HEALTHY PLACES
Improving health outcomes through placemaking
Place matters for health. More than half of all American adults are affected by chronic diseases like heart disease, diabetes, and cancer, and more than 80% suffer from mental health challenges, including depression, which itself affects over a quarter of adults. But some have suggested that our zip code has more to do with our likelihood of experiencing these health problems than our genetic code, and unsurprisingly, this geography disproportionately affects disadvantaged neighborhoods that struggle with systemic problems like poverty and unemployment.

Placemaking—the community-driven design and management of public space—is a proven method for reshaping the environments and behaviors that lead to negative health outcomes.

This process results in more walkable and bikeable streets, actively used parks and squares, farmers markets and community gardens that provide fresh food and employment opportunities, and a livelier public realm at large that helps foster healthier lifestyles. The process itself also builds a sense of belonging that improves mental health, and increases our capacity to address collective challenges.

No one benefits from a public space that no one uses. Through 40 years of working in public spaces, PPS has identified four characteristics that make a place well-used and well loved: people are engaged in a wide range of activities there; the space is comfortable, safe, clean, and welcoming; the space is visually and physically accessible; and finally, it is a social place where people take friends and family, rendez-vous, and meet new people.

The Place Diagram above outlines these major attributes along with the qualitative ways that people use to describe them (inner ring) and the quantitative ways they can be measured (outer ring).
How Project for Public Spaces can help?

Project for Public Spaces (PPS) is a nonprofit planning, design and educational organization dedicated to helping people create and sustain public spaces that build stronger communities. Since 1975, we have worked in over 3,000 communities, all 50 US States, and 43 countries around the world.

When it comes to improving the public health, PPS offers a comprehensive range of services as part of a placemaking process:

- **Identify the stakeholders and sites**, building on existing community assets in a neighborhood in need of health improvements.
- **Facilitate a healthy placemaking workshop**, which helps the community audit their own site, and develop ideas for new health-promoting infrastructure, amenities, uses and programming.
- **Develop a concept plan** with our interdisciplinary team of certified architects, planners, traffic engineers, and place-makers to put community ideas into action through “lighter, quicker, cheaper” experiments.
- **Work with the community to implement the plan** within the next three to five months.
- **Evaluate the impact on health-related behavior** through user observation, surveys, in collaboration with local public health partners.
- **Document lessons learned and refine the process** with PPS’s global communications reach and network of placemaking practitioners.

This booklet, based on research from PPS’s *The Case for Healthy Places* report, includes placemaking guidelines and initiatives that can be implemented by city agencies, nonprofits, community organizations, healthcare institutions, and others to improve the well-being of their communities. PPS’s research suggests at least five distinct strategies for making healthier places: Social Support & Interaction, Play & Active Recreation, Green & Natural Environments, Healthy Food, and Walking & Biking.
SOCIAL SUPPORT & INTERACTION

Strong social support and networks help instill a sense of belonging amongst community members, which is an important contributing factor for mental health and overall well-being.

Placemaking initiatives—both the resulting public places and the community engagement process—create opportunities for gathering, socialization, and volunteerism, which have been shown to reduce psychological distress and depression, as well as increase perceived safety and mitigate crime.

Taking Action

1. **Institutionalize community engagement.** Enable local residents, workers and other stakeholders to shape the use and design of their public spaces.

2. **Identify spaces for additional public uses.** Empty lots, streets, and building lobbies, as well as parks and squares, can all become social gathering places through additional activities and programs.

3. **Organize or host community events and programs.** Activities like communal meals can bring together community members from varying social, economic and cultural backgrounds.

4. **Provide amenities that encourage social interaction.** Certain amenities like tables, movable chairs, music, and games, as well as free community meeting spaces, can encourage more social connections.

5. **Build the capacity of local stakeholders to manage public spaces.** Trainings, internships, volunteer opportunities and working groups can all help people—especially those affected by health disparities and other disadvantages—to have a say in the design, maintenance, and decision-making processes that impact their public spaces.

6. **Showcase local talent.** Events like art displays, performances or locally designed and built amenities can help celebrate local artists and cultures.

**Peaches & Greens, Detroit, MI**

A small produce store grows into a community and health hub that houses a commercial kitchen, a meeting space, a plaza and park, community gardens, and an orchard.
PLAY & ACTIVE RECREATION

Regular physical activity is critical for maintaining healthier weights, improving longevity, increasing cognitive function, and decreasing the risk of chronic illnesses such as heart disease and type 2 diabetes.

