

Placemaking Done Right

*Building Community through
Public-Private Spaces*



What is Placemaking?

Let's start at the very beginning, what exactly is placemaking? It's a hot subject for both real estate pros and urban planners, but everyone has a different definition. Some focus more on the repurposing of existing public spaces while others focus on creating those places from scratch. Another common difference between definitions of placemaking is the emphasis on the space itself vs. the programming that drives people there.

At coUrbanize, we define placemaking as the activation of a space that represents the uniqueness of that community - driving economic impact by giving people a place to gather.

“ Put simply, [placemaking] involves looking at, listening to and asking questions of the people who live, work and play in a particular space, to discover needs and aspirations. ”

- Placemaking Chicago

It does not include the word “public.”

The line between private and public space continues to blur. This is especially true on the real estate development side as mixed-use projects center on the concept of placemaking with public spaces grounding retail, residential and office builds.

“Community” is multifaceted and is left purposely open to interpretation.

A community could be as large as an entire town or neighborhood or as ‘small’ as a single residential complex or office tower. Placemaking can be done at either scale or something in between.

The “uniqueness of the community” is the most important part.

Too often, placemaking is misassociated with gentrification, as highlighted by the [Project for Public Spaces](#). However, when placemaking is done right, it directly reflects the programming and public space that existing residents want and need.

Placemaking should correlate to a positive economic impact.

Placemaking components and activities are most powerful when there are measurable results, whether that's increased revenue for adjacent businesses, higher property values, etc.

A Formula to Successful Placemaking

Too often, people expect the same placemaking efforts that worked in one neighborhood or one development to work in another. There are definitely common elements of placemaking that work no matter where you are – for example, everyone seems to want more green space – but planners and real estate pros should go several layers deeper to design spaces, use cases and activities that reflect the particular fabric of the community.



STEP 1

STEP 2

STEP 3

Define your audiences and their personas

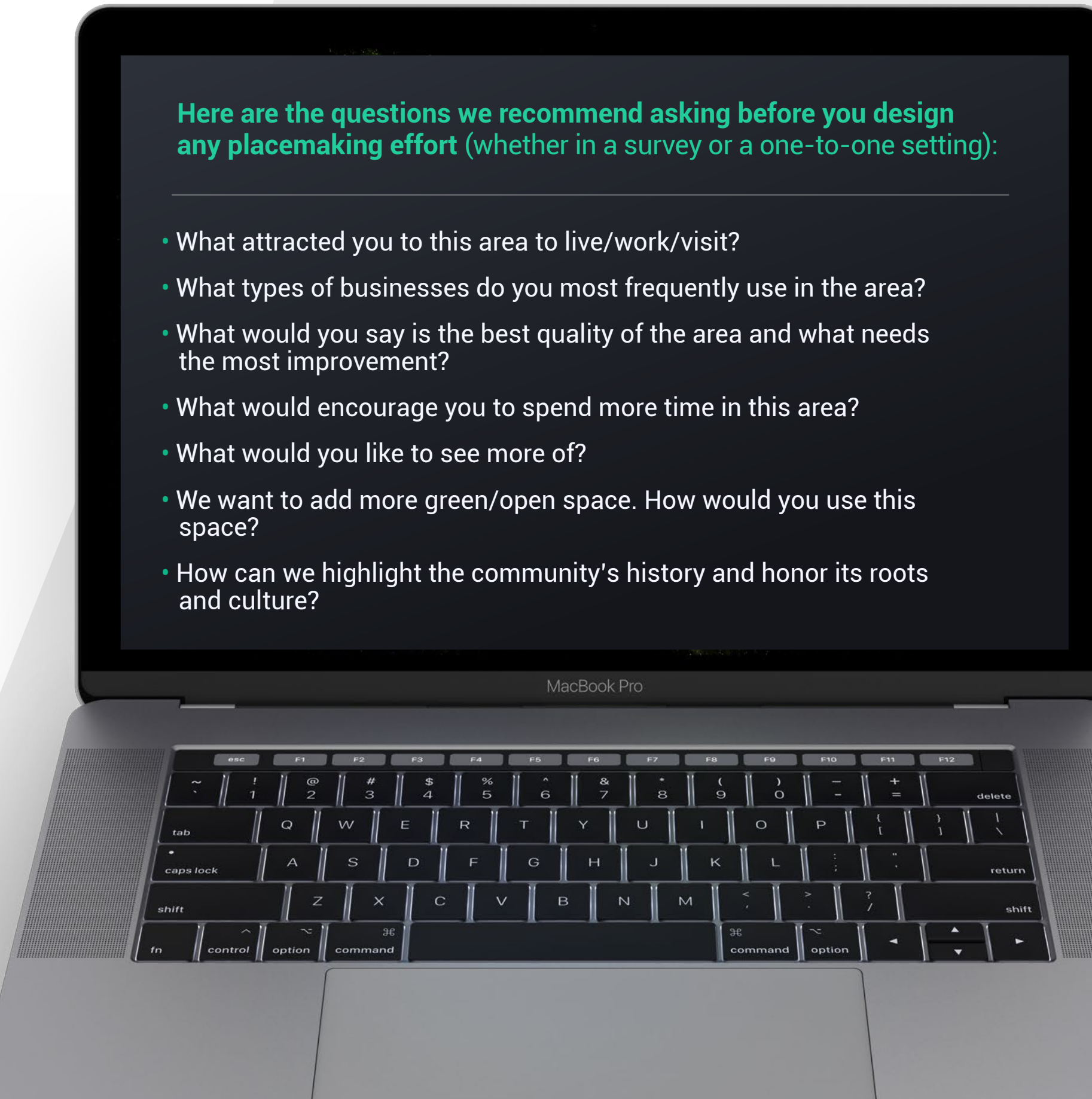
Are you designing placemaking for people who live in the immediate area? Or is your audience only in the area from Monday to Friday for work (most common in urban cores)? Have these people lived in the area for a long time or are most people transplants?

