

The Second City: Notes on Chicago's Funny Urbanism

The story is of how the city of Chicago provided the ground for the development of a style of improvisational comedy, making it a setting, but also a seedbed; the fertile ground for a creative explosion. This is an urban study as cultural history, and also as performance.

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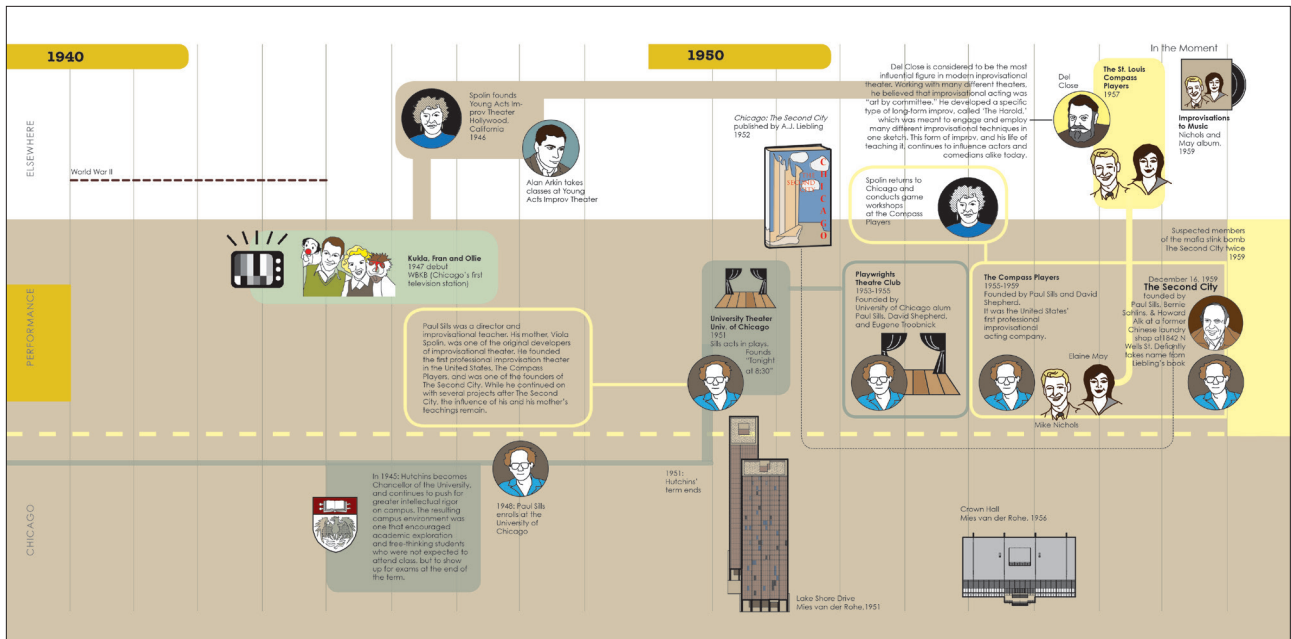
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Cities are funny things, both equation and caprice, they are testaments to, and limit cases of, “big plans,” and nowhere more so than Chicago. Chicago is the Magnificent Mile, the South Side, and the Loop; it is also the ‘Windy City,’ the ‘City of Broad Shoulders,’ and the ‘Second City.’ “Come and show me another city with lifted head singing so proud to be alive and coarse and strong and cunning.” Published one hundred years ago, this line from Carl Sandburg’s seminal poem “Chicago” speaks to the unique character of the city, borne of equal parts optimism and effort. Chicago, like all cities, is a combination of circumstantial facts (the quantities and dispositions of its urban form) and a projective imagination (how it is seen and understood). In Chicago these combinations have been particularly colored by the city’s status as an economic capital; its history is one of money and power, its form one of hyperbolic extrapolation. Whether reversing the flow of the Chicago River in 1900, or raising the mean level of the city by physically lifting buildings six feet in the 1850s, Chicago’s answer to the question of what the city is, has always been, in a manner of speaking, funny (both peculiar and amusing).

To understand this condition, the research outlined here proposes that ‘The Second City’ provides a model to understand Chicago’s urbanity. In this undertaking, we not only explored a specific organization within Chicago, but also used it as a general model for understanding the city’s particular urbanism as one of improvisation, collaboration, and, undeniably, humor.



