

# Precarious Playgrounds

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In his book, 'Playing and Reality,' child psychologist D.H. Winnicott proposes that an abstract playground exists between two people in a relationship. This 'potential space,' as he calls it, hovers between the inner worlds of an individual's mind, which are private and subjective, and the external reality that we occupy together, in which observation and experience can be shared. Part of the game is to test our inner world—our ideas, thoughts, hopes and dreams—in and against reality.<sup>1</sup>

Winnicott's notion of a potential space, emphasizes the importance of play not only for the developing child, but also for the evolution of society, for it is through play and experimentation that technology and culture proliferate. For artists and designers, the studio is a kind of playground. This 'potential space' facilitates and exercises the imagination through make-believe theoretical frameworks. Having a potential space to play—to test our imaginations in and against reality—is essential for not only for creative practitioners, but for all engaged citizens.

Around 1960 Cedric Price and Joan Little set out to design designed Fun Palace, a performative architectural platform meant for all members of society. In this interactive cultural space, the game was to have fun. It was a place for amusement, experimentation, and discovery; a place to create, explore and learn. Although Fun Palace was never realized, it left us with some important design tactics that have endured. This paper argues for three architectural design strategies used by Price and Little to promote play as a form of creative activity and cultural practice: (1) it must have a changeable form, allowing for improvisational extensions, alterations and interventions. (2) The infrastructure must be exposed, and (3) it must be designed to be temporary. These strategies are highlighted for designers who wish to create inclusive play environments that are adaptable to changing populations.

## INTRODUCTION

The act of playing is an essentially satisfying and pleasurable experience, but it is also full of risk on many levels: physical, psychological and emotional. There is excitement in the danger. Outcomes are uncertain. In this imaginary pretense anything can happen— a leap, a twirl, a gesture— inhibitions fall away, and a sense of freedom, spontaneity and possibility unfold. When we play with others, we risk being misunderstood, the humiliation of defeat, or the embarrassment of undue exposure. But we know we might also find connection

in our exchange, a sympathetic participation in the experience of another, a joining of forces, a feeling that we are not, in fact, as alone or separate as our inner worlds might feel. This is the kind of encounter we hope for— a spontaneous and delightful exchange between two people.

According to Winnicott, the importance of play, both for children and adults, is essential for emotional health and the development of an *authentic self*. The term *potential space* refers to the capacity for spontaneous activity to explore, discover, and pursue interests by engaging with the world. The captivation we feel in such a space is connected not only to our curiosity, but also to our need to differentiate reality from the imagination. This game, as we may call it, begins as one of the very first we learn as children and advances to the highest form of cultural expression, science and technology.

For young children, playing involves the body and the manipulation of objects in space. These objects, known in psychology as the transitional object, begin as a substitution for the mother and become a toy (and/or tool) for practicing interaction with the external world. Winnicott believed that the creation of a transition object is perhaps the first truly creative act of a child. The object is both a symbol for something else (ie. mom) and a tool which can be mastered. As we mature, language and other complex instruments enter the playground too. We play with sounds, colors, words, materials, images and technology. Here, the transitional object can be used to create something real— that exists in the outside world rather than just in the mind.

## STUDIO

Like Winnicott's *potential space*, the studio is a place for improvisation, where ideas (that are abstract and invisible) can be translated into real space/time (that is perceptible and sensual). As ideas take shape in the tangible world, they also take on symbolic meaning, like the transitional object. The value of the studio-as-playground lies in its pretense and potential. It's a place for our imaginations to take off into make-believe worlds as a way to rethink the world we now live in. Unlike the sterile and uniform play structures we see in most playgrounds today, a healthy studio is full of risk and uncertainty. It's a space to test limits, climb high, and swing low. It's a place to build strange and insecure structures, to ride the spinning wheels of an idea, passing it back and forth, all the while trying to determine when it's best to let go or hang on. When it works out, it feels like we've won, all our scrapes, cuts and

