

Infrastructures “in between” and the role of placemaking in the circular transition



The concept of circular economy spans all spectrums of society and is intrinsically linked to a progressive change in society's habits, moving from a consumer society to a circular society. This broad range of behaviors goes from the household scale to the industrial scale. As we move up the scale, we need a series of collective infrastructures to facilitate the circular chain of transformation. One of the key scales for this process is the neighborhood scale, where domesticity and community merge in everyday dynamics of belonging, appropriation and collective life. Understanding placemaking as a practice anchored in this community scale, this article seeks to explore how these community building processes can contribute to the creation of productive infrastructures to support everyday life as a strategic element in the circular transition, starting from the needs and specificities of a local context.

The circle of daily life

When we think of circular economy, we commonly associate it with large industrial transformation processes and with the progressive change of production models through pilot projects and innovative success stories. On the other hand, the idea of circularity also drains into the habits and daily life of people, valuing the domestic practices of reuse, recycling, responsible consumption and resource optimization. However, we know that there is no point in separating garbage in our homes if there is no management system that properly processes household waste and puts it back into circulation as raw material for other production processes.

We also know that circular production models, where products are returned to the production line at the end of their useful life, are based on changes in consumer habits as a linkage in the circular production chain. If the consumer does not return the empty ink cartridge from his printer to a point where the ink supplier can use it as a raw material, the system is not complete; the cartridge simply becomes waste as in the traditional linear system. The consumer must therefore assume his role within the production system as a structural part of his daily life. The consumer is a link in the circular chain and without his participation, the circle is broken.

It is clear that both dimensions are necessary, but not only. We are aware that the transition to a circular social order must occur simultaneously throughout the production process. Therefore, the system is not reduced to the simple producer-consumer binomial. When the consumer takes the ink cartridge to a collection point conveniently located near his home or workplace, the consumer is participating in the distribution system. The consumer takes on another role in the process, assuming part of the logistics operations within his daily routine. But for that to happen, the collection center must be strategically located where the consumer can easily incorporate it into his or her daily life.



¹ [Wasted Lab](#)

Where? Amsterdam, NL.

What? A mobile lab capable of melting plastic into 4x4 inch (10x10 cm) cubes for building purposes. The lab is based in the northern city district and it is accessible to neighborhood residents, which receive a locally tradeable plastic coin as incentive for each plastic bag brought to the mobile lab.

How? Demonstrating the transformative potential of plastic as a local resource and challenging people to consider the origin and final destination of the plastic used in their daily lives. The coins work as a reward system that is recognized at over thirty local shops and cultural associations for freebies and discounts. Since 2015.



The transition to a circular model goes beyond an ink cartridge; ideally, this logic should be applied homogeneously to everything we consume. Many of the different steps in the collection, treatment and reuse processes occur at an intermediate scale, outside both domestic spaces and large production centers. This intermediate scale is the neighborhood scale where proximity relations facilitate integration between productive flows and daily habits. However, textiles, foodstuffs, electronic devices and furniture follow different circular systems that involve technical processes particular to each product. In this sense, if we want to incorporate circular habits we must equip our

neighborhoods with a technical support infrastructure to the production processes. In other words, the collection point must be appropriate to the type of product. If in addition to leaving our empty ink cartridge, we leave a chair that has a broken leg, this place could be linked to a carpentry workshop that repairs the chair and that could supply it to a second-hand store that makes it available to another consumer. Scaling this logic to the level of an entire community, we are then talking about a network of collective facilities that in their daily operations incorporate logistics, transformation, sales, training and employment with a considerable impact on the spatial and functional configuration of a neighborhood.

2 [Tournevie Tool Library](#)

Where? Brussels, BE.

What? An affordable and ecological tool library in Brussels that offer to all-age community members tools and training to take part in the sharing economy model.

How? Offering neighbors the opportunity to borrow a wide variety of tools to improve their home or community space. The tool library provides training programmes and workshops that teach tool and technology use. Tournevie is an open commons. The community itself manages the tools using a set of transparent rules.

Since 2015.



