



# Free Play for Grownups: Towards the Playful City

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ARCH 506  
December 18, 2006

## Introduction

David Canter's tripartite model of place defines a place in terms of its physical attributes, the activity it hosts, and the meanings it holds.<sup>1</sup> Public spaces, normally envisioned as parks and plazas, may vary in the details, but generally share some physical attributes, including seating of some kind (typically benches), some aesthetic or natural elements such as trees, plantings, water features or sculptures, and large (typically empty) open spaces. They can be meaningless corporate foyers, memorials rife with meanings both literal and symbolic, or spaces in between. Typically, however, public spaces welcome only a limited range of activities: walking, jogging, sitting, socializing, and observing others. The occasional festival may inject a bit of temporary chaos into the public sphere, but otherwise parks and plazas tend to be rather staid.

Successful playgrounds, by contrast, are filled with a wide range of activity: running, climbing, yelling, bullying, swinging, sitting, talking, watching, experimenting, learning, and general playing. Today's playgrounds are often uniform in physical attributes, but were not always so; they are certainly easy to recognize on sight, and their meaning (as a place for play) is transparent.

Activity-centric studies of public places are not in short supply. Jan Gehl, in his 1971 work *Life Between Buildings*, identified three classes of activities that take place in public, depending on the physical and environmental conditions of a public space: necessary activities, optional activities, and social activities.<sup>2</sup> William Whyte, who spent years studying use of public plazas in New York City, made elaborate maps of seating patterns, conversational wanderings, and human interactions in public spaces.<sup>3</sup> In general, it seems that observers and theorists of the public realm are content to see them as places intended for social interaction and passive activities. If a place is regularly filled with people, it is deemed a good place. Few questions are raised about

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<sup>1</sup> Groat, lectures

<sup>2</sup> Gehl, 11-16

<sup>3</sup> Whyte

what other functions public spaces could play, in terms of daily life or in terms of human developmental needs.

Theories relating types of play to stages in children's cognitive and emotional development abound; together with a coupling of playground design to the modern art movement, they led to innovative playground designs that encouraged exploration, experimentation and learning.<sup>4</sup> Many playgrounds included malleable materials or dynamic equipment that encouraged meaningful opportunities for discovery. Public space design, on the other hand, has rarely been concerned with developmental needs. Ideas about the restorative power of nature, the need to provide city denizens with sufficient light and air, and the necessity of social and democratic space have all had influence on public space design, but few (if any) designs seem to have been motivated by a desire to provide challenging activities for adults. In general city designers have traditionally overlooked the possibility of adult play.<sup>5</sup>

Is adult play important? Are adults provided sufficient opportunities for legitimate public play in our cities? Ought architects and urban designers take a page from playground designers, and move toward encouraging and legitimizing public play? How might designing physical place attributes to encourage and accommodate this new range of activities impact meaning, and change our overall sense of public space as *place*?

### **Acting In Public**

What do we do, in public space? According to William Whyte, we sit, stand, socialize, sunbathe, move chairs, observe all manner of activity and all available other people, eat, and sleep.<sup>6</sup> But are we doing all that we could? Stephen Carr, Mark Francis, et al developed a list of five needs we have of public spaces. According to them, we need: comfort, relaxation, passive engagement with the environment, active

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<sup>4</sup> Solomon

<sup>5</sup> To be fair, children's play was not historically of paramount concern, either. One of the principal motivations for creating playgrounds in New York City, for example, was to decrease juvenile delinquency by getting children off the streets, where unstructured and unsupervised play was believed to lead to crime. (Hart, 2002)

<sup>6</sup> Whyte

engagement with the environment, and discovery. Do our public spaces meet these needs?