Answers to these questions and others help you create personas for your target audiences. You could have one target audience or several, but cap it at three to four “top” audiences. Building personas will define what these audiences value and how they may use spaces. Personas should include demographics like age and psychographics such as their attitudes and beliefs. You can gather most demographics through public information, but it’s also important to ask your audiences directly so you can gather the psychographics.

Most often, these definitions are built by surveying or polling so you can get a larger sample of quantitative information. However, don’t underestimate the power of talking to the community. Sit down with local officials, faith-based leaders, business associations, community groups, neighborhood associations, individual community members, etc. to hear their thoughts firsthand. Be sure to ask these leaders whose voices typically go unheard and go the extra mile to meet these people, explain how valued their opinions are and ask for their feedback.

Here are the questions we recommend asking before you design any placemaking effort (whether in a survey or a one-to-one setting):

- What attracted you to this area to live/work/visit?
- What types of businesses do you most frequently use in the area?
- What would you say is the best quality of the area and what needs the most improvement?
- What would encourage you to spend more time in this area?
- What would you like to see more of?
- We want to add more green/open space. How would you use this space?
- How can we highlight the community's history and honor its roots and culture?



STEP 1

STEP 2

STEP 3

Connect placemaking to local culture

That last question brings us back to an important part of our definition of placemaking, “the activation of a space that represents the **uniqueness of that community**...” Beyond designing for what your audiences will value, placemaking has the power to pay homage to the history and culture of the community.

Spend time in the community and experience it as the people who live, work and play there experience it (if you’re not a local). Is there a vibrant music or arts scene? What about local sports? And equally as important, what’s lacking? That could be anything from a lunch spot that’s actually open on the weekends if you’re doing placemaking in an urban financial district or a place for children to play in a newer neighborhood.

Research is another important component in setting a placemaking strategy. What historical milestones or events (for better or worse) define the community? What trades or industries – or perhaps even specific companies – hold particular significance? How can this project celebrate the community’s history and culture?

Through these experiences and research, you can identify ways to activate spaces that connect the people to their community and its history. It could be as grand as a large-scale public art installation that celebrates an important historical moment or as ‘small’ as sourcing building materials and finishes from local artisans and makers.

“ Successful creative placemaking highlights unique community characteristics. Projects can focus on connecting local history with the present, bringing cultural influences into the spotlight and creating new traditions.

