

## Designing the Unexpected - How to Foster Creative use of Public Space

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We are living the era of the *filter bubble*, where the experience is tailored around the user; in the digital world, autocomplete functions suggest to us what to search, advertisement is customized and directed towards specific target groups/audiences, and algorithms protect our comfort zone and isolate us in our own cultural bubble. Social media platforms suggest to us who to follow and we are followed by people with our very same interests and views, enhancing social, cultural and demographic segregation.

Such characteristics are not limited to the digital world, they are embedded in the physical realm: in our cities, in our public spaces. Over-designed open public spaces favour predetermined spatially defined functions and give little space for socio-cultural mix. Free occupation and creative use of the space is limited if not absent.

There are several negative consequences of such a design and planning approach including spatial segregation of users, minimized potential for the unexpected, and limited risk-taking opportunities - key for kids' self-education process and an outcome of a free spatial experience. Precedents from various cultures and places prove the positive aspects of generating the condition for the 'unexpected', while maintaining a safe and well-functioning public space.

The paper advocates for a less designed and less-functional approach which can create conditions for a more creative experience of the city, enhance its education and recreational potentials, foster diversity and interaction between different groups, and eventually, generate a more exciting urban experience.

### *Experience Tailored Around the User*

Between the vastly different realms in which the life of average western people spent, the virtual world of screens of PCs and smartphones and 'the real world,' a common link exists - the ways we experience these realms. There exists an obsessive search of comfort, silently created around us. If on one hand we have commodities at hands-reach, on the other we are slowly segregated in groups that share similar values, and our experience of things is watered-down into a never-surprising permanent condition.

### *The 'Filter Bubble' and GPS Navigation*

The "filter bubble"<sup>1</sup> (term coined by Eli Pariser) is the result of our web behaviour: different algorithms select information, suggest to us advertisement and indicate contacts to 'follow' based on our previous search history, click- behaviours, contacts, and location. With the aim of generating a

'comfortable' user experience and even more to maximise commercial interaction, the filter bubble isolates social groups in their own intellectual bubble of people who think alike and share the same values and interests – minimizing any discomfort (read encountering diversity) and resulting in group fragmentation. In the digital world "we rarely encounter anything that is outside our comfort zone, we normally engage with people who share our worldview and we often end up simply being sold more stuff things that we already have, all the while making sure that our behaviour fits the image that we want others to have of us. Different search results for different people make for cultural and intellectual isolation."<sup>2</sup>

The importance of mixing, of knowing point of views that differ from ours, is that it embeds within us the crucial cultural value of tolerance and understanding, in addition to expanding the breadth of personal knowledge. In this vein, Bill Gates once stated, "(Technologies such as social media) lets you go off with like-minded people, so you're not mixing and sharing and understanding other points of view ... It's super important. It's turned out to be more of a problem than I, or many others, would have expected."<sup>3</sup>

The GPS-based map systems, perceived as "small and inexpensive, and are increasingly used by sailors, hikers, and other outdoor enthusiast"<sup>4</sup>, besides being a commodity, have dramatically changed the way we perceived the city. Additionally, it has changed urban navigation from an activity centered on social interactions into a tool for social isolation, where users are absorbed by their screens, minimizing unexpected encounters and the experience of discovery. But the obsessive seek of comfort is not an exclusive feature of the virtual world, it is instinctively perused in the real world too, and its expression is multi-fold and complex.

### *Risk and over-regulation*

The perception of risk is a defining element of public space design and maintenance. Society sees public life under the continuous threat of a wide range of risks; governments consequentially enforce restrictive rules for designers and planners whom produce spaces which are monotonous, restrictive, and limited in their capability of generating unexpected conditions which are perceived as risks.

"With respect to perception of the environment, the paradigms of possibilistic thinking and probabilistic thinking formulize two fundamental approaches, namely *risk-aversion* and *risk-awareness*"<sup>5</sup> The common tendency towards risk-aversion transforms every external input into (perceived) threats. Designers are called to respond to a highly-protective approach, a mind-set grounded in paranoia and oriented toward a defense from the 'other' which reduces opportunities of discovery and diminishes the individual capacity of evaluating the real risks of public life.

An overly defensive approach generates more fear, establishing a harmful vicious cycle. Closed-circuit televisions (CCTVs) are densely scattered around the city for the purpose of surveillance. At the same time they communicate an underlying and vague condition of danger. Consequently, users become overly cautious, generating a fearful culture. These safety measures, deployed in the CCTV network and induced by the strict regulations of public space design is resulting in a both a psychological state of fear of the public experience, and in designs which discourage any unexpected situations.

