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Welcome to the Future Fix. The promise of game changing data and technology to improve our lives is ubiquitous. And the field of placemaking is no exception. In a way, good placemaking has always relied on data, who frequents a place in what numbers at what time of day and so on. Technology is not new to placemakers, there are just more potential uses. But many people are looking to push the boundaries of what we can do with data and tech to provide the best possible public spaces for the widest variety of people. How do we make the most of a place? How do we make it useful and welcoming? How do we maintain it, program it and make it responsive? That's the world of digital placemaking. And that's what we aim to find out. You're listening to the Future Fix: Solutions for Communities across Canada. This is season three of the Future Fix an audio exploration of the way technology and data are shaping communities across Canada. I'm Glyn Bowerman. Each episode, we present community challenges and solutions and take you to places large and small from coast to coast to coast. In this episode, we take a look at how technology can be used to reach people and empower them to shape the public spaces they rely on. For this, we speak to Farhaan Ladhani, co founder and CEO of Digital Public Square. DPS looks at a range of digital tools to reach out and engage with people about the way their neighborhoods are shaped, and how services are provided. This could mean a different approach to consultation, or even interactive online tools to help people visualize the possibility of the spaces they use and love. So Farhaan to begin, I was hoping that you could help me define digital placemaking. Because I think a lot of this lingo, you know, with the advancement in technology and data, it's kind of mercurial so what do you think of when you think about the term digital placemaking? Well, what does that mean to you?

3:00

Yeah, I'm glad that you asked the question that way. Because when we first started out, how do you define it, and I was hesitant, because I think it actually means so many things to so many different people. When I think about digital placemaking, I'm really thinking about the way in which digital tools can enhance or increase the way in which people can both enjoy very particular places, or spaces, the way that they can contribute, to how those places or spaces can be used by communities. And I hope over time, increasingly, how digital tools can help increase the way in which those places or spaces are governed, so that people can have a much more active participant role in the way in which the spaces are used to improve the quality of their lives.

4:00

As you say, it could be many things, but is there sort of a project ongoing in Canada, in municipality big or small that you kind of look to as something that you can get people excited about the idea say, Well, look over here?

4:15

Yeah, I don't know if I would even give you just a single one. What I would say is I think that there are a lot of municipalities, I've had the privilege of talking to a few of them recently, where I was at an event with ICLEI Canada, that was looking at communities that are looking at the challenge of sustainability over the course of the next generation and more, not, and talking about the role of digital in their communities. And what I saw actually, remarkably was many communities doing a wonderful job of trying to find better ways to foster meaningful engagement in the way in which your spaces are being used from the perspective of trying to address all sorts of challenges that they face, whether that be around the way in which climate is affecting those communities, whether that be around the way that they're building resilience, those communities to all sorts of challenging and pressing issues, or the way in which they're trying to increase the effectiveness of the use of those spaces. And many of them thinking hard about how digital can complement each and every one of those efforts from communities large and small. And I think that that's the part that I found, frankly, most remarkable is that it's not just big communities, it's not only larger metropolitan centers that are thinking hard about this, they've got a distinct set of challenges, certainly, but communities of all sizes are thinking about how to drive the way in which digital tools can increase the connective tissue by and amongst members of those communities, and then how those municipalities can benefit from that increased active participation to improve the economic, political and social fabric that exists in those neighborhoods and in those communities. So I wouldn't say that there's a single one case example, my takeaway actually is, there's a lot that's being tried that people are very much looking to the way in which digital tools can be used to improve some of their efforts, and then others to kind of radically change them to radically change the way that communities can participate in them. That's happening right here in the city of Toronto, where I live too, and I'm happy to talk to you about one example of that, that we've had, in our own experience, at digital public square.

6:27

It seems to me that it's a bunch of people who may not be familiar with the tools, but they're walking into a large art studio for the first time. And there's paint brushes and, and pencils and canvases, and you know, pottery, Clay, everything.

6:41

Yeah, 100%. And, and I think that you still have the excitement of the opportunity that may be afforded by all of those supplies, how you put the pieces together, make a really big difference in how people feel like they can recognize it, how they feel reflected in it. And then as a consequence, whether they're going to hang it up in their walls in their homes, but that the fact that people are approaching is very much as a tapestry that they feel like they can participate in

building was one of the main takeaways that I had, from engaging with so many of them -- this real vibrance and excitement around the way in which people might leverage these tools. And I think the pandemic has pushed that along a lot, actually. Because I think it helped open up both the demand, the need for people to embrace the way the digital tools can be used in very helpful ways. Certainly considering the risks, and we can talk about those, but can be used in very helpful ways. But the necessity, given the way in which the pandemic shuttered people from face to face connectivity for some time, necessity drove, I think, a lot of really positive forcing function in now picking up those paint brushes and saying we have to do something about this, not only do I want to and now forced to, I have to.

