Document 17: Phil Smith Transcript

Podcast: The Placemakers
Episode: Phil Smith – Art, Creativity & Placemaking
Host: Stephen Burton
Guest: Phil Smith, Architect & Urban Designer at AECOM

Stephen Burton: Today we're talking about the intersection of creativity and placemaking and the role that creativity might play in creating successful places for people. I'm joined by Phil Smith. Phil is an architect and urban designer based on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland. He's had 30 years of experience across public and private sectors, working from urban policy and master planning to building design, city design, and delivery. Phil's interest is in cities as engines for arts and culture. Phil has held positions in creative arts organizations, he's been a long-term advocate for the arts, and hopefully he won't mind me saying that he himself is an artist with an interest and a practice in sketching and drawing, often creating self-reflective pictures of himself and quirky observations on the world around him. Phil is currently Urban Design Lead at AECOM on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland. Phil, thank you for joining us today on the Placemakers.

Phil Smith: Thanks Stephen. Thanks for inviting me and it's a pleasure to be here. In spite of that dodgy introduction, I've got to say. And for the record, I do and maybe I shouldn't, but I do avoid using the term "artist" because I haven't like many of my artist friends made the commitment to actually build a life on arts practice. Whereas I'm a bit of a dabbler and a hobbyist. So I do out of respect to my professional artist, my working artists, which is a very hard way to make a living, I do always defer to not calling myself an artist. But I'm flattered anyway.

Stephen Burton: So let's start there. So what if you don't call yourself an artist, but you dabble in the arts, what do you call yourself or how do you refer to someone who does that kind of thing? Because I know I'm exactly the same.

Phil Smith: Yeah. Well, I mean the tempting thing and the obvious thing is to sort of go by our disciplines, the way that we were trained. And for me that was in architecture and then I've had you know 25 years in applied sort of experience in urban design and what's now called placemaking.

And I suppose it's a product of just getting a little bit older where you start to sort of tighten up your identity and the way that you perceive yourself, you start to think about what it is that you really do, what value that you really bring. And I suppose I made a decision when I was

younger to sort of move into architecture out of pragmatics and left behind I suppose a desire to paint and I'm now trying to sort of move back into that space.

But what I have discovered over the last 15 years in particular working with arts and cultural organizations is that um creative practice is good for me and it's good for my day job if you like for design. And it teaches me things about noticing. So I'm trying to... I suppose I would call myself a **creative practitioner** and the work that I do is a practice. I'm just trying to understand what it is. I like to draw, I like to understand the world through drawing and I find it I use it as a way to sort of make sense of what I don't understand about the world. So that's why I do drawing and paint. And fortunately I'm I'm in a lucky position where it does directly inform drawing and the drawing that we do to communicate to our clients but also to the community about buildings and placemaking. So I'm lucky that the thing that I'm trying to chase down as a hobby and understand also informs the work that I do.

Stephen Burton: Do you think having that creative practice going on in your life outside of your day job makes you better at your day job? Does it feed into it in a really positive way? And if so, would you recommend other people in the field of urban design, architecture, and placemaking pursue that kind of creative expression outside of their work?

Phil Smith: Yeah, look I definitely would. I mean I think we all have... we all need and deserve a creative life. And it doesn't matter what our day job is or what our discipline is. There's things that we learn through play and through creativity that we all experience as children. It's a powerful learning tool that we can use those same processes to bring them into our job regardless of what discipline or sector that we're in.

It just so happens that in the placemaking, building, design, architecture field, they are traditionally embedded and rooted in creative forms of creative practice. And so it's part of what we do. There's another reason for it though, which is I think a broader malaise or a broader issue about creativity isn't often recognized or valued in the broader community. And I think it's part of a broader conversation about how we bring creativity into the mainstream in daily life and professional working life across all endeavors. Not just architecture and design and placemaking, but certainly engineering and others. They're all creative pursuits. They all have parts of the doing which are well informed by noticing and understanding and synthesizing and that's really all creative practice is. It's a way of doing.

Stephen Burton: Do you think the best places that we create for people are also creative places? Or can we have good places for people that aren't necessarily that creative?

Phil Smith: Well again, a really good and deep question. The process of... well, a place that is creative is a place I'm thinking that through that that allows us to either engage in creativity or think differently or think creatively. And all places can do that.

So I suppose in the context of your question we're talking about public places and public... because we all live in places and we all create place in our own environments and our homes,

but we're talking about the broader act of creating places for others and for community. Great places are places that make you feel happy and good or engaged or have meaning. And that's inherently a creative process.

