FROM TRASH TO TREASURE: COMMUNITY PLACEMAKING AT TIN CAN BEACH
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From Trash to Treasure: Community Placemaking at Tin Can Beach

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About the project

Active learning and community engagement

The report is the outcome of an activity learning activity in the political science course Urbanization, Poverty and Politics. The course discusses how the design of the city can enhance or deteriorate the living conditions of residents. The goal of this active learning and project based assignment was to engage students directly with the local community and its social needs and in that way develop the latter’s skills of critical thinking, research and writing in their interaction with real life.

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Table of Contents

Introduction.................................................................1
Tin Can Beach and the Community ........................................4
Case studies........................................................................7
  North Bay, Ontario........................................................7
  Halifax/Dartmouth, Nova Scotia.........................................8
  Portland, Maine............................................................8
  Placemaking, water and culture.........................................8
  Public space and the Making of places...............................9
Public Space, Placemaking and Social Capital .........................12
Think Tin Can Beach: Recommendations and Impacts.............16
References.........................................................................18
Introduction

Public space is central to facilitating social interaction and enhancing the quality of life in a community. In public space, the community comes together through a process of placemaking so as to naturally use space according to people’s social and physical needs, giving the latter a sense of belonging or “sense of place” (Silbergberg, 2013, 1-6). This is particularly significant for the development of social capital which is the development of tightly knit networks and participation in diverse social milieus. Social capital is crucial for economic development and civic engagement (Putnam 2000).

Tin Can Beach is an example of a community space in the making. Tin Can Beach is located south of uptown Saint John, New Brunswick. People from the South End already use it in order to have direct contact with natural surroundings, in other words, the existing wildlife and the Bay of Fundy. It is also the only direct access to the Bay close to the uptown and a residential area with an unobstructed view to Partridge Island.

The report argues that Tin Can Beach is an important public space for social bonding and economic development. People in the South End and the uptown core feel connected to the space because it is part of their personal and social history. Community bonding compels people to stay within the area, creating social capital that leads to economic development, urban growth and civic engagement. The space can be used for multiple outdoor activities and events, promoting socioeconomic and cultural diversity in the city.

In order to show the importance of Tin Can Beach as a public space, the report presents the results of interviews and ethnographic work in Tin Can Beach and the South End, a neighbourhood in the south part of the city Saint John. It also discusses best practices in other cities and the literature on public space, placemaking and social capital. In the first section, the study includes the voice of the community in Saint John’s South End and the opinion of key informants based on unstructured interviews. The community and key informants support the enhancement of Tin Can beach as a public space defined by the community. In the second section, the report explores best practices in the cities of Halifax, North Bay and Portland in relation to water-based public spaces and placemaking experiences in different parts of the world. This investment in public space has resulted in high levels of social and economic return. In the case of placemaking, the cost effectiveness increases because it requires low levels of investment and it decreases exposure to the instability of the real estate sector in financial markets.

The third section reviews the literature on public space, placemaking and social capital, which suggests that investment in public space and pedestrian infrastructure is cost effective. It allows government to save money in areas such as healthcare and social development as public spaces with natural surroundings
in a priority neighbourhood assist the community with issues of physical and mental health and promote social interactions among people from different backgrounds. The enhancement and protection of public spaces already defined by the community in terms of uses and identity stimulates the economy and creates social bonding. In the last section, the report provides recommendations and addresses the social and economic impact of placemaking at Tin Can beach based on the research findings.
"I have lived in the South End for about 10 years- that area is a waste of land. I would love to see it be turned into an attraction for the community. Maybe a dog park or a place to hold concerts in the summer, just something to make the part of town safer and fun."
Leslie

"I have young daughter and if she wants to go to the park I have to take her to Rainbow park, it is close, but Tin Can Beach is much closer. There are a lot of people in this area who have kids and are young, turning that space in to a family park would be ideal."
Matt

"I am not too enthused by the city- there is a lot of wasted land around here, but there are also a lot of kids around here who get in to trouble just cause. Turning that area in to a venue for the younger population would make our community safer and more fun for the kids."
Nicole

"I live deep in the South End, I have heard what is going on down there and I will be honest, I am not interested in seeing an industrial park in my backyard. I am a runner- why are there not running paths, street lights, or sidewalks down there? Even a biking lane! That is what I want to see, instead smog every morning I wake up."
Taylor

