

Welcome to the Placemakers. This is the only podcast where you will find all the ingredients that make thriving, successful public places. And I'm your host, Stephen Burton, the founder of Pomo, where a multi-awarded boutique placemaking design and delivery practice. In this podcast, you'll be hearing from experts who create our public places, from designers and developers through to policy makers and academics. These people are the placemakers. Today we're talking to **Hyesun Jeong**. She's an assistant professor of urban design at the University of Cincinnati. Her work has been supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the American Institute of Architects, and her work has been published in peer reviewed journals. And most recently, she's released a great book, which is called *Creating Sustainable Cities Through pedestrian urbanism*.

Hyesun, welcome to the Placemakers.

Hyesun: Stephen, thanks for inviting me to this podcast channel. I'm very excited to talking with you.

Stephen: Great. So your book, *Creating Sustainable Cities Through Pedestrian Urbanism*, a great title. Can you perhaps begin by telling us a little bit about pedestrian urbanism, and what drew you to that as something that you wanted to research for this particular book?

Hyesun: Yeah, sure. So as you introduced me before, my work bridges architecture and social science and planning, uh, where I basically look at the physical design of cities and how it drives the social behavior of people. So my research focuses on sustainable cities through the lens of pedestrian urbanism, where I look at how people can walk, bicycle, and socialize, uh, and also do all kinds of things comfortably without completely relying on cars. Um, so I'm especially interested in how arts and cultural programs could also synergize with, uh, local commerce and activate public space and neighborhood main streets, because that's the place where, uh, everyday life actually happens around us.

So as an architect and urban designer, I also realized that physical planning or architectural design doesn't necessarily explain, um, the whole dynamics of cities. Um, I was born and raised in South Korea, but also lived in four other countries around the world, um, US, France, Malaysia and Hong Kong. So this cosmopolitan experience, uh, got me really curious about how cities actually functions and what makes them more or less successful. And of course, I'm always excited to learn about culture and everyday life, things like food, art and local businesses and how they drive social life of people. So these are all curiosities eventually became the ingredient of my research topic and how I published this book.

Stephen: That's such a wide range of interesting information to put into a book, and it's and obviously, your experience living in different cities is deeply informed, the way you have thought through this. Can you tell me what some of those key differences are that you've noticed, um, living in different cities throughout the world in terms of the way their cities function?

Hyesun: Mhm. So while traveling and also working as an architect in different cities in the East and west, I realized that sometimes public space felt alive, whereas others are very empty. Um, like even when they are both well designed. So for example, in Seoul and Paris. If you go to subway stations, they are actually functioning as a social condenser because these stations are not merely just infrastructure, uh, or public transit, but they are also well connected to other services like commercial or shopping, you know, a convention center or all kinds of amenities. So people consider this public space as a meeting place.

Whereas when I first came to us, um, the first city I lived in the US was in Chicago, um, and many transit stations were perceived as unsafe places. And the people tend to avoid these

places because they're often crime hotspots, and they just merely use them as passing through or taking transit services. So I found that that's very interesting, uh, contrast between, you know, my home city and the Paris where I worked as an architect, and also Chicago, where I studied architecture. Um, and of course, while traveling other cities, I also found the similarities and differences in how this urban form shapes the culture and social life of people. Um, so that became my observation and also a great engine for this research, long, long term research. And I'm always keen to learn more about these cities and how can we actually adapt good things from each other and how we can learn from each other to, uh, develop, uh, for the good, uh, community life and, uh, economic, economic growth of the cities. Mhm.

Stephen: What are some of the challenges that you think we face in turning our cities into places which are more conducive to walking?

Hyesun: MM. That's a great question, I think the public perception plays a lot. Um, because in the US, a lot of people have a stigma around who uses public transit or even, you know, public space like parks and small scale, uh, plazas, because there is a predominant perception of a car culture. So, um, there's, you know, a certain group of people who primarily, uh, depend on more public transit and even bicycle. Um, so what was very interesting to me was when I lived in Dallas, Texas, it was more extreme, uh, because the first city I lived in the US was a Chicago, which was relatively more walkable and well connected in terms of transit. When I lived in Dallas, um, a lot of people drive to work and they rarely walk, um, because of weather. And of course there is not less equipped, equipped public infrastructure or sidewalk. So people tend to think walking is for us poor or low income group, uh, of population. And they primarily use automobiles.

So that perception also became interesting difference to me. You know, um, they are both in the states the same country, but because of this urban form, um, this urban form also reshapes how we live and work and commute on a daily basis. Um, and eventually it also became a big part of decision making process for the people where, where is the good place to live and where is a good place to socialize. Of course, in Dallas, people go to strip malls and big box shopping centers to meet other people. Uh, whereas, you know, in Seoul, we go to more small spaces like parks and, you know, transit stations connect to shopping mall, um, underground malls. Um, so these are the interesting, uh, differences. I, I recognized, and I think that there's no right or wrong answer, but definitely coming back from, you know, urbanist perspective, I was always greatly inspired by Jane Jacobs, uh, you know, uh, sidewalk use and more eyes on the street that actually influenced more foot traffic and more social life of the street. So I think, uh, we can think about this as a cultural differences, but also how we can learn from each other to make better cities and, uh, make it more successful in the long term. mhm.

