

TEMPORAL AGENTS AND THE POWER OF PLAY IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

CHOI, JANE

Assistant Professor, Colorado State University, 111 Shepardson, 1173 Campus Delivery, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523-1173, jane.choi@colostate.edu

CARMAN, SCOTT

Instructor, Colorado State University, 111 Shepardson, 1173 Campus Delivery, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523-1173, scott.carman@colostate.edu

1 ABSTRACT

Researchers have long touted the many developmental benefits of physical play for children. More recently, evidence has been accumulating of the importance of play for people of all ages. Some of the documented personal and community benefits of play include improved fitness, greater social cohesion, stress relief, greater creativity and productivity in the workplace and improved interpersonal relations. In order to bring the benefits of play to a greater number of people and communities, designers must begin to explore opportunities for introducing unexpected and limited-duration 'play interventions' in settings where people are otherwise going about their daily routines. Though artists have been at the forefront of this movement, landscape architects are well positioned to understand, allow for, and encourage such interventions in the built urban environment. Designers, artists and community and civic organizations have offered important examples of these principals in action that are worth understanding and emulating. Through precedent studies and reviews of behavioral research, the significance of time-limited and unexpected events and interventions within the urban built environment are presented not only as a topic of design consideration for landscape architects and students of landscape architecture, but also as an urgent contemporary planning issue with greater ramifications for the physical and psychological health of the community.

1.1 Keywords

play, temporal, participatory, interventions, environments

2 INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2012, the Parks and Recreation Department of the City and County of Denver announced a competition to create a multi-seasonal, multi-generational play space of the future, replacing a rather ordinary, though much beloved, playground in City Park that had reached the end of its useful life. The competition was called “Re-imagine Play” and invited participants to “challenge currently accepted definitions of play and...re-think play as a unique, multi-faceted experience in an urban, multi-generational space” (Denver Parks and Recreation, 2012). The authors teamed with a talented and inspiring group of designers and consultants to prepare a proposal. Through several rounds of public exhibits and presentations, their team was selected as one of three finalists in the competition. Though not the eventual winners, the experience sparked a deep interest in the role of play in the built environment, as well as the role of the built environment in play. The accommodation of play activities has many fascinating angles to be explored and perhaps one of the most intriguing is the way play can sometimes sneak into our urban environments for a few hours or days when it is least expected. Such ‘temporal interventions’ and their importance to the experience of the built environment are the focus of this paper.

3 PLAY

A common link among all higher-order animal species is that we play. Much more than a squandering of valuable time, play is a critical developmental process that continues to provide benefits throughout one’s lifetime. Play is also a powerful incentive to increase physical activity, a decline in which over the past several decades has been linked to the growing epidemic of obesity in the United States and elsewhere (Caballero, 2007).

3.1 Defining Play

If we are to view physical activity, and design accommodations for it, through the lens of ‘play,’ it is critical to first establish an understanding of what, exactly, constitutes play. Psychologist Peter Gray offers a suitable definition of play as having five intrinsic components (Gray, 2008):

1. Play is self-chosen and self-directed; players are always free to quit
2. Play is activity in which means are more valued than ends
3. Play is guided by self-chosen or freely-accepted rules
4. Play is non-literal, imaginative, marked off in some way from reality
5. Play involves an active, alert, but non-stressed frame of mind

In other words, play is any activity a person freely chooses to participate in, that is enjoyed for the process more so than the outcome, is bound by rules that the players freely accept, includes some aspect of fantasy or imagination (losing oneself in the moment) and actively engages the mind. As the title of Gray’s article suggests, by defining play more precisely than simply as ‘leisure activities,’ we begin to reveal the many benefits conferred by play. Dr. Stuart Brown, founder of the National Institute for Play, has spent a career studying and articulating the many advantages of play.

3.2 Importance of Play

Research in animal behavior has shown that play is a critical survival tool that teaches sound judgment, recognition of social cues, navigational skills and threat detection among many other lessons (Brown, 2009). For humans, in addition to learning survival and socializing skills, play frees the mind from stress, sharpens thinking skills and problem-solving abilities, stimulates physical activity, enhances creativity, improves learning and counterfactual reasoning (Gopnik, 2012), and perhaps most importantly, imparts a sense of joy and ecstasy that invigorates us physically and mentally to continue to meet life’s challenges. For these reasons, our minds and bodies crave play; in fact, it is an instinctual behavior that does not need to be taught. Play provides what psychologists call ‘psychological arousal,’ which means it incites excitement and ecstasy (Brown, 2009).

Play has its benefits not only for individuals, but for groups as well. For the community, play enhances cooperation and understanding, forges common bonds, builds relationships, promotes inclusion and produces broad-based improvements in physical and psychological health. The individual benefits are multiplied many times over, producing more tightly-knit communities that function more smoothly (Brown, 2009).

