

"To be successful, we must constantly look at ways to activate our downtown spaces and places. Call it 'placemaking', call it 'Main Street', I don't care, let's just get down to the business of making this place somewhere that people want to be and want to come back to."

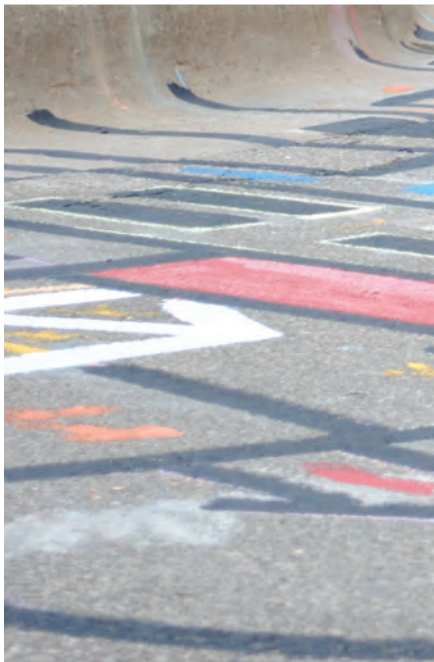
-JAMIE DAUBENDIEK, BOARD PRESIDENT, JEFFERSON MATTERS: MAIN STREET

By Michael Wagler

ACTIVATING THE MAIN STREET APPROACH THROUGH PLACE MAKING

A LITTLE LESS CONVERSATION, A LITTLE MORE ACTION

There is a growing understanding in the economic development discipline that creating a place where people want to be is a critical element to creating a strong, sustainable, interconnected community and economic development strategy. Broadly referred to as ‘placemaking,’ this concept is neither new nor foreign to our district revitalization movement. However, the new broadening interconnectedness of placemaking and economic development positions Main Street programs perfectly to demonstrate their effectiveness and value now more than ever.



“The future of economic development must include an emphasis on place-based economic development,” according to Iowa Economic Development Authority Director Debi Durham. “Community and economic development go hand-in-hand and the Main Street program continues to lead the way in this connection. Successful businesses and their employees help support and create thriving downtowns, and in turn, thriving downtowns attract new businesses, employees, and residents.”

Street murals bring the community together through action, art, and collaboration in downtown Dubuque.

Credit: Dubuque Main Street

When implemented effectively, the Main Street Approach is inherently placemaking. However, too many times we see placemaking introduced as a totally new strategy that diverts us from focusing on active implementation of the Main Street Approach. At the same time, community leaders (including Main Street programs) get caught up in the ‘right way’ to do placemaking, or the ‘right person’ to hire to help us do placemaking, or the ‘right place’ for a placemaking activity, or what the term ‘placemaking’ means in the first place. In the end, we generally tend to overthink placemaking.

over·think | *to spend more time thinking about something than is necessary or productive*

In many successful examples, the actions encouraged by the placemaking principles are utilized as an implementation strategy of the local Main Street effort rather than placemaking being implemented as a separate process. By using small-scale placemaking to drive incremental implementation, the local Main Street programs are able to empower local community members that don't always feel like they have the power to be engaged or impact change. This empowerment acts as an activation moment for the Main Street Approach and program.

Types of Placemaking

The term 'placemaking' is now used across many sectors and can take on many different definitions depending on the source. "This variation of use can sometimes be confusing and contradictory, and this dilutes the value of the concept and undermines its utility in helping neighborhoods and communities imagine and create a better future," explains Mark Wyckoff, Michigan State University Land Use Policy Institute. While many times placemaking is most visible through the 'tactical' actions that have become popular in many downtowns, gaining an understanding of the different types of uses of the term can empower you to use the concept more effectively. The Michigan State University Land Policy Institute outlines four primary types of placemaking.

