

Confetti Urbanism

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In the absence of pre-existing rules, favoring instead the production of atmosphere and experience, the conventional placeholder(s) of disciplinary or systemic protocols are supplanted by qualitative effects that expand received histories or inherited definitions. Perhaps, then, we can think of Candy Land as analogous to self-authorship developed within, across, and atop broader physical arrangements whereby loose, fleeting, and informal organizations affiliate with explicit functional protocols and subtly embedded experiential intentions. In this way, Candy Land is affiliated with confetti – simultaneously immersive yet fleeting, informal yet temporarily specific, and individuated yet collectively social. Furthermore, qualities, in the absence of hard-core rules, are transferrable. This opens conceptual territory for an expanded definition of confetti as both a material and organizational logic and of urbanism as an institutional construct.

CONFETTI URBANISM - OR, A TWO-ACRE CANDY LAND

In the absence of pre-existing rules, the production of atmosphere and experience supplants the conventional placeholder(s) of disciplinary or systemic protocols with qualitative effects that expand inherited definitions. Perhaps, then, we can think of Candy Land as analogous to broader physical arrangements whereby loose, fleeting, and informal organizations affiliate with explicit functions and experiential intentions. In this way, Candy Land associates with confetti – simultaneously immersive yet fleeting, informal yet temporarily specific, and individuated yet collectively social populated with ‘stuff’. Stuff is an unsuspecting source for spatial ordering. As Venturi reminds us, “a valid order accommodates the circumstantial contradictions of a complex reality. It accommodates as well as imposes. It thereby admits control and spontaneity, correctness and ease – improvisation within the whole.”¹ This is certainly true at the scale of institutions, especially for architecture schools that are stuffed with operational materials requisite to educational operations. The spatial politics of such operational materiality is deeply important to the institution, yet there is often the imperative that it be absorbed into the spatial logics of the physical context. These institutional materials include not only desks, lamps, or chairs, but also materials found in re-use depots, facilities management equipment, tool and machine rentals, bike storage, café products, faculty mailboxes, items

at shipping & receiving, NAAB accreditation project storage, trash cans, spaces for leisure and socializing, and so forth. At the scale of an institution, all of this stuff aggregates in myriad ways, often opening conceptual territory for an expanded definition of confetti as both a material and organizational logic as applied to spatial design, which reads as follows:

Confetti *(kuh n-fet-ee)*

Plural noun, singular confetto [kuh n-fet-oh; Italian kawn-fet-taw]

1. Small bits of material, usually colored paper, thrown or dropped from a height to enhance the gaiety of a festive event
2. A large quantity of small materials in which the relative space in-between produces the effect of colorful flatness that is both literal and abstract
3. Temporary material “dropping’s” encouraging an alternative image of an existing public, institutional, or civic landscape by partially obscuring the existing ground
4. A simultaneously retrospective and projective event-based physical accumulation of material on a ground where more complex assemblies & assemblages have mingled, are mingling, and will mingle again
5. A non-hierarchical, material composition of a non-patterned, scattered arrangement giving the appearance of fullness
6. Accommodates and enrolls new material additions along with the diversity of existing materials, objects, subjects, and “things”
7. Encourages unforeseen affiliations between distinct entities within an otherwise normative arrangement or proximity of known things

When applied to an urban landscape doubling as a student work yard for the production of art, we find that confetti becomes an urban experience unifying disparate and unrelatable obligations or materials.

