

# **Building Community Resilient Communities: Two People-Centred Placemaking Projects from Hong Kong**

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## **Abstract**

This research paper explores the substantial influence of human connections and collaborations in placemaking and how the reshaping and activation of public spaces could foster a stronger sense of belonging and build community resilience. We will be using two of our placemaking projects in Hong Kong, namely the Community Plant Library and the Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival to illustrate our mantra “Interconnecting People and Making Places”.

Community Plant Library was a living example of how shared responsibility and stewardship can cultivate community cohesion. It was a project that brought together residents and local businesses to work together. The aim was to create welcoming shop spaces and street corners where everyone felt welcomed and included. This shared effort strengthened the community and made it more resilient. It was a project where everyone could take part and make shared experiences. Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival leveraged the arts as a tool for social bonding. The festival transformed rural landscapes into lively, colourful spaces which amplified the natural beauty and cultural wealth of Sai Kung. Other activities, such as island-hopping using the local *kaito* ferry service and guided tours, provided visitors with an opportunity to create shared experiences, stimulating conversations and strengthening interpersonal connections with nature and other communities, which are fundamental to developing social cohesion.

Both projects utilised onebite’s in-house design thinking methodology KNOTIE, which emphasised the iterative nature of placemaking and the importance of continuous engagement and assessment to enhance placemaking efforts. It underscored how the essence of placemaking extends beyond mere physical transformations and highlighted how shared experiences, trust-building and friendships could enliven a community which leads to better social cohesion and community resilience through shared experiences. In essence, onebite believes a robust community is not built in isolation. It requires sustained efforts, a common vision, and the continuous nurturing of human relationships to transform ordinary spaces into beloved community places. Placemaking is the catalyst to kindle every community’s enthusiasm to foster a conducive living environment that is not only physically inviting but also socially cohesive and resilient to adversities.

**Keywords:** Placemaking; Shared Experiences, Community Engagement, Rural Revitalisation, Community Involvement

## Introduction

An old Chinese proverb tells us, “A near neighbour is better than a distant relative”. Nowhere is this truer than in bustling city life where it is more common to share an apartment block with strangers than relatives. A friendly community creates a welcoming living environment, boosts cohesion, and grows social capital. The tighter the neighbourhood bond, the more likely folks are to lend a hand in times of crisis.<sup>1</sup>

However, the community spirit seems to be flagging in Hong Kong. Surveys conducted in Hong Kong’s neighbourhoods over the last twenty years concluded that most residents had weak relationships let alone developed friendships.<sup>2</sup> Common across private and public housing types, most respondents also claimed they had never participated in community activities. It even came to light that nearly 40% of folks would think twice about helping a neighbour in trouble!<sup>3</sup> These points towards a lack of preparedness for crises and possibly, an unwillingness to collaborate during disasters in the absence of government intervention. This does not bode well for developing community resilience.<sup>4</sup>

The worrying trend prompted our team at One Bite Design Studio (onebite) to explore how placemaking could be an effective tool to rally community stakeholders together and stimulate curiosity about a place and its community. As a placemaking-oriented architectural studio, we knew how important human connections are in turning generic spaces into beloved places. Hence, our mantra, “Interconnecting People and Making Places”.

Our projects adopt a “we” approach that builds consensus and establishes common ground among diverse stakeholders, including government agencies, business owners, homeowners, and community users. We believe the greater interest in a community’s past, present, and future, the stronger the sense of pride and social cohesion. In turn, this would motivate members to improve the well-being of their community and give them the credibility and confidence to work with government agencies and businesses to bring about positive change. In essence, it creates a win-win cycle where in-depth community engagement underpins participatory planning and co-creation, allowing project proponents and residents to develop trust and shape project outcomes positively.

This article presents two of onebite’s placemaking and curatorial projects in Hong Kong, namely Community Plant Library (CPL) and Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival (SKHAF). They illustrate how we used KNOTIE, our in-house design thinking framework, to create social

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<sup>1</sup> “Community Resilience Service”. *Hong Kong Red Cross*. Accessed 6 July 2023.