### *Comfort.*

Without comfort it is difficult to perceive how other needs can be met, although people sometimes will endure major discomforts in attempts to enjoy themselves.<sup>7</sup>

Comfort is the most basic need that we have of public space, corresponding to our most basic physiological survival needs. It includes elements such as seating, sun, shade, shelter from wind and weather, and the presence of accessible public bathrooms. It also refers to the quality of these amenities: an ergonomic bench may be far more comfortable to sit on, for instance, than a low curb or step, and may encourage users to stay for longer periods of time. Psychological aspects of comfort are also important: perceptions of choice and safety contribute toward users' ability and willingness to visit a space. The presence or absence of other people, proximity to streets and businesses, and the ability to see and be seen may all contribute toward psychological comfort.<sup>8</sup>

Individual public spaces vary in the level of comfort they provide. Some provide adequate shade and shelter from the elements; some provide none at all (and are used nonetheless). William Whyte found plazas that provided ample, high-quality seating and some that provided none. For every factor that improves comfort, there are public spaces that are marvels of accommodation and spaces that are failures. On the whole, though, public spaces that intended to serve as social space do an adequate job of providing at least some factors that increase comfort, and, as the quote above says, people will sometimes endure a great deal of discomfort in order to have a good time.

### *Relaxation.*

Relaxation is distinguished from comfort by the level of release it describes. It is a more developed state with body and mind at ease. A sense of psychological comfort may be a prerequisite of relaxation [. . .]<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Carr et al, 92

<sup>8</sup> Carr et al, 92-97

<sup>9</sup> Carr et al, 98

Many public spaces provide space in which people are free (and able) to relax. Provision of natural elements such as grass, trees, and water features is common, and seems to reflect the implicit idea that nature has a relaxing and restorative effect. This idea has been in vogue at least since the time of Frederick Law Olmstead, and people do seem to find restorative benefit from spending time in nature. Whyte's observations confirm that relaxation is an important benefit that people seek in public space. Although he does not tie relaxation to any restorative powers of being in or observing nature, he does devote attention to the ways in which people relaxing seek out comfortable places, e.g. looking for the right combinations of sun and shade.<sup>10</sup> Parks and plazas certainly meet our need for relaxation, providing space for sleeping, sitting, reading, casual chatting, observing the landscape, and other forms of relaxation. Providing space for relaxation appears to be a major impulse behind the provision and design of public space.<sup>11</sup>

### *Passive Engagement.*

Passive engagement [. . .] involves the need for an encounter with the setting, albeit without becoming actively involved. [. . .] This kind of encounter is indirect or passive, because it involves looking rather than talking or doing.<sup>12</sup>

A great deal of ink has already been devoted to people's need for passive engagement in public spaces. Passive engagement activities involve observation: of people, children, activities, performances, rituals, traffic accidents, nature, landscape, etc. This need has been well documented; as William Whyte wrote, "What attracts people most, it would appear, is other people."<sup>13</sup> Such passive engagements are what Jan Gehl refers to as "low-intensity contacts," important because they demonstrate that public space is

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<sup>10</sup> Whyte, Chapter 3

<sup>11</sup> The question of which people are allowed to relax in public does arise. A businessman taking a nap with his suit jacket draped over his face may be welcome to relax fully (even sleep) in a park or plaza, while a homeless person may not. However, for the purpose of this paper I am not focusing on the needs that the homeless have for public space, although they are many and the needs important to their daily lives. Instead I will be focusing on the intended users of public space, which unfortunately excludes the homeless in most instances.

<sup>12</sup> Carr et al, 105

<sup>13</sup> Whyte, 19

working, and because they open up a world of possibilities to the individuals involved.<sup>14</sup>

The degree to which a specific public space succeeds in meeting our need for passive engagement has to do with a number of design and location questions; public spaces in general, however, when well-designed and not designed to prevent assembly, do meet this need. By allowing people to congregate, the spaces invite subjects of interest; once there are interesting things to see, people will stop and observe. As Gehl puts it, “something happens because something happens because something happens.”<sup>15</sup>

### *Active Engagement.*

Active engagement represents a more direct experience with a place and the people within it.<sup>16</sup>

Active engagement requires getting involved, either with other people or with the environment. It includes a wide range of activities, from socializing to mountain-climbing. In public spaces, available activities tend to include: talking, walking, jogging, playing organized sports (although organized sports may require advance registration as well as payment and thus exclude some potential users), playing in water (if water is available and playing permitted), playing with the environment (collecting sticks or rocks, shredding grass while in conversation, skipping stones across a pond, etc), picnicking, and exploring nature (in some parks). Community gardens, though not generally found in parks or plazas, provide another way to engage actively (and meaningfully) with the environment.

