

Document 8: Daniel Hewitt Transcript

Podcast: The Placemakers **Episode:** Daniel Hewitt – Digital Placemaking **Host:** Stephen Burton **Guest:** Daniel Hewitt, Co-Founder of FutureLabs

Stephen Burton: Today we're speaking to Daniel Hewitt. Daniel is the co-founder of FutureLabs, a technology-inspired creative experience agency. FutureLabs uses technology in ways that can complement traditional forms of placemaking. Daniel joins us today to talk about digital placemaking. Thanks for joining us today Daniel on the Placemakers.

Daniel Hewitt: No problems at all Stephen, thanks for having me.

Stephen Burton: So I wanted to jump straight in and ask the obvious question: What actually is digital placemaking?

Daniel Hewitt: It's a great question. To sum it up simply, in my opinion, it is using different forms of digital technologies to not only enhance an environment—it might be an overlay of an environment—but generally just helping either educate, enhance, excite, and ultimately problem-solve when you're looking at a public space or a particular place.

The word "digital" is interesting. The way I personally see it is looking at digital technologies. It could be as simple as using audiovisual elements—lighting, projections, sound—but then taking it to the next level and integrating some form of software programming to make it a little bit more interactive. It could be using sensors, electronics to trigger things, turn things on and off, and kind of add that extra element of "wow" to a space. Or it could also be used in a little bit more of a passive way where you're using different forms of technologies to analyze a space, improve a space, and learn from how people are using a space as well.

One thing I am big on is not using digital technologies for digital technology's sake. It's really important that whenever we consider digital in a form of placemaking that we're using the right tools and the right technologies for the job. We don't want to detract from the environment. The way that we approach it is definitely around that word of **enhancing**.

Stephen Burton: Is it correct that digital placemaking was born originally as part of marketing, advertising, branding—perhaps originally occurred in environments like shopping centers and retail environments? Can you trace that out a little bit for us?

Daniel Hewitt: FutureLabs started in the experience game—tech-inspired creative experiences. We use technology to create these experiences. FutureLabs has worked in so many different types of industries—we've done a lot of stuff in the events space, fan engagement at sporting events (Australian Open etc.), right through to going into more of a retail experience working with brands. And then even folding into what you see a lot more now, getting more popular, is these museum and gallery-based experiences—creating interactive and immersive spaces more around engagement and education.

Over time, we're starting to see that drift into the placemaking space with governments and councils and property developers to really take things to the next level.

Stephen Burton: Is digital placemaking always about creating experiences for people in places? Or is there an element of it that's about gathering data and using information to inform decision making?

Daniel Hewitt: I'd like to say it's both. I can talk a bit about an example that we're currently working on. We were fortunate enough to be invited by the City of Melbourne to engage in an innovation pitch around how they could look at using any forms of innovation (we brought tech to the table) around biodiversity and how they can instill a bit more back into one of their local precincts being Fisherman's Bend.

Fisherman's Bend was an old industrial area just off the Docklands in Melbourne. It's now kind of been turned into a beautiful suburb. But what the City of Melbourne realized is simple things that we would take for granted like birdsong and birds and trees... they noticed that there was a dwindling bird population in this area.

So we came up with the idea of how could we use digital and technology to potentially analyze the space, listen, and create these beautiful-looking wooden totems and place them around the Fisherman's Bend precinct to listen to birds and pray [prey?] and what's going on in the environment. Analyzing that data. And then from learning from that, we can then play different types of bird song to attract birds back into the area.

So that's a really good way of analyzing—using those technologies to then again bring something back into that space. So I think that's a really clever way of analyzing and creating a place.

Stephen Burton: A project's only as good as its brief. Do you find yourself having to educate your clients about what digital placemaking is in order to receive requests to do work which is of high value to places?

Daniel Hewitt: Yes and no. It depends on the client in the industry. Someone who might have a bit more experience, say on the property development side of things, they may be a little bit more exposed to that. Whereas a local council might not. So our role would be to come in early on to talk about the possibilities and where you could take and add digital placemaking into a space.

We are speaking to a lot of councils around problematic spaces—how can we attract people back into the area? How can we add different digital elements into the space to attract the right type of people and create a sense of community again?

Like anything, we'd always encourage local governments and councils to engage us early on to consult and show them the possibilities of what's out there. But we also look at a lot of the commercial realities as well. It's the boring stuff but it's like: how risky is something like this to do? What kind of budgets are we looking at, timings, upkeep? We work really closely with stakeholders to dispel a lot of those myths and paint that picture of how we could use that form of funding to create the best possible space. So it is an education process.

