural and ecological hubs. Festivals dedicated to public arts have begun adopting environmentally responsible approaches, embedding principles of sustainability into the very fabric of their programming. This alignment between artistic expression, environmental awareness, and urban renewal demonstrates how placemaking can extend beyond spatial considerations to embed ethical and ecological imperatives into the heart of community development.

The presence of artistic practice in public space also contributes directly to **cultural wellbeing**⁷, reinforcing the intrinsic link between art, mental health, and social cohesion. As urban environments become increasingly dense and privatised, access to

7. Cultural wellbeing refers to the positive impact of cultural participation on individuals' and communities' quality of life. It encompasses equitable access to culture, the strengthening of identity and sense of belonging, and the promotion of creativity as a key factor for social cohesion and personal development.

shared cultural experiences is fundamental in maintaining a sense of community. Outdoor arts, by their very nature, cultivate encounters that are inclusive and unmediated, allowing individuals to engage with artistic expression in an organic, participatory manner. Studies suggest that cultural engagement in public space reduces stress, fosters emotional resilience, and strengthens collective identity. The immersive nature of public performances and participatory installations offers opportunities for social interaction, alleviating isolation and reinforcing connections between individuals and the spaces they inhabit. When artistic interventions are embedded in placemaking strategies, they not only revitalise urban environments but also contribute to a more profound sense of belonging, encouraging residents to take ownership of their surroundings and engage in collective acts of meaning-making.

The **digital transition** is also shaping the way outdoor arts interact with placemaking, opening new avenues for participation while challenging traditional notions of public space. Emerging technologies such as augmented reality, interactive projection mapping, and digital performance art have redefined how audiences experience cultural interventions. These tools provide opportunities to enhance engagement, expanding artistic narratives beyond physical and temporal constraints and inviting broader participation. At the same time, digital placemaking has raised critical questions about how technology should be integrated into urban environments without diminishing the essential human and spontaneous qualities that define outdoor arts. The challenge lies in ensuring that digital tools amplify artistic experiences rather than create passive consumption, striking a balance between technological innovation and the live, collective dimension that is intrinsic to performance in public space. As cities increasingly turn to smart technologies in urban planning, there is potential for collaboration between artists, technologists, and policymakers to co-create immersive experiences that redefine how public space is imagined and lived.

The global nature of contemporary outdoor arts practice also highlights the complex relationship between international networks and local contexts. Festivals dedicated to outdoor arts serve as platforms for cross-border exchange, enabling artists to bring diverse practices and perspectives into conversation with specific urban and cultural settings. While this circulation of ideas fosters artistic innovation, it also raises questions about how large-scale events engage with local communities. Striking a **balance between the global and the local** is key to ensuring that festivals and transnational collaborations are not merely cultural imports but rather meaningful interventions that contribute to the identity and agency of the places that host them. When structured with sensitivity to local needs, these exchanges can generate long-lasting cultural impact, providing artists

and residents alike with opportunities to co-create new narratives and methodologies for placemaking. The challenge, however, is to ensure that these interactions do not reproduce extractive models of cultural production but rather operate as reciprocal engagements that empower local voices while benefiting from global connectivity. As festivals and artistic networks evolve, a more nuanced approach to international collaboration is needed, one that embraces cultural specificity while fostering interconnectivity and shared learning.

At its core, **outdoor arts have long been a space of political expression**, challenging dominant narratives and asserting the right to the city. Since the 1970s, public performance and street theatre have been used as forms of resistance, speaking to political struggles and amplifying voices that are often marginalised in institutional settings. Today, in the face of increasing urban inequality, shrinking civic spaces, and the growing commodification of culture, the role of outdoor arts as an instrument of activism remains more relevant than ever. Public performances and site-specific interventions have the capacity to disrupt routines, interrupt commercialised urban landscapes, and provoke dialogue about issues ranging from social justice to environmental crises. By embedding art into the everyday fabric of the city, outdoor arts continue to act as a powerful tool for reclaiming public space as a site of collective agency and civic participation. In this sense, the intersection of placemaking and artistic intervention is not simply about designing aesthetically engaging environments; it is about creating spaces that allow for dissent, negotiation, and alternative ways of being together. At a time when cities are under increasing pressure to prioritise private interests over public good, the transformative potential of outdoor arts in placemaking is a reminder that public space is not a neutral or static entity — it is a living, contested, and continuously evolving arena where culture, politics, and social action converge.

Building on these reflections, it becomes clear that placemaking is not merely about designing or delivering projects; it is about creating places that people genuinely connect with. It is a process that is people-focused, inclusive, and collaborative, ensuring that public spaces are not only functional but also meaningful and engaging for communities. The performing arts, particularly in the context of public space, emerge as a fundamental pillar of this process when approached with intentionality and depth, offering unique opportunities for connection, transformation, and collective memory-making. **Arts in public space contribute to placemaking when they transcend being merely one-off events or spectacles and instead become embedded within the social and cultural fabric of a place.** This means that artistic interventions must go beyond temporary, disconnected performances and instead foster a sense of belonging, participation, and shared experience. The most effective

placemaking through the performing arts is visionary yet practical, flexible yet deeply engaged with the local context. It actively involves communities, encourages shared responsibility, and adapts to the evolving dynamics of the space in which it occurs.

However, not all artistic activities in public space qualify as placemaking, and distinguishing between the two is essential for ensuring meaningful interventions. If an artistic intervention is solely about delivering a performance without embedding itself into the lived experience of the place, it remains an event rather than a placemaking act. Similarly, if a project is led exclusively by an external team without local participation, or if it prioritises aesthetics over genuine engagement, it risks becoming an imposition rather than a transformation. **Creative placemaking is not about infrastructure upgrades alone, nor is it about singular artworks that do not integrate with the broader dynamics of a place.** For performing arts to meaningfully contribute to placemaking, they must be deeply rooted in their context, designed as participatory, inclusive, and responsive interventions that reflect and enhance the lived realities of the communities they engage. Whether through outdoor theatre, site-specific performances, interactive experiences, or long-term artistic residencies, the key lies in creating lasting relationships between the place, its people, and the artistic practice. In this way, public space ceases to be just a backdrop for performance and instead becomes a dynamic, evolving site of cultural and social co-creation.

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#urban
#art
#regeneration

Gängeviertel

Hamburg, Germany

Gängeviertel, a former working-class quarter in the centre of Hamburg, was saved from demolition in 2009 thanks to its occupation by a collective of artists, activists, and citizens who mobilised against real estate speculation. What began as a protest evolved into a landmark process of culturally rooted urban regeneration. Since then, the area has been transformed into a self-managed centre for artistic production, featuring studios, rehearsal spaces, exhibition venues, and ongoing public programming. The Gängeviertel illustrates how placemaking can emerge from acts of resistance and symbolic territorial reclaiming, activating community dynamics, reinforcing the right to the city, and promoting cultural sustainability.

Through public artistic creation, political discourse, community events, and horizontal governance models, Gängeviertel has become a living symbol of participatory city-making. Its physical and symbolic preservation — the result of negotiations between the collective and the municipality — exemplifies a form of placemaking that values heritage alongside emerging cultural practices. The dialogue between past and present is made visible in artistic interventions across façades, courtyards, and alleyways, reimagining the district's working-class history through new visual and performative languages. Gängeviertel is not merely a reclaimed space — it is a cultural ecosystem that resists urban homogenisation, offering a sustainable and inclusive vision of the city, anchored in art, memory, and civic action.

Pentalum, by Architects of Air/ Alan Parkinson [UK]
Imaginarius, Santa Maria da Feira, Portugal (2017). © Municipality of Santa Maria da Feira





4.
shaping
place(s)
through
artistic
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4.1.

Enlisting artists as allies in equitable community planning and development.

Jamie Bennett

The past 35 years have seen much of the community planning and development world move toward asset-based strategies and approaches, which focus on what is already in place in a neighborhood and build from a place of strength. This approach was a sharp departure from the “urban renewal” that had previously been the dominant approach, which applied words like “blight” and “slum” to neighborhoods.

In asset-based community development, planners are invited to adopt an abundance mindset, focusing on assets like built and natural environments, access to transportation, informal social associations, institutions, and economic opportunities.

Artists often remain invisible to those plotting communities' futures, and arts and culture are left off community asset inventories.

There are at least three reasons that this does not make any sense.

First, in a world where we can increasingly work from anywhere, what makes a person put down roots and choose to make a life somewhere? The Knight Foundation and Gallup found that social offerings, openness, and aesthetics are the top three drivers of community attachment⁸. All three are hallmarks of arts and culture (things to do, curiosity about new ideas and experiences, and how things look).

In addition, artists are possibly the only assets already in place in every community. Not every community has a beautiful waterfront, a light rail stop, or a burgeoning new industry, but every community has people who sing, dance, and tell stories.

Finally, artists have knowledge, skills, and abilities useful for equitable planning and development.

Since artists help drive social cohesion and community attachment, since they are already there and can be helpful in the larger project of building a community's future, it makes sense to include them alongside their neighbors at the community planning and development table.

8. <https://knightfoundation.org/sotc>

This move toward enlisting artists and ensuring that community planning and development is culturally rooted was popularized in the United States as “creative placemaking” by the National Endowment for the Arts⁹ and ArtPlace America¹⁰ — although the term was first coined in Canada by Artscape¹¹.

It was a reference to the work of urbanists like Jane Jacobs and William H. (Holly) Whyte, Jr., who believed that community planning and development should focus on the resident first, that it needed to be holistic and consider all of the systems in place in our communities, and that it should be locally informed (so that neighborhoods in Poughkeepsie, New York, Peoria, Illinois, and Pasadena, California, retain the unique character of their places). This was placemaking, and the addition of “creative” invited artists to join with others in this work.

For many, however, the “placemaking” phrase evoked some of the worst aspects of the urban renewal approach, in which leaders literally bulldozed an existing neighborhood and “made” a new place on top of it with no regard for what had been there. And for many, the “creative” was seen as a synonym for “art-washing”¹², a shorthand for the ways that some creative economy moves can both lead to and accelerate gentrification — metaphorically bulldozing an existing community.

Counter terms like place “keeping”¹³ and place “knowing”¹⁴ have emerged to underscore the importance of taking an asset-based approach and beginning with the people and things already in place.

Dancemaker and Arizona State University Professor Liz Lerman's framework may be most helpful in understanding how to enlist artists in equitable community planning and development: for decades, Liz has been developing an Atlas of Creative Tools¹⁵. She has been unpacking artists' hidden rigors so that what they do in making their art may also be understood and deployed more broadly.

In Anchorage, Alaska, a Tribal housing authority did exactly this by partnering with an artist who has worked as a set designer. The Cook Inlet Housing Authority partnered with Sheila Wyne¹⁶ and her fellow artists who were a part of The Light Brigade¹⁷ collective when they wanted to introduce a more efficient studio apartment floor plan.

Building in Alaska can be prohibitively expensive — the season is short, the distances to supplies and materials can be long, and

9. <https://www.arts.gov/about/publications/creative-placemaking>

10. <https://www.artplaceamerica.org/questions/what-creative-placemaking>

11. <https://www.artscape.ca/about-us/creative-placemaking>

12. <https://artwashing.antievictionmap.com>

13. <https://blog.iooby.org/ioobys-comprehensive-guide-to-creative-placekeeping>

14. <https://www.aslacolrado.org/event/placeknowing-versus-placemaking-an-indigenous-perspective>

15. <https://lizlerman.com/atlas-of-creative-tools>

16. <https://www.sheilawyne.com/about>

17. <https://aklightbrigade.com/people>

some 80% of the state is not on the road system — so there are real reasons to encourage people to live in smaller homes. However, given the scale of the state and enormous expanses of land, few people imagine living in smaller spaces, so CIHA had a tough case to make with their potential residents. This case was more challenging to make because not many people are trained to look at two-dimensional blueprints and translate them into the experience of inhabiting that space.

However, set designers have an exquisitely honed ability to create facsimiles of reality at full scale inexpensively. So Sheila and her team did just that and made a 1:1 model that people could walk through, stand in, and rearrange to understand better how this new apartment design would work for them.

In planning and urbanist circles, this would be referred to as “rapid prototyping”, which is quickly fabricating an at-scale model of a thing to understand and evaluate its design and functionality.

In theater, this same endeavor is called “rehearsal”, and it is how theater makers have built their work for millennia.

However, it can be hard to make the mental leap from “rehearsal” to “rapid prototyping” to understand that the underlying skills are the same and that theater artists can be useful in community planning and design contexts. Although Liz refers to her project as an “atlas”, it can also be considered a bilingual dictionary, translating between artistic practice and community planning and development so that each side can understand the other’s language.

Let us break this project into its basic building blocks to understand how creative placemaking happens.

The project begins by focusing on a place — in this case, Anchorage. It considers all the people who live, work, worship, and play there. It leaves room for people who might move there in the future, but it is centered on the current population. Any work in the tradition of Jane Jacobs is place-based and resident-centered.

Next, it identifies a community development opportunity or challenge: how can we build more housing for more people more efficiently?

It then enlists an artist’s knowledge, skills, and abilities, in this case, those of a set designer — her ability to create easily facsimiles of realities to let residents experience a possible future.

Finally, there is an evaluation loop: residents can easily share their recommendations and feedback with the real estate developers.

Creative placemaking is not something that can only happen in Alaska, nor is it specific to housing. Projects like this are common across the United States, and artists work in many community planning and development sectors.

St. Paul, Minnesota, was building an extension of its light rail system, a spur to connect the Lowertown neighborhood with the rest of the metropolitan areas. Once this infrastructure was complete, the project was an asset to the neighborhood that improved transportation

equity. However, the construction of large-scale transportation infrastructure can be disruptive to communities. Springboard for the Arts¹⁸ decided to enlist artists to ameliorate this disruption.

They worked with some 650 local artists and trained them to self-produce their work and build community partnerships. They then asked the artists to go out and work with the businesses and organizations along the construction corridor. During the 18 months of construction, these artists produced more than 250 creative projects — dance lessons, art installations, concerts — in the parking lots, at restaurants, and on fencing all around the neighborhood. This was no longer a neighborhood being disrupted; this was a neighborhood that became even more lively than it had been. People did not avoid the neighborhood because there was less parking. They came to the neighborhood to experience the art, and they stayed to dine, shop, and stroll. Construction did not temporarily disconnect this neighborhood from the larger city. It encouraged people to come and go, and in doing so, it created the demand for the very amenity being built: a new transportation option.

In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, artists joined with legal experts to work with “returning citizens”, women who had completed prison sentences and were returning to their citizenship. Through the People’s Paper Co-op, the Village of Arts and Humanities¹⁹ pairs these women with legal experts to expunge their records as appropriate and ensure their rights and benefits are affirmed for them. The process of community reentry is often fraught and unsupported in the United States, and getting it right can drastically reduce recidivism and improve community safety.

