The Promise of Public Spaces
A guide for practitioners by the team behind *Middle Ground*
Introduction

What drives you to pursue the promises (and challenges) of working in public spaces?

Why does your organization or institution want to work in public space? For the Exploratorium, there are many answers to this question, but perhaps the most important are equity, access and inclusion. We know that museums have a well-deserved reputation for being elitist organizations, and that many members of the public simply don’t feel comfortable or interested in visiting them. Directly engaging with people and places allows museums to discover and directly address the needs of communities where they live. Becoming more intimate with what your public visitors value enables museums to better serve a community’s needs by featuring relevant, applicable, and accessible science.

As you’ll soon read, this requires far more than building exhibits; it requires a fundamental shift in how museums operate. Our combination of placemaking and informal science learning is a new practice that has shown evidence of increased community participation and pride. This broadens our potential impact in exciting ways that start to address some of the equity issues faced by museums that ultimately want and need to be a meaningful part of our visitors’ lives.
Strategy: Using the TILL Model

To partner with different communities and reach them in their own neighborhoods, the Exploratorium has been employing the Transforming Informal Learning Landscapes (TILL) model.

TILL incorporates three parts:

1. Learning-centered placemaking. Outdoor urban spaces can feel like thoroughfares, with people rushing to indoor locations for work, home, or play. Placemaking, a movement led by planners, designers, and community activists to increase social interaction in public spaces, helps people slow down, interact, and learn by offering tables and chairs, sufficient lighting, protection from harsh weather, and comforting design. Learning-centered placemaking promotes radical accessibility to education, comfortable and convivial spaces for learning to occur, and science learning opportunities and activities.

2. Contextually relevant science inquiry. The location of the experience can be utilized to help emphasize the relevance of the content, or even provide fuel for people's activities. Coastal locations might showcase environmental science content about sea level rise, while urban areas might provide learning activities about heat islands or air quality. Diverse urban contexts might explore social science: for instance, cognitive shortcuts such as stereotyping and confirmation bias, and concepts of social influence such as the bystander effect.

3. Content-humanizing facilitation. Authentic sharing of lived experience through human facilitation can develop common ground and meaningful emotional links to the content you want to communicate. For example, having teenagers facilitate inquiry into environmental science can emphasize and humanize the long-term impacts of climate change. Similarly, facilitators from marginalized communities can personalize a social science installation, driving home the importance of thinking twice before making judgments about others.
Audience

Who do you want to reach and how do they want to work with you?

We can't emphasize enough how important it is to know who you are trying to reach, and who is already utilizing the public spaces you seek to “improve.” Changing a place is not rearranging a museum gallery. Placemaking can easily lead to alienation of certain users who don't feel like they are part of the creation process. To avoid this, do your homework (know your area’s demographics, literacy rates, languages spoken, etc.). Talk to community leaders who already value the site. Repeatedly visit the area, walk the streets and get to know the feel of the neighborhood, poke your head into local institutions, and observe. Above all, talk to people. They'll tell you all about a place. Look around. Are elders out and about? Families with children? Tourists? Workers? For Middle Ground, our neighborhood was highly impacted by housing challenges, mental illness, and drug use. San Francisco's Civic Center is a continuously challenged area that takes an extra level of compassionate governance which our partners, Urban Alchemy, brought to the equation.

Audience research may also help you determine which language you'll be presenting your content in. Based on our research for Middle Ground, we determined a need for incorporating multiple languages at the installation and provided binders of the full exhibition text in Spanish, Simplified Chinese, and Braille.
Choosing a Content Area

What should inform your decision?

Some questions to ask yourself as you try to narrow down a content area for your installation are: What content area would be most relevant and in service of this community's needs, interests, and values? What kind of experiences would best engender questions, encourage extended conversations, and honor varied points of view? Is the science content directly or indirectly relevant to local issues or conditions? In what way does the science content lend itself to placemaking and other co-design processes? In what ways are community members already experts and how might that be celebrated and leveraged in the final design?