Stephen Burton: How do you think digital placemaking can work alongside traditional forms of placemaking? Is there a way that these two can complement each other?

Daniel Hewitt: From our dealings anyway, we're greeted with open arms and collaborate. Bringing a company like ours in at an early stage, working with traditional placemakers, they can understand how we can complement and help them solve problems as well. It's not just about flashy lights and audio visual, it's really about attacking a problem that they may have. So for the most part, lots and lots more people are engaging us early on to help them.

Stephen Burton: You mentioned a couple of times about solving problems. What kind of problems do you come across that you think digital placemaking is well suited to solving?

Daniel Hewitt: We're actually working with a regional council at the moment and they have a public square surrounded by retailers. During the day it's just a normal bustling place. But what they're finding is going into the late afternoon/evening, it gets very dead. It might attract the wrong crowd—vandalism, that type of stuff. Which is a real problem.

They're kind of working closely with us on how can we bring that space to life at night—not just during the day—and creating these little interactive play spaces for families, parents, kids. To not only enjoy during the day but also late into the afternoon and evening. It's a really good project because it's bringing that sense of community back into that space after hours.

Commercially, it's solving a big problem for local businesses and retailers where they are struggling to attract the right traffic at night times, especially in hospitality. And so yeah, it's just a great way of solving that was a real problem that they've got. How can we enhance that space using different forms of interactive lighting, water misters (it gets quite warm there), interactive sound... Creating a space for people that they wouldn't have experienced this before. So it's a bit of a destination. A free destination.

Stephen Burton: Are there barriers to experiences that are digital? Does it require certain technology for people to interact with it, whether that be their smartphones or a certain level of IT proficiency?

Daniel Hewitt: I'd say no. And I think that goes back to careful planning and understanding the community and your audience. Making your experience extremely accessible for the general public is obviously very important. You can't rely on just solely "if you don't have a smartphone you can't have the experience." How else can we open that up to anyone of any walks of life to have that experience?

There is an education working closely with councils and governments around how does this work, what is the kind of upkeep, what kind of measures do you put in place from an IT perspective to ensure this continues to work 24/7. So again just careful planning is the key here.

Stephen Burton: It sounds to me like there's possibilities for digital placemaking to be able to target certain people with certain challenges—whether that be around mobility or hearing or sight or issues around aging. You could create experiences for these types of people who might not get experiences in the public realm in other ways.

Daniel Hewitt: Spot on. It's got to consider all different factors. Whether it's an experience that just requires vision, you've got to think about how visually impaired people can also

have that experience as well. So it is about looking at the whole diverse range of audiences that you might need to work with and bringing that all together and again carefully plan.

We've done projects where we've worked with vision impaired organizations. For example, we worked with a famous chocolate brand and they wanted to bring Easter egg hunts to visually impaired children. We take that for granted—Easter egg hunt, see something, go find it. We created a product using digital technology—an Easter egg that had sensors in it and audio in it. So when this person that was visually impaired was getting closer, they could hear where that sound was coming from and we'd have different audio cues to then kind of keep them on the right path to find that object.

Using technology for that benefit to extend that experience not just to vision people that can see but vision impaired as well. So that's just a small example of how you can do that type of stuff.

Stephen Burton: What's the driver behind a kickoff for a digital placemaking project? Is it a renewal of a place? Or is it driven by an idea like the chocolate one? Is there a commercial driver like a brand behind it?

Daniel Hewitt: I'd say it's a little bit of everything. We have a bit of both. Definitely a renewal—existing spaces, how can we slightly revamp them or enhance them. Right through to a new development working with property development and local council looking at their audiences and starting from scratch. So I'd say it ranges from both. Both are just as exciting because it still is a little bit of a blank canvas.

Obviously with a renewal project you've got to understand—and this is where analyzing can come into play—analyzing the current environment and see what's working, what's not. And then using those learnings to come up with concepts and working with a traditional placemaker to then help them complement their area.

Stephen Burton: What do you think the future looks like for digital placemaking? What are some of the things that we're going to start seeing in our public places over the next decade or so that maybe we're not seeing much of now?

Daniel Hewitt: I'm a fan of technology. I'm an old programmer from back in the day so I might be slightly biased here. But I think whether we like it or not, we can't escape technology. It's just part of everyone's day in whatever way shape or form.

What we are seeing a lot more and more of is **augmented reality**. You would have people might have had the experience where they were using their smartphone to have an augmented reality experience—hold up their phone, analyze the area, and a digital overlay pops up in front of them.