COMPARISON OF FOUR TYPES OF PLACEMAKING

THE PROBLEM	THE SOLUTION	THE PAYOFFS
<p>STANDARD PLACEMAKING</p> <p>Communities are not effectively using public spaces to create vital, vibrant and livable communities that people want to live, work, play, and learn in.</p>	<p>Broad public and stakeholder engagement in revitalizing, reusing, and creating public spaces using short and long term techniques rooted in social engagement and new urbanist design principles.</p>	<p>More quality places with quality activities and a strong sense of place. More vital, vibrant and livable public spaces, communities and regions that residents, businesses and visitors care deeply about.</p>
<p>STRATEGIC PLACEMAKING</p> <p>Communities are not competitive in attracting and retaining talented workers.</p>	<p>Revitalization that increases housing and transportation choices, and urban amenities to attract talented workers.</p>	<p>Faster gains in livability, population, diversity, jobs, income and educational attainment, than by standard placemaking.</p>
<p>CREATIVE PLACEMAKING</p> <p>American cities, suburbs and small towns confront structural changes and residential uprooting.</p>	<p>Revitalization by creative initiatives that animate places and spark economic development.</p>	<p>Gains in livability, diversity, jobs and income. Innovative products and services for the cultural industries.</p>
<p>TACTICAL PLACEMAKING</p> <p>Many physical improvements are expensive and policy makers are understandably reluctant to commit resources due to uncertain risks.</p>	<p>Test various solutions using low cost proxies to gauge effectiveness and public support.</p>	<p>The public and policy makers can actually see the result and degree of support for various options before committing permanent resources.</p>

CREATING AN ACTION-ORIENTED STRATEGY

There is no prescription to how placemaking happens in a community. This is a good thing and a bad thing. While it provides the opportunity to customize, this openness also creates the environment ripe for overthinking and analysis paralysis. When using placemaking to activate the Main Street Approach, consider each of these elements to help move to action:

IMPLEMENTATION: We must constantly focus on getting things done. If a local Main Street program is not focused on implementation, that program is not doing placemaking or Main Street. In the words of Elvis, “a little less conversation, a little more action, please...”

ACTIVATION: This includes bridging the gap between creating a space where people “can be” and a place where people “want to be.” Sometimes to activate a space, it is necessary to bring people into a space and demonstrate to the community how a space can be used. Other times, it may be being more deliberate about including the community in the implementation and invitation process. When the implementation process is collaborative and activated, the implementation may be just as much of the placemaking effort as the outcome.

ATTACHMENT: Magdalena Florek, co-founder and vice-president of the International Place Branding Association, comments that place attachment is “the emotional connection between a person and a place that is formed when a person can connect to the past, have a feeling of belonging to a place, and have the potential to grow closer to a place with repeated experiences in that place.” This provides the opportunity for a community to build a healthy relationship with a place, feel secure, connected, and have a desire to invest in this place in their own ways. Main Street programs need to constantly consider how we are enabling these emotional connections in all that we do.



Woodbine incorporates the community’s student population in its placemaking initiatives to help seed the next generation of leaders.

Credit: Woodbine Main Street

INCLUSION: Now is the time for all Main Street programs to take a lead role in building an environment of openness, empathy, and engagement for all. This is primarily because downtowns, at their best, are engines for social friction, creating spaces for the interactions of different groups of people who would not otherwise meet.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE INVESTMENT: Buy-in from both public and the private sectors is critical for any community development activity. It opens the door for conversation and helps build in the ability for longer term impact beyond individual activities. Placemaking in public spaces has the ability to spur investment by the private sector and vice versa. It is not about creating a plan and hoping people buy into it. It is about starting to do things that build love for a place. That love will, in turn, build confidence in the future of that place and encourage other people to demonstrate their love through investment.

Incorporating these elements consistently into a Main Street program’s implementation strategy will create a built-in action-oriented placemaking strategy to get things going. This idea doesn’t replace the need to ensure that an ethic of long-term planning is incorporated into a community’s priority development process. However, by not overthinking a Main Street program’s next steps and leaning into inclusive and comprehensive action, the spark will be created to guide and build the future of downtown.

