COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Building Effective Partnerships for Placemaking

Rhindon is a multi-disciplinary design consultancy that applies a human-centred design and systems approach to placemaking. We have worked with a diverse range of organisations to help them re-imagine what a thriving community could look like, driven by collective ownership and creative impact.

TEXT AND IMAGES: RHINDON (BILLY KWAN, JOSHUA TEO AND AQIDAH HASLAN)

Building a Systems View of Partnerships for Placemaking

One of the aspects of placemaking that we have been constantly re-thinking, is how to move beyond short-term activation (e.g., through programmatic interventions), to creating sustained impact and tangible change within a neighbourhood or district. As a system, our urban environment has many different parts that exist in interrelated ways. These webs of interrelations mean that issues are often complex and multifaceted, unsolvable by any one party or agency.

Building partnerships becomes an important key to creating meaningful impact as it facilitates the process of finding common ground amidst differences in perspectives, and leveraging on the assets of the system to collectively drive outcomes based on a shared vision. Ultimately, this translates into greater opportunities for meaningful impact where there is ownership of the change by the communities who inhabit the space.

Here are 5 key principles that we have found to be hugely important in building successful partnerships for placemaking:

1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
Build empathy and trust through a common understanding of the different needs within the system	**Align on a common picture for the future**	**Partner according to common interests and complementary strengths**	**Have clarity of roles and outcomes**	**Lower the barriers of partnership through experiments**

1.
Build empathy and trust through a common understanding of the different needs within the system

A neighbourhood or urban district is often made up of groups of people with a variety of needs and aspirations. Often, these differences could be seen as in competition with each other resulting in a phenomenon of multiple groups working in silos to improve their own circumstances. Getting the different groups into the same room to listen to each other's challenges helps them find common ground with each other and helps them discover opportunities to make a bigger impact through collaborations. This can be done at various levels and the key is often to centre the conversation around a common challenge or experience that groups are passionate about improving.

The National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre (NVPC) Lower-Income Colabs brought together over 140 people who were involved in working with lower-income families, to build a common understanding around the families' lived experience. Over five sessions, participants went through a facilitated process of Learn, Align, Act, with the goal of partnering to solve for unmet needs.

Under another project, we worked with Wisma Geylang Serai (WGS) to engage youths, young adults and political stakeholders, to align on what was important to them in the refresh of WGS. The insights from these engagements were used to guide how they wanted to partner with retail tenants.

2.
Align on a common picture for the future

A shared vision of the future is essential in building trust and enabling collective action among the different stakeholders within the system (whether place or community). The aspirations of each individual or group are galvanised and translated into a common vision that each party is able to identity with and thus align on. It also builds collective ownership around what the stakeholders hope to see and the role they see themselves playing in that new future. It is important to use different tools to make this experience as visual as possible, as it helps stakeholders visualise their future involvement in a more tangible way.

Conversations That Help Bring Alignment of a Common Future

Who is in this future vision?

Where are you and what is the role you are playing?

What impact has been made? Who achieved it and how was it achieved?

What are the important narratives you see in this future?

How are people feeling about the future? What are they saying?

54

3.
## Partner according to common interests and complementary strengths

A common barrier to successful partnerships is often the question of effort versus value—"How much effort is this going to require of me and my organisation and what are the returns from this?" To overcome this inertia, we believe it is important that partnerships start from a position of strength, which is to say, "What does one bring to the table and how can that be enhanced by partnering with someone else with a common interest and complementary strength?" For example, bringing together funders, different service providers and residents creates a unique opportunity for those with resources to identify, understand and address the gaps in the system. Even end users should be considered as assets with something to bring to the table and not just recipients.

Forming Partnerships Using a Strengths-Based Approach

Strengths of Organisation

Existing Resources

Is there data or research that we can share with others?

Who else can I interest to be part of this effort?

Existing Networks

Is there someone who has access that I can leverage on?

Is there someone who can help me scale what I am doing?

What we are good at doing?

Who has similar interests as me? Can we do more together by sharing our learnings?

Strengths of Individual

55

4.
Have clarity of roles and outcomes

Partnerships that start off with clear roles and outcomes often have a higher chance of lasting the distance. Identifying a Project Champion is key to imbuing a sense of responsibility and trust among stakeholders. A champion's passion and commitment will go a long way in building collective ownership and advocating further the causes they support. Most importantly, a champion should be capable of mobilising resources with the commitment to take positive action. Here, partnerships can be harnessed as a strategic tool to aid the champion in expanding their resource pool, ensuring success of placemaking initiatives and securing longer term investments needed to address emerging urban issues.
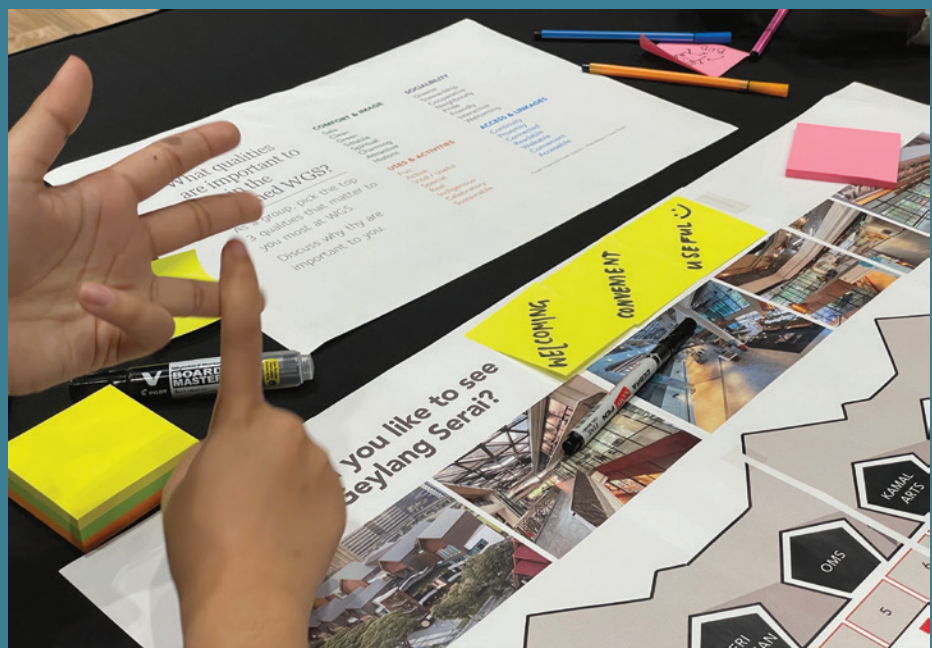
5.
Lower the barriers of partnership through experiments

Translating relationships into partnerships is no easy task. A common struggle is in formalising the partnership beyond a friendly relationship. This could be due to a lack of organisational buy-in or the lack of clarity on what to partner on. This is where taking a prototyping approach towards the partnership could create the space for buy-in and commitment. We often urge groups to start first by doing something together as an experiment and then building on it, encouraging a bias towards action rather than a wait-and-see attitude.

For example, by partnering with a community service provider who already had a network of relationships within the community, we were able to test different ways in which partnerships between the organisation, a public gathering space (in this case, the coffeeshop), volunteers and residents could create a more liveable neighbourhood for seniors and families.