These activities meet our need for active engagement only in limited form. Some additional needs are met when groups of people make formal agreements with public spaces to engage in alternate activities there: Central Park in New York City, for instance, is home to both weekly tango sessions and a decades-old skate-dance group. These agreements can be hard to come by in many public spaces, however, especially where fear of potential liability suits is allowed to dominate.

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<sup>14</sup> Gehl, 17-20

<sup>15</sup> Gehl, 77

<sup>16</sup> Carr et al, 118

Although public spaces provide some opportunities for active engagement, they neglect a fundamental aspect of this need: the need for challenge.<sup>17</sup> Sports provide challenges for those who can pursue them, but the (time and money) costs associated with playing sports excludes many potential players. Sports also require pre-organization; it is difficult in the United States to go to a park alone and find or instigate a pick-up game of any kind. Some parks are installing advanced features like climbing walls, which do provide personal challenge for individuals, but again require monetary investment. Personal challenge that is freely available to all comers is often neglected as an aspect of active engagement in public spaces.

### *Discovery.*

Exploration is a human need. Forcing people to remain in confined, bare settings is a form of torture or punishment.<sup>18</sup>

Discovery is the hardest need to meet in public space, particularly in small spaces. The most obvious way to meet this need is through allowing exploration, which cannot happen in empty plazas. Parks provide more opportunities for discovery than plazas can; a variable landscape that provides hidden clearings, wooded areas, secluded waterfalls, and open assembly spaces invites exploration. A plaza in front of a building generally has less potential for discovery, although there are notable exceptions: the First National Bank Plaza in Chicago invites discovery through its multi-level layout, and rewards exploration when users who take a moment to lean up against the curved wall of the bank building experience the dizzying impossibility of its architecture curving into the space above them.

In the world of playground design theory<sup>19</sup>, however, discovery has another meaning. “Discovery play,” also known as “constructive play,” or “free play,” has little to do with exploring a physical place and everything to do with exploring possibilities. When spaces are appointed to support discovery play, they often provide not only playground equipment in surprising and inviting shapes, but malleable materials: sand,

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<sup>17</sup> Carr et al, 124-125

<sup>18</sup> Carr et al, 134

<sup>19</sup> It is important to note that there is no field of “playground design theory,” as such. The work I refer to primarily comes from developmental psychology and environmental psychology, and involves analysis of observed play styles and studies of cognitive development. Where these culminate in recommendations for play-space design, I refer to them as “playground design theories.”

water, and other materials that can be moved, manipulated, and built with. Free play is unstructured but supported, and is often social in nature. Needless to say, this aspect of discovery is lacking in virtually all public spaces designed for adults.

### **Design for Play**

Although modern-day playgrounds are rarely built according to theories of playground design, there was a considerable amount of work done on the subject in the late 1960s and 1970s. A great deal of this work involved detailing the kinds of play that children engage in, and determining how environmental design could create spaces that support types of play deemed necessary to children's development. These descriptions of types of play were often colored with nostalgia, and rarely included playground behaviors like fighting, teasing, or bullying, but the idea that the physical environment could or should be designed in order to support personal development remains valid.

The design of play spaces focuses both on the age of the children playing in the space (toddlers and infants require different provisions than older, more widely mobile children) and the types of play being done. Play is categorized in different ways in the literature, but generally involves at least three main types: social / dramatic play, active play, and discovery / constructive / free play.<sup>20</sup> Although there is some overlap between types of play, they can generally be characterized thus: social or dramatic types of play include any kind of play-acting, or social game-playing, including acting out stories, playing doctor or house, or mimicking grown-up activities like cooking, parenting, or teaching. Activity play involves running, jumping, horseplay, climbing, playing sports and other physically intensive kinds of play. Discovery play involves creative exploration and construction, including making forts, playing in sandboxes, using building blocks or other "loose parts" to construct fantasy objects or worlds, etc.<sup>21</sup>

In order to accommodate and encourage these varied kinds of play, designers of play spaces have thought to include many kinds of playground equipment such as: rope climbing structures, the platform-and-post structures that now dominate

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<sup>20</sup> Beckwith; Olds; Shaw

<sup>21</sup> Beckwith; Olds; Shaw

playgrounds, and other free-form climbers; sand pits and water features for free play; loose parts such as blocks, tires, and other moveable objects; and structures that loosely delineate indoor / outdoor spaces, to facilitate dramatic play.<sup>22</sup>