[https://www.redcross.org.hk/en/CommunityResilience\\_Service.html](https://www.redcross.org.hk/en/CommunityResilience_Service.html)

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Forrest, Ray and Kearns, Ade, (2001). “Social Cohesion, Social Capital and the Neighbourhood”. In *Urban Studies*. Vol. 38, No. 12. pp. 2125 – 2143; Forrest, Ray, et al, (May 2002). “Neighbourhood in a high-rise, high-density city: some observations on contemporary Hong Kong”. In *The Sociological Review*. Vol. 50. Issue 2, pp.215 - 240; Adrienne La Grange, (May 2011). “Neighbourhood and Class: A Study of Three Neighbourhoods in Hong Kong”. In *Urban Studies*. Vol. 48. No.6. pp.1181 – 1200; Lau, Chung-yeung, Harold, (2018). *A study of social cohesion in gated communities: a comparative study of public and private housing estate in Hong Kong*. Master’s Dissertation. University of Hong Kong.

<sup>3</sup> “Hong Kong: city of strangers”. *Taipei Times*. 6 October 2006.

<https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/lang/archives/2006/10/06/2003330679>

<sup>4</sup> “Community Resilience”. *National Institute of Standards and Technology*. Accessed 6 July 2023.

<https://www.nist.gov/community-resilience>. Also see “City Resilience Framework”. *Arup*. Last modified December 2015. <https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/City-Resilience-Framework-2015.pdf>

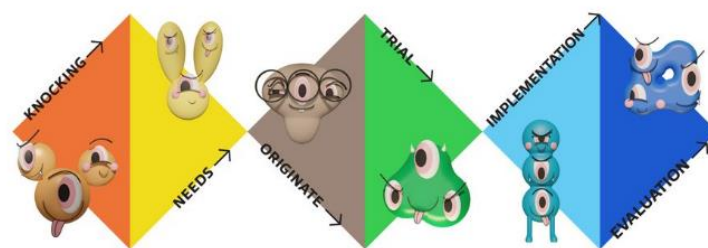
innovations that are tailored to the context, driven by the community, and embody local identity. Though the two projects varied in context, scale, and objectives - CPL focussed on community programmes centred around plants, while SKHAF was a three-year-long arts festival that aimed to breathe life into the rural and deserted villages on Sai Kung's islands - both stressed the importance of consensus-building. They harnessed the collective resources, ideas, and energy of stakeholders, ensuring the success of these initiatives.

## Designing for Good Starts from Good Public Spaces

In the final chapter of his book *City*, renowned urban planner William Whyte advocated for the reinvigoration of public spaces modelled after the agora in ancient Greece. He was not advocating to replicate its spatial features, but rather to recall and reclaim the ingredients that sustain and support public life within a community. Whyte hypothesised that a community “becomes a better place to live in if there is someplace to go to”.<sup>5</sup> He further explained the importance of a vibrant public space that becomes “the place for news and gossip, for the creation of ideas...the stuff of the public life of the city -- by no means wholly admirable, often abrasive, noisy, contentious, without apparent purpose. But this human congress (becomes) the genius of the place”.<sup>6</sup>

Esteemed placemaking advocates like Denmark's Jan Gehl and Ryo Yamasaki from Japan share similar viewpoints.<sup>7</sup> Successful public spaces are not necessarily about aesthetic appeal; instead, they are where people can come together and have a good time, see and enjoy each other's company, and utilise the spaces freely. The first step begins by observing the unique traits of a neighbourhood and engaging residents on how to make their living environment better. Having local input in planning public spaces develop a greater sense of ownership and a deeper appreciation of the resources and options available.<sup>8</sup>

Figure 1: KNOTIE Design Thinking Methodology.



