HIGHLIGHTS IN THIS EDITION.

> GET READY FOR THE NATIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CONFERENCE (NEDC23)

> REGIONAL GROWTH – HOW WE MEASURE MATTERS

> LEVERAGING IMPACT CAPITAL FOR SHARED PROSPERITY: A CHALLENGE FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONALS

> REINVENTING HOW SPACES AND PLACES ARE SHARED

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REINVENTING HOW SPACES AND PLACES ARE SHARED

Jeremy Hurst

Wherever there are people, there is a need for spaces… right? Spaces to work, learn, train, connect, counsel, celebrate, play, pray, exercise, trade, entertain, compete, be, grieve and more.

The right space is a container for the things we do as humans. How we find, share, use, book, pay and return to spaces has, typically been a series of awkward processes. Without meaning to, these processes have blocked the hiring and sharing of spaces in our communities.

Over seven years ago, my organisation set out to understand why these blockers existed and how to make bookings frictionless. We also wanted to fix the waste that occurs with existing and under-utilised spaces in our communities. In a nutshell; improve the customer journey and grow space utilisation in the process. In this article I'm going to share some of the insights we have uncovered in partnering with community space owners, local government and local businesses.

Reinventing how spaces and place are shared matters for community, for sustainability and for local area economies. But first, why is the space sharing economy important?

WHY WE NEED TO ENABLE SPACE SHARING

Think about the activities you have participated in this year; what has been in your daily, weekly, monthly routines? Have you attended any of these activities in buildings or outdoor spaces/places that are not your workplace or your home?

Workshop e.g. art
Community meeting
Coaching
Lesson e.g. dance
Sport training
Fundraiser
Performance e.g. music
Committee meeting
AGM
Class e.g. yoga / cooking
Offsite work meeting
Social sport
Rehearsal e.g. dramatic
Fitness
Wedding or Engagement
Ceremony e.g. culture
Birthday party
Interview
Quiz night
Competition e.g. debate

This is not an exhaustive list but most people would say they've attended at least 8 of these, few would say less than 4. What is evident when we think about these things is the depth of activity going on in our communities at all times. These activities bind people with things in common, within shared spaces.

Some of these activities are centered around volunteers (committee meeting), some are people with a side-hustle (teaching drama to kids), some are part of a professional service (corporate training). Other activities could be new and untested ideas (entrepreneurial experiments). In most cases, there is a transaction of funds for either one, two or all of these:

1. Hiring a community venue
2. Paying for the activity experience that occurs in the community venue
3. Potential for overflow into other local businesses

What really matters here is the purpose for booking and the secondary activity it triggers. The mechanics of bookings need to 'get out of the way' and be simple, efficient, provide the required information and be trustworthy. Unfortunately, in towns and cities across the country, bookings are still made manually with sticky notes or, with a poorly designed digital flow. These processes can be a blocker for economic activity within a local area. When people use spaces efficiently, the local economy wins, the space owner wins, the activity provider wins, the environment wins and neighbourhoods become more vibrant.

When reviewing the activities listed, it's helpful to consider if the space was easy to book.

SPACE SHARING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Step one in enabling the Space Sharing Economy as part of any economic development strategy is to know the user journey for accessing local community venues, spaces and places. In 2023, the bar has been set very high by digital platforms that have normalised efficiency. Digital platforms (AKA marketplaces) have been a binder for connecting a resource to a customer and making a transaction simple. Want a table at a restaurant? Just book it online in minutes. Want to travel to Rome? Book your flight online in under an hour? Need transport? Book a ride share in seconds. Anyone with a space to share is ultimately competing with the likes of Amazon, where that book you purchased last night can be on your doorstep the next afternoon.

These disruptive platforms now save the consumer time, provide answers to common questions (price, availability and reviews) in one place and makes the financial transaction completely frictionless. We have all been trained to expect this new normal and if we stumble across a process that is time-consuming and a bit cumbersome ('they just wrote my credit card on a sticky note') then we bounce and go elsewhere where it's just a bit more seamless.

From working closely with community space owners for the past several years we know that:

• Most business owners have space to share but believe it's not worth the hassle.

Figure - the flow of economic Activity tied to space sharing
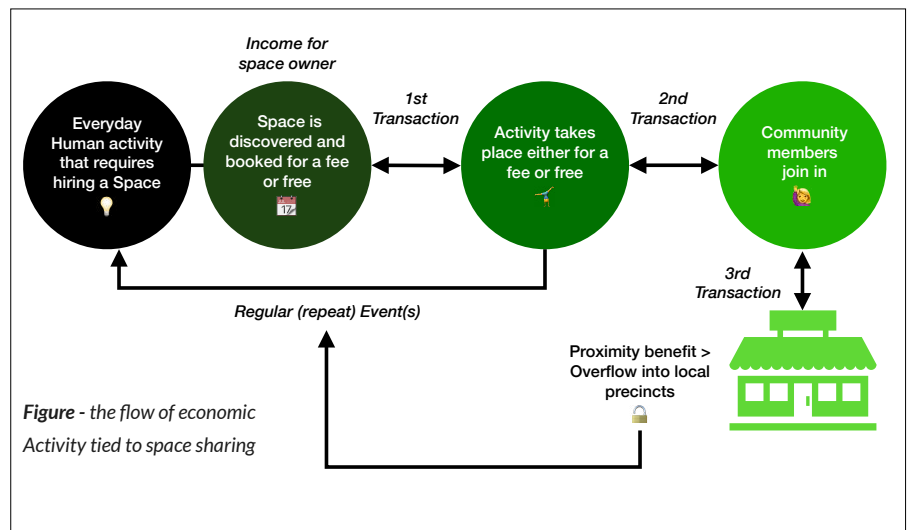
• Many space assets in the community are under-utilised, or suffer from peaks and troughs in demand at key times of day.