”

- [American Planning Association](#)

Marry space + programming

There are two elements of placemaking: the space itself and the uses/activities that draw people to that space. For real estate teams, this means understanding the role that placemaking plays in an overall project – no matter if it's a ground-up development, repurposing or a new acquisition.

Go back to your audience and personas when it's time to design both the space itself and the calendar of programming. How will people experience this space? Sometimes, people will visit these spaces organically, as a part of their typical day. Other times people may only visit these spaces in transit and may need a reason to stop. Space activation and programming could be one-time, like a kickoff event, or short-term (think pop-ups) or reoccurring/permanent such as a weekly farmers market or ground-floor retail.

Franco Faraudo, Editor and Co-founder of Propmodo, [highlights Rockefeller Center](#) in Manhattan as the ultimate example of placemaking for its ability to attract locals and visitors alike every day through the artful combination of the space itself (hello, art deco architecture) and thoughtful programming.

Faraudo says this of the iconic area, managed by real estate giant Tishman Speyer since 1996, "By creating a center of gravity for the neighborhood, [Tishman Speyer] is able to bridge public and private interests. By investing in the future of not only a building but an entire district they have been able to make an office tower become more than just a place to work. All you have to do is walk down the block, feel the energy and look at all that the campus has to offer."

Uses and Activities



Games + activities



Live local music



Food truck schedules



Free community classes



Pop-up retail



Parklets



Farmer + maker markets



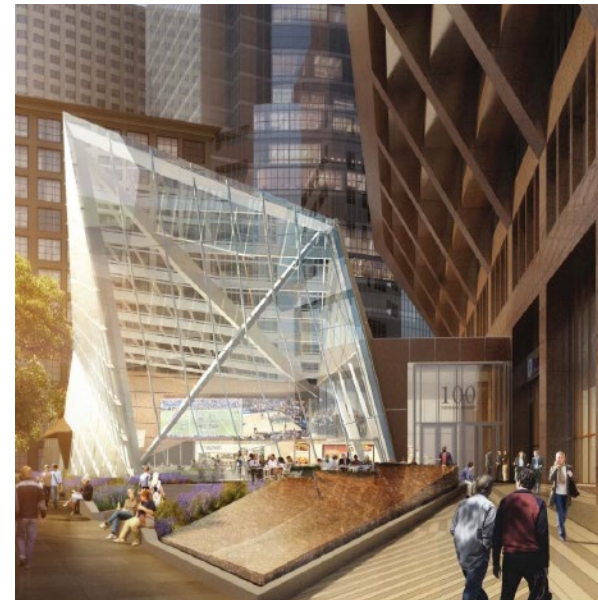
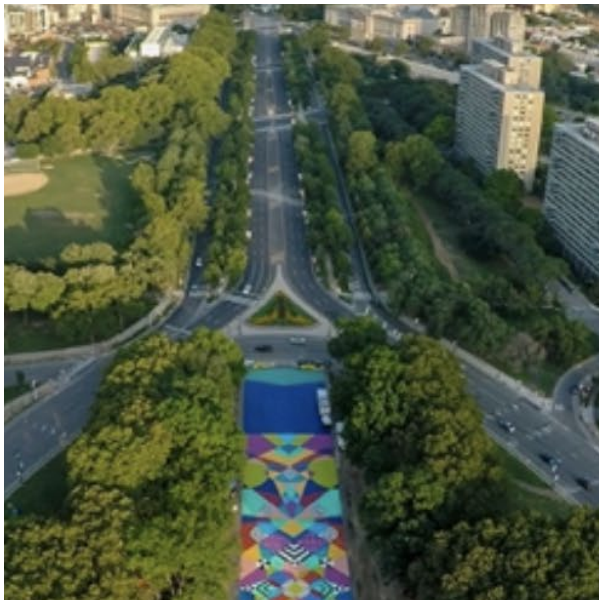
Public art installations



The Rise of the Pop-Up

From parklets to rotating, short-term retailers, pop-ups are a hot trend in placemaking. They give placemakers a tactic to attract new visitors and those who haven't been to the space recently, driven by an urgency to have a "for a limited time only" experience. The downside: Managing a series of pop-ups is no small task and placemakers may feel pressure to one-up the last pop-up. The plus side: pop-ups infuse a sense of freshness to any space.

