Play: The Spaces, Bodies, and Rules of Games and Public Spaces

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In child psychologist D.W. Winnicott's exploration of play and its connection to creativity and reality, he employs play as critical device for both understanding and appropriating the world around us. Play provides the opportunity to construct a shared reality that is tied to our concrete and social environments, but figures them as instigators of action rather than a given which must be acknowledged and abided.

In this way, playing finds its most explicit expression in games where rules are constructed within a contrived arena to animate space and give purpose to bodies. Yet Winnicott argues that playing is not simply reducible to either games or children as he argues that "creative apperception" is what opens up the world to our making of it.

Dave Hickey offers a similar argument about the potentially liberating power of rules in "The Heresy of Zone Defense". Using the rules of professional basketball as a model for tactical (and exhilarating) action, he argues that rather than prescribe movement, these rules foster improvisational response.

This paper will describe a capstone studio prompted by these questions of space, bodies and rules and their potential implications for thinking about urban public spaces.

INTRODUCTION

> Play: It is an activity which proceeds within certain limits of time and space, in a visible order, according to rules freely accepted, and outside the sphere of necessity or material utility.[1]
>
> —John Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*

The ordering of time and space for human activity is central to definitions of architecture. The body's experience of space and space's support and expression of that bodily activity is fundamental to how we design. And rules, whether explicitly codified in law or informally enforced as social norms, are embedded in the spaces they are designed to govern.

It is perhaps in playing where the relationships between spaces, bodies, and rules are most direct. Rules describe how bodies must act in space. All players must start on this line. The players must advance beyond this line within 10 seconds. The player may only use their hands inside these lines. This is out of bounds. This is the duration of play.

We might assume that these rules suppress play, as if creativity emerged in the absence of limits. Yet the rules of playing don't stifle it, they enable it.

Playing, often written off as a childish activity, continually reappears in critical circles to counter the mechanical, bureaucratic, and political worlds around us. For its lightness and frivolity, playing opens up and exploits loopholes that the "serious" discourses of art and beauty hold at bay because of their popularity and baseness. Architects, urban planners, child psychologists, art critics, and others attribute play a particular capacity to engage and connect people to the physical world through creative adaptation, curiosity, and openness.

Spaces, bodies and rules served as a prompt for a capstone studio where students were asked to explore their relationship to play, architecture, and public spaces. These three elements were initially introduced to provoke questions about the role that play might play as a model for social, cultural, and political life in the city.

PLAY AS CULTURE AND CREATIVITY

Psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott wrote about and used play extensively during the mid 20th in his clinical work. While he worked generally with children it is critical to note how he framed play as a foundation for more comprehensive social and political arenas in adulthood. In "Playing: Its Theoretical Status in the Clinical Situation," he writes, "The place where cultural experience is located is in the potential space between the individual and the environment (originally the object). The same can be said of playing. Cultural experience begins with creative living first manifested as play."[2]

Play serves as both a mediation and negotiation between Winnicott and his child patients as a way to open up that potential space.

For example, The "squiggle" games is used as a way to instigate a conversation with his patients. The rules of the game are simple. Either he or they would begin by making some marks on the paper and then pass it off to the other who would complete the squiggle. The space of the page and the squiggle would constitute a shared reality for the two to explore and discuss. For example, he recounts a story where during one session when a young boy he was working with was drawing a spiraling black line which he took as a sign of his growing loss of a sense of control, he took the pencil, drew

a circle around it and declared it a plate of spaghetti. The boy, in the next session took a cue from Winnicott's plate and upon receiving the doctor's squiggles, drew a box around them and called it art.

Of this kind of interaction, Winnicott would write about the one question which was prohibited: "Did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from without. "[3] That is, is this pure fantasy and lives only within your own mind or was it already there and you simply recognized it.