### *Deterministic Design*

A risk-aversion approach is one, but not the only, cause that unfolds into an over-deterministic design approach towards public spaces. Designers and planners often produce public spaces that give very little room to interpretation. They are based on the notion of ‘function’ – where spaces are conceived as containers of predetermined programmatic areas, and each area as an un-ambiguous use and role.

Have you ever wondered in the streets of Barcelona tired of long day walking, and wanted to sit for a bit? Great, if you are alone. The city, rightfully known from its outstanding public spaces, is, on the other hand, full of benches made only for one person, usually gathered in small groups, and spaced to barely allow any interaction and physical contact with others.



Image 1

The rotating feature of those urban elements is the ultimate mockery to sociability.

Such an over-functional approach to the design is particularly visible and strident in playgrounds. These places which are supposed to be the most dedicated to learning and creativity, are instead framed and defined in their usage, leaving very little space for what the play experience should be: spaces for creative use, appropriation and self-organization.

### *Where to Learn*

Play was one of the main themes in Carl Theodor Sorensen career, theorist of the “Junk Playground” concept. Vacant lots filled with debris and leftover construction materials could create, in his opinion, the perfect condition for a form of free play that could generate new, exciting

opportunities which are unconstrained and with high pedagogic values. In-line with the ideas of F. Frobel, R. Steiner and M. Montessori about the importance of independent play and self-education, Sorensen believed that children “should be encouraged to teach themselves and that, above all, they should learn through their own experience”<sup>6</sup>. He illustrates in the “junk playground” that children could learn to manage themselves on their own, and consequently they could experience the joy of creating without being forced to do so.”<sup>6</sup>

It is clear in Sorensen's vision how important it is to leave children the possibility of creating their ludic environment by themselves, providing the conditions to, more or less literally, create their own games by self-organizing and by collaborating with other children for larger games. Such public space empowers individuals as active actors, instead of passive users of space that have to follow predetermined rules and fit with the ‘box’ of a given function.

If in several of Barcelonan public spaces, as well as the public spaces in other cities, the unsociable singular sitting element was moveable, such as in the Tuileries Gardens, it could, in fact, be regarded as a good example. The Parisian garden, located between the Louvre and the Place de la Concorde displays a very different kind of sitting-furniture. The chairs created for Jardin de Luxembourg in 1923 are movable, and while they are an interpretation of the French garden style, they create the possibility of people sitting where they prefer by composing different layouts. Formations can be generated for small or large groups; individuals looking for isolations can stay on their own and the ones willing to sunbathe can orient the chair towards the direction of the sun.



Image 2

In both Jardin de Luxembourg and in Tuileries, sitting becomes an act of space appropriation.

Space appropriation is at the core of the so-called guerrilla urbanism: activists and local communities reclaim neglected or under-exploited public spaces by bottom-up processes involving occupation. Such spaces and means challenge the conventional view of public space, their use and their maintenance. Communities, with their interventions and actions, embody a “mode of city making that is different from the institutionalized notion of urbanism and its association with master-planning and policy making”<sup>7</sup>. This view does, however, suggest the complete identification of the citizens as a substitute of professionals and experts: “Unlike the conventional practice of urban planning, which tends to be dominated by professionals and experts, the instances of insurgent public space suggests the ability of citizen groups and individuals to play a distinctive role in shaping the contemporary urban environment in defiance of the official rules and regulation”<sup>7</sup>; communities, in these scenarios, play a new active role while fulfilling a need for spaces, uses and interactions which are not pre-determine but rather dynamic and ephemeral, capable of adapting to change.

#### *Freedom of Interpretation: Less-Functional Spaces*

An approach in which function is not a prominent driver of design and decision making could be the key to creating exciting spaces capable of being interpreted differently and therefore used by a many different groups varying in age, ethnicity, and class, amongst other socioeconomic characteristics. A mix of demographics leads to spaces of integration, where different actors can ‘colonize’ the space according to their need, their will, and their culture background. The result is a public space that serves as a platform where a multi-layered and diversified society meets.

As opposed to the experience tailored around the user, generated in advance by both the virtual world and the real world, individuals can tailor the space around themselves, freely, with an act of space appropriation. Some less-functional spaces can generate a vibrant city life: this is the case of many Chinese cities, where people use open spaces for a wide range of self-organized group activities. In many Chinese parks, squares, and streets a variety of performances and activities, such as group dancing, tai-chi, and couples playing badminton (just by stretching a string rather than setting up a net), are common. When each activity is complete, the space is left to be freely occupied by other people and other uses.

The tendency of over-designing playgrounds is a rather common condition, visible in the many uncreative play objects which are scattered around cities; many play furniture, besides being unexciting for children, are expensive to the community both in terms of purchase and in terms of maintenance. But do children actually favour such equipment rather than adventure and free interpretation?