1

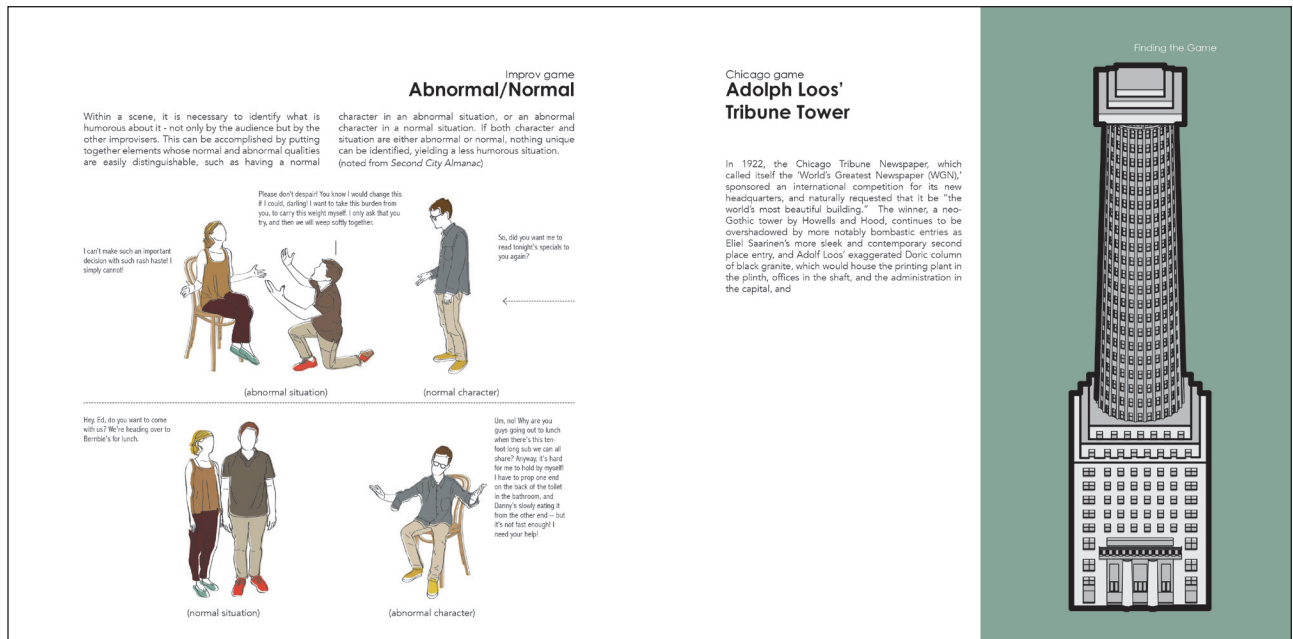
IMPROVISATIONAL HISTORY

Investigating the relationship between Chicago and improvisational comedy (improv, for short) immediately generated a series of methodological questions. How does one posit the relationship between city and performance? A city, in all of its histories and politics, its infrastructures and buildings, while in a constant state of long-term change, seems to the casual observer to be a permanent thing. Then how do we compare the city and its relative permanence to improvisation, a form that seems to exist without script, or setting, which, in fact, seems completely based on impermanence?

As a specific form of theatrical performance, improvisation finds its origins in Chicago, with Viola Spolin at Hull House in the 1930s. There, Spolin developed improvisational games as a version of imaginative and collaborative play to facilitate communication among the children of the immigrant communities who did not share a common language, but did share a common experience, once that could be expressed through the unscripted play-acting of improvisation. This unscripted, open-ended capacity of improvisation also found its commercial use in the revues of Chicago nightlight, with its constant need for new and renewable material that could keep customers in their seats, and also coming back week after week. Freed from the pressure to continually write new material, with improvisation, performers could extend their stage time, keeping the audience amused and buying drinks. Improvisational performance, predicated on openness and connection, developed into a collaborative form in which many individuals work together to make a live, real-time performance. Though it operates on a model of reactions to unplanned prompts with unscripted elaboration, the form is one with specific rules and codes defining a necessary etiquette of behavior that enables all players to work together toward mutually beneficial results.

