



URBAN SPACESHIP PODCAST, EPISODE #5, June 16, 2021

Topic: Urban Institute: Embedding Equity into Placemaking

Program hosts:

Jeremy Fojut - Co-Founder & CEO, NEWaukee

Montavius Jones - Development Associate, Cinnaire

Michael Bradley - Amateur Demographer, Passionate about Urbanism

Guest: Mark Treskon – senior research associate in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center at the Urban Institute

Urban Spaceship presented by Greenfire is a civic program that explores the intersection of planning, architecture, housing, development, transportation, placemaking, government, economic development, historic preservation, construction, and design.

Each episode will dive deep into inspiring ideas to make Milwaukee more human-centered, sustainably-developed, and rethink and reframe the very foundation and function urbanism has on our region.

Podcast 5 Summary:

Michael, Montavius, and Jeremy dive into the Urban Institute's Embedding Equity into Placemaking report over two episodes. The report examines The Night Market and Beerline Trail projects through a lens of inclusive, community-oriented development, with the goal of helping local stakeholders more effectively communicate the benefits and effects of placemaking. The report presents process and implementation lessons focused on how these projects can continue to strengthen equity in the city and region moving forward and on how creative-placemaking techniques more generally can help drive equitable development. Part 1 will focus on the Night Market and Westown neighborhood. Part 2 (date TBA) will focus on the Beerline Trail and Harambee/Riverwest neighborhoods.

Here's the report for reference: <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/embedding-equity-placemaking>

Deep Dive Topic: Urban Institute's Embedding Equity into Placemaking Report

Westown: A Neighborhood Evolution

In the 1870s, Westown was already very built up as it was connected to the Great Lakes trade. It was the manufacturing and trade center of the region. This was the era before trucks, and the Milwaukee and Menomonee rivers were ideal to ship goods.

The train station stood where we-energies is now, and was the main entry to Milwaukee. In 1950, there were 20,000 people living in Westown. By the 1960s, the building of highways hit the tapestry of the city, and the population declined. By 1990 there were less than 1000 people living in Westown. Today, there are about 5,000. Much of the growth is from commercial to residential conversions.

Westown is one of the most dynamic parts of the city with its central location, riverfront access, and there's still the connection with Amtrak as the entry point for many to Milwaukee. It's staggering to see a neighborhood go from 20,000 to 1000 people. Projects in the pipeline now are converting office space to housing, like the former Milwaukee Journal Sentinel building. A lot of older office space, industrial and department stores are being repurposed as housing and that is bringing a lot of people back to the neighborhood.

It is interesting to see the evolution of the popular side of town – once Westown, now more popular in Eastown. The trajectory for Eastown was similar, but they began bringing back housing developments about two decades sooner. Yankee Hill Towers, developments north of Wells Street.

The Grand Avenue mall didn't have enough people living around there. We're seeing the demise of monolithic buildings for one use.

Ten years ago developers, residents, city officials sat down to see what could be done to bring people back to the neighborhood and engage them. Night Market was an event everyone could participate in. It was really successful in bringing people together. Milwaukee is one of the more racially segregated cities, but this was an opportunity to come together in a shared space. Visitors, vendors, participants all welcome, it was an inclusive process.

One of the goals of the Night Market was to change the perceptions of the neighborhood. It was part psychological, getting people familiar with the neighborhood, get them re-acquainted with it. And it was part of a broader set of changes along the riverfront, the new food hall, which going forward has the potential to connect people and bring on more stakeholders.

What stands out about the neighborhood is the historic buildings that create an interesting built environment. There's a vitality at the street level making walking the corridor less moribund. Some stretches still not pleasant along W. Wisconsin Ave. and the mall – but can open that up and look at these spaces to reactivate them.

One concept is incremental development – taking the next small step toward the bigger development goal. For example, if area is not ready for a coffee shop, but may want high quality coffee, sell it at an existing corner store, build the demand until can sustain the actual coffee shop. The Night Market is doing that, but for the neighborhood. The Night Market is taking the incremental approach to counter the Westown perception as unsafe, not as good as Eastown as an investment. Residential dwellers not ready, but the Night Market preps the area to be ready for that next step.

The Night Market helps in justifying the neighborhood as a source of possible investment. There's evidence that people are more familiar with the area now, using that as a way to signal to developers and entrepreneurs to look at the space, and stay open to the broader community as it develops.