Infrastructures “in between”

Moving beyond the top-down dimensions of production or the bottom-up dimensions of the conscious consumer, it is absolutely crucial to work on intermediate scale infrastructures where both systems merge in collaborative models. Partnerships between different actors (community, economic and institutional) is key to the implementation and operationalization of this network of infrastructures. Their productive vocation support communities by generating opportunities for capacity building, employment, inclusion of vulnerable groups and the creation of meeting spaces. The circular transition is based on the capacity of a community’s living spaces to incorporate the infrastructures that support the different steps of the productive process.

Urban renewal operations should therefore seek to systematically incorporate spaces that allow the development of this type of productive practices as complementary elements to the traditional network of facilities and public spaces. This is a great challenge, especially in existing urban fabrics where market dynamics and traditional real estate management models make it difficult to provide spaces for such practices. However, when we consider urban renewal as a collective exercise of space and resource optimization, the identification of spaces with unrealized potential (residual open spaces, vacant buildings, underutilized first floors, etc.) becomes an opportunity for the incorporation of such support infrastructures.

3 [Brooklyn Microgrid](#)

Where? Brooklyn, NY, USA.

What? A reorganization of the way electricity is generated and distributed at the scale of the neighborhood by the use of microgrids. Microgrids are a small type of utility grid that can operate independently or alongside a larger power network.

How? Homeowners can sell the excess energy that they generate, and consumers can choose the source of their energy supply, which could be right across the street. In addition to this, the hyper-local solution encourages energy to travel a more effective pathway. Since 2016.

At first glance it is hard to imagine how a residual space in our neighborhood, be it a clandestine garbage dump or an abandoned warehouse at the bottom of an internal courtyard, can be adapted to incorporate ambitious dynamics, which in turn can offer a spatial quality that contributes to the creation of a community and is also feasible at the operational level. This leads us to think about the fundamental difference between a space and a place.

A place for everything and everything in its place

According to Marc Augé, a place (as opposed to what he defines as Non-Place) can be defined as a space around which an identity is built, which has a history, which forms part of a collective imaginary and which belongs to a spatial and cultural context. Therefore, transforming a space into a place requires a collective process of appropriation and memory creation.

It is around this principle that the concept of Placemaking is built on, as a practice that seeks the progressive generation of places. Placemaking is a fluid concept that can be applied to multiple processes and about which many definitions have been written. The Project for Public Spaces (PPS) initiative defines Placemaking as a method that “invites people to collectively reimagine and reinvent urban spaces as the heart of every community to maximize shared value. It facilitates creative patterns of use, considering the physical, cultural, and social identities of a place, as well as the needs of different users”.

Placemaking is essentially a process, which seeks to reactivate dysfunctional urban spaces, creating places of collective appropriation by and for the community. Placemaking implies very effective bottom-up democratic processes as strategies of inclusion and citizen participation. By being processes, there are certain phases that are articulated over time at different intensities. Broadly speaking, placemaking can be summarized in four fundamental stages:

The first stage is **identification**. It is in this phase of analysis that problems and their root causes are identified; it is here that ideas emerge and, consequently, opportunities are glimpsed. It is at this point that various initiatives (institutional, individual, and/or collective) arise spontaneously in response to a specific challenge. It is in this phase where spaces of opportunity are identified and where the first mobilizations of efforts arise, where different individuals agree to take action.



It is in this phase when the residual space that serves as a clandestine dump of debris captures the attention of a group of neighbors and they decide to take action to address the problem of household debris in their neighborhood and recover that space for neighborhood use.

The second stage is **activation**. The first ideas are put into practice, usually through temporary activations of the space to be transformed. The organization of events or the installation of short-term structures contribute to the creation

of a collective memory of the place, to create opportunities for interaction, to reveal hidden potentials and to enhance its qualities. The temporary and light character of this phase makes it favorable to experimentation, this allows to test uses, to test collaborations and to start mobilizing the first resources (both human and financial). The organic and fluid nature of this phase helps to create alliances and identify skills and talents within the community. This is of fundamental importance to reveal the productive potential of the community to activate the intermediate systems of the circular chain.

It is in this phase that the first decision-making structures are put in place, taking the first steps towards a site-specific management model. This is what we mean when neighbors install a collective compost in an underutilized green space and organize a small gastronomic festival to inaugurate it. The neighbors cook different dishes, creating opportunities to share their culinary skills, but also their customs and cultures.

⁴ [Esto no es un solar](#)

Where? Zaragoza, ES.

What? It is a project to clean, rehabilitate and maintain abandoned lots within the city and to recover them in order to make them open spaces for neighbors.