In addition to pairing the women with legal experts, the Village also pairs them with an artist. The artist walks them through a process of printing out a paper copy of their criminal record, the list of some of the worst things they have done. The women are invited to tear up that record, place the pieces in a blender, and then make a literal blank sheet of paper from the remains. They attach a photo of themselves to the paper and write an intention for their future. Creating these “reverse mugshots” becomes an important part of starting a new chapter of their lives, one focused on fresh starts, rather than past transgressions.

Housing, transportation, and community safety are only three domains in which artists work. At ArtPlace, we tracked ten sectors of community planning and development: agriculture and food, economic development, education and youth, environment and energy, health, housing, immigration, public safety, transportation, and workforce development²⁰.

When we step outside, what place are we looking for?
Art in public space and placemaking

18. <https://springboardforthearts.org/big-moves/> and <https://creativeplacemaking.t4america.org/placemaking-in-practice/minneapolis-green-line/arts-improve-process>

19. <https://peoplespaperco-op.weebly.com>

20. <https://www.artplaceamerica.org/blog/community-development-matrix-20>

For each sector, ArtPlace commissioned a field scan that gave an overview of some of the most pressing issues and concerns and examples of projects within the sector that worked with artists to achieve their goals. These included a visual artist who worked with environmental activists to stop a pipeline²¹, theater artists who worked on the public health pandemic of social isolation²², and dancemakers who worked with urban planners to redesign a neighborhood corridor²³.

You can explore all of these projects, plus many more, at ArtPlace Filed Scans²⁴, and you will quickly see that in any community, with any planning and development project, artists can bring a new way of understanding, organizing, solving, and seeing.

21. <https://www.avivarahmani.com/blued-trees>

22. <https://islandsofmilwaukee.org/crossings>

23. <https://www.arts.gov/impact/creative-placemaking/exploring-our-town/takoma-park-md-new-hampshire-ave-place>

24. <https://creativeplacemakingresearch.org/field-scans>

Jamie Bennett was the Executive Director of ArtPlace America from 2014 to 2020. Previously, Jamie served as Chief of Staff at the National Endowment for the Arts and Chief of Staff at the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. He has also provided strategic counsel at the Agnes Gund Foundation; served as chief of staff to the President of Columbia University; and worked in fundraising at The Museum of Modern Art, the New York Philharmonic, and Columbia College. His past nonprofit affiliations have included the Board of Directors of Art21 and the HERE Arts Center; the Foot-in-the-Door Committee of the Merce Cunningham Dance Foundation; and Studio in a School's Associates Committee. Jamie received his BA from Columbia College in New York City and is currently the interim Executive Director of Americans for the Arts.

Planteia

Ílhavo, Portugal

Community-driven project that reimagines public space as a living, multifunctional environment, blending nature, culture, and social interaction. Situated in the square adjacent to the Casa da Cultura de Ílhavo, it transforms an urban setting into a garden, stage, audience space, and gathering place, embodying the principles of cultural placemaking. The project was developed in four key phases: construction, planting, painting, and activation, with strong community participation at its core. Over several weeks, local residents collaborated to build structures, plant diverse vegetation, and create a dynamic, interactive space. The initiative culminated in its official launch on 10 June 2021, marking the transformation of the site into a public platform for creativity, education, and sustainability.

By integrating artistic expression, environmental awareness, and social engagement, Planteia exemplifies cultural placemaking in action. It encourages intergenerational dialogue, strengthens local identity, and fosters a sense of shared ownership of public space. More than just a physical transformation, the project activates the site through concerts, performances, workshops, and community gatherings, ensuring its long-term relevance as a hub for collective experience. A collaboration between 23 Milhas — the cultural programme of Ílhavo Municipality — and Jardins Abertos, a Lisbon-based organisation promoting urban green spaces, Planteia demonstrates how public space can be shaped through participatory design, ecological consciousness, and cultural activation.

Speaking Willow, by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer [MX/CA]
Washington DC, USA (2020). © Mariana Yanez





4.2.

Visual arts and placemaking: a mature and recognised field.

Bruno Costa, Daniel Vilar

Within European urban development, the integration of visual arts into placemaking strategies is now broadly recognised as a valuable and well-established practice. From large-scale murals and architectural interventions to ephemeral installations and community-led design actions, visual artists have become consistent collaborators in transforming underused or neglected spaces into vibrant, meaningful places. These artistic interventions often serve as catalysts for wider processes of regeneration, offering aesthetic, symbolic, and narrative value to the built environment while actively involving communities in the reinterpretation of their surroundings.

The success of visual arts in placemaking also stems from their accessibility. Unlike more codified or institutionally framed forms of artistic practice, public visual artworks often communicate in immediate and visceral ways — through colour, scale, materiality, and spatial presence. They can be experienced passively or actively, by accident or intention, and by a wide range of publics. This versatility is particularly valuable in urban contexts marked by demographic complexity and competing uses of space. Visual art in public space can become a common language — one that articulates difference, sparks dialogue, and reclaims visibility for marginalised narratives. Another key strength lies in the capacity of visual artists to inhabit a double role: both as makers of objects or interventions and as facilitators of process. In many successful European projects, artists have co-designed workshops, public assemblies, walks, or mapping exercises with residents, embedding the creative process into the life of the neighbourhood. This model not only strengthens social bonds, but helps align artistic outcomes with local values and expectations.

Equally important is the contribution of visual arts to the symbolic and emotional landscape of cities. In a time of increasing alienation from public life, murals and other urban artworks often function as spatial anchors — commemorating shared histories,

celebrating cultural hybridity, or simply breaking monotony with colour and humour. They offer surfaces for projection, memory, and identity that formal planning mechanisms rarely provide. In this sense, visual arts contribute not only to the visual regeneration of space, but to its semantic and emotional regeneration — essential components of resilient and liveable urban environments.

Finally, the integration of visual artists into placemaking must also be understood as a shift in governance culture. It implies a willingness to embrace creativity not as an accessory, but as an essential dimension of how we think about place. This requires sustained investment, fair commissioning structures, and trust in artistic experimentation — especially in early-stage planning and visioning processes. It also calls for cross-sector alliances, where artists, planners, architects, cultural producers, and residents work in dialogue, not in parallel. When these conditions are met, the visual arts can powerfully contribute to a new paradigm of public space — one that is not only seen, but shaped, inhabited, and felt.

The impact of visual arts in placemaking is often immediate in appearance yet complex in meaning. While murals and installations may offer visible transformation and symbolic renewal of a space, their deeper value lies in the social processes they activate and the long-term relationships they foster. However, evaluating this impact remains a challenge. Standard cultural indicators such as audience numbers or media reach tend to overlook less tangible outcomes: shifts in community perception, increased sense of safety, or the strengthening of local identity. Recent studies by European cultural observatories — such as the *Compendium of Cultural Policies & Trends* — advocate for more nuanced evaluation frameworks that combine spatial, relational, and emotional dimensions of impact. These include indicators like the degree of co-authorship, the persistence of community use post-intervention, or the extent to which local narratives are represented. Importantly, this also calls for participatory evaluation methodologies, where residents, artists, and stakeholders reflect together on the meaning and legacy of the artistic process. In doing so, visual arts are no longer seen merely as embellishment, but as tools for structural and symbolic transformation of public space — capable of shaping not only what we see, but how we relate to place and to each other.

#residencies
#installation

Art et Territoire

Geneva, Switzerland

Thematic residency programme initiated in 2019 by the Embassy of Foreign Artists in Geneva, in partnership with Villa Bernasconi. Focusing on the Praille-Acacias-Vernets (PAV) district — one of the most dynamic areas of urban transformation in Geneva — the programme invites artists and collectives from diverse disciplines to reflect critically on contemporary urban challenges, governance, and the social impact of redevelopment. Over a three-month residency (typically from July to September), participants receive accommodation, workspace, and a monthly grant to support the development of site-specific artistic projects that interact with the local context. Past residents have included Constructlab, Lost and Finds, Francelle Cane, Julie Chovin, and Urbz, among others.

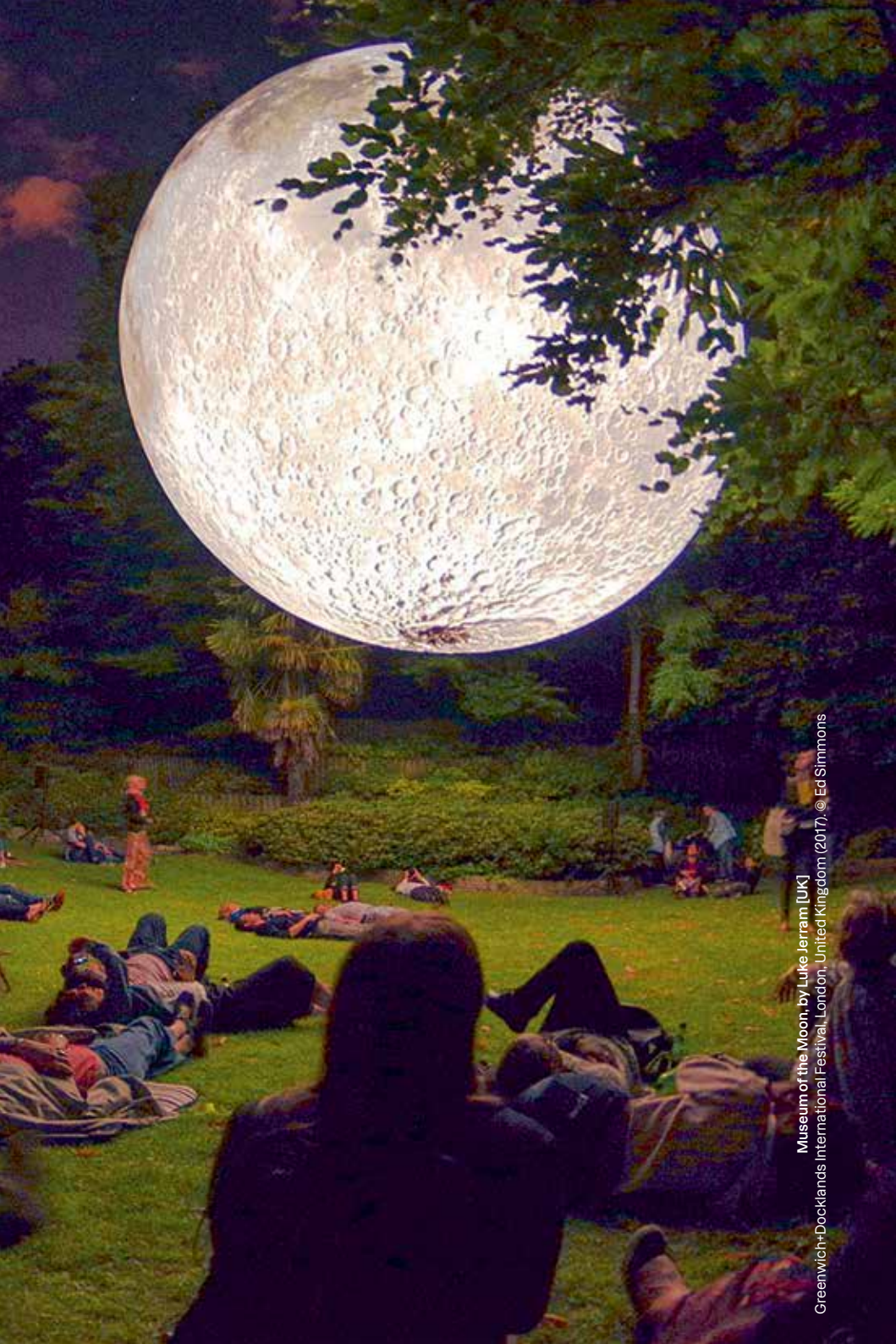
At the heart of Art & Territory is a strong commitment to creative placemaking, encouraging residents to explore how artistic practice can activate public space, foster community dialogue, and contribute to new imaginaries of city life. By engaging with local residents and responding directly to the evolving landscape of the PAV district, the programme positions art as a tool for collective reflection and urban co-construction. Through interdisciplinary approaches combining art, architecture, and urban planning, Art & Territory reaffirms the role of the artist not only as an observer, but also as an active agent in shaping inclusive, people-centred cities.

Quando saímos à rua, que lugar queremos encontrar?
Arte em espaço público e placemaking

Coletivo Warehouse

Lisbon-based collective of architects, designers, and urban practitioners dedicated to participatory urbanism, public space activation, and creative placemaking. Since 2013, they have been developing projects that bridge architecture, art, and community engagement, transforming underused urban spaces into vibrant, functional, and socially inclusive environments. Their work is deeply rooted in co-design and collaborative methodologies, ensuring that local communities play an active role in the development of their built environment. By combining temporary and permanent interventions, public art, and experimental design, Coletivo Warehouse fosters a sense of ownership, identity, and sustainability within the spaces they transform.

From interactive installations to large-scale urban regeneration projects, the collective's approach is flexible and adaptive, responding to the social, historical, and architectural specificities of each location. Their projects often explore tactical urbanism, self-building processes, and the role of ephemeral architecture in shaping contemporary cities. By empowering communities through design and placemaking, Coletivo Warehouse contributes to more inclusive, dynamic, and people-centred urban landscapes, reinforcing the importance of creativity and participatory action in urban development.



Museum of the Moon, by Luke Jerram [UK]
Greenwich+Docklands International Festival, London, United Kingdom (2017). © Ed Simmons

4.3.

Performing arts and placemaking: a strategic opportunity.

Bruno Costa, Daniel Vilar

Compared to the visual arts, the relationship between performing arts and placemaking in Europe remains less developed and more fragmentary — yet it presents a substantial and timely opportunity for innovation. Performing artists, particularly those working in participatory and site-specific formats, possess unique skills in activating public space through presence, movement, ritual, and co-creation. Their work engages with emotion, embodiment, temporality, and the collective experience of space, often generating a strong sense of belonging, memory, and transformation. Despite this, they are still rarely considered as key contributors in urban development frameworks or placemaking strategies.

This oversight limits the potential of placemaking to be truly holistic and resonant with the lived realities of communities. Participatory performing arts have long demonstrated their capacity to foster dialogue, trust, and inclusion in complex social settings — from rural villages to post-industrial cities. Their methodologies, rooted in co-creation and shared authorship, align naturally with the aims of community-led development. By strategically involving performing artists and creative teams in urban regeneration processes, municipalities and developers could access powerful tools for community engagement, narrative-building, and emotional mapping. Recognising these professionals not only as cultural providers but as creative strategists would represent a significant step towards more inclusive and imaginative placemaking practices — where public space becomes not only something we design, but something we live together.

Despite the scarcity of formal frameworks linking performing arts to placemaking, there are numerous examples of community-based, participatory, and site-responsive performances across Europe that illustrate the latent potential of this connection. These practices often emerge independently of urban planning agendas, driven instead by local associations, cultural institutions, or

temporary artistic residencies. While they may not be branded as placemaking, they generate many of its desired outcomes: local involvement, spatial reimagination, social cohesion, and a renewed sense of agency among participants. The challenge, then, is not one of invention, but of integration — of recognising the value of these artistic languages and embedding them structurally within urban strategies.

