



How Adelaide revitalized itself through 'placemaking'

Stephanie Johnston April 29, 2015

ADELAIDE, Australia — Not long ago, this city on the South Australia coast was a 9-to-5 town, where restaurants catering to suburban commuters closed once lunch was served. As the latest UK edition of *National Geographic Traveller* magazine put it, residents “regarded their town as a wallflower, ignored by visitors who prefer the long-legged hotties in the eastern states.”

But these days, Adelaide has a new energy flowing in its streets, both day and night. The same article calls Adelaide today “sassy,’ ‘wicked-sexy’ and “happ-a-NIN’.” Adelaide made recent “top destinations” lists put together by *The New York Times* and *Lonely Planet*. In March, London’s *Sunday Times* placed Adelaide number one on its list of the best places to live in the world.

A number of factors have contributed to Adelaide’s turnaround. Relaxation of small-bar liquor laws has produced a “can-do” atmosphere among young food and bar entrepreneurs. A whirlwind festival season known as “Mad March” fills the city each year with artists, musicians, writers, dancers, comics, circus performers and burlesque acts from around the world. The city’s inner square mile has the good bones of a compact street grid and distinctive bluestone buildings, surrounded by delightful parks, food-and-wine producing hills and unspoiled beaches.

PLACE GOVERNANCE

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But to a remarkable degree, Adelaide’s transformation is the product of simple and inexpensive strategies for activating its public spaces. It started a few years ago with light-weight interventions such as shutting down a street to cars for a night, giving it over to food vendors and musicians, and giving those commuters a reason to linger after work. It later evolved into a sustained effort to put “placemaking” at the heart of how [Adelaide City Council](#) engages with the public.

It’s an innovative strategy that Peter Smith, Adelaide’s recently retired CEO, calls “place governance.” To Smith, a dead street, laneway or plaza is the perfect petri dish for civic experimentation. It’s an opportunity to challenge citizens and businesses to come up with ideas for bringing that space to life. And it’s an opening for the city to bend its own rules just far enough to make good ideas happen.

At first, there were a lot of skeptics. When Smith proposed the evening street fair, he says, neighboring restaurants were sure nobody would show up. “That first year I said, I’m going to show you that this works,” Smith says. “We closed the street at 3 pm, and started the event at 5:00. I took the liquor license for the whole street. People said I was mad.”

“By 6:00, we had 10,000 people out there,” Smith continues. “By 6:30, the restaurants had run out of food because they thought no one was going to come. Now, three years later, they run that party themselves and they do it five or six nights a year.”

Making a 'splash'

Inner-city resident Megan Hender had been on the council for six months when she first approached Smith in early 2011, feeling a little frustrated at having “done nothing” on council to date. The city had just elected its youngest-ever lord mayor in 39 year-old Stephen Yarwood, and a fresh new line-up of councilors was bursting to express itself.

Smith suggested that Hender move a motion to allocate AUS\$ 1 million (US\$ 790,000) to bringing the streets and public spaces to life through a series of activations, pop-up events and “place-led” pilot projects.

And so “Splash Adelaide” was born. It was a “fast and dirty” anything-goes approach to placemaking, intended to trial new ideas and see what might work. Splash Adelaide projects could break any council policy, but not break the law. Streets, laneways and squares were closed off almost without warning to create street parties, outdoor film screenings, spontaneous orchestral performances and urban guerilla-style vegetable gardens. Mistakes were encouraged, as a way for city administrators to learn how to do things differently.

The idea was to “consult by doing” and to get businesses and residents to think about shared spaces in new ways. Because the interventions were temporary and experimental, there was no huge risk. According to Yarwood and Smith, the aim was for these ephemeral projects to inspire members of the community to become involved, take charge and create a longer-term legacy of positive and sustainable transformation, step by step, square by square, street by street and district by district.

The concepts built on extensive work over ten years by Gehl Architects. The international urban consultants worked with the council and the state government of South Australia — of which Adelaide is the capital — to develop a comprehensive public-space and public-life strategy for the inner city.

According to Gehl Architects, completing the strategy represented only a half of the task at hand. The other half was about using the document to engage people with place, and with government “as the real change takes place in people’s minds.” At the launch of the report Mayor Yarwood called it “the bible by which we can engage people in an exciting innovative paradigm shift that is all about involving people with their city.”

So the Council and its administration found themselves asking residents and businesses: “What are some of the little things we can do now? What are the long-term strategies that can gradually be implemented? And what are the special catalyst projects that can create change?”

Dancing differently

At the heart of all this experimentation was the belief that participation in placemaking could be the single most important tool for building community and citizen capacity over time. That’s an idea promoted by the New York-based Project for Public Spaces and championed by Smith. Not only would the program transform Adelaide’s public spaces, it would also transform city governance itself by empowering citizens to become involved, rather than simply working around them or consulting with them in a tokenistic way.

The experiment was directly inspired by New York-based initiatives like the Times Square Alliance, the business improvement district that manages much of the public space in the famous Manhattan crossroads. Also influential was the city’s Public Plaza program, which works with nonprofit organizations to turn bits of pavement into space for cafes, public markets, music and more.

