

Objects at Rest Will Stay at Rest Until Acted Upon by an Unbalanced Force

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While cities are massive and complex machines, they can also be understood as the aggregation of many smaller actors, objects, and phenomena. A focus on minor but agile, temporary, and mobile agents of the city may lead to new conclusions about the ability for spaces in the city to develop deeper contextual relevance and catalytic potential, and in turn, a more malleable sense of ownership, identity, and public space. Further, given the era of millennials, this perspective may allow for a reinterpretation of infrastructure to be speedy and accessible - even “Instagrammable” - while also being integral to community outreach and the politics of art and space.

One case study in small, quick, and light infrastructure is a recent mobile pavilion designed by SPORTS for the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara. The paper examines how this project - a collection of architectural objects with changing composition that gets deployed anew in a series of different sites - generates public space and public art programming within various underserved communities of the city through mobility, compactness, and versatility. The project’s mobility allows it to operate in many different neighborhoods in the city (those generally neglected by contemporary art) rather than statically act in one location and context. Compactness allows the project to easily move and perform effortlessly as an intervention and catalyst for small (but many) unanticipated social experiences within the city. The project’s versatility develops a renewed public form and composition as well as identity in each new site.

Through the discussion of the qualities of this project, the paper advocates for minor urban infrastructure that deploys itself flexibly and variably, inviting the (re)discovery and (re)interpretation of the city and landscape anew. In aggregate, these types of urban artifacts, and the activities they instigate, can be understood to produce a robust and nebulous layer to the city - a layer that re-positions the city as a series of small episodic moments rather than grand architectural or infrastructural inventions.

Large, expensive infrastructural endeavors can yield adverse architectural inertia - a condition of limited adaptability and transitionality. While cities are massive and complex machines, they can also be understood as the aggregation of many smaller actors, objects, and phenomena. In fact, small architectural episodes in the city may develop a social and political impact that rivals conventional grand architectural

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or infrastructural inventions. Since scale is critical, perhaps before considering the small, we should look at a theory of bigness. The two don’t necessarily stand in opposition to one another: instead, we might understand the collection of minor, but agile, temporary or mobile architectural agents as constructing a new layer of the city, and therefore operating at a scale comparable to bigness. About bigness, Rem Koolhaas says: “in a landscape of disarray, disassembly, disassociation, disclamation, the attraction of Bigness is its potential to reconstruct the Whole, resurrect the Real, reinvent the collective, reclaim maximum possibility.”¹ One could then argue that an alternate version of bigness is actually a *big* theory of *smallness*. Projects that trade on certain principles of this notion, like Runaway, the recent pavilion SPORTS designed and built for the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara (MCASB), may lead to new conclusions about the ability for spaces in the city to develop deeper contextual relevance and catalytic potential, and in turn, a more malleable sense of ownership, identity, and public space.

Yona Friedman’s theory of mobile architecture, conceived in 1950s, proposes a strategy through which small projects might develop their large-scale impact. Friedman’s theory advocates for a flexible and open architecture that users can adapt “as well as you can move a chair.”² Large buildings and infrastructural projects lack this flexibility and mobility, but small projects can leverage these ideas to impact more of the city (and more of the community of that city) than could otherwise be done. Further, given that Runaway was developed as an extension of a museum, Yona Friedman’s Street Museum project has been interesting to consider, relative to community forms the museum can take. Anna Daneri describes the project as “literally a museum in the street, a museum without walls that sets out to hold a dialogue with the community in which it is inserted offering – in Friedman’s words – “a screen to exteriorize the emotional content of people’s selves.”” Friedman muses that “a whole Street Museum doesn’t necessarily need to be disposed in one concentrated area, but can be displaced within a same street, a district, or even in the whole city.”³

RUNAWAY

As a tourist destination and location steeped in California Mission Style architecture and culture, Santa Barbara, California is a highly curated and determined environment. In 2016, the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara developed an initiative titled “takepart | makeart: Arte para