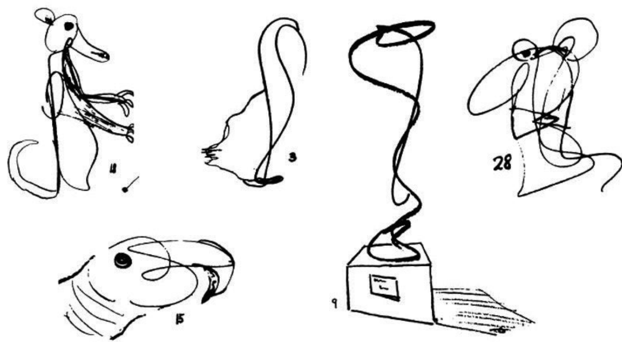

Figure 1: Squiggle game drawings from Winnicottt's work.

Such a question would break the shared reality making. If the child simply conceived of it then it would be a projection or illusion of the child's mind, or conversely, the child is not actually a participant in the conversation.

It is for this reason that he argued in *Playing and Reality* , "[It is] in playing, and perhaps only in playing, the child or adult is free to be creative." Playing produces a shared reality amongst player. For Winnicott, this notion of a shared reality creatively constructed between those that populate the space defines emotional and mental health, not just for children but for adults as well. "It is creative apperception more than anything else that makes the individual feel that life is worth living. Contrasted with this is a relationship to external reality which is one of compliance, the world and its details being recognized but only as something to be fitted in with or demanding adaptation…" Absent one's ability to see the world as something they could participate in, rather than simply conform to, the world demanded only compliance. [4]

The subtext of this is clear for Winnicott. Playing is reality making.

Within the contrived space of the psychoanalyst office, such playing makes sense. But how does this kind of play translate to the everyday spaces of the city? How are those spaces creatively apperceived?

GAMES, LIMITS, AND RULES

To connect these questions to a design studio, games were introduced as a special version of play through a small exegesis titled "Finite and Infinite Games: A vision of life as play and possibility" by James Carse. He begins the book by stating, "1. There are at least two types of games. One could be called finite, the other infinite. A finite game is played for the purpose of winning. An infinite game is played for the purpose of continuing play." He continues, ."3. Therefore, we can speak of finite games as having temporal boundaries – to which, of course, all players must agree. But players must also agree to the establishment of spatial and numerical boundaries as well. That is, the game must be played within a marked area, and with specific players.

For the studio's purposes, finite games fit a more conventional definition of game. According to Carse these finite games exist within a prescribed boundary outside of which the rules change. There are explicit rules, agreed to by players, that coordinate the motivations and actions of play. While the notion that rules are intrinsic to games seems apparent, the capacity for rules to enable creativity needs articulation.

In Dave Hickey's collected writing Air Guitar, he begins the essay "The Heresy of Zone Defense" with a description of one particular play which would become NBA basketball lore. He sees Julius Erving drive to the basket while being defended by Mark Landsberger. As he gets a path and jumps, Kareem Abdul Jabar slides over to double-team and block Erving's shot. In midair, Erving rolls the ball around the hoop, and while out of bounds floats the ball underneath the backboard, inventing what would later be dubbed a reverse layup. He writes.

> In retrospect, however, I am less intrigued by the play itself than by the joy attendant upon Erving's making it, because it was well nigh universal… Even Kareem, after the game, remarked that he would pay to see Doctor J make that play against someone else. Kareem's remark clouds the issue, however, because the play was as much his as it was Erving's, since it was Kareem's perfect defense that made Erving's instantaneous, pluperfect response to it both necessary and possible – thus the joy, because everyone behaved perfectly, eloquently, with mutual respect, and something magic happened…
>
> Consider this for a moment: Julius Erving's play was at once new and fair! The rules, made by people who couldn't begin to imagine Erving's play, made it possible.[6]

He continues by describing how the rules of professional basketball have evolved, prioritizing speed, improvisation, and chance. For example, he points the establishment of the shot clock required a team to move the ball across the court and attempt a shot in a short amount of time, fixing a tempo to the play. However, it is the illegal defense rule,

initially established in 1946, to which he gives the majority of his attention and gives the essay its title.