5 Spaces that Embody Spacemaking



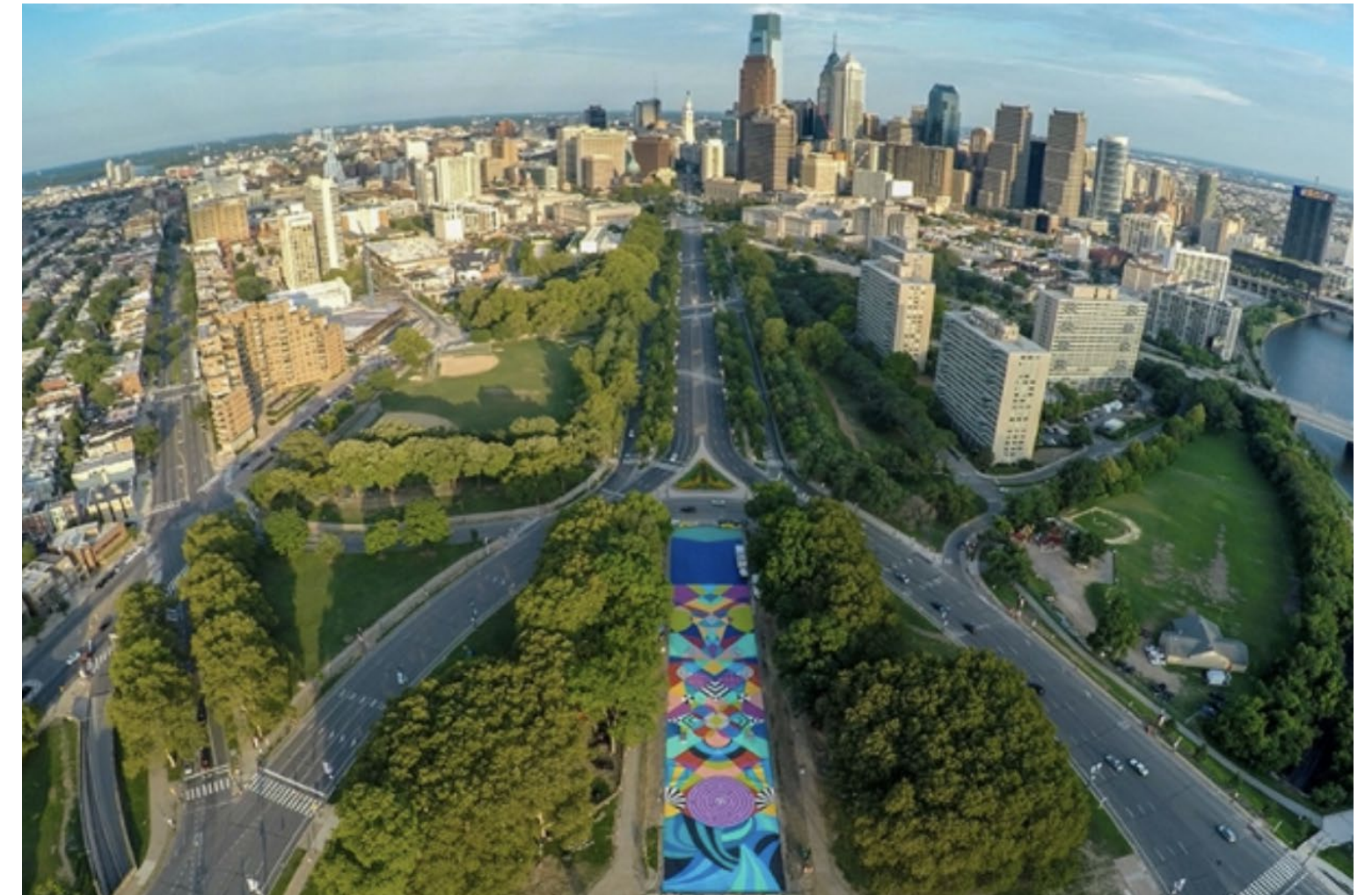
1

Turning a Traffic Circle into a Public Art Installation

The Oval+, Philadelphia, PA

Since 2013, the Philadelphia Parks & Recreation Department, in partnership with the Fairmount Park Conservancy, has transformed a busy traffic circle on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway into a community destination rooted in public art installations and family-friendly programming.