The IN SITU platform, a European network for artistic creation in public space, has been instrumental in pushing this agenda forward. Comprising over 20 partners across Europe, IN SITU supports artists who work transversally — across space, disciplines, and communities — and who interrogate the public realm through performative, immersive, and often collaborative practices. Their projects frequently challenge normative uses of space, explore contested histories, and question the ownership of the commons. Crucially, IN SITU champions a shift in narrative: from using space as a stage to considering it a participant, a witness, or even a co-author. These framings resonate strongly with placemaking principles, but demand an expanded imagination of what constitutes urban development. One example is Dream City (Tunisia), co-produced by L'Art Rue (IN SITU member), where artists from across disciplines inhabit and transform overlooked corners of Tunis into temporary arenas for civic reflection. Although the geopolitical context is distinct from Europe's, the project exemplifies how performative interventions can activate memory, stimulate discourse, and engage passers-by as co-creators of meaning.

Similarly, the field of participatory performance in Europe has generated powerful practices of community storytelling and collective authorship. The work of Rimini Protokoll (Germany) blends documentary theatre and site-specific design, offering citizens the chance to perform their own realities, often in non-theatrical spaces. In Portugal, companies like Teatro do Vestido, Ondamarela and Mala Voadora have produced performances based on oral history, neighbourhood listening, and embedded residencies. These projects show how artistic processes can serve as listening infrastructures — platforms for amplifying local knowledge, needs, and aspirations in ways that are embodied, affective, and immediate. They reveal how public space, when activated through performance, becomes a site of memory, tension, and imaginative projection.

Beyond individual companies, broader platforms and festivals have also played a key role in demonstrating how the performing arts can serve as vehicles for creative placemaking, inclusion, and urban transformation. In Portugal, the MEXE — international encounter of art and community in Porto stands out as a sustained example of how participatory and community-based performance can activate public space, promote dialogue, and contribute to

inclusive city-making. MEXE brings together artists, activists, and residents to co-create work that is grounded in local contexts and social urgencies, often taking place in non-institutional settings such as streets, housing estates, and community centres. Similarly, Festival TODOS in Lisbon has, for over a decade, explored interculturality and coexistence through artistic occupation of neighbourhoods undergoing transformation. By designing each edition around a specific area of the city, TODOS works in close collaboration with local communities, challenging perceptions, fostering hospitality, and temporarily reframing urban spaces through collective cultural experience. These initiatives show how festivals can function not only as cultural events but as experimental infrastructures for relational placemaking, where movement, encounter, and storytelling redefine how space is shared and experienced.

However, several barriers persist. Urban developers, policy-makers, and even cultural institutions frequently struggle to articulate the value of ephemeral, process-based artistic practices — especially those that do not culminate in a clearly defined output or product. This challenge is not merely technical; it is conceptual. As art historian and critic Claire Bishop (2012) has argued, socially engaged art often privileges “process over product”, emphasising relationships, negotiation, and collective meaning-making over tangible results. In placemaking contexts, this orientation can clash with more instrumental logics that prioritise visibility, permanence, or replicability. There remains a fundamental disconnect between the timeframes and logics of artistic research — which may require slowness, iteration, and responsiveness — and the urgency of urban intervention or policy implementation. Similarly, the qualitative and affective impact of participatory experiences is often difficult to reconcile with the quantitative evaluation frameworks favoured by funders and public authorities.

As British researcher and writer François Matarasso has long argued, the value of participatory arts lies not only in aesthetic outcomes, but in their capacity to foster social capital, individual confidence, civic voice, and collective memory. In his seminal publication *Use or Ornament? The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts* (1997), he proposed a multidimensional framework that moved beyond audience metrics, recognising emotional, educational, economic and political dimensions of impact. More recently, in *A Restless Art* (2019), he deepens this perspective by advocating for evaluation methods that reflect the complexity and unpredictability of participatory performance — what he calls an “art of negotiation”. This framing is particularly relevant to placemaking, where the process of engagement and relationship-building is often as significant as any material result. Citing Matarasso allows us to centre performing arts not merely as outputs to be measured,

but as catalysts of dialogue, reflection and local agency within the evolving public realm.

Assessing the impact of creative placemaking through performing arts poses even greater challenges, precisely because its most powerful effects are often intangible, embodied, and relational. Performances that unfold in public space — particularly those based on participation, co-creation, and lived experience — tend to generate what some scholars have called “soft impacts”: changes in perception, affective attachment, or social connectedness. These are notoriously difficult to measure through conventional metrics. Yet dismissing them for their invisibility is to ignore the very qualities that make the performing arts uniquely suited for engaging communities in meaningful ways. Several initiatives have highlighted how performance can operate as a form of emotional cartography, mapping not the physical layout of space, but how people feel, move, remember, and relate to it. To capture this type of impact, researchers and practitioners are increasingly experimenting with narrative-based evaluation, creative documentation, and participant testimony — approaches that honour the ephemeral, processual, and often transformative nature of these interventions. Recognising these alternative forms of impact is crucial if placemaking is to embrace not just structural change, but also the cultural and emotional infrastructures that underpin lasting community transformation.

Addressing this disconnect requires not only more appropriate tools for assessment, but also a broader cultural and institutional shift. We need evaluation models that are capable of registering transformation through relational and contextual indicators, rather than through outputs alone. This demands interdisciplinary literacy across fields such as urbanism, cultural policy, and critical theory; and above all, a willingness to embrace uncertainty, experimentation, and care as legitimate dimensions of public work. It also requires dedicated infrastructure: long-term artistic residencies embedded within planning cycles; facilitation frameworks that support dialogue between artists, communities, and institutions; and professional recognition for those operating beyond the traditional circuits of performance and production. Without these conditions in place, the transformative potential of the performing arts in placemaking will remain underutilised, or worse, co-opted into superficial gestures of consultation or spectacle.

At the same time, many performing artists express reluctance to engage with urban development agendas, fearing co-option or instrumentalisation. For placemaking to benefit from the unique insights of the performing arts, collaboration must be grounded in mutual respect, artistic autonomy, and collaboration. Artists should not be invited merely to “animate” consultation processes or to deliver spectacle at ribbon-cutting ceremonies. Rather, they should be

involved early and meaningfully, shaping how questions are asked, how futures are imagined, and how conflicts are held in public space. Performing arts are uniquely suited to facilitate such complexity — to rehearse possible worlds before they are built.

In this sense, incorporating performing arts into placemaking is not just a matter of widening the cultural toolkit; it is about transforming the process itself. When performance is treated not as an afterthought but as a mode of inquiry and engagement, placemaking gains access to new temporalities, new sensibilities, and new publics. It becomes a cultural process as much as a spatial one; a collective act of imagination, not just design. The path forward, then, is not to force performing arts into existing urban frameworks, but to let their methodologies reshape how we understand participation, place, and transformation itself.

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Dream City

Tunis, Tunisia

Dream City is a multidisciplinary biennial festival that takes place in the medina and wider urban landscape of Tunis, Tunisia. Founded in 2007 by choreographers and artists Selma and Sofiane Ouissi and organised by L'Art Rue, the festival aims to reclaim public space through artistic creation, weaving together performance, visual arts, music, film, and debate. Each edition of Dream City is developed in close collaboration with citizens, artists, and researchers, positioning art at the heart of civic and urban engagement.

Deeply embedded in the social and political fabric of Tunisia, Dream City is a powerful example of creative placemaking in North Africa. It transforms the historic city centre and surrounding neighbourhoods into a living laboratory for artistic experimentation and civic dialogue. The festival challenges institutional norms and offers a platform for emerging and established artists to create site-specific works that address pressing issues such as freedom of expression, migration, memory, environmental justice, and postcolonial identity. Through participatory methods and collaborative research, Dream City fosters belonging, critical thought, and artistic resistance in the public realm.

#performance
#memory

Rimini Protokoll

Rimini Protokoll is a Berlin-based collective of theatre-makers — Helgard Haug, Stefan Kaegi, and Daniel Wetzel — whose work has revolutionised contemporary performance by blurring the boundaries between theatre, reality, and civic life. Since the early 2000s, they have created a vast body of work across theatre, radio, installation, and public space, often featuring “experts of the everyday” instead of professional actors. Their process challenges the traditional frameworks of representation and engages with themes of technology, migration, politics, economics, and collective memory.

A significant part of Rimini Protokoll's practice involves site-specific and participatory works that activate the urban fabric and foster new relationships between people and place. Projects such as 100% City and Cargo X exemplify their approach to creative placemaking, using performative tools to reimagine the city as a space for co-authorship, critical inquiry, and shared narratives. Their work often turns spectators into active participants, encouraging reflection on the structures that shape public life. By combining documentary strategies with immersive formats, Rimini Protokoll creates performative cartographies that reveal the unseen dynamics of the territories they inhabit.

Quando saímos à rua, que lugar queremos encontrar?
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Eléctrico 28

Eléctrico 28 is a European performance collective dedicated to urban theatre and site-responsive artistic interventions, playing a crucial role in contemporary artistic placemaking strategies. Since 2012, the company has transformed public spaces into interactive, theatrical landscapes that challenge perceptions of everyday city life and foster a deeper connection between people and places.

Through a fusion of theatre, movement, visual arts, and live performance, Eléctrico 28 engages directly with urban environments, encouraging communities to reclaim and reimagine public space as a shared cultural territory. Their work enhances the social and artistic potential of streets, squares, and overlooked urban areas, making them more inviting, vibrant, and participatory. By adopting a playful, poetic, and site-specific approach, the collective activates urban memory, strengthens local identities, and fosters social cohesion — key principles in effective placemaking. Their performances not only activate cities with humour and spontaneity but also provoke reflection on mobility, cohabitation, and the fluid boundaries between private and public space.

Eléctrico 28's work has been presented across Europe, adapting to the unique rhythms, architectures, and communities of each location. By placing human interaction at the core of their artistic practice, they contribute to more inclusive, accessible, and people-centred urban environments.





Digitized Kairakuen Garden, by teamLab
Okayama, Japan (2021), © teamLab

Rural 5.
placemaking:
this
is
not a blank
slate.

Karine Décorne

To give some context to this chapter I'd like to give a bit of personal context and background. I am Karine Décorne and I have been living and working in North Wales for over 20 years. I grew up in France, between 2 places, a small town in a rural place with my parents and a tiny hamlet, Hauban, in a small farm in the Hautes — Pyrénées where my mother's side of the family still lives. Hauban is the place that has always felt like my home. Growing up in a family of peasants, I have developed a strong and visceral attachment to the land and a deep sense of connection to nature.

I do not want to romanticise this upbringing: life on a farm is hard work and it never stops. I didn't realise it then, but my family was living in poverty. I loved my childhood, following my grandmother as she accomplished her various chores throughout the day. How she knew every bird song and the name of wild flowers, every corner of the land she worked. The land that fed us in return and gave me so much enchantment. I have such fond memories of sitting under an old oak tree together, looking after the cows, while she knitted socks for the family. The gorgeous smell of the hay in the attic above the stables that we pushed through holes in the floor to feed the cows below. The warmth of the stables as she milked the cows by hand, the comforting sound of the cows ruminating and nursing their calves while swallows came in and out through the doors to feed their chicks.

I loved it, and at the same time, as I grew older I couldn't wait to leave and go and discover the world, knowing I would always want and be able to come back. My dad loved traveling and we'd go and explore places in our tiny tent and later a camper van. This gave me the curiosity to explore further and meet different people.

I regret it now but I never wanted to learn our local patois (indigenous language known as Birgourdan), which was the first language of my grand-parents, the only one my mother ever spoke with them. I was associating this to a very small place and there was so much more to find and learn from. I understand now how much knowledge of the places is held within indigenous languages and wisdom.

This upbringing, despite the various barriers I had to overcome to finally make my way into the contemporary arts world, was a tremendous gift. I didn't realise then how much this would shape me, my values, my work, my understanding and interpretation of the role and value of the arts in place making in rural places.

What do we mean by placemaking? I like the definition given by Placemaking.Education²⁵: *Placemaking is a philosophy and an iterative, collaborative process for creating public spaces that people love and feel connected to. Placemaking is about bringing different people, organisations and disciplines together to create positive changes in a place or area.*

25. <https://placemaking.education/p/whatisplacemaking>

This also includes improving existing spaces to make them more comfortable, accessible, active and attractive.

It is a growing global movement that aims to improve not only the physical elements of a space, but also the way people think and feel about the world around them. It promotes agency and active citizenship through the collaborative, iterative art and process of creating better places.

What role can the arts play in place making in rural places? I will try to answer this question by taking you through my own journey of learning, findings, reflections as I worked for many years in rural Wales and share some case studies.



Locator 20

Simon Whitehead. © Joel Cockrill

When I was 18, I left home to study in a large city. I was the first one in my family to go to university and experienced for the first time the notion of being part of a minority. I was shocked to realise I was part of the 3% that came from working class and agricultural backgrounds. The rest of the students were from higher middle class and upper classes backgrounds. I had never really been exposed to this concentration of people from these demographics, nor to these levels of wealth either. I remember laughing to myself as I had naively believed that my parents were rich, only because they were a bit more comfortable than the rest of my family. I suddenly had a very embodied understanding of what lack of social mobility meant.

I also found that my values and beliefs were often in opposition to those around me. I was also often made to feel that I didn't belong or that my opinions were not valid because I came from the working class / peasant background. My accent alone was sometimes enough to invalidate some of my contributions. My cousin, who was the second to go to university and joined a similarly prestigious and competitive course, experienced the same difficulties and shared how it was hard to feel equal when surrounded by individuals who didn't consider you as such because of your class and origins.

Only recently I was having a similar conversation with an artist I had been working with and also comes from a working class background. Despite our various achievements, we both felt that we constantly still had to prove ourselves and that our work never felt quite as valid. It is difficult to say if it's the amount of barriers we've had to overcome to get where we are that still affects how we see ourselves, or whether it is actually the reality we are still experiencing.

Why do I talk about this? Because it is quite central to how the voices of people from rural places and working class backgrounds can remain unheard, as if they have nothing to say or knowledge to share.

The arts world wasn't necessarily more welcoming. There again, I was sometimes made to feel that I didn't belong. I experienced again that difference in social economic backgrounds and worse, I had not studied arts. I naively thought I'd be able to learn from those who had and would welcome my eagerness to learn. Instead I was made to feel small and ignorant.

At the time I was the co-artistic director of an arts venue in a capital city. I made myself the promise that I would never make any audience member feel this way, while somehow trying to mold myself into an artistic director that would be accepted in the international contemporary dance sector which I was learning to navigate.

When I moved to rural north Wales in 2003, I wasn't sure at first what I would be doing professionally speaking. I didn't know the context and how I could meaningfully contribute. I decided to start by spending several months meeting people working in dance

across the region and the country to get a sense of the place, where the needs and gaps might be and whether I had something relevant to share. I also spent time attending local events of all sorts to understand what the dynamics were, what people wanted, needed in a place where there were no large cities, long distances between small towns, poor public transport facilities and a lot of underprivileged areas. This is without mentioning the huge cultural difference of being in north west Wales where the first language isn't English but Welsh.

