Podcast Transcript: The Placemakers

Host: Stephen Burton
Guest: Brooke Williams, Director of Fourfold Studio

Stephen Burton: Today we're speaking to Brooke Williams. Brooke Williams is the Director of Fourfold Studio. Brooke advocates for people-centered approaches to placemaking with high levels of stakeholder collaboration. Brooke has founded a not-for-profit, delivered internationally acclaimed activations, and been a leading voice in the placemaking movement here in Queensland, Australia. She's passionate about creating vibrant cities with proud and connected communities.

In my personal experience, having collaborated with Brooke on many projects, her dedication to putting people first and community voices at the center of the placemaking process is both inspirational and truly democratic, and it creates an absolute influence on what I do in my practice. I've always looked up to Brooke as a peer, as a fellow hard-working small business owner, and also as a fearless placemaking practitioner doing things differently and pushing new approaches which I know firsthand is often not easy. So Brooke, hi and welcome to the Placemakers.

Brooke Williams: Hey Stephen, thank you. And thank you for that very kind welcome and introduction. Nice tailoring.

Stephen Burton: So Brooke, I'm just going to jump straight into it today to give you a bit of open space to tell us all about placemaking from your point of view. Really, I'd love to just straight away ask you: what do you think is the most important ingredient to creating successful public places?

Brooke Williams: I try to be really clever and think of something out of the box but honestly, it absolutely just comes back to **people**. To me, it's the critical ingredient to every successful thriving public space. Obviously, there are spaces in our environment that are quiet places and there are places in our environment that are busy places. But if we're talking about an intentionally public space—and I probably have the lens of those more civic spaces—it's people. And yeah, that is most definitely the thing that's needed and so often missing.

Stephen Burton: When you say so often missing, why do you think that it is so often missing and how do we address that?

Brooke Williams: That has been pretty much the question that has inspired my career. My background is urban design, as you would know. I think that we have a really good design

practice in Australia. We have really good processes to bring together a number of different expert opinions around how we can create really great places. We were also very fortunate to live in a world where investment into our public spaces is pretty significant.

I think what happens in most cases—and certainly in the past, although hopefully, we're getting a bit better at this—is that we bring together all of these experts of place. But instead of working with those locals that are the people making that place really authentic and different, we tend to sort of work together. We're not necessarily looking at the attributes and the whole of life of place that a community or an everyday stakeholder would be considering when they think about that place.

As a result, we get really pretty places that are often soulless and lifeless and don't have those people using them. The locals aren't seeing themselves reflected in that place and they haven't been part of that process. So they don't necessarily understand how they can use it, activate it, and bring that everyday life towards it.

Stephen Burton: So how do we put people at the center of the placemaking process? Tell us a little bit about the methodology that you go through to achieve that.

Brooke Williams: I don't think we do anything that's too crazy out of the box. We've always had a pretty good integrated process around urban design bringing all those experts together. It's just about thinking about people—and local people and local stakeholders of all levels—in that process and actually integrating it. So, not having it as mutually exclusive processes.

I think placemaking, as a term... let's think about it in terms of process versus outputs. As a process, I think placemaking has brought to the world some really great tactical trials around how we can be having those conversations with the community in a more engaging, easier-to-interact-with way regarding the changes in their neighborhoods.

What we try to do is intertwine those methods within the traditional city-making process. So, a lot of collaboration at the earliest stages, ongoing collaboration, really thinking about all of the different people that have a role to play, and then helping them understand what that role is through the process so that once we actually deliver a public space, those people understand how they can actually play a part in that revitalization. Often it's about getting those people involved early and letting them start to see the changes that they want to create before we've even gone ahead and finished the delivery of the final public space. If we can get that to happen, in my experience, that works the best.

Stephen Burton: Is what you're doing and what you're talking about somewhat of a radical proposition? Is this something that we're doing here in Queensland and in Australia that maybe isn't being done in other places? Is this a cutting-edge thing? Are there parts of the world where this would be considered completely out of the box?

Brooke Williams: Good question. I don't know. I started in urban design where we were

following a fairly traditional process, that kind of more of a top-down approach. And then I was exploring how we could increase culture and activity in public spaces and so at that stage was the not-for-profit with the Urban Collective in Brisbane, where we were really trying to impact change at the grassroots level.

I then joined an organization called Co-Design Studio. That was essentially the similar process—it was trying to let communities lead change in their neighborhood. Throughout all of those pieces of my career, I have essentially then with Fourfold, what we now do is bring it all together. We know that there are challenges with both a top-down and a grassroots bottom-up process. So what we're trying to do is create a system where local people have a really meaningful role, but they're being supported by systems that are empowering and enabling them to play that role. So they're not fighting against a system; it's all part of the one.

