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Placemaking in Practice. Lessons learned from activating public space on campus

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Abstract

University campuses offer unique environments rich with opportunities to test, challenge and innovate. Yearning for possibilities of social interaction and the need for better, livelier public spaces on campus, students from the Master of Urbanism Studies program at the Royal Institute of Technology (KTH) in Stockholm, Sweden have facilitated Placemaking Week on campus for two consecutive years. The tools of placemaking were put into action as students organized the inaugural Placemaking Week at KTH. The project was collaborative by nature in every aspect of the process, challenging the students to navigate the complex interplay between public and private actors. To achieve the partnerships necessary to initiate Placemaking Week, stakeholder's strategic drivers and potential roles were defined early in the process. All influential stakeholders were engaged, as understanding their concerns and working with them created strategic partnerships which otherwise may have acted as obstacles. These partnerships were important to the program's sustainability, co-producing a long-term strategy together with the stakeholders as the cohort of students change each year. Through the approach and execution of each Placemaking Week, the potential of placemaking as a tool to foster community was assessed, formally studied and documented for learning purposes. The results of this study demonstrated that space could be made livelier and provide better opportunities for people to spontaneously interact, even with stringently limited time and resources. Further, Placemaking Week has provided content for the campus plan and contributed to building a trust-based relationship among stakeholders. With each year, the implementation process enables these relationships grow. Finally, the recurrence of Placemaking Week, which has been executed for the third year in a row, shows positive signs of embedding itself in the campus and student culture.

Keywords: placemaking, bottom-up, public participation, sustainability

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Introduction

Unlike equations that call for straight-forward answers, wicked problems are intricate and interconnected puzzles without a simple solution. Design theorist Horst Rittel (1973) was first to coin the term "wicked problem" to refer to complex challenges without an easy answer. Climate change, public health, and urban planning are all considered wicked problems. Likewise, cities are complex ecosystems; they cannot be studied through a single lens. Instead, analysing challenges in a holistic way and considering the interdependences within them is essential in solving these hard and complex problems (Jensenius, 2012). To rigorously engage the wicked problems of designing within a city, it is imperative that graduate education includes both a theoretical and a tactile approach. The Master of Urbanism Studies program at the Royal Institute of Technology (KTH) in Stockholm, Sweden is a one-year intensive graduate program providing the framework for students to investigate and research through both course work and studio projects. The students define an opportunity to apply their understanding of public space to activate areas devoid of activity with the intention of sparking the imagination of campus stakeholders regarding the potential of public space on campus. For two consecutive years, students accomplished this through the planning and execution of Placemaking Week. The first Placemaking Week aimed at encouraging pro-environmental behaviour and action by transforming public space, while the second consisted of an installation that provided movable and informal seating that could be used in a variety of ways, inviting students and locals to discuss the future of the space together. Although different in their intention and form, these two practical experiences allowed the students to apply their understanding of not only placemaking, but the variety of challenges faced along the way, encouraging a more participatory approach to imagining the future of public space.

Background: Placemaking and Tactical Urbanism

The Industrial Revolution introduced the age of the car and the transition of streets from places for people to places for vehicles. Over time there was a decrease in public space, making way and prioritizing the automobile over people, threatening public life and social interaction. In response to this, a variety of bottom-up movements with different levels of structure have popped up with the intention of shifting the focus of public space back to people. Ranging from ephemeral actions to more holistic long-term strategies, those movements all attempt to create community and empower people through the transformation of public space (Petcou and Petrescu, 2015). Professionals from various disciplines including environmental psychologists, architects, economists, urban planners, and sociologists have studied the dynamics of public space and identified key findings. Pioneers of these movements include Jane Jacobs, Jan Gehl, Kevin Lynch, William Whyte, and many more. Today, the US non-profit Project for Public Spaces (PPS) and in Europe, the Netherlands based company STIPO (Strategy, Innovation, Process development, and Open-source), a multi-disciplinary consultancy team for urban strategy and planning, work on spreading the message while structuring an international network of placemakers. This community aims to document case studies, share lessons, best practices, and work on more rapidly making cities more human-centred.

