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PLAY IN THE CITY: PARKOUR AND ARCHITECTURE

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Abstract: The ability to play freely in our cities is essential for sustainable wellbeing. When integrated successfully into our cities, Urban Play performs an important role; physically, socially and culturally contributing to the image of the city. While Urban Play is essential, it also finds itself in conflict with the city. Under modernist urban approaches play activities have become progressively segregated from the urban context through a tripartite of design, procurement and management practices. Despite these restrictions, emergent underground play forms overcome the isolation of play within urban space. One of these activities (parkour) is used as an evocative case study to reveal the hidden urban terrains of desire and fear as it re-interprets the fabric of the city, eliciting practice based discussions about procurement, design and management practice along its route.

Key words: Play, City, Urban Space, Parkour, Urban Play

1 INTRODUCTION

—Naked children will never play in our fountains, and I.M. Pei will never be happy on route 66...” (Venturi, Brown, & Izenour, 1972)

We need play in our cities. Play is important for the sustainable wellbeing of people from all ages, abilities and cultural backgrounds (Huizinga, 1955). It is of empirical benefit, mentally and physically for participants (Groos, 1899; Eastman, 1997; O’Brien, 1994), and socially for observers.



FIGURE 01: A Traceur moves from a precision to a cat leap. (NFG, n.d)

Play generates memory and sense of place. It connects people with the city. Play reveals the hidden terrains of desire and fear which affect the shape of our cities (Calvino, 1974). Play renegotiates the obstacles and frames and projects new interpretations on them. Play is a powerful positive force, benefiting the architecture that supports it, and the inhabitants that experience it.

It is physically possible to play anywhere in the city, but often play brings out conflict between competing desires and fears surrounding the public realm. The design of buildings and cities can mediate this conflict, removing barriers to our wellbeing and expressing the hidden urban terrains of desire and fear.

1.1 Methodology

After defining and justifying play as an essential contributor to sustainable urban wellbeing, Urban Play is examined throughout history and through a modern case study. The terrains of desire and fear expressed through the spatial activities of participants and the way in which civic governance responds to these spatial activities are revealed. Observations of these activities reveal *spatial qualities* of varying degrees of legibility which relate to framing and path elements required supports these activities; informing their deployment and articulation. Equipped with this knowledge,

we are then able to describe ways in which the methods of spatial procurement, design and management may change, mediating conflict and responding to the desires and fears which are revealed by Urban Play

1.2 Defining Play

Play activities are a consistent feature in cultures throughout the world and history, and although they may appear in very dissimilar forms, they share an underlying conceptual construct. *Play* activities are dependant upon the context and environment in which they occur (frames), and also require a changing stimulus (such as a ball, the weather, social conditions or activity) (Huizinga, 1970). For *Parkour* and other physical urban *play* activities, architecture is a fundamental contributor to the creation of the frame. Asofsky (1992) suggests that a playful ritual function of architecture lies in delineating the frame through which an activity occurs. Tschumi describes this relationship:

—Bodies not only move in, but generate space produced by and through their movements. Movements of dance, sport, and war are the intrusions of events into architectural spaces. At the limit, these events become scenarios or program... independent but inseparable from the spaces that enclose them.” (Tschumi, B. as quoted in Asofsky, 1992, p.4).

Huizinga (1955), Tschumi and Asofsky’s (1992) definitions allow the creation of space to be generated by play activities which link potentialities between objects, filling the gaps through activity and the insertion of the body, event or object. Play activities, although often very different in the description of their activities, share a common conceptual construct. Play activities in the city are also heavily reliant on the architecture that supports them.

1.3 Justifying Play

Urban Play is critical to the wellbeing of a city’s occupants. Play has empirical benefit to body and mind, and is an important feature of cultures throughout history. Play is often mentioned in the context of the urban environment, and an integral part of the image of the city.

Since Heraclitus (~500BCE), play has been featured in the works of Evolutionary Biology (Groos 1896; 1899), Psychology and Paediatrics (Eastmann, 1997; O’Brien, 1994). The scientific professions stress the importance of play in psychological and physical health. Play is of such importance that it is written into Article 31 of the United Nations ‘Convention of the Rights of the Child’ (United Nations Children’s Fund. n.d.) and the World Health Organisation also promotes play activity in adults (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2010).

