

Episode transcript

The Placemakers, with Timea on regenerative placemaking

Speakers: Stephen Burton (host), Timea (guest)

Stephen (host): 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, 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. So today we're talking to Timea. Timea wears many hats across her projects. She's a placemaker, a facilitator, a community weaver and a researcher. And over the past decade, she's led participatory projects, learning journeys, conferences and festivals, and co-created artistic interventions in public spaces across Europe. She is currently pursuing a PhD in regenerative placemaking at the International University of Catalonia in Barcelona. And she joins us today to help us understand and learn about the concept of regenerative placemaking. Timea, welcome to The Placemakers.

Timea (guest): Hello. Thank you. I'm happy to be here.

Stephen (host): Can you please tell us what is regenerative placemaking?

Timea (guest): Oh, yeah. So we are jumping right into the middle. So basically it's bringing together two different fields, or different worlds, that are quite complementary actually, if we think about it. So we have the placemaking, and I'm sure I don't need to explain that on this channel. And then we have the regenerative field, the regenerative design and development, which actually aims to go maybe one step further from sustainability, going from not causing any harm to actually making the environment where we do our interventions a little bit of a better place after we leave it. Or in even better cases, don't even leave it, but have a long term stewardship over the places where we work. And then at the same time, having the creativity and the bottom up and community focused approach from placemaking, and bringing that together in how we work on different places. So basically that's the idea. The term itself comes from very different angles. Some people have been exploring it in the past years. It's quite new also. But yeah, basically this is the concept, and then we can go as deep as we want into it, but the whole idea is to combine these two fields.

Stephen (host): There seems to be a focus at the moment in other fields to not only do things that are sustainable, but also do things that leave an enhancement of the environment. So in other fields, there's descriptions of things like nature positive design, and it sounds like this is almost like placemaking starting to do stuff which isn't just sustainable, but actually has an uplift component to it. Is that a fair assessment of what it's about?

Timea (guest): Yeah, I think so. I think it's very accurate. And me personally, how I like to frame the whole thing, I try to frame it around relationality, and around the relationships that we have. So in my research, I'm looking at different public spaces and how they can foster or strengthen or build connections on different angles. Connection to ourselves, like how we are present in our bodies, how we are present in the spaces, in the communities where we are engaging. It's also our relationship to each other, to our neighbours, to the people, and also other beings, including more than human life, whom we are sharing these places with. Also connection to the place itself, its essence, its story, its characteristics, to be embedded in it. And then the fourth line of relationships is to be connected to the wider context where this place sits. So I like to frame it around these four relationships, which I think explains it quite well. And it aims a little bit to overcome some of the isolation and the individualism that we have in our cities. And I think many placemaking projects are already doing this. Maybe they don't call themselves regenerative placemaking. It's just, I think, a term that helps us see some of the practices, some of the work that we do, with a different, maybe a little bit more holistic, lens.

Stephen (host): That's a really good point. So what you're saying is perhaps it's not a brand new thing. Perhaps it's just a better way to look at some of the things that we've already been doing, but perhaps we didn't have a way to explain them.

Timea (guest): Yeah, exactly. If you think about the whole regenerative field, it's not something very new. It's very innate in nature, or how life works, if we think about it. So it's very much based on how life cycles are working, and it takes a lot of inspiration from, basically, how nature regenerates itself many, many times. We can talk about the example of soil or agriculture, where regenerative agriculture is quite a well known field to many. And they're like, yeah, we are cultivating the soil, but at the same time we are making a better soil. So the soil becomes more fertile, more nourished, more nutrition rich. So that's the idea, and how we can take that idea into the built environment and into public spaces. So that's also an interesting way. And I do believe, and also in my research I see a lot, that many people are doing amazing work. And it just gives another lens, maybe also a little bit of a checking, like, oh, do I really address everything that is there in the place, you know? Do I look at it from a good point of view? Do I also look at myself? You know, in the regenerative field it's also very important to engage ourselves as the practitioners who are working there. Am I really present there authentically? So I think it just helps us ask the right questions, maybe to have the right type of relationships in the places.