Developing whole new bodies of work can be time- and work-intensive. Look for low-hanging fruit and smart improvisation based on past work. How does your content area align with your organization's current body of work? What have you already done that you can leverage or adapt? Is this project a way to experiment with a new content area? Are there community partners or local content experts who you can bring in to help inform the development of your project? Are you trying to address something that’s very topical (if so, be aware that depending on the scale of your installation, you may not be opening to the public for a year or more)?
Choosing a Site

Where do you want to be, and why?

The greatest thing about living in a place with a lot of people is that no matter where you go, it’s full of people who have the potential of making places better. The worst thing? That potential often requires working with baffling complexities that will alternately thrill and rattle you and your team, and even your institution. Embrace it. Thrive on it. The grit required to pull it off is what defines this entire field of work. And here’s the best part; it is never the same twice. Places matter, a lot, but they give up their secrets slowly and only after you’ve managed to develop some level of mutual trust and understanding.

So where do you want to be? Wherever you’re needed and wanted. Look for existing city initiatives or community activity that indicate some level of increased engagement. While money can be one of the elements that shows a commitment, it is not the only measurement of enthusiasm. For instance, while the city’s Civic Center Initiative provided a framework for our project, it did not provide direct funds. However, being able to secure letters of support and encouragement from the local Community Benefit District, the SF Main Library, and the City Planning Department was hugely valuable in our pursuit of NSF support. Tap into existing networks and knowledge and find out what’s going on behind the scenes. Most of all, make your project a win for everyone involved whenever possible.
Working with City Partners

Who are your trusted guides and champions?

Pretend like it’s your first time over the Sierra Nevadas and it’s 1846. You’ll need a trusted guide, preferably in City Planning but it will vary. City partners all work in a complex web of overlapping jurisdictions. Do not presume that their departments talk to or already work with each other. There are alliances and (occasionally) turf wars that erupt. A good guide has their ear to the ground and will help head off trouble.

When at all possible, get high cover from as far up the bureaucracy as possible. The Mayor is preferred, but even that cover isn’t always enough to make things happen. Make sure you’re aware how you might serve a City Supervisor’s agenda, or get aligned with some other agency’s efforts. Your institution and your project should always be seen as net positives.

Your institution’s name can help get you through the door, but won’t necessarily take you beyond your first meeting. Make sure you’re clear about your intentions and emphasize your ability to partner well. Remember, these folks are approached all the time by people looking for favors. Emphasize the educational aspect of the work and your organization’s mission statement. It clarifies and expresses your good intentions and keeps the discussion focused on positive impacts, not just objects placed in spaces.

Every meeting you have, every person you meet, every community partner you invite matters. Every. Single. One. Pay attention to newcomers and make sure you help them network with your other partners. Being a hub for connections is a powerful place to be.

Finally, celebrate your City and community partnerships whenever possible. Attend your partner’s events. It’s fun and part of the job for working out in public space.
Building an Experience

How do you build a team to do this work?

Combining the practices of inclusive placemaking and inquiry-based learning requires museums to rethink a few things; why, how to, who for, what, where, and when. Answering these questions requires a team that is committed to rethinking their institution’s role in the world and unafraid to challenge the status quo. This leads down many paths of change, including giving up some power over the design process, honing the content to better align with community needs, and serving broad civic needs that may go beyond our museum’s stated mission statement.

The word “teams” can be taken as separatists by some (this team vs. that team) but really the best teams are no more than a collection of people in pursuit of a common goal. Our team of designers, engineers, graphic artists, science writers, content specialists, evaluators, and project managers were all deeply involved in rethinking our institutional processes in pursuit of serving the needs of people in public places. We folded in elements of past practice such as extensive site prototyping and rigorous evaluation while evolving our understanding of how to co-create convivial, culturally productive, public spaces.