Play is important to culture and society. Huizinga's (1955) anthropological work locates play elements in important cultural functions of law, war and myth throughout history. Huizinga demonstrates that play is a vital activity which informs all aspects of culture and society. In this fashion, play activities both inside and outside of official governance functions give testimony to the politics of space and place. In this way play reveals the desires and fears of urban players.

2 URBAN PLAY IN HISTORY

We have always played in our cities, although play has also exhibited signs of conflict with societal norms (being labelled as deviant, and even criminalised). Progressively, it has been removed from the urban context through design, commercial procurement, and governance practices, although its consideration has seen a recent resurgence in professional discourse about the design of our cities.

A pertinent example of play tied intrinsically to the infrastructure of the city is 'Shrovetide football' games. Dating back to the 12th Century, Shrovetide football was originally played between medieval towns in matches where the church of the opposing town acted as the goal. Shrovetide matches are still today considered to enhance sense of place, community identity and social exchange (McCabe, 2006).

Shrovetide football also demonstrates play in conflict with the city, revealing conflicting desires, fears and politics of space. In 1314, Nicholas de Farndone, Lord Mayor of London, issued a decree banning football (Gerhardt, n.d.). The desires for playful expression and activity by the public, and the fear driven maintenance of a comfortable status-quo are evident in the narrative of space revealed by play activities.

Football games and other urban sports perform important social functions, bringing together both participants and observers in simultaneous competition and co-operation. Urban play activities also required the appropriation of normatively programmed space. Unlike the modern play method of building purpose built spaces which remained un-inhabited when not in use, public squares and roads were used in these early and continuing examples. These urban play activities use the urban environment as the frame for the activity. Multiple paths are creatively generated as they negotiated these frames, demonstrating how these play activities are reliant on urban integration.

Similarly, Florence's Calcio Fiorentino, (Axion, 2008), Siena's Piazza del Campo (Jackson & Nevola, 2006), Marostica's chessboard and Isfahan's Naqsh-e Jahan Square (Joshi, n.d; Lawler, 2009) all provide strong historical examples of play intrinsically tied with the architecture of the city. All examples demonstrate multiple play paths, flexible frames open to reinterpretation and co-location of normative and ludic activities at different times. Other examples like the paintings of Brughel and Avenkamp demonstrate that exceptionally ludic spontaneous play was able to be accommodated alongside normative activity.

2.1 Play and the design of cities

Since the late middle Ages, technological, political, social and economic forces have changed the way cities have been designed, governed and managed. Some of these changes have led to the segregation of play from the urban context through the design of these spaces.

After the industrial revolution, the image of the city changed dramatically. While older cities largely retained their traditional urban images borne from gradual emergence of form and space

successfully co-locating many programmes (including play) simultaneously (Gehl, 1980) (Carmona, Heath, Oc & Tiesdell., 2003), new cities have had to come to grips with the swift development of technology, with many resultant changes to the image of the city and consequences for play activities. These changes are demonstrated in Knox and Pinch's 'Fordist' and 'post-Fordist' city model whereby the old town centre becomes simply an administrative centre from which radiate a plethora of specialised programmed precincts.

The development of mobility technologies meant a decentralisation of urban form, and the isolation and separation of urban programmes, connected by high-speed transit systems. Play spaces, like residences and workplaces, became segregated and removed from the overall urban context and began to attract specialist consideration in architecture and planning. (Carmona et al., 2003)

Often procurement and governance bodies will require the design of space to physically segregate 'deviant' play activities, using 'defence-able space' tactics.

Design does not have the ability to advocate or condemn activity directly, but design has the ability to mediate the relationship between people, activity and the space in which it occurs. Design can be done in such a way as to create conflicting relationships, or to mediate these conflicts and create a more co-operative urban environment for the inclusion of new additional activities in the same space.

2.2 Play and the governance of cities

As well as design, the governance and management bodies of cities and public space have also assisted in segregating play from the urban context as demonstrated by the Lord Mayor of London when responding to Shrovetide football.