Stephen (host): That's an interesting point of view. You said, am I present in this moment? Am I present here as a placemaker? That's not something that I've ever really come across or necessarily considered. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Timea (guest): Yeah, sure. So in the whole regenerative field, it's very important that everything we do comes from ourselves, and from us being present as people. And

me working in academia, I in many cases see this contradiction, that we want to have knowledge that is very objective and very quantified and very adaptable to other cases. But in reality, I cannot withdraw myself from the work that I'm doing, from the knowledge that I'm producing. No matter how hard I try, I will have my biases, I will have my background, I will have my emotions, I will have my impressions, I will have my previous experiences of places. I will have all these things, all this lens that I cannot just take out. So we might as well work with this, you know? So that's the idea. That's the invitation to also work with what we can bring into this place, and what can be our role as placemakers in the places. What is the authentic role that we can bring here, this approach to bring ourselves and be present. For me, that came through the training that I did with Jenny Anderson, *The Power of Place*, which is her signature learning journey. And there, for example, every concept or every little exercise that she introduced, we could apply it to our projects. But at first we had to do it on ourselves, you know? So for example, I'm sure many of the listeners are familiar with creating a story of the place, doing a little bit of historical research. And she invited us that before we go out and do the research of the story of the place, let's do a story of ourselves, you know, to see what the patterns are in our lives, because it can really inform what we are the best at, how we can best help that place become the best version of itself.

Stephen (host): That's fascinating. I really love that. It's almost delving into these types of questions around subjectivity and, you know, your own presence in the moment. And it's also about how you can, not necessarily take on the role as an expert, but how can you be part of the performance of a place? How can you be part of that story yourself? Which I think is a beautiful way to look at it, because often with places we create, we don't really think about the fact that perhaps they might be there for many, many generations, and other people will have their stories which become overlaid in that experience as well. So places tend to be a culmination of all of these experiences that people have, and it's a really beautiful way to think through that. I just wanted to go back to one of your earlier points around sustainability. It seems as though regenerative placemaking is the next step up from sustainability, and perhaps some people may not necessarily know what that difference is clearly. Could you explain what the difference is between sustainability and regenerative placemaking practice?

Timea (guest): Yeah, that's a very, very valid question, and we get asked that question quite a lot. And actually in the regenerative approach, I think, to have this... I'm thinking of, this is black and this is white, you know, these dualities that we have in our world, like right and wrong, black and white. All these things, and putting something in opposition, like, oh, sustainability is bad now and we have to do regenerative. It's not necessarily the point. But sometimes it's easier to explain when we give examples of what the differences are. So usually how they explain it in the literature, and some practitioners who have been doing this for decades, they are saying that if sustainability is aiming for, I don't know, zero emissions or carbon neutrality, you know, this is always kind of having the balance of how much we

extract and how much we give back. And so if we think about regeneration, it could be that, okay, we are not just balancing it out, we are trying to make it better. But this is a simplification, of course, because I really like the term, in the regenerative field, which comes from many indigenous knowledge systems. It's reciprocity, and how we can have reciprocity in different places and how we interact with the places. And reciprocity means that it's not transactional necessarily. So it's not like I'm giving something and you are giving something back. It might be like that at the end of the day, but my expectations, or my attitude towards the work, is a little bit different. And also I think the other example, how I like to explain the difference between sustainability and the regenerative field, is through regenerative agriculture, permaculture, that is very widespread and many people know about it. So this idea of making the soil better after we cultivate our crops. How can that be transferred to the built environment? And I don't have very specific answers at this point. And also it's not about creating guidelines or quick fixes. I think, like what we talked about earlier, it's more about the approach, it's more about a holistic lens, a different lens of seeing all of these things. But it's very controversial, and many people, I think, use some of these terms interchangeably even, because, yeah, maybe regenerative is the new trendy word. It's a new buzzword. So if you put it in your project, it looks nice, it looks more contemporary, more cool, more hip in many cases. But it's also about how deep we want to go into this. But there is a very cool article, and I think the title is City, Regenerative, Resilient or Sustainable, maybe not in this order, but basically the author explains that certain scholars and practitioners have used these three terms of sustainability, resilience and regenerative over the past, I don't know, thirty, forty years, interchangeably for cities and the built environment. So I think the difference is very nuanced, and it's more about the approach and this more holistic lens.