Taking all these learnings into consideration, I came with the concept of Migrations which started as a series of small scale international contemporary dance events in Conwy county and grew to commission and present multi arts form activities and site-specific across Wales in the public place.

The idea was extremely welcome by the Arts Council of Wales, Conwy Local Authority and partner venues. However I wasn't prepared for the hostility I met from some of the dance organisations based in Cardiff (capital city of Wales) who refused to engage with the project. One representative even told me: "Listen, we haven't been able to make it work in Cardiff so there is no way you will make it work in a place full of ignorant peasants".

Here we were again; peasants / people living in rural places being perceived as ignorant.

More than this, these words encapsulate the reductiveness of thinking that you can just transpose something from one place to another without understanding the context and its people. I have often come across colleagues coming from and working in urban settings approaching developing artistic activities in rural places as a need to educate those living there.

I've always disliked the term "educating" in this context; it states that the way things are being done in urban settings is the only recognised way of doing them and there's a need to show how it is done to rural places. This dominant culture is seen as the valid one and doesn't consider what already exists in rural places.



Store

Matsune & Subal. © Migrations

Before I continue with my journey through curating contemporary arts in rural places, I'd like to share some reflections in an attempt to understand the roots of this perception and reasoning.

I can't help but make parallels with major historical and contemporary events which have subconsciously affected how we see the world and others from less dominant cultures. This will to "educate" by bringing "real" arts and culture to rural places, is not that different from Christians imposing their religion on many people across the world, believing that is the right thing to do. It is not that different from my ancestors colonising countries and justifying their acts by saying they were improving indigenous people's lives by bringing them civilisation.

This is complex and a great contradiction with some of the values and beliefs a lot of us hold; many of us actively condemn these atrocities and would never want to think that we could somehow replicate these in any form. And yet, we sometimes think we know better and only we know the right way of doing things because it's received the validation our society has been given to art created in urban settings and for too long not given equal validation to arts created in rural settings.

I'd like to go even further back. I have found the work of Merlin Sheldrake, a British biologist who has specialised in fungi, enlightening. In his wonderful book "**Entangled life**", he explores the reasons why humans place themselves above other beings and outside of nature. According to him, we have a very hierarchical understanding of our own bodies with our brain, where our 'superior' intelligence lies, and our heart, being the most important organs. Based on this conception of intelligence, we recreate hierarchical structures in how we see the world which leads to the concept of spiecism: humans are at the top of the pyramid, followed by dolphins, elephants, then other mammals, we see as less intelligent... Trees, plants and fungi are not even represented. Because they do not have a brain, they cannot possibly have intelligence. And yet, science has now shown the incredible ability of slime mold to have a variety of behaviours otherwise seen in animals with brains. Fungi and mycelium contribute to creating an incredibly complex network of communication and nutrient exchange among plants and trees known as the worldwide web and uncovered by the brilliant forest ecologist Suzanne Simard.

Merlin Sheldrake goes on to explain how we replicate this hierarchical understanding of the world in our societies by creating government structures based in capital cities which tend to centralise policy and decision making while being disconnected from rural places.

I strongly believe that despite being knowledgeable and informed, colonialism, spiecism and our human perception of what intelligence is, are deeply ingrained in us and continue to affect how we look at rural places and those who inhabit them.

While our intensions may be good and driven by the desire to create positive change, like our ancestors, we sometimes make the mistake of looking at rural places as a blank slate.

I met Henk Keizer back in 2015 during an IETM event in Budapest. He was running a session on arts in rural places and said these words that resonated deeply with me: *You don't need to bring culture to rural places. There is already culture.*

We met again in IETM in Porto in 2018 and together with Jean Vinet we shared in depth discussions about the specificities of arts practices in rural areas and the vital role the arts were playing in connecting people, places and place making. We also shared the need for a dedicated network to support this work through the sharing of knowledge, experiences, the research in working methods, the creation of resources and advocacy for this specific way of working. Together we founded the network AREA (Arts in Rural European Areas and beyond) and were soon joined by other amazing creatives, organisers, policy makers and scientists.

One of our motto was to always be curious, in other words, never assume that we knew everything when working in rural places

and always reopen how much we could learn from the place and its people to create meaningful arts projects.

Unconscious bias is a very powerful thing that we all need to guard ourselves against. It takes on going self awareness and checking to counter it.

Looking back at my professional path and various roles, I think I have always had a strong sense of understanding gaps and how I could positively use the power I had in hand to create positive changes. I also realise that I was carrying a lot of preconceived ideas shaped by the systems I was operating within. Moving to Wales marked a significant turning point. I profoundly believe that my work became most relevant when I stopped trying to fit into existing models of what an arts curator should be, what art should be like, where and how it should take place and for who.

Instead I let the places and their people inform me and used my creativity to respond and initiate new ways of curating art work.

In Wales, I continued to present work that profoundly moved me and that I wanted to share with others. What was new is that instead of working in an arts venue in a city where there already was an audience with a huge appetite for this type of work, I did this in places where there were no existing audiences and sometimes no suitable venue. High profile artists on the European performing arts scene were utterly unknown and very sadly, many people thought contemporary arts was not for them.

Contextualisation became a big part of my approach to curating work.

In 2008, my usual partner venues all happened to be closed for renovation.

I wondered whether I should stop activities for one year or think differently. I considered what was there. North Wales offered some incredible landscapes, which I've always felt a strong emotional connection to, and we were facing an economic crisis.

I took Migrations out into the beautiful hills of Conwy with **Locator 20** by Simon Whitehead to create a traveling performance in collaboration with a local historian and a group of international and local artists. I won't expand further on this project due to space constraint but this new approach to curating in the landscape deeply informed me of the power of contextualising and presenting arts in this way to connect people that would never come together otherwise, and connect them with a place, the land and nature in a new way.

In parallel, the town of Bangor was doubly affected; by the economic crisis as 50% of the shops had closed on the high street, and their dearly loved venue Theatre Gwynedd was being closed for good.

I therefore started to look for a show specifically conceived for an empty shop and that somehow could help bring back some joy, life and senses of connection among the community.



When we step outside, what place are we looking for?
Art in public space and placemaking



Bodies In Urban Spaces
Willi Dorner. © Migrations

One of my colleagues, Eva Martinez, recommended Store and I can never thank her enough for this as this marked another turning point in my way of working. The impact this event had went beyond all my expectations.

It was transformational for me as a curator. It opened my eyes as to how working in public places enabled me to be more impactful by going further in reaching those who think contemporary art is not for them, and deepening engagement with audiences in ways I had not experienced before. Because so much consideration had been put into understanding the place and its people's concerns beforehand, the work touched the audiences in numerous ways. At the core of this curatorial approach, artistic work and the artists themselves were care and generosity, and this is what people perceived and responded with equal generosity, curiosity and creativity in return.

It also created space for new possibilities and inspired others to use empty shops as opportunities to place arts organisations at the heart of the community, create spaces for conversation, take part in creative activities, listen to people's concerns, ideas and engage them in new activities and developments.

The brutal closure of Theatre Gwynedd had triggered a lot of anger from the local community who felt ignored and hurt by how insensitively the University, who owned the venue, handled this decision and process. This only deepened the strong and existing divide between the University and local community. The divide wasn't just social and cultural, it was also physical. The university occupies the higher grounds of the town, dominating the place with a series of large and old buildings. On the opposite side the lower town hosts most of its inhabitants, shops and some of the poorer estates.

It is no wonder that the local community felt initially rather hostile to the plans for a new venue to be rebuilt instead, Pontio (bridge in Welsh).

I knew the newly appointed Artistic Director well and we shared the same values. I presented the idea of working together to bring **Bodies in Urban Spaces** by choreographer Willi Dorner to Bangor, a traveling performance for a group of dancers responding to architecture enabling the viewers to uncover unnoticed details of architecture or perceived known ones in a different way. Dorner's work explores the appropriation of city spaces, architecture that exercises power over us and behavioural conventions in public spaces and puts these forward to discussion.

Bodies in Urban Spaces would look wonderful anywhere. In this context I felt that it could help us have a much deeper impact and open a space for dialogue in the face of the complex issues the town was facing.

It also responded to the ongoing difficulties of the dance sector in rural north Wales and the lack of professional development,

performing and networking opportunities for local dance and performing artists.

Outcomes:

- While we never stated that we were presenting Bodies in Urban Spaces to unite the town, audience members stated how much they had loved it because they felt that it had helped bringing the town together and start bridging the divide, making space for more positive dialogue with Pontio.
- Local dance artists really valued that opportunity and discovered other local performers which then led to new collaborations, helping to break the isolation.
- The pictures of the event were so striking that I decided to curate an exhibition of a series of life size ones and to place them in situ. These were meant to stay on for a month and ended up staying for years as people loved them so much.

These two examples alone shows the instrumental and unique role the arts can play when placed at the centre of Place Making in rural places. This is far from being the only way of doing things. My learning journey has never stopped and today I continue to learn about this very subject from incredible artists who have focused their work on helping to tackle the climate crisis, reconnecting people with nature and social injustice.

Placemaking is about bringing people together to collaborate and develop new ideas. It is about empowering, giving agency, a sense of belonging and ownership.

In order to achieve this, it means shifting power and as the artist Rabab Gazhul explains, it is about ‘moving away from the uncomfortable conditions and realities she sometimes faced “as an artist working with institutions, or organisations in general, who’s agendas were so often informed by outcomes over process, by delivery over enquiry”’.

Owen Griffiths is an artist, workshop leader and facilitator. Using participatory and collaborative processes, his socially engaged practice explores the possibilities of art to create new frameworks, resources and systems. The Arts act as a starting point to gather and create spaces for conversations and exchange ideas between people who may never engage with one another to start with, and with institutions. This is about rebalancing power so the citizens can take an active and equal part in making decisions and shaping the future of the neighbourhood, town and local government for example.

One of his most iconic projects is **Vetch Veg** which he initiated with ADAIN/AVION Cultural Olympiad Wales, Taliesin Arts Centre in partnership with Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, Swansea Environmental Forum and the City and County of Swansea.

Vetch Fetch was described as a participatory interdisciplinary social art work when it first started in 2011.

Owen Griffiths, located on an iconic former football ground in Swansea, *Vetch Veg* is a community garden aimed at promoting and encouraging community spirit through gardening, art and social activities.

Responding to a consultation and dialogue with the local residents which identified the urgent need for more green resources and communal spaces, Owen worked with the local community to develop a temporary garden.

Intended as a 9-months project by the local council, the garden became a permanent green civic space run by its users. As the project developed it was recognised as a critical resource for the community and was granted extended access. *Vetch Veg* has informed Arts Council of Wales policy, encouraged the creation of the first Cabinet Member for Sustainability position in Swansea, and encouraged public funding into community green projects in the city.

14 years later, *Vetch Veg* is now home to 110 beds, where community members, families, local organisations, churches, retirement homes and charity groups can grow their own food. The gardeners care for the site, learning skills such as beekeeping and cob oven building, keeping chickens and preparing meals together. The garden is a site for a divided community to work together, exploring cultures and identities through food, accessing and sharing culturally appropriate produce and modelling alternate food systems.

It has informed the use of local green and civic spaces, and encouraged increased public funding into community green projects in the city. The adjacent green space within the Vetch Field, now referred to as “The People’s Park”, has also been saved from development through the planting of a community orchard. *Vetch Veg* continues to exist as a community green space, now run solely by its members.

My most recent role as Creative Nature Programme Manager for the Arts Council of Wales, I had the brilliant opportunity to help develop and deliver the innovative programme called the **Future Wales Fellowship**. It supports 8 artists to undertake creative research around climate justice related issues over 16 months.



In My Nature

Julia Thomas. © Lyndsey Fouracre-Reynolds

This programme is unique in the way it:

- Represents a significant cultural shift as working towards shifting power and making space for conversation from a more equal footing between artists, local communities and institutions.
- Values artists' lived experiences and represents the voices of those often excluded from the environmental discussion and decision making processes that are directly impacting on their lives.

I cannot do justice here to all the incredible findings which came out of the *Future Wales Fellowship* but to name just a few in relation to the importance of the arts in place making in rural places I want to highlight a few examples.

Kirsti Davies is a community artist and scientist based in rural mid-Wales. Her work focuses on seaweed, its incredible versatility and crucial role in finding solutions to the climate crisis. While extremely knowledgeable about the impact of climate change, she never uses this term when engaging with her local communities. Combining arts activities, walks and meeting people on their grounds, she has used seaweed as point of entry to engage various people in conversations about what interests them. During her fellowship, she discussed with farmers animal feed and fertiliser which seaweed can provide. With a beautician, she exchanged beauty products and seaweed often unknowingly being a key ingredient. Together with local cafes, restaurants and other food outlets, she created a seaweed festival where those involved created special seaweed based recipes and meals, engaging this way with the wider community. All these interventions helped raise awareness about the benefits of seaweed, reconnecting people with forgotten Wales' traditions around harvesting, eating and using seaweed in many different ways, and start discussions about imagining future solutions for the local communities in the face of climate change.

Julia Thomas is a theatre maker and through deep engagement with her own post industrial community, she enables people to feel listened to and to grieve over their past. This crucial step has often been ignored as part of successive regenerations plans which have failed to consult and involve the very people directly impacted by the major changes their livelihood and home faced, and directly affected by the decisions supposedly made for their benefits. Making space for true listening, and acknowledgement of the sense of loss through the arts, allows people to imagine a future for their own town of which they are active citizens of rather than passive ones.

The *Future Wales Fellowship* is not the first and only project doing so. However, it is a very good example of the important step taken

by institutions in moving away from thinking they have consulted with the rural communities when in effect they have been talking to them. Not consulting properly often results in failing to recognise the knowledge held within these local communities, understand the history of the place and feeling towards it, and how it has shaped this particular place and its people. Then these same institutions fail to foresee and understand the resistance from these same rural communities when trying to bring change.

A good example of this is *Tir Canol* and how the arts and co-design have played an important part in helping turn a failing project into a success. The “original” *Summit to Sea* project was launched in 2018 and was managed by Rewilding Britain. It started as an exploration of the possibilities of a large-scale ecological restoration project in the Pumlumon area and secured funding from the Endangered Landscapes Programme to support a dynamic ecosystem from the top of Pumlumon to down into Cardigan Bay. Rewild Britain aims to see rewilding flourishing in Britain, reconnecting us with the natural world, sustaining communities and tackling the extinction and climate crises.

Their vision is highly commendable and their projects necessary. The initial project didn’t use co-design to start with. It was met by a high level of criticism and lack of trust from local community members, leading to some partners leaving the project. In 2019, Rewilding Britain UK also left the project.

This initial lack of engagement with the place had a deep impact on how people felt about this major project coming to their home. Furthermore, it failed to understand the culture, language, history and people of the place. This England based organisation applied that blank slate approach so symptomatic to dominant cultures. Wales was colonised by England and this significant historic fact is still shaping relationships today between these two nations.