Whether that happens in other places? I'm not sure. I know people are pretty surprised; it takes a fair amount of explanation to get people on board with the processes that we put forward. But again, I think it's becoming more common. Some of these concepts like Place Plans... often that is about short-term and long-term action and actions that can be delivered by many different partners including community, all the way through the councils and state governments. I think we're getting there and there has certainly been a shift that I've seen over the last 10 years.

Stephen Burton: Do you often find yourself having conversations with prospective clients on projects where you really have to explain why this sort of thing is important? So when people are creating public places... do you find yourself at the early stages of the project having to educate our policymakers and our decision-makers about why something like this is important and why we need it?

Brooke Williams: Yes, often I do think that I am. And I mean that's part of the role and it's part of what I love about what I do. I also find we'll introduce an idea and everyone gets it and they say, "Yep, that's great." But then you've got to keep at it. You've got to keep at it throughout the entire process, keep reminding the team what you mean and how it fits in and how you can actually get it to work.

I think it is all good in theory until it gets to this sort of pointy end where we're out on the ground trying to do a collaborative design piece for a small-scale project. We can't do that in a way that's effective unless we have a community that is passionate, engaged, and want to be involved. Because ultimately what we're saying is: we'll support you to deliver your project.

When we get to that stage in the project, I find there is a really strong role for placemakers to play in terms of sharing lots of examples, helping those project teams or the officers in councils quite often to connect with other people and other officers in other regions that have done this work. So that they can overcome all of the many internal barriers that they've got

around this piece of work.

I've never found it that the council officers don't get it or that they don't want to do it, but *how* to do it and actually making it happen is where we get a bit stuck. And so the placemaking network has always been a pretty beautiful thing in my opinion in that everyone is so willing to share their experience and their time. We often bring people together that have similar challenges and I've never had the case where there are closed doors.

Stephen Burton: Do you think there's an argument to be had around creating more of a methodology that's applicable across multiple projects? Can people inside council, people in the development space, employ a methodology for their work that puts community at the center of it? Or do you think that we can somehow create something as a movement, as a placemaking movement, that better equips our decision-makers and our developers and policy-makers to implement a people-first approach?

Brooke Williams: Yes, I think that would be a good starting point. We've definitely been trying to do that. And in certain types of projects, we have got great methodology. So say for example, Main Street revitalization or a master planning process for a city center or a CBD area—those sorts of processes, I feel like at least at Fourfold, we've got methodologies that work.

But then I also would say some of the bigger challenges that we have is that our councils are quite large, and Southeast Queensland in particular struggles here because we have really big councils with quite siloed disciplines. It's not that they don't want to work together, but they haven't necessarily got processes in place to be able to collaborate across project budgets and resources and operational programs.

And so when we get to the level of talking about a place—and particularly that kind of place identity, the activations, the small-scale improvements, maybe amenity improvements—we talk to community and community don't see "oh that's not this department's role or that's not that department's role." They want to talk about everything that has to do with place.

It's a fear I think that we come up against within councils where they say we can't have that conversation with community because... we're promising empty promises or we have to be realistic about the expectations of what we can achieve. And at the moment internally, they aren't able to work with all of the different departments coming together to support the community to realize their visions and aspirations.

Stephen Burton: Do you find when you start these projects that the community are eager to participate? Or is there often a case of having to drag the community along in the process?

Brooke Williams: Both. Just depends. Every community is completely different. Always the change of "why are we doing this" and "why is council not doing this," that's often a barrier. That trust issue has been something that we've really had to tackle. But once we get over that,

I think yeah, it's incredible.

Usually, it starts quite small. It can be a small group of five or six people. And then once others start to see that it's positive energy, it's action, it's not just talking, we're actually delivering things on the ground... then that momentum and the swell kicks in.

Stephen Burton: What are some of the challenges in working with communities? I mean, there must be good experiences in what you do and there must also be challenges. What are some of the things that you find difficult?

Brooke Williams: I think with community, it's ongoing. It takes a long time to establish a community group that's really proactive. Usually, we wouldn't just suggest *just* community; it's usually a working group that involves some council officers, that has businesses... the support of major investors in town, for example, can be really critical. Because that's one of the barriers they hit, will be funding. Another barrier will be that governance that they operate between themselves—how do they make decisions? Who's actually responsible for delivering things on the ground? So all of those things need to be considered.

