

Lessons from Polo: Creatures in the Expanded Athletic Field

JOSEPH ALTSHULER

School of the Art Institute of Chicago
Illinois Institute of Technology

As a world within a world, sports fields demand that occupants alter their makeup—both cognitively and cosmetically—in order to make meaning and pleasure out of its constructed territories and team affiliations. This paper explores how those territories and “teams” might engage augmented interactions with context, rules, otherness, and a relationship to the ground. In the process, we might understand ourselves, nonhuman people, and built things as companion creatures participating in a shared game brimming with treats.

“Architecture animalizes space by maintaining its distinctness. It acts as animal, as repository of the classifiable. Architecture thus makes culture much as the animal makes it—by filling in, with classifiable differences, the place of the inert, the speechless. It gives meaningful materiality to the speechless, which might also be a kind of repression of the ‘life’ of a material in order to give it certain form.”¹

—Catherine Ingraham, *Architecture and the Burdens of Linearity*

“Myth-images of half-human beasts like the mermaid and the minotaur express an old fundamental, very slowly clarifying communal insight: that our species’ nature is internally inconsistent; that our continuities with, and our differences from, the earth’s other animals are mysterious and profound; and that in these continuities, and these differences, lie both our sense of strangeness on earth and the possible key to a way of feeling at home here.”²

—Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*

FOREWORD

This paper is part of larger body of design research for a forthcoming book called *Creatures are Stirring: Toward an Animate Architecture*. The book explores zoomorphism and animism in contemporary architectural practice and argues that animate architectural form is endowed with a subjectivity of its own, positioning architectural objects as companions that cohabit our urban and rural landscapes and empowering human and nonhuman subjects alike.

JULIA SEDLOCK

School of the Art Institute of Chicago
Illinois Institute of Technology

The book extracts examples from the discipline of architecture, as well as cultural references at-large to illustrate instances where a creaturely human subjecthood is enacted through augmented interaction with rules, context, and otherness. While the work is motivated by an appreciation for formal expressions of creaturely character, its creature-oriented ontology suggests that it is not sufficient to perceive a zoomorphic building as a companion being with its own subjectivity, but that we might also adjust the perception of our own human personhood to acknowledge all that we have in common with these creature companions. This adjustment levels the planetary playing field occupied by ourselves, nonhuman people, and built things as companion creatures inhabiting a shared and expanded environment.

As one of the oldest known *team* sports in the world, the game of polo is in a unique position to illustrate a real world (yet artificial, and certainly anthropocentric) instantiation of this shared playing field. While there are many sport types that involve animals, including racing, fighting, and hunting, polo is unique in its team-based gameplay and its greater intensity of interaction and cooperation between human and nonhuman persons. While neither polo, nor a disciplinary practice of architecture can ever claim to represent anything other than a human perspective, it can augment that perspective through an amplification of architecture’s inherent qualities. By providing our shelter and accommodating a range of everyday needs and “creature comforts,” architecture activates and engages the basic creaturely qualities of being human and inhabiting the world as humans. In other words, architecture inherently enacts a creaturely human subjecthood—a spatial identity contingent on perception, sense receptors, and interpersonal relationships with beings and things. By challenging our everyday understanding of these creaturely connections to space, the game of Polo may help us imagine other possibilities for our creaturely human existence.

Here we extract lessons from polo that will guide our analysis of three selected case studies that demonstrate how architecture, like polo, can amplify the creaturely augmentation of the human experience through planimetric strategies that reorient our relationship to ground, in much the same way that airborne, aquatic, or sticky footed creatures inhabit the



Figure 1: Pool Party (2016). The project elevates nine found swimming pool basins above the open triangular courtyard at MoMA PS1, reenacting the viewpoint of a planimetric worm’s eye drawing and casting the human occupants into the role of virtual earthworms. Image courtesy of Bureau Spectacular.

world. All three projects use plan to prompt us to suspend our human disbelief and to enter into the fictional world of the creature.

AUGMENTING RULES: PLAN AS SIMULATOR

Rules are an abstraction of lived experience that facilitate interaction in a shared environment, or even simulate the lived experience of another being. In the case of polo, the primary rules dictate how players may move on the field in relation to one another. The “line of the ball” is an imaginary line that represents a “right of way” for the last player who hit the ball, and restricts movement across the area in order to prevent collision. As a safety precaution that responds to the strength, speed, and visual restrictions of the horse, these rules impose artificial constraints on human players that change their perception of the field and other players on it.