"We need street lights and sidewalks, the South End is a high Priority Neighbourhood. We got drug dealers at every second house, kids carry weapons and antagonize other members of the community, there are no shops that are close by. Our community needs a makeover. I would love for that area to be a destination for families and their kids- of all ages, developing a community will give everyone who lives here a sense of purpose, and hopefully keep these kids outta trouble!"
David

"There is a school close by and daycares around here- it is mandatory for the kids to go for a walk outside, I think it would be great if that was turned in to a park or something for them so they don’t have to walk the streets uptown. Make it a learning destination for them too- about the history of that area and Partridge Island. I think that would make our community safer- oh and street lights and sidewalks. They are desperately needed."
Brent

"We need street lights and sidewalks- but I have 3 dogs and I would love to walk them down to Tin Can Beach and let them run a round instead of taking the all the way to Rockwood park. A nice sitting area under a gazebo maybe and a couple of BBQs. Just a nice multipurpose area where I can take my dogs and relax. That would be nice."
Victoria

"I would love to see use of the water- a look out to Partridge Island or maybe boat rentals to visit the spot. A summer destination that has a stage for concerts, and food venues. Movies in the park would lovely too. Just turn that spot in to a communal area. That would be nice."
Andrea
Tin Can Beach and the Community

The research team for this report conducted qualitative research to understand the significance of Tin Can Beach for the priority neighbourhood of the South End. Tin Can Beach is already a place appropriated by the community according to their social needs. This qualitative research was done through ethnographic work in the South End and Tin Can Beach, and unstructured open-ended interviews with residents of that neighbourhood. Experts on urban, social and environmental issues were also consulted in order to recognize the potential for placemaking in Tin Can Beach.

It is worth noting that the process of formulation of Saint John's Parks and Recreation plan included a consultation process at Lily Lake Pavillion. The ethnographic work and the unstructured interviews complement the consultation process initiated Play SJ. This research was conducted in a more inclusive manner because the research team was able to have direct contact with residents of the South End that were not able to attend the Play SJ meetings due to lack of information as well as cost and accessibility barriers.

Ethnographic work in Tin Can Beach suggests that it is already a “place in the making.” People already take walks in the area and use it as a site to access nature and the Bay and have an unobstructed view of Partridge Island. Other examples include the projection of movies and visits by students from Saint John High School for fieldwork in their environmental science classes to study the intertidal zone. Students are able to access the beach during class time, saving in transportation costs. Other activities include beach clean ups showing that there is community interest in Tin Can Beach. All these existing uses show that placemaking already exists in this area, adding to the social capital of the community.

The paradigm of urban development in Saint John, New Brunswick, has favoured industrial needs and wants, heavily influenced by industrial actors (Marquis, 2009). The process of revitalizing a post-industrial area “entails the displacement of old waterfront industrial and commercial zones by new mixed-use office and residential development, and associated upscale retail services, festival marketplaces, leisure areas, and public amenities” (Sieber 2008, 120). The opening of public spaces is supported by the interviews with members of the South End community. Most interviewees suggested a multi-purpose green space with a walking path, a lookout scope to Partridge Island, food availability, a multi-use field for sports activities and a dog park. The residents of the area showed support for the promotion of placemaking by all levels of government (See Figure 1).
Key informants suggested a tidal park and interpretive centre in Tin Can Beach ecology of the harbour and the possible collaboration of the Biology Department at UNBSJ for this park and centre. Key informants also stressed the cost-effectiveness of enhancing places like Tin Can Beach close to the urban core and a priority neighborhood with an aging population. More people are able to use small places such as Tin Can Beach rather than large parks further away from their homes. Placemaking at Tin Can Beach is cost effective in relation to health expenses. Having an accessible and natural public space assists people in increasing their physical activity and coping with mental issues, lowering medical costs. According to experts, the transformation of Tin Can Beach into a more accessible natural area could potentially complement the goals of the future Safe Harbour Transitional Youth Services Shelter on Broad Street. In that way, youth-at-risk will not only be supported by the transitional shelter, but also by the urban and natural surroundings of Tin Can Beach.
“Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.”
— Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*
Case Studies