During the summer, from Wednesday to Sunday, from 11:00 am to 11:00 pm, traffic at the circle is rerouted and the community enjoys a 30,000+ square foot art installation and daily theme-based activities known as The Oval+. This is a true public-partnership in placemaking with support from PNC, the Philadelphia Office of Arts, Culture and The Creative Economy and other local nonprofits and businesses.



2

Developing an Innovation Cluster

Kendall Square, Cambridge, MA

Kendall Square was once a series of underutilized surface parking lots surrounding the MIT campus. Alexandria Real Estate (ARE) has transformed those lots into an epicenter of research and development for the world's largest life sciences companies. But beyond more than 1 million square feet of new office and lab space, ARE has transformed Kendall Square into a destination for students, young professionals and families that call East Cambridge home, by introducing streetscape improvements like bike lanes and building public parks and activating 40,000 square feet of ground-level retail and restaurant space.

To those unfamiliar with Kendall Square today, here's how Jay Bradner, President of the Novartis Institute for Biomedical Research, describes it, "Perhaps the best way to explain Kendall Square to the people beyond the world of science and the world of Massachusetts area is this: Kendall Square is to science what New York is to finance, what Paris is to culture, what Washington is to government."

Before



After



3

Transforming a Building Lobby into a Destination

100 Federal Street, Boston, MA

100 Federal Street has been an easily-identifiable building in the Boston skyline since the 1970s, but in 2015, building owner and operator Boston Properties unveiled plans for the “Exchange at 100 Federal,” a new atrium that would act as a lobby, event space and ground-floor retail for tenants in Boston’s eighth tallest building. This was originally designed to be an outdoor space, but it was enclosed to give Bostonians a year-round destination.

The Exchange isn’t just for the building’s occupants. Go there at any time of day and you’ll see people from neighboring office buildings hosting business meetings, catching up over coffee dates or just relaxing in the angular, glass-and-steel structure that’s not your average building entrance.



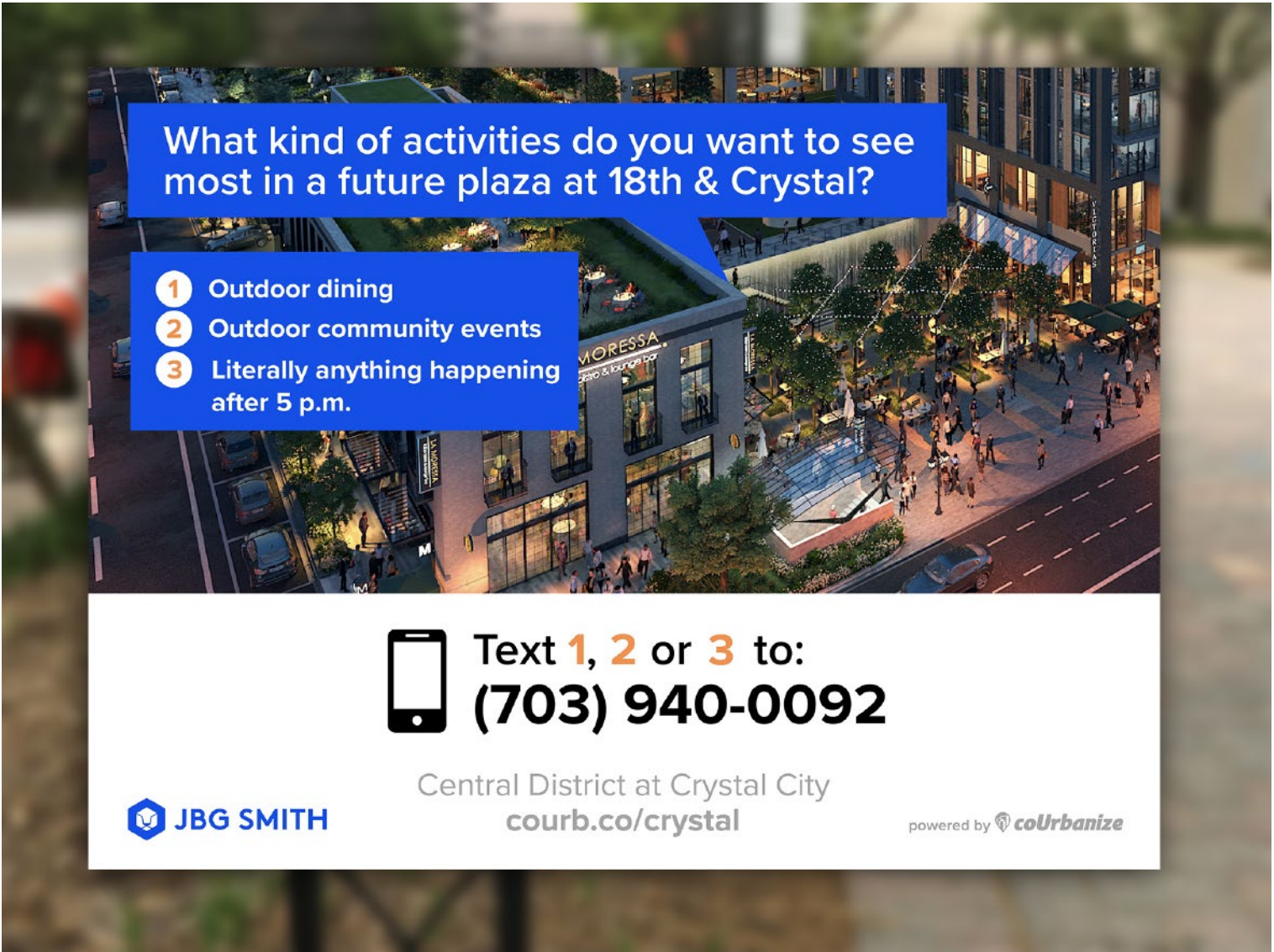
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Making an Office Park a 24/7 Attraction (and Getting the Attention of Amazon)