The Second City comedy troupe (a name defiantly chosen from the title of a derisive 1952 *New Yorker* article about Chicago by A. J. Liebling) evolved from being the first on-going improvisational theater troupe in the United States to a major force in the entertainment industry. It is the starting point for countless comedians, award-winning actors, and directors, with methods that changed

Figure 1: Research Book Timeline, *In the Moment*



2

the nature of comedy from joke-driven standup to scene-based improvisations. Since the 1960s, the Second City has been training a stellar roster of performers and writers, with an extended field of alumni efforts in and beyond television and film. Through multiple efforts exemplified by *The Blues Brothers* (a movie about Chicago made by Second City players), it has projected a vision of Chicago onto the national and international imagination. Second City is an institution that is not only a singular entity in the city but an expanding industry as well, spreading the improv model through the myriad alumni and spin-off improv troupes that have been founded as a result of its influence.

The principles of improvisation are many, and include provocatively useful maxims such as "make accidents work," where, rather than stopping the action because something is not working out as planned, the scene continues, and is even possibly heightened, not unlike the way that Chicago, rather than being brought to its demise by the Great Fire, seized the opportunity to create a newer and greater city. Even the repetition that makes up the city, whether with the blanket of the city grid, or the Merchandise Mart's countless windows, finds a corollary in the "rule of a thousand" where any improv bit will work, if you just repeat it more times than necessary – beyond the audience's natural level of comfort. By this understanding, allying the explicit rules of improv with the implicit rules of urbanism, we unearthed particular resonances of improv with useful design conceptions. "Finding the Game" asks players to let the evolution of the logical order emerge from the work, rather than from a pre-contrived plan, which is helped significantly by being sufficiently "In the Moment," to let the effort at hand be addressed in the fullness of its potential in the present, without concern about where it might be going, knowing only that it is going to go somewhere. Improv's most identifiable motto, "Yes, And..." allows for all input and exigency to be incorporated into the effort. Also known as "don't deny," it puts the emphasis on affirmation and acceptance rather than on rejection. The Second City is not a planning agency, but it could be understood as a model for urbanists, both in its practices (in its inclusive and collaborative approach), and in its products (performances that elucidated the manners and mores for contemporary life, which are, also, humorous).

Figure 2: Research Book excerpt, *Finding the Game*



3

RESEARCH PERFORMANCE

The initial findings seemed fruitful, but overwhelming. With so many connections discovered so quickly, the question became not “are there connections?” but “how can we make sense of them, and how can these connections be studied, proven, and communicated?” Traditional formats of urban analysis seemed unable to accommodate the challenge of simultaneously mapping the logic of improvisational comedy onto the city, so the answer came from an understanding of the historical development of improv itself, in a format that improv had developed to solve an analogous dilemma. Del Close, an early Second City performer and teacher/guru, saw the need for a style of improvisation that could be self-generating, but also coherent. As he described it:

...So, my idea for the improvising company was to find some sort of form, or structure, where we could all play at the same time. I wanted to show that you could create art by committee. Basically, all you need is some traffic patterns and game rules and some kind of image of what it is that you’re going to do, and it turned out to be Harold.

The adoption of the structure allowed by the Harold gives improv the means by which it can develop under a coherent logic. The structure itself is not significant in its “meaning,” but rather, its acts are an arbitrary framing mechanism of the collective effort of the improvisers. In our research, the Harold format provided a conceptual grid within which to invoke, coalesce and communicate the connections we were finding between the city and improvisation. The following outline is of ‘Chicago’s Funny Urbanism,’ the research Harold that emerged, and which follows the standard Harold’s structure organized around three major beats:

The Harold is initiated by the prompt of “Second City,” which lays out the clear association between Chicago and improvisation, through the Second City founders making accidents work with their purposeful claiming of Liebling’s derogatory label. The three scenes of the first beat address the idea of both the city and improv as forms of practice, illustrating how each can be understood as operating in an analogous fashion, with titles taken from the vocabulary of improv. Scene 1, “The Abstract Where,” describes the sense of place that must be invoked by the