Although today's playgrounds often contain little more than a climbing structure, some swings and a sandbox (and sandboxes are becoming more contentious as a result of maintenance issues), other kinds of playgrounds were more accommodating to different types of play, especially discovery play. Adventure playgrounds, long successful in Europe and Japan, provided loosely supervised areas where self-directed children could build structures, play with odds and ends such as nails, scraps of wood, and old tires, care for animals, do pottery, or work in small gardens. Adults were available for consultation but did not direct the proceedings.<sup>23</sup> Berkeley, California, is home to one of the few operational adventure playgrounds in the United States. It was also home (until the 1990s) to the Berkeley Environmental Yard, where architects and educators came together with parents and children to transform a large, asphalt play lot into a more engaging setting that served as a microcosm of the natural environment.<sup>24</sup> According to Solomon:

Kids responded positively to the streams, ponds, garden, and waterfall that emerged out of the old school grounds. These lush surroundings guided them into cooperative play and sensory exploration of nature, and served as the basis of an interdisciplinary curriculum. [. . .] children learned by making choices, taking chances, making mistakes. [. . .] At the same time, the Yard did not neglect more traditional playground activities. There were tried and true elements, such as a "ballwall," a kickball square, a basketball court, and climbing and jumping equipment, as well as quiet areas for "meeting." Most significantly, the Yard was never locked, making it available to the community at any time.<sup>25</sup>

Facilities like Berkeley's adventure playground and Environmental Yard provide opportunities for self-directed and cooperative exploration and discovery (in both senses of the word), as well as more traditional active play. They create non-exclusionary settings where children can take chances, be challenged, and learn from their mistakes – all necessary components of learning and development. Where are there comparable opportunities for adults to play, be challenged, and learn? Do adults need such spaces and opportunities?

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<sup>22</sup> Beckwith; Olds; Shaw; Solomon

<sup>23</sup> Carr et al (171-174), Solomon (75-77)

<sup>24</sup> Solomon, 74

<sup>25</sup> Solomon, 73

## The Developing Adult

For years, developmental psychologists believed that human cognitive development reached its pinnacle in late adolescence, with the formation of abstractions. This view is no longer predominant, however. Psychologists now indicate that development continues throughout adult life, even in the latest stages.

Fischer et al suggest that, rather than progressing up a ladder of clearly distinguishable cognitive skills, people construct a dynamic web of capabilities over a lifetime, and move up, down, and laterally on that web to access skills needed to perform tasks at many ages. They suggest that the level of skill employed by adults depends heavily on the context they are working in, whether or not their work is supported (by means of coaching, e.g.), and whether they are working alone or in groups. The adult discovery-learning process they outline indicates that adults, like children, benefit from experimentation, exploration, and practicing skills.<sup>26</sup>

In particular, Fischer et al suggest that, “In all phases of adulthood, people need to update their skill repertoire in multiple domains constantly in order to adapt themselves to change.”<sup>27</sup> According to their vision of development in multiple directions along an ever-expanding web of skills, adults use not only higher-level skills such as abstraction, but also low-level, “primitive” skills like representation and mapping, depending on the situation at hand. Developing new skills and understanding often seems to require regression to lower-level techniques before building up to higher-level ones.<sup>28</sup> As an example, Fischer et al describe an experiment done by Nira Granott, where pairs of adults were invited to determine how a Lego-based robot called a “wuggle” worked. In graphing the progress of teams, Fischer et al note a “scallop” shaped learning curve – incremental progress for a time, followed by an abrupt drop to lower-level understanding and skill sets, and a gradual rebuilding of higher-level understanding that surpassed earlier achievements. Over time, repetition of this start-and-stop progress led to complex understanding of the toys. This learning

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<sup>26</sup> Fischer et al

<sup>27</sup> Fischer et al, 19

<sup>28</sup> Fischer et al, 32

process is reminiscent of skill-building in children, where repeated experimentation and testing leads to knowledge.<sup>29</sup>

As adults age, their cognitive abilities change. Fischer et al document a possible trend toward “wisdom” that comes after multiple stages of abstraction. They note:

Many kinds of intellectual skills increase slowly but consistently with age, even in research limited to standardized psychometric tests. These reflect what is called *crystallized intelligence*, composed of skills that benefit from accumulated experience, such as vocabulary and general knowledge. On the other hand, many skills also decline with age, especially from middle adulthood, and these reflect what is called *fluid intelligence*, composed of skills that depend on novel activities and information. Most of the activities that adults need to do involve accumulated knowledge and crystallized intelligence [. . .]<sup>30</sup>

Fischer et al do not posit a causal relationship between the fact that most adult tasks involve crystallized intelligence and the fact that aging adults make gains in crystallized intelligence while losing fluid intelligence. It seems possible that causality could run in either direction: we tailor our tasks to our cognitive abilities, or our cognitive abilities depend on the kind of tasks we do. It is worth considering, however, that if we learn by continual exploration, practice, and challenge, and if the majority of our tasks as adults do not involve using fluid intelligence, we may lose skills in that area as a consequence. Although Fischer et al do not refer to adult play, it seems that play (particularly discovery play) is an ideal arena for using fluid intelligence.

Although not mentioned, play may also fit into an important niche in Abraham Maslow’s famous hierarchy of needs. Developed in the 1940s, Maslow’s hierarchy posits different levels of needs that underlie human motivation, beginning with the most basic, physiological needs for food, water, and shelter, and progressing to the most abstract level of self-actualization. According to Maslow, self actualization might be described as “the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming.<sup>31</sup>” In other words, self-actualization refers to achieving one’s potential – an idea much-emphasized for children in our culture, but not for adults. While adults are generally confined to pursuing their psychological needs in the spheres of relationships or work, those two domains can be ill-suited to provide for self-actualization. Adult employment often severely limits acceptable

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<sup>29</sup> Fischer et al, 32-38

<sup>30</sup> Fischer et al, 29

<sup>31</sup> Maslow, 382

activities to a narrow range required to do a job. Relationships require that adults behave in particular, predictable ways that have everything to do with securing love and belongingness, but potentially little to do with realizing one's potential. Discovery play, on the other hand, where one is challenged and comes up with creative solutions to problems, may be precisely the arena for achieving self-actualization.

There is very little research available on the advantages or effects of play on adult cognitive or physical development. Various studies have reported that continual mental stimulation and physical activity may reduce the likelihood of suffering from problems such as Alzheimer's disease or even cancer in later life, but these are far from conclusive. Few or no studies have been done specifically on play. However, basing the importance of adult play in health or psychological research may be unnecessary. Adults do play, and the persistence of the activity may be sufficient indication of its importance.

### **Adults at Play**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, John Dewey postulated that play was the work of children, whose main employment should be exploring their environment and learning from it by adapting to it.<sup>32</sup> Ought we then consider work as the play of adults? It may depend on the kind of work an adult does. Some kinds of work invite more play than others. Scientists, mathematicians, and artists (including performers and fine artists) all have work that is frequently considered playful. According to Kennedy:

The project of the young child resembles that of the artist. The artist may be said to be the adult who has resisted [. . .] the "false dichotimization" of work and play. For both artist and child, something emerges from the engagement with the environment, a product that is relatively unexpected, because it has emerged through interactive play that allows for creative outcomes.<sup>33</sup>

Scientists and mathematicians engage in a similar kind of interactive play with the environment, although the tools they use to investigate and manipulate the environment may be more sophisticated than those used by children or artists. Other highly self-directed professionals may also experience playfulness in their jobs: architects, other design professionals, even academics pursuing research topics they

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<sup>32</sup> Solomon, 8

<sup>33</sup> Kennedy, 41

find interesting may find their work a kind of play. However, despite these examples, there are many more jobs that are not playful; many jobs are repetitive, performed within strict rules, and regimented. Assembly line workers, middle managers, customer service agents, retail workers, stockboys, employees in call centers: none of these people would be very likely to consider their work play. While in an ideal world (Plato's Republic, perhaps) adults would find room to pursue self-actualization through their jobs, in reality this privilege is reserved for precious few. Even those fortunate enough to work in "playful" jobs may find their work tedious and uninspiring after sufficient time.