Where that technology is going is into glasses—into spectacles. So walking into a space with a pair of glasses on that might have camera technology, microphone technology embedded, and I think that'll kind of really take off. Not right now. I would say give it 5-10 years. We're seeing it in cars—on your windscreen as you're driving, giving you that digital overlay of where to turn next or speed limits and stuff like that. So I'd see that being more and more popular.

I think even just enhancing general play spaces around a playground—seesaws making sound as kids go up and down on them. I think that'll become more and more of the norm because the demand will be there. People will start to expect that. And I think using digital placemaking is a way to drive people into these spaces and give them something different that they haven't experienced before.

Stephen Burton: What about the concept of purely digital places? So places in which we don't exist physically but we exist conceptually. When I first heard the word digital placemaking I kind of thought about the metaverse and I thought about these purely conceptual realms. Is that digital placemaking?

Daniel Hewitt: It's quite a bit of a controversial space, the metaverse. Obviously it was a very big topic of conversation during COVID—trying to create alternate spaces in alternate realities being virtual. I think personally it's more of something that's targeted to the younger audience. And it's something that we can't not look past. But you do see lots of brands—you got the likes of Roblox. That probably would be the closest thing to a metaverse at the moment. There's other people talking about it with Meta and Facebook and that.

But you know, you got your Roblox and there's brands investing money to create new retail environments for kids. It's a little bit crazy. I think we've got to keep an eye on it. I don't think it's going away. But I wouldn't call that digital placemaking per se, in my opinion. It's bordering on just good video game design.

But it's kind of again where what we're seeing right now is brands are investing money to be in those spaces. So I can go have a Nike experience in Roblox. I can go to a Nike retail outlet. I could buy a pair of digital Nike shoes. So it's an interesting space.

Stephen Burton: What role do you think AI will play in digital placemaking in the future? And is it playing a role in digital placemaking right now?

Daniel Hewitt: Definitely. AI is an interesting thing, can be a little bit controversial as well. There's two ways that we're seeing AI play a little bit of a role now and it's going to just keep getting bigger and bigger by the way, we can't avoid it.

What AI is really good right now is **creating efficiencies**. So in terms of say a digital placemaking [project] where we might be using a digital tool to analyze a space, AI can start predicting based on kind of models and data that it already has. It can start predicting stuff a little bit more and actually help with that analysis. So I think that's a positive thing. It can definitely speed up the process, it's more cost-efficient, so that's exciting in that part of it.

You'll see maybe a lot of artists using AI to create kind of digital art pieces using AI. You'll see that in public spaces a little bit more or museums where these forms of artwork take on they're kind of ever evolving, they're never stagnant. They're moving and and you know I think Refik Anadol—I think that's how I pronounce his name properly—he's a quite a famous artist that's using AI in public space and in museums and galleries. So again it's kind of efficient as well because it's creating these pieces of animation and artwork that would take months and months and years and years to create and it's just happening magically in front of you. So I think AI is an extremely efficient tool. It's way more powerful than lots of people

put together however it's only as good as what it knows and what it's trained to know. And it's like teaching a child—what's right, what's wrong. So it's a very interesting space.

Stephen Burton: Daniel, I've learned a lot today. You've opened my eyes to a lot of things in the digital placemaking world. What are some of the key things that a traditional placemaker should know about digital placemaking when they're embarking on a project?

Daniel Hewitt: Coming in at a very early stage, trying to understand the vision, the ultimate vision from that placemaker and what they're trying to achieve, what problems they're trying to solve. And then understanding the objectives of not only the stakeholders but what do we want to achieve out of that space.

And then what we do really well is then come to the table with some creative ideas around how we can enhance that space. And then hopefully we'll start to answer those objectives. And then as I said getting into those commercial realities of what realistically does that involve. Like anything when you're pitching an idea you've got to have wiggle room or you've got to have a plan B or a plan C. And I think that's where that planning comes into place that we understand that feasibly that might not be able to be achieved with the time and the budget. So where do we pivot and what's the plan B look like? Still obviously staying true to the original idea and the objectives of not only the placemaker but the stakeholders involved as well.

So again, it's exciting because it gives us... there's always new stuff coming out. And there's old stuff that has been around for 10 years that we go "hey, this thing's been around for 10 years, it's solid. Let's use this. It's proven." And taking the risk out of things. I think people think it's really risky. It's not. It's just about understanding the parameters and then again effectively planning and planning the right solution for it.

Stephen Burton: Well Daniel I've learned a lot today. Thank you so much for joining us today on the Placemakers.

Daniel Hewitt: Thanks Stephen, much appreciated.

Stephen Burton: Thanks for listening to the Placemakers.