

Cam Perkins

Speaker Today we're talking with Cam Perkins. Cam is a pioneering place maker who plays at the intersection of urban regeneration and human behavior. His official titles are many thought leader, agent of change, proud member of Gen X. But his philosophy is really pretty simple, which is just get started. Cam's played a pivotal role in delivering some of the world's most awarded destinations, including workaround, innovation, investment and regeneration. Cam's brought his dynamic drive to the Darebin City Council in Melbourne, where he's leading economic development and activations, and he's currently responsible for what's been called the coolest street in the world. Cam likes to explore the deeper question of how we inspire change from the ground up. Cam, thanks for joining us today on the Placemakers. Wonderful to be here, Stephen. Have seen a couple of the episodes and of course, heard you speaking at a number of really excellent conferences. So happy to be here joining you today to talk about all things placemaking. Fantastic. I'm excited. Kim, let's jump in now. People come to placemaking from all different angles, people from all different backgrounds. And for me, I find that that's what makes placemaking wonderful. Can you tell us a little bit about your background and how you found your way to placemaking and to where you are today? Yeah, sure. So I started out as a landscape architect, being taught, somewhat controversially, that designers sit at the center of the design process and can facilitate the whole process. And I went down that path for quite a long time. I had this great mentor through a company called Place Design Group. My mentor at the time was Lindsay Thorpe, who was the chairman of the organization. Lindsay took me to all sorts of destinations around the world designing tourism destinations. So we did all sorts of things around hotels and resorts, all those sort of places where big corporations wanted to keep people around. And for a long time I thought, yeah, this is the work that a landscape architect should do is create these great places for people where they can go and relax for a while, forget about all the daily stressors and that sort of thing. But there comes a point where you start to question the value of your work and what you're contributing to the world, right? And it was at that point that I started to really start to see the world and cities in a very different way and wanting to know, well, if corporations can spend this much money on understanding their customer and helping to make great places for their customer, what if, what if cities could do the same? Can you imagine how amazing our cities would be if we took the position of really thinking about all the people who come to our cities as customers, and as the people who we want to keep in our public spaces, and then how do we invest in that sort of stuff? And it got me thinking as a consultant at the time. It got me thinking to where does my brief come from and who's been writing my brief? What I found when I asked those questions of a couple of our clients was that the brief that was being developed in a local government environment had been through an extensive internal process, and it was actually really hard to change. And so I thought, well, what if what if I could go in and find out who's writing the briefs and how do you improve that, right? So that you could start to get a great brief that starts to really open up the possibilities of what people can do in cities from a design and public space perspective. And I guess that's where I started to come across this idea of placemaking and come across this idea of the importance of public space, the public realm in our cities, because they're these places where we see people who are different to us. They're places where we get to experience the city. That's probably a bit outside of our normal bubble, where we get to hang out. And you'll learn very quickly when you look at that space that not all voices are created equal. So that starts to take started to take me down a path of, of working with local people, working through engagement, that sort of thing to understand the connection that people had to place and to really start to bring about that voice of place and the voice of those people. So I suppose that's it's a bit of a roundabout way. So all the way from private destinations through to what is the power of a great public space. In the introduction, I said that cam likes to explore the deeper question of how we inspire change from the ground up. The type of thing you were talking about then sounds like the precursor to some of those internal conversations you were having around, well, how do we actually involve people in the creation of these places, and how can we make the voices in the creation of places a little more equal? As you said before, about some of those voices are louder. You know, sometimes we hear and pay attention to things, perhaps in the creation of places that maybe we shouldn't. So how do you conceptualize this idea of inspiring change from the ground up? What does that mean to you when you think through that? Yeah, okay. Often local people don't have a great, um, they have a great handle on how much is possible and the opportunity that exists in creating public space and being able to. How do I put this. Being able to really shape their local space. Often we think of local governments as an organization that might do sort of roads, rates and rubbish. That's what we that's what we hear about. But in fact, the role of local government is to shape so many aspects of the way that we live, work and play in our places, in our cities. So I think when we talk about