How, then, do adults play? Some choose highly structured forms of play, joining sports teams, coordinating children's recreational activities (e.g. as scout leaders), or pursuing hobbies like carpentry or gardening. Some adults pursue creative activities such as writing, playing music, or participating in community theater, and some may find opportunities to "play" by volunteering for community or outreach organizations. Play that happens in specialized facilities provides a great deal of the "active play" done by adults, including paintball, laser tag, rock-climbing (as done in gyms and other facilities), martial arts, partnered sports like tennis or racquetball, and other kinds of gym-centric exercise. Activity play and social play, then, are well accounted for. But what opportunities are there for adults to legitimately pursue discovery play?

Despite the name, the need for discovery is not sufficiently met by travel, which often involves a passive kind of discovery through observation. Nature hikes and camping expeditions may provide athletic and even strategic challenges, but also don't provide a lot of opportunity for the kind of discovery we are talking about. Florence Ladd, in the 1960s, spent time interviewing adolescent males in Boston about how they experienced adventure and found that most of the adventure they engaged in was illegal: breaking and entering, shoplifting, picking pockets, racing stolen cars. Outside of rural areas, where kids might test themselves against challenges in nature, Ladd writes:

During the years when boys and girls need external challenges against which they can test their own daring and endurance, there are few legitimate opportunities available to them in their daily routines and environments which permit their

testing themselves. There are few legitimate adventurous situations which allow them to explore the range of their physical and intellectual skills and abilities.<sup>34</sup>

The lack of opportunities for “legitimate” adventure does not stop people from seeking it. Experimenting, taking chances, and learning from mistakes is a vital part of the human learning process, for children and adults alike. If Abraham Maslow is correct, and humans seek self-actualization, the way we reach this pinnacle is by overcoming challenges and refining our skills. If there are no legitimate challenges available to them, people will make their own.

And they do. Some of the kinds of challenging free play that adults pursue in public spaces include (but are certainly not limited to): parkour or “free running,” skateboarding, pranks or performance art (like park[ing] day), guerilla gardening, and graffiti (including high-art types and reverse-graffiti).

### *Parkour / Free Running*

Parkour is a highly dangerous, potentially illegal form of free play / activity play done in predominantly urban areas. According to [americanparkour.com](http://americanparkour.com):

Parkour is the art of moving through your environment using only your body and the surroundings to propel yourself. It can include running, jumping, climbing, even crawling, if that is the most suitable movement for the situation. Parkour could be grasped by imagining a race through an obstacle course: the goal is to overcome obstacles quickly and efficiently, without using extraneous movement. Apply this line of thought to an urban environment, or even a run through the woods, and you're on the right path.<sup>35</sup>

In effect, this description translates to a new “extreme sport” that involves treating the entire urban setting as a giant playground. Runners launch themselves over obstacles, up walls, and through windows, jump from roof to roof, and do impressive backflips off of overhangs, all while in continuous motion. Parkour is incredibly physically challenging, and also forces players to “discover” new things about gravity, physics, and their own capabilities.<sup>36</sup> The pursuit is very much in line with Maslow’s idea of people attaining their potentials.

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<sup>34</sup> Ladd, 444

<sup>35</sup> [americanparkour.com](http://americanparkour.com)

<sup>36</sup> for more information: [americanparkour.com](http://americanparkour.com); videos available at [youtube.com](http://youtube.com)

### *Skateboarding*

Recognizable as free play mainly because it is so frequently banned from occurring in public places, skateboarding has long been a popular way for teenagers to find challenges and test their capabilities. Skateboarders, like free runners, tend to see the urban world as fair game for their play; the best challenges come from trying to tackle obstacles like handrails, stairs, and low walls. The tricks skateboarders perform are difficult, and the difficulty level always increases to exceed ability. Skateboarders are engaged in a constant cycle of overcoming challenges, setting the bar higher, and beginning again.

### *Pranks / Performance Art*

Pranks and informal performance art are advanced kinds of social / dramatic play that involve free play elements. Practitioners often combine commonplace materials and events in unexpected ways. REBAR, an art collective in San Francisco, instituted an annual event called Park[ing] Day, where metered parking spaces can be turned into miniature parks with the addition of some rolled sod, a tree, a bench, and enough quarters to keep the meter fed.<sup>37</sup> Projects like this test the boundaries of society while the perpetrators get to think laterally, playing with language, assumptions, meaning, permissibility, and physical logistics. Flash mobs, where hundreds of people will congregate in a public place in what seems like an instant to perform an (often ridiculous or silly) act and then peacefully disperse, present similar challenges, and offer often marginal individuals a chance to communicate with a very large audience.