But above that I think sits sort of the aim to make places welcoming and places that have a high amenity. Because when when you feel welcome and you feel like you have a sense of ownership, then every other possibility of the human condition is in theory opened up to you, of which creativity is one of those. So I don't think it's essential... I don't think it's essential... it can be a marker or a way of classifying whether or not a space is or indicating whether a place is successful, but it doesn't have to be. Because a successful place can be a place where you can just go to meet people you've never met before or just sit and watch the world go by or observe humanity. So creativity is a part of a successful place but it's not the only indicator.

Stephen Burton: So now that we're talking about public places and what makes them successful, as I ask everybody on my show, what do you think is the most important ingredient for creating a successful public place? Do you feel as though creativity is part of that mix for creating successful places? And would you say that it's perhaps the most important ingredient or is something else more important from your point of view?

Phil Smith: Yeah. Look, I think the first the first thing I would say is that I don't know. I mean blank... to be blunt I really don't know. I have some opinions and I've got some experience and I've seen things that really work. I think the most important ingredient... if I had to pick one... because there are multiple factors, infinite number of factors and conditions that are required for a place to be successful. And I'm not sure if there's any one thing that is vital.

But I would say that in the first instance places are temporal. So they're driven by time, they're fleeting (or they can be fleeting), they have their day, they ebb and flow, they're successful then they're not successful. Generally speaking. I mean of course there are things that are places that are successful over millennia. But by large, you know, they ebb and flow like the cities and the places around them ebb and flow—competition, politics, economics, you know the communities around them that change.

So... but for me and this sort of gets back to I suppose creativity and culture... I think one thing, one ingredient that can really help make a place successful is **story and meaning**. So you know we we are driven completely by story in many ways as a species. And story is not just how we communicate culturally but it's also how we protect and preserve and pass on knowledge, you know?

So meaning is embedded I think into us in some sort of you know biological way. So for me so I think I think story and meaning and **identity** is really critical to a successful space because what it actually does is it builds **ownership**. And I think in a roundabout way what I'm saying is I think **community and ownership of a place by a community** is the most important thing to its success. But I think the way that you get there is through story and meaning. So you make

it valuable to the community, they own it.

And I'm not talking about ownership in a colonization sense or but but we I think Australians as a would be a good example... we probably would all go to the Sydney Opera House and have a sense of ownership about the place around that. You know collective ownership because it has some meaning for us and it's about our identity as Australians and and a whole lot of other things within it. So that sense of ownership brings value and and we're also invested in making sure that it's a great place and stays a great place over a long period of time. So and you do see places fail or become less important and and sometimes in many cases that's predicated by a sort of a bleeding away of ownership or or a corporatization of that ownership or a change in the way that the community feels connection on meaning to that place.

Stephen Burton: How can we get more creative outcomes in our public realm? And what's holding us back now from having that? Why don't we see more really good expressions of creativity in our public places? Not necessarily just here where we both live and work in Queensland Australia but perhaps more broadly.

Phil Smith: Yeah. Again another kind of good question that I do think about this a lot. I mean it's partly about the processes that deliver places and the organizations or the groups (governments usually) who who drive those. They they have a mandate, a political mandate and money. They have processes which are driven by statutory outcomes and policy um and you know the politics of delivery. And they're serious... it's a serious business. There's a lot to be had. It's a it's a it's a... they're difficult... public places are very difficult to get up and about and funded and built. So there's a lot of pressure around them.

And but sadly when when there is pressure in contemporary society a lot of the things that don't seem that seem subjective and not you know objective and and are subject to ambiguity and and uncertainty like design is... then then that tends to be sort of either either demonized as um fragile or a risk and can't be controlled very well um or and it's ignored.

And so what we tend to do in those very highly politicized and and um complex spaces is we tend to kick creativity and those what are seen as subjective... I actually think they're a designs an objective process... but those those things are kicked down the road. It's partly because there there's not a lot of advocacy and championing for the benefit and the value of creativity and design. But it's also because designers and and those we're not the loudest voices in the room and we're also not very skilled at advocating necessarily for what we do.

So it does it does tend to get either dropped off or or deliberately excised. And it's partly about this idea about um a need for closure. Again I said earlier that that I don't know what the answers to these things are because I'm deliberately trying to be uncertain about things. But one of the one of the drivers of creativity and design is not trying to close the loop too early. Trying to keep all of your tabs open for as long as you can until a piece clicks in that that at all... and you will have experienced this in your own practice Stephen when you're trying to struggle with a design problem or a creative problem and and you can have lots of stuff and

then out of the blue at the last minute a solution will come.