ground up, it's not necessarily an understanding or perhaps a level of trust or perhaps a level of agency that people are used to in being able to have a ground, a ground up approach to placemaking. So I feel like one of the great places to start is to be is for us as placemakers, working in all aspects of the industry, whether that be private or public, for us to be really good story listeners and place listeners. So being able to really hear those stories that are coming through from local people to find the common threads that are there to give people a bit of confidence, I suppose, about telling their story and what their story means to their place and what their place means to them. With that, we can start to really build a bit of a groundswell about what a place means to a group of people, and therefore show a united front to perhaps those who are making decisions. And that may be either in sitting in your governing body, say, councillors, that sort of thing. Or it might be council officers, officers and executives who want to know that there is a unified voice that's coming forward to be able to help with these projects, because often the difficulty comes from dealing with a fractured group of stakeholders who may not necessarily understand their own commonalities, and therefore they represent as as a real broken front, which means that a lot of energy goes into trying to understand where people are coming from. And I suppose that means that local government can often shy away from those conversations, because the energy is the energy and the draw on officers is really, really quite high. And so you want to go where the energy is. So I think starting from the ground up. You want to be able to present as a group of local people that unified front that someone can understand, and someone can have confidence that you'll be a partner in creating their place together. Sounds like there might be challenges in listening to people who are unified, and it sounds like perhaps people who are unified might be organized and organized around agendas, whether those agendas are economic agendas or not in my backyard agendas, or maybe there maybe there are other agendas which are absolutely altruistic. So as you know, more green space and better places for kids and more accessible places. It sounds like a complicated environment to work in, and it sounds like there might need to be a balance between stuff going on at ground level, and also stuff going on from the top down. Is that is that a hard balance to strike? And has it been your experience that sometimes we get those conversations wrong or sometimes we get them right? Like, how would you how would you explain some of those, some of those complications? Yeah, absolutely. Look, I think as with any complex issue that you're dealing with in society, it takes a long time to be able to have conversations with people, often to understand what's under the surface of the words that you're hearing, some of what one of the key things that I take away from my time working in New Zealand is a particular Maori phrase that translates to one thousand cups of tea. And it loosely, loosely, loosely, sort of talks about the fact that there wouldn't be a formal meeting held until you'd sat down and had a lot of cups of tea with someone to get to know them, so that you could then be on the same plane to have this discussion. Right. And I've taken that with me with, with a lot of my work. It's a really, really helpful approach is to be able to sit down through many conversations and be able to understand what that meaning is below the words that you're hearing. And I think that's where we probably need to invest a little bit more time and a little bit more skill, certainly investing in capability to help those of us who are working in this space to be able to have those conversations. It's not just for practitioners, though. We need to be able to invest in people who live in our places, who may not, may not have been involved in having constructive conversations before. It's really, really important that we invest in this sort of stuff so that you can have a multifaceted and nuanced conversation about what a place means to people. I really think that that is the secret sauce to being able to not necessarily resolve differences, but to accept that there may be differences in opinion, but there may be alignment on some of the things that we can work on, because we don't need to agree on everything. That's never going to happen. And as soon as we realize that, we can move forward with the things that we do have alignment on. So I think that one thousand cups of tea is a good one. I love, I love that I'm gonna, I'm gonna keep that in the forefront of my mind. It sounds like a very expensive engagement. One thousand cups of tea could be here for a few years, but sometimes that's what you just need to do. Stephen. That's right. I mean, you would have been involved in things in the past where you would think to yourself, gee, I wish I had a bit more time. Absolutely. A sort of pivot a little bit. Cam, in the intro, we we spoke about the fact that you're responsible for the coolest street in the world. I can't help but asking you about that. Tell me a little bit about this idea of the coolest street in the world. And what exactly is it that you do in relation to that street? Okay, cool. So let's, let's have a look at a key word here. Responsible first. I didn't create it. This this place was already evolving long before I turned up to Durban. So my role as head of economic development and activations is to make sure that that street is operating in the most, um, in the most vibrant, in the most efficient way. And that our local traders and our local people have got all the tools that they need to be working together really well to keep a straight working in a really, really vibrant way. So coolest street in the world. Monica came out from Time Out magazine. So there's always, you