ACTIVATION IN ACTION

Across the country, downtowns of all shapes and sizes have been experimenting with placemaking activities to ignite local Main Street interest and activity. In the fall of 2017, the Main Street Iowa network came together to learn, experience, and translate placemaking through a large-scale Better Block project in downtown Ottumwa. Better Block Ottumwa became a placemaking immersion experience to inspire Main Street Iowa programs across the state to consider ways to enhance their current activities and partnerships to reactivate their local programs. Now, more than a year later, examples of placemaking being incorporated into local downtown revitalization efforts are demonstrating impact and change.

CASE STORY BEYOND A BETTER BLOCK

OTTUMWA, IOWA (POPULATION: 25,000)

Ottumwa's Better Block experience has extended well beyond the implementation weekend. The community's first dive into the 'placemaking' world has resulted in many projects that started as demonstration ideas now being implemented as permanent elements of place in downtown. "We were able to engage the community—people of all ages and diversity—to come together and change the look and feel of Main Street," says Ottumwa Mayor Tom Lazio. "People were excited that we made some quick changes that have now translated into more livable space with seating, art,

and activities for families. Pop-up stores have opened permanently and filled some of our empty spaces. People found out that it was fun to be downtown and enjoy the new look and feel." Influenced by the Better Block, the improvement of Canteen Alley reimagined an alley space into a place that now includes innovative stormwater management, public art, and safety features. Canteen Alley was also the host of a recent event highlighting the diversity of the community through fashion and art. "Events like this gave people the experience that they could be part of a significant change in the appearance and enjoyment of the downtown space," comments Lazio. ***Learn more at mainstreetottumwa.com.***

The landmark Canteen Lunch in the Alley restaurant has been a destination 'greasy spoon' restaurant that is now highlighted as part of the image and brand of the district. Canteen Alley is now a center of diverse activity in downtown. Credit: Main Street Ottumwa



The repurposed chairs are now low-cost, quality seating options that are helping to create place in downtown Clarence. Credit: Clarence Main Street



CASE STORY

SMALL PROJECTS, BIG IMPACTS

CLARENCE, IOWA (POPULATION: 974)

In Iowa's smallest independent Main Street program, collaborative Design Committee projects have begun to change people's perceptions about downtown through experience. What started out as simple strategies to improve the curb appeal of downtown have blossomed into a series of placemaking efforts that have created spaces that people are connecting with in unexpected ways. One of the most impactful projects came out of the need to provide downtown seating. With no budget for benches, the program had to get creative. The committee started talking about how they had old metal lawn chairs around their houses. Not knowing what response they would get, they asked the community to donate their metal chairs to Main Street...no matter what the condition. Working with a local welder, Clarence Main Street restored these rusty chairs into a functional splash of color in downtown that has created a buzz of emotional connection to the district. "Nearly everyone in the community has a direct connection to at least one of those chairs," say Tami Finley, Clarence Main Street Executive Director. While a small step towards the overall revitalization of downtown Clarence, these creative, colorful benches have been the catalyst for new investment, volunteerism, and larger development projects. **Learn more at facebook.com/clarenceiamainstreet.**

Left: Demonstrating the use of underutilized spaces can be an effective way to inspire long-lasting physical and emotional changes in downtown. This before image shows the blank slate Main Street Fort Dodge was working with when considering a downtown gathering space. Credit: Main Street Fort Dodge

Right: Created with plywood, pallets, a little bit of imagination, and the engaged work of community members and leaders, the formally blank lot was converted into an active gathering space. This temporary action has inspired permanent art in the space and the reuse of the "Pop-Up Pallet Patio" in other locations in downtown Fort Dodge. Credit: Better Block Foundation

CASE STORY BUILDING EXCITEMENT THROUGH POP-UP PLACES

FORT DODGE, IOWA (POPULATION: 25,200)