Stephen (host): So when we are thinking about regenerative placemaking, are we also thinking about leaving that sort of net positive effect on the social, on the society of the people who are in that place? Are we thinking about it in terms of the economy, the local economy and that sort of thing as well? Is that part of the way that this model might work, or perhaps should work?

Timea (guest): Yeah, exactly. Ideally it would be embedded in all the different aspects of a place, as you say, the social aspects, the economic aspects, the built environment itself, the design itself, all the nature, all the life that is present there. And of course, if we think about it, it's not very easy to do something like that. There is a nice model that was developed by people at Village Well, from Melbourne, and Gilbert was on your podcast. They are working on making this type of work more tangible and creating these models that could help me better understand that. And in their model, you have, I think, seven different aspects of a place where you can work on the regenerative idea.

Stephen (host): It sounds wonderful, and in some ways it sounds a little ambitious. I mean, it feels like we're just trying to get people to understand this thing called placemaking, and now we have to get them to understand this thing called

regenerative placemaking. Are there examples of people who are doing this in practice, other examples of projects you've come across in your research where you can say, oh, that's a really good example of regenerative placemaking? Has that happened yet, or is it still too new to allow that to have occurred?

Timea (guest): Yeah. So actually, as I said before, many people are doing something like this even without branding it regenerative. I see many projects that are placemaking projects, and many of the aspects fit this lens and these models and what we are talking about. And I also see many regenerative initiatives that are not calling themselves placemaking, and doing very embedded place based work that might as well be called placemaking. So I think the terms, and language, and the power of language and what kind of dynamics it carries, is another very interesting discussion that we could have a whole other episode on, I believe. But basically what I'm trying to do in my research is to look at these initiatives and try to see the patterns of the different socio spatial practices in these places that could make up regenerative placemaking. So the main aim for my thesis is to have some sort of a pattern library that collects these practices, that could maybe later be used as a toolkit, kind of like mix and match. If we have all of these different practices, then we can make up a regenerative placemaking project. And by practice I mean small gestures to place that could really help strengthen these relationships that we talked about. Just to give an example, gardening in a place evolves our connection to ourselves, because it improves our skills. We are present there, we are doing something with our hands. It also improves our relationship with our neighbours, because we have to do it together. Or maybe I'm going out of town for a day, and then I have to ask my neighbour to water my tomatoes. It also builds this relationship to the land, because we are learning about how the plants are behaving, how the soil is there, you know? And it also builds this relationship with the wider life, through engaging with the plants and seeing all the different insects that come, maybe after. But this is just one example. Another example could be more in the placemaking practice that is in the programming part, maybe offering food. It's the same kind of thing. So these are different social practices, but we can also talk about the design aspects, like, okay, how does the place look? Where do the [unclear: "see things"], you know, are directed. But in the design part, I think we are already quite advanced. There is a lot of literature and a lot of design frameworks which are talking about the human centred design of places. Of course, in practice we see a lot of places that are not doing what is already there in the guidelines and in the aims and ambitions. But I think that one is more explored. So I'm more interested in these social practices that can build the relationships in the places. So hopefully my research will result in some sort of toolkit where you can see how this can be built in place, and I'm taking inspiration from a lot of different projects across Europe, where I'm based mostly, but recently, that's also how we met, I was in Melbourne doing a research stay. So I'm going to include some initiatives from there as well.