The idea in Adelaide was to change the notion that economic development happens through big, contentious projects. As politicians “announce and defend” public works, Smith says, they automatically trigger a public reflex for pushback. Smith likens this cycle of action and reaction to a

bad dance, where members of the community instinctively oppose what is imposed on them as governments, in turn, dismiss those responses as selfish NIMBYism.

Smith says the placemaking process gives both sides a chance to learn “to dance differently.”

Citizens are “used to getting things done by complaining and the ones who shout the loudest get the funding or the subsidy,” Smith says. “Placemaking is almost the facilitator, the stalking horse. It’s the feather on the hat that says: Pay attention! Something different is happening!” (Read *Citiscope’s* [interview with Smith here](#).)

Dedicated roles

One place where this strategy is getting a test is at Topham Mall, a tired and under-utilized pedestrian laneway. The choice of location reflected Gehl Architects’ vision of revitalizing a series of narrow laneways connecting Adelaide’s river to its bustling central food market, in order to encourage more pedestrian movement through the city.

Two laneways along that route had already successfully “taken off” through local and state government interventions and investment in wider footpaths, street furniture and outdoor dining infrastructure. Digital business incubators moved into newly renovated buildings, but that forced out other creative entrepreneurs who had previously enjoyed cheap rents in older unrenovated premises. The Topham pilot aims to extend the revitalization, but with a more collaborative approach that can test the place-led governance methodology by involving the existing businesses and surrounding property owners from the start.

A key ingredient in the Topham Mall project (and two other place pilot studies) is the role of a “place facilitator.” Sarah Maddock’s job is to cultivate relationships among a whole bunch of traders, businesses, residents and property owners, so that they can collaboratively plan a future that adds social, cultural, economic, environmental and aesthetic or design value to the common space. Reporting directly to the council CEO, she is also there to penetrate the bureaucratic barriers that normally constrain creativity and collaboration within the council’s administration.

Property developer Dimitri Aretzis owns a collection of buildings around the Topham site. His prior interaction with Adelaide City Council had more often than not been through the law courts. He says having a single point of contact made all the difference: “Sarah has been amazing. She is very proactive in linking traders together with ideas, which is great because you feed off each other to make the whole area work,” he explains.

“We are doing things with students at the art school, designing a podium for musical performances, installing a green wall, and putting trees in where the public sit at lunch time so they can enjoy the area,” he adds. To help deliver a coherent plan for the site, the council offered Aretzis access to its design resources, and Aretzis reciprocated by commissioning his own graffiti-style public art concept for a small laneway off the main thoroughfare.

Mike Fisher, coordinator of the council’s placemaking strategy, says cultivating positive relationships like the one with Aretzis is crucial to its success. “Council’s role is to make this an experience where Aretzis wants to come back and do it again, and to use his energy and his capital somewhere else in the city,” Fisher says.

To measure its progress, Adelaide has even begun using something called a Place Capital Inventory. It’s an analytical tool, managed by Fisher, that gives city officials a framework for measuring the environmental, social, cultural, economic and physical values of locations that have been the subject of placemaking activity. (Read *Citiscope* [coverage of the inventory here](#).)

New leadership

In local elections last November, Yarwood lost the post of Lord Mayor to a challenger, Martin Haese, who promised to do more to build up the city's commercial sector. Last month, Smith announced he would leave as CEO, to start a place governance consultancy.

The new Lord Mayor Haese says the value of the placemaking agenda was never in question during the election campaign. "The activation of our city streets and public spaces is undoubtedly very important to the people of the City of Adelaide," he says. "Some may not have understood it all fully, but all were aware of it, and none were against it."

However, a small backlash may be afoot. The recent closure of an iconic city hotel has triggered debate among disgruntled landlords about the impact of pop-up businesses and small bars on more traditional "bricks and mortar" establishments who are required to pay larger sums to comply with liquor licenses and building regulations. (The hotel was located adjacent to a number of "Mad March" pop-up bars and a newly-invigorated laneway of smaller establishments.)

Some councilors are suggesting there needs to be control over the number of pop-up interventions allowed in the city's public spaces. Others argue that the impacts are minimal, and that business closures are more likely to reflect failing business models or a slowing economy.

For their part, Haese and Fisher confirm a shared desire to see Adelaide's place-led governance experiment evolve and expand. It may have to, if Adelaide is going to meet the growing expectations of the current wave of global interest in the city.

"Adelaide Council's leadership in place governance has begun to influence the brand of the city of Adelaide," says Haese. "When people think about what Adelaide is, and what it stands for, how we use our city streets is really factoring into that... It becomes a competitive strength."



Stephanie Johnston

Stephanie Johnston is a former book publisher turned town and country planner who writes for a number of publications including *a+u*, *Historic Environment*, *Australian Garden History*, *The Adelaide Review*, *SA Life* and *Fleurieu Living Magazine*. [Full bio](#)

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LEARNING FROM ADELAIDE

- A program called "Splash Adelaide" facilitates pop-up public events intended to trial placemaking ideas and see what might work.
- City council staff include a dedicated "place facilitator" whose job is to cultivate relationships among traders, businesses, residents and property owners to help them collaboratively plan around shared public spaces.
- To measure its placemaking progress, Adelaide has begun using an analytical tool called the Place Capital Inventory.