An example comes for the “Into the Wild” Playground (designed by: Openfabric, Dmau), where self-standing play equipment has been avoided by creating two different playscapes: an artificial outside and a natural – wild- inside.

The artificial area is characterized by a continuous line pattern that sometimes creates traditional sport fields but, for the remaining surface, also creates a random geometrical pattern. Such patterns become the matrix where children can self-organize their own games, where the lines



Image 3



Image 4

are the base to come up with new rules and actions.

The inside part, kept natural, and defined by selected trees with branches suitable to become construction material, provides users with the needed raw-material to construct and deconstruct structures and objects freely.

A diagonally planted willow tree (rather than upright), climbed by many, is one of the main attraction. That tree symbolizes how children can use the space and enjoy it with no need of predetermined play equipment which, on the contrary, would limit their actions to those defined by the manufacturer and designer.

*The Dysfunctional: A Leap out of the Comfort Zone*

If the less-functional allows one to interpret spaces which are not predefined in their use by a given function, the dysfunctional challenges peoples' understanding of space, and reorganizes the code from which people live in the city. Dysfunctional conditions lead people to question space, instead accepting it uncritically, and forces people to find (creative) solutions as 'answers', finding themselves in a new condition with an intrinsic relationship with surrounding space. As Martin Rein-Cano says "in many cases, public spaces can become overly harmonious, and actually people have a craving for interesting conflict."<sup>8</sup>

The 'Superkilen' public space in Copenhagen, designed by Topotek 1, BIG Architects and Superflex- displays an interesting example in this direction. On site, a bus stop that goes to nowhere is present, in-fact even though the bus shelter is real, there is no public transport line passing and stopping by: it confuses people, leading them to question themselves and ask others about the possibility of taking a bus – interacting, and eventually understanding the trick. The dysfunction, challenges users not to give a public space for granted.



Image 5

Another example comes from "Breedveld Playground" in Amsterdam-north, designed by Openfabric and Dmau. There, two little goals are places in a staggered layout, instead of being in line. Children use them anyway – they are inspired and challenged to find their own way of playing football not in the traditional way. The rules are disrupted and the players have to find and agree on

new ones. In this case, the dysfunctional foster user's self-organisation capacities, communication and teamwork. The unexpected generate a more exciting range of uses.

#### *A New Cultural Approach to Public Space: Manifesto for the Unexpected*

Acknowledging that in both the real and the virtual life, the experience is tailored around the user is the starting point to redefine a new cultural approach to public space. The filter bubble restrains the user, inhibiting any encounters or inputs outside of its comfort zone, isolating groups that share the same background, values and interests in clusters, weakening possibilities of integration.

In the real world, the experience of public spaces is centered around the notion of safety and denied by a deterministic design approach that favour functions over free appropriation of space. Together, they result in the dramatic decrease of engagement with anything 'unexpected'.

#### Manifesto for the Unexpected

##### *Step out of the comfort zone*

Stepping out of the comfort zone is of crucial importance for an exciting urban experience, and to empower citizens as engaged actors, rather than passive users. Furthermore, the importance of it is magnified in playscapes, which should have the pedagogic role of giving children the possibility of 'free play'.

##### *Fight the culture of fear with re-interpreting the notion of risk*

It emerges to be of clear importance to move from a risk-aversion approach to risk-awareness one, both in terms of policies and design, giving agency to individuals, and rebalancing the perception of risk which now tends to fade to anything 'unusual'.

##### *Learn from guerrilla Urbanism while maintaining separate roles*

Learn from guerrilla and absorb the lesson of bottom-ups initiatives transforming them into policies and into design tools, but not by negating the role of the design professionals and policy makers which can intervene in public spaces to create the conditions for civic involvement.

##### *Fight deterministic design: create interpretable spaces*

It is the responsibility of the designer to adopt a new attitude towards public space design, refraining from overdesigning spaces and programming each square meter with functions 'defined-at the table', but rather creating exciting and interpretable spaces. Space for multiples uses and multiple interpretation where the unusual and unexpected are welcome.

##### *Shift from function to performance*

Designing the unexpected is a paradigmatic change that redefines the very meaning of public space: they can be seen as areas to perform, instead of use. Free of occupation instead of



predefined experience will follow. Designers should address performance over function, and policy makers should not see performances as a threat to public life.

A new cultural understanding of public space is possible, one that, while acknowledging the advantages of new technologies and regulations can inherit the legacy of bottom-up processes, creating a new form of space that enables the unexpected, uniquely re-centering the public realm around performance rather than function.

*Note*

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