National Landing, Crystal City, VA

Crystal City made headlines in 2018 when it was named as the future site of Amazon's HQ2. This little-known Virginia city became an attractive option for Amazon largely because of the work that real estate company JBG SMITH did to understand how to transform Crystal City's Central District, known as National Landing, from an office park to a neighborhood that people wanted to visit outside of Monday-Friday, 9 to 5.

JGB SMITH rolled out a sweeping community engagement to understand how to make Crystal City more vibrant and dynamic. The team placed signs throughout Crystal City that allowed residents and visitors to text in their answers to questions like, "What kind of restaurant would you visit most often at the corner of 18th & Crystal Drive?" and "What stores or shops would encourage you to spend more time here in the evening and on weekends?"



What kind of activities do you want to see most in a future plaza at 18th & Crystal?

- 1 Outdoor dining
- 2 Outdoor community events
- 3 Literally anything happening after 5 p.m.

Text 1, 2 or 3 to:
(703) 940-0092

 **JBG SMITH**

Central District at Crystal City
coub.co/crystal

powered by  **coUrbanize**

5

Creating Community by Going Car-Free

San Francisco, CA

Nonprofit [Livable City](#) has partnered with the City of San Francisco to bring Sunday Streets SF to life. From March on, a different street is shut down every Sunday to vehicle traffic and community members are encouraged to come and experience their neighborhoods in a new way.

Programming is layered on to promote local organizations, schools and performing groups, showcasing the vibrancy of each unique neighborhood in San Francisco.



Conclusion

Placemaking has the power to define a community and drive economic growth if the space itself and the activation of that space reflect what the people of that community desire most. The fact that placemaking is becoming deeply-rooted in real estate and urban planning alike is a bold step forward in understanding and designing specifically for a community's unique needs.

But what makes placemaking ultimately successful is its ability to enable people to have a deeper connection to their community. That means the process of designing placemaking spaces and programming should be thoughtful and inclusive.

About coUrbanize

coUrbanize is the only online community engagement solution purpose-built for real estate developers and municipal planners. Paired with traditional mechanisms for community engagement, coUrbanize has helped secure faster approvals on more than 400 projects across North America.

With coUrbanize, companies like Boston Properties, Alexandria Real Estate Equities and JBG Smith are gaining control of the engagement process and preventing the surprises and miscommunication that lead to costly project delays.

Connect with us to learn more: sales@courbanize.com

