

Intro: This is “*The Advancing Communities Show*” hosted by OHM Advisors. Each week, we bring you ideas, information and inspiration to make our world a better place through architecture, engineering, planning, innovation and collaboration.

Sarah Pilat (OHM Advisors): I'm Sarah Pilat and I'm here today with planner and urban designer, Aaron Domini. He has been focused on the practice of placemaking as an integral part of local economies for a decade. He's currently conducting a research study on the influence of pets in shaping lifestyles and the potential value of integrating pets into placemaking for communities of the future.

Welcome to the show, Aaron, glad to have you with us.

Aaron Domini (OHM Advisors): Thanks, Sarah.

Sarah: First and foremost, you've been studying this topic of placemaking. What is it?

Aaron: Placemaking in the world of planners, urban designers, architects and engineers has really become this buzzword. You can't go anywhere without really hearing about it or in some cases doing it.

The idea of placemaking goes back all the way to Jane Jacobs, when we talked about eyes on the street and creating the street as a public space. I think she was really one of the first pioneers in creating the idea of what placemaking can and could be.

Since then, it has grown into a movement that is now this idea of creating places that are authentic and is built around what makes a community unique, specifically the assets that they have. Those can be physical or social, and then how do we engage community members in shaping their environment.

That can be through visioning sessions or actually bricks-and-mortar projects where people are hands-on helping shape their urban environment. That's really what placemaking is and where it came from. I think, for us, especially at OHM, it's just our way of doing business. I mean, that's what we do.

Sarah: So tell us, how does this idea relate to building communities with pet owners and pets in mind?

Aaron: That's a good question. For me, this idea of placemaking for pets just started through my experience of being a pet owner and also as a planner. I have three dogs and I interact in public spaces and in urban environments as well.

I started to realize that there were so many different places, districts, areas of activity that weren't pet-friendly. And, not only were they not pet-friendly, they were almost anti-pet and that started to get me thinking, "how can we do it differently, and also, why is it important?"

Looking at all the demographic changes in this country, we know that family household size is getting smaller. The millennials are coming and growing into the marketplace, and the boomers as well are shaping the marketplace.

Both of those groups tend to not have children, have them later or are losing them. In the case of the baby boomers, they're starting to replace them, in many instances with dogs.

The number of households with children today is around 33 percent in this country. Those with dogs are over 40 percent. We have more households that have dogs than those that have children. We shape entire communities and places around children, which is great, we should, I also have two kids and that's important, but what about those who have dogs, how are we attracting them?

The idea of attracting dog owners is one of our economic development tools. Today everybody's looking to attract, whether it's talent, people or investments, and that 40 plus percent is a big part of the market that we need to be mindful of.

Sarah: Can you describe for us what the fundamentals of this pet utopia would be?

Aaron: For me as a planner, one thing I always think about is the livability factor, "What makes a place great? What makes it livable?"

We started to look at the great American cities that are the top ten of the most livable., and then, we started to compare those to the index of what makes a place dog-friendly. We found that there's a lot of overlap in those two areas of analysis.

The one thing that really tied them together is green space. Not in the sense of large community regional parks, but just places for people to go and interact in, either by active recreation or through passive enjoyment of a space, whether that's green or gray, it could be an urban context, a pocket park or a node.

That's one piece that makes places pet-friendly, but I think the other piece is just a mindset. When you go to places that have this cool mindset and they also tend to be pet-friendly, there is a clear message to those who own pets that they're welcome. Those are always very active and vibrant places. There's lots going on and keeping people there.

I think one of the third pieces would be just making sure that local ordinances are pet-friendly. There's also a regulatory piece that we need to address and I think over the time we've really taken it to the extreme, to be very anti-pet in some instances, some communities more than others. But now that you're seeing the millennials growing in numbers and moving through our society and taking new roles, I think you're going to find a lot of pushback to almost start to go the other direction. It'll be interesting to see how that works itself out.

Sarah: Explain to us what you mean by, "communities have almost become anti-pet." What does that mean exactly?

Aaron: Well, a lot of communities are kind of restrictive in terms of breeds, numbers or types of pets you can have. There are places created that literally don't allow people to take their dogs. Those are just some examples.

I think also just not being mindful in terms of what we're asking our communities to be built like. We're not promoting or requiring new amenities. Whether that's a green space or trash cans, things like that that are going to be accommodating and attract dog owners.

Sarah: So what has been the reaction from communities when you've brought this up with them, or have you?

Aaron: When we first started talking about it, communities would say, "we are doing things for dog owners." But when you really get down to it, you'll find that they have a dog park. We talked to them about where we think demographically we're going as a country and then also about the relationship between households with children and households with dogs and that the large sector of the market that actually are dog owners. I think they started to realize they're not doing enough.

We can then start to talk about the things we can do, like create parks that have activities for dogs or plazas and special events, whether you're a main street community or a downtown organization. Then we can discuss how can we create things that are going to attract dog owners to a place and keep them there.

I think then we start to get them thinking more critically about what they can do in the future.

Sarah: And what about the private sector? Have you had these same conversations with them?

Aaron: We have. We do a lot of work with the private sector, so it's a natural fit for us to talk to some of our existing clients about this topic. And for the private sector, both office and residential, but more on the residential side, the response is: "we do allow pets at some of our facilities."

We talked to them about the numbers, that 40 percent of the market, who they may or may not be accommodating and how big the industry is, at \$60 billion.

We started to ask them: "what if we create a place that is specifically designed for pet owners? What are the premiums we can get for that type of product?" And really have that conversation and run the financial element and the value of creating that type of product.

I really have experienced some interesting conversations with those particular developers and investors to say, "maybe we should try to do something more of that nature." For both the public and private sector, I think where we're at now is getting them to start to think differently

The next step will be to see where we can go with them to create places that are almost designed, branded and marketed to and around households with pets, specifically dogs.

Sarah: What's next with your research?

Aaron: What we've done to date is tell the story. Telling the story has consisted of getting a lot of secondary research data together and stringing it together in a meaningful way that starts to justify the topic and get people interested.

Next, we're going to do some primary research with some of the market research partners that we work with, to understand what our households with pets are looking for in a community, whether it's housing, a park space or a district. What is it that would attract them and retain them?

And then for the private sector, we're doing some research on what would be the value or the perceived value from the customer, as it relates to buying into, moving into or taking part in a community. Whether that is a residential, multi-family product or entire new development that is built and branded around pet-friendly elements that attracts households with pets and with dogs.

Sarah: Perfect. When can we expect you back?

Aaron: What we'd like to do is bring in some of our partners, so that would be some of the developers that we work with, to get their perspective on the topic, as well as our market research partners, to talk more about the topic.

We probably also want to bring in a local leader, whether that's a mayor or a development director, to get their perspective on this and really create a full-circle dialogue around this idea of placemaking for pets.

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Sarah: Perfect. Thank you.

Aaron: Thanks, Sarah.

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