The two case studies addressed in this paper use placemaking as a tool to activate public space and spark community development. Placemaking is a process that aims to

increase social cohesion and sustainability through the activation of public spaces including streets, squares, and neighbourhoods (Project for Public Spaces, 2007). The main idea behind placemaking is to save resources and time, or, in other words, an approach that values being agile and embracing the mentality of “lighter, quicker, cheaper” as coined by Eric Reynolds (Maclver, 2010). This hands-on, commonly bottom-up approach to urbanism has been largely used by PPS, STIPO and other planning practices. Drawing on the work of the public space pioneers mentioned above, STIPO more specifically initiated *The City at Eye Level*, an open-source learning network offering a practical methodology aimed at “improving cities, streets and places all over the world” (Karssenberget al., 2016; back cover). Placemaking also seeks to improve community participation and collaboration, which are central to the planning process. The value of collaboration in discussions regarding the formation of public space is well documented (Gifford, 2014). Therefore, the early stages of a placemaking project are essential in order to understand the needs of the community and the potential of the space. More generally, placemaking uses bottom-up approaches to enhance and facilitate communication between communities and experts in urban planning, as well as developers and authorities. Involving a variety of diverse actors together in the process while also facilitating discussion is essential to understanding the needs and desires of each other, and even more important when it comes to encouraging members of the community to have an active voice in planning its future.

With the goal of initiating a conversation with the community around the future of public space, the research on placemaking consists of strategies that have been proven successful and are well documented online, especially with the contributions of PPS. In line with the strength and international support of the placemaking community, the students partnered with an organization to mentor and advise them throughout the process. As part of the learning process, these placemakers were invited as consultants by the students and gave feedback throughout the process. The engagement of STIPO and Fine Young Urbanists with the Master of Urbanism Studies program proved the relevancy of placemaking as a tool to address the future of public space on the KTH campus.

Master of Urbanism Studies Program

The Master of Urbanism Studies program is an advanced one-year graduate program in applied social science and design in the public realm. The program addresses the need for urban professionals from a variety of backgrounds who are specifically concerned with issues of the design of the public realm and the effects urban form has on social life and human behavior. This international program consists of students from more than thirty different countries and captures students from a variety of disciplines including, architecture, sustainable and community planning, civil engineering, psychology, etc. Together for one year, this diverse and multicultural group of students meet in Stockholm, Sweden to address the political and social forces that form public space. The program consists of a series of modules and exploratory studio courses taught by an international faculty, concluding the program with a thesis. Similar to the student body in the Master of Urbanism Studies program, the faculty come from diverse backgrounds and fields, all sharing an extraordinary body of research and professional work.

KTH Campus

KTH is located in Östermalm, 10 minutes north of the city center by train. At the entrance of the campus, there are two train stations and several bus stations. In addition to the plethora of public transportation options, the area offers an abundance of bike and ride-sharing services that all converge at the entrance of campus. Upon walking through campus, a visitor could not go without noticing the number of active construction sites. KTH campus is constantly undergoing major transformation, a common trait of evolution among leading international universities. New housing blocks and academic buildings open each semester with additional projects soon to be completed. With all of this change underway, it has never been so important to address the improvement of public space. Public spaces are where students intuitively want to stay longer, spontaneously meet, and generate new ideas. Academically, KTH is very well known for its innovation and technical expertise through education, research, networks, and businesses; however, these activities primarily happen within individual collegiate houses, leaving the public spaces with very little sense of life. For students studying urbanism, there is a real challenge in making the campus livelier and creating a sense of community around the transformation of campus spaces.

Placemaking Week

Over the past two years, students in the Master of Urbanism Studies program at KTH were challenged to apply their skills and knowledge developed throughout the program to realize an urbanism project on campus. This project is seen as an opportunity to grow out of the academic modules as students delve into a hands-on local project. Inherently, to realize an urbanism project at the scale of campus requires students to take on leadership roles in order to plan and facilitate the event. Over the course of approximately four months, students proposed a rigorous process that included analyzing, designing, fabricating, and assessing. Through this process, students discovered the intricacies, both challenging and rewarding, of implementing a placemaking project.

Through different approaches, the students from each class took on the challenge, building on the successes of the prior year with their own unique identity. The inaugural KTH Placemaking Week was proposed by the Center for the Future of Places and the Master of Urbanism Studies students. During the inaugural year, students identified stakeholders on campus. It was essential to propose a collaboration that would be mutually beneficial for both the stakeholders and the future of Placemaking Week. After several meetings, emails, and phone calls these stakeholders agreed to support the project through both the allocation of funds and the approval of using campus property. These stakeholders included the campus landlord, Akademiska Hus, the KTH Sustainability Office that oversees the campus master plan, and the Master of Urbanism Studies program. In addition to local partnerships on campus and financial support, students collaborated with external placemaking professionals for feedback throughout the process. Each year the project had a unique theme and was led by two students. The following sections describe the evolution of Placemaking Week at KTH in addition to the approach, method, and results over the course of two years.