3.3 Accommodations for Play

The psychological and social advantages of play and recreational activities have long been recognized by governments and social organizations as critical to a content and productive populace. However, accommodating these play and recreational activities in the built environment has often presented significant challenges to urban planners and landscape architects. The current system of land allocation, which seeks to assign land to 'optimal uses' based solely upon economic value creates a conundrum for individuals and communities seeking to improve physical fitness and increase activity levels for the many health benefits such activities provide. As a result, accommodations for play activities in our urban environments have largely been a marginal concern for urban planners. Structures and spaces designed for physical activities often require large areas of land, which is typically unavailable or far too valuable in the real estate market to be devoted to such uses that do not generate income, particularly in urban centers. The solution all too often is for individual tracts to be 'set aside' for use specifically as play or recreational areas. Location is key, however, as studies have shown that physical activity levels increase substantially when opportunities for such are easily accessible and conveniently situated for individuals to take advantage of (Kahn et al., 2002).

Recently, however, the extensive benefits of play have begun to gain widespread traction. Traditionally, of course, what allowances have been made for play have been focused on children's activities, typically in the form of playgrounds. Though certainly an important niche focus for some designers, urban playgrounds have largely been typified over the past half century by a static and familiar composition of mass-produced play equipment, creating a numbing variety of sameness. Even disregarding the aesthetic indignity posed by such arrangements, it is questionable whether they are even developmentally appropriate for their intended audience (Frost, Wortham, and Reifel, 2012). Furthermore, beyond all these shortcomings, playgrounds are only intended for a small slice of the population; indeed, they are often specifically off-limits to any adults who are not accompanied by children (Newman and Schweber, 2010). The realm traditionally left for the older children and adults has been the recreational fields for organized team sports. Though certainly valuable, these facilities leave much to be desired in the attempt to lure sedentary adults to an active lifestyle. Partially filling this gap is the 'adult playground' (Hu, 2012) or fitness circuit. But these, too, are little more than outdoor gyms which offer physical activity without the promise of those powerful attractants, fun and play. A new model is needed in order to bridge the gap between children's play and adult exercise. After all, play is an important aspect of life at all ages, and given the opportunity and permission to do so, adults will engage in active play.

4 SURPRISE

Perhaps one of the most stimulating reasons for living in any city is the regularity of chance encounters, discoveries and surprises that greet its citizens. Unexpected events, whether sanctioned or unofficial, offer the opportunity for engagement and delight that provide a new lens through which to view and understand the urban environment. Since antiquity, cities have been gathering places where these types of events naturally unfold, allowing for a constantly changing kaleidoscope of uses embedded in a seemingly permanent urban fabric. These time-limited occurrences may have a variable longevity, ranging from a few minutes to a few months, but all are temporary in nature. Given that humans are innately curious creatures with a powerful psychological drive to explore the unknown (Loewenstein, 1994), it is precisely this transitory nature that in many ways makes these events so compelling and so appropriate for urban environments.

4.1 Temporal Agents

All landscapes are, of course, impermanent. Whether it's the growth and seasonal changes of vegetation or the changing appearance and weathering of materials due to wind, rain and ice, all built (and natural) landscapes are constantly changing, if only at a seemingly glacial pace. The changes of interest here, however, are those that occur quickly, either through an environmental change or a shift in use patterns. Due to their transitory nature, such changes are frequently extremely limited in scope and expense, particularly as compared to more typical construction projects. Yet they are capable of producing dramatic effects, altering the community's perception of places they may know intimately.

4.2 Precedents

One of the simplest and yet most profound examples of this phenomenon is the weekly event known as 'ciclovía,' which started in Bogotá, Colombia in 1976 (Wood, 2007). Translated literally as 'bicycle path,' the ciclovía is an official closing of certain urban streets, typically main thoroughfares, to motorized traffic and opening them for the exclusive use of cyclists, skaters and pedestrians. This reversal of the urban transportation routes occurs on a grand scale, transforming some 70 miles of roadway that are typically off-limits to pedestrians into acres of public open space, attracting 1.5 million participants weekly (Kent, 2007). At various points along the ciclovía routes, other group activities are organized, such as dances and aerobic classes. Though the change is relatively simple, involving only a diversion of traffic, the relocation of familiar recreational activities into an unfamiliar setting has the effect of powerfully reframing the urban environment for the participants each Sunday morning.

Many Americans are familiar with the ciclovía concept, as the phenomenon has spread worldwide, often referred to as 'Open Streets' in English-speaking countries. As graduate students at Harvard, the authors were frequent participants of one such long-running event in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which opened miles of Memorial Drive along the banks of the Charles River and created indelible memories of the possibilities for urban open space. Other American cities that have successfully implemented ciclovías include Portland, Boulder, San Francisco, Baltimore and Miami.