7:59

Let's talk about you. What were you trying to address, you're the CEO and co founder of Digital Public Square, what were you trying to address with DPS?

8:08

So Digital Public Square was based on the idea that need for us to foster meaningful and oftentimes challenging conversations is hard. It's hard. In the best of cases, it's hard at the best of times. And it's gotten harder and harder, I would argue as a function of the way in which our online, both identities are shaped and the platforms around which those identities are then shared with one another. There's a whole host of reasons as to why. But the bottom line is it was hard and it was getting harder. And the idea that we needed a better way to foster those meaningful conversations, even in the most challenging places, and even on the most complex subjects was really what gave birth to Digital Public Square, as a way of trying to identify methods for us to be able to have those discussions to find ways of including more people that would otherwise be party to conversations, maybe because they were limited from participating, maybe because it was difficult for them to participate. Maybe because people were purposefully being excluded from the discussions, sometimes inadvertently, not able to participate. The bottom line was we needed better ways to foster those conversations. And so Digital Public Square grew, the idea that you could actually do that, you could do that in a simple and meaningful way. You could do it in a way that people wanted to participate to increase the demand for participation in those very dialogues, and do so in a way that that ultimately meant that whatever outcomes whatever decisions that communities would take or that participants in the conversation would take that they would be more durable because they were appropriately challenged and ultimately included far more people to the idea of Digital Public Square approaches, can we go build some of those approaches? Could we build some of those tools? And can we learn about how people wanted to participate in ways that we could create space for our participation, but could tackle even the most difficult things.

10:12

You mentioned a project in Toronto? What is that the Annex project? Because I wanted to ask you about that. Yeah, it is. Can you tell our listeners a little bit about the annex project, how that began? And what that looks like?

10:25

Yeah, you bet. So the annex is this really amazing community that -- it sits in and around the University of Toronto's St. George campus. And so it's a neighborhood that has a really high degree of diversity; got people that run across a wide array of socio economic conditions, you've got a community that has really diverse demographic, in terms of renters, and owners, you've got a high degree of diversity of people who come in out of the community, because of the way that the neighborhood is shaped and the number of people that come in and out for economic reasons and for, for boys to participate in the work that people might do at university or students that that attend the university. So a really high degree of diversity in the neighborhood. And as a result, they were trying to find ways of encouraging people to connect with the neighborhood association, that is regularly trying to better understand the community in order to be able to reflect and represent their interests in ways that that reflect that diversity of the community. That Annex Residents Association was trying to find better ways of doing that they would host community meetings, they have a good newsletter, they had people consuming the content that they would discuss. But they were really looking to find ways of fostering greater connectivity with the residents association and to broaden the participation. And so in discussions with them, we took a project that we were piloting around a new way of fostering connectivity to the work of the organization, to help people better understand the whole array of issues that the residents association was trying to tackle, that the kinds of inputs that they would provide to other stakeholders, members of the community, neighborhood businesses, the city, the whole array of stakeholders that engage with the residents association, to give the community a better understanding of that work, and how they can play a role in that work. And so we developed a framework some time ago, around how to foster better engagement at the level of the community that allowed people to weigh in on the kinds of things that they were interested in. And we've customized it in the context of the Annex Residents Association to give the community a better understanding of the work of the ARA and how that work ultimately impacted the lives of the people in the community. So we asked them questions about, you know, the kinds of issues that the residents' association was tackling from planning and development, to the way in which it was tackling community safety, and the whole array of issues that the residents association was working on. And over 10 weeks, that project was launched across the neighborhood. And what we learned was that 1000s of people actually checked out the platform to engage and about 20% of people actually

