

ROUNDAABOUTS

An Opportunity to Create a Sense of Place

PROJECT PURPOSE

Roundabouts are a form of intersection control known primarily for their safety and capacity benefits. One sometimes overlooked advantage of roundabouts, however, is the placemaking opportunities they present. Through thoughtful and collaborative design, the space not dedicated to vehicle movement can be leveraged to reinforce and enhance the character of the community; to create a sense of place.

What are placelessness, sense of place, and placemaking? And why are these concepts important? Placeless landscapes have no apparent connection

to their surrounding communities; they could be anywhere. The opposite of placelessness is a sense of place; a landscape that conveys a strong identity that can be perceived by residents and visitors. And placemaking is a planning and design process informed by the physical, cultural, and social identities of a place to create a landscape with a sense of place. These concepts are important because they affect the relationship between people and places, encouraging community involvement, building civic pride, and supporting tourism.

How does a community decide to embrace the opportunities presented by a roundabout's geometry to develop a sense of place? What are the factors that must be weighed and balanced? To better understand the many, and varied, reasons for placemaking a sense of place at roundabouts, interviews were conducted with owners (municipal agencies), arts councils, civil engineers, and landscape architects. The results of those interviews are summarized below.

APPROACH

The first step in researching sense of place and the factors contributing to placemaking was to define these two concepts. First, sense of place is a frequently used, interdisciplinary term with a range of definitions. For the purposes of this discussion, landscapes with a sense of place are those that convey a strong identity that can be perceived by residents and visitors. Closely related to sense of place is the concept of placemaking, a planning and design process informed by the physical, cultural, and social identities of a place. Sense of place is an attribute of the landscape; placemaking is the purposeful design of a landscape with a sense of place.



Enhanced landscaping includes native plantings and changeable center island banners in Snohomish, WA



Placeless roundabout

We next considered the “who, what, when, where, why, and how” of placemaking

- Who was involved in placemaking decisions?
- What elements were considered?
- When was placemaking considered for inclusion into the project?
- Where were sites located?
- Why did owners elect to pursue placemaking?
- How were placemaking improvements financed?

In considering the above questions, several others naturally followed.

- What proportion of the roundabouts in your community have been used to develop a sense of place?
- What elements of a community's character were considered when developing a sense of place?
- Were safety concerns surrounding placemaking elements expressed? How were they addressed?
- What were the biggest challenges encountered when planning, designing, and constructing placemaking elements?
- Was the community happy with the placemaking efforts?
- What were the lessons learned from the placemaking process?

In-person and telephone interviews were conducted with owners, an arts council, and designers; interview responses were compiled; and findings summarized.

FINDINGS

Who was involved in placemaking decisions?

- Owner – Project Manager typically had significant input. Other Owner representatives (Public Works Director, Mayor, City Council, etc.) typically wanted to be kept informed but their approval was not required.
- Arts Councils – When involved, their participation came after the roundabout was constructed. They had agreements with Owners that gave them authority to make decisions about art.
- Public – The public was often informed of the project and placemaking efforts, but was not actively involved in decision making.

What elements were considered?

- Enhanced landscaping was the most commonly employed placemaking element. For this discussion, enhanced landscaping was considered to be landscaping beyond the minimal treatments of mounded earth, seeding, and gravel.
- Owners were typically presented with two to three landscape alternatives. Alternatives included a wide variety of elements such as native and ornamental plantings, non-vegetated landscape treatments (wood, rock, decorative hardscape), site furnishings, decorative and pedestrian scale illumination, signage, and suggestions for public art.
- When public art was desired, a call for artists was issued by and coordinated through the local arts council.

When was placemaking considered for inclusion into the project?

- Pre-Design - Gateways were typically identified as locations where a sense of place was desired prior to roundabout design.
- During Design - Sometimes placemaking elements were introduced as the roundabout was being designed.
- After Construction – Previously constructed roundabouts typically possessed some form of placemaking, often landscaping, and were then retrofitted with public art installations.

Where were sites located?

- Gateway intersections were the most popular locations.
- The City of Bend in conjunction with Art in Public Places, however, installs art in roundabouts all over the city and makes an effort to distribute art throughout the community.

Why did the owner elect to pursue placemaking elements?

- Owners wanted to create a welcoming landscape for the community and visitors.
- Several owners used the opportunity to create a sense of place as part of the “sales pitch” when proposing the idea of the roundabout.

How were placemaking improvements financed?

- Most placemaking elements were paid for by local funds or grants. Two notable exceptions were:
 - The City of Snohomish used water quality treatment funds to pay for plantings in bioretention cells.
 - Art in Public Places, a non-profit organization, installs, then gifts public art to the City of Bend.



Landscaping shows a connection to natural environment in Monroe, WA



Public Art installation in Bend, OR
Photo Courtesy of Art in Public Places



Water quality treatment funds were used to pay for plantings in bioretention cells in Snohomish, WA

What proportion of roundabouts in your community have been used to develop a sense of place?

- Most interviewees have multiple roundabouts in their communities and at least one with placemaking elements.
- Communities with more roundabouts tended to place greater value on sense of place and employed placemaking techniques frequently.

What elements of a community's character were considered when developing a sense of place?

- The most common connections were to community culture, history, and natural environment.

Were safety concerns surrounding placemaking elements expressed? How were they addressed?

- The most common safety concern was not being able to see directly across the center island, through the placemaking elements. These concerns were addressed by having discussions about why sightlines are obstructed and that it has been done thoughtfully and deliberately.
- Another common concern was that if rocks were used in the landscape, smaller rocks would be thrown and larger rocks would be climbed. Owners decided they would accept this risk and modify the landscape if necessary but there has generally been very little misuse of the improvements.

What are the biggest challenges encountered when considering and implementing placemaking activities?

- Securing funding.
- Creating a realistic maintenance plan and budget.

Was the community happy with the placemaking efforts?

- Placemaking efforts were generally well received by the community after installation.

What lessons were learned from the placemaking process?

- Vandalism is often a concern but has not been a significant problem.
- Maintenance crews sometimes lack the time and resources to care for elaborate landscaping; creating a partnership with a nearby school, nursery, garden club, or other civic group can be a good way to reduce owner costs and build community pride.
- Engaging in public outreach is a powerful tool in gaining community buy-in; do it as early as possible.
 - Skagit County constructed a roundabout with a welcome sign at a gateway entrance into the county but the adjacent unincorporated community wanted recognition as well. The constructed sign was retrofitted to include the name of the unincorporated community.
- If art installations are considered, involve the design team as early as possible so they can accommodate art installations.
- When placemaking elements are built to the design specifications, the results are typically viewed as successful by owners and designers.
- When placemaking elements are not built to design specifications, the results are often viewed as less successful by owners and designers.



Landscape reflects cultural connection with community on Lummi Reservation, WA. Welcome wall is in Lummi and English



Landscape roundabout retrofitted with public art in Anacortes, WA



Welcome sign as originally constructed in Skagit County, WA



Welcome sign retrofitted to include local community in Skagit County, WA