

Episode One (part 1): The transformation of 'Place' during COVID-19...

Hannah (00:05): Today we are exploring place in the midst of this global pandemic. With so many of us around the world practising social distancing or my preferred term socialising distantly. I'd like to explore some of the implications this is having on how we experience place and how we create and plan for places. I'm joined today by Evan Brumley, Digital Solution Architect, Evelyn Sung, Graduate Civil Engineer, Michael Tyrpenou, our Human Centred Design lead and Peter Aspinall, Principal Occupational Hygienist. I'm going to start by asking Michael, what place are you joining us from and what does placemaking mean to you?

Michael (01:06): Well, I'm joining you today in a coastal town on the New South Wales seaboard, I guess you could call it. And it's a place I grew up and, and holds many memories for me and my family and a connection to community that I cherish and that I've decided to come back to and I guess that's what place means to me. It means that connection to people. I can't separate the two. I can't think about places without the people that go with them. And I can't think about people without the places that I know them from or I've interacted with them.

Hannah (01:34): What about you Peter? What does placemaking mean to you?

Peter (01:38): I'm coming from a position where as an occupational hygienist, we look at the workplace and how people interact with the workplace and at the moment everyone's working from home. So it's changing the whole dichotomy of how people are working at the moment. So from an occupational hygienist point of view, these are really unusual times and how people are safe in those environments is really important for me going forward and how we can best service and support people when they're in a new workplace.

Hannah (02:06): I want to pass over to Evan, our digital solution architect on what place making means to you from a digital perspective.

Evan (02:14): Sure thing. So my name is Evan Brumley. I'm coming to you from my little office in my house in Flemington. I've just moved in. Placemaking to me in a digital sense is really about communities and building communities online. You know, I've been working in digital space for about 15 years now and I was there when placemaking was just beginning back in the 90s and the early days of the web. So I've seen digital placemaking evolve from early message boards and use net and so on. All through the early sort of internet forums of the early 2000s, of the advent of Facebook and the growth of communities from something that was really just in the tech sector all the way through to what it is now and what we're seeing now with the COVID crisis is really the, almost like a final stage of that evolution. Where everyone is going online, workplaces are finally being dragged, kicking and screaming into remote working and remote working has been something that's been very common in the tech sector for years now, but all the other sectors are having to catch up very, very quickly. So that placemaking side of things is really going to be taking very significant leaps forward over the next six months and there's also

going to be a big push to take the public places and various functions of public places are going to be moving online and it's going to be interesting to see how that evolves and what form that takes.

Hannah (03:31): I'll open up the question to Evelyn sung. What are some of the other ways you've noticed people starting to use digital placemaking?

Evelyn (03:40): One of the cool things i've seen in light of the situation is my friend who's coding a virtual space of a museum, the Museum of Human Diseases and still finding ways to get people to interact with the museum virtually and access information and continue the learning in a very accessible and interactive way. This is kind of like an opportunity to harness the tools that we have available to build on virtual spaces or hybrid spaces. We have become sort of stagnated in old ways of interacting public space like this is opening up new opportunities to really open up that door to different ways of people engaging.

Hannah (04:19): What do we think about this concept of digital augmented places or digital twinning for other places? Not just museums, but we're seeing that we can't really enjoy public places that we use to. Do you think there's value in creating these public places online?

Peter (04:36): Well from a workplace perspective, if you've got a hazardous environment and you want to minimise the number of people going into that area, you can have it set up in a digital twin or environment where using the pandemic experience, you can have someone who doesn't have to leave their house. They can go to a workplace, measure up, look at what they need to do in the physical space to get the details and get a job planned and created without having to actually be exposed to the potential hazards in that workplace.

Hannah (05:00): I want to ask Michael if you think that some of these examples they've been sharing can authentically and fully substitute the physical places that we experience. Do you have any thoughts around that?

Michael (05:12): I think we've covered a lot of those positives around how private spaces can be brought to the homes and democratized in a way where there's greater access for people. I find a lot of the spaces that have evolved over time, whether it's public or private, have continually been leaving others out. So if you think about some of the spaces that we've built over time, the equity of access doesn't always exist. Whether that's for people with accessibility issues or for people with socioeconomic statuses that don't meet a certain criteria in instances. So for me, the digital opportunity seems to democratise that and brings it towards flattening that curve. The challenge that place makers have in the public realm and Hannah, I think you could probably speak to this better than anyone else, is how do we replicate experiences in the public realm in a way that we've been talking about for these private spaces?

Hannah (06:02):

I think in the public domain it's going to be really difficult to fully replicate in a digital world. So much of our interaction in public spaces happens by chance. It's the, Oh, you caught a whiff of some great smell and you're gonna go to that cool little restaurant or cafe, or it's the buskers that you pass by that really capture your imagination and make you stop. It's the experience of being almost like a magnet and responding to the things that are magnetizing you their way. And I don't think you can get that fully in a digital world, but I still think there's obviously great value in having the digital, virtual augmented places as well.