Source: One Bite Design Studio

<sup>5</sup> Whyte, William, (1988). *City: Rediscovering the Centre*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. p.338

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* p.341

<sup>7</sup> See Gehl, Jan, et al, (April 2015). *Public Life Diversity Toolkit*. San Francisco: Gehl Studio SF. [https://issuu.com/gehlarchitects/docs/gehl\\_publiclifediversitytoolkit\\_page](https://issuu.com/gehlarchitects/docs/gehl_publiclifediversitytoolkit_page); Ryo Yamazaki (山崎亮), (2018). *Community Design*. Chinese translation by Zhuang Yaxiu (莊雅琇). Taipei: Faces Publishing Ltd.

<sup>8</sup> “Community Design in Japan”. Hong Kong Design Institute. Accessed 6 July 2023. [https://www.hkdi.edu.hk/en/news/publication-detail.php?product\\_id=161](https://www.hkdi.edu.hk/en/news/publication-detail.php?product_id=161)

While several design-thinking methods could systematically guide discussions on complex problems, not many cater to the specific demands of architectural practices. To tackle our public space design projects, we developed the KNOT method. This approach knits together on-site observations, full-scale prototyping, and other spatial instruments into a comprehensive design-thinking activity. Consisting of *Knocking*, *Needs*, *Originate*, and *Trial*, they form an iterative process to draw unique insights from people of diverse backgrounds and experiences. The four steps have since been improved. The new KNOTIE framework introduces a triple-diamond framework, which gives equal emphasis to ideation, prototyping, and assessing these outcomes through the additional steps of *Implementation* and *Evaluation*.

The acronym KNOTIE may appear to represent insurmountable problems. However, our perspective at onebite differs. We perceive these knots as the inevitable challenges, tension, and pain points that surface during stakeholder engagement. With skilled facilitation and application of our design-thinking methodologies, onebite untangles these knots and to co-create solutions that are inclusive and intuitive.

## **Getting to Know Stakeholders, Starting with a Knock**

*Knocking* is the first step towards understanding the neighbourhood we work in. It allows us to look for new and relevant insights from the diverse perspective of residents, business owners, and other stakeholders. Being curious and asking questions helps us to distil real community needs, originate new ideas, and trial prototypes that respond to the requirements of the community. Although some projects incorporate a structured process of identifying potential stakeholders and inviting them to participate in formal workshop settings to seek their inputs; more often, our placemaking and public space intervention projects require us to knock on doors literally and reach out to stakeholders proactively. This involves visiting public spaces, chatting with residents, collecting useful information to understand community relationships, gathering knowledge, and collaborating with subject matter experts.

Community Plant Library (CPL) is a good case in point. It is a community initiative conceived by onebite that uses plants as a medium to engage the public on topics like sustainable development, community development, and the arts. The main activities of the initiative include a community programme to train plant librarians for the event, lead guided tour to learn about plants in the neighbourhood and organise plant-inspired art workshops led by well-known artists, designers, and illustrators.

*Figure 2: A key objective of Community Plant Library is to foster interaction with local residents through plants.*



*Source: One Bite Design Studio*

During the planning phase of CPL in 2022, we wanted to reach out to more business owners and residents, hence we invited residents in the vicinity of Taipingshan, a quiet neighbourhood occupied by low-rise tenement blocks, to join our initiative as plant librarians. Through four training workshops, we empowered them with placemaking and design thinking strategies to help them discover the stories behind potted plants and trees in their neighbourhood, map out their types and locations, and co-design structures to hold these potted plants and beautify the streetscape. As local experts, they were also roped in to create a large-scale Community Plant Map with well-known local map illustrator, Maoshan Connie, who incorporated the information plant librarians had gathered into an intricate neighbourhood map which tells the history and social life of the district. This narrative is not told through events and objects, but rather through humble-looking plants which passers-by hardly noticed during their daily commutes; only upon deeper enquiry, we realised how these potted plants contained precious memories and memorable anecdotes which residents treasured and wished to share with more people.