Stephen: In your book, you talk about the relationship between walkability, life on the streets and cultural placemaking, cultural expression, arts, culture, food and so on. Can you elaborate a little bit about what that relationship actually is and how we can perhaps go about encouraging it?

Hyesun: Yeah. So, um, for example, I look at every day amenities like arts and culture, food businesses, murals and festivals, or even community events like flea markets or farmer's markets and how they influence the street activities such as foot traffic, um, uh, commuting patterns or even crime rates. How these, you know, urban form combined with cultural environments influence more presence of foot traffic. And in the process, I use, um, mixed methods from GIS mapping to statistical analysis, to comparative case studies, um, through using, uh, different data sets. And these data sets also include cell phone based foot traffic

data, uh, business patterns and demographic data from the census. Um, so these methods allow me to understand which neighborhoods or public space, uh, flourish versus others struggle and why, why, why some of these neighborhoods, uh, tend to thrive, whereas others decline.

Um, so I, in my NEA funded research, I actually found that when the blocks both have, um, commercial amenities, murals, blocks containing the murals tend to have, uh, three times more foot traffic than, um, the blocks without murals. And that also, um, stays the same when I compared um blocks with murals um have which, which have a commercial amenities. So I think there is a synergy between these cultural, um, public public arts, which is a mural and also commercial amenities, um, in the same condition. That actually drives more foot traffic and the more local economies. Um, and I found it is very consistent throughout the block.

And then also we should think about, uh, further in the national and global context, we can understand the change of consumer trends and how they respond to the future, uh, changes of urban development. So in the US, uh, when I looked at the business, uh, patterns record from the census data, um, there, there is a certain group of amenities growing like cafes, microbreweries, barbershops and health gyms, whereas the traditional retails are declining. So that also tells us that, you know, there are certain type of retails or commercial amenities are more favored by consumers. And to us architects and planners, we should think about this more rigorously. Right. Um, how can we deal with empty storefronts? How can we reutilize empty office spaces? So that also leads us to this important question of adaptive reuse and how we can deal with this changing urban dynamics, um, in both architecture and urban urban planning scale.

Um, and of course that is attributed to the change of commercial, um, environment because of the rise of online Commerce like Amazon or, you know, other platforms. Right. But, um, these retailers are even, uh, hit harder during Covid nineteen. And we see a lot of, you know, downtown storefronts becoming empty. Um, when I visited Chicago downtown a couple months ago, the whole strip, uh, became empty and on certain streets. So that was very striking to me. Um, however, if we look at, you know, some of the neighborhood main streets, uh, especially those combined with, uh, more fine grained mixed use and more community based activities and arts and cultural programs. They actually, um, survive more resilient way. So I, I found it's very interesting because, you know, downtown is obviously the backbone of our economy, but also we have to rethink how we can revitalize, um, this economic challenges and how we can actually, um, encourage more, you know, different type of experience based, uh, consumption. Right. So I thought it was very interesting finding.

In my view, uh, sustainability isn't just about Leed certified building or a smart infrastructure at the end. Uh, we want to encourage people to use this space in the long term. Um, so that comes from cultural aspect of sustainability, right? So to me, both physical and non-physical, um, sides of sustainability matters a lot. Um, so what I try to do through this book and research is translate this research and ideas into, um, some evidence, uh, which could help practitioners and policymakers as a as a reference. And I try to give my own observation, but also give more data based findings so that they can use it, um, in the, um, you know, decision making process for, um, design planning and future policies. Um, I want to stay on the topic for the moment, um, if possible of adaptive reuse.

The death of the high street is obviously a huge issue globally. The changing face of retail and what that leaves behind in our communities. And you flagged it earlier, empty shopfronts is a big part of that. And when you have an empty shop fronts, you have declining, um,

confidence in towns and you have a perception that things are often worse than they are. In your research and in your travels, did you come across towns and cities that were able to mount a successful fight against the decline of the high street through adaptive reuse and through other programs and initiatives. And if so, what are some of the learnings that you think other people, other practitioners and other cities could take away from some of those some of those cases?

Hyesun: Thank you. That's a great question. Um, there's no one answer for this question, but based on my experience, I could say that, um, in Seoul, for example, my hometown, um, there is a lot of traditional um, Korean houses in the north of Han River, uh, which used to be more old part of the city, uh, for, um, one hundred years. I think it was more than six hundred years. And um, nowadays we have to deal with this traditional architecture and how we can utilize these historic buildings, um, as a new way of consumption and also cultural activities. So in some neighborhoods in Seoul, um, they do adaptive reuse for this, um, older and traditional buildings, um, and transform this into um, cafes and galleries and some cultural, uh, entrepreneur spaces. Um, and we also talk about gentrification a lot, uh, because these are very historic neighborhoods and we don't want to see any drastic increase of rents. So in these cases, especially for adaptive reuse for, um, old historic buildings or even abandoned warehouses, um, they set a limit of rent increase to see, um, you know, these owners, business owners can do whatever they want, but there can't be any corporate franchise or luxury condominium next to these adaptive reuse buildings. So they want to ensure the city wants to ensure that adaptive reuse can be, um, generator of the new consumer activities and also cultural activities and programs, uh, not necessarily gentrifier.

