

Placelt! Workshops: Transforming Urban Planning through Play and Community Engagement

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June 2023

Urban planners—whose task, ultimately, is to serve the public interest—play an important role in guiding the efficient development of the built world around us, from structures to signage to the use of land. However, to many, the field of urban planning is opaque, if one is even aware of the profession at all. Most residents who interact with professional urban planners likely do so only to obtain a building permit or to support (or more likely protest) a development proposal. Legalistic, technocratic, and jargon-filled terminology is often bandied about by planners during these interactions, further confirming a sense that urban planners are merely ‘cogs’ in the seemingly impersonal machine of urban development. One California urban planner, James Rojas, is keenly aware of the image held by the public and is actively working on a warmer approach to engaging community residents in the process of urban change.

Rojas is a big name in urban design thinking and participatory planning practice. An East Los Angeles native, graduate of MIT, and former LA Metro employee, he is considered a father of Latino Urbanism, beginning his work in the early 1990s. Since then, he has focused his efforts on a play-based community engaged urban design method called Placelt!, which has become something of a global phenomenon. With John Kemp, Rojas’s recently released book’s title memorably encapsulates his approach: “Dream, Play, Build: Hands-On Community Engagement for Enduring Spaces and Places.”

Rojas notes, “In stark contrast to planners, architects, and other credentialed experts, most people experience cities in profoundly tactile ways, through their senses and emotions. The building blocks of cities comprise more than structures, streets, and sidewalks, but equally encompass personal experience, collective memory, and aspirations. While less tangible and more difficult to measure, these aspects are what transform infrastructure, mere physical objects, into place, a sense of belonging—community. And yet these more ephemeral ways of understanding are discounted within conventional planning practice and education. The result is an acute distrust between planners and the public.”

Breaking down some of this distrust is the mission of Rojas’s Placelt! workshops. They are remarkably simple to set up and can be conducted just as easily in a formal meeting hall with dozens of participants of any age, background, or ability, as on a bustling street corner. Placelt! uses objects, storytelling, and play to capture details and patterns of public space often overlooked by traditional planning; the image below shows the technique in action as a pop-up event in downtown San Jose. Participants are given a huge supply of materials—including toys, miniature buildings, and trees, to name a few—and a generalized base map upon which to place them.



James Rojas (left, front) and SJSU urban planning graduate student Yuchen Sun (left, rear) engage San Jose residents using Placel! in front of City Hall, April 2023

The spontaneous, informal discussions during these design sessions reveal the power of Rojas's approach. As he notes: "Our workshops are designed for people who would never attend a public meeting, let alone speak out at one. It is largely based on nonverbal methodologies that use objects, storytelling, and play to inspire visual and spatial thinking. We want to discover the things that viscerally connect them to their homes and neighborhoods..... These exercises reveal the physical and emotional connections to place, capturing details and patterns of public space often overlooked by traditional quantitative approaches, such as maps and graphs. Participants quickly realize that they possess a singular expertise that surpasses anything that credentialed experts can provide; after all, who knows and understands their community better than the community itself? This is an extremely empowering realization."

Who understands a community better than community members themselves? This is an extremely empowering realization.

With the support of a grant from the Mineta Transportation Institute, Rojas brought Placelt! to San Jose in April 2023. Graduate urban planning students and their faculty members at San Jose State University had the opportunity to experience Rojas in action as he deputized the students to lead Placelt! events at a Viva CalleSJ event and during a Capstone Studio class session instructed by Rick Kos, AICP.

James notes: “This class is examining East Santa Clara Street between Diridon Station and 11th Street, ultimately making recommendations to the San Jose Department of Transportation for how to convert it into a ‘complete street.’ This street is a major spine in Downtown San Jose connecting many landmarks, but the public realm has been designed for cars, making it uncomfortable for pedestrians, cyclists, and public transit users. The students used the interactive Placelt! model to engage the public through their hands and senses by using the provided objects to improve the street.”

Following the pop-up events, Kos guided his students in a discussion about their impressions of Rojas’s approach. He reminded them of what Rojas often likes to emphasize, that “urban planning begins with your story, your life, and that needs to be brought into the plan. Placelt! offers people who have never participated in urban planning a way in.” The graduate students were clearly moved by their experience with the simple yet profoundly warm approach to urban planning conversations. Kos encouraged them to remember what they learned about Rojas and his work as they complete their studies and fan out to jobs in far-flung city halls and consulting firms, serving the public interest and helping guide the future of our communities.

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