

Document 12: Gilbert Rochecouste Transcript

Podcast: The Placemakers

Episode: Gilbert Rochecouste – The Soul of Place & Village Well

Host: Stephen Burton

Guest: Gilbert Rochecouste, Founder of Village Well

Stephen Burton: Today we're talking to Gilbert Rochecouste. Gilbert is recognized locally and internationally as a leading voice in placemaking and the creation of vibrant, resilient, and loved places. He is the founder of Village Well, one of Australia's first placemaking consultancies. He's worked with over 1000 communities, cities, towns, and main streets over the last 30 years. Gilbert is a true visionary and a pioneer of the placemaking movement in Australia. Gilbert, welcome to the Placemakers.

Gilbert Rochecouste: Thank you Stephen, it's a joy to be here.

Stephen Burton: Gilbert, you are often referred to as one of the fathers of placemaking in Australia. I'm interested to know, when you started Village Well 30-odd years ago, was "placemaking" even a word that people used? Or were you having to invent the language as you went along?

Gilbert Rochecouste: It's a great question. Look, 30 years ago, the word didn't exist in the Australian lexicon. We were using words like "urban renewal," "revitalization," "main street management." But I felt there was something missing in the language. It was very technical, very hard. It didn't speak to the **heart and soul** of community.

I stumbled across the Project for Public Spaces in New York and their early work, and I really resonated with the term "placemaking." But I wanted to deepen it. For me, it wasn't just about putting furniture in a street or painting a road. It was about the connection people have to place—the story, the spirit, the essence. So we started using the term, but we really focused on the "being" of place, not just the "doing."

Stephen Burton: You talk a lot about the "soul" of a place. That's quite a spiritual or philosophical term for an industry that is often dominated by architects, engineers, and planners. How do you define the soul of a place, and how do you communicate that to hard-nosed developers or councils?

Gilbert Rochecouste: The soul of place is its unique DNA. It's what makes a place feel like *itself* and not like anywhere else. It's the layers of history, the Indigenous story, the landscape, the characters, the memories.

When I talk to developers or councils, I translate it into value. I explain that if you create a place that has soul, that feels authentic and welcoming, people will want to be there. They will stay longer, they will spend more, they will tell their friends. It creates **stickiness**. A place without soul is just a sterile environment that people pass through. A place with soul is a destination.

I often use the example of the work we did with the laneways in Melbourne in the early 90s. Before that, they were just service lanes for rubbish trucks. We saw the potential for them to be the veins of the city, pumping life and culture. By activating them with small bars, art, and independent retail, we didn't just clean them up; we gave the city a new identity. That's the power of finding the soul of a place.

Stephen Burton: What is the process you go through to uncover that soul? Is it just intuition, or is there a methodology?

Gilbert Rochecouste: It's both. We have a methodology we call "**Place Visioning**." It starts with deep listening. We listen to the land, we listen to the elders, we listen to the community. We look for the clues that are already there.

We ask questions like: What is the story of this place? What is its rhythm? What do people love about it? What are they ashamed of? We sit in the space, we observe how people move, where the sun hits, where the wind blows. It's about being a "place detective."

Then we synthesize all of that into a story or a vision that acts as a compass for everything that follows—the design, the retail mix, the programming. If the design doesn't align with that soul story, it gets thrown out.

Stephen Burton: You've worked on thousands of projects. Is there a common mistake you see people making when they try to create public places?

Gilbert Rochecouste: The biggest mistake is **over-designing** and **over-controlling**. We try to make everything too perfect, too tidy. We design out the spontaneity, the grit, the happy accidents.

Great places have a looseness to them. They allow people to shape them. If you bolt every bench to the ground and dictate exactly how a space should be used, you kill the life of it. You need to leave room for the community to add their layer—whether that's through busking, markets, art, or just moving a chair into the sun. We need to move from "master planning" to "master frameworking," where we set the stage but let the community perform the play.

Stephen Burton: I love that distinction. It connects to the idea of trust—trusting the community to treat the space well.

Gilbert Rochecouste: Absolutely. Trust is the currency of placemaking. If you treat people like vandals, they'll act like vandals. If you treat them like citizens and custodians, they will step

up.

Stephen Burton: Gilbert, the question I ask everyone: What is the most important ingredient for creating a successful public place?

Gilbert Rochecouste: For me, it is **Love**. And I know that sounds fluffy to some, but I mean it seriously. If a place is created with love—with care, with attention to detail, with generosity—people feel it. They respond to it.

Love looks like shade on a hot day. It looks like a comfortable seat. It looks like beauty. It looks like safety. When a developer or a council invests in quality materials, in public art, in greening, they are essentially saying to the community, "You are worthy. We care about you." And that love is reciprocated through stewardship and pride.

Stephen Burton: That is a beautiful note to end on. Gilbert, thank you for your wisdom and for inspiring so many of us in this industry.

Gilbert Rochecouste: My pleasure, Stephen. Keep up the great work.

Stephen Burton: Thanks for listening to the Placemakers.