This rule required that defenders pair off against players rather than simply mark a particular territory. Hickey argues that the effect of this rule was to prioritize momentary, tactical advantages as picks and screens could force a small, fast player to guard a taller, slower player close to the basket, and vice versa. Of course, defensive assignments could be shifted, meaning that defense players would have to be just as nimble and aware as on offense, hence Hickey's declaration that the play that instigated his analysis was as much Kareem's and Dr. J's.

He argues these rules make players freer, fairer, more aware, and more engaged. They forbid them from falling into routinized, repeated, patterns that defenses could predict and the spectators would find boring.

DESIGNING SPACES FOR PLAY

The studio began with the writings of Carse and Hickey and was broken into two projects. The first would follow the framework of Carse's finite game and explore how rules might shape space; the second would expand to his notion of infinite games.

For the first project students began with simple form making exercises with lines, planes, and solids. There was initially no site or scale, simply a 3 by 6 by 12 volume. They then introduced bodies into the spaces to speculate about scale and reflect on how the spaces engendered different forms of play. Some were spaces to run, others to climb, or hide, or explore. Some spaces were too big to be handled alone, so they needed others to help them play. They then selected one strategy and wrote a series of rules for games they imagined children would invent in order to inhabit them. This required them to revisit their space and heighten the specific opportunities outlined in the types of games.

Students were told that the strongest project would not simply fulfill the requirements of one game, but would provide a space where many games could be played simultaneously by many children without interfering with each other. This multiplying and compounding organization of play and spaces led students to think about games that would connect to games and overlap other games in time and space.

One student began with a simple volume and then excised a series of spheres. Sometimes spheres were linked together to form a chain, sometimes to form a large gathering area, other times to pockmark the surfaces. Rather than scale the block into some immense volume, she used the same block and took sections through it, documenting isolated moments and layered these together as paths through space. Rules were not codified, but suggests by the thought and speech balloons, postures of children, and lines of movement.

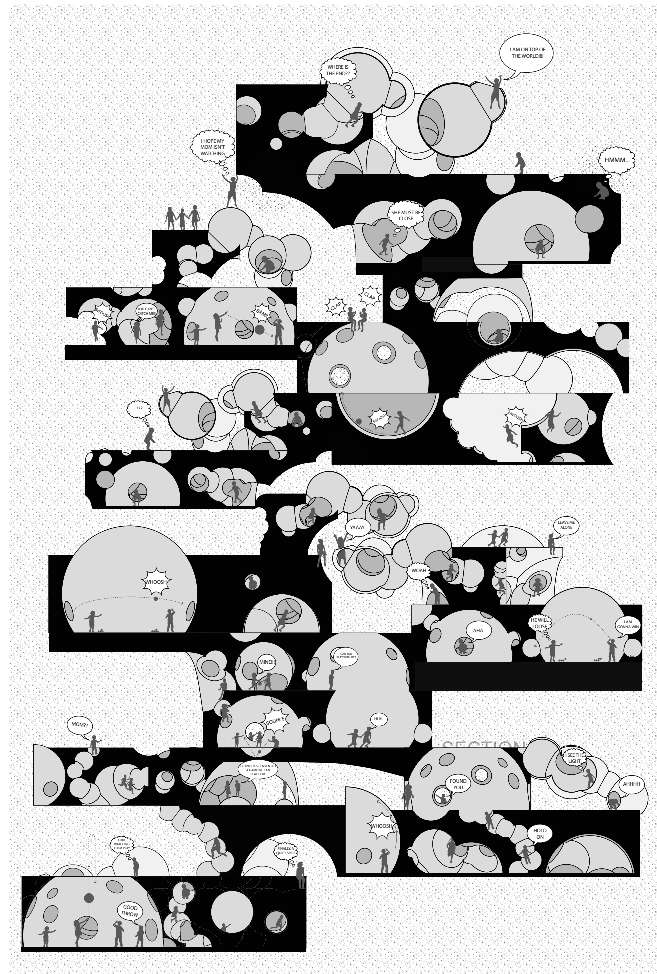

Figure 2: Endless Section, Valerie Frolova.