decided to give it a try. So we had a high number of people that chose to participate. And as we started to learn about the results of this, what we learned was that three quarters of the people who started learning about a particular area of work, or what we call the topic, actually completed what we call an entire module, they decided to engage deeply on the issues. And almost half of those people actually decided to dive in deep on to two or more topics. Meaning that what we're, what we're learning was that actually there was a huge demand for trying to understand the work that the residents association was undertaking across a whole array of subjects. Nearly everyone who chose to participate, actually decided to share information about themselves voluntarily, you didn't need to put your email, I just say you don't have to provide any personally identifiable information. We're very, we're an organization that values privacy, a great deal. And so as a result, we want to create the space for people to participate without being forced to share any information about themselves or any identifiable information. But people voluntarily decided to tell us about themselves as they learn more about the work that the community was doing. So a very active transparency, opened up a channel for people to tell us more and nine out of 10 people actually voluntarily told us more about themselves. And I can tell a little bit about that. In just a minute. Nearly three quarters of people told us they felt that we actually learned something new about what the community was was doing. 40% of present people identified as coming from groups that are underrepresented in decision making and high degree of participation from equity seeking groups. In fact, nearly half of the participants self identified as coming from an equity seeking group. And that matters to us because the goal very much was how do we broaden the array of participants that we that their neighborhood association heard from on a regular basis. And what we're seeing was that they were actually doing that they were hearing from a much broader array of people that might otherwise participate in their meetings, or that they might oftentimes hear from telling them not just what they think about the issues that the areas working on, telling them the kinds of issues that matter to them, but also telling them more about themselves. And I think the net impact of all of that is a much deeper understanding of the community that makes up the fabric of the of the Annex, but then, as a result, a much better way of representing the interests that they might have. And in doing so, as, as the community thinks about the choices that it makes, as a Resident Association, thinks about the choices that it makes, and the community that I represent is a much greater fidelity on the what makes up that community and all those people individually, as well as collectively as part of a vast array of groups. But think about the kinds of issues that the area has to tackle on a regular basis. It really met the challenge in trying to better represent and reflect on the views and opinions of many more people from a diverse array of backgrounds into the decision making that the ARA undertakes on a regular basis. And I think on that measure, really demonstrated the power that digital tools can have in fostering some of those types of

conversations from a much broader array of people.

16:46

Yeah, I mean, it seems like this project was a good way of, for the association to sort of take the pulse of its residents. But I wonder, in the future, if it could have utility for things like participatory budgeting that kind of thing?

17:01

I mean, that's to me, that's very much the future, right? Because part of this is, how do you foster participation that we can get people interested. How do you give them the space to feel like they got a voice? How do you give them the space to be able to influence the choices and decisions that the community is making? And then how do you close the feedback loop to show them exactly how their input leads to either the same or different outcomes that are more consistent with their needs and their interests, and in doing so encourage them to participate more, drive more demand for participation, so that you can get into challenging issues like participatory budgeting, challenging issues, like what to do with development in the neighborhood, challenging issues around how people would like the seats to be better designed to reflect on the way in which they'd like the community to grow over the course of the next 10 to 20 years. Those are, those are really important issues. And they can be challenging, and so opening up space for people to feel like they can participate, that they can both understand the issues, find a way to have a voice in the issues, and then be able to do that on an ongoing basis is absolutely the direction that we hope this type of platform can take in the direction that I think digital tools can very much afford.

18:18

A challenge to all of this, I think, I'm sure it's one that you consider, as you say, you're you're looking at ways to involve equity seeking groups that may or may not always be part of the discussion in the status quo of consultation, that kind of thing. But, you know, I'm sure the idea of the digital divide and the fact that not everyone may have access to these kinds of technologies. It probably keeps you up at night, sometimes.

18:43

It does. And I gotta tell you, it was a question that really we focused on heavily 10 years ago, when you know, thinking about these issues. I'll say a couple of things, one: that divides persists, you know, the availability and accessibility of information and tools persists. And just because people have now found that they might be able to use the accessibility of the informational content remains to be a real challenge, right. So we're developing the realism like a universal we people will produce content and people who produce information, try to do so in a way that's intended to be accessible to a particular audience or a group of audiences. But our ability to

capture the feedback on what people actually do understand on what they do reflect on in the context of what's shared with them, that they do appropriately contest when they disagree with things that they do tell you. They have a high degree of confidence in because they believe the veracity of them, that they do believe that the sources of evidence that are provided reflect those that they might feel a high degree or low degree of trust, trust and all of those feedback loops, I think are still really difficult for us to grasp at. And so as a consequence, even today, we talk about that digital divide It may not be necessarily in the form of you know, physical devices, because many more people have them, it may not be on the basis of their availability of a data plan or the ability to access a Wi Fi network where they can get access to that content, though those still persist, and they're not persisting the same numbers. But the question of accessibility and the content and the way in which people feel like those, that content actually reflects them. I think that is a persistent challenge, and one, which I think is actually growing, not getting smaller.

20:29

So this is kind of a big question. But you know, how can local governments of any size take advantage of these sorts of digital placemaking tools? And it seems like there's more and more of them every day? And then on the other side? You know, what do they need to be wary of? You know, talking about possible pitfalls or slippery slopes?