While the human and the horse each maintain their distinct species-specific subjectivities and worldviews, the human-horse polo player effectively becomes a *composite creature* where the two bodies operate in tandem—a new creature with its own individuality and agency. The humanly “organs” of the new polo creature privilege vision and direction, while the horsely “organs” privilege touch and feeling. The human rider’s broad range of binocular vision expands the pony’s separate left and right fields of vision. The pony provides high

speed locomotion and spatial intuition that the human body cannot perform. And as opposed to pulling dramatically on the reins to constrict the horse’s posture, the skilled polo player subtly leans and shifts their mounted body to haptically signal commands and direction to the running pony.

Bureau Spectacular’s *Pool Party* elevates nine found swimming pool basins above the open triangular courtyard at MoMA PS1. In effect, the project reenacts the viewpoint of a planimetric worm’s eye drawing, casting the human occupants into the role of virtual earthworms, wriggling their way through the invisible substratum of simulated soil. The high perimeter concrete walls of the PS1 courtyard reinforce the fiction that the audience is exploring a subterranean world.

The simulation of a worm’s eye view reveals that the assumption of human uprightnes defines plan as opposed to section. For a creature with sticky feet or locomotors like earthworms, the orientation of plan seamlessly transitions into section and vice versa, with little regard for gravity. The project privileges cognition over experience, re-orientating the spatial qualities that we typically associate with section (the eye-level perception of simultaneous spaces) into the gravity of plan. The figural profiles of the swimming pools is delineated in plan, but if you swim according to a conventional stroke technique in a pool, the body is re-oriented such that the planimetric shape of the pool is temporarily registered as “section” relative to the horizontal orientation of the swimmer. As a result, the pools provide an instructional catalyst for transposing occupational spatial qualities that we associate with section into the organizationally instrumental potentials of floor plan.



Figure 2: New Zocalo (2016). The project transposes fragments of Augustus Woodward's masterplan for Detroit into a colorful architectural plan for a contemporary cultural complex set upon a large figural plinth. Image courtesy of Pita & Bloom.

AUGMENTING CONTEXT: PLAN AS TRANSLATOR

Context is often a matter of interpretation or re-interpretation. Context may be used as an excuse to justify repetition of the past, but it may also be used as the raw material for a new future condition—an opportunity to re-present a known condition with the intent to produce alternative outcomes. Sam Jacob's obsession with the football pitch (and his practice of redrawing it) as an abstracted vestige of medieval village rivalries is one such instance where context is re-drawn in a playful reconsideration of cultural conventions that define one of the world's favorite pastimes.³

Similarly, an architectural reconsideration of polo for its interspecies dynamics permits us to simultaneously acknowledge and then re-contextualize polo's historic roots in violence and warfare as training for the elite cavalry units of the Persian Empire, and later with its colonial appropriation by British imperialists in India. Evidence of its fluid and adaptable nature is not only its position as oldest recorded team sport, but also the myriad nonhuman creatures with which it can be played—a broad range of other biological and mechanical creatures, including elephants, yaks, and bicycles. Through this process of recontextualization, we arrive at a contemporary condition where bikes can be read as creaturely companions, reframing an age old sport in today's urban reality.

Pita & Bloom's *New Zocalo* transposes Augustus Woodward's masterplan for Detroit into a colorful architectural plan for

a contemporary cultural complex set upon a large figural plinth. *New Zocalo* challenges the conventional construction of human subjectivity by offering something akin to a bird's eye view. A bird's eye view is closest to true plan with its vantage point from the sky. However, a bird also experiences a continuously shifting perspective as it takes off from ground to sky, transitions from vertical to horizontal motion, and then returns to ground or to perch in a treetop or a roof. In this way, its relationships to context is always changing—at one moment a building's elevation looms above, at another moment the building's roof is ground, or the elevation drifts by alongside as it flies down the street. The sampled urban fragments of *New Zocalo* build an immersive experience that reproduces this alternative construction of the city. Elevation is projected onto ground, ground is projected onto elevation; solid figural extrusions bleed into transparent figural frame structures. Ground is layered upon ground. In effect, this augmentation of context constructs it anew.