This three week project set the stage for the longer project, moving from finite to infinite games. In contrast to Carse's finite games, which were discrete, infinite games are situated in the-world where the territories have historic, cultural, and political significance. The relatively singular body type of the child (the subject of the students' first project) would become the multiple bodies of tourists, commuters, residents, weekenders, retirees, with all of their attendant age, gender, and ethnicity. Rules would not only be explicitly codified but would be implied and contingent.

The shift in bodies from singular to plural is significant for a public space. As the body was positioned as the activator of spaces and rules, this plurality could not simply be written off as a difficulty to mitigate, but one that might enable the design to contend with multiple motivations simultaneously. These motivations might not only be incompatible, but potentially at odds.

To serve as a model for the kinds of rules that might govern these kinds of bodies, the students were introduced to

Chantal Mouffe's idea of Agonistic Democracy. In her book "The Democratic Paradox" she argues that the drive towards consent or a mechanical focus on the institutions that govern democracy tend to treat private issues as something out of bounds, rather than something that motivates us. She suggests reframing the categories of us and them:

> A first step in my argumentation is to assert that the friend/enemy opposition is not the only form that antagonism can take and that it can manifest itself in another way. This is why I propose to distinguish between two forms of antagonism, antagonism proper – which takes place between enemies, that is, persons who have no common symbolic space – and what I call 'agonism,' which is a different mode of manifestation of antagonism because it involves a relation not between enemies but between 'adversaries', adversaries being defined in a paradoxical way as 'friendly enemies', that is, persons who are friends because the share a common symbolic space but also enemies because they want to organize this common symbolic space in a different way. [7]

This description prompted students not only because it identifies the productive capacities of pluralism and difference, but it requires that bodies confront each other in place as friendly enemies, or in other words, as players. As a model for urban public space it suggests that many players might occupy the same field though may be playing different games.

The site for the second project was Franklin Square. It is one of the five original squares outlined by William Penn in his initial plan for Philadelphia. While Rittenhouse and Washington have capitalized on their historic significance and Logan Square became the midpoint on the parkway between city hall and the art museum, Franklin has become the forgotten square.

Located at the base of Ben Franklin bridge, the park is separate by off-ramps connecting to both the city grid and the sunken Race-Vine expressway. To the northeast is Northern Liberties, a haven of bars, coffeeshops, art groups. To the southwest is Philadelphia's Chinatown. Directly to the south is the Constitution Center and Independence Hall.

One student began by arguing that the best way to reinvigorate the space was to let a group claim it who would activate it and teach others how to use public space. Using Miffilin Square, colloquially known as Cambodia Park, she investigated how that immigrant community was able to informally take ownership of the park. She suggested the clusters of residences coupled with small institutional and commercial enclaves in the surrounding blocks were capable of placing the park as a nexus between them.

As the Chinatown district (located a block away to the southwest) has become one of the densest neighborhoods