always take these things with a bit of a grain of salt, but they're also really good PR opportunity. What the traders actually found from, um, from the moment that that award was given, they noticed a significant uptick in, in income and in footfall to their stores. So it's amazing. Yeah, there was actually, there was actually quite a lift in trade over that period of time because people love to go to great places, right? We, we, we like to read restaurant reviews to find out whether others liked others, liked the food that was on offer. And it's the same for cities. It's the same for streets. So when we talk about Cooler Street in the world, some of the reasons that Time Out spoke about were the vibrancy of the street, the fact that there were lots and lots of independent businesses on the street. So you could get on High Street in, uh, in, in Northcote and in Thornbury, you can get access to all sorts of businesses that you wouldn't see anywhere else. So it's not the typical big box retail, big brand sort of stuff. So the people, the traders that you're seeing on the street are local people who have been invested for a long time in their place and have invested a lot of their own time. There are a lot of their own money to make sure that this is a really thriving strip, and it continues to be so. We have a really, really strong mix of music venues of great food and beverage. Darebin has the highest number of of recognised songwriters in the country, across the suburbs of Thornbury and Reservoir and Northcote. I think it was higher than any other area. So that really starts to tell us that this is a creative hub. So when we're talking about managing and being responsible for the coolest street in the world, we're trying to ensure that council's policies and our economic framework are shaped towards making sure that that remains the case. So part of part of what we're doing with traders is working collaboratively to be able to create some great place visions that they can build on, that they can market and create their identities together. And, and that sort of starts to help us to shape action plans and ways that we can, ways that we can invest. That's the sort of I suppose that's where I'm talking about, uh, being responsible for as in, there are a particular number of levers that local government has, but need to recognize that a lot of these, um, a lot of these awards, a lot of these, um, a lot of the recognition really is down to celebrating who is in that place and those local people. When you think about that street and what makes it wonderful and what makes it attractive and what makes it win, you know, awards or accolades such as that, what are some of the things that you think are important about that place, and what are some of the things that you guys are trying to do internally to keep that place, either the way it is and making sure that those things don't disappear through challenges, and of which there are as many, I'm sure around land use and gentrification. And these are all really big topics. But what are some of the core pillars that you guys are focusing on to make sure that the coolest street in the world doesn't suddenly become one of the coolest streets in the world in a decade from now. Yeah, yeah. As you're posing that question, I'm thinking about the reasons that people visit great destinations, right? You sort of want to live life like a local. Whenever you go overseas, you want to be able to experience that place in its full authenticity. And I think that's really what comes comes to the fore when you walk down, particularly walk down High Street it's a very, very authentic place. This is a place that has grown out of decades of creativity and investment. And therefore, it's very, very unique. It's it's very different to many other main streets because you'll see those great, um, all these wonderful, independent, unique businesses that are there. The street, of course, changes from day to night. So there's a really strong night time economy in, in a number of those places. So what we're starting to look at, and I suppose this is what we do as Placemakers is you're starting to have conversations with people and make observations of places to see where are the opportunities that you can strengthen, and where are the challenges that you can work with people to try and resolve. So a lot of our placemaking work is, of course, informed by some of the really classic, the classic work of PBS and of course, placemaking, where we're trying to understand and make sure that there is activation, that there's great things for people to do, lots of different opportunities for people to have an experience and sort of find the awe and mystery and all that sort of thing. So one of the, one of the key issues that we, that we have at the moment is graffiti on the street. And we're looking really, really closely at vacancy rates as well. So the graffiti on the street is really popping up across Melbourne. It's um, it's certainly not unique to, to where we're working, what we've had to do with, with, with traders in the local communities is to be able to look at programs that can start to pop up really great artwork around the city, which means that there are less vacant. Vacant spaces, vacant walls for people to take. That's now become quite a big issue across the city is how do you deal with this much graffiti? And of course, a local government body only has so much power to or authority to be able to look after their own assets. So one of the ways that we're working at the moment is, um, is through telling the multicultural stories of many of the traders who operate along the street and looking at looking at being able to tell their stories through, say, portraiture, lots of artwork, lots of great stories and those sort of things. So you start to fill in the spaces, right? So that there's not so much space for the graffiti happening. The other thing that we're looking at at the moment is, how do we start to activate some of the vacant spaces around the city?