How? This vacant plot intervention program stems from the need of crossbreeding a couple of correlated and complementary initiatives: the municipal employment plan and the local state backed agency responsible of housing and planning policy. It is supported and implemented in collaboration with local associations, neighbors and guided by spatial designers. Since 2009.



The third stage is **appropriation**. The already activated space becomes a laboratory where the dynamics of daily use allow for different appropriation formats. This lets us to evaluate the use, analyze results and learn from them. Much of this feedback process is based simply on critical observation of how the space is being used and early reaction to adjust the uses when necessary. It is this experimental use that allows the imagination to be stimulated and provides the basis for developing a collective vision. This vision will potentially drive a new design of the space as it becomes a place.

This is when the former clandestine dump becomes a point of organized collection of materials that will serve as a supply of raw materials for carpenters and artists. It is also when the neighbors who love gardening decide to build a vegetable garden near the compost heap and evaluate what type of crop is best suited to the physical conditions and use of that place.

The fourth stage is **consolidation**. The places have improved their spatial quality and matured their formats of use, inserting themselves into the network of social infrastructures of the community. The preceding stages have made it possible to define the functional vocation and have brought together various actors with management capacities, generating alliances between community, institutional and economic actors. Consolidation is the moment when the site acquires a permanent status, either by the formalization of its use, by the lessons learned, by the capacity to expand or replicate in other places and by its impact on the improvement of the community's support systems (social, economic, environmental).

This is the stage in which the materials collection center expands its operations within the neighborhood and installs a transformation workshop in the abandoned industrial warehouse and opens a showroom on the first floor of a neighboring building.

The collection center becomes a cooperative that creates alliances with schools, which in turn become material collection centers and use the workshop as a technical training center for young students. At the same time, the neighborhood garden is professionalized and replicated in other underutilized open spaces in the neighborhood, creating a local food production network. This network becomes a supplier of vegetables for school canteens and organizes a weekly market of community producers that puts them in contact with other networks.

5 [Le 56 eco-interstice](#)

Where? Paris, FR.
 What? Structural activation process of a vacant building plot located in the heart of the Saint Blaise district.
 How? The Paris City Council (DPVI) invited the Atelier d'Architecture Autogérée (AAA) to explore the potential uses of this unused 200m2 space. After surveying and multiple contacts with local actors AAA proposes the main lines of a project elaborated on the basis of suggestions and desires from locals and following ecological principles. This project should then evolve with the future users of the place. Since 2006.



Considering placemaking as a dynamic process, an action, this suggests that it does not have a definitive end, the consolidation phase then becomes a trigger for other operations revealing new challenges and new opportunities.