*Figure 3: The Community Plant Map of Sheung Wan designed by Maoshan Connie, with contributions from CPL's plant librarians.*



*Source: One Bite Design Studio*



By leveraging the enthusiasm and resourcefulness of plant librarians, many of whom are already familiar faces within their community, we were able to encourage residents to walk around and know other plant lovers through gardening encounters and interactions in public spaces. Thanks to their enthusiasm and community ties, sharing plant stories became an effective icebreaker among our plant librarians, residents, and business owners. The simple act of *knocking* created a ripple effect. It gathered engaging stories for the CPL programme, forged personal connections with local stakeholders, and stimulated positive community change by transforming gardening and plant knowledge sharing into communal activities, thereby fostering community vibrancy.

## Community Plant Library: Creating a Community Sharing Movement

From gathering stories about plants in the community, onebite then worked with collaborators to curate a series of events for the public to know more about the community through its plants and gardening culture. Two rounds of CPL had been launched so far. The first round was held over April and May 2021 and involved close cooperation from local shops in San Po Kong, a mixed-use neighbourhood in Kowloon known for light industries, traditional shops, and public housing estates.

First, we worked with 20 partner shops, including snacks shops, herbal tea shops, and eateries, to co-design and adopt plant furniture to display in their shop space. We hoped to leverage the power of flora to transform the look of their interior spaces and pique passerbys' curiosity to find out more about the programme. The furniture is made from repurposed wood gathered by Coutou Woodworking Studio. Based on a few furniture prototypes such as a bench with planter or a planter that could be hung, we worked closely with Coutou to customise them to our partner shops' requirements. This made the design process for the plant racks collaborative and insightful in fulfilling users' needs. For the second part, we encouraged locals and visitors to explore these partner shops and discover the plant stories they held. Some residents who enjoyed gardening and conversing with our partners and staff were even spontaneously roped in as CPL's Plant Librarians, helping with day-to-day operations, including chatting about plants with residents, visitors, and the owners of partner shops.

*Figure 4: Plant Furniture onebite co-designed with Coutou Woodworking Studio and our partner shop in San Po Kong.*



*Source: One Bite Design Studio*

To involve more residents in the programme, we also organised a weekly “Roving Plant Clinic” during the event period. Our plant therapist would set up a mobile booth at designated locations to answer residents’ questions about plants and diagnose the problems they were having with plants. Wherever the plant therapist went, a group would naturally gather to chat and share their plant stories. To promote deeper community involvement, we also encouraged residents to donate small plants and saplings during the Roving Plant Clinic. These were gifted to other residents with the advice of our plant therapist on how to take care of the plant.

The second CPL took place in March and April 2023. This time, the location shifted to Sheung Wan, one of Hong Kong’s oldest residential neighbourhoods boasting cultural attractions such as museums, bookshops, cafes, and art galleries. Apart from retaining popular programmes in the inaugural edition such as the Roving Plant Clinic, we also formalised the Plant Librarian training programme, inviting 16 participants from Sheung Wan to join us as plant librarians. Their local expertise was tremendously helpful in mapping the plants in the neighbourhood and creating a large-scale Community Plant Map, which featured stories about interesting trees and plants shared by locals. The map instilled community pride and spotlighted the achievements of residents known for their green fingers. We also worked closely with invited artists to organise plant-inspired art workshops, using the emotional appeal of art to draw visitors to learn about the area’s history.

*Figure 5: The popular Roving Plant Clinic at Sheung Wan, residents are invited to adopt potted plants.*



*Source: One Bite Design Studio*

CPL may not be an actual library, but it shared the same aim: fostering a friendly environment for knowledge exchange and creating inviting community spaces in shops and on street corners using cost-effective, sustainable design strategies. We hope these spaces would evolve into local hubs where residents gather and garden together. CPL is akin to a “planting bed”, where residents could plant the seeds of placemaking themselves through simple communal activities like gardening and friendly greetings. As we let CPL take root in other neighbourhoods, our message is clear: everyone, including the elderly and those differently abled, deserves to enjoy safe and inclusive open spaces and a vibrant social life.