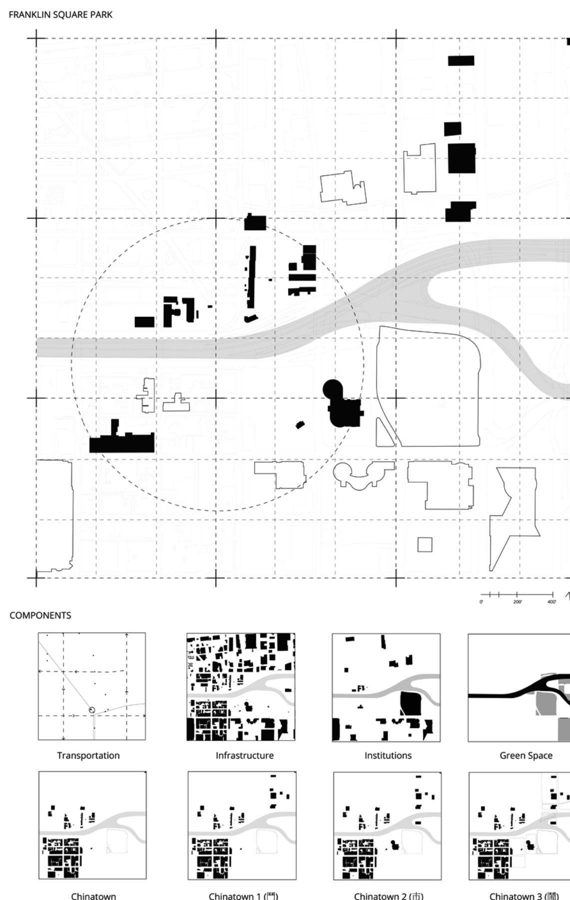

Figure 3: Chinatown Institutions and Incremental Urban Territories, Natalie Lee

in Philadelphia, she suggested giving them the same kind of informal control of the park in the hopes that there continued presence would invite others to make it part of their social fabric. She speculated that few specifically located residential projects and ease of access would allow Chinatown to extend across the crisscrossing infrastructure of the Ben Franklin off-ramp. She employed a grid, showing remarkable similarity to a board game, that allowed her to think of the spaces strategically.

She began by placing a bridge that would connect the existing Chinatown to its new enclave to the North and serve as a gateway from those entering the city from the Ben Franklin Bridge. To anchor that bridge she suggested a set of market spaces that would allow the bridge to connect physically and programmatically to the ground. Finally, she shaped a new entrance from the defunct regional Patco train station to the west, welcoming commuters from New Jersey to the park.

The emphasis on edges help bind the park with the movement of Chinatown residents and commuters. Only a light

Figure 4: Franklin Park, Valerie Frolova..

structure and few programmatic elements shape the park itself in order to emphasize existing zones of use and connect them more visibly.

The same student who used the layered section to explore the play-spaces used a similar strategy to analyze the existing park. She found a number of rules (no cooking, no hawking, etc.) posted in the park that she believed lessened its potential usefulness to the community. She began by selecting some rules to circumvent and identifying zones within the park that could specifically cater to those uses. She then employed three systems (ground cover, screen, and canopy) to demarcate their uses.

While the circular zones established discreet spaces for use, the screens grouped different visual connections between the different programs within and the city beyond. Sometimes these collapsed in perspective to become opaque and other times open to connect both visually and physically. A community center surrounded by a look-out ramp anchored the park along with the historic fountain at the center.

In both of these projects, while individual zones are clearly identifiable in plan, they merge and fall apart as they are experienced in motion. Individual bodies, and groups of bodies, are given spatial devices and either implicit or explicit rules that allow them to territorialize the park. The negotiation of ownership is sparked by this tension and occurs within the shared space of the public realm. The hope that people might play, that they might tacitly understand their participation in the making of this space, drives both these projects to organize different uses and communities in precarious, though sensible ways.

ENDNOTES

1. John Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Boston : Beacon Press, 1950).
2. D.W. Winnicott, “Playing: Its theoretical status in the clinical situation*”The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 49(4), 591-599.
3. D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York : Brunner-Routledge 2002) 12.
4. Ibid, 65.
5. James Carse*, Finite and Infinite Games* (New York : Random House, 1986) 3-5.
6. Dave Hickey, “The Heresy of Zone Defense” *Air Guitar* (Los Angeles : Art Issues Press, 1986) 155-6.
7. Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (Verso : New York, 2000) 13.