Not much has changed since the Fourteenth Century, with many popular play activities being banned in urban public space. Skateboarding and ball games are common examples of activities legislated against and removed from an integrated context of the city. Often such legislation relies on the banishment of the tools and equipment related to play activities in an attempt to identify play as deviant activity separate from normative activities. Additionally legislative methods are used, such as provisions in 'riot acts', the use of 'summary offences' and restrictions on freedom of association and assembly in a public place in order to remove play activities (contextually identified as deviant) from the city (Borden, 2001; The Bunny, 2009; Sane, 2009). Once play participants have been labelled as 'deviant' by society, penalties are increased and play activities are criminalised (Florida State University. n.d)

2.3 Play and the commercial city

Not only must the activities of integrated play contend with governance, but play activities must also contend with commerce and the novation of public space management and development to privately run governing bodies. Private corporations are now often made responsible for the building and maintaining of public assets, from highways to pedestrian bridges to entire sections of cities. Under the economic rationalism of commercially developed space, civic citizenship is superseded with 'consumer citizenship', whereby a person's right to belong is conditional on their net positive contribution to the economy of the space. (Aalst, Melik, & Weesep, 2007; Voyce, 2006) The purchase of 'consumer citizenship' makes access to play difficult by curtailing appropriation and innovation while imposing a normative preconception of activities that may be undertaken within these spaces. Un-regulated play activities are often seen as threats to the

commercial productivity and economic functions of retail programmes, and conflict with the 'branding' of commercial public space. As such, often these non-normative activities are 'banned'.

The conglomerate effect of current design and commercial governance expectations for public space establishes a further expectation during spatial procurement that play is not a justified consideration and that developers of public space are within their rights to continue to exclude play.

2.4 Play and the contemporary city

Fortunately, there is a resurgence of play in the city, driven by both the design professions and the practitioners of play. The failures of modernist urban planning gave rise to new reactionary planning methods and urban theory frameworks which embrace the complexity and fluidity of space (Alexander, 1987; Shane, 2005; Helie, 2009; Marshall, 2008). The post-war period saw resurgence in playground design, featuring different degrees of segregation from the urban context and image and pursued by prominent modernist architects including le-Corbusier and Louis Barragan (Lefaivre & Döll, 2007). Jacobs' *Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) saw segregated playground environments condemned, and theories of urban design began to instead focus on integrating play activities with the image of the city and its streets. Unbuilt visions like Constant's *New Babylon* (1950), and Price's *Fun Palace* (1961) sought to re-integrate flexible and appropriate play in the city. Realised interventions such as *Fontein Beurtraverse* in Rotterdam (Lefaivre & Döll, 2007) and *Chess Park* in Glendale, Los Angeles drew upon historical frame and path precedents of *Schloss Helbrunn Wasserspiele* and *Marostica* respectively.

In addition to the efforts of contemporary urban design professionals, a resurgence of play in the city is occurring through 'avant-garde' emerging unregulated play activities. New event-based interventions like skateboarding, urbex, guerrilla gardening and parkour begin to communicate both a rebellion against the oppressing socio-spatial norms of the city, and a declaration of the creative ludic potential and the playing spirit of humankind. They wear the architecture of the city in new ways, with the potential for generating entirely new languages and forms. They are performances which reveal terrains of desires and fears (Calvino, 1974; Brown, n.d.; Borden, 2001; Gough, 2007) inherent in the procurement, design and governance of the public realm.

Parkour is a highly accessible and distinctly urban play activity. Its re-interpretation and creative misuse of the paths and frames of the city acts as a pertinent case study through which to discuss the nature of play in the urban environment. By exploring the way which parkour practitioners wear the architecture of the city differently, we may generate conversation surrounding the design and management of public space, and come to a greater and more creative understanding of how play qualities and play elements may be deployed in the city of our desires. Parkour is also a relatively young subject of academic investigation, and therefore many unexplored research opportunities exist.

3 PARKOUR: A CASE STUDY

3.1 Introduction and Justification

Parkour (derived from the French 'parcours' or 'course') is a modern phenomenon in which a Traceur (French for bullet and term for a practitioner of Parkour) moves through their environment as efficiently as possible. In this pursuit for efficient movement, Traceurs re-negotiate obstacles which may slow them down or divert them from an optimised course in un-conventional ways, moving over, through or under them. Geyh (2006) likens the

movements of Traceurs to a Deleuzian subversion of 'striating' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) urban obstacles. Daniels (2003) sees the activity of Parkour as re-interpreting and displacing Traceurs in their urban context.