The most important element in all of this is trust; trust in your team members, trust in your institution to back your work, and trust that what you’re doing is terribly important even if, at some moment, it doesn’t go so well.
Working at Scale

What are the placemaking considerations?

If you have the budget for it, collaborate with an architect, preferably one who can be embedded on your team, who understands how public installations nest within the greater existing site design. Architects also understand how to do specific tasks (such as ascertaining egress models and how to navigate City agencies) that will help ease the permitting process.

Control the whole space, don't think small or at an individual exhibit level too early. Scale up your exhibits when appropriate. People like iconic markers and objects, which act as attractors in the landscape. They also provide great social media opportunities. To that end, utilize color wisely. You can cover a lot of ground (literally) and add cohesion to a site economically with paint.

Study and get to know all of the current uses of a space and make sure your installation augments existing positive uses. Don't be afraid to try and solve some site problems; chances are that by providing positive experiences you may also end up displacing antisocial behavior. Do this with caution as it may be interpreted as pushing out those who are already inhabiting the space.

Know your site partners and all of their hopes and needs for a project before you put pencil to paper. Study the long view(s). We often think of our experiences as starting once we touch an exhibit, but larger installations set up an interaction from 100 yards away. Make a visual promise with intrigue.

If you're building next to something big, respond to it, leverage the location and tease out the positive aspects of the site. A minor improvisation of an existing architectural detail can be surprisingly impactful. Sometimes a tired old plaza just needs a little color and shine to open new possibilities for how it's perceived and utilized.

Big things are heavy and usually require at least minor site modifications. Work with structural engineers, historic preservation experts, and movers to ensure safety for the public and your crew. Working at larger scales takes more planning, more time, and more effort than you might initially estimate. It's also fantastically rewarding to see a site transformed into a human-scale experience that acts as a cradle for positive outcomes, including learning.
Permitting

Know the nuts and bolts.

Don't underestimate the complexity of the permitting process when working in public space. Be prepared for multiple rounds of permits and approvals. You won't use the same permit set for everyone—you'll likely need to develop specific sets for various agencies. Be prepared to stand at a lot of podiums and present your plans earlier than you would like; it's just a tricky part of the process. Find someone in government that can help lay the groundwork for success. Walking into a review or permit meeting without some foreknowledge of the agency's standard operating procedures can be a frustrating experience and lead to unnecessary delays.

You will find that many city agencies such as San Francisco's Rec and Park, City Planning, Public Works, and even the Mayor's Office have both cooperative and competitive dynamics. Do your best to utilize your good intentions, institutional reputation, and emphasize your high level of competency and commitment. Museums are trusted institutions, use it to your advantage. State and restate your commitment to being in service to the community and be aware that just because you mean well doesn't mean you won't have to jump through all the hoops. Mostly likely you will succeed by being both accommodating and persistent. Lastly, do your best not to break trust by messing up on small details. Always follow up, do what you said you were going to do, and be there on time.
Maintenance Strategy

How to keep it all looking good (and working).

It's a fact of life when you're putting your work outdoors that it will get a lot of use from a lot of excited people over time, and that means a lot of wear and tear. It's wise to create a maintenance strategy before opening to the public for the length of time you plan to have your installation out in public space, and to budget for ongoing maintenance, repairs, and replacement parts.

Some questions to ask yourself are:

- Are there materials that you could choose to use that are hardier or better suited to weathering outdoor conditions? Have you built in sufficient security measures to keep components from getting stolen?
- If you're partnering with a City agency such as a Parks and Recreation department, can their staff take on certain aspects of day-to-day maintenance such as tidying up litter or scrubbing minor graffiti? How quickly will you be able to turn around any necessary repairs? Who will be doing those repairs?
- How often will someone be coming by the installation to inspect how things are holding up? Have you supplied your site partners with the knowledge and supplies they need to help maintain the installations?
- Have you built in your maintenance costs into your overall budget? If not, you might consider raising additional funds from partners as a way of bolstering their commitment to the project.
Evaluation

How can you improve your deliverables?