Case Study I

Approach

In 2017 students planned and organized a two-day placemaking event, Sustainable Placemaking Week, with the intention to encourage pro-environmental behavior while making the outdoor spaces of the campus more inviting and enjoyable. In this case, placemaking was used as a tool to encourage changes in human behavior through the transformation of public places. As the students led the planning process, experts from STIPO continuously gave support and advice on the management of a placemaking event, while Landskapslaget AB, a Stockholm-based landscape architecture firm acted as a network activator, connecting the students with other local partners.

Method

The two-day placemaking event was organized in three main stages that included analysis, planning, and executing. The first phase consisted of analyzing spaces on campus and reaching out to local actors. A survey was sent out to understand students' perception of campus life and spaces, followed by a public workshop to understand the community's ideas and desires, foster engagement, and generate a creative vision. During that phase especially, steady communication with STIPO provided the students with feedback. The second stage was planning the event itself which included fostering and maintaining community engagement through communication, meetings, and interviews. The process also involved communicating with stakeholders, designing creative content such as promotional material, posters and maps, coordinating members, managing a small budget, and getting official authorizations.



Image 1 and 2. Planning process and design orientation (left) and group activity in public workshop (right).
©Elisa Diniz, 2017

The final stage was the building and hosting of the two-day event, which concluded with a small seminar to brainstorm about the steps that could happen next. The process of planning and executing the placemaking project raised many challenges that are thoroughly documented in *Bottom-up Urbanism: Exploring the potential of bottom up initiatives as to encourage pro-environmental behavior change and action* (Carvalho Diniz and Riou, 2017).

In a spirit of "lighter, quicker, cheaper" (Maclver, 2010), Sustainable Placemaking Week was comprised of a variety of activities located throughout the campus. Sidewalks were

marked with colored lines that led people to different areas in order to promote existing sustainability efforts.

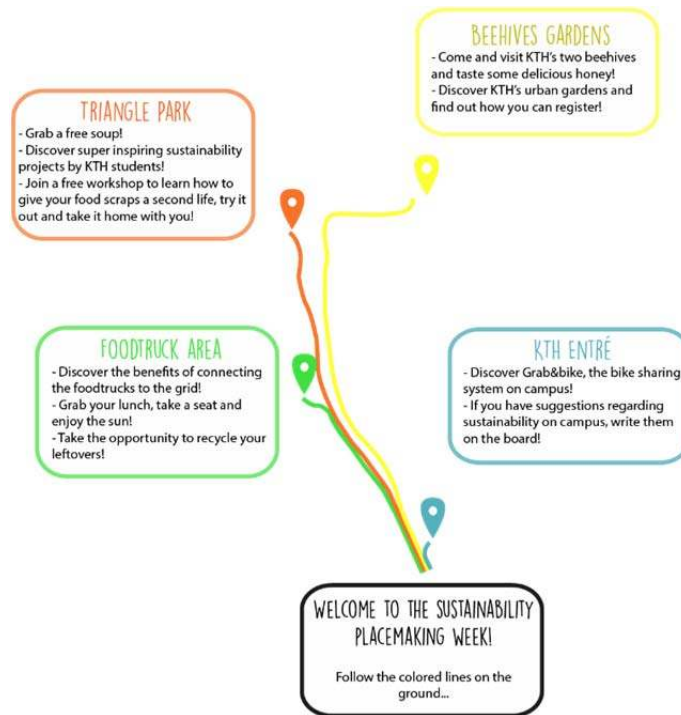


Figure 1. Map of routes and activities during the Placemaking Week ©Mathilde Riou, 2017

New experiments were also conducted to test ideas that could be implemented on both short-term, and long-term timelines. For instance, one idea was to create a more convenient and desirable environment around the food trucks that are parked every day in the main street. To do this, the students worked with the local stakeholders to facilitate their connection to the grid rather than the use of generators that produce pollution and noise. This change, paired with the addition of informal seating, made the environment and space more conducive to enjoying lunch on the grass.