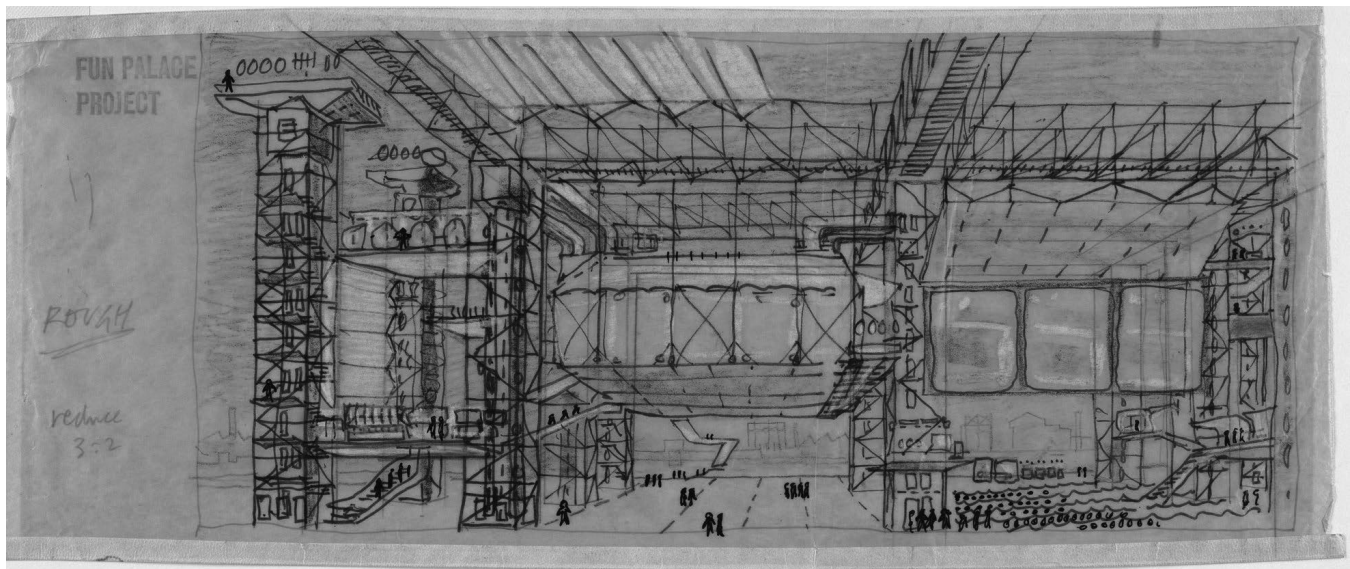


Figure 1: Cedric Price Fun Palace for Joan Littlewood Project, Stratford East, London, England (Perspective) 1959–1961.

bruises are overwhelmed by the sheer exhilaration of making. When it doesn't (which is often) we feel defeat, from which we must learn to accept and keep trying.

In a healthy studio the rules are constantly changing. The rise of post-studio practice and other collaborative models seek to tear down the walls of the traditional studio by expanding the field of art making and other creative activity. Rejecting the confines of a studio has been tremendously liberating for some artists- no more walls, no more isolation, no more frames or spatial limits. Now the studio can be anywhere and everywhere we want it to be. It's a street, a park, a gallery, a laptop, or a museum. But in 1959, when Fun Palace was conceived, walls were the norm.

### THE PRECARIOUS FEATURES OF FUN PALACE

*"it's a kit of parts, not a building"*<sup>2</sup>

One of the most remarkable aspects about Fun Palace was its visionary attempt to integrate multiple spaces (ie park, museum, lab) in such a way that would accommodate continual change. Cedric Price designed Fun Palace in collaboration with Joan Littlewood, a London based theater producer. Their idea was to make a space where visitors would be able to participate in the architecture itself by modifying the walls, floors and platforms according to their wish. This radically unconventional cultural center was dubbed a "cultural launching pad" because users would be "launched" into culture rather than passively entertained by it.<sup>3</sup> Unlike a museum, which had stationary walls with pre-designed programs, Fun Palace had an open program that encouraged spontaneity, hands-on invention and creative expression.

Although Fun Palace was never realized, it had an enduring

influence on many architects including the more radical architects of the 60's and 70's. Archigram's Plug in City and Walking City, for example, promoted the transient urban platform as a way to activate culture in a variety of locations and contexts. One could argue that The Centre Pompidou in Paris, by Rogers, Piano and Franchini, is the most well-known building incorporating Price's concepts, with its exposed infrastructure, stairwells and transparent facade. And then there are the Follies at Parc de la Villette, also in Paris, designed by Bernard Tschumi in 1986. Tschumi's architectural experiments call attention to human interaction with the surrounding environment. Like Fun Palace, their intent is to offer a sense of freedom and opportunity for exploration and discovery. A more recent example (opening in 2019) is The Shed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro. This moveable shell extends on tracks to expand and contract performance and exhibition space. But what distinguishes Fun Palace as a play-space is its precarious nature, its uncertain and unpredictable form which allows for spontaneous activity. The three essential design tactics outlined below, illustrate ways that Fun Palace promotes play, as a form of cultural practice.

### I. CHANGEABILITY

*"mentality is awakened during self-willed activity"*<sup>4</sup>

For a cultural center to be truly interactive, it must have a changeable form, allowing for improvisational extensions, alterations and interventions. Without a changeable form it risks becoming a monument or spectacle, inspiring awe perhaps, but not intervention and agency. Price described Fun Palace as an *anticipatory architecture*.<sup>5</sup> That is, it anticipates and responds to needs and desires of its users. Its changeable nature is characterized by its apparent formlessness. Price was not interested in form or shape of a building, he was



Figure 2: MVRDV: The Future City is Wonderful, 2017. Photo by OSSIP VAN DUIVENBODE.

interested in how it was used and what affect it had. “No one should be interested in the design of bridges” he wrote, rather, “they should be concerned with how to get to the other side.”<sup>6</sup> In Fun Palace, space was mutable and could be altered by moveable screens, warm air screens, transitional platforms, and make-shift stages.