Formative Evaluation. We believe that any designed object or activity, including museum exhibits, can be improved through feedback and iteration. Hence, we conduct formative evaluation on our exhibits, even ones that will be installed outdoors. However, outdoor evaluation conducted before placemaking has improved the area raises many issues: Is the area safe for participants and evaluators? Is there enough context for people to understand the exhibit(s) being evaluated without the surrounding installation? Will people even notice the exhibit, or will it be swallowed up in the larger context of the outdoor space? To address these challenges, we have tried the following:

- **Find a surrogate location.** The final installation for Middle Ground was located on the outdoor front plaza of San Francisco's Main Library. We conducted formative evaluation inside the Main Library, in its atrium, as a similar context. We hoped that the people who came inside were similar to those who walked by the outside.

- **Evaluate a cluster of exhibits.** Having a cluster of exhibit prototypes allowed for larger exhibition-style labels to provide context for the evaluation. Moreover, people tended to use more than one prototype, giving us a scenario to evaluate that was more similar to the final installation.

- **Utilize a team of evaluators.** Although the indoor location was safer than outside, it was not entirely safe. The Main branch of the library sits at San Francisco's Civic Center, home to many people dealing with mental illness, homelessness, and drug addiction. Many of the female evaluators were verbally accosted even inside the library. Having a pan-gender team allowed the evaluators to watch out for one another and intervene, distract, and redirect unwanted behavior.
Evaluation
(continued)

**Summative Evaluation and Research.** Once your outdoor installation is complete, new evaluation challenges might emerge. In the case of *Middle Ground* these included:

- **Establishing an office outdoors.** Research and Evaluation often require technology, from paper and pencils to digital tablets and audio/video recorders. We asked the exhibit developers to create a lockable storage space inside one of the exhibits for evaluators to store their coats and technology. The library's WiFi was unreliable outside, so we purchased hot spots so our tablet-based surveys could record visitors’ responses to the cloud.

- **Protection from the elements.** *Middle Ground* faced south, so the mornings were shaded and cool and the afternoons were sunny and warm. Wind and rain were additional variables that could scuttle our interviews and even our audio recordings. (Evaluation was canceled on rainy days, but that occurred only once during our summer and fall data collection months.) Researchers had to dress for variability, wear sunscreen and hats, and remain hydrated, issues not typically encountered by staff inside museums.

- **Safety and well-being.** Once outside, the researchers were in direct contact with members of the public, and sought out anyone who engaged with the exhibition or facilitators. To maintain safety, all researchers worked in pairs. Moreover, several Urban Alchemy stewards joined the research team as community-based researchers, helping to de-escalate conflict while interviewing and surveying study participants.
More for Your Toolkit

Helpful links and other resources for working in public space

Middle Ground
https://exploratorium.edu/middleground

Studio for Public Spaces at the Exploratorium
https://www.exploratorium.edu/publicspaces

Project for Public Spaces
https://www.pps.org/

The Participatory Museum
http://www.participatorymuseum.org/

Placemaking X
https://www.placemakingx.org

Anne T. and Robert M. Bass Center for Transformative Placemaking
https://www.brookings.edu/center/anne-t-and-robert-m-bass-center-for-tr

American Planning Association
https://www.planning.org/knowledgebase/creativeplacemaking/

Convivial Public Spaces by Henry Shaftoe
https://www.routledge.com/Convivial-Urban-Spaces-Creating-Effective-Pu

Placemaking Europe
https://placemaking-europe.eu/people/

National Endowment for the Arts, Creative Placemaking
https://www.arts.gov/impact/creative-placemaking

Place Leadership Network
https://www.tbf.org/what-we-do/strategic-focus-areas/arts/place-leaders

Art Place America Resource Page
https://www.artplaceamerica.org/resources
Middle Ground Project Team

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**City and Community Partners**

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Your local public spaces need you. Good luck!

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