

BATTLING SPATIAL STEREOTYPES

*How a reinterpretation of theatricality
can significantly enhance the pedestrian
experience of public space*

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Despite decades of research on Urban Design, many American cities still lack a pedestrian focus that is tangible, flexible, and playful.¹ Some urban developers and designers have learned that strategies such as wider sidewalks or suspension as you move through space are valuable and as such they have employed some clever design tactics. However public space planning is often still confused and overwrought with cliché elements. Those elements are typically trying to represent some foreign, typically European, downtown area, despite completely different context, history, and culture. The designs are also frequently subdued by the stranglehold of an obsessive committee with misunderstood historical context as their driving force. To add to the confusion, many malls and private establishments misrepresent their properties as being part of the public domain and generally speaking, the public is none-the-wiser.

What are the designers doing and why?

These buildings and establishments in urban centers are essentially being theatrical. They are building a set with a stage and doing it as cheaply as possible while still capturing an audience with those simple elements.

Why does that matter?

Recently an interesting trend has arisen on the internet. The amount of websites where the user can rate their experience of a product has grown dramatically. When looking at the multitude of reviews for movies, books, music, cities, restaurants, etc, it may become apparent that the users are not typically critiquing things by appearance alone. For most, the area of greatest concern is the story and the experience of the thing being reviewed. In this case, we can apply this trend to public urban spaces. People do not necessarily care about the built design on a surface level. Even when you include some people in design professions, seldom do friends gather and tell stories about the shapes of buildings or the design of space. They typically relate to each other through the experience they had in the space.

People like telling, hearing, and seeing stories unfold. The set can keep attention for a moment, but the story is the interesting aspect of theater that so many designers are forgetting when it comes to architecture. The design is not just about slapping facades on a box and putting a lot of 'public' space in front of it. It cannot be that simple. Yes, many people fall for this, perhaps out of a lack of choices or understanding. Examples include just about any 'Towne Centre' in America and many similar places discussed in the research of Brian Lonsway and his contemporaries.² People prefer theatricality to some extent. If they did not, architecture would not be a profession.

Clearly there is a relationship between architecture and theater, intentional or not. And theatricality has a material quality that merits further investigation. This research contends that if we look to theater and observe which other theatrical elements are missing in our public spaces, perhaps we could devise a way to infuse them back into the design of the space.

At its core, theater is about which elements?

Theater is about being 'live.' Perhaps its most defining characteristic and the primary thing that sets it apart from film is that theater is in the moment and could change at any time. Yes, theater is often scripted, but almost every show strays from the script in a different way. At each level, when a script is going to be performed it suddenly gets a reinterpretation by a slew of people from the producer to the director to the set designer to the actors. Improvisation is more than just a back-up when the script fails but a continual strategy for approaching performance.³

Theater is tactile. It is about touch and a sense of feeling elements in the space you could not feel in a film. The audience does not necessarily literally touch the set, the props, or the actors but they could. The point is that it is a visceral experience far greater than film and more closely related to an architectural or spatial experience than one might initially realize.

Theater is commonly understood as involving transitions. It is about transitioning the audience into a different world. Those transitions come in at every level of procession from the viewpoint of the audience. On the stage the performers transition between scenes, roles, locations, times, states of existence, etc. The words procession and proscenium are inherently theatrical terms.

Most theater is highly flexible. It often sets out to represent a variety of things with a simple kit of parts. The back of one set is the front of another. One character could portray another character as well. Many theatrical pieces are not just multi-purpose but actually transformable. Those terms are often viewed as synonyms, but are not actually the same and should be distinguished from one another. For example, a field of grass could be multi-purpose, as it is a blank slate on which many things can happen. However, that field is not transformable in itself because it only has one state. But a fold-out couch is something that has more than one purpose as it has two separate states: bed and couch.

Often, in the design of more compact spaces like planes, RVs, and boats, an important goal is to simplify and compress objects in space to make them foldable, changeable, and highly flexible. For example, on an airplane, the seat back becomes a tray table for eating, and it also contains pockets and sometimes an embedded screen. The seat cushion is also a floatation device.

When an area is limited, much like on a theater stage, people tend to get more creative about how they use that space in the most efficient way possible. In the United States, particularly in the western US, where space has not been much of a factor for city planning, this need for versatility and flexibility in design has seemed unimportant. However, as cities have grown larger, we are hit with the

realization that expanding outward is not the answer. This argument as it applies to cities can be translated to almost any scale.

How can design of public space tie together tactility, transition, flexibility, and the momentary nature of theater?

Designers already understand how to design the theatrical sets, but typically without an understanding of the non-static aspects of the design. In his film, *The Social Life of Small Public Spaces*, William Whyte made a comment in reference to the Seagram Building Plaza in New York City that can be applied to this situation:

As we move from the rear, we see another aspect of the place that's quite fascinating: the movement of people across it. Choreography is wonderful and choreography really is the right word; the way people move, circle, stop, speed up, the colors they wear. There's a beauty that they most often sense themselves. You see none of this in architectural photographs, usually quite empty of people, but visually this movement is the ultimate test of a design.⁴

How curious that used a theatrical term to describe an architectural experience. Architects have a tendency to design fixed components while the audience and the space are not being used in a static way. Imagine a building where you could literally pull off a piece of the facade and use it as a bench or play a game with it. Simultaneously, other people could be using it for additional purposes. Imagine layers upon layers of transitional spaces that fold in and out of one another to create ever-changing experiences.⁵

The popular and stereotypical understanding of theater is not the understanding this research intends to encourage. Empty facades placed over simple boxes to create excitement where there was none is like false advertising. They are devoid of any relationship that makes a building into architecture. It is this understanding that makes fake and over-the-top synonymous with theater and drama.

However, there is more to theater that is often ignored that this research would argue is more pertinent to spatial design. By blending standard definitions of space and using theatricality as an instrument for material and spatial design, urban spaces can ultimately become truly pedestrian friendly and as dynamic as the people that use them