Images 3 and 4: Before and after the intervention in the food trucks' area at KTH campus ©Nawarat Yansomran, 2017

To support the concept of Sustainable Placemaking Week, there was an effort to enhance sustainable behavior among campus-users. Different activities were organized with this intention including a bike repair station, a workshop to learn how to reuse food scraps, an outdoor exhibition of student projects addressing environmental needs, and gazpacho was cooked from left-over food and was served directly on the street. Again, informal seating was provided in different spaces to encourage people to engage with the space.

Results

Sustainable Placemaking Week attracted many visitors and generated a significant amount of excitement around the possible transformation of public spaces on campus. These results highlighted the potential of KTH's public spaces and demonstrated that a bottom-up collaboration between different students and campus stakeholders could yield resourceful and creative outcomes. There were challenges around coordinating students, the other locals who were participating, and the various stakeholders, particularly regarding everything coming together in an orderly and timely fashion. Having all the users and groups communicate effectively was at times an obstacle, and there were political challenges such as connecting the food trucks to the grid. Although the interventions were experimental and of temporary nature, a thorough reflection was conducted following the event.



Image 5. Placemaking Week 2017 ©Mackenzie Childs, 2017

Case Study 2

Approach

The students who led the second Placemaking Week intended for the event to reimagine the specific public space that would become the main square of the campus in

the future master plan. The concept of placemaking remained an important tool to invite people to inhabit a centrally located yet unused public space on campus. The aim was two-fold: to engage locals in the future of the public space and to provide a precedent for stakeholders about the importance of this site.

The planning process of the event was kicked off by an exciting workshop that was part of the *Cities for All Conference* hosted in Stockholm, Sweden. This two-day conference hosted by STIPO consisted of presentations, ideation workshops, and onsite workshops. One of the options for the onsite workshops included the KTH Campus. The rapid construction in response to the recent effort to incorporate more housing on campus has driven KTH to reconsider its campus plan. Students attended this workshop and gained insights from an international group of professionals attending the conference. The data collected during this workshop was integral to defining areas of opportunity on the chosen site. For the design of the installation, experts from Fine Young Urbanists, an architecture and planning practice, provided guidance and feedback.

Method

Building off of existing relationships, students reached out to the inaugural KTH Placemaking week organizers and stakeholders. The theme of Placemaking Week 2018 was “Creating Place Through Mixed Media.” The students shared a goal of better understanding the tools and techniques that planners might implement to establish a more participatory planning process. Pursuing this endeavour exercised the variety of practical and leadership skills necessary to encourage and execute public participation in planning. The theme and goals led to a more installation-based approach to the event, focusing on creating an interactive space for people to gather and discuss the future of public space.



*Images 6 and 7. Design studies (left) and planning process of the installation for Placemaking Week 2018
© Michelle Pannone, 2018*

To accomplish this, the process was organized into four main phases that included immersing, planning, designing, and executing. The immersion phase included reaching

out to the stakeholders and continuing the conversation that was started in the prior year. This was important so that they understood the continued concern and support for public space on campus. The organizers of Sustainable Placemaking Week 2017 provided useful insights in addition to introducing current students with the administrators. During this phase, baseline data and observations of the site on a typical day were taken for later comparison. The second phase was the planning phase which focused on the event. This included communicating with those that would be impacted by the event so they were aware and had the opportunity to collaborate. A series of both formal and informal discussions and interviews were held to inform the planning and design. Some were facilitated over email, although most were conducted in person. This phase also included many administrative tasks such as managing the budget, ordering materials, and creating promotional materials, in particular a schedule, posters, and Facebook event to get the word out. Occurring concurrently, the third phase focused on the design. The driving question was how can we create a space that encourages people to discuss the future of public space on campus? It was essential that the space was inviting, provided informal seating to urge people to stay and chat, and also featured an element of interaction. The design was developed through a series of workshops that led to testing ideas and materials on the site. The final execution of the event included a heavy documentation component to collect suggestions, observe interactions with the installation, and solicit feedback.