We try to do training. We'll often connect community groups or community trader groups with other established organizations that are set up to support these groups, like Town Teams. They're an excellent group because they've got templates and examples and a whole network of people that are doing similar things in their own towns. So whilst the issues and the barriers that are faced in a city or a place in Queensland might be very different to Western Australia, there's still some connection there where they can understand, "Okay, well they've done it. So what have they done? How can we get over that hurdle?"

One that comes up all the time is public liability insurance. I've always had a hope that maybe one day we'll get to a system where we can actually absorb that at a state level like they've done in New Zealand. And I think also Canada does something similar. But it's a bit beyond me trying to figure that one out. I think we need to get the lawyers involved. But it is a constant issue, public liability insurance.

Stephen Burton: Some of your marketing material talks about creating places that people can see their fingerprints over. And I really like that expression because to me it speaks to the way in which you go about really including people's vision and people's input into what they want to see in their public places. Can you talk a little bit about what that means to you?

Brooke Williams: Yeah, sure. So I think it probably goes back to that process of urban design. If we're talking about public spaces, when we are looking at revitalizing a main street, let's say... the community, often we ask them "what do you want to see in this space?" and they'll talk about car parking, they'll talk about the road and the street structure, they'll talk about seating and spaces that they want. But they'll also start to talk about the way they want to use the space, the way they want to see it come to life. You'll talk to them about their identity of

their town and so they'll start to share stories.

And the more you get to know a community, the more those things that they really value and care about come to life. And so for people to be able to see their **fingerprints** over a public space, what that means to us is that the community feel very much directly reflected in the places that they are inhabiting. So it might be through working with artists or working with landscape architects or people like yourself who can then translate community values and community stories into physical things that may be temporary or may be permanent. But they start to reflect that community and they make that place really special.

Anyone visiting there has that automatic connection with who this community is and what they care about and what this place is and some of those local stories. So I guess this is at that other end of process versus outputs. The fingerprints piece to me is that community sees something tangible in the delivery, particularly around these physical infrastructure amenity projects, that they know has come from them. It's something that could only be specific to them. And if we don't engage with people authentically throughout the entire process of change, we miss that. And that's why we start to get places that look and feel the same. You could plonk it anywhere in Southeast Queensland and you couldn't tell where it was. So there's plenty of those around.

Stephen Burton: So it's really what you're talking about is like an antidote to creating placelessness—these cities and these things that could be, like you said, plonked anywhere in anywhere in the country and show no sort of connection to the places in which they exist or tell no stories of the people in the community in which they live.

Brooke Williams: Yeah, exactly.

Stephen Burton: What happens when we get this stuff wrong? What happens when we don't put people in the heart of this process and we're not focused on what it is that the community wants out of their public places? What do you see?

Brooke Williams: I guess at the very beginning of it, I think there's the vision of a place. And I think where we've made the mistake is when we are not happy with a place as it is and we as the experts come in and say, "Nope, this place is going to revitalize the local economy, it's going to drive investment... We need these things to happen." And so we come up with a vision that doesn't necessarily align with the existing community that's there, but under the intention of catalyzing change to see something new happen, right?

When that happens, I find if the community haven't been brought on that journey and they haven't been able to, as part of that process, still be able to see that reflection of themselves in this new place... I think we create these great places—they don't work. And so then often that's when they bring the placemaking people in. "We need an activation strategy, we need to figure out how to bring life into this place."

But give it 10, 15 years and all of a sudden everyone starts to blame the physical infrastructure. And so then there's more investment that goes back into that place and we do it all over again. And so I've seen that happen that many times in my career on projects I've worked on and projects that I've seen done by others. And I think that's where we really need to reflect and take some measurement and look at what is it that are the full ingredients, all of the things that have to come together to make a place work. And if it wasn't the amenity upgrade that changed that place in the first instance, why would it do it in the second round of revitalization? Surely we need to look at something else. So I think we just jump to big spend and big money too often because that's the thing we've always done.

Stephen Burton: Throwing money at a problem and hoping it will create a solution. You said one word you used earlier was the word **measurement**. And I really like that because I'm wondering if there's in your practice and in your experience, is there an engagement with the metrics around what makes a place great? And is there an appetite for us to go back and look at successful places and say, "Well, what was it about this project that made it successful? What did we do right here? Or even what did we do wrong here?" Is there a role for this data gathering? Is there a role for more measurement and metrics around creating good places for people?

Brooke Williams: It's actually, I'd say, one of the hottest topics in the industry. It's constantly a request: How do we measure this? What do we measure? How do we measure consistently so that we can do comparison across places?