By physically treading on these familiar fragments planimetrically (as opposed to viewing them elevationally in an exhibit display), the context becomes experiential rather than interpretative. The fragments cannot be readily dissected, classified, or analyzed, but as a series of overlapping ground figures, they become a living diagram suggesting other ways to occupy the ground. In this sense, the project operates like a full-scale occupiable map of a fictional cityscape. As opposed to a GPS that directs you along a specific path to reach a fixed endpoint, this map exposes the construction and logic of possible pathways to discover new and open-ended routes, while revealing that the urban ground itself (a plinth after all!) is a fabrication of the imagination.

AUGMENTING OTHERNESS: PLAN AS NARRATOR

Otherness is a fiction used to define many harmful exclusionary practices that keep us separate and distant from those beings that are deemed different than (and therefore inferior to) ourselves. On one hand, the spectacle of the polo grounds is infused with cultural practices that maintain such an existing order: the fancy dress and feathered hats of a well-groomed audience make for a festive and playful atmosphere, but also serve to reinforce the neatly compartmentalized worlds of spectators in the stands in opposition to the composite creatures on the field (not to mention the unrepresented hoi polloi outside).

On the other hand, there is a moment in the game where this boundary comes down and a glimpse into another world is made possible during the stomping of the divots at half-time. In this ritual of unknown origin, human spectators jump the fence and take to the field to turn over and smooth out clods of dirt that have been churned up by the horses hooves during the first half. The practice serves a practical purpose of protecting players and horses from tripping hazards and keeping a smooth surface for the travel of the ball. However,

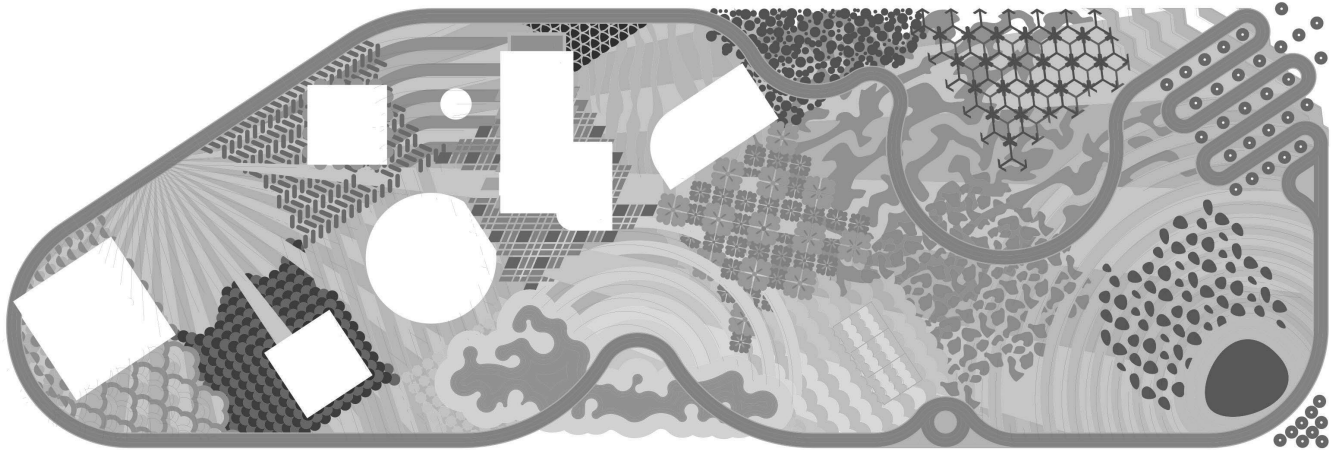


Figure 3: Collider Activity Center (2013). The project for a recreation campus circumscribes its site with a three-quarter kilometer figural pedestrian track that collects multiple zones of activity into a sprawling masterplan. As the headquarters for a rock climbing company, the entire project serves as a billboard for and demonstration of alternative forms of human engagement with surfaces of ground, whether they be horizontal, vertical or somewhere in between. Image courtesy of Design With Company.

it also turns the spectacle from one of restrained refinement to a playful display of surreal absurdity by placing well-heeled ladies and gentleman in a muddy pit that is typically the domain of horses.