So city is trying to, uh, put a lot of effort to both development and preservation at the same time. And I think many cities around the world can do the same. Um, we always talk about displacement and we want to find in a good way of utilizing the existing resources, right? Whether it's a building or public space, even vacant lot or parking lot can be transformed into some meaningful spaces. But I think at the end we want to give back to communities. So what that means is that we want to create a space, whether it's a building or a public space, or even the main street, give identity or special meaning so that people can have their own authentic ownership of this place. And I think the presence of a local commerce, independent stores is really a key to generating this long term resiliency. Um, and also establishing this emotional connection to these buildings and public space is also crucial to make this space more active, uh, over time, not just during the grand opening, but, um, in the long, uh, over the long time.

Stephen: So one question I, you know, I ask all the people who appear on my show, which is, what do you think is the most important ingredient for creating a successful public place? Do you think there is one ingredient, or do you think it's a mix of many things?

Hyesun: I think it's a mix of many things. But to me, um, what matters most is the culture of sustainability. But also it should be in good balance with high quality, uh, physical environment. So, um, successful public space should have, uh, good architecture, a mix of good old and new buildings, as Jane Jacobs mentioned, uh, walkable streets, uh, with a lot of trees and lighting and seating and combination of residential and commercial and other uses. Um, so they have a reason to be there on a daily basis, uh, not just as a destination, but also as a part of their daily lives. Um, so it also circles back to our discussion of A fifteen minute cities, right? We don't want to completely rely on cars. Uh, we can have we can have a car, but we don't want to just rely on car. Um, so that's the concept I really promote. Um, and I think the physical quality alone is never enough. Uh, we have many examples, um, in different cities. For example, uh, in Chicago, my second home city, um, there are large

historic parks designed by Frederick Olmsted, who is famous landscape architect. And these parks are beautifully designed, uh, full of green space, but many of them are actually underused and empty for most of the time.

Um, so these unused spaces become more problem because people perceive it as a crime hotspot. They want to avoid these spaces and green spaces because they think it's not safe. So I think the design is not the problem. But actually there is a missing part, which is the cultural elements and cultural elements, as I said before, needs to, uh, be associated with historic identity and ownership of people. What motivates people to use this public space in the long term and, uh, routinely. Right. And so I think there's a mix of things that could help this, uh, public space more vibrant and being used more frequently. Um, so I think we should consider a mix of things. And also the context matters because we all want to have nice, uh, park grocery store, coffee shop and high quality education, uh, within this fifteen minute walking distance. But I think the scale also matters, right? Um, so the scale and the context of the local area, uh, needs to be more considered carefully when we designed this public space.

Stephen: Last question for today. Um, what are some of the key takeaways from your book that practitioners and people working in the field of placemaking, urban design architecture, the creation of public places. What are some of the key takeaways that you would really like them to understand and really like them to be implementing in their work?

Hyesun: Yeah. Um, that's a great question. I believe investing only in infrastructure, like, uh, widening sidewalks or, um, streetscape upgrades like road diets, um, doesn't really guarantee success. Walkable places also need local amenities, uh, cultural activities or strong transit connections by bicycle and food to surrounding neighborhoods. So I think in practical terms, this means, uh, planners, designers and city officials should think about streets as, uh, more as an ecosystem, not just as, uh, infrastructures. So there should be more support on both sides. Uh, bottom up and top down on small businesses, um, affordable housing near transit encourage more mixed use. And we should also program public spaces, um, that are empty, right? And also increase more pedestrian bike infrastructure. So I think when these elements work together, um, this public space becomes more inclusive and connected. So, um, the takeaway of this book is, um, to help cities, um, that are not only environmentally sustainable, but also socially and vibrant and resilient over time. Um, and there's no one single answer, but we need to consider many different ways of doing so. Um, and that's why I put all these case studies together.

Stephen: Um, and if you're interested in getting your hands on this book, it is again called *Creating Sustainable Cities Through Pedestrian Urbanism* and it's published by Routledge. Thank you so much for appearing today on the Placemakers.

Hyesun: Thank you so much, Stephen.

Stephen: Thanks for listening to the Placemakers brought to you by Pomo. I'm Stephen Burton. Remember, the places that you create today will be the experiences that your children have tomorrow. And if you like what you've heard today, please follow us. If you want to make a comment or a suggestion, please do so via our Instagram page, which is Pomo design. Thanks so much.