# Street Revitalization

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Main Street revitalization can occur through placemaking, a collaborative planning approach that puts public spaces at the centre of urban life. According to the Project for Public Spaces (2007), placemaking requires a community effort to consolidate multiple visions so that spaces work for different uses and users. They highlight sociability, uses & activities, comfort & image, and access & linkages as four essential qualities of great places (Figure #1).

This document examines placemaking approaches that aim to solve problems facing small towns and cities across North America. While some examples are from larger towns with populations over 100,000 residents, they can be scaled down to meet the needs of smaller locales. Although the examples are not explicitiy age friendly, placemaking is all about collaborative approaches and the creation of inclusive spaces. Precedents have been organized into three themes: increasing community involement, visual improvements, and service improvements.

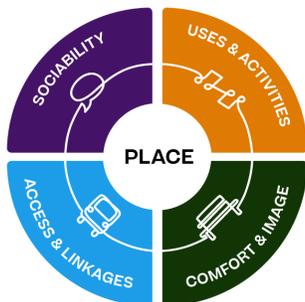**One of the best ways to sell people on change is to demonstrate it for them.**



Photo Credit: Project for Public Spaces

Figure #1: *What Makes a Great Place?* Core elements of placemaking, adopted from the Project for Public Spaces.

## Increasing Community Involvement

Change can be intimidating, especially for long-time residents in small towns and villages. One of the best ways to sell people on change is to demonstrate it so they may experience it firsthand. Thunder Bay, ON conducted a one-day Strong Blocks Event intended to display what their streets could look and feel like with greater activity and a stronger emphasis on the pedestrian experience. This included temporary modifications such as bike lanes, vendor pop-up booths, live music, and the closure of the street to vehicle traffic (Quednau, 2017).

A larger event in Memphis, TN expanded this idea by turning vacant properties into pop-up businesses, adding crosswalks, and installing public art. Certain changes, like the bike lanes (Figure #2), were so popular they remained, and 10 years later the four-block stretch has received over $15 million USD in investments (Herriges, 2020).

A caution from Thunder Bay is the importance of landlord participation. For their event, the landlords of vacant properties were not interested in allowing their storefronts to be used as pop-ups. This created a more street-fair like atmosphere that did not fully communicate design intentions, in contrast to the Memphis event which was more successful. Ultimately, this strategy shows people what they are missing and gets them excited for change.

Figure #2: The painting of a temporary bike lane in Memphis, which became permanent.


Figure #3: 629 King St. in Bridgewater undergoes a complete makeover.

## Visual Improvements

Visual improvements are the most apparent changes when a location undergoes revitalization, and a little bit of paint can go a long way toward changing the feel of a space. Municipalities across Nova Scotia have been using grants to encourage façade improvements and to beautify their streets. Although each initiative is organized at the municipal level, they share common characteristics and goals. In the Lower Sackville suburb of Halifax, funding pays 50% of the total cost of improvements with an upper limit of $5,000 (Sackville Business Association, 2020). Eligible improvements are mostly aesthetic, such as painting, landscaping, and renovating entrance ways, and only businesses within the predefined downtown zone can apply.

**Encouraging landowners to take on renewal projects by paying part of the cost can foster economic returns.**

The Town of Bridgewater has an identical program which has been proven popular with landlords, taking just two years to deplete the initial $50,000 budget (Town of Bridgewater, 2021). The town provides a detailed guide with examples, which claims benefits such as a more attractive environment for all users, increased property values, and historical preservation (Town of Bridgewater, 2020). The results can really change the look of a structure (Figure #3) and this program can be easily modified to fit the needs of a given locale. For instance, the City of Halifax has a separate grant specifically for façade lighting improvements in their downtown district. Running as part of a larger beautification project, this grant program seeks to highlight building architecture (Figure #4) to enhance the urban environment while meeting wider goals for placemaking (Downtown Halifax, 2020). Encouraging landowners to take on renewal projects by paying part of the costs can foster economic returns while enhancing the quality of life for residents and guests alike.


Figure #4: An example of a building in Halifax after lighting improvements.

## Service Improvements

Empty spaces along main streets generally come in two varieties: vacant buildings and vacant lots. Creative approaches to filling these gaps demonstrate the ability to make these spaces work for the people. For vacant buildings, an emerging movement to share spaces seeks to address this problem. Becky McCray (2017) of SmallBizSurvival.com provides several examples of this strategy being used in small towns across the United States. In Washington, IA a 15,000 sq. ft.

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Figure #5: *The Village* in Washington, which has been divided into smaller shops through the construction of stalls. This allowed the former department store to be used without finding a single tenant for the entire space.

Photo Credit: TheVillageWashingtonIA.com

## Vacant lots present the opportunity for parks.

department store was segmented into smaller stalls (Figure #5) with a public gathering place at its centre. This simple idea can easily be scaled down to divide any large retail space and meet the needs of the local economy. McCray also writes of Roscommon County, MI which housed a seasonal boat storage facility. Following planner intervention, it began opening in the summer months as a crafting shop with plans to build shared workspaces. This example demonstrates the ability for spaces to take on different roles with seasonal demand and can be adapted to local contexts, so storefronts need not sit empty for half of the year.

Vacant lots present the opportunity for parks. In North Branch, MN, the Minnesota Design Team recommended filling empty lots with pocket parks: small, temporary greenspaces that fill the gaps between structures (Figure #6). This solution both looks better than empty lots and provides value for residents of all ages. North Branch also saw economic improvements within the first year of installing pocket parks, including lower vacancy rates, new investments into façade restoration, and the attraction of new businesses (Minnesota Design Team, n.d.). Getting creative with the use of empty space along main streets can have quick returns that improve the look, feel, and function of an area.



Photo Credit: Daniel Mallo

Figure #6: An example of a pocket park from Newcastle, UK.

## Final Thoughts

These examples are indicative of what can be accomplished when communities pool resources and come together under a shared vision for bettering their urban spaces. The solutions are scalable and contribute to the achievement of placemaking goals as outlined by the Project for Public Spaces. For further information about placemaking on main streets, the Canadian Urban Institute and Happy City have assembled a toolkit to assist in rapid placemaking both during and post-pandemic. The toolkit is available for free online and covers guiding principles, the design process, examples, and more (Bring Back Main Street, 2020).

For assistance with funding, grants are available through a partnership between the Province of Manitoba and the Government of Canada. Manitoba offers grants through the Building Sustainable Communities Program, covering 50% of funding up to $75,000 for projects like cultural or recreational infrastructure upgrades (Province of Manitoba, n.d.).

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