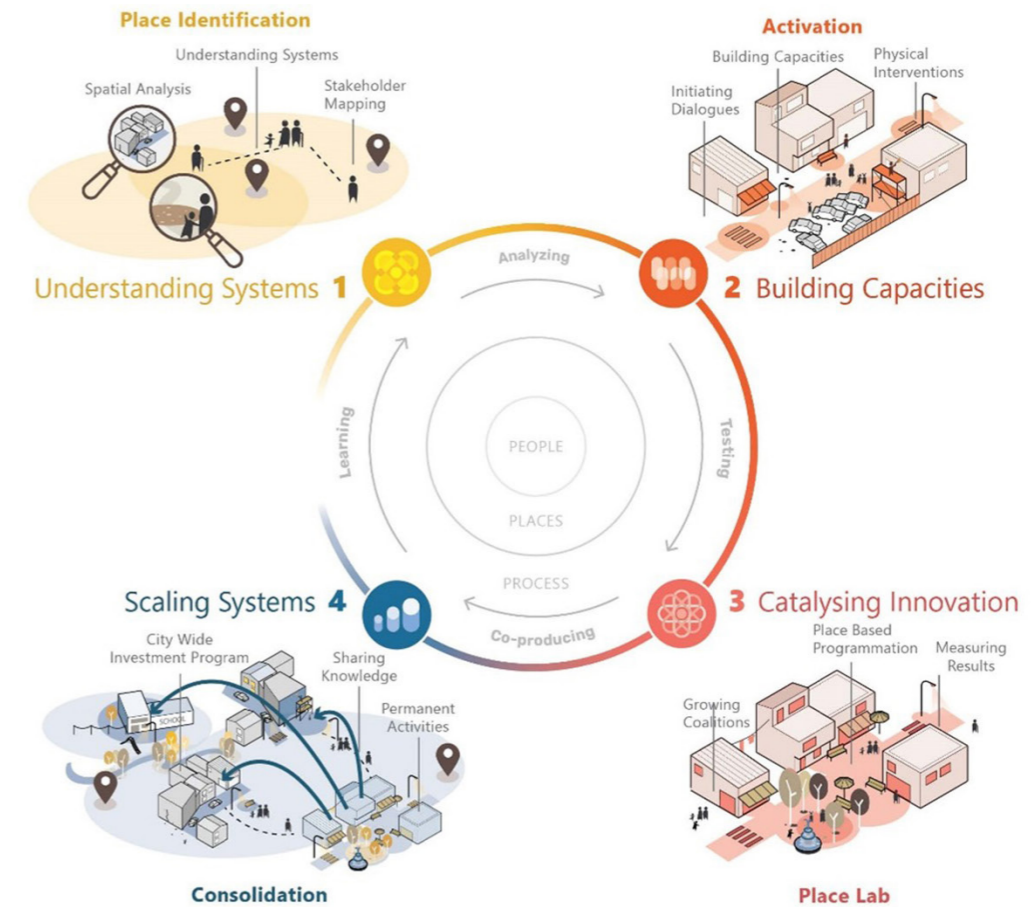
It is precisely this amplification of systems that makes it possible to complete the productive cycle, where domestic initiatives acquire that intermediate scale so necessary for the creation of added value, the provision of employment, the valorization of urban spaces and the consolidation of communities.

Caring is sharing

In a situation of transition, one of the great challenges is to be able to move in a clear direction, knowing that there are

many uncertainties that we will have to discover, learn and assimilate as we go along.

The speed with which we must implement changes requires new and radical forms of learning that are not possible to achieve without diverse formats of collaborations with other challenge oriented entrepreneurs and knowledge networks. Hence the importance of urban experimentation as a culture of development that allows proposing innovative alternatives, learning from their implementation and consolidating the good results, setting up trends as a way of creating systematic change.



This directly echoes the Doughnut Economy model. This model places prosperity as the space of opportunity in which the essential needs of society are satisfied (social foundation) within the possibilities that the planet allows (ecological ceiling). This requires a collective effort that does not come without responsibilities attributed to society in all its spectrums.

In this sense, placemaking represents the field of action that links the two extremes of the spectrum by creating dynamics of interdependence between institutions and civil society. This means to attribute a share of responsibility to the many actors who build the city from specific places and communities and ensuring that they have the means and capacities to fulfill this responsibility.

But with great responsibilities also come great powers. The transition to a circular model should not be conceived as an obligation to be fulfilled but as a systematic instrument for the empowerment of individuals. Empowered communities are better prepared to react collectively to change, always looking out for the well-being and quality of life of those who live in them.

Placemaking is therefore a strategic to bridge place-based challenges and societal ambitions. It is crucial to create opportunities to include placemaking within the formal urban planning and renewal processes, to raise support for community scale practices and to incorporate placemaking in the methodological approach to spatial projects.

6 [De Potterij](#)
Where? Mechelen, BE.
What? Vision creation and project direction of the Potterij site, a former laundry in the center of downtown Mechelen, in the framework of the Pilot Projects 'Back in circulation'.
How? OVAM has been fully engaged in the remediation of the site for several years and has high ambitions for the future: the development of a circular urban lab in and around the Potterij. Through a transition-oriented planning process this initial future vision at building level evolved into a supported policy vision at building block level. Since 2016.

7 [S²Cities Programme](#)
Where? International (pilot cases in Envidada, Colombia and Bandung, Indonesia).
What? S²Cities is an open and interactive programme based on a cyclical process of system understanding, building capacities, prototyping solutions, and improving and scaling solutions.
How? The S²Cities Programme aims to empower young people of ages 15 - 24 in cities to shape safer and more inclusive urban environments. By partnering with strategic advisors, learning partners, and local implementation organizations, the programme connects young people to the resources they need to become agents of change in their cities. Since 2021.

“ A place belongs forever to whoever claims it hardest, remembers it most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it in his own image.

Joan Didion



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