As author Carwyn Graves explains in *Tir: The Story of The Welsh Landscapes*, “Rewilding” is mostly understood in the English language and culture as restoring nature by removing humans, livestock and farming from the land. In Welsh, this translates as the antithesis to what Welsh culture means: people, animals and the land are intrinsically connected which means removing them from the land equates to killing culture.

It is little wonder that this initiative was so badly received in the first place.

The remaining partners of the project decided to take a new approach. To regain the lost trust, listen to diverse voices, learn from the local knowledge held with the local community members, empower people and create a shared vision of the future which support the primary aims of the initial project, they worked with the arts and co-design.

This slower approach has enabled people and relationships to heal, stakeholders to be listened to and become actively involved in the development of a long term project and solutions to climate change.

In conclusion, the arts have a unique way to create an immediate emotional connection with people to help us make sense of very complex issues like the climate crisis.

I see the arts acting as the mycelium of our world and society. The arts connect their different parts (people, nature, institutions, organisations, sectors...) allowing us to put democracy into action, transfer of knowledge and resources, enabling us to mimic nature itself by building relationships of reciprocity, equality, inclusivity where everyone has a part to play.

The power of the arts should not be underestimated in the vital role they can play in place making and tackling the biggest issue of our times: climate justice.

The approach may sometimes seem soft or slow but the unique emotional connection and sense of empowerment they enable those involved to find are crucial to the success of place making. They enable the parties involved to find common grounds, a voice, a sense of purpose, of belonging, of ownership and together to imagine new solutions. The more diverse and meaningful people and parties are involved from the start of the process, the better and more sustainable these endeavours and solutions will be..



Vetch Veg
Owen Griffiths

Karine Décorne has over 20 years of experience in the arts as a freelance curator, artistic director, chief executive, and creative producer, working across London, Geneva, and Wales. She is the co-founder of Migrations, an arts organisation dedicated to bringing international contemporary arts events to Wales. Karine has extensive expertise in programming and producing work across a wide range of contexts — from traditional venues to outdoor, site-specific, urban, and rural environments — collaborating with a diversity of art forms and practices.

#rural
#post-industrial
#community

Malacate

Mina de São Domingos, Portugal

Malacate is a multidisciplinary artistic intervention project specifically designed for the Mina de São Domingos, a site marked by a powerful history of mining exploitation. The initiative seeks to transform this deactivated industrial space into a platform for contemporary artistic creation, fostering encounters between national and international artists and the local community, grounded in a comprehensive process of community mediation. Inspired by the malacate itself — an industrial mechanism once used to connect the underground with the surface — the project builds bridges between past and present, the visible and the hidden, the real and the imagined.

Through artistic residencies, workshops, performances, and installations, Malacate aims to reoccupy the former mining spaces with new memories and meanings, creating an open-air performative gallery that celebrates the region's industrial and natural heritage. This approach promotes both territorial and community regeneration, positioning the project as an active agent of creative placemaking that enhances the area's attractiveness and contributes to the quality of life of its inhabitants. The project contributes to reimagining the future of rural territories by linking artistic experimentation with social engagement, memory, and identity. It demonstrates how the arts can serve as a catalyst for territorial belonging, intergenerational connection, and the revitalisation of public and shared spaces.





6. The future outdoor arts: key trends, challenges, and opportunities.

Sud Basu,
Rachel Clare

Public arts transform how we experience our cities, momentarily suspending the everyday to create space for wonder, connection, and shared imagination.

Helen Marriage, Artichoke artistic director

Outdoor arts have long been a space for experimentation, cultural expression, and public engagement. Whether through large-scale spectacle or intimate, community-driven projects, the sector has consistently pushed the boundaries of how performance interacts with place, politics, and people. Outdoor arts do not exist in isolation. Their development has been shaped by a web of international influences, with artists, companies, and movements across the world contributing to a shared language of performance in public space. In the UK, companies such as *Welfare State International* (1968), *Emergency Exit Arts* (1980), and *Walk the Plank* (1991) demonstrating how outdoor performance could fuse artistic ambition with social impact. Their work was not only significant at home but also engaged in a broader conversation with international practitioners who were redefining outdoor arts in their own contexts.

Across Europe, companies such as *Royal de Luxe*, *Transe Express*, and *Teatr Biuro Podróżu* have reshaped perceptions of outdoor performance through innovative storytelling, kinetic spectacle, and large-scale interventions in public space. Beyond Europe, artists and companies such as *Legs On The Wall* and *Stalker*, have brought different sensibilities to outdoor performance, emphasising physical theatre, immersive experience, and audience agency. These international influences are not separate from each other but deeply intertwined, forming an ecosystem in which ideas and practices evolve across borders. This foundation has led to a myriad of new thinking from artists globally that now spans decades.

What is clear is that outdoor arts as a global sector in 2025 has momentum — perhaps post COVID more so than other sectors. The number of artists, festivals, and commissions dedicated to this work is increasing, and the appetite from audiences and civic bodies appears to be stronger than ever. This growth is a testament to the power of outdoor arts to connect people, shape public narratives, and transform spaces into sites of cultural and political expression. But expansion comes with challenges. As demand rises, so too do expectations — on artists, on infrastructure, and on the financial and logistical resources that sustain the sector. The cost of creating, touring, and presenting work is increasing, and funding models have not necessarily kept pace with the sector's growth. There is also a tension between large-scale spectacle and more community-focused, intimate work; both have value, but the current funding and commissioning landscape does not always support a healthy balance between the two.

This chapter considers these dynamics from a broadly UK perspective — how outdoor arts are evolving, the trends that are

shaping their future, and the challenges that lie ahead. It asks whether the sector is generating truly new ideas or simply refining existing forms, whether it is growing in a sustainable way, and what needs to be done to ensure the art form continues to thrive in a way that is both ambitious and equitable.

Outdoor arts have consistently been celebrated for their ability to democratise creative experiences, moving performances beyond conventional cultural institutions and directly engaging audiences in shared public spaces. However, by 2025, simply being accessible may no longer be sufficient. There is growing concern that the sector may have become overly comfortable with its past successes, relying heavily on proven formats rather than actively pursuing new artistic possibilities. Are we genuinely innovating, or have we begun to play it safe? While the prominent role of outdoor arts in cultural programming suggests a thriving sector, critical questions remain: are we truly cultivating an environment where creative risk-taking, bold experimentation, and sustained artistic development are nurtured and valued?

Undoubtedly, there are notable global examples highlighting significant creative innovation in outdoor arts. Projects such as Green Space Dark Skies by Walk the Plank (2022) exemplify an ambitious interdisciplinary approach, uniting thousands of participants in wild landscapes using low-impact lighting technologies to foster collective experiences rooted in environmental responsibility and co-creation. Likewise, Carabosse's storytelling through fire installations and Groupe F's large-scale pyrotechnic narratives have successfully transformed traditional use of fireworks from brief spectacles into compelling story-driven performances, showcasing how innovation can revitalise familiar artistic practices. Yet, while these initiatives reveal a sector eager to explore new methodologies and multidisciplinary collaborations, they prompt reflection on whether such innovation is becoming the standard or remains the exception. Are these groundbreaking projects indicative of consistent progress across outdoor arts, or do they highlight the continued rarity of truly pioneering endeavours within the global cultural landscape?

Another critical question is whether the sector is actually growing in a way that matters. It may seem that outdoor arts are flourishing, but is the number of artists working in this space genuinely increasing? More importantly, can they build sustainable careers, or are funding limitations forcing them to pivot elsewhere? Are artists sustaining their practice — and thriving.

The rise of hyper-local yet national projects such as Jeremy Deller's *We're Here Because We're Here* (2016) which mobilised thousands of volunteers in a nationwide performance commemorating the Battle of the Somme, suggests that outdoor work can be both intimate and expansive. However, projects like this are often one-off,

commission-driven works that do not necessarily create long-term opportunities for artists to develop their practice.

And then there is the audience — arguably the most important factor of all. Outdoor arts claim to be accessible and transformative, but what does that transformation look like? Are audiences genuinely hungry for more outdoor work, or is it simply an easy programming choice for festivals and funders seeking high-visibility, high-impact moments? If there is real appetite, does it extend beyond spectacle? Projects such as *Southern* from Wildworks (2001) with its immersive site-responsive performances, which invite audiences to engage deeply with all senses, show how outdoor work can create intimate, personal connections. In contrast, Royal de Luxe's *The Sultan's Elephant* (2001) demonstrated how large-scale spectacle could reshape a city's relationship with its public spaces. These projects engaged audiences in dramatically different ways, but both required significant investment — investment that is not always available to smaller-scale work.

If we claim that outdoor arts create cultural, social, or political change, we must interrogate how we measure that change. Do we prioritise scale, depth of engagement, or long-term legacy? If we cannot articulate and measure the impact of outdoor work, we risk diminishing its value in the eyes of policymakers, funders, and audiences alike. These are not comfortable questions, but they are necessary ones. The outdoor arts sector is having to confront them head-on to ensure it remains relevant, dynamic, and artistically ambitious rather than a sector that survives on repetition and familiarity. If outdoor arts are to be a force for change, we must constantly interrogate whether we are truly pushing forward or simply treading water.

The impact of COVID-19 - A catalyst for the outdoors

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented disruption for the arts sector everywhere, shutting down venues, halting live performances, and creating financial precarity for artists and organisations worldwide. However, outdoor arts found itself in a unique position — rather than being sidelined, it became a lifeline for cultural engagement. As indoor venues remained closed or operated under restrictions, outdoor spaces became the primary sites for artistic expression, allowing audiences to experience live performance safely and reconnect with their communities.

Governments, local authorities, and cultural organisations turned to outdoor arts as a means of rebuilding social interaction and supporting wellbeing. Festivals adapted, site-responsive performances flourished, and new models of engagement emerged, emphasising hyper-local and socially distanced works.

Artists experimented with promenade theatre, projection mapping, and mobile performances, sometimes on doorsteps, that could reach audiences in their neighborhoods rather than requiring them to travel to centralised cultural hubs.

The pandemic accelerated long-standing discussions about accessibility, decentralisation, and the role of public space in cultural life. It demonstrated that outdoor arts were not just a supplement to the cultural sector but an essential and resilient part of it. The question now, 5 years on is whether this momentum has been or can be sustained. Has the increased visibility and funding for outdoor work translated into long-term structural support? Or was this surge in outdoor arts investment a temporary response to a global emergency? The sector must continue to advocate for the lessons of the pandemic to be embedded in future policy — ensuring that outdoor arts remain a core part of cultural programming rather than perhaps the go to option in times of instability.

Outdoor arts as a mainstay in major events

In the last two decades, outdoor arts have evolved into an indispensable element of major national and international cultural events — wonderfully so — highlighting their unique capacity to unite diverse communities, reshape civic identity, and embed enduring cultural memories into public spaces. At their most impactful, these moments facilitate radical artistic experimentation, challenge conventional perceptions of public space, and leave significant legacies that resonate far beyond the events themselves. Yet, as outdoor arts become increasingly embedded into mainstream event programming, critical questions emerge: are these initiatives genuinely advancing creative innovation, or have they become predictable instruments for placemaking, tourism, and economic development?

The Olympic Games exemplify this duality vividly, consistently incorporating outdoor arts into their cultural offerings. The London 2012 Festival remains in the UK a landmark example, profoundly embedding outdoor performance into the global identity of a sporting event. Jeremy Deller's playful yet poignant *Sacrilege* (2012) — an inflatable, interactive version of Stonehenge — offered an accessible artistic encounter that both celebrated and critiqued British heritage.

In Wales, Marc Rees' *Adain Avion* (Wing Flight) (2012), a silver “wingless bird” was the official Welsh contribution to the Cultural Olympiad. Found nesting at locations throughout Wales, as a mobile arts space created from the recycled and transformed fuselage of an abandoned DC-9 aeroplane, it hosted a programme of activities reflecting the distinctive history and culture of the area, involving contemporary artists and local communities.



We're Here Because We're Here
Jeremy Deller



Arch
Kaleider. © Nichon Glerum

Meanwhile, *Piccadilly Circus Circus*, curated by Crying Out Loud (2012) in partnership with the Mayor of London and *London 2012 Festival*, radically transformed one of London's most iconic locations into a vibrant stage, drawing over a quarter-million spectators. Internationally acclaimed performers dazzled audiences, from high-wire walkers suspended above historic architecture to acrobats and aerialists enchanting crowds against neon-lit backdrops. The event challenged the everyday urban rhythm, repositioning public spaces as communal stages for collective awe and wonder. It not only showcased the immense creative potential of outdoor arts but embodied the inclusive ethos at the heart of the Olympic spirit. It also drew parallels between the athleticism of the circus body and that of sport, bringing the skill and perfection that takes years of training in both, closer to the public eye.

Similarly, City and Capital of Culture designations have significantly shaped the development of large-scale outdoor performances. These initiatives have offered unparalleled opportunities for artists, commissioning ambitious works that simultaneously unite local communities and engage global audiences. Liverpool's transformative 2008 European Capital of Culture programme famously featured *La Machine's* giant marionette spider and Laika's *Sensazione* a theatrical circus fairground creating lasting cultural resonance and affirming outdoor spectacle as central to civic storytelling. More recently, the UK's Bradford 2025 City of Culture programme commissioned RISE, a remarkable, community-driven spectacle involving over 200 local performers and drawing crowds exceeding 20,000 people, reclaiming civic urban spaces for collective expression. Such projects exemplify how large-scale performance can function both as an economic stimulant and cultural cornerstone, fostering civic pride and weaving local narratives into broader placemaking strategies.

Internationally, major cultural initiatives continue leveraging outdoor arts to fulfill ambitious cultural and economic goals, though outcomes remain varied. The European Capital of Culture programmes in Marseille (2013), Aarhus (2017), and Galway (2020) — alongside the Paris Olympic Programme (2024) — highlight differing trajectories in long-term artistic development post-event.

The UK's *Unboxed* festival (2022), aimed to commission boundary-pushing interdisciplinary works. Projects such as *Pollinations* led by *Trigger* and *GALWAD* led by *National Theatre Wales* offered grand public spectacles, participatory performance, and digital storytelling. However, critics questioned whether these ambitious events genuinely connected with public audiences or simply provided visually compelling yet transient spectacles without creating lasting infrastructural support or meaningful engagement with local communities.

Such examples reflect a broader tension within outdoor arts: balancing the benefits of heightened visibility and prestige against the risk of superficial engagement and short-term impacts. Are these grand spectacles fostering sustainable cultural infrastructures, or do they primarily deliver ephemeral excitement before cultural investment inevitably moves elsewhere? Do they truly cultivate new, lasting audiences, or are they merely leveraging public spaces for transient visibility?

Navigating these complexities will be crucial for the future of outdoor arts. The sector stands at a critical juncture, offering immense potential for radical artistic exploration and genuine community engagement. To fully realise this potential, stakeholders must critically assess their motivations and outcomes, prioritising sustained artistic development alongside spectacular one-off events.