*Fig 6: A guided tour on interesting plants and trees in Sheung Wan.*



*Source: One Bite Design Studio*

## **Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival: Collaborations Create “Joy Again, Isle”**

Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival (SKHAF) is another successful placemaking project we partnered various collaborators closely. This project shared a common spirit with CPL: both shared the same spirit of collaboration with multiple stakeholders and recognised the power of the arts to build community resilience by advocating and celebrating nature and culture.

SKHAF is a three-year programme organised by the Tourism Commission, supported by Hong Kong UNESCO Global Geopark, and with onebite commissioned as the festival’s curatorial partner. For the inaugural SKHAF 2022, onebite worked with artists, musicians, and community guides to turn Yim Tin Tsai and Sharp Island into a unique “open museum” with 9 pieces of artwork. With the help of over 100 festival ambassadors, we organised 47 programmes and held a total of 284 guided tours through the inaugural 2-month festival spanning late 2022 and early 2023 where Hong Kong’s mild weather during this period made it ideal for hiking and sightseeing.

The festival’s theme “Joy Again, Isle” encouraged visitors to experience the restorative power of art and nature through vivid sensory experiences on the islands. We aimed to revitalise the island-hopping experience intrinsic to Sai Kung’s history. To this end, we arranged convenient half-hourly ferry rides for visitors, utilising the local *kaito* ferry service to shuttle between Sai Kung Pier and the festival’s islands.



*Figure 7: During the festival, visitors could use the local kaito ferry to island-hop and visit the various artworks on different islands.*



*Source: One Bite Design Studio*

Inspired by renowned land-based arts festivals such as Setouchi International Arts Festival, SKHAF leveraged the natural beauty and history of Sai Kung as a key selling point in addition to its artworks. Many rural villages grappled with ageing and rapidly decreasing populations as young families moved away for work and study opportunities. This left quaint, once-beautiful village houses abandoned and neglected. SKHAF came as a breath of fresh air. It offered an innovative way to inject vitality into the countryside through the magic of arts. It was also an opportunity for villagers and NGOs working on Yim Tin Tsai, an island actively preserving its Chinese Hakka and Catholic culture and salt-making tradition, to showcase its heritage to a broader audience.

Like a conductor orchestrating a beautiful symphony, SKHAF brought together Yim Tin Tsai's and Sharp Island's stakeholders for a dialogue with participating artists. During the planning phase, they came together for an overnight stay on the island, swapping the city's hustle for tranquillity on the island. Spending more than 30 hours together, our artists held meaningful conversations with villagers throughout the day and bounced off ideas late into the night. The hearty Hakka claypot chicken dinner and the late-night chats that followed, immersed artists in the island's serene community life, absorbing the sights, sounds, and sensations during these quiet, wee hours visitors rarely experienced. Some even savoured lone morning walks, absorbing the captivating spectacle of dawn's first light bathing the island's salt pans in an ombre glow. Because of this spiritual visit, all nine artworks radiated a deep contextual understanding, reflecting the artists' insightful immersion and conversations with villagers.

Figure 8: Visitors interacting with Joseph Chan's artwork, *Water Dragon*



Source: One Bite Design Studio

For instance, Joseph Chan drew inspiration from the tales of long-time villagers to craft his dynamic installation *Water Dragon* on Yim Tin Tsai. This mechanical masterpiece celebrated the former dragon-bone water lift which villagers once used to manually pump seawater into the saltpans. Joseph took the villagers' treasured memory and suggestions to present a structure that reimagined the past in a new light.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile on Sharp Island, Breakthrough Art Studio captivated visitors with *Moonrise in Daylight*. They fashioned this artwork from bamboo and rattan, creating an engaging experience where the sculpture shifted from a full moon to a crescent when seen from different perspectives. The artwork bore an intimate bond with its sandbar location, as lunar cycles sway the rhythm of the tides. As the sea retreated and revealed the tombolo sandbar that connected Sharp Island to its neighbour, only then could visitors access the artwork. This instance echoed the perfect alignment of time, place, and opportunity needed to experience the artwork. Adding a layer of community involvement, 10 participants co-produced the 12 rattan spheres which surrounded the central moon. They crafted these during the inaugural *Artists - Co-creation Workshop* which Breakthrough Art Studio hosted before the festival kicked off.<sup>10</sup>