As a new Main Street Iowa program, Fort Dodge developed a priority to bring people back downtown through small scale pop-up places and empowered the community to get involved in the experience. These pop-up places are intended to take advantage of underutilized assets in downtown; creating curiosity and experiences the community is not accustomed to in downtown Fort Dodge. From a pop-up museum to the creation of an intimate (and portable) pocket park stage with a bar constructed from donated pallets to spectacular rooftop parties to take advantage of downtown's tall historic buildings, 'placemaking' is alive in Main Street Fort Dodge's approach. Each of these activities include hands-on experiences building a tight connection between the program, activity, and community. "In Fort Dodge, placemaking involves creating a culture in a physical space where people create emotional attachments to the district. Our activities nurture a group of people creatively thinking about an area in a new way and implementing their ideas into a place for people to gather," says Kris Patrick, Executive Director, Main Street Fort Dodge.

Learn more at main-streetfd.org.



CASE STORY AN EFFECTIVE MAIN STREET PROGRAM IMPLEMENTING IMPACTFUL PLACEMAKING EFFORTS

JEFFERSON, IOWA (POPULATION: 4,300)

Jefferson demonstrates how a community can approach placemaking from every angle through an effective Main Street program. From the broad-based strategic planning perspective to dynamic partnerships to incorporating creativity into every space, Jefferson Matters Main Street and the City of Jefferson are leading by example in the realm of community development. The program's Tower View Team, named for the unique perspective a person can have from the observation deck of downtown's 120-foot bell tower, has taken ownership of incorporating collaborative public art throughout downtown. Most recently, the Tower View Team transformed mid-block alleys from underutilized and unmaintained spaces to centers of public gathering. When buildings fell into disrepair, the City of Jefferson partnered with the Main Street program to develop an innovative and effective process of ownership, investment, and property sales that has reinvigorated the real estate market for downtown properties. The Main Street program's efforts to foster business relationships, develop a robust communication strategy, and facilitate targeted business recruitment has created a sense of belonging that has produced exponential benefits to the district. This may sound like a description of an effective Main Street program. It is also the description of an effective public-private placemaking strategy that is reaping economic outcomes well beyond imagination when the program started seven years ago. **Learn more at jeffersonmatters.org**

Top: Sally's Alley has transformed a dark, dirty mid-block alley to a gathering space for downtown visitors, employees, and residents. Credit: Main Street Iowa

Bottom: The City of Jefferson has taken an active role in the placemaking process through purchase, stabilization, and initial steps in the rehab of many downtown buildings. Led by the City's code enforcement officer, this proactive approach has maintained the community's historic architecture, as well as creating 'white-boxed' spaces, new businesses, and residential development. Credit: Main Street Iowa





CASE STORY PUBLIC PLACEMAKING BUILDING CONFIDENCE FOR PRIVATE INVESTMENT

WEST DES MOINES' VALLEY JUNCTION, IOWA (POPULATION: 56,600)

While traditional placemaking focuses on public spaces, private investment in creating place can be a positive byproduct of the public placemaking emphasis. After years of targeted public investment in the district's amenities, paired with the Main Street program's focus on social-driven experiences, a growing private sector confidence is now translating to new types of district investment. This new investment is creating a wave of placemaking by the private sector, which is complementing the activated public spaces. The injection of upper floor residential, niche retail, and diverse entertainment options supports the district's defined entertainment strategy. One example of this private sector placemaking is Vino209 Wine Café. Owner Kelly Sharp, who also owns a second business in the district, created a place that combines the third space comfort of a coffee shop with an indoor-outdoor entertainment space that benefits the street just as much as it benefits the business. This indoor-outdoor feel is created by an accordion door that was sensitively incorporated into the historic street wall. With the door open, it is not uncommon to have people stop on the along the street to listen to the music or interact with customers inside. "The addition of Vino has inspired other businesses in the district to make investments to their spaces that have enhanced district experiences and increased the feeling of place in Valley Junction," commented Jim Miller, Historic Valley Junction Foundation. **Learn more at valleyjunction.com**