Traceurs express how Parkour exists in the mind and through the eyes: 'seeing' one's environment in a new way, and imagining the potentialities for movement around them. Chau Belle-Dinh, a founding member of the Yamakasi group of Traceurs struggles to define the phenomena; it's physical and mental connection:

"[you] need to see things. It's only a state of mind. It's when you trust yourself, earn an energy. A better knowledge of your body. Be able to move, to overcome obstacles, in real world, or in virtual world, thing of life. Everything that touch you in the head, everything that touch you in your heart. Everything touching you physically. That's it!" (Belle-Dinh in Daniels, 2003).

Parkour as a play activity, through its social critique, reveals the desires and fears of the city's inhabitants. It contributes directly to the physical and mental wellbeing of participants and generates strong social connections between place, mind and body. It relates directly to urban play qualities and urban play elements. Parkour interprets these elements and qualities in new and challenging ways. By re-interpreting and re-presenting these qualities and elements, new approaches by the tripartite of public space design, procurement and management are made available for use.

3.2 Discussing Parkour, the City and Play.

The urban image which Parkour interprets is strongly reliant on path and frame elements (Day, 2003). Where path and frame elements do not exist in a normative legible manner, play activities re-interpret the urban elements available to form new frames (Lamb, 2003) (Fig. 02a) through which to create a new path. Play thus creates new meanings and memories for normative elements through a higher level of interaction with the city.

Parkour enhances both participant and observer *sense of place* and the social sustainability of the city. The re-interpretation of the frames, paths, and boundaries of the city requires Traceurs to imagine new possibilities and meanings for seemingly banal and non-descript architectural elements: *"This [wall] is my baby...if a brick falls off I'll be devastated"* (Angel, 2007). Likewise, observers of parkour are exposed to event as a spatial generator (Asofsky, 1992) and spatial meanings are shared.

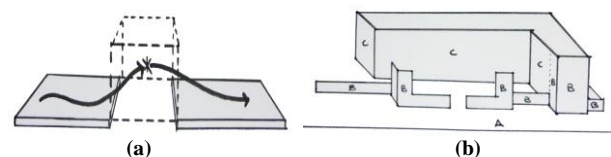


FIGURE 02: (a) Normative frames become reinterpreted in order to re-frame ludic activity (Lynch: 1960, Huizinga: 1955). The occupation of the new frame exhibits Tschumi's (Asofsky, 1992) concept of event space linking potentialities (also referred to in Day, 2003, and Borden, 2001); (b) —A denotes normative conceptions of public space suitable for interaction. —B denotes surfaces framing public space which interacts with (which may or may not be on or within a private property boundary). —C denotes Carmona et al. (2003)'s concept of public space framing elements. (NOTE: Images by the author)

Parkour contributes in many ways to the *social sustainability* of the city. French Corrective Services have encouraged the use of Parkour (Daniels, 2003), citing parkour's ability to positively effect people and their response to their environment, themselves and society. Similarly, the city of Westminster has used parkour amongst its youth to encourage positive sustainable social and

environmental relationships (Angel, 2008). Parkour directly connects alternative positive social and physical activity with the urban context of the participants, creating landscapes of memory and desire.

Parkour relies on the public realm to increase its social accessibility, as well to provide vast constantly changing environments and frames against which new creative methods for engagement must be developed. To this effect, parkour *appropriates* space for temporal use. (Angel, 2008; Schroeder, 2010; Daniels, 2003; Cliff, 2007). To prevent a 'Traceur' becoming stagnant, new experiences and problems must be sought, and skills and confidence must be progressed. Parkour's roots in Herbertism also stress a utilitarian relationship with any training, being 'strong to be useful'. As such, any isolated training, such as inside a gymnasium or a specially designed facility suffers the negative baggage of not being able to be directly applied to the everyday 'useful' context (Cliff, 2007). Parkour's appropriation of space is temporal, existing for as long as a second, to sometimes an hour or so. Unlike graffiti which appropriates space semi-permanently, the appropriation of parkour is easily shifted and adjusted in order to fit the local conditions. If the appropriation of Parkour presents itself in an inappropriate fashion for normative activities being conducted at that time, Traceurs can be quickly relocated to another space which does not interfere (Sane, 2009). Traceurs may return at another time when the contextual conflict is removed.