This report examines the experience of three cities with a large public space along the water. These cities were selected because they have similar demographic characteristics to Saint John, New Brunswick. The case of North Bay, Ontario was selected because this city is undergoing a parallel process of deindustrialization and employment shortage as in Saint John. The case of North Bay shows that investment in public space with direct access to the water through consultations and active participation of the community has favourable impact on the economy and the quality of urban living. The cities of Halifax, Nova Scotia and Portland, Maine were selected due to their location in the Maritimes and their inner harbours. These last two cases show that the cities use most of their inner harbours connected to the urban core to enhance the quality of life of residents, create vibrant neighbourhoods and foster economic development. In all these examples, the use of water access connected to the urban core is maximized and the community has been deeply involved in the planning for public spaces with access to water.

The report also discusses three examples of urban beaches and placemaking in order to understand the importance of water and community in urban life. The study discusses the Paris Plage, placemaking in Peregian Beach, Queensland, Australia, urban beaches in Detroit and Mexico City and interactive art in Toronto.

North Bay, Ontario

In northern Ontario, along the Nipissing Lake, the City of North Bay consists of the largest population of the Nipissing district. In 2000, the group Community Waterfront Friends (CWF) was formed to create a plan that would beautify the waterfront area, revitalize the community and substantially contribute to an improved quality of life for their citizens. In joint participation with the city, the CWF acquired rail lands along the waterfront (Community Waterfront Friends 2013). In 2002, a study issued by the architecture and planning firm IBI group determined that the development would act as a catalyst for the downtown and confirmed the economic viability, sustainability and the environmental and social benefits (Community Waterfront Friends 2013). According to the study, the waterfront would attract between 50,000-100,000 patrons per year and generate $4.5-$10 million dollars.

The city has adopted crowdsourcing to fund waterfront development. Anyone is able to make a charitable contribution to waterfrontpergola.ca. The Pergola Fundraiser is an innovative attempt to draw money to further the development of the waterfront. This prevents tampering with current city budget limitations and allows for a greater sense of communal achievement and accomplishment via charitable contribution (Community Waterfront Friends Pergola 2013).
Halifax/Dartmouth, Nova Scotia

One of the current development projects is the growth of Dartmouth Cove. For this project, the Waterfront Development Corporation has regular workshops that include government officials as well as citizens from the community. Some of the most popular ideas are the implementation of bike lanes, public access to water, green space and increased opportunities of play.

Another project is the Nathan Green Square Revitalization Project in Halifax financed by the Halifax Regional Municipality and the Waterfront Corporation. The project’s benefits include the extension of the Timber Harbour walk, enhanced landscape, improved lighting, additional public seating and improved access to historic properties (Region of Halifax, 2012).

A tide pool concept is currently being put forward by the designers of the Cunard project. The Cunard Project is located on the Halifax waterfront and aims at encouraging developments along the water’s edge. The tide pool involves public access to the water as the education on the environmental impacts of the area (Halifax Waterfront Development 2012). The concept of protecting the marine heritage of Halifax makes it more dynamic by promoting sustainable positive change.

Portland, Maine

Portland is Maine’s largest city with an Old Port district along Portland Harbour (City of Portland Planning Office 2002). In early 2000, the Waterfront Development and Master Planning Committee were created to engage the public in a consultation process to discuss the potential development in the East End waterfront (City of Portland Planning Office). The 30 person appointed committee worked with the Planning Division to conduct forums and public meetings that involved over 600 citizens. This resulted in the Eastern Waterfront Master Plan, which was adopted by Council in 2004. The plan established principles for development, design standards, street layouts, and build-out plans that encourage mixed use developments in a pedestrian-friendly, urban environment. This plan also involves the rehabilitation of historic sites and structures.

Placemaking, Water and Culture

Placemaking is occurring in different parts of the world as an alternative to top-down planning and real estate development. This kind of urban intervention in public spaces is particularly important in the current context of instability of financial and real estate markets. For that reason, different cities are employing placemaking as an alternative form of economic development that also serves to empower citizens, strengthening their right to the city. An example of this is the
Paris Plage where the expressway on the Right Bank of the Seine is closed to vehicles during the summer and transformed into a public “beach” through the placement of objects associated with beaches, such as deckchairs, beach umbrellas, palm trees and thatched huts (Quentin and Ambler, 2010). This project has been replicated in Mexico City. This type of placemaking allows residents that cannot drive or cannot afford to go to a beach outside of the city to enjoy the sun and access to water in the proximity of the urban core.