Figure 1: Runaway by SPORTS at Stearn's Wharf, Santa Barbara, CA. Photo by Elliot Lowndes

todos". This initiative explores ways to "develop contemporary arts programming that is responsive to and inclusive of Santa Barbara's complex sociocultural context and diverse communities."⁴ While 38% of the Santa Barbara community is Latinx, the museum was critical of the fact that much of this population is neglected by the institutions that develop art experiences and programming within the city, and they wanted to try to change that. To create a central platform for takepart | makeart: arte para todos, MCASB hosted an architectural competition to commission the design and construction of a contemporary public art pavilion – that had to move around the city to a number of different sites. Easily movable, inexpensive (\$50,000 budget), but yet super impactful. SPORTS' winning submission – called *Runaway* – is a vibrantly-colored, modular pavilion which served as a central meeting point and information hub for takepart | makeart: arte para todos.

Runaway is designed as a piece of mobile architectural infrastructure, and serves as an aesthetic catalyst that invites communities to view and interact in unexpected ways with their surroundings. As a response to the brief of the competition pavilion, we were interested in how the project - that would get deployed anew in a series of different sites around Santa Barbara - could generate public space and public art

programming within various under served communities through three main techniques: 1) mobility, 2) compactness and 3) versatility. The project's mobility allows it to operate in many different neighborhoods in the city (those generally neglected by contemporary art) rather than statically act in one location and context. Compactness allows the project to easily move and perform effortlessly as an intervention and catalyst for small (but many) unanticipated social experiences within the city. The project's versatility develops a renewed public form and composition as well as identity in each new site.

The project is comprised of three objects with simple self-similar geometries that have a number of possible orientations. Depending on position, each matrix object can act as something a bit different. Sometimes a shade structure, a barrier, a loungescape, a bench or performance stage, or simply temporary landmark. During its year and a half long life span so far in Santa Barbara the project has moved to 8 different sites, each manifesting a unique composition of the three matrix objects. As the pavilion relocated and the contextual contingencies changed (demographics, adjacent activities, etc.) its display and spatial articulation changed, its programming was different, and the visual effects were reinvented – establishing a renewed existence and unique identity within each new community.

During periods of its lifespan, the pavilion also hosted contemporary artists leading participatory arts programming

designed to encourage community members of all ages to engage as co-creators in the arts process. Prior to the project being built, SPORTS envisioned the way in which each artist might engage with the pavilion - their art and products might shift the identity of the project to being specific to the given neighborhood. Desert ArtLAB - a public art group based in California and Colorado that explores connections between ecology, technology, and community - was imagined turning the project into a kind of urban chia pet - growing succulents and other native plants in, around, and through the pavilion's matrices. Given their past work, they were imagined to be working with local Santa Barbara chefs to develop recipes for these plants, as a way to promote ecological restoration, indigenous foodways, and a new understanding of living in dryland environments. Cruz Ortiz, a Texas-based artist, uses print, performance, and film to address issues related to his experiences growing up in a bicultural landscape. In Cruz's case, the pavilion might become a politically-charged collection of urban artifacts skinned in wheat paste murals, or a space to host guerilla AM radio broadcasts. Tanya Aguiñiga - a Mexican-born LA-based artist - uses the craft of fiber arts - as a performative medium to generate dialogues about identity, culture and gender. During Tanya's residence, the collection of pavilion objects might become tied together through soft lumpy weaving, the metal matrices acting as an internal organizing structure for rope, yarn, and other fibers.

Viewing the artists' temporary projects as catalysts for long-term creativity, MCASB partnered with local organizations and other local artists to activate the pavilion as an outdoor platform and gathering space for additional art workshops, performances, and public programs throughout the course of *takepart | makeart*. The museum said "by engaging local residents and community organizations as co-creators in these projects, *takepart | makeart* generated dialogue, connection, action, and exchange around critical social, environmental, and political issues facing Santa Barbara. Open to the public, free to participate, and with bilingual programming in Spanish and English, *takepart | makeart* provided Santa Barbara's diverse communities with new opportunities to explore contemporary art in neighborhoods typically underserved by art programming."⁴ Ultimately acting as an urban exhibition - or perhaps "street museum" to use Friedman's term - the project renews itself and its effects with each move.