Evelyn (06:45): If I can add a little bit to that. I think digital has the capacity to provide information to people that otherwise wouldn't go to under explored corners of the public. If I think of how I interact with Sydney is that I find out information digitally through either forums, communities before I ended up at the physical places. That's a positive, I think, and this is definitely translating in the ways that art galleries have been promoting themselves. You can still have the capacity to promote and provide information.

Michael (07:15): To me, that's how I see it. Like digital tools can help us find public spaces that we can then experience or vice versa. Right? So I think they work in support of each other and I don't think that it necessarily, they move apart from each other, if that makes sense. So you know, I moved to London nearly 10 years ago now and I decided where I wanted to live based on forums, ideas. I got to look through the place and wanting to live with the VR technology, the real estate offered us. I was there before I was there. I had an idea, a cognitive feel of this place, but when I got there, it was those chance meetings. Those people, you know, brushing up against the culture, the sights, the sounds, the smells, those things that you can't replicate. In that way we can hand over those, those experiences and I don't think necessarily that one negates the other.

Peter (07:58): I think it's really highlighted the things that people have been taking for granted for such a long time, those interactions that you have and now, when they're not there, suddenly it's highlighted how important they were. That's what I finding when I take the dog for a walk every morning. That's my little get out of the house time and the number of people you walk past who are walking their dogs who I've seen many years, different times interactions, a lot more nodding and hi, how you doing? And yep you're okay sort of stuff. It's amazing how much we took it for granted.

Hannah (08:26): Do you see any concerns or issues around trust as at the end of this pandemic, when we're able to go back into public spaces and back into our workplaces? Given you're an occupational hygienist, what's your take, what's going to happen as we transitioned back to these physical places?

Peter (08:44): From a workplace perspective, and I guess a lot of us have got office sort of mentalities there, but we're talking all workplaces. This is going to impact on a classic one is we're starting to hear it on the news now and through the media where they're shutting down a little pockets or outbreaks of COVID infections and that's going to be the reality for quite some time going forward and it's how the workplace is going to respond to that. How they can then turn around to their staff and say, hey look, it is okay to be here or no, it's not. You need to go home, come back in 10 days when they come back in 10 days, 14 days. How can they be comfortable in that space again? And that's what the reality is going to be for quite some time. And it's almost a dystopian sort of a thing where we might have to be everybody coming into workplaces getting a temperature check.

Peter (09:29): Everyone's going to be having to moist carry a card around or little badge around on on their ID that says, I've had a COVID test in the last week and I'm clean. That's almost the way it's going to go, so it's then how do we either make that seamless? How do we make that happen without taking away too many personal liberties? I guess what does the workplace and the building of the future look like? I see it to a point where there's going to be a lot of companies going you know what?. We don't really need that office space. We can just have everyone working from home. It's worked fine for the last six months. Why are we renting this floor space? So there's going to be some massive changes in the workplace.

Evelyn (10:06): That's something that I've been thinking about as well. If we can open up some of these office spaces that are occupied by corporations in the city and get people to modulate their working life a bit more and how that would really help on congestion, how we're travelling travelling and then would this fundamentally change how we interact and build and facilitate for public spaces?

Peter (10:28): Well, we've got clients that are forcing their employees to split shifts now so that they're only half interacting on a work basis so that the risk is that if you have all your people working in the one spot, someone goes down sick, all those people need to isolate, so then you have critical infrastructure that has no

people that support and services, so they're splitting shifts. They'll have a day shift and afternoon shift doing pretty much what they've traditionally done Monday to Friday, nine to five so that they can at least have half of the staff available if something goes wrong. Those sorts of considerations need to be in place now, so that means now does that mean that we have to have two separate offices? Do we have two locations? Do we have co-location sharing of desks anymore? It's lots of things changing very rapidly at the moment and it also helps.

Peter (11:09): Like you were just for saying with the infrastructure, transit times and stuff like that, well maybe do we need to have a nine o'clock start? Can we not have people starting earlier? Does that mean we're going to have to increase the number of trains? Does it spread out the peak traffic times or does it actually reduce the travel times because actually, you know, it's much easier getting to and from work because I'm on the earlier shift.

Michael (11:28): And transport's really interesting. I think we've got a really good case now to say we don't necessarily need to be anywhere except for where those places are that make us happy and give us the most productivity and provide us with a sense of community and joy and whether that be online or whether that be 200 kilometres away from a physical office. Changing those perspectives around what we've done in the past and what is possible in the future. I think if there's a silver lining, I think that's what we can gather from, from this current pandemic.

Peter (11:56): There's been studies and does evidence that shows that people have different work times where they are much more productive. Some late afternoon. I myself get the spike around 2:00 PM or three to five you know, I get my most work done at those times and other times of the day. Maybe that's a better time to be out going for a walk and interacting with public spaces and getting out of home at the moment, but out of an office environment and refreshing ourselves. Who says now that nine to five is nine to five.

Hannah (12:26): That was the first of our two part episode on how we experience place and how we plan for and create places. Join us next week, for part two where our guests examine the boundaries between physical and digital, protecting people in online spaces, Skeuomorphic design and what physical places will look like post COVID-19 I'm your host Hannah Bleyerveen.