Another example of water-based placemaking is the “Confluence” project in a 300-mile stretch of the Columbia River in the states of Washington and Oregon. The project is tied to culture and place. The project comprises public artwork, environmental restoration, and educational programs in seven First Nations sites in the area (Benfield, 2013). In Perregian beach, people are involved in making the seating infrastructure with rudimentary materials such as sand bags to create seating or the community couch (www.inperegianbeach.com). Overall, these placemaking projects also emphasize mobile services, programmes, themes, and atmosphere rather than fixed infrastructure. It also creates a sense of belonging when people interact with these sites in a positive way through their collaboration in “making” a place.

Besides infrastructure, another crucial element to increase the use of a space is culture, which serves also as a form of learning outdoors. The Before I Die Wall in Toronto is an urban intervention that combines placemaking with interactive art. This form of interactive art consists of a chalkboard wall that invites people to share their hopes and dreams. This chalkboard has helped to change a neglected space into a public space for cultural expression. Another example of educational placemaking is the “Library Patio” project in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia where seating and shade is offered to locals while reading a library book. In this way, public space acts as an extension of the library itself (Kent, 2008: 62-63).

Public Space and the Making of Places

The first three case studies on waterfront development and placemaking differ from one another. The best practices on public spaces along the water focus on fixed infrastructure, private real estate development and a process guided by policy makers and developers. Still, these best practices show the importance of investment of public space along the water as central not only for vibrant neighbourhoods but also for economic development. The case studies of North Bay, Halifax/Dartmouth and Portland also show alternative sources for funding of waterfront developments and the need for community consultations throughout the process.

The discussion of examples of placemaking emphasizes its grassroots basis with continuous community participation as well as the existence of mobile services and infrastructure rather than inflexible and fixed arrangements. These examples
of placemaking include the enjoyment of public space, learning, and an urban form that extends ecological processes. Some of these case studies take place in cities in that are re-inventing their economies through placemaking due to the collapse of the real estate and financial markets. Thus, this community-based form of urban intervention not only enhances quality of life of city residents at low cost but also does not expose the local economy to economic instability of global financial markets.
“Given a fine location, it is difficult to design a space that will not attract people. What is remarkable is how often this has been accomplished.”

William H. Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*
Public space, Placemaking and Social Capital

The concepts of public space, placemaking and social capital are central to understanding the importance of Tin Can Beach (TCB) for economic and social development. Public space is a key dimension of urban life. It refers to the ownership of a place by the state and its citizens and/or to the notion of access to all who wish to use it (Latham, 2008). Historically, vibrant urban public space relate to democratic life (Amin and Thrift, 2002). Currently, popular use has reinvented urban spaces to create new forms of sociality and emphasize the significance of community gatherings in public space to city life (Latham and McCormack, 2008).

To guarantee the use of a public space, the location requires mixed uses and connectivity to the urban core. Alternatively, the specialization of a public space can replace diversification when mixed uses are not possible in the area and there are different competing public spaces (Jacobs, 1961:14). In regards to specific factors required for the creation of a well-used public space, Jane Jacobs points to intricacy, centering, sun and enclosure (Jacobs, 1961:103). Intricacy refers to the subtle differences in space, while centering is the gathering of people in the public area. Jacobs also discuss access to direct sunlight along with protection from the sun and enclosure through nature, buildings or other kinds of infrastructure to define public space. Thus public space is a democratic and open site where strangers come together to acknowledge and celebrate difference, creating a sense of shared citizenship (Pacione, 2009: 159).

Placemaking is the process through which community defines places through the use of public sites according to their social needs and how this people-process of “making of places" shapes a neighbourhoods’ sense of belonging and civic engagement (Sibergberg, 2013: 5-9). The idea of placemaking was raised in the 1960s by urbanists such as Jane Jacobs and William H. Whyte in order to challenge the conventional wisdom of city design centred on cars, shopping malls and large industries rather than people. Placemaking involves the deep involvement of the community not only as recipients but as active participants through inclusion, the promotion of discussion, collaboration, and the empowerment of citizens as a cyclical and never-ending process. This in turn enhances public life, community participation and common spaces (Silberberg, 2013: 10).