Equitable placemaking activity changing the perceptions of Westown, creating more interest. Our region is segregated, but diverse, and Night Market did not just draw on one type of people. Night Market was intentional about bringing in diverse artists, vendors. Good placemaking is a long process. We paid everyone for their time.

Didn't expect the number of young people under 18 coming downtown. Families from Waukesha, kids from all over. There was an intergenerational quality to it. Placemaking is going to be essential for the

future of Westtown, activating park space like Pere Marquette and Postman's Square. It presents an opportunity to leverage the energy of the Night Market 365 days a year.

The region is demonstrating a need for a central gathering place. Westtown makes the most sense. Now to translate that to diversity of the surrounding neighborhood. Wealth is concentrated in a minority of people who aren't minorities. Black, brown, women-owned businesses, LBQTG might want to invest, but due to certain economic factors can't buy into the market. There's a need to help people get into the neighborhood.

There's a stereotype of putting a mural up, and like a commercial gentrification, people get pushed out. It's tough going from one temporary event like Night Market to a multi-million dollar redevelopment of a building where you need capital.

The Night Market provided a place for children/teens to be. We need to do more things for kids and younger families and look at how to create more free things for families to do. Milwaukee is the youngest of the 10 largest cities, with an unusually high population under 18 years old. Definitely like to see city leaders look at how we're tending our population. There's opportunity for the city to get better at this.

When thinking of placemaking initiatives and who we're bringing to the table, it's important that the people you want to involve and attract are at the table. The entire process has to be an equitable process.

NOTE: We'll be hosting 'part 2' of this Embedding Equity into Placemaking series in July focused on the Beerline Trail project and the Riverwest/Harambee neighborhoods, date TBA.

Chat from attendees:

Every 20 minutes to Chicago sounds like a fantasy land and I want it
Me too, Montavius! And daily trains between small towns in the Milwaukee regions. #ruralurbanflow

If you haven't heard, the Night Market is back for one night this summer on Wednesday, August 18th!
<https://www.mkenightmarket.com/>

As Jane Jacobs famously argued, "Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody." So, I appreciate your inclusive placemaking efforts and am looking forward to the return of The Night Market.

Is there an aspect of these types of placemaking events that capitalize on a subconscious sense of "place taboo" for lack of a better term? Even for people that work in this area of downtown, they may often not see this area in a different light (both figuratively and literally). I've noticed times successful events take place in locations that are non-traditional. We've hosted events in airplane hangars over the years, and these events have always been some of our most well attended. A common response to the question of "what made this event a success?" was that there was a general curiosity of the physical space in the "new context" that a public event brings. People seem to like to be witness to things that at face value would not seem compatible, and the excitement that arises when a mash-up like this occurs.

Yes Milwaukee demographic ratios were a guide, Megan. Milwaukee has a majority population that is African-American, Latina/o, and other neighbors that associate to being BIPOC. So we thought about that as a guide for who became the vendors and artists that made Night Market what it has become. Recent blog post by Angela from NEWaukee and me about this report and work

https://www.newaukee.com/events/rebuild/?mc_cid=706cab3d40&mc_eid=6b6daeb300

Getting people together in places that they wouldn't consider a traditional gathering place or giving people access to a space they would not typically have access to definitely adds an interesting layer to events and helps people think differently about the opportunities of these places and what could be.

Getting a unique playground downtown could be helpful in welcoming families

Harbor View Plaza (though technically south of the traditional "downtown" area) is a good example of this

<https://www.google.com/maps/uv?pb=!1s0x88051950690989bd%3A0x7c0b7715c231d472!3m1!7e115!4shttps%3A%2F%2Flh5.googleusercontent.com%2Fp%2FAF1QipNzbjy2WtyqlBDV6ylAGgavJYDovKFjSO4nbktQ%3Dw300-h200-k-no!5sharbor%20district%20park%20-%20Google%20Search!15sCgIgAQ&imagekey=!1e10!2sAF1QipNzbjy2WtyqlBDV6ylAGgavJYDovKFjSO4nbktQ&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewjn86zdtJzxAhVJop4KHZE8DqsQoiowEnoECDYQAw>

Westown is not family-friendly. As someone who used to work with residential communities, I saw countless couples who left Downtown and moved to the suburbs when they wanted to start their families. On the flip side, empty-nesters were also happy to downsize from their McMansions and rediscover the amenities of Downtown living.

I like the idea of creating spaces in parks that are MEANT for teens to hang out.

I think we created a social experience for the vendors and artists in the design and production process that creates social support. And that encouraged vendors and artists to bring others from their life to experience Downtown through Night Market.