Temporary physical modifications to a space are another common aspect of temporal events. Farmers' markets are a fixture of many cities across North America and around the world, transforming otherwise ordinary open spaces into bustling marketplaces for a day or two each week. Similar to the ciclovía, the change is a relatively modest one, implemented on a small scale by many participants in the form of individual stalls or tents. Taken in aggregation, however, the transformation is striking, creating a carnival of sensory experiences. Many farmers' markets, of course, are a combination of both environmental and use alterations, transforming public streets, parking lots and public squares into urban bazaars.

Other examples of temporal events range from street fairs to concerts, art installations, parades, celebrations, rallies and street performances. The most compelling of these, from the standpoint of community engagement, tend to be those that are participatory experiences, drawing people into unfamiliar or unplanned activities. These offer a break from one's daily routine that place the participant, if only for a moment, firmly in the 'here and now,' detached from the concerns that only minutes earlier may have seemed all-consuming. Such models for temporal interventions offer a glimpse into the possibilities of an urban experience that promises new opportunities for civic interactions.

4.3 Barriers to Temporal Interventions

Unfortunately, despite the success and popularity of many of these temporal agents there are numerous obstacles to bringing such projects to reality. The legal and procedural barriers to temporal interventions are often burdensome and can vary widely from city to city. Indeed, these events appear to be a decidedly local phenomenon, with some cities hosting many dozen such events each year, and others hosting few, if any. Some of the barriers faced by organizers include lengthy 'event permit' application processes and requirements, insurance / liability concerns, security concerns / need for police detail, objections from civic groups, private property rights, etc. There are often also physical barriers to temporal interventions, which may include inadequate pedestrian and bicycle accommodations and dangerous vehicular traffic. Of course, there are also organizational impediments, such as lack of funds or material resources.

5 NEW APPROACHES

Despite the many obstacles, temporary interventions are still far easier to implement than more "permanent" urban improvements and there are some groups that are successfully navigating these barriers to create vibrant, though temporary, urban environments that offer additional opportunities for urban play.

The vanguard for this new thinking about play at all ages is composed largely of interactive urban artists and designers who are rethinking contemporary means of civic engagement and personal experience. Sometimes working within the established channels of local governance and at other times working around them, they are creating some of the most compelling and inviting urban experiences to be

seen in many years. These designers seem to have a keen understanding of human curiosity and motivations, tapping into our deep-seated need for fun.

The temporary nature of their works have allowed for the freedom to direct their energies not towards the building of static objects and the challenges that come with constructing large-scale 'permanent' designs, but rather towards the creation of more meaningful and purposeful ways of engaging the public. Inviting participation with their works, the designers devise playful opportunities for powerfully transformative collective experiences.

6.1 Participatory Interventions

An invitation to play is often all that's needed to bring people together to participate in a collective activity. Daily Tous Les Jours, an interactive design firm based in Montreal, Canada specializes in creating irresistible invitations to play. One such piece is "21 Balançoires," a temporary installation consisting of 21 swings set on a wide, empty median, surrounded by vehicular traffic. But these were no ordinary swings; each was equipped with an LED light on the underside of the seat that was activated only when the swing was in motion. Further, each swing played a musical note in response to the motion. The piece was conceived as a participatory game, producing melodies out of the seemingly random sounds when participants synchronized their swinging with that of their neighbors (Daily Tous Les Jours, 2012). In the end, the experience is a journey of discovery, first inviting participation through the novelty of swinging in a median, which in turn invites others through the beacon of moving lights and finally inducing cooperation amongst friends and strangers to create musical melodies. It is an ingenious and irresistible trail of clues that leads the community to work together to unravel the mystery and meaning of the piece.

A similar project, the "Sit and Spin Shanty," designed by the artists' collaborative Art Shanty Projects, recalls that beloved toy of childhood vertigo, the Sit 'n Spin. The artists created an adult-sized version for groups of friends and strangers. Installed in the winter season, it was part of a series of twenty interactive art installations scattered along the shores of a Minnesota lake. The oversized egg-shaped structure features a central table inside the egg with a wheel that participants must operate in order to physically spin the structure. According to the artists, this rotation generates "heat through activity and potentially light through the capture of rotational energy" (Roff et al., 2012). Here, participants again discover that communication and physical cooperation are needed to bring the piece to life. The apertures in the walls of the structure allow for changing views as one spins, while from the the outside, passersby can witness changing patterns of light emanating from the spinning eggs.