The benefits of placemaking include the promotion of a community sense of belonging and comfort; the creation of opportunities for social interaction and cultural exposure; and improved access for pedestrians and people with disabilities. Placemaking is cost effective while empowering city residents and their public spaces. Placemaking can decrease government spending on health care. The promotion of active transportation in public spaces with natural
surroundings in the city might improve the levels of physical activity, which is an important factor in the prevention of health problems such as obesity and its associated risks and concerns (Handy et al., 2002). Access to public spaces and a sense of belonging also assists people with mental health issues and in situations of risk.

Also, high quality public spaces that involve the community do not have to be expensive to create a sense of belonging and place in the community. Placemaking is also affordable in different ways. Programming fosters community around a physical location by involving the latter in the maintenance and the improvement of the site according to its needs. Tactical urbanism relates to low-cost temporary additions of built environments and art without sanctioning from state authorities. An example of this activity is “chair bombings.” Homemade seating is placed in public spaces to improve comfort and social activity. Tactical urbanism is also considered a lighter, quicker, cheaper (LQC) form of community-driven creative intervention in public spaces. A mobile version of this LQC approach is the storage of chairs, tables, umbrellas, games, and a temporary stage in a truck so these objects can be moved around and set up for a couple of hours in a particular public space (Rock Ventures LLC, 2013: 13). These initiatives of tactical urbanism and mobile LQC are taking place in cities such as Detroit, Michigan and Bogota, Colombia. In Bogota, the city government promotes 100 spontaneous interventions in the same day in the urban landscape through street art, urban gardens and bike lanes (Peach, 2013). Placemaking also leads to economic outcomes beneficial to small and medium-sized businesses and the high skill sector. It creates quality and liveable places attractive for investment and skilled labour. According to a study entitled Soul of the Community, there is an empirical relationship between higher levels of attachment and cities’ GDP growth in the United States (Knight, Soul of the Community, 2010: 5).

Placemaking also adds to social capital. Robert Putnam defines social capital as the ability of people to access resources via social networks through reciprocity and access to diverse social ties and milieus, which increases trust and social tolerance. The enhancement of social capital has two positive outcomes (Putnam 2000). On the one hand, this sense of community allows individuals to deal effectively with everyday problems (Hampton, 2010: 97). On the other hand, social capital assists economic growth by decreasing transaction costs because of the high levels of trust it creates in a community (Woolcock, 1998).

As will be discussed in the section Tin Can Beach and the Community, this area of the South End is already being used by the community through low intensity placemaking. The potential for placemaking in the area can be realized with the support of government at different levels. Three municipal policy guidelines already support placemaking at Tin Can Beach. Plan SJ Vision and Directions and the resulting Municipal Plan emphasize the importance of protecting the natural environment, complete communities, community engagement, waterfront
access and enjoyment of public space as central to the sustainable future of the city (Plan SJ, 2011: 18). More specifically, the Plan “embraces water as a central feature of the City’s economy, natural environment and a key to the lifestyle and collective community experience of living in Saint John,” and acknowledges the environmental and historical and significance of water front for the city and the need for making these spaces inclusive in order to enhance city life (Plan SJ, 2011: 21).

Saint John’s Municipal Plan also includes land use intentions depicted in the Inner Harbour Inner Harbour Land Use Plan and Implementation Strategy. This plan emphasizes the centrality of public access to the inner Harbour and the uptown waterfront as an engine of economic growth. In relation to Tin Can Beach, the plan envisions the expansion of Harbour passage to the former Lantic sugar site.

The proposed City of Saint John’s Parks and Recreation Strategic Plan (PRSP), suggests LQC placemaking and other forms of community involvement such as through the Adopt-a-Park Program and community development programs for neighbourhood improvement. While Tin Can Beach is close to Harbour passage and two squares, it is unique in its direct access to water and its wild natural surroundings. Placemaking also requires low maintenance. Tin Can Beach is also close to a priority neighbourhood and the uptown business area, providing access to people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The investment in recreational assets in intensification areas is key goal in the PRSP (PRSP, 2012: 5-7). Placemaking at Tin Can Beach also complies with the three focus areas of the Strategic Plan for Playground Services: healthy/active living, right-sizing and community development (PRSP, 2012: 28).