Adain Avion
Marc Rees

Outdoor arts within the realm of civic identity

Beyond major singular cultural events, outdoor arts now play a crucial role in shaping civic narratives by commemorating historical moments, exploring local heritage, and addressing contemporary social issues.

14-18 NOW, exemplifies this transformative potential. Through ambitious outdoor projects such as Processions and Pages of the Sea, it successfully facilitated profound public engagement with history and collective memory. *Processions*, led by *Artichoke*, mobilised tens of thousands of women and girls who marched through major cities — London, Cardiff, Belfast, and Edinburgh — carrying handmade banners produced in community workshops nationwide. This powerful mass participation commemorated 100 years since women first secured the right to vote, vividly illustrating how outdoor performance can activate historical narratives through communal participation and reclaim public spaces as sites of political and cultural discourse. Similarly, Danny Boyle's emotionally charged Pages of the Sea brought thousands to beaches across Britain on Armistice Day to create vast sand portraits of WWI servicemen and women, poignantly erased by the rising tide. This ephemeral artwork underscored themes of loss, remembrance, and the impermanence of memory, highlighting the powerful role of outdoor arts in collective storytelling and commemoration.

Outdoor arts have also emerged as essential tools for place-making, reshaping communities and revitalising both urban and rural environments. Carefully curated performances, installations, festivals, and site-specific events can reimagine neglected spaces, fostering deeper connections between people and their surroundings. Lumiere Durham, the UK's largest light festival, dramatically showcases architectural heritage, inviting residents and visitors alike to see familiar environments through new eyes. Internationally, events such as Vivid Sydney in Australia have successfully harnessed outdoor public art to define cultural identities, boost tourism, and inspire lasting civic pride, translating temporary spectacles into meaningful social and economic legacies.

Yet placemaking through outdoor arts extends beyond mere spectacle, often serving as a catalyst for sustained community engagement and broader local development. Strategic investment in outdoor arts can support urban regeneration, exemplified by the Creative People and Places initiatives across the UK. Artist-led community activities have sparked positive change in underserved areas, with notable examples such as *Revoluton Arts in Luton* who's co production with *Tangled Feet's Rave New World* (2025) connected local memories of rave culture with performance and music, and *Super*

Culture (2022) in Weston-super-Mare a programme that is revitalising urban coastal community spaces through powerful, community-driven storytelling and artworks. These programmes and events can not only enliven urban centres but also boost local economies, attracting diverse audiences, increasing local business revenue, and fostering inclusive community collaboration.

There is also an increasing intersection with heritage, providing innovative pathways to revitalise historic spaces and their narratives, re-interpret and re-utilising outdoor performance, installations, and creative interventions to invigorate historic urban areas. Collaborations between artists, heritage professionals, and local communities breathe fresh life into heritage sites, deepening community engagement and cultural identity. Historic England's High Street Heritage Action Zones programme revitalises historic market towns through outdoor arts, combining cultural heritage, contemporary creativity, and community participation to reinforce local identity in 67 high streets across England. By bridging heritage, art, community, and built environments, outdoor arts prove instrumental in enhancing public spaces, empowering communities, and shaping the cultural and physical fabric of both towns and cities — demonstrating significant potential for future growth and innovation in placemaking strategies.

Looking ahead, key provocations remain: can outdoor arts deepen their engagement with complex civic issues, fostering greater dialogue around social justice and equity? How might artists more boldly challenge traditional narratives to foster genuine social transformation rather than reflecting existing histories? And critically, as funding and civic support fluctuate, can outdoor arts sustain their impactful placemaking potential without compromising creative integrity and community ownership?

Sustainability and eco-conscious practice in outdoor arts

As the climate emergency accelerates, outdoor arts face a fundamental reckoning — not only with how work is made and toured, but with what kind of future it envisions. Artists are increasingly placing environmental sustainability at the heart of their practice, moving beyond surface-level greening into deep, structural change. Performance in public space — particularly in natural and contested environments — demands this reckoning more urgently than ever.

Across the UK and internationally, a growing body of artists and producers are challenging extractive production models, shifting toward regenerative, circular, and community-rooted approaches. Touring is being reimaged, not only for its carbon costs but for its ethics of presence and engagement. As funders begin to require

environmental accountability, the sector faces a creative challenge: can we build models where sustainability is not just a compliance exercise, but a radical opportunity for new ways of working?

Several projects are suggesting a way through.

The *Collaborative Learning Initiative*, developed by Caravan (UK) and ILT Festival (Denmark), pioneers concept touring — inviting artists to explore how work might travel without the artist physically moving. Through digital exchange, reflective practice, and cross-border dialogue, the project questions whether presence must always mean physical proximity. What if artistic exchange was measured not in miles but in mutual understanding, process, and adaptation?

UK-based company *Kaleider* has created ARCH in 2023 — a large-scale outdoor performance and kinetic sculpture built over time from blocks of ice. The structure slowly rises and falls in public space, melting as the performance unfolds. ARCH is not just a metaphor for environmental fragility; it is a real-time performance of climate breakdown, temporality, and disappearance. Its material composition — melting water — forces the audience to confront impermanence and the consequences of human impact on our planet. Crucially, ARCH doesn't leave a trace. It resists legacy in favour of transformation.

Luke Jerram, meanwhile, actually presents the universe up close. Combining arts, science and engineering, his large-scale public engagement artworks address concerns over the health of our planets. With his giant *Museum of the Moon*, its size creates a sense of human scale and fragility, the more recent *Helios*, brings the public face to face with the surface of a 7 metre replica of the sun, flagging issues of deforestation, forest fires and the challenges we face imminently.

But critical questions remain. As funders increasingly ask for green credentials, will access to sustainable practice be limited to the best-resourced organisations? Can artists working at the grassroots level — often those closest to community-led climate action — access the tools, networks, and time required to embed ecological thinking meaningfully?

And artistically, what happens when sustainability becomes a creative brief? Can we imagine new aesthetics, new paces, and new relationships with place and time that emerge from this constraint? What would it mean to centre slowness, repair, and resource-sharing — not only in process but in form? To meet the challenges of the climate emergency, the outdoor arts sector must shift from adaptation to leadership. It must embed sustainability not just in policy, but in creative culture. If outdoor arts have long been a space for reimagining the world around us, then this is the work of now: to model a future where care for the planet and care for the public are indivisible.

Technology and digital integration in outdoor arts

Digital and extended reality (XR) technologies are reshaping outdoor arts, opening innovative pathways for artistic expression and audience engagement. Artists are increasingly leveraging augmented reality (AR), interactive projection mapping, virtual reality (VR), and AI-driven performances to redefine public spaces, enhancing their creative and experiential potential. These technological advancements expand audience reach beyond physical boundaries, promoting greater accessibility and inclusivity, and presenting opportunities for remote, immersive engagement.

Yet, this digital evolution also presents critical challenges that must be navigated carefully. Data privacy concerns, digital equity issues, and the potential erosion of communal, face-to-face experiences highlight the complexity of integrating technology into outdoor arts. While digital tools undoubtedly enrich artistic possibilities, they must not overshadow the inherent qualities that define outdoor performance — the immediacy, physical presence, spontaneous interactions, and direct community connections. As the sector increasingly embraces technological innovations, it must remain vigilant to ensure equitable participation and maintain the distinctive, tangible immediacy central to outdoor arts experiences.

Significant UK-based projects demonstrate both the artistic potential and practical barriers associated with digital integration. *Wired Aerial Theatre's* groundbreaking performance *As the World Tipped* (2009) successfully blended aerial choreography with large-scale projection mapping, creating a powerful visual narrative about climate change that captivated wide-ranging audiences. Similarly, *About Us* by 59 Productions (2022), an ambitious fusion of projection mapping, digital media, and live performance, exemplifies how technology can powerfully augment storytelling, deepening emotional resonance and broadening public engagement.

These high-profile examples illustrate both the potential and prominence of technological approaches within outdoor arts but also underscore persistent challenges relating to budget constraints and technological accessibility. Currently, large-scale digital integrations tend to remain the preserve of well-funded, high-profile commissions, potentially widening the gap between smaller, grassroots initiatives and major institutions or festivals.

Emerging initiatives, such as creative labs specifically targeting artists interested in digital exploration — including artificial intelligence, immersive technologies, and other emerging digital practices — suggest significant future growth and innovation in this area. Organisations such as Watershed's Pervasive Media Studio in Bristol and FACT Liverpool's Digital Labs provide structured support for

artists exploring the intersection of technology and arts, highlighting ongoing sector-wide investment in digital capacity building.

The *Past Makes Future* micro-conference series (2024 — 2025), initiated by digital artist Thomas Buckley, further exemplifies the creative potential of digital storytelling. Collaborating with artists from the UK and Malta, including the *Bored Peach Club* with their residency centre in Gozo, these events interrogate and celebrate intersections between heritage, arts, and emergent technologies. The series explores narrative possibilities enhanced by digital innovation, demonstrating the expansive creative potential at this intersection.

However, key considerations arise as we consider this trajectory further. Will increased digital dependency inadvertently privilege technological spectacle over meaningful artistic experiences? How can the sector mitigate risks of digital exclusion, ensuring that outdoor arts remain genuinely accessible to diverse communities regardless of technological access? As immersive and digital experiences proliferate, what might be lost or compromised in terms of collective, embodied audience experiences that traditionally underpin outdoor arts?

Addressing these areas will be crucial as the sector continues to navigate the delicate balance between technological enhancement and preserving the shared values of outdoor arts. The challenge remains: Can the sector ensure digital innovations remain a catalyst rather than a constraint, enriching community interaction, equity, and artistic depth in outdoor experiences?

Decolonisation and inclusive representation in outdoor arts

The outdoor arts sector is increasingly adopting decolonial and inclusive frameworks, proactively confronting Eurocentric narratives and elevating historically marginalised perspectives. Festivals, curators, and cultural institutions globally now prioritise diasporic, Indigenous, and intersectional viewpoints, striving to ensure that outdoor arts authentically represent and resonate with the diverse communities they serve.

An increasing number of festivals worldwide are commissioning and showcasing artists from diverse cultural backgrounds, ensuring performances genuinely reflect lived experiences and histories of their communities. UK-based programmes such as *Birmingham's Fierce Festival* and London's *Greenwich + Docklands International Festival* consistently foreground diverse voices, challenging traditional power dynamics in public spaces through artistically ambitious and socially relevant programming. *Without Walls* exemplifies this proactive approach, prioritising equity and diversity through targeted artist development initiatives, equitable commissioning policies, and accessible

touring frameworks. Internationally, networks such as Europe's IN SITU actively embed principles of inclusivity and community co-creation into their strategic objectives, promoting systemic change at both organisational and sector-wide levels.

Artworks such as Jeanefer Jean-Charles's innovative large-scale choreography, *Black Victorians*, vividly exemplify this shift. Through vibrant public dance performances, the piece reclaims overlooked Black histories and narratives, inviting audiences to engage deeply with hidden historical perspectives. Similarly, in 2000, Southbank Centre celebrated 21 years of South Asian dance in Britain with *Coming of Age*, a site-specific spectacle produced by *Akādemi* under Keith Khan's visionary direction. The performance featured nearly a hundred dancers aged 2–82, showcasing diverse South Asian dance forms — from Bharatanatyam to Bhangra and Kathak — transforming public spaces into dynamic platforms for cultural representation. Its 2003 sequel, *Escapade*, further celebrated this cultural diversity by fusing film songs, R&B, rock, and club beats into an immersive outdoor experience.



Black Victorians

Jeanefer Jean-Charles. © Glodhi Miessi

Internationally, Australia's YIRRAMBOI Festival demonstrates the potential of outdoor arts to centre Indigenous knowledge, culture, and contemporary perspectives, empowering First Nations artists as creative leads and cultural ambassadors. Similarly, Canada's *Talking Stick Festival* amplifies Indigenous storytelling, intentionally using public spaces to foster critical conversations about reconciliation, visibility, and cultural resurgence. In South Africa, *Infecting the City festival* engages diverse local artists and communities through performances that interrogate social histories, identity politics, and contemporary issues, creating accessible platforms for dialogue and cultural exchange. Its rural extension, *MyBodyMySpace* in Mpumalanga, further integrates these themes by addressing the climate emergency in collaboration with Pro Helvetia and the Swiss Arts Council.

Despite these significant strides, genuine inclusivity requires deeper structural transformation beyond representational visibility. Systemic shifts in commissioning practices, funding distribution, organisational governance, and leadership dynamics are essential for addressing entrenched inequalities. Outdoor arts organisations must move decisively beyond symbolic gestures, embedding equitable decision-making processes, meaningfully resourcing historically marginalised artists, supporting sustainable career pathways, and enabling genuine leadership opportunities.

The sector faces critical questions: can outdoor arts genuinely achieve decolonisation and inclusivity without radically reconsidering historical roots, funding priorities, and curatorial practices? How will organisations measure genuine progress and ensure accountability, avoiding superficial or performative inclusivity? Can these progressive approaches become permanently embedded, transcending shifts in leadership and political climates?

Ultimately, the enduring challenge — and opportunity — for outdoor arts lies in institutionalising these transformative shifts sustainably. Persistent action, rigorous self-reflection, and structural accountability are crucial for outdoor arts to authentically represent, empower, and resonate with the diverse communities they aim to serve, paving the way for a genuinely equitable and inclusive cultural landscape.

Creative health, and regeneration in outdoor arts

The biggest deficit that we have in our society and in the world right now is an empathy deficit. We are in great need of people being able to stand in somebody else's shoes and see the world through their eyes.

Barack Obama

Outdoor arts are facing ongoing economic pressures due to reduced public funding and an increased reliance on private sponsorship and philanthropy. Although essential, private funding often comes with constraints that may limit artistic independence by aligning creative work with commercial interests or urban development agendas.

In response, the outdoor arts sector is proactively aligning new performance-based work with regional regeneration, creative health initiatives, and housing developments, leveraging these strategic partnerships to access diverse funding sources and amplify community impacts. This approach positions outdoor performances not only as cultural experiences but also as significant contributors to community wellbeing, economic regeneration, and social cohesion.

Performance-led collaborations between outdoor artists and housing developers demonstrate significant potential for community-building and placemaking. For example, in Thamesmead, Peabody's work as housing developer integrates vibrant outdoor public art and performances into new residential developments, creating active public spaces and fostering stronger community connections.

Additionally, outdoor arts are being effectively integrated into public health initiatives, highlighting their potential to positively impact community health outcomes through creative engagement.

Empathy Museum's art and wellbeing projects are participatory, dedicated to helping us look at the world through other people's eyes, working with multiple partners from the National Health Service in the UK to the EU funded *Art and Wellbeing* project in Italy, Romania, Belgium and Slovenia. With a focus on storytelling and dialogue, their travelling museum explores how empathy can not only transform our personal relationships, but also help tackle global challenges such as prejudice, conflict and inequality. *A Mile In My Shoes* is an interactive installation housed in a giant shoe box, it's a shoe shop where visitors are invited to walk a mile in someone else's shoes — literally. This roaming exhibit holds a diverse collection of shoes and audio stories that explore our shared humanity. From a Syrian refugee to a sex worker, a war veteran to a neurosurgeon, visitors are invited to walk a mile in the shoes of a stranger while listening to their story. The stories cover different aspects of life, from loss and grief to hope and love taking the visitor on an empathetic as well as a physical journey reaching global audiences in the public domain worldwide.