There are so many big organizations that are out there and have incredible tools around how we can do this based on all sorts of freely available data or smart technology. All of these things are available. I think what's really challenging—and for places that are permanent and are changing slowly over time or we're measuring over time, some of those tools are incredible and we definitely should be looking at them as how we can actually look at the ingredients of places.

I think the other end of the spectrum is when we do something short-term temporary and we want to measure whether or not it's worked. And those, we find that often we don't have the metrics in place to be able to do that. Often it requires quite labor-intensive methods, which is possible to do and it does is effective if you do them, but it just doesn't happen as often as it should because it ends up costing a lot of money.

But one other thing, I think just going back to how we actually measure places and see effective places and grab the ingredients of a successful place... I think we need to be cautious of is: it's not necessarily just the ingredients. So you can't put together the same retail, the same streetscape, and the buildings in one place and expect it to work the same in another. But we do that. That's what we do often in the design industry. We'll have clients come to us and say "I want *that* in *this* place." But the people in that place are completely different and the way that that place is being used is very different. And so that's where we

can have a bit of failure I think, with the cookie-cutter approach. So, with caution.

Stephen Burton: So how do we know when we've got it right? When you go into a public place, whether it be one that you've worked on or just one that you like, how do you react? How do you feel? What tells you that that place is a success?

Brooke Williams: For me, the way that it feels is something that's huge to me. We worked on a project in Grafton. It was meant to just be a planning project, but through the process that we go through, we essentially came up with an action plan with the local businesses about how they could... yes, this is long-term planning, there's no budget for this, however, what are some of those things that you could start to do right now to see change?

And off the back of that, they were then able to later down the track secure a Streets as Shared Spaces grant—which is a New South Wales government grant for $500,000—and have recently implemented it. And so I had that experience of being in that place and walking up and down the street and getting to know the businesses... and then coming back two years later after they'd run short-term temporary activations. And they've had no vacancies in that period—so they filled all their vacancies apart from one which had interior issues—and the feel of the street was completely different.

It had a sense of personality. You felt like there was, yes, beautiful things there in terms of fine, refined landscape detail... but it's all those other little personal touches. And I think when we see those places, we feel really welcomed because we can relate to them as people. But it's also the way that you'd walk into a business and you can see that they're proud. They'll talk about other businesses. They'll talk about things that are happening on the street or in the town. So I think the people in a place and whether or not they're happy with that place is really a critical thing that we need to be able to bring about through our process.

Stephen Burton: And just one final question. It's a question that comes back to I guess a lot of the ways in which we fund the development or the redevelopment of our public places. And that's often through an economic lens. So often there's a call for a place to be revived because it's suffering economically or there's an expectation it's about to suffer economically because of a bypass to the town or some other sort of change. Is there a way that we can measure what we do in terms of creating good places beyond just the feel-good factor? Is there a way that we can build more solid cases for putting people at the center of our placemaking process every time?

Brooke Williams: Yeah, that's a really good point. There was a report done recently by ABC talking about loneliness and isolation. And we know that loneliness is up there with one of the biggest killers in our nation and it's a real issue that is increasing. We've got I think it's one in three people under 18 are lonely, feel lonely. And it might even be more than that. It's crazy.

I think that what placemaking does is it gives people a way to connect with each other around a place. And that is a connection that can happen outside of gender, it can happen outside of

culture, it can happen... it's a place where we all come together. And so for those places and the process of being part of creating those places to play a real role in health and wellbeing and happiness of our communities... to support things like social isolation, to support people with needs in terms of loneliness or whether it's health needs or whatever those things might be... for them to connect, to create new networks, I think that it's a massive opportunity for placemaking.

I do think that as an industry we do talk about that, but I don't think the funding supports that argument as much as it should. It definitely lends itself towards the local economic revival piece. I was talking about the money that we spend on infrastructure change—that's one of the reasons I think we are able to get placemaking projects consistently in Queensland is because there is so much investment underway and change underway. And so then to be able to take a small percentage of that big budget and put it into placemaking, knowing that it's got all of those added social benefits and local economic revival benefits... that's the way we talk about it because we know that that's the way that we'd be able to effectively get the resources and budgets that we need to deliver it.

Stephen Burton: Brooke, thanks so much for sharing your experience and your thoughts today on the Placemakers and for telling us about the importance of putting community first at our placemaking process.

Brooke Williams: Great. Thank you so much for having me.

Stephen Burton: Thanks for listening to the Placemakers.