Figure 3: Research Book Cover



Figure 4: *Urban Improv Study Center exhibition*

The speculative project of our Third Beat proposes a new kind of institution, theater and workshop, for collaborative work in, and of, the city. The design began through a series of collaborative drawings, incorporating images and diagrams created in support of the other sections of the research. The exhibition of this research Harold was a small-scale test run of this idea, and involved two spaces: an “Urban Improv Study Center” where one could sit, read the research report, and watch the short films about Chicago and improvisation, and a “City Stage” where those so emboldened could try their hand at performing improv.

player, as there is virtually no use of set or props in classic improv performances. This section is a graphic exploration of the set-up of an improv stage, and the street grid of Chicago. The sections “Group Mind” and “Finding the Game” describe the desired idea of consensus and collaboration unfolding in improv and urban practices such as zoning and morphology.

The Harold’s three beats are divided by two games, which are not intended to directly follow the previous material, but to exhibit “Second City” in another way. Our Harold’s games are two films: “Chicago Theater” features video footage taken by the research team around Chicago, with voiceover from an interview with Del Close for a 1987 public access television show. The film is edited to highlight the correlation between the city and Close’s description of the Harold. The second film mirrors the first in that it both repeats and reverses its compositional logic, with footage of improv troupes from around the world, that showcase the international influence of Chicago-bred improv.

The second beat is an elaboration of the first, with attention given to the status of improv as an institution in the city of Chicago. “In the Moment” is a timeline tracking the development of the Second City troupe, and the myriad alumni and spin-off companies, “Object Work” is a material history of the connection between Chicago and improv, and “Yes, and...” shows the diversification of improv as a business model. The Harold’s third and final beat brings back together the information from the previous scenes and games. Our third beat proposes an urban project for a “Center of Improvisational Urbanism” on the now empty site of the first Second City Theater. The ambition in this beat is a synthesis that is as illuminating as it is surprising. As Del Close described:

What an audience laughs at and indeed will cheer at, as you guys have seen, are these moments of discovery, moments of connection, where the ‘art by committee,’ the ‘group brain,’ really does start functioning. We see amazing kinds of communication going on between people...And that’s why the audience is so much on our side...We’re going to do something in the presence of the audience. It’s an indicative thing. We draw them along with us.



5

URBAN PROBLEMS

In making an argument to propose a “Second City Chicago,” we view the most pressing and on-going issue of urban research to be the development of models by which to understand the city; not as a static, known, quality - but rather, as an evolving set of practices that accommodate difference and change.

Urban studies commonly describe the city as a site of problems to be solved and crises to which to react, because cities face daunting challenges, and their issues deserve to be studied and resolved; serious dilemmas deserve adequate reflection and resolution. The city is also the site of something else. From the earliest market villages to the modern megalopolis, people are drawn to cities for something unique, for exchange, communication and opportunity, and recently, theorists of the city have indicated that the opportunity sought is not just economic, but also cultural, with exchanges borne of a need to be with and amidst others, sometimes in the name of fun. In this description, the city and improvisational comedy provide very similar things: intense communication in the service of connections and audiences, and often in the service of fun.

To understand this condition, the research we undertook posits the idea that “The Second City” comedy troupe offers a model to understand Chicago’s urbanity. In this undertaking, we not only explored a specific organization within Chicago, but also used it as a model for describing the city’s particular urbanism as one of improvisation, collaboration, and humor. Our hope is that there are many realizations about Chicago, urbanism, improvisation and humor, and that the connections among them can be mobilized out of the work. These realizations do not operate as facts, but as changes in perception about how to understand the city, for those inside the specialized fields of design (architecture and planning) as well as other audiences that comprise the numerous constituencies and populations that make the city. They provide for this unique opportunity to not only study the city, but to actively engage it; to work with a broad range of audiences and constituencies, to understand the city that is, and to envision the city yet to come.

The city is not a problem, but a (sometimes funny) solution.

Figure 5: “Chicago Theater” film still by Caitlin Sylvain and Isaac Howell

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was made possible by a grant from Alan and Cynthia Berkshire at Taubman College at the University of Michigan.

The project team consisted of Principal Investigators John McMorrough, Julia McMorrough, and Joseph Rosa (Director of the University of Michigan Museum of Art). Research and Production Assistants were Isaac Howell and Caitlin Sylvain.



BEYOND PATRONAGE