The first site was the Santa Barbara pier, which was an interesting site in that it played off the beach image of the city and the main audience was tourists. After two weeks at the pier, the pavilion moved to a number of different locations with different types of users and contingencies. Some of these conditions were: a low-income residential community in Isla Vista (near UCSB), a local elementary school on the Westside, and urban plaza downtown, a recreational park within the city, among others.



Figure 2: Runaway by SPORTS at Stearn's Wharf, Santa Barbara, CA. Photo by SPORTS

The eight sites to which the pavilion has traveled so far are each under different and varying governing bodies - building & safety, obviously, but also coastal commission, parks & rec, harbor patrol, City of Santa Barbara, City of Buellton, City of Goleta, among others. Due in part to the momentum of Santa Barbara's top down curation of its built environment, there are almost no public art works nor pavilions in the city (temporary nor permanent), and they did not have a process for which a temporary project like this would make its way through permitting. In fact, the city had to create a new, bespoke form to permit the initial install on the pier at Stearn's Wharf.

There is a kind of theatricality of urban and public space that comes from the mobility and rearrangement at each site, and a disobedience toward accepted dominant spatial and social practices within the city. Given the movement of the project, each new site is a sincere experiment - what happens when we put it here? What happens when we put it over there? In some sites a friction develops between the existing behaviors of a given site, and the new uses catalyzed by the pavilion. The location of the pier site is typically used as a fishing spot by locals (primarily working-class, middle-aged men) at sunrise, but after the pavilion arrived that space was also shared by a local yoga studio leading a sunrise yoga class (mostly college student clients), dog walkers, and tourists (families). Though we hope these urban interruptions are productive in places where daily activities are routine and regimented, it doesn't always work.



Figure 3: Runaway by SPORTS at FERIA DE LA TIERRA with Desert Art Lab, Harding Elementary School, Santa Barbara, CA. Photo by Brett Bollier.

The phenomena of how the project actually lives in each site is particularly interesting to view through social media. While social media often gets a bad rap in contemporary culture - critiqued for its superficial “like”- based value system and its saturation of superfluous information - Runaway was perfectly aligned to leverage this network of communication. Given the transient and nomadic nature of the project, as well as its intentional provocation to be redefined and reinterpreted within different contexts, social media became a crucial extension to the project’s design ambitions. Platforms such as Instagram constructed a broad and shared dialogue within the city about the project and generated a digital public connection between disparate and diverse communities. Through Instagram posts, users were able to discuss the project’s movement, location, and activities as well as provoke new narratives and perspectives. Similarly, since posts are generated from primary users and not the architects, curators, or third-party voices (ex. design blogs), the discussions and images of public space became authored by those on the ground and in the communities. These posts allowed for the public to demonstrate the malleability of engagement and define their local appropriation of the project as it changes in each location, illustrating the latent potential of temporary and mobile urban public spaces.

The inherent spectacle of the project was furthered, too, by how the project was physically transported through the city for each new site installation. Each metal matrix structure was constructed as one piece, and together the three structures fit together on the back trailer sized to fit the maximum freight size allowed by Santa Barbara code. The image here of the three blurry objects on a trailer cruising through the city, or being craned into all the different sites enhanced the awareness of the project within the Santa Barbara community.

Runaway demonstrates how minor urban infrastructure can deploy itself flexibly and variably, inviting the (re)discovery and (re)interpretation of the city and landscape anew while simultaneously creating improvisational public space of greater inclusivity, diversity and identity. In aggregate, these types of “hugely small” urban artifacts, and the activities they instigate, can be understood to produce a robust and nebulous layer to the city - a layer that re-positions the city as a series of small episodic moments rather than grand architectural or infrastructural inventions.

ENDNOTES

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