And that's just the nature of of the design process. So the need for closure which is absolutely vital to the delivery of complex expensive political places you know placemaking... that need for closure is important in a project management and a delivery sense but the need... but as designers and creatives we're trying not to close the loop. And so how how we can get our colleagues and the people that we collaborate with in project management and delivery to understand that you know what we do is not a threat, it's sketchy and you know it's amorphous and ambiguous at times... but it is a a well-informed and understood process and letting them become more comfortable with it... I think that's the only way we can kind of get around that. So it's just a constant process of advocacy for design and trying to um prove to people that that we can add you know significant value to to uh you know sometimes a very a very nuts and bolts process.

Stephen Burton: Do you find that the briefs that you're reading now in 2024/2025 are different than the briefs you were reading say 15, 20, 25 years ago in terms of allowing space for creative work to be done, allowing space for collaboration, allowing space for practice to emerge and evolve through the design process? Or are we still just getting on those same trains that we got on 20 odd years ago when we're heading towards a deadline, we've got a budget and it's just get us there however we can get there the quickest the cheapest the fastest way we can. How is that different now? Or is it different?

Phil Smith: Um well I would say a couple of things. Briefs are getting... I'm seeing a lot more consistency within governments and clients. Well certainly within governments I'm seeing a lot more consistency between briefs and so whether that's a templated approach. But there's a general... there is a good understanding. I mean you see a lot... I think the the quality of briefs these days is generally better than it was 20 years ago undoubtedly.

But the biggest change that has happened within that process I think is actually **community consultation**. So so it's built in at a statutory level certainly here in Queensland. Not for all projects but but for most projects certainly state government projects. So the community consultation process in many ways is our greatest friend as designers and creatives because because it introduces the community into that process and their opinions. And the answers and the things that come out of that aren't always easily solved through a project management framework. They require design, they require sometimes a different approach or a certainly an approach that's connected to community.

So I see the statutory implications and and this broad momentum around the need and importance of community consultation as being a very beneficial thing. It slowed the process slowed a lot of processes down which then creates more time for nuance and time for solutions and time for design. And it also means it introduces a difficult political element into it which is the politics of community. And that's where we as designers also and and placemakers I think we've got a really good role to play because design becomes especially if there's a storytelling narrative or a meaning driven vision behind a project... and the

community that don't always agree with you but they want to know that you're that governments aren't just you know feathering their own nest or just um just doing stuff willy-nilly.

So so a design... so consultation creates space for a design narrative. It slows the process down, it adds some more steps in it and and I think that's probably one of the biggest changes that impact on design in the work that we do. I couldn't say definitively that there are better opportunities for design these days but I think there's... you'll find co-design written into methodology and a whole lot of the briefs that we get these days. So governments get it. They understand that it's a risk management tool from a political point of view but they also understand that it builds better outcomes. So I you know I think they are two fantastic things that have become... there's no going back from those things now. We'll never lose them. They're part of the process and fortunately they're here to stay.

Stephen Burton: So last question for today Phil. Someone going into practice whether that be at a young age or perhaps a little bit more advanced in their career and they're thinking about working in the field of placemaking however that's defined... What's your advice to those people?

Phil Smith: First and foremost you've got to understand what your **passion** is. You know as Simon Sinek if you know Simon Sinek always talks about starting with Why. It's understanding *why* you're doing what you do and and what that sort of higher purpose is for you. Whether that's you as an employee or you starting up your own practice and business.

And then it's uh I think going to work in terms of understanding... there's been a lot of people that have gone before you. So if we're talking about sort of setting up your own design practice there's a lot of people that have gone before you a lot of people have failed and there's a lot of people that have been successful. And I I would highly recommend that if someone's starting up that they that they seek advice. They find themselves a **mentor**. Every successful business person should should have some sort of form of mentor or sort of coach to give you some direction. So there is lots of people out there that have got lots of experience.

And then the other thing I would say is just sort of **read**. You know I've I've read a lot of books a lot of business books and uh some of them been good some of them have been wonderful you know. And I've got a number of books that I always recommend and some that I keep going back to and I've read you know four or five times over because it just sort of refreshes me. So yeah they're probably the main fundamental things.

Stephen Burton: Well I've learned a lot this morning Phil so uh thank you so much for your time and thanks for joining us today on the Placemakers.

Phil Smith: Thanks Stephen it's been a pleasure. Enjoyed it.

Stephen Burton: Thanks for listening to the Placemakers.