This section of the report shows how public space and placemaking are new policy trends in urban planning and politics that aim at decreasing costs while providing city residents with spaces of social interaction. This interaction empowers residents’ right to the city and builds social capital. The latter is central to enhancing “meeting-place democracy” and promotes sustainable economic development (Salberberg, 2013: 5). The importance of public space and placemaking at Tin Can Beach is supported by the Plan SJ, the Inner Harbour Plan and PRSP, which shows how the local legal framework is already in place for the “making of places” at TCB.
“Placemaking is community organizing. It’s a campaign.”
Fred Kent, Project for Public Spaces
Think Tin Can Beach: Recommendations and Impacts

Based on the literature review, the study of best practices and fieldwork in the South End and Tin Can Beach, the report suggests retaining the wild character of Tin Can Beach while creating more environmental diversity and active intervention in the landscape through placemaking. Placemaking at Tin Can Beach is effective because it enhances public spaces, facilitates access to nature, empowers the community and does not require a large investment. All of these aspects are particularly important in Saint John due to the limited local budget and the lack of accessibility to natural surroundings for residents of a priority neighbourhood such as the South End due to affordability and transportation issues.

Public spaces improve civic engagement and interaction, promoting social capital and social diversity. Placemaking activities can range from “chair bombing” to other forms of LQC mobile infrastructure in such a way that the use of Tin Can Beach extends beyond the summer months. Examples of LQC placemaking in the winter months include hot drinks, blankets, heat lamps, tent structures and programming strategies like “Happy December” in Slovenia. Other examples of placemaking are interactive fixed or mobile art. Interactive sculptures bring people out to public spaces in cities like Chicago with the Cloud Gate Sculpture and Halifax with the Mont Blanc. In Quebec City, people use public spaces even in the cold weather with Luminothérapie/Sphères polaires display. An example of interactive mobile art is the “Before I Die” chalkboard mentioned in the Case studies section of the report. In order to facilitate placemaking, the city can use “grace periods” for temporary zoning to allow placemakers to make brief urban interventions, which can help the community to envision permanent changes in the long term.

It is also important that Tin Can Beach connects to other destinations. According to the approach “The Power of Ten” developed by the Project for Public Spaces, a vibrant downtown area should have 10 connected destinations within walking distance. Furthermore, Tin Can Beach and Rainbow Park could be connected through a rainbow crosswalk. The crosswalk can also become an attractive destination itself.

UNBSJ’s Biology and Engineering Departments could collaborate in the creation of an interpretative park in Tin Can Beach and provide suggestions for low maintenance and weather-resistant material required for art and infrastructure (solar lighting, public benches, garbage cans and fire pits) in that site. This would make UNBSJ a crucial stakeholder in this area while allowing students to have practical experience in community-oriented projects.
For funding, the city and the South End community can employ crowdsourcing and placemaking competitions. Crowdsourcing takes a project traditionally performed by a developer or government entity to a larger committed community for funding and planning, giving the project a local flavour. An example of placemaking competition is the city of Detroit’s “It’s About Place” contest, which is a project of the Michigan Municipal League. This contest asks participants for placemaking proposals with a limited budget of $2000. People in Detroit then vote for the best project.

The promotion of placemaking at Tin Can Beach has low costs and high economic and social returns. In economic terms, Tin Can Beach provides a favourable space for employees working in nearby areas, increasing their productivity and attracting high skilled jobs to the area. Placemaking in TCB could also have a multiplier economic impact on the local businesses of the uptown area as people choose this site as a destination area.

Placemaking in TCB also lowers health care expenses for the province. This is particularly important in Saint John and New Brunswick. Saint John has the highest levels of obesity in the province. Obesity rates in New Brunswick are higher than the national average. Active and pedestrian infrastructure and recreational and leisure public spaces that encourage an active lifestyle and save money that would otherwise be spent on healthcare. Access to green and natural spaces is also documented to be highly beneficial for mental health and child development, both issues of concern in the city of Saint John (University of Washington, 2010).

Finally, placemaking in TCB could also enhance the public life of common spaces, and strengthen the sense of place through the celebration of the ecology, history and culture of the South End and this beach. Such sense of belonging through place promotes civic engagement and social capital, which are central to local democracy and economic development.
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Revitalization of Tin Can Beach