An recent example of this changeability in architecture can be seen in MRDV’s design for The Future City is Wonderful. Built in 2017 for Dutch Design Week, this prototype for a future hotel was made up of nine colorful rooms that can be moved into different configurations. In theory, the shifting shape of the building could adapt to the different needs of families, students or refugees, giving the users agency to create their own spatial configurations.<sup>7</sup> Like Fun Palace, it could take on numerous architectural forms and shapes.

## II. EXPOSED INFRASTRUCTURE

The second condition is that the infrastructure must be exposed, nothing should be intentionally hidden from view. Without an exposed infrastructure the design risks turning into a simulacrum or hyperreal construction laden with candy-sweet fakery. Examples of this would include fun-parks like Disney World or Las Vegas. In Fun Palace there is an authenticity that is revealed by the transparency of its construction. Circulation elements like catwalks, escalators, and “travelators” were made to be visible. Ventilation and enclosures were to hang-out like the exposed organs of a body. Its skeletal anatomy would constantly be adjusting to accommodate diverse utilitarian purposes. In many ways, the exposed infrastructure of Fun Palace, along with its shifting ladders and cranes, behaves almost like a circus, except here, the spectators and architecture itself are considered the players. They make their own acts, their own sideshows, their own rings. It was a “provisional stage to be continuously set and reset, sited and re-sited.”<sup>8</sup>

The concept of a *provisional stage* with exposed scaffolding is evident in Europa Stage, an outdoor set design for a London



Figure 2: MVRDV: The Future City is Wonderful, 2017.

one-day opera. Installed overnight in 2012 by Office S&M, this design relied on portable elements that could be fixed to an exposed framework. During the performance, the elements became players in the opera itself. When the show was over the pieces could morph into benches, and other interactive structures.<sup>9</sup>

## III. IMPERMANENCE

In his 12 design maxims: On Safety Pins and Other Good Designs, Price argued that “The value of permanence must be proven, not merely assumed.”<sup>10</sup> Fun Palace was designed to be short term game, with a life-span of no more than ten years. This is important because the vitality of a play space is dependent on its temporality. Without impermanence it risks either banality, platitude or sheer exhaustion. How many swing sets sit motionless in the yard after their initial novelty wears off? The built-in expendability of a structure contributes to its liveliness, sparking energy and innovation as it embraces new forms and technologies. In Fun Palace, change and growth were privileged over monumentality and durability.

The significance of impermanence can be understood more deeply through Hakim Bey’s concept of *TAZ*. In early 90’s Peter Lamborn Wilson, under the pen name Hakim Bey, published a little book called *The Temporary Autonomous Zone or TAZ*. Lamborn was an anarchist, writer and poet. He envisioned *TAZ* as a “pirate utopia,” a liberated zone for creative and expression and political rebellion. These temporary utopian spaces would appear in the cracks or gaps of dominant power structures. These vacancies in the “Empire” could be geographic, social, cultural, imaginal.<sup>11</sup> The early creators of Burning Man were heavily influenced by *TAZ*, as were many other festival organizers. Regardless of what form *TAZ* may take, it must include an aesthetic of disappearance. While *TAZ* could be planned and designed, the element of spontaneity and happening is crucial. If it doesn’t *happen* it’s considered a failure. It is “the festal aspect of the moment which is uncontrolled, and which adheres in spontaneous self-ordering, however brief.”<sup>12</sup> The face-to-face “flow of forces” was a key element of the *TAZ*. It was in fact the essence of the event, where a group is able



Figure 3: Cedric Price, Fun Palace Lea River Site, Photomontage 1961

to synergize their efforts to realize mutual desires, weather it is a place to eat, dance, talk, rebel, create or celebrate.<sup>13</sup> But regardless of its context, The Temporary Autonomous Zone is not meant to last.

And neither was Fun Palace, which is what makes it so precarious. Its fragile, temporary, and sometimes even dangerous. On the one hand Price called it “a pleasure arcade and an instrument which motivates the typically passive participant into thinking more abstractly,” where “scientific gadgets, new systems” and knowledge could be brought to the street.<sup>14</sup> But on the other hand Littlewood recognized its menacing potential, saying it was “full of games and tests that psychologists and electric engineers now devise for the service of war.”<sup>15</sup> Despite (or perhaps because of) its potential risk or hazard, this precarious playground is the foundation for cultural experience that begins with the *potential space*.

## CONCLUSION

In ‘Playing and Reality’, Winnicott argues that “cultural experience is located 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 in play.”<sup>16</sup> Whether it occurs in a studio, or some other built (or unbuilt) environment, having a potential space to play— to test our imaginations in and against reality— is essential not only for creative practitioners, but for everyone if they are to be active participants in our society. The 60-year old concept of Fun Palace maintains its relevance for designers who wish to create a platform for cultural experience that is inclusive, interactive and rich with vitality.

## ENDNOTES

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