In this way a dark foreboding alley becomes a place of laughter and excitement, an after hours shopping centre car-park becomes a gymnasium and an after hours school becomes a jungle to be explored. Parkour and other play activities never completely take over space, but rather borrow it for a time and then return it to normative uses. Play activities also tend to discriminate between suitable and un-suitable spaces. Congested urban environments and sites of previous spatial or social conflict are avoided by Traceurs because they disrupt play. Space which does not provide the opportunity for ludic utility (in the form of suitable physical design, finishes structure, paths and frame) is likewise often avoided.

Interaction with the urban environment and the image of the city is important to Parkour and other play activities, sometimes requiring interaction with parts of the city generally considered not public space. Parkour does not readily recognise differences between spaces that are privately governed and designed or publicly governed and designed. Parkour reads the image of the city as a contiguous whole, (Lamb, 2008) mirroring Carmona's (2003) (Fig. 02b) position that all available architectural surfaces are public objects and part of the public realm. Although such an approach to the city could be expected to incite trespass, Traceurs tend to avoid trespass where possible, preferring a non-confrontational approach to public space management and law enforcement (Sane, 2009).

Like football and many other play activities, Parkour appears in conflict with the governance of public space. Although it has not directly been the subject of legislation in Brisbane, parkour has been banned by private managers of public space (The_Bunny, 2009) and Traceurs have been charged under legislations such as the Summary Offences Act (Sane, 2009). As Traceurs move over the city, their actions elicit dialogue amongst observers and participants about the use and governance of space considered to be public in nature. The legislative landscape is revealed through the play activities as territories of segregation and integration are mapped by the Traceurs movements and memories. The underlying social and political desires and fears that are not expressed in the architecture are revealed when they come into conflict with play.

Traceurs are required to negotiate the fragmented legislative territory of public space under the administration of commercial bodies empowered by law to enact by-laws regarding behaviour and activities of the public. Sometimes the concerns of management and governance arise from a perceived threat to persons or property (The_Bunny, 2009; Christie, 2003), as well as for commercial (Aalst, Melik, & Weesop, 2007) and insurance reasons (The_Bunny, 2009). As a result of these concerns play activities, and parkour in particular, find themselves segregated from the public realm. However, these concerns can be addressed by a tripartite approach (design, procurement and governance) in order to minimise and remove the conflict between people, play and space.

4 TOWARDS A PLAY-FILLED CITY

Having considered the urban nature of play, it is evident that ludic utility assists the wellbeing and the image of a city. By considering the definition and nature of play we can understand how it can best be accommodated. By considering its historical context we can appreciate its importance and the many issues which play negotiates today. By considering emergent 'counterculture' activities it is possible to reveal hidden desires and fears of stakeholders in the city. These activities subvert those restrictions revealed as a consequence of fear, and act out the desires of inhabitants for the benefit of the city. It is then possible to address the tripartite restrictions against play by designing a more co-operative relationship between play and the city, mediating these revealed fears and desires. By applying the lens of Parkour, a range of design perspectives are proposed which potentially remove the conflict between physical urban play activities and the spaces which they occupy. The successful integration of ludic utility into some of the urban fabric may change the relationship of play from conflict based, to co-operative. As a result, the physical, social and cultural wellbeing of the city and those that inhabit it can be improved, and a new spatial, social and economic efficiency can be achieved.

The first place to begin considering the integration of play is during the procurement of public space. It is at this initial stage when the legislative frameworks, developer attitudes and design strategies are formulated. Developers and governance bodies who provide public space (either as a standing requirement for inner city developments or as part of a joint commercial/government enterprise) can expect that public spaces (and quasi-public spaces) are made suitable for public use, including physical interaction. By identifying the haptic accessible exterior of a building as a potential public asset, the design and governance of 'public space' can add utility and value through appropriation of space built to mediate potential conflict. By minimising possibilities for conflict through design, maintenance and alteration expenses are minimised and the functional utility of space is maximised.

By considering the accessible exterior fabric of the building to be potential ludic utility, new forms, thresholds and features may proliferate throughout the city.

If the city is to be used by citizens for play activities without conflict, then building elements need to be designed fit for (ludic) purpose; capable of wearing use and possible abuse with dignity without compromising their non-ludic purpose. By designing in such a manner, conflicts over damaged property as a result of play activities and some social stigmas that surround urban appropriation are removed (Florida State University, n.d.)