Images 8 and 9. Interaction with the community during assembling (left) and during the event (right)
© Michelle Pannone, 2018

To create a welcoming and playful environment, it was important to use lightweight materials that people would be able to pick up easily and use in a variety of ways. After a significant amount of material research in combination with testing to make sure the dimensions and strength were adequate for the weight of an adult, 22-liter round buckets were selected as the primary material. Using approximately 160 buckets in diverse ways provided visitors with seating, enclosure, and even fun! Campus sidewalks leading to the site were marked with circles the same size as the buckets using red paint. The same technique was used on the grass to show how buckets might be moved around the space to form different seating arrangements or even play games.



Image 10. Poster displayed online and in the area to advertise Placemaking Week © Atefeh Mortazavi, 2018

Results

The movement of the buckets indicated areas where people were most inclined to sit and enjoy the space. Some places were more conducive to group discussion, while in other places individuals were able to relax. Students documented these tendencies to provide proof of concept for the stakeholders. During the event, faculty, administrators, students, locals, children, and even pets enjoyed the space. The overwhelming increase of engagement with the space during Placemaking Week 2018 further exemplifies the opportunity for more communication and participation in public space. The ideas, proposals, and feedback of those that interacted with the installation and discussed the future of the space were documented. Their willingness and eagerness to be involved in the process of designing the future square of the campus prove the need for a more participatory planning process on campus.

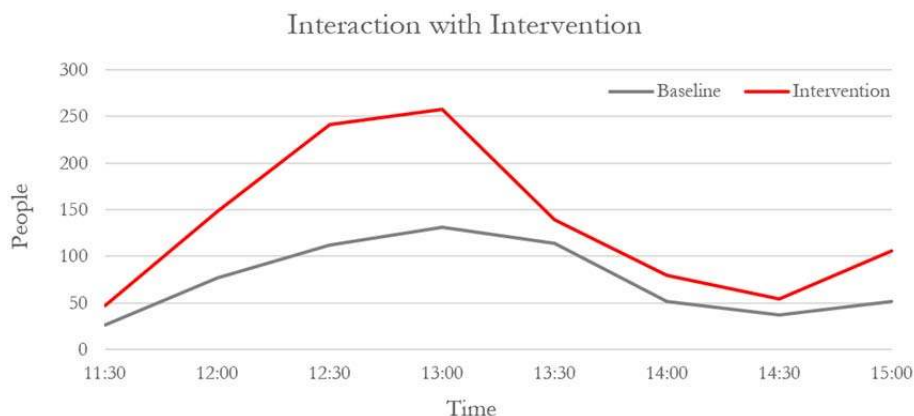


Figure 2: Graph indicating the number of people interacting with the installation © Michelle Pannone, 2018



Image 11: Placemaking Week 2018
© Michelle Pannone, 2018

Discussion and Conclusions

Placemaking Week at KTH is a great illustration of the “lighter, quicker, cheaper” principle (Maclver, 2010) with both years demonstrating that it is possible to have a great impact on how people feel in public space with limited budget and resources. Each year, informal seating was provided using basic objects such as buckets, palettes, blankets, and rugs. These objects were readily populated, appreciated, and used by those that passed by. Quick edits and refinement to the process between years improved both the planning, execution, and ultimately the level of impact. For example, students from the first year recommended documenting more thoroughly. In the second year, this led to metrics such as counting how many people used the place per hour during the day, how long they stayed, how they interacted with the space and if they were in groups or alone. However, there could still be improvements made to photos of before and after the event, in addition to filming and even interviewing some users about their experience. This type of both qualitative and quantitative data is extremely helpful to make a strong case for future proposals during feedback sessions with the campus stakeholders.

Lessons Learned

Clear communication and collaboration are key between private and public sectors and the local population. Due to the planned events requiring authorizations and financial support, it is essential to build trust and clearly communicate with the campus

stakeholders. Beyond keeping them updated on the status of a future intervention on campus, it is important to identify their needs, fears, and opportunities. Ultimately, these stakeholders have the ability to either hinder or encourage future interventions. One example of the importance of these relationships is evident in the logistics required to connect the food trucks to the grid during Sustainable Placemaking Week 2017. To accomplish this collaboration, clarification of the obstacles faced by each party was necessary. Through the process, students discovered that the streets that run through the KTH Campus are not owned by KTH nor Akademiska Hus, but rather that they are the property of the city. Therefore, the food trucks have a contract with the City of Stockholm that allows them to park on the main street that extends through the KTH Campus to sell food. As a result of this complex relationship, Akademiska Hus was reluctant to power the food trucks since it would force KTH to pay for the electricity. The argument is that the city should be providing them with electricity since the food trucks pay the City of Stockholm through their contract. Unfortunately, because the City was not directly involved in the ecosystem of actors, there were no stakeholders from that group that could resolve the situation. There were times when the students were unsure if they would be able to connect the food trucks to the grid, but after there were no other options, Akademiska Hus agreed to supply power for the event due to the environmental and spatial quality implications.