We took the concept of co-creation a step further, incorporating it into SKHAF's guided tours. Collaborating with Kaifong Tour, we curated four thematic tours intertwining artworks, natural beauty, and the cultural jewels of the two islands. Many guides were locals or *kaifong* as Cantonese speakers would say. Mostly from Sai Kung, Tseung Kwan O, and nearby regions, they shared a common enthusiasm for guiding and preserving village culture. During the two-month SKHAF period, three tours ran in Yim Tin Tsai and covered the themes of religion, culture, and nature. The fourth on Sharp Island showcased its unique volcanic geology.

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<sup>9</sup> For more information on Joseph Chan's artwork, visit <https://skhartsfestival.hk/en/work/water-dragon/>

<sup>10</sup> For more information on Breakthrough Art Studio's artwork, visit: <https://skhartsfestival.hk/en/work/moonrise-in-daylight/>

Figure 9: Breakthrough Art Studio's *Moonrise in Daylight* is located on a sandbar which is accessible only during low tide.



Source: One Bite Design Studio

Maoshan Connie and St. James' Creation's whimsical art series *A Grand Pineapple Bun Tour* found its muse in Sharp Island's unique igneous quartz monzonite stones. Weathered and eroded by thermal expansion and contraction, the stones' cracked surfaces oddly resembled the beloved pineapple bun, a traditional local delicacy. The playful art series, coupled with our guides' engaging storytelling, made deep geological knowledge accessible and animated. This created a connection between city dwellers and the Hong Kong UNESCO Global Geopark, which includes Sharp Island. Our placemaking endeavours shone a spotlight on Sai Kung's unique natural and living heritage. Weaving together art and storytelling, they fostered a sense of pride and identity rooted in Hong Kong's distinctive rural villages and natural landscapes.

Figure 10: Young visitors exploring Maoshan Connie & St. James' Creation's artwork, *A Grand Pineapple Bun Tour*



Source: One Bite Design Studio

Guided by our KNOTIE methodology, SKHAF aptly embodies the triple diamond framework. Each edition of the festival go through the stages of *ideation* and *prototyping*, while the lull between each edition became our *assessment* phase. We reflected, gathered insights, and refined ideas, in preparation for a more vibrant festival the following year. This cyclical



process of ideation, prototyping, and evaluation makes SKHAF a journey of continuous growth and evolution.

*Figure 11: Ambassadors, collaborators, and artists all came today to mark the last day of the inaugural Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival 2022. It also represents an important milestone for onebite's placemaking journey.*



*Source: One Bite Design Studio*

## **Placemaking: Igniting Change Through People, Not Just Design**

Ryo Yamazaki, after years of advocating community design, distilled a powerful truth, “When we shift people’s behaviour, the environment transforms as well”.<sup>11</sup> This aligns with onebite’s goal to make placemaking not merely about designing places, but to form deeper connections between people. CPL and SKHAF were envisioned as catalysts to inspire Hong Kong’s residents to explore public spaces through fresh perspectives and develop a sense of belonging.

As onebite looks to the future, our hope rests on collaborators, facilitators, and local stakeholders. We invite them to sustain the momentum and to continually engage their communities beyond the lifespan of our projects. Building community resilience is not a sprint but a marathon; relying on building regular, meaningful connections between people, and nurturing a strong sense of belonging; only then can we count on our community to stand together during challenging times.

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<sup>11</sup> Ryo Yamazaki’s Chinese quote reads, “人改變，地域就會改變”. See “鄉村中「隱藏的智慧」，城市的我們都該好好學習！專訪日本的社區設計師：山崎亮” (The Hidden Wisdom in Villages We Should Learn From: Interview with Japanese Community Designer: Ryo Yamazaki). 明日志(MOT Times). 25 Nov 2019. [http://www.mottimes.com/cht/interview\\_detail.php?serial=447](http://www.mottimes.com/cht/interview_detail.php?serial=447)



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