The design of frame and path elements can be made to outlast our normative expectations of their use, and continue to provide a ludic and normative utility into the future. Such an approach will likely

be characterised by material finishes and structural specification. Tactile qualities can be designed which enhance the ludic potentials of frames and paths through the articulation of hard, soft, grippy, slippery, natural and artificial surfaces (Gehl, 1971).

Finishes can be sacrificial in nature, easily replaced or 'well wearing', removing the governance and management fear of property damage. Further sacrificial elements may be deployed to protect more sensitive elements whilst simultaneously performing a ludic framing or path function (Fig. 03). Over time play-friendly spaces may be characterised by rich material palettes which co-locate resilient and sensitive materials deployed in a purposefully ludic fashion.

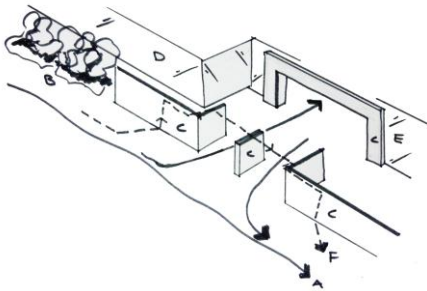


FIGURE 03: —A denotes normative interaction path. —B denotes natural sacrificial layers that are easily regenerated. —C denotes artificial sacrificial layers. —D denotes 'sensitive' finishes. —E denotes off peak ludic interaction paths. —F denotes peak ludic interaction paths. Note also the use of adjacent and perpendicular axis relevant during different periods of intensity. (NOTE: Image by the Author)

Co-location of activity brings benefits of greater pedestrian presence leading to heightened levels of peer surveillance, and contributing positively to the memory, sense of place, and cultural capital of the city. Where co-location of normative and the ludic programmes are deemed irreconcilable, then programmes can be separated, either physically through the deployment and articulation of architectural elements or chronologically through governance protocols, allowing play to spread throughout many new public spaces where it may not have previously been expected.

Capitalising on the temporal nature of ludic activity, and contributing to the legibility of the image of the city, is the consideration of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Potentially ludic programmes spaced proximate to each other enables the scaling of paths (Lynch, 1960), and heightens the mobility and flexibility of play activities, further removing opportunities for conflict and giving play practitioners alternate paths and frames to 'move-on' to, further mediating potential conflicts.

Unavoidable spaces that require security or privacy, but that are outside of the façade, must clearly communicate that they are not fit for appropriation. This can be achieved by the use of materials, and their formal composition as well as signage and by ensuring that they are not located in the vicinity of the street edge, major flow paths of activity or major thresholds. Sensitive spaces can also be located behind a sacrificial layer or element as discussed previously. Adding further legibility to the public realm, it is also important to delineate spaces which are under different governance protocols. In this way conflicts between the immovable desires of the public and changing fears of governance can be communicated and expectations of special use can be aligned.

After public spaces are imagined, designed and built, governance attitudes and initiatives are essential to the continued success of play programmes. Governance bodies can advocate positive play

behaviours, beyond simply regulating and curtailing activity based upon buried fears and desires. Such an approach may utilise purposeful programming which co-locates ludic and normative activities in public space, and the use of variable such as time, intensity and location to re-distribute play activities and mediate between potential conflicts.

Elected representative governance bodies can advocate for the role of play in the city by requiring the procurement, design and management of space to achieve performance requirements. Understanding the ludic performance of space may be informed through clear communication with user groups and local stakeholders, ludic and normative, casual and permanent.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The study has justified and explored the integrated role of play in the city. As a case study, parkour powerfully represents the desires of public urban actors for freedom, connection with place, social and physical interaction and the ability to re-interpret their environment through appropriation. The case study also clearly demonstrates how the ludic desire of public actors comes into conflict with governance actors, and how design can mediate these conflicts. By identifying connections between ludic activities and elements of the image of the city, conclusions are presented as a series of strategies which remove barriers to the integration of play with physical urban infrastructure.

The research has capacity for expansion. Using a similar methodology, other integrated urban play activities may present fertile case studies which reveal latent desires and fears of urban actors, how these come into conflict, and how this conflict may be mediated for the future wellbeing of the city and its inhabitants.

With continued research, and creative intervention, we may yet live to see the dire predictions of Venturi et al. (1972) disproved, and the sustainable wellbeing of our cities enhanced with abundant play.

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