Placemaking strategies directed at creating or improving parks and play spaces help to encourage increased physical activity and diversify uses of the space. Involving local stakeholders in the planning process of these spaces helps generate a sense of community and ownership, which in turn contributes to greater use of parks.

Taking Action

1. Engage local stakeholders in planning and creating places for active recreation.
2. Work with community groups to gather stakeholder feedback on programming and improvements to public spaces.
3. Seek opportunities to increase the number, size, safety, and quality of public active recreation spaces accessible on foot.
4. Add active recreation opportunities to existing spaces. Evaluate the need or desire for additional amenities, equipment, or programming on a permanent or temporary basis.
5. Sponsor or organize Play Street or Open Street events.
6. Advertise play and active recreation opportunities widely. Use language, imagery, and methods that appeal to diverse populations, including non-English speakers and those most impacted by health disparities.
7. Improve walking, bicycling, and public transportation access. Connect these various modes to local community parks, playgrounds, physical activity programming, and public active recreation spaces.
8. Promote socialization and interaction in active recreation spaces. Strategies like cleanup days, special events, interactive equipment or games, and the co-location of equipment for multiple ages and interests can all help bring people together.

New York Playground Program, NY, NY

A twenty-year-old program which has built 200 playgrounds in New York City public schools to address unequal access to outdoor play areas in neighborhoods of varying income levels.
GREEN & NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS

Well-used green spaces provide a wide range of benefits, like increasing physical activity and cardio-metabolic health; reducing mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and stress; increasing cognitive functions like attention and memory; and providing a platform for social interaction and community activities that build social capital. They can also improve environmental factors that affect health indirectly, such as reducing violent crime; improving air and water quality; and building resilience to flooding.

Placemaking initiatives can use greening as a simple, inexpensive, short-term intervention to make public spaces more visually appealing, comfortable, and unique.

Taking Action

1. Increase the number, size, safety, and quality of parks and trails accessible on foot. Vacant lots are especially ripe for transformation.

2. Incorporate more natural features into existing green spaces, such as trees, water features, walking paths, and birdlife.

3. Incorporate trees, landscaping, and other engaging natural features into the urban fabric at large, such as street trees or plantings in plazas.

Avers Community Garden, North Lawndale, Chicago, IL

A neighborhood collective transformed an empty lot into a community garden that has become a center of youth activity.
HEALTHY FOOD

Having access to healthy, affordable food is a key factor in preventing malnutrition and poor diets that can lead to obesity and related chronic diseases such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and some cancers.

Placemaking projects, such as creating public markets or community gardens, increase people’s consumption of fruits and vegetables; ensure food security, particularly for low-income and disadvantaged populations; provide economic development opportunities to producers, distributors, and other members of the local food system; support environmental sustainability; and create opportunities for local entrepreneurship, community building, and food education.

Taking Action

1. Establish regular, year-round farmers markets at already existing and centrally-located properties, like building plazas, parking lots or streets.

2. Co-locate healthy food opportunities with health services and other food system services, like food banks.

3. Integrate community gardens into the planning of schools, affordable housing, and other developments.

4. Create opportunities for education and health-related programming in public spaces.

5. Ensure the affordability of products sold at farmers markets by offering vouchers, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program benefits, “bonus bucks,” or similar programs.

Flint Farmers Market, Flint, MI
Relocating a public market downtown improves food access and health-related investment.
WALKING & BIKING

Walking, biking and active transportation increase our physical health and cognitive function, while also reducing risk factors for obesity and chronic disease.

Placemaking supports more walkable and bikeable communities by fostering the creation of new sidewalks and bike lanes and new community destinations, improving the safety and accessibility of the street, while also boosting the local economy and supporting more environmentally friendly modes of transportation. The most effective active transportation strategies happen citywide.

Taking Action

1. **Create or enhance public spaces that are easily accessible by foot, bike or public transit.**

2. **Improve walking and bicycling access to key public destinations** by providing safe sidewalks, bike lanes, crossings, secure bicycle storage, and so on.

3. **Sponsor or organize regular Play Street or Open Street events.**

4. **Support traffic calming efforts** on neighborhood streets in order to create safer places for walking and bicycling.

5. **Work with residents to clean up, repair, green, and beautify streets** to make walking a more enjoyable, safe experience.

6. **Provide wayfinding signage and maps** at transit stops, public spaces, major institutions, and other destinations.

Guerrero Street, San Francisco, CA

A group of neighborhood activists came together to create a safer, healthier, pedestrian friendly street.
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Learn more about us / download the full report: pps.org