



Public Joy: The Missing Infrastructure
for Civic Life
The Neighborhood Design Center
Mount Rainer
Jay Pitter, April 2026

My Practice and Public Joy



Public Joy Framework

Civic Infrastructure

Public joy reveals the health of democracy in everyday life.

- Indicates whether people feel safe, a sense of belonging, and freedom of expression in public space;
- Sustains dignity, openness, and respectful participation during difficult debates, elections, and public engagement;
- Signals fractures in civic systems and spaces when unevenly distributed;
- Reveals which groups must continually take to public space to advocate for their rights, and which groups have the luxury of occupying public spaces through joy;
- Reflects whether democratic rights are experienced in practice, not just written on paper.

Cultural Infrastructure

Public joy transmits cultural memory and intergenerational joy across time.

- Transmits cultural memory and intergenerational joy—a counterpoint to intergenerational trauma;
- Circulates through practices such as music, laughter, adornment, food sharing, reverence, storytelling, and imagination;
- Builds resilience by shaping identity beyond histories of harm;
- Opens possibilities for the shared co-creation of culture grounded in values, aspirations, and connection to place — not limited to social identity categories such as race, gender, or sexuality.

Spatial Infrastructure

Public joy operates as both a design prompt and an evaluative metric in city-building.

- Operates as a design prompt, shifting conventional planning from technical and procedural priorities toward the quality of embodied experiences in space;
- Guides consideration of how streets, parks, and public spaces can support free expression, belonging, and collective presence;
- Functions as a rigorous evaluative metric, drawing attention to how planning decisions affect collective flourishing;
- Reveals how mobility systems, policing, amenities, and environmental conditions diminish or contribute to collective flourishing.

Public Joy: A Catalyst for Civic Repair

Civic Engagement Processes

Question:

How might we move beyond traditional town halls and design charrettes to embed public joy practices into community design—by engaging people in the civic spaces they already inhabit, rather than expecting them to come to us?

Action:

Pilot one place-based engagement in a naturally occurring public setting (e.g., park, transit stop, or market), using public joy practices such as intergenerational storytelling, cycling, and cross-cultural cooking—while capturing insights to inform public space policy, programming, and design.

Governance and Decision-Making Structures

Question:

Which of our current policies or decision-making processes unintentionally limit not only expressions of public joy, but also people's ability to exercise agency, shape outcomes, and co-steward spaces and programs?

Action:

Identify one policy, guideline, or approval process to uncover an invisible or implicit barrier that may be restricting public joy, and outline a shift that enables greater flexibility, access, or community stewardship in practice.

Citizen-Led Spatial Analysis and Site Assessments (Mapping)

Question:

What forms of place-based power, informal practices, and everyday expressions of public joy exist within this community—alongside and despite its history of harm and marginalization?

Action:

Revisit a community that is often defined by marginalization or harm, and intentionally document its assets—such as local celebrations, mutual aid practices, cultural expressions, and moments of collective care—through observation and/or conversation with community members. When sharing or speaking about this community, be intentional about carrying forward these insights to shift dominant narratives about the place.

Civic-Oriented Participatory Research

Question:

How might we design participatory research processes that intentionally surface forms of public joy, cultural memory, and everyday rituals that are not immediately visible in space?

Action:

As part of a participatory research process, intentionally engage elders, citizen historians, and longtime residents—inviting them to share stories, rituals, and expressions of public joy that may not be visible through site observation alone, and ensuring these insights are included in how the place is understood and represented.

Metrics and Evaluation Frameworks

Question:

What would it mean to measure public joy in ways that are defined by people's lived experience of place—rather than relying solely on standardized metrics?

Action:

Work with community members to define what belonging, freedom of expression, and cultural stewardship look like in practice within a specific place. Translate these into 2–3 qualitative indicators and integrate them into an existing public space evaluation framework—then assess how these conditions are experienced and sustained over time.

What Changes When Public Joy Shapes Civic Life?

- Mitigate polarization in civic conversations;
- Adopt an asset-based lens that is sophisticated enough to address harm and inequity without reproducing division;
- Orient public space toward its original civic purpose;
- Move toward a shared civic vision that is bigger than any single project or policy;
- Center collective flourishing as an active design outcome, not an abstract ideal.



Thank you...
And let's keep talking!



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