Another example was the tenuous relationship with THS (Tekniska Högskolans Studentkår) Union, which is the student union on campus. Students reached out to the THS Union and invited them to collaborate however they declined, unsure of how they could engage the project. At this point the project leaders missed the opportunity to follow up further and develop the relationship that could be mutually beneficial. Therefore, the students proceeded unaware of the concerns that THS had in regards to the project. As a result of this conflict, rather than becoming a collaborator this organization became a barrier. It was evident that if THS was better informed of the proposal, the students could have responded to their concerns and they would likely have contributed more and demonstrated their support for the projects of fellow students.

These anecdotes show that it is essential:

1. To include, or at least invite all actors who have leadership and or power and are concerned by the project; and
2. To identify and clarify the drivers and fears of each actor - or else there is a chance that important concerns will be left unstated, slowing down or undermining aspects of the project.

In conclusion, both case studies have proven that the longevity of any intervention in public space extends beyond the aspects that are visible. A strategic plan for sustaining partnerships, management, and maintenance is likely the best indicator of continued success. Designers, architects, and urban planners too often are focused on what STIPO (2016) refers to as the “hardware” and the “software.” The hardware includes buildings, urban landscape, furniture, and other objects that inhabit public space while the software includes the activities and uses offered in public space. This oversimplification is natural, placing the most importance on the aspects that people are able to see and experience. However, the risk is that addressing the hardware and software only overlook the aspects that impact the execution and longevity of the space. There is a third part that is often overlooked despite its role in dictating the success and

sustainability of an intervention designated by STIPO as “orgware” (Karssenberget al., 2016; p.320). Orgware encompasses a range of necessary components including maintenance, funding, and management. How is the space funded? Who takes care for the space and how? Who ensures events and activities planned in the space are not colliding? The orgware is what really matters by establishing the roots that ensure structure and stability of the whole. In these case studies, there was little consideration of the orgware beyond the events’ date. The business model was designed only for the short term, just like the collaboration between the Master of Urbanism Studies program, Akademiska Hus and KTH Sustainability Office. With the maintenance and management dependent on students, the process remains both vulnerable and ephemeral, happening only once per year. If the findings from Placemaking Week are to be implemented and sustainable, key actors who stay on campus for extended periods of time such as professors, doctoral students, administrators, and public stakeholders must be integrated in the process. Governance needs to be addressed and shared or else the whole event will disappear with its leaders (Karssenberget al., 2016).