Three times longer than an American football field, the overwhelming scale of the polo field is most apparent when standing upon it, and while there, it is impossible to avoid the exhilaration and terror of how it would feel to remain standing in that spot while the game is in play. One is refreshingly aware of one's own human, nay creaturely, vulnerability when stomping in the footprints of these fierce and formidable steeds. Whether friend or foe, it is clear that it is best to stay out of their way.

Design With Company's proposal for the *Collider* recreation campus collects multiple figural buildings and zones of activity into a vast and sprawling masterplan. Even the most straightforward inhabitation of the ground plane is translated into a locomotive adventure that is narrated by the plan drawing, specifically the pedestrian track that loops its way around the entire site. On one end of the site, the track rises above the ground as an elevated walkway while on the other end, it twists and meanders along labyrinthine coils at grade. For a pedestrian walking or jogging on the track, the experience of moving along a sequence of sweeping radial curves, oblique straightaways, and winding slalom produced by the coiled "trail gauntlet" provides an ever changing perspective and relationship to the ground, prompting bodies and buildings to cohabitate within the campus loop.

As formal creatures in their own right, the buildings' spacing and orientation in relationship to one another is not just a matter of planimetric organization, but of planimetric storytelling. The site plan that fixes the footprints of these

creatures to the ground also determines who will face each other and at what proximity; it suggests who are friends and who are "others." These relationships are determined by both the fixed location of the structures, but also the constantly changing location and perspective of the viewer. As a human cohabitant moves around the figural track, their view of the creature cluster is always shifting—at moments brushing up against the underbelly or seeing a pink head peeking out from behind the massive grey rhino-like body to spy on you. Or rounding another corner to see that the other side of the pink head is too preoccupied to spy on you because she's kissing



Figure 4: Collider Activity Center (2013). Image courtesy of Design With Company.

the jolly green-peaked gryphon. While on the far side of the track, you are no longer a companion to the crew, but rather an observing spectator, watching as these characters move together and then apart, like the fickle love stories of a tawdry telenovela or the back-and-forth scrimmage of a polo match.

IN CLOSING

Candyland⁴ is a gameboard populated with a host of subjectivities and vital matter: gesticulating plum trees, humanoids with peppermint appendages, bats that feed on long strands of red licorice, and a vibrantly viscous pool of erupting molasses. Yet its game pieces, as placeholders for human subjectivity, are tethered to a singular pathway from which they may never stray, and which denies direct experience or perception of these diversely enticing sugary landscapes. While Candyland's graphic representation of another possible world is seductive, its potential is stymied by the alienation of its anthropocentric worldview, where humans are pre-determined winners based on the initial privileged shuffling of a hierarchical "deck" of species and subjectivities.

While it is easy to dismiss the vibrantly illustrated (albeit inaccessible) creatures and treats of Candyland as mere frivolity, perhaps we need to more seriously leverage frivolity itself. The worldview that elevates animism above mere frivolity, also elevates frivolity as a core value that defines an ethic for inhabiting the planet with extravagant playfulness, smashing the fearful righteousness inherent to "grown-up" behavior. Access to Candyland's broader nonhuman territories and occupants requires us to re-train the spatial and ontological cognition of how we see and understand the world, to get off the singular path, and to share space with the creature-like candies and candy-eating creatures. Mounting a polo pony (literally or figuratively) to play the game as a composite creature may help empower us to take the initial leap away from an anthropocentric worldview.

ENDNOTES

1. Catherine Ingraham, *Architecture and the Burdens of Linearity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).
2. Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (New York: Other Press, 1999).
3. Sam Jacob, "Folk Football: Landscape, Space and Abstraction." *Strange Harvest* (blog). February 5, 2008. http://www.strangeharvest.com/mt/archive/the_harvest/folk_football_landsc.php
4. This paper was originally presented as a presentation as part of "CANDY LAND (scape)," a session at the ACSA 2018 Fall Conference, moderated and "disrupted" by Antonio Torres. From the original prompt, Candyland is "a colorful low stakes game for all ages. There is no strategy, just a path with tasty treats and fun along the way. It is more interested in creating an alternative world and atmosphere than it is in rules. The simplicity belies a cruel reality: winners are pre-determined through the initial shuffle of the deck. Need architecture concern itself with clearly defined strategies? Are rules and fun equally important? Can architecture build worlds? What kinds can and should it create?"