The welcoming interior and indoor/outdoor space created by the accordion storefront have demonstrated a placemaking ethic that has inspired other businesses to consider placemaking efforts in their businesses. Credit: Vino209

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A CULTURAL SHIFT TOWARDS ACTION

In the last decade, the Main Street movement has experienced several evolutionary shifts. There are shifts in the way we implement the Main Street Approach, necessary transitions to incorporate online presence and marketing in all that we do, and a shift in our work to incorporate sustainable practices. Each of these shifts represent a change in culture—transitioning from buzzwords to integrating these activities into the way we do business on a daily basis. This same thinking is now needed to take ‘placemaking’ from a term thrown out at every turn to an expectation of how Main Street is implemented at every level. By incorporating a shift towards activating spaces and creating emotional connections to the district in small ways all the time, we can relate the key principles of ‘placemaking’ to our program’s efforts, activities, and, most importantly, community members.

This change in culture towards action shouldn’t be extreme or scary. As Main Streeters, we are built to be a positive force for change and action. However, any shift in thinking can be made easier with encouragement. As leaders in the movement, we have the ability to support this change.

Downtown Cedar Falls develops a third space environment through creating outdoor rooms along their streetscape.

Credit: Cedar Falls Community Main Street

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING IDEAS AS A STARTING POINT:

SUPPORT FELLOW MAIN STREET PROGRAMS:

Main Street’s energy is contagious. Consider ways that your community supports other Main Street programs through sharing your stories, lessons learned, or holding colleagues accountable to be action-oriented.

ADVICE *“Write a short article about action in your district and share that article with regional media and Main Street America. Don’t be bashful, sharing your district’s story of action through connections will inspire others and demonstrate leadership in the movement.”*—DARLENE STRACHAN, MAIN STREET IOWA ASSISTANT COORDINATOR

CREATING PLACE IS INCREMENTAL:

Main Street directors must think about placemaking like the Main Street Approach—as an incremental process. There is no one project that is going to create a sense of place and connection. Rather, it is the collection of small activities that work together to create repeated opportunities for experience in a place that in turn creates the sense of place.

ADVICE *“We are starting to incorporate an element of ‘placemaking’ in each of our program’s projects”*—DEB SPRECKER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, WOODBINE MAIN STREET

DON'T OVERTHINK PLACEMAKING:

Long-term planning and the development of targeted strategies are critical to a Main Street program’s long-term sustainability. This process deserves critical thought and the creation of a defined action plan. When it comes to implementation, use placemaking principles and don’t overthink it. Action and activation breed more action and interactions.

ADVICE *“Just do it...we are doing more hands-on projects and less sitting in a room and talking...”*—STACIE HULL, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, GREENFIELD CHAMBER/MAIN STREET

DEFINITIONS AND CONFUSIONS:

Terms like ‘placemaking’ can cause confusion or even derail a program’s momentum by creating the feeling that they must reinvent the wheel. If using the term ‘placemaking’ creates confusion, substitute a word that would resonate with the local community.

ADVICE *“With so much conversation happening around ‘placemaking’, we tend to use the term ‘activation’ now. Activation, or doing things that bring people to a given space, is the thing that really resonates with communities and business.”*—MAX MUSICANT, PRINCIPLE, THE MUSICANT GROUP

INCENTIVIZE SMALL SCALE PRIVATE SECTOR PLACEMAKING:

Incentive programs are created to encourage a desired activity. Investing a small amount of local dollars to create a ‘vibrancy grant’ can provide ways to encourage small scale placemaking in big ways. If the Main Street program wants to have more live music in the district, can the program provide a small amount of dollars for bar/restaurant owners to hire musicians?

ADVICE *“Creating an incentive for people to make small changes has had a big impact and added so much life to our street. Now we are seeing others invest on their own.”*—SARAH GRUNEWALDT, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, MAIN STREET WASHINGTON

The Main Street Approach is one of the strongest economic development tools. Working together, we will continue strengthening the Approach by moving to action more often. This action starts with you.

What will you do today to demonstrate that your district is action-oriented?