And this work really stems from the great work of Marcus Westbury and Renew Newcastle. That's now become Renew Australia, those sort of things. And looking at ways of connecting, say, emerging artists, emerging businesses with those landlords who've got vacant properties that may have been vacant for a period of time. Because what we know is that vacant spaces along main streets can often, I suppose, detract from the visual aesthetic, the great visual aesthetic of a street. And that can sometimes mean that people invest less money in that street, and it's a bit of a downward spiral. So you want to make sure that you're really monitoring those, those vacancy rates and being able to invest in activating some of those vacant spaces. So we have a program, as do many other local government programs, local government organizations. We have a program called Active Spaces that does just that. So putting art into windows, connecting, connecting landlords with emerging businesses. And we're just starting to ramp that up now as we see some of our areas vacancy rates starting to escalate. So can where you are, you're working in in Melbourne, in Victoria. And when people talk about placemaking in Melbourne, I often find that they're all they're often also talking about economics. So they're talking about placemaking for an economic outcome or activation for an economic outcome. So we want our street to be functional. We want it to be active. We want an economic outcome out of that process so that those interventions are tied to specific outcomes around economy. Do you find that that focus around economic outcome hampers ideas around place making, and what creates good places, or do you find that it enlivens that conversation and creates even more stimulus around what makes great places? It's a really interesting question, Steven. I recall working as a young landscape architect, consultant, and in local government agencies coming across the economic development teams, we would often find that the design team and the dev teams were doing similar sort of work, but weren't talking to each other. This won't be any surprise to people who work in this space. So there's often there are often challenges around communication because both of those, the placemaking world and the economic development world are trying to do similar things, but may not be speaking the same language. So I think there is a need to be able to bridge that language. So the role that I'm working in at the moment actually brings those two roles together. It's something that probably ten, fifteen years ago wasn't necessarily the case, but is increasingly we're seeing through different organisations. That being so, I think where we see the challenge of place making sort of being hampered by economic development is because they are speaking those two languages. So from an economic development perspective, they're trying to get really, really strong data. They're trying to, um, they're trying to prove the case for their work. And it's really, really hard to gather the right sort of data to prove the value of placemaking. Right. And anyone listening to this, to the podcast who's a pacemaker will know. Yes, absolutely. How do we measure this stuff? One of the ways that I think is really, really powerful is that place makers are fantastic storytellers. They're fantastic story listeners and fantastic storytellers. When we start to look at the value of a story as a piece of data, and being able to weave that in with the numbers that we're getting out of economic development. This is when they start to work really, really well together. And so what I think we need to be doing across the industry is building capability to bring those two practices together, because the economics, economics of city building of placemaking can really help to legitimize the practice in the eyes of decision makers, senior execs, those and private investment. So once we can start to weave those beautiful stories in with the actual data, then you're looking at gold. And I think the fact that we're talking a bit of a different language and may or may not have the capability to be able to weave those two together, is probably where we start to have those issues. And it starts to feel really uncomfortable because it feels competitive in a very, very limited funding space and conversations where you're having where you're fundamentally saying different things are always frustrating, so you tend not to spend time together, which is a real shame. So yeah, I think I think there is an issue there. And I think we need to approach it with capability and with storytelling. Yeah. You've certainly touched on one of the fundamental challenges that placemaking has, which is being able to quantify its value essentially. And how do we actually do that? And, you know, I've learnt a lot from many guests throughout this podcast in different ways that that's actually happening. And there's so much good work and research being done on that. It's inspiring. And we're really in really in a period of change where that data is starting to become more rigorous and, you know, we're all looking for it and we're all wanting to be able to use it as part of our argument as to why we need to invest more heavily in these processes to get these great places. So, Kim, last question for today and the question I ask everyone on the show, provided I don't forget before the show finishes, which is what do you think is the most important ingredient for creating a successful public place? Well, Okay. The most important ingredient. You know what I'll go back to? I'll go back to human evolution. We have passed down information for thousands and thousands of generations through story. And I think that along the way, very, very recently along that timeline, we've forgotten how to tell a really great story. And I

think that's where the real value of placemaking comes in. And it's not just being able to hear a story or write down a story, or being able to put it out in the socials or get it in the newspaper. We can tell stories of place by, um, being able to make change in place in a rapid way, you know, like using tactical urbanism, adaptive urbanism, any of those sort of tools that can really demonstrate the possibility of a shift in the future. When we see that shift, we start to the stories that we tell ourselves about a place start to actually shift, and people can start to see what that place could mean for their own, um, for their own meaning in their own life. Right. So I feel like the number one ingredient, number one capability we need to work on is absolutely the world of storytelling, being able to tell a great story of, of what a place is, where it came from, who the people are in that place, what they do, what they love about that place, and where they'd love to take it in the future. For me, the story helps people to connect to a place, and that really helps us to make decisions that are informed by both that level of connection, but also the data that we were talking about earlier. So I think number one, one is the power of storytelling. We need to get a lot better at that to be great. Placemakers Kim, thank you so much for that wonderful response. Couldn't agree more. Storytelling is so powerful and so important in what we do as Placemakers Kim Perkins, thank you very much today for joining us on Placemakers. Steve, lovely to join you and everyone else, keep listening to all the great podcasts on Placemakers. Thanks so much. All right.