When we step outside, what place are we looking for?
Art in public space and placemaking

Place des Anges
Piccadilly Circus Circus. © Matthew Andrews

On a smaller scale, the UK's South Asian led *Akādemi* established Ageing Artfully, an initiative to give the older adults in the community a chance to revive and re-discover themselves through creative activities. The project explored *Walking for Health* with innovative *Bollywalk and Dance* walks which blends walking and Bollywood-inspired moves with theatrical storytelling to create fun, playful and enjoyable group experiences outdoors. The concept of dance-walking, is a phenomenon started in New York in the 80's which encourages dance participation in mass movements with unplanned groups of people. This inspired *Akādemi*'s director, Mira Kaushik, to invite South Asian dance artist Khavita Kaur Rendhawa, to adapt the idea to take place on Hampstead Heath in the heart of north London supported by the expertise of local primary care trusts and the *Camden Active Health* team.

However, integrating outdoor performance with health, housing, and regeneration agendas raises crucial questions for the sector. Can artists maintain authentic creative freedom when their work is tied explicitly to social or economic outcomes? How might artistic innovation and risk-taking be preserved when external stakeholders have defined, outcome-driven objectives? Moreover, are there risks that performance quality and authenticity could be compromised by overly prescriptive partnerships?

To navigate these challenges effectively, outdoor arts practitioners could adopt collaborative governance models, clearly communicating artistic goals alongside social and economic outcomes. Policymakers and funding bodies should support frameworks that preserve creative autonomy while encouraging meaningful community engagement and sustainable regional development.

Reimagining touring and festival models in outdoor arts

The outdoor arts sector faces critical indirect impacts as wider arts infrastructure grapples with increasing financial and operational challenges. Traditional arts venues and supporting organisations worldwide are under intense pressure, significantly reducing their capacity to provide essential partnerships, co-commissions, and artist residencies, which have historically been crucial to sustaining vibrant outdoor arts practices. This contraction not only limits essential resources — such as rehearsal facilities, technical infrastructure, and promotional platforms — but also impacts artists' professional development, innovation, and audience engagement across the broader cultural ecosystem.

Simultaneously, traditional long-distance touring models are under urgent scrutiny due to their unsustainable economic and environmental implications. As a response, there is a growing shift

toward localised, residency-based, and site-specific approaches. Organisations such as *Without Walls* in the UK exemplify these adaptive strategies by fostering regional touring circuits, enabling artists to engage deeply with local contexts while reducing travel-related costs and environmental footprints. Similarly, Europe's IN SITU network promotes context-sensitive creation through dedicated residencies, transnational co-commissions, and collaborative production structures, supporting artistic practices that respond meaningfully to diverse local environments.

Globally, organisations like Australia's Performing Lines have championed more sustainable regional touring circuits, balancing ecological considerations with cultural accessibility by embedding artists within local communities. Likewise, Canada's Ontario Presents promotes innovative, community-based touring models designed to enhance artist-community dialogue while significantly reducing carbon footprints through targeted, regionally clustered performances.

Despite these encouraging developments, financial precarity remains pervasive among outdoor arts festivals, exacerbated by reliance on short-term funding cycles that impede long-term planning and artistic innovation. Festivals and touring programmes frequently lack stability, restricting opportunities for artists to develop ambitious, experimental, and longer-term creative projects.

To confront these persistent challenges effectively, structural reform in festival and touring funding models is vital. Advocating for multi-year investment and long-term strategic funding commitments can provide the necessary stability for ambitious artistic projects and organisational sustainability. Greater collaborative efforts between festivals, institutions, and regional authorities could foster resilient, resource-sharing networks that enhance sector-wide sustainability and artistic diversity.

Provocative questions emerge in response to these evolving dynamics. Can outdoor arts sustainably maintain international dialogue and exchange without traditional touring structures? How might the shift toward hyper-localised and residency-based models affect artistic innovation, diversity, and audience reach? Are current adaptive strategies truly sustainable, or do they risk unintentionally reinforcing regional or national silos, potentially limiting global cultural exchange?

Ultimately, the future of outdoor arts touring and festival models hinges on a willingness to radically rethink existing frameworks, actively embracing innovative partnerships, resource-sharing models, and funding structures that balance environmental, economic, and cultural imperatives. This transitional moment provides a powerful opportunity to shape a more equitable, sustainable, and creatively dynamic global outdoor arts ecosystem.



Marawa the Amazing
Piccadilly Circus Circus. © Matthew Andrews

Sustaining and innovating international collaboration in outdoor arts

One of the most pressing challenges facing the outdoor arts sector today is sustaining robust international collaboration amid increasingly complex geopolitical realities. Over recent decades, the establishment of international networks such as IN SITU, *Circostrada*, and *Perform Europe* significantly bolstered structural support, artistic mobility, collaborative opportunities, and advocacy within the sector. These networks have been pivotal in strengthening connections among artists, producers, and festivals across Europe, facilitating not only artistic innovation and knowledge sharing but also critical engagement with broader social, cultural, and political issues.

IN SITU notably champions site-specific and context-driven artistic practices, offering platforms for artists to deeply engage with diverse cultural landscapes, while *Circostrada* has been instrumental in advocating for contemporary circus and street arts through dedicated research, policy engagement, and sector-wide dialogue, including annual research field trips beyond Europe. *Perform Europe* specifically tackles contemporary theatre, dance, circus and performance touring complexities, pioneering sustainable, inclusive, and innovative approaches to cross-border performance exchanges.

Globally, additional networks illustrate broader possibilities for international collaboration. The *International Society for Performing Arts* (ISPA) fosters global dialogue among cultural professionals, supporting artistic innovation and strategic partnerships across continents. Australia's APAM (*Australian Performing Arts Market*) similarly promotes robust international networks, actively encouraging cross-cultural artistic collaboration, thereby enhancing both regional and global connectivity. Networks developing outside traditional European frameworks, such as the *Asian Producers' Platform* and Latin America's *Red Sudamericana de Danza*, further diversify international dialogues and enrich global artistic practices.

Yet, sustaining these international collaborations faces significant hurdles. The UK's departure from the Creative Europe programme has profoundly impacted the ability of UK-based artists and producers to engage in cross-border partnerships. Over two decades, Creative Europe and INTERREG initiatives played critical roles in shaping Europe's outdoor arts landscape, enabling international touring, transnational projects, and essential infrastructure. Their absence now leaves UK organisations facing increased competition for alternative funding sources, higher administrative burdens, and reduced collaborative opportunities.

Crying Out Loud, historically involved in platforms like *Circostrada* and various EU-funded projects, significantly contributed to knowledge exchange and the visibility of UK work across Europe.

Out There Arts — similarly with a long track record in leading and developing major international partnership programmes from Great Yarmouth also continues to demonstrate the appetite for cross-border collaboration through residencies, co-productions, and showcasing international artists despite reduced infrastructure support.

Beyond funding, broader geopolitical challenges further threaten international mobility and collaboration. Increasing nationalism, rising administrative barriers such as complex visa requirements, and elevated transport costs complicate international touring and partnership building. The erosion of longstanding collaborative frameworks underscores the urgency for advocacy and innovative approaches within the sector.

Despite recent structural changes, the *British Council* remains crucial, refocusing its efforts geographically to enhance local relevance while continuing competitive International Collaboration Grants programmes supporting cultural collaboration between UK artists and their global counterparts. Leveraging these resources strategically can continue to help sustain international connections and stimulate innovative collaborations.

Looking ahead, digital collaboration could increasingly play a role, facilitating international connectivity through virtual residencies, co-creation processes, and hybrid touring models. Initiatives like Perform Europe illustrate the potential when digital tools and international cooperation intersect, enabling new, sustainable touring models that rethink traditional methods.

However, the future of international collaboration also suggests potential for more radical, cross-sector partnerships. With outdoor arts increasingly intersecting critical global issues such as climate activism, public health, digital innovation, social justice, and urban regeneration, opportunities emerge for forging alliances beyond arts-specific networks. Partnering with environmental NGOs, technology hubs, research institutions, and social enterprises could profoundly reshape artistic practice, audience engagement, and the sector's broader purpose.

Provocative questions remain essential as the sector navigates these complexities: Can the outdoor arts sector maintain its artistic integrity while embracing cross-sector collaborations and partnerships? Are existing arts networks equipped — or willing — to embrace radical interdisciplinary shifts and innovations necessary to address contemporary global challenges?

Moreover, can the UK reassert itself as a valued international partner without formal alignment to EU structures such as *Creative Europe*? What diplomatic and cultural alliances must be forged to protect the spirit of international cultural exchange? And critically, how can artists and organisations resist rising cultural nationalism, ensuring transnational collaboration remains vibrant, innovative, and mutually supportive?

Ultimately, for outdoor arts to remain agile, relevant, and globally connected, reliance on traditional arts-focused networks alone will not suffice. The sector must proactively cultivate diverse and resilient partnerships across geographic and disciplinary boundaries, ensuring outdoor arts remain both a creative and a resistant force in an increasingly divided world.

Reimagining space for audiences and artists

Audience expectations for outdoor arts have evolved dramatically post-pandemic, reflecting broader shifts towards participatory, interactive, and hyper-local cultural experiences. Audiences increasingly prefer engagements that foster deeper connections between artists, communities, and environments, moving away from traditional passive spectatorship toward more inclusive, community-driven co-creation. This shift presents exciting opportunities for innovation, demanding new methods where audiences actively shape artistic narratives and experiences.

Yet, alongside evolving audience dynamics, the sector faces significant challenges from shrinking access to public spaces, traditionally foundational to outdoor performance. Urban developments increasingly driven by privatisation, intensified security measures, and restrictive policies limit cultural and community activities. London's Southbank and East Bank, along with the King's Cross developments, exemplify how commercial interests reshape urban spaces, often curtailing availability for cultural activities lacking direct economic incentives. Globally, tighter restrictions and heightened surveillance in cities like New York, Paris, and Hong Kong further impact outdoor arts, underscoring the urgent need for advocacy to reclaim and protect these public cultural commons.

Organisations such as *Outdoor Arts UK* and international networks like *IN SITU* actively advocate policies recognising public spaces as essential platforms for cultural democracy and civic engagement. The sector must creatively navigate increasingly restrictive urban landscapes, developing innovative models to reclaim and revitalise public spaces through advocacy, strategic partnerships, and responsive artistic approaches.

Parallel to these immediate challenges is the critical need for dedicated spaces supporting experimentation, development, and interdisciplinary collaboration within outdoor arts. Unlike traditional indoor theatre, outdoor performance requires expansive, adaptable environments for prototyping and site-specific responsiveness, involving collaboration with diverse specialists — engineers, designers, community organisers, and technologists — to realise ambitious projects.

European creation centres have responded innovatively to these demands. In the UK, *101 Outdoor Arts* in Newbury provides

artists with essential large-scale rehearsal spaces, technical resources, and peer-led residencies. France's *Atelier 231* supports street arts through comprehensive residencies and technical assistance, while Spain's *FiraTàrraga Creative Lab* facilitates outdoor and site-specific work development, fostering connections with international programmers. Beyond Europe, TOHU in Montreal supports interdisciplinary outdoor arts practices, and Australia's *Artlands* connects regional artists with experimental, ecologically informed creative labs. *Third Version Creative* and *Crying Out Loud Carousel* initiative represents a new wave of artist-led residencies, supporting bold, cross-disciplinary explorations of public performance.

Despite these valuable examples, access to creative spaces remains uneven, particularly disadvantaged marginalised artists. Too often, artists face tight production cycles focused on short-term outcomes, limiting time for experimentation and innovation. This hampers the sector's capacity to respond creatively to evolving artistic, ecological, and social contexts.

Greater strategic investment in dedicated creation centres, mobile creative labs, and innovative cross-sector residencies is urgently needed. As outdoor arts increasingly intersect with broader global issues — digital technology, climate action, health, and urban regeneration — collaborative residencies involving ecologists, urban planners, social scientists, and technologists could seed impactful, research-driven creative projects. Such investments would enable artists to experiment boldly, facilitating innovative, adaptive, and responsive practices.

Provocative questions remain: How can artists creatively navigate restrictive urban environments while fostering meaningful audience participation? Can advocacy successfully shift public spaces from commodities to cultural commons? How can we ensure equitable access to development spaces, especially for under-represented artists?

Ultimately, for outdoor arts to thrive and evolve, the sector must secure spaces — both physical and conceptual — that enable experimentation, interdisciplinary collaboration, and community-driven innovation. This proactive approach will ensure outdoor arts remain vibrant, relevant, and capable of shaping how we gather, imagine, and transform our shared public spaces.



Kea i potsa
Brian Montshiwa Studio

Outdoor arts stand at a vibrant but challenging crossroads — celebrated yet fragile, visible but uncertain. Now expected to drive regeneration, inclusion, civic pride, ecological awareness, and creative innovation, the sector must navigate shrinking public spaces, limited resources, and shifting audience expectations.

Yet its power remains undeniable: outdoor arts uniquely activate places, foster deep community connections, and create transformative shared moments. From major spectacles to grassroots co-created events, this form sits at the heart of how we collectively imagine and reimagine our shared spaces.

But thriving in this new phase means asking bold questions. Can large-scale events build lasting support for smaller, experimental practices? How do we ensure artists have space and freedom to test, fail, and innovate beyond established boundaries?

Inclusion can't simply be a programming choice — it demands systemic change. Are we truly prepared to challenge funding structures, leadership models, and commissioning practices to elevate diverse perspectives and dismantle historic inequalities?

Sustainability must become a creative driver, not merely an obligation. The climate emergency invites radical innovation — new artistic forms, low-carbon practices, and meaningful engagements with place and environment. Can ecological responsibility inspire rather than limit artistic ambition?

As public spaces shrink under privatisation and restrictive policies, advocacy becomes essential. Artists must creatively reclaim urban landscapes, asserting public space as vital cultural commons. What artistic strategies will help us safeguard the right to gather, create, and engage publicly?

These aren't just logistical questions — they're ethical and creative provocations. To remain impactful, outdoor arts must be bold, experimental, and socially responsive, constantly pushing new boundaries.

Amid climate crisis, political instability, and cultural uncertainty, outdoor arts have a critical role — not just reflecting society, but actively shaping and transforming it. If we're brave enough, outdoor arts can transcend performance, becoming a powerful force for public transformation.

Sud Basu is director of Third Version Creative and a UK-based programmer and consultant with over 20 years of experience across theatre, dance, music, and visual art. He has commissioned projects and developed curatorial strategies for festivals, venues, and public spaces. He has worked with the Greater London Authority, London Legacy Development Corporation, Arts Council England, and cultural programmes including 14-18 NOW. As a freelancer, he has supported City of Culture bids, Place Partnership projects, and major socially engaged commissions.

