Firstly, thank you to the Theatres Trust for having me here today, and it’s a pleasure to speak to you all on the topic of culture and placemaking.

I am a practitioner that has worked in arts in place and the public engagement in the built environment for around 20 years.

I have a PhD in the arts processes of placemaking and I now work as a Strategist for Futurecity – and my colleague Tim Jones is also here today – and am a Research Adjunct in creative placemaking metrics at University of Virginia Thriving Cities.

I am going to explore with you different aspects of placemaking and talk about the special role that theatre can have in placemaking.
There are as many different definitions of placemaking out there as there are practitioners – it means lots of things to lots of people.

For me, placemaking is an approach and a set of tools that puts the community front and centre of deciding how their place looks and how it functions.
It represents a paradigm shift in thinking about planning and urban design, from a primary focus on buildings to a focus on public space - what happens in these spaces, why, how and by whom, is placemaking.
So placemaking isn’t the placing of an item of star-architecture in a place – that’s architecture.
Nor is it putting in cycle lanes or cool bus stops— that’s the basis of good urban design.
It’s not a sculpture in a city square either – that’s public art.
Put all of those things together though, and get the community hands on in the process, working alongside architects, designers and artists, and we’re on our way to placemaking.

More than just planning and designing spaces, placemaking facilitates creative patterns of activities and connections - cultural, economic, social, environmental - that define a place and support its on-going evolution.

Placemaking is an overarching term – just as art and architecture covers all sorts of forms and genres, so too does placemaking.
A type of placemaking pertinent to us today is that of creative placemaking.

The term originated in the States with the National Endowment for the Arts and the 2010 Markusen-Gadwa white paper.
In creative placemaking, partners from public, private, nonprofit and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, tribe, city or region around arts and cultural activities. Creative placemaking animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire and be inspired.

Markusen and Gadwa (2010)

...this understands creative placemaking as something that marries public and private, that uses the arts in regeneration, and that has a fiscal benefit as well as social and cultural ones.

Here you see the public-private mix that is evident in much placemaking, but also the concern with the arts, on communities thriving...
However you look at it, placemaking is grounded in the particulars of place. This is its heritage and built environment – of which theatres are a key component – but it’s also about its culture and traditions, the things a community celebrates and defines itself as – it’s the place ‘terroir’.

Community is key. Places are made with and by a community, not to or in spite of it.

Arts are the prime tool that placemaking uses to both understand people and place as well as shape place.
When anchored in placemaking, arts and culture can engage the community in the issues of place – anything from housing, education, transit, safety... - and the outcome of this is threefold.

Firstly, it gets people civically minded and active.

Secondly, it can create a critical mass that activates place revitalisation.

Thirdly, it can join with the systems of place – the housing, education and so on, to collaborate in its creation.
The most visible aspect of placemaking is its impact on place identity.

It's rare indeed to have a place that has no prior identity, and what placemaking does is work with the assets of that place and make it the best that it can be for the people that live, work and play in that place.

Place identity is questioned, explored, reaffirmed or made anew with placemaking.

This can happen at the level of the local park, it can happen across a region of a city, and it can happen to a whole place.
The town of Huntley has affirmed its identity through an arts-led placemaking and the place is now synonymous with inter-connecting its place with artists and communities and making the town a year round, all-pervasive arts venue.
Placemaking is also a process whereby issues of place can be discussed and resolutions explored – placemaking gives a voice to the community, amongst itself and also to those that might not usually listen.

In Certain Places in Preston, a project that fosters artists’ contributions to the form and functions of the town and it has affected how people live in Preston, its urban design, policy and regeneration.
Project Row Houses in Houston, founded by artist Rick Lowe, has worked since 1993 in Houston’s Third Ward, building houses for those on low-income.

It was borne from Rick’s wanting to create a positive presence in his community and has taken this desire to transform the social and built environment to give art a social role in neighbourhood revitalization, historic preservation, community service, and youth education.
Regeneration and placemaking go hand in hand – it's not always an easy relationship, often positioned in a tripartite with gentrification.

Large-scale regeneration projects though can get it right.
I have been involved with Big Car in Indianapolis over the past four years and have seen artists there create an artist-led development model, one that puts the means of development – the land and buildings – in the hands of artists who work to keep the community front and centre of development.