### *Guerilla Gardening*

Guerilla gardeners are like graffiti artists in that they claim control of a piece of the public realm that they do not own. Rather than “defacing” the property, however, guerrilla gardeners will “attack” a vacant piece of public land they perceive as neglected and plant it with flowers and shrubs. Police have investigated this activity, suspicious that practitioners were stealing plants. Although it is technically illegal, guerrilla gardening rarely leads to negative consequences. Gardeners get to engage

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<sup>37</sup> for more information: <http://www.parkingday.org/>

with the land, design plantings, coordinate “attacks,” and feel that they are having a beneficial effect on the urban surroundings, something most urban dwellers rarely get a chance to do.<sup>38</sup>

### *Graffiti*

Graffiti is ubiquitous. In its simplest form, tagging, graffiti lays claim to a piece of public property, demarcates turf boundaries, and has little to do with the notion of free play. More sophisticated levels of graffiti, including mixed-media graffiti (e.g. the art of Swoon, in New York City<sup>39</sup>), layered mural graffiti that is more akin to art than to tags, and reverse graffiti (similar to guerilla gardening in that it puts its mark on public property by improving it) are highly creative forms of play that involve significant logistical challenges in addition to artistic ones. Reverse graffiti is particularly playful, since it challenges the very idea of graffiti – artists reject paint as a medium, and instead strategically clean walls and windows, leaving behind an image where the dirt of the city has been removed.<sup>40</sup>

### **A Playful City?**

So: adults play. Although it might seem sensible to assume that adults do not need specific play activities because, unlike children, they have the whole world to play with, very few adults are empowered to pursue self-actualization in the context of everyday realms such as jobs or relationships. Adults need specific play opportunities, demonstrated (if by nothing else) by the fact that they make them – often in dangerous, illegal, or at least unappreciated contexts.

Why, then, are we officially so opposed to the idea of adult free play in public? The litigiousness of society creates fear of liability wherever challenging activities are pursued, and certainly that must impact the official attitude toward play. But play activities are also considered disruptive, “antisocial” (although they are frequently social in nature), and even criminal (even where they are not illegal). Perhaps adult free play is inherently subversive, since it conflates the roles of adults and children, and

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<sup>38</sup> for more information: <http://www.guerrillagardening.org/>

<sup>39</sup> for images, try flickr.com (search terms: “swoon, graffiti”)

<sup>40</sup> for more information: <http://www.inhabitat.com/2007/01/11/reverse-graffiti/>

allows people to step outside traditional roles. Perhaps, however, with time and exposure people would grow more accustomed to and accepting of adult play.

Architects, landscape architects, and urban designers may be uniquely well suited to begin the legitimization process. Skateparks are already considered legitimate features of public parks in some places, although they may be tolerated more because they remove skateboarders from more visible public areas than for being good in themselves. Climbing walls have also started to appear in public places, providing challenge to those who can pay for training and equipment. If public spaces were designed with an eye toward accommodating and facilitating adult play, if physical elements that encourage a new range of activities were added to public space, perhaps the meaning of that space would expand and deepen.

What would such design look like? It could incorporate physical challenge elements that may build off of children's play equipment designs (net climbing courses, half pipes to run up, obstacle courses, climbers) but are scaled for adults. It could incorporate public work space, like an adult adventure playground, where adults can come and work on projects in a social setting. Facilities that rent out power equipment for home carpentry projects do a fair amount of business; perhaps a communal woodshop or pottery studio, free to all, would be embraced.

How, though, could we design for free play? It may be, due to the size and scale of adult ambition, that no space smaller than the entire city can encapsulate truly challenging free play. Perhaps, in that case, it is time to look toward a future playful city. The playful city would invite experimentation and interaction with architectural features, open up unexpectedly to disclose secret worlds, and invoke a permissive attitude toward citizen-initiated modifications to the urban landscape. It would be imbued with new layers of meaning, would encourage individuals to test themselves against myriad challenges, and would work creatively to allow all of its residents to pursue Maslow's self-actualization. The playful city would not just be a place to work and live; it would be a place to be whole.

## Sources

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