20:47

Now, it's a great question. So, you know, I would say that there are, as you said, more and more of these tools available every single day. And they do some really similar things and novel things. And I would say there isn't like one tool that you can use to do all the things and that's okay, we're at a time when there are lots of people trying many different ways to try to foster these types of outcomes. So my advice to them is get started, like get started right now, if you're not starting, get started right now. If you have started, try, try many different approaches, find a cluster or community of people that are willing to try with you what I mean by that, find a group of people that are willing to share in the learning that you're trying to undertake at figuring out how to maximize the use these tools to foster the kinds of outcomes you want with the community, those early adopters are going to be incredibly helpful to giving you really useful, raw and unadulterated feedback, meaning that they're able to give you their true genuine views and opinions about whether the you're trying to accomplish was actually something that worked, whether or not the tool they're trying to use was actually easy. Whether or not it might appeal to the people who were actually trying to reach. And in trying, you're going to figure out pretty quickly, whether or not you're reaching your objectives. And whether or not your objectives may be easily reached with one set of tools, one group

of people, but ignores a whole other set of them. Which is why I think you have to try many of them. Because the risk, of course, and we'll get to risks in a second is Oh, it worked really, really well whatever tool was worked really well in solving one particular problem, but didn't actually engage the broad array of people that you may be trying to reach, it didn't work really well for some people and you still have other groups that you need to find alternative ways to get to. Don't forget about the fact that these tools might be really accessible for some and not very accessible for others. So trying a lot of them, I think is one way to avoid that pitfall. When it comes to risk, I would say a couple of things, one resources, right; resources are always going to be at risk. And so thinking hard about the way in which you're measuring performance, thinking hard about what you're trying to accomplish, and how you're going to see evidence of it will help you identify those tools and approaches that are really working for you. And the ones that you can discard, you can waste a lot of time if you're not careful. And that's not something that any of us have. And the resources are certainly finite, particularly for municipalities. And so my first piece of advice is get started and start trying. The second is make sure that you understand what you're trying to accomplish and having an measurable impact that you're trying to reach. Because that'll help you reinforce whether you're moving things in the right direction, or ones that are just not as fruitful. I would also say that thinking about the way in which these tools can be used to foster engagement and community can be really useful for all sorts of things from consultation through to participation on decision making through to the provision of information that might be really important for people to know. Don't think about them as only one thing, think about them as being able to affect engagement across a whole array of issues. Because when you start to think about it that way, a couple of things happen. One, you start to think about participation in a kind of a different way, you're not thinking about just wanting people to latch on to this one particular issue or I need to tell people about this one particular event, you're thinking about it as a constant opportunity to foster that engagement to produce really good participation outcomes. And that solves a second problem, which is you don't need 100 tools to do 100 things you can think about the ones which help you accomplish your objectives, but there might only be a couple of them. And that brings down the kind of resource barrier. And I got asked this at an event that I was talking about a couple of weeks ago for particularly small communities in municipalities that don't have you know, a chief data officer, they don't have 100 staff that can help advance some of the use of some of these capabilities. I think they're to the solution is think about a couple of them that can help you address multiple challenges, and then invest in those, invest in those because many different parts of your organization, many different parts of your institution can use them. And if you couple that mindset of we're thinking about participation across the whole lifecycle alone With the selection of a couple of tools that can be really useful for you, with

really clear identified outcomes, and all of a sudden your resource challenge becomes a lot more modest because you can apply this into the resources to accomplish many things. And two, I would argue that you're investing in the exact right place, because what you're really doing is saying, we're going to try to understand our community much better so that when we ask them to collaborate, the collaboration produces outcomes that are much more durable. Even through the tensions that invariably arise when you're going to seek decisions from community members that may have different interests, the durability of those decisions is likely to be much greater.

25:39

Farhaan, I want to thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me.

25:42

Really lovely to meet you. Thank you for inviting me here. And I hope to talk to you guys again soon.

25:46

All right, all the best. As technology evolves, so will ideas about how to harness it, tools will adapt to our needs, and we will adapt to new tools. When it comes to placemaking. Possibly the best way to make use of that technology today is to use it to involve everyone. A public forum that both informs people as well as gathering those people's lived experiences and expertise. A healthy symbiotic relationship aimed at addressing the needs of both people and place. It's been pointed out often incorrectly, that previous methods of engagement for public spaces leave some people without a voice are unable to participate. In a world where digital tools are becoming more accessible. Digital placemaking is the fix. Thank you for listening to the future fix: solutions for communities across Canada. We are a partnership between Spacing magazine and Evergreen for the Community Solutions Network, a program of Future Cities Canada. As the program lead, Evergreen is working with Open North and partners to help communities of all sizes across Canada navigate the Smart Cities landscape. The Community Solutions Network is supported with funding provided by Infrastructure Canada. This podcast was produced by myself Glyn Bowerman and Neil Hinchley original music composed by Neil Hinchley. Our content consultant is Sanchita Rajvanshi. See you next time.

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