Some of the most transformative temporal agents, however, go beyond the moment to live beyond their intended span. The temporal agent becomes a catalyst for more permanent change, in effect. Collectively, these short-term interventions that are inspiring long-term change have become a movement known as 'Tactical Urbanism.' One prominent example of this is the Better Blocks Project, a variety of temporal intervention on a grander scale that seeks to transform an entire city block. Started in Dallas in 2007, this movement relies on volunteers and donated materials to temporarily transform derelict and poorly-functioning urban streets into a more vibrant and attractive version of urban life. A recent example was a project in San Antonio in 2012 that transformed a disused segment of West Commerce Street into a viable pedestrian environment. Through the addition of temporary seating, park areas, bike lanes, cafes, musical entertainment and pop up shops, they successfully created a vibrant neighborhood for a single day (Better Block Project, 2012). Perhaps most promising about this movement is the aspect of play that it introduces to the urban environment; both the creation of the Better Block and the enjoyment of its fruits are forms of imaginative adult play. Experiments such as this likewise point toward future opportunities to improve urban living through both time-limited and permanent changes. In fact, some cities, such as New York and San Francisco are trying to learn the lessons of these interventions by creating programs that allow for the creation of experimental urban spaces, with the most successful of these being funded for more permanent build-out (San Francisco Planning Department, 2009). Although they are typically only in place for a matter of days or hours, some of these initiatives have resulted in permanent changes to the blocks they sought to revitalize, in the form of new businesses and municipal investment in street furnishings and infrastructure (Better Block Project, 2012).

6.2 Exploratory Interventions

An alternative to the participatory intervention is one which simply invites people to follow their natural curiosity and explore an unfamiliar landscape. On such piece is "The Gates," by Christo and

Jeanne-Claude, which was a site-specific temporary art installation consisting of 7,503 saffron-colored fabric panels mounted on posts along 23 miles of paths in New York's Central Park in 2005. The gates altered the familiarity of Central Park, seemingly creating a different, unrecognizable place. Attracting visitors by the tens of thousands, it invited exploration, including at night, which itself is an unusual experience for many urban parks. The design was intended to be viewed in motion, rather than as a static object, in order to give the full experience of the ever changing play of light and shadow against the billowing fabric and varying backdrops of the park (Christo & Jeanne-Claude, 2005). It highlighted a meandering path and created a sense of a "golden ceiling" as one walked beneath. This project offered a template for ways to not only engage visitors, but to also engage their environment.

Similar in effect but quite different in execution, the interactive works by Howeler + Yoon, architects by training, have garnered much attention for using modern technology to create unique and playful environmental pieces. One of their early projects, commissioned for the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, was entitled "White Noise White Light." The piece is a site-specific installation that sits on a plaza directly beneath the Acropolis. Consisting of a gridded field of 400 fiber-optic "stalks" that were custom designed with sensors capable of detecting the distance of visitors, the stalks would illuminate and produce sounds through hidden speakers as the motion of the visitors was detected. As visitors moved away from the piece, the sound and light dissipated. This created a heightened awareness of the presence of others within the field and a poetic play of motion and sound effects, depending upon the variable movement of people through the space. The designers intentionally designed their installation to be juxtaposed against the historic Acropolis to create a dialogue about the past and future, with one architecture fixed in time and the other set in motion by human interaction (Yoon & Howeler, 2009).

7 FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Presuming that this trend in temporal interventions continues and grows, one question must be asked: what role, if any, is the landscape architect to play in promoting public health and welfare through temporal agents and the encouragement of play activities? Perhaps the most important factor here is the education of design students, who are the next generation of designers, in the understanding of these events and elements in the built environment. If nothing else, landscape architecture is ultimately an exercise in the ordering of relatively uncontrollable elements; temporal agents are simply one more variety that needs to be accounted for and accommodated to varying degrees. There are clearly some public spaces that are more amenable to these activities than others, allowing for them to co-exist with the normal day-to-day functioning of an urban environment without presenting impediments to the normal ebbs and flows of movement.

Streets, sidewalks, alleys, parking lots, parks, plazas and vacant land are among the many public spaces already in abundance in every urban environment that can offer opportunities for temporal interventions if designed appropriately. The totality of this space potentially provides a powerful democratizing force for the distribution of temporal agents and play opportunities in cities. Understanding the dynamics of temporal agents will allow landscape architects to better accommodate them in the design of our public spaces, as well as apply the lessons learned from them to the design of more permanent features. Looking forward, the increasing availability of play for all ages in our urban environments is an imperative for reasons of psychological, physical and community health. Temporal play agents provide an important low-cost, low-risk laboratory for the testing of urban play concepts that landscape architects need to be mindful of in creating built spaces. A constantly changing field of research invites designers and public entities to create, as well as allow for, more opportunities for temporal interventions that make play a part of each person's daily life.

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