Here, the artists are seeing that gentrification is just about to hit their area, so, with a mixed income model. They have bought up a disused warehouse to turn it into an arts and community venue, and houses around it to let out at a peppercorn rent to artists, all to keep the artists and community in place and to support the local mom and pop stores.

Placemaking then is more than just an aesthetic wash to be put over place...
It can also impact infrastructure too.
Irrigate is a billion-dollar light-rail project that links the downtowns of Minneapolis and St. Paul, a project from Springboard for the Arts.

Over 450 artists worked through this project, from the station design through to activating the areas around the stations, to help secure the cultural and commercial life of the areas the line passes through – keeping in the small family-run shops and restaurants in, the chains out, building social capital to sustain the community.

This isn’t an exhaustive list of the outcomes of placemaking, and its just a snapshot of the examples given anyway.

To sum up, in placemaking, people have their love of place confirmed, renewed, valued; their place attachment leads to place stewardship; which leads to social cohesion and wellbeing; and leads them to form the vibrant, liveable places that administrations, planners and developers the world over are working to variously create or secure.
So what now of the relation between theatres and placemaking?

There are two interlinked aspects of this – the building of the theatre and the work of the theatre.

A theatre buildings connection with the architectural, social and cultural history of a place assures its role in defining place identity and in economic development. I anticipate that this much is a given to us today.

But it is the function of theatres more than their form that I want to focus on here.

Theatres work in transforming one space into a new dimension – space is your medium, relationships your metier.
When theatre moves out of its cultural anchor building it moves into being part of the placemaking conversation. It creates space for interpersonal interaction, driving the local economy as much as driving social connection and civic transformation.

I’ve learned from my own research and practice that at the heart of placemaking is storytelling. And what else is the arts broadly and theatre more specifically than storytelling?

Placemaking has a natural open curiosity with the world around it. There is an invitation here for theatres to work out of their walls and into the broader community and in creating cultural experiences that are part of a place's storytelling.

The work of theatre can work with community knowledge to help them uncover and articulate their sense of place, framing their place issues and together finding the solutions to them.

Incredibly importantly, it can give platform to the voices of those constituents that might find themselves excluded from the development process, or who have development done to them, rather than with them.
Look at the work of Theatre Delicatessen.

Here is a group that creates meanwhile projects with the intent of empowering the local community by giving them access to creative resources and new ways of thinking and doing.

Its orientation is to the community, but also to Council and developers, those with the means and the money to deliver on community benefit.

This is the theatre work of creating social capital and social cohesion, bridge building between the community and the administration and developer – and of engendering place transformation as its output. This is the stuff of the imagination, that takes the individual position and transforms it to the community perspective.

What does all this mean for how theatres should be working with placemaking and for the future of this relationship?
There is a twofold need for the processes of placemaking.

Firstly, for all those involved to work across sectors and out of silos.

I think the arts as collaborative and transdisciplinary are best placed to lead by example here, and indeed of breaking some of our sibling sectors fear of the trial and error of process.

Secondly, there is a need for architects, urban designers and planners to pay more attention to local knowledges and desires to be part of creating more meaningful places. There is a vital role for theatre makers in this, driving and incubating the conversations through community-based and explorative and testing methodologies.
There is opportunity for theatre to take a place at the development table – the recent Futurecity brokering of the new theatre space at Crossharbour is an example of this.

The era of centralised, local authority-led administration has been superseded by an ecology in which the developer is now in the lead. This goes beyond the well-worn section 106 mindset and a new way of working is demanded, and indeed desired, by developers.

This of course doesn’t come without its dangers and I ask you all to be mindful of where you draw your own personal and institutional lines.
Tipping off from this, there is a need for an expanded vision of placemaking beyond physical enhancement, social amenities, art spaces and place branding for example, that brings greater focus on people and culture, social justice, and equity.

There is a need for theatres to be part of the cultural leadership in this regard and have the conversations that surface those issues and the work that goes on to affect place policy.
Let me conclude by saying that in these difficult and complicated times, placemaking is a clarion call for a creativity that is rooted in place and engaged with community to actively define the issues of our time.

Integral to placemaking’s story is that community-building is a creative act, and the creative act is an integral part of community-building.

Thus, theatres need to be part of the placemaking conversation, theatre practitioners bringing the tools to make that conversation happen.