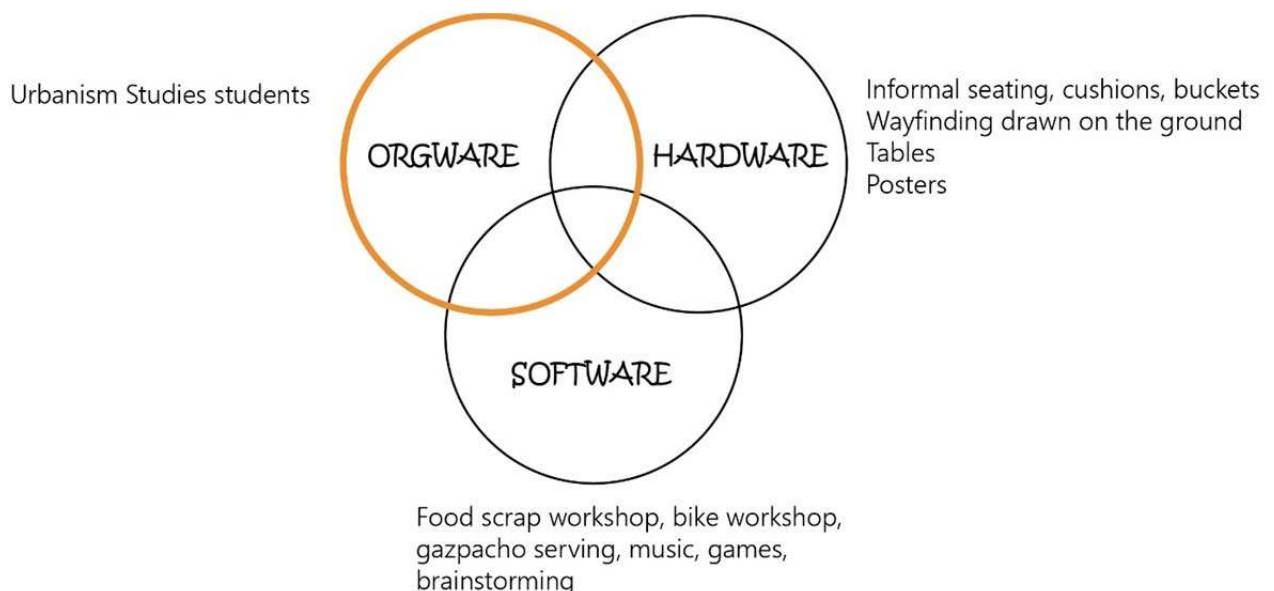


Figure 3: Diagram of the orgware-software-hardware interaction, based on the work of Karssenberget al. (2016)

Moving Forward

Following Placemaking Week, a meeting was organized with the main actors of the campus including Akademiska Hus, KTH Sustainability Office, the Master of Urbanism Studies program, and also OpenLab. OpenLab is an innovation incubator that brings people together from diverse disciplines to solve complex problems. A permanent organization like OpenLab is an ideal partnership to establish a potential facilitator that would remain constant each year with a new group of graduate students. To conclude the project, this meeting discussed the successes, areas of opportunity, and next steps. Beyond ideas directly linked to thematic aspects of the event, such as organizing a

Sustainability Tour for incoming students to celebrate campus efforts, three main strategic directions were offered to the campus stakeholders:

1. To consider permanent outdoor seating on campus as a short-term goal (e.g. movable chairs like other universities) and the tangible outcomes from the results of Placemaking Week as an input in the Campus Master Plan;
2. To organize a workshop with the food truck owners and all stakeholders involved, including the City of Stockholm, to brainstorm ways to connect the food trucks to the grid permanently and discuss additional ways to create a more sustainable environment on campus; and
3. To create a permanent group discussion / Placemaking Lab consisting of students, faculty, Akademiska Hus, KTH Sustainability Office, and other stakeholders to create a constant dialogue regarding the future of public space on campus. This includes developing a business model that would facilitate discussions, meetings, experiments, and activities to activate space on campus, as well as establishing a participatory process with new residents on campus to create an environment that feels like their backyard.

As the first edition was a success, the Master of Urbanism Studies program decided to reiterate the Placemaking Week the following year. This second edition continued to strengthen the partnership between Akademiska Hus, KTH Sustainability Office, and the students. Following Placemaking Week 2018, a large board was installed where the event had taken place providing an area to propose ideas. This permanent installation is a huge step towards a more user-driven approach to public space on campus.



Image 12: Sign installed after the Placemaking Week 2018 to collect suggestions
© Michelle Pannone, 2018

Since recurrence is a fundamental element in changing culture (Verplanken, 2018), the recurrence of Placemaking Week should in time add to and become a part of KTH's culture and identity as a school. It is, therefore, essential that KTH continues to make Placemaking Week both an evolving and transformative event. Based on the first two

executions of Placemaking Week, the following general guidelines are necessary to structure this event for long-term success and impact:

1. To reorganize a Placemaking Week every year, to make it larger by inviting the private sector, and to contribute and combine with existing initiatives (i.e. other student manifestations that already occur on campus);
2. To work together with Akademiska Hus and KTH to facilitate and encourage innovation on public spaces and bottom-up initiatives; and
3. To evaluate the user experience and measure successes, both during the event and regarding the long-term impact on the space and community.

The findings and impact of Placemaking Week extend beyond the KTH campus and across disciplinary boundaries. Encouraging members of the community to have an active voice regarding the future of public space and engaging the various stakeholders to come together to enable change is integral to creating more human-centered public spaces. Placemaking Week and the work of the students in the Master of Urbanism Studies program at KTH exemplify that successful interventions are achievable through bottom-up endeavors. It takes dedication from a diverse set of stakeholders coalescing to enact permanent change, but only a few committed community activists to initiate the process.

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