• Any dedicated staff who manage bookings are dealing with old booking administrative processes. Their day can be distracted by managing enquiries, checking availability, sending invoices and chasing unpaid bills.

• The systems and processes used to manage bookings are usually highly manual or inefficient. For example, keeping a physical registrations book or having to enter data in multiple systems. This can lead to human error, a frustrating process for customers and staff.

• It's extremely difficult or just really time-consuming to get reliable data on utilisation, participation and community reach and impact. Many space owner operators spend hours each month manually adding up space utilisation from an outlook calendar.

• The compounding effect of lack of funding and time means valuable staff hours cannot be spent either finding ways to change or improve the system. But more importantly all this time spent handling repetitive transactional administration takes their time away from doing what's really impactful in their space; programming and events, building community connections and activation and placemaking.

SPACE SHARING DATA INSIGHTS

Community facilities are everywhere but many of them are also a mystery. Great effort goes into providing the many halls,

centres, parks, courts, gazebos and more, but just how much are they used and how?

By looking at insights from over 2,200 spaces across 40+ Councils we've discovered patterns about facility utilisation. For example, the average facility hiring time is 3 hours, the average hire spend is $70 and the average number of attendees is 30. The impact is that space bookings are very much part of the local economy.

When we review the bookings data for regular hirer groups with Councils we work with, we always shine a light on the highest value hirers. The data always speaks volume. For example,

'Did you know that the Jumping Jellybeanz dance group (not their real name) is bringing in more than $70,000.00 in bookings turnover in a year? There are also 500 families accessing the hall each week.

In most cases the numbers are surprising and then the next question we ask is - 'is the hirer happy?'

Usually it's a 'yes'. Sometimes it's 'so-so' and if it's a 'no, they're not happy', it's due to maintenance issues. Being able to demonstrate the financial return strengthens the business case to fix the issue and complete the necessary maintenance.

OPPORTUNITIES

How can we amplify community connections and economic benefits for neighborhoods? There are three parties involved:

COMMUNITY

- There is an abundance of community groups, small businesses, organisations and individuals across local areas who need spaces.

- As highlighted already, we know the variety of community initiatives that are happening all day and everyday in the spaces we work with. From meetups, to mindfulness, business meetings to language classes and everything in between.

- The global pandemic has created a fundamental shift in where people want to work. Liberated from punishing commutes, many people and businesses have realised it's perfectly productive to enable people to work remotely. Even just for a couple of days a week. This is creating a growing demand for people wanting to live where they can work.

SPACE OWNERS

- There is untapped potential of space that can be used more if we enable people to understand when it's available and how much it costs. Most spaces have peaks and troughs of demand, but these are varied, meaning when one space is busy, another may be free.

- There is potential to create new income opportunities for spaces if we shift mindsets on what spaces can be used for and how this demand is distributed.

- Local facilities can provide space for cultural events, workshop training, seminars and more.

- There is an opportunity for community spaces to become hubs and generate more income from their spaces.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

- By spreading the demand for community space across a diverse range of spaces and facilities, council facilities could realise a greater return on its property assets. Whilst council community spaces are not necessarily built to raise income, improved use can at least mean that costs are covered.

- By making it easier for communities to learn, create, play and do in spaces local to them, we can build more connectedness across diverse community groups.

- It's possible to create opportunities for learning and social mobility and greater understanding and compassion in a world that sometimes feels more divided than ever.

- By encouraging communities to meet and spend locally, neat circular economies are created within localities, where household and community incomes are ploughed back into the local area.

If the administration around space sharing is removed what does that mean for booking staff? It means freedom from boring repetitive administration and a chance to engage hirers and gather feedback, apply for more grants and funding, do proactive community outreach and placemaking, run community programmes, plan events and so much more. Bookings should be easy so that the real work can begin.

IN SUMMARY

Reinventing how spaces and places are shared is not only necessary in 2023, it is an imperative and ought to be included in the transformation strategy in every local government. The cost of not making this a priority is a continuation of burdensome admin, low utilisation and a lost opportunity to enhance customer relations.

The space sharing economy is real and it's happening every single day and night right in front of us. The disruption of the past 5 years has changed society and people are seeking connection, flexibility and local resources. Many of these things are to be found in our local community spaces and places.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JEREMY HURST

Jeremy works with Councils, business and all types of community venues to help make it easier for people to find, book and use local affordable spaces and places. In 2015, he created SpacetoCo - a unique marketplace and enterprise bookings solution that can be used by local authorities to create a hirable ecosystem of both council and non-council facilities, therefore making more facilities available for community use. The business went live in early 2017 is used by over 45 local governments and over 110 community venue partners. Jeremy's mission is to galvanise people to think differently about how space is shared and booked. For more information visit: **www.spacetoco.com**