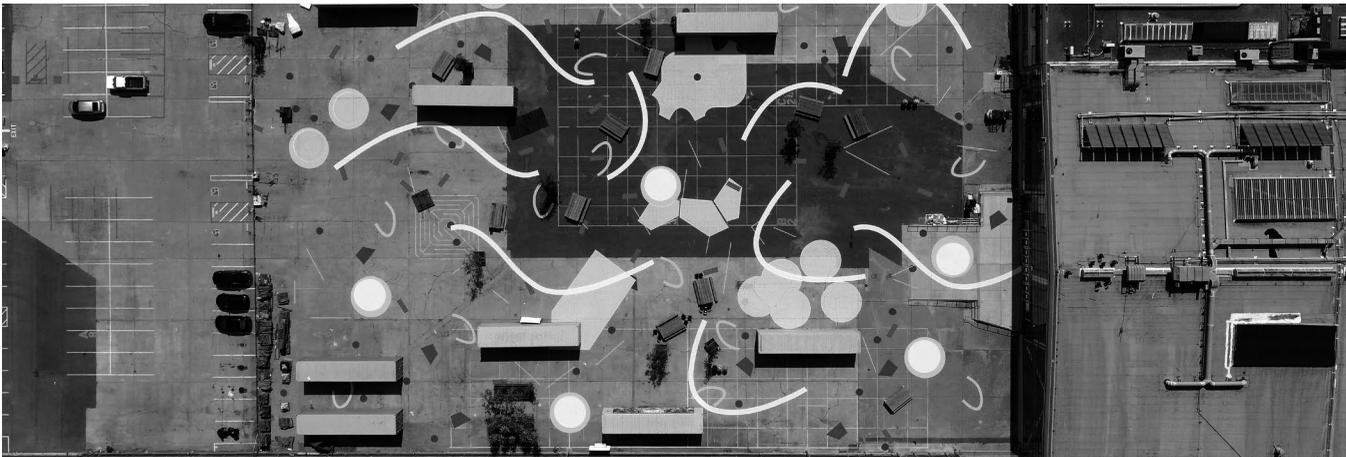


Figure 1: Aerial View of Confetti Urbanism



Figure 2: Kids playing

At California College of the Arts, a 73,470 square foot Back Lot behind the college is where much of this institutional stuff is housed. In September 2017 this almost 2 acre Back Lot was host to an exhibition curated by then CCA Architecture Dean Jonathan Massey showcasing full scale architectural prototypes with the roll of exhibition designer played by yours truly. This was an atypical site for an exhibition design. At once display venue, work yard, and social space, the Back Lot is equipped with at the time ten, (now 12) 40'-0" shipping containers for storage, a material reuse depot, a facilities management outpost, a welding and casting station, forklifts, an Airstream trailer, picnic tables, benches, umbrellas, portable basketball hoops, trees in planter boxes, trash cans, a working garden, hammocks, and random debris from

art-making processes. Rather than impose a singular order, this operational and social infrastructure was understood in the manner of confetti; dispersed, informal, and both accommodating and imposing as an organizational strategy with a scattered material quality. Scattering, as confetti does, easily accommodates material additions and subtractions to a pre-existing diversity of materials and subjects without disrupting the perceptions or operations of order. As a virtue of scattering, confetti sponsors circumstantial improvisations within an otherwise known landscape while giving an appearance of fullness and continuity to large areas. Scattering the Back Lot components across the pavement as though they were tossed confetti created a loose yet carefully studied frame for the prototypes on display while painted super-graphic confetti discs, ribbons, bands, and shapes cued visitors to move, stand, and look in particular ways. Subtle tensions and alignments among Back Lot elements draw out the nuances in the five exhibited projects, animating the Back Lot site through a pervasive back-and-forth between autonomy and engagement, environmental effects and graphic image, and function and festivity engaged through individual experiences, ages, and social encounters.

Just as Candyland affiliates with confetti and therefore opens the possibility for an expanded definition of confetti as an organizational medium, so too does it construct a form of urbanism. This is not urbanism in the broad, sweeping sense of a totalizing city, but rather a discrete site with legible boundaries nested within a larger context. However, the

discreteness of the boundary intensifies the space it binds it creates its own urbanism where hierarchies, rules, and exchanges occur in their own world. In the case of the CCA Back Lot the discrete boundary of the site operates similarly, bracketing out certain urban situations of the broader city, such as homelessness, while intensifying certain institutional or educational situations such as socializing and making. Thus, urbanism is a term describing the institutional politics, culture, sociability, and educational operations of CCA rather



Figure 3: Social event. Photo by Mike Campos

than the urban context of San Francisco itself. This urbanism is not picturesque. Though it is spatially ambient and immersive, it is best comprehended in plan view. In fact, it is a kind of urbanism that most literally occupies and activates the plan drawing, though it accommodates erasures, additions, or alterations to the 1:1 drawing as the terms of its urbanism are edited from both top-down (the institution) and bottom-up (the student body).

Shortly after Confetti Urbanism opened it spurred a range of unanticipated uses and situations. During the design process an emphasis was placed on ensuring the life of the school as it pertains to the Back Lot would be maintained and not disrupt the existing social and operational aspects of the site. While this remained true after complete, the confetti revealed itself as a spatial and graphic participant in the educational and social context of the school in ways that were not intended, but which were certainly welcome. Painting studios held class on the Back Lot and students were asked to paint the site...paintings of a painting, really. Children played on the confetti, riding scooters along the splines or hopping from shape to shape. Students moved the basketball hoops into positions near confetti to play H-O-R-S-E by shooting from various confetti pieces. Instructors held class discussions in the large circles of the confetti, treating them like a spatial

enclosure. Some students chose to sit in the red rectangles to read a book rather than sit at table or hammock. This is where the Candyland analogy ends. Whereas in Candyland the path is fixed, only taking participants past the pleasures of the scene but never affording them agency to modify, edit, or appropriate it, Confetti Urbanism does the opposite. The spontaneity sparked by the confetti confirms that there is not a set path one must follow in order to engage the scene, but rather that the scene itself can be appropriated, manipulated, and activated in unsuspecting ways. In fact, while the original ambition was to merely strengthen or highlight the social, cultural, and institutional life of the Back Lot, Confetti Urbanism produced new forms of engagement, novel experiences, and alternative understandings for pairing logistical imperatives with informal organizations.

Confetti Urbanism leverages the institutional and operational stuff of the college to become the scattered materials of an institutional urban landscape underscored by a confetti super-graphic that accommodates social, eventful, operational, and institutional obligations. While setting the stage for the five prototypes, Confetti Urbanism merges work yard with play space, gallery with social scene, storage with festivity, facility management with educational environment, and aimless wandering with specific orientations. In so doing,



Figure 4: Confetti Urbanism aerial view. Photo by Mike Campos

Confetti Urbanism offers alternative organizational and aesthetic principles that can be co-opted and understood through varied other contexts, be they urban or otherwise. What Confetti Urbanism suggests more broadly is that loose, fleeting, and informal organizations can also be precise in their intent without forgoing spontaneity, individuality, and opportunities for appropriation.

ENDNOTE

1. Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction*. Chapter 6: *Accommodation and the Limitations of Order: The Conventional Element*. Page 41. The Museum of Modern Art, New York in association with the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, Chicago. 1966.