Rachel Clare is artistic director of Crying Out Loud, which she co-founded in 2002 with support from Arts Council England. With a background in theatre design and international touring with Ra Ra Zoo, she has worked extensively as a programmer across major London venues including Riverside Studios, Lyric Hammersmith, and the Southbank Centre. Her career spans outdoor events, contemporary performance, and visual theatre. Through Crying Out Loud, she has played a leading role in bringing contemporary circus and cross-artform work to audiences across the UK and internationally.

#large-scale
#event

Piccadilly Circus Circus

London, United Kingdom

For one day only, Piccadilly Circus Circus transformed central London into a pedestrianised paradise, turning its historic streets and architecture into the stage for a breathtaking celebration of contemporary circus. Conceived and created by Crying Out Loud, with Rachel Clare and Aletta Collins as joint artistic directors, this large-scale event was a highlight of the London 2012 Festival. With its grand facades and sweeping streets, Regent Street and Piccadilly Circus became an arena where circus artists could truly come to life. "The elements of the architecture on Regent Street are absolutely fantastic, they're really suitable for the way we want to animate and bring to life contemporary circus artists". This vision was fully realised as performers leapt, flew, balanced, and tumbled against the backdrop of London's most iconic landmarks.

Over the course of an extraordinary afternoon, 247 performers from 33 international companies delivered 143 performances of 48 different acts across 15 spaces. From aerialists suspended high above the crowds to intimate street performances weaving through the audience, the city itself became a living, breathing spectacle of movement and creativity. The event drew an estimated 250,000 spectators, culminating in a jaw-dropping high-wire performance above Piccadilly Circus — a moment that cemented the event's place as one of the most ambitious outdoor circus productions ever staged in the UK.





Transe Express
Piccadilly Circus, London, United Kingdom (2012). © Matt Grayson

Using 7. outdoor arts to foster social and cultural wellbeing:

14-steps guide
for transforming public
spaces through
outdoor arts.

This guide reflects an evolving process, exploring how outdoor arts can deepen and refine placemaking practices. By integrating creativity with urban transformation, it aims to create more inclusive, vibrant, and sustainable public spaces. As placemaking through outdoor arts continues to develop, this approach should be further tested, adapted, and improved in real-world contexts. Above all, this is a working model — one that invites continuous learning, dialogue, and innovation.

Step 1

Embrace outdoor arts as a catalyst for placemaking

- Recognise the power of outdoor arts to activate public spaces and foster community pride.
- Use performances and installations to inspire storytelling, dialogue, and connection in underutilised spaces.
- Highlight outdoor arts' ability to address social issues and promote inclusivity through creative expression.
- Leverage their flexibility to adapt to diverse communities and cultural identities.

Step 2

Place wellbeing at the heart of placemaking

- Prioritise enhancing emotional, social, and mental wellbeing through artistic programming.
- Design spaces and events that encourage gathering, celebration, and reflection.
- Use outdoor arts to promote health and happiness by offering moments of joy and connection.
- Align programming with wider health and wellbeing goals, such as reducing loneliness or stress.

Step 3

Map and assess local spaces

- Identify public spaces that are underused or in need of revitalisation.
- Conduct site assessments to evaluate accessibility, connectivity, and safety.
- Analyse the historical, cultural, and social significance of spaces to guide interventions.
- Explore opportunities for outdoor arts to complement existing resources, such as green spaces or town squares.

Step 4

Engage the community as co-creators

- Involve residents from the outset, inviting them to shape the vision and objectives of the project.
- Use participatory workshops and storytelling sessions to gather ideas and input.
- Encourage community members to contribute as performers, creators, or volunteers.
- Build a sense of ownership by ensuring their voices are visibly reflected in the final outcomes.

Step 5

Build strategic partnerships

- Collaborate with local councils, businesses, and cultural organisations to share resources and expertise.
- Partner with artists, architects, and urban planners to co-create holistic solutions.
- Engage health professionals to integrate wellbeing principles into placemaking strategies.
- Establish partnerships that prioritise equity and inclusivity, ensuring underrepresented voices are heard.

Step 6

Activate public spaces with outdoor arts

- Design site-specific performances or installations that respond to the unique character of each space.
- Use temporary interventions, such as pop-up stages or community murals, to test ideas and generate excitement.
- Encourage multi-functional uses of public spaces, balancing aesthetics with accessibility.
- Plan programming that invites spontaneous, informal interactions, fostering community connection.

Step 7

Promote inclusivity and accessibility

- Ensure all public spaces and events are accessible to people of all abilities and economic backgrounds.
- Provide multilingual signage, sensory-friendly designs, and adaptable programming for diverse audiences.
- Collaborate with disability advocates to address barriers to participation.
- Offer free or affordable programming to reduce financial obstacles.

Step 8

Foster cultural wellbeing

- Celebrate local culture, history, and traditions through artistic programming.
- Use outdoor arts to amplify the voices of underrepresented communities and tell untold stories.
- Design programming that fosters intergenerational connections and appeals to all age groups.
- Reflect the community's diversity through inclusive narratives and artistic representation.

Step 9

Develop a shared vision and measurable goals

- Co-create a clear and inspiring vision that aligns with community aspirations and local identity.
- Define measurable objectives, such as increased footfall, community participation, or cultural engagement.
- Use storytelling to communicate the vision in an accessible and compelling way.
- Regularly revisit and adapt goals to reflect evolving needs and challenges.

Step 10

Secure sustainable funding and resources

- Explore funding streams from arts councils, businesses, sponsorships, and crowdfunding.
- Advocate for public investment by demonstrating the cultural, social, and economic benefits of outdoor arts.
- Build resource-sharing partnerships with local suppliers, artists, and community groups.
- Plan for the long-term financial sustainability of spaces, including maintenance and future programming.

Step 11

Embed sustainability and resilience

- Design interventions using eco-friendly materials and sustainable practices.
- Incorporate green infrastructure, such as planting trees or improving drainage, to enhance environmental quality.
- Use outdoor arts to highlight sustainability themes, inspiring ecological awareness and action.
- Create adaptable spaces that can respond to changing community needs or climate conditions.

Step 12

Activate programming for connection and engagement

- Plan seasonal events, such as outdoor performances, community planting days, or local heritage walks, to sustain year-round activity.
- Host open rehearsals or interactive installations to encourage public involvement.
- Promote informal uses of spaces, such as family picnics or casual community discussions.
- Foster connections between artists and audiences through workshops and participatory activities.

Step 13

Monitor impact and share results

- Use surveys, interviews, and observational studies to measure the success of placemaking projects.
- Assess social and cultural wellbeing outcomes, such as reduced isolation or increased community pride.
- Document and share success stories widely through exhibitions, reports, and social media.
- Create toolkits or case studies to inspire similar initiatives in other communities.

Step 14

Build legacy and long-term ownership

- Empower local leaders and organisations to take responsibility for ongoing programming and maintenance.
- Establish governance structures to ensure inclusive decision-making for future uses of the space.
- Provide leadership and skill-building opportunities for young people and emerging artists.
- Leave behind flexible, adaptable spaces that evolve with the community's changing needs.
- Document lessons learned to inform future projects and improve best practices.

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#installation
#identity
#belonging

Vhils

Vhils (Alexandre Farto, Lisbon, Portugal) is an internationally renowned visual artist and urban interventionist whose work redefines the relationship between public space, identity, and collective memory. Through his innovative technique of carving and excavating urban surfaces, Vhils reveals the layers of history and human presence embedded in cityscapes, creating striking portraits that resonate with the people and places they inhabit. His approach, often described as “creative destruction”, symbolises the ephemeral nature of urban life while uncovering the cultural and historical narratives that shape local identities. By working directly with walls, facades, and materials that bear the imprint of time, his art transforms forgotten or overlooked urban elements into powerful statements of belonging and identity.

Quando saímos à rua, que lugar queremos encontrar?
Arte em espaço público e placemaking

Vhils' work plays a key role in cultural place-making, reinforcing the emotional connection between people and their cities. His interventions reclaim urban space as a site of memory and identity, countering the impersonal nature of rapid urbanisation, while amplifying local voices and histories, often featuring portraits of ordinary individuals who reflect the spirit and resilience of a community. By integrating his work into the urban fabric, he encourages a renewed perception of the city, prompting residents to engage with their environment in a more conscious and emotional way. His art serves as a bridge between past and present, turning architecture into a living archive of urban life and creating a sense of continuity and belonging in ever-changing cityscapes.

With large-scale public artworks in cities across the world — including Lisbon, Paris, Hong Kong, Rio de Janeiro, and Shanghai — Vhils' projects demonstrate the power of art as a tool for social reflection, engagement, and empowerment. His collaborations with communities, cultural institutions, and social initiatives reinforce the idea that public art is not just a form of expression but a means of fostering collective identity and urban storytelling.





Fluorescence, by Liz West [UK]
Kings Cross, London, United Kingdom (2024), © John Sturrock

Afterword

**What
now?**

Luís Sousa Ferreira

And now, as we reach the final pages of this book, we are invited to reflect on the profound intersection between art, public space, and the ways in which we conceive and inhabit our cities and rural territories. The preceding chapters have shown us that the arts — far from being mere ornament or simple entertainment — are active social practices, capable of challenging structures, connecting communities, and transforming spaces into vibrant, meaningful, and inclusive places.

The reflection proposed by Bruno Costa and Daniel Vilar positions the arts in public space as fundamental to contemporary placemaking. They are essential for strengthening community bonds, amplifying under-represented voices, and redefining the role of public space as a realm of active participation, memory, and transformation.

The challenge often lies in fostering this understanding among those shaping the future of our communities — where arts and culture are still too often absent from local development strategies, as Jamie Bennett has underlined. It is necessary to build more bridges and cultivate a broader, more integrated understanding of these practices.

**Culture creates places, yet it has
no fixed place in which it must occur.**

The question that gives this book its title — “What place are we looking for?” — resonates not only within urban contexts but across all landscapes where people live and relate to one another, including rural areas, so often overlooked by cultural and urban planning policies. For this reason, the dialogue between rural and urban emerges as a vital axis for understanding the challenges and potential of contemporary placemaking.

In a world marked by centralised power dynamics, where capital cities and major cultural hubs tend to monopolise the production, circulation, and legitimisation of art, this book reminds us of the urgency of broadening our perspective. Rural and peripheral cultures — with their knowledge, traditions, and practices — are not voids to be filled. They are rich, complex, and ever-evolving worlds that deserve recognition, value, and support.

Placemaking, in this context, becomes a tool for decolonising culture — so powerfully illustrated in Karine Décorne’s text — by dismantling the prejudices and hierarchies that relegate rural territories to a secondary role. The invisible network of connections fostered by artistic processes has the power to rebalance relationships, reinforce local autonomy and agency, and nurture dialogue between different forms of knowledge.

I struggle to see culture as a tribal boundary that delineates identities and redraws the line between “us” and “them”. Yet I also

struggle with cultural agents who impose evangelising processes on territories, operating from a position of certainty about what is best for others. Cultural projects must promote transformation through a fluid context of exchange and mutual learning. It is therefore essential to place people at the heart of urban development – a principle as simple, and yet as complex, as Ramon Marrades highlights in his historical and interdisciplinary framing of placemaking.

The art of creating environments that reflect the environment.

The projects described in this book, such as Vetch Veg in Swansea or the *Future Wales Fellowship*, illustrate how art — when embedded in participatory and interdisciplinary processes — can become a powerful force in addressing the social and environmental crises we face. It is not merely about creating works, but about building spaces for encounter, listening, and collective action.

Art in public space is never neutral: it shapes narratives, reinforces memory, and can regenerate places, contributing to the construction of fairer, more sustainable, and more inclusive cities and territories. Awareness of the climate crisis and the urgency of environmental justice are driving forces in rethinking artistic practices, with a growing emphasis on local, regenerative, and circular models.

The integration of new technologies — augmented reality, artificial intelligence, interactive projections — may offer one path towards more sustainable interventions. However, this requires balance, so as not to lose the community-based and in-person dimension that lies at the heart of public space arts. Cultural decolonisation, the meaningful inclusion of marginalised voices, and the creation of lasting legacies are goals that point towards an artistic practice that is truly transformative.

There is no participation without method, and no transformation without a plan.

Here, too, we are faced with the challenges that affect the field of public space arts, aptly outlined by Sud Basu and Rachel Clare: financial precarity, barriers to mobility, the privatisation of space, and tensions between artistic autonomy and social expectations. In the face of such a landscape, the capacity for innovation, collaboration, and resilience becomes vital.

I believe that collective action can be sparked by an individual act of resistance. But it is essential to design clear projects with defined objectives, in order to bring communities together and ensure that, throughout the process, inevitable setbacks do not distort the purpose or leave the project vulnerable to interests that run counter to the common good.

Creating comfort to engage with the discomfort of art.

Reading this book reinforces the conviction that art in public space and placemaking are not luxuries, but pathways towards the achievement — or preservation — of fundamental rights. Rights that guarantee everyone access to spaces of creation, encounter, and belonging. They are a means of fulfilling Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “The right to cultural, artistic and scientific life”, which affirms that all human beings have the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts, and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.

When we step outside, the city — understood here as any urbanised territory — we encounter should reflect a collective commitment to social justice, cultural diversity, and environmental sustainability. It is this city — plural, vibrant, and in constant evolution — that the arts help us to imagine and build.

Placemaking, as proposed by Tiago Mota Saraiva, is much more than a methodology for urban planning; it is a way of thinking and acting upon the city from the perspective of people, and for people. It demands listening, imagination, courage, and above all, a deep commitment to the common good. By reclaiming the political and social roots of the concept, the author offers us a critical tool to reflect on how we shape the city — and with whom.

What now?

I see this book as a wake-up call, and I hope other readers, too, feel inspired to be part of the change. We do not need to be urban planners, artists, or legal experts to claim action in defence of the common good. Great projects often begin with modest gestures. As we have seen here, a place can begin with a bench — with the political act of placing a bench in a square or in the corner of an alleyway. The journey is made step by step, as the guide at the end of this book reminds us.

Now that we have turned these pages, a gentle invitation — or perhaps a challenge — remains: step outside and walk without haste. Observe.

Notice the places we usually overlook: the graffitied wall, the tree still standing on the pavement, the empty square in the afternoon, the sound from an open window. Observe who moves, who lingers, who is missing. Listen to the silences and the noise of the place. Ask: what stories live here? What possibilities remain to be revealed?

Imagine what could be different. What place could emerge here? What gesture might spark a transformation?

A space begins to change when we are able to see it attentively — placing people at the centre. To look at our surroundings as if seeking a shared meaning. Because when we step outside, we are not merely looking for a city; we are looking for a place where we can truly live.

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Van Gogh-Roosegaarde, by Daan Roosegaarde & Heijmans Infrastructure
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