Stephen (host): I really love the idea of a pattern library, and that's a great way to describe it. Almost like these characteristics of what might make up a regenerative

placemaking project. And by you researching them and outlining them, it's potentially a really good resource for consultants and practitioners. So that can be like a touchstone for us to be able to say, oh, okay, so what we're doing here is regenerative placemaking, or if we wanted to do it, perhaps here is our guideline as to how we should go about doing it. And it's almost as if, when you were talking before, it made me think of the role of a placemaker as more like a social practitioner, almost like a social facilitator. And that's not often something that we come across in practice, at least in Australia. So I really love that idea. And it's almost as if it's evolving placemaking itself into another field. So it sounds like your research is very cutting edge and very of the moment. What are some of the things that you've come across in your research that have really surprised you? What are some of these big aha moments that you've had when you've been researching, and some of the breakthroughs that you've come across?

Timea (guest): Oh, that's a very, very hard question, because I like to think about my research, you know, as doing something for a long term, across years. You have to celebrate the small wins, because otherwise, to keep you motivated and keep you going. And this motivation is the good part, but for me these small wins are always the connection between the practitioners who I meet, the communities that I get to engage with, or the other researchers that I meet. So I get a lot of inspiration from engaging with people and having these conversations and finding these aha moments, like, oh yeah, I've also been thinking about that, you know, the power of language and how we call ourselves. And also we have to translate in so many cases the professional terms to the communities that are more explained. And when I hear a nice way of putting it, I get inspired by that. Or if I see a long term project that works for, I don't know, years, and it started with a very, very small thing. I had this moment in Melbourne when I learned about the Guilford Lane story, that it started with one person putting out little plants in front of their door on the street. And it was years ago. And now if you see it, the whole street is very green, very lively, it helped also the local businesses, the community came together. You can see the story of the community on the street, and now it put the street on the map, not only in Melbourne but worldwide, they are very famous and a very good example. And it started with a very small gesture, a very small action of care. And I also learned that after that, the local council was picking up on it and supporting it, and maybe supporting other streets to do similar things. So I think I value more these small wins and small gestures that give you hope and inspiration for the future, and also to see that we can do things better or we can do things differently, that can contribute maybe to a better future that we want to have.

Stephen (host): [Start of question unclear] practitioners who are practising in placemaking at the moment, if they want to do something which is more regenerative, what do you think some of the basic things they can do in their practice would be that would make their work more aligned with regenerative placemaking?

Timea (guest): Yeah. I think, if I have to choose one thing, it's to try to take into consideration not only the human perspective of a place, but also the more than human, the context, the story that is there, also the wider field, maybe the whole bioregion, what kind of watershed the place sits on, or what the native species are there generally, and is it really a good place not only for us humans, but also maybe for other life there. So it could be this as a first step. But if I want to be very methodological, then the first step can go back to what we talked about earlier, starting with ourselves. So maybe we should start with ourselves and think about our role as policymakers, our role as designers in the place, and try to think about where we can be the most useful to contribute, to have this stronger relationship with the process that's going on in the place.

Stephen (host): Last question for today. What do you think the future of placemaking looks like?

Timea (guest): Yeah, that's an interesting one. I hope that we as a field, we as placemakers, can be contributing to a different future for our cities, for our built environment, that really nourishes all life and all kind of connections. And that we have more lively, more connected, more holistic places in the world. So I wish for that. I don't know if that's the future we are going to have. I'm trying to hope for that, and that we have more of these reciprocal relationships in places, and not use it as something for more extraction, but to create better places. Maybe it's an old one, but I think it still stands.

Stephen (host): Absolutely. Thank you so much for chatting to us today on The Placemakers. And it sounds like your work is going to really help contribute to that great future that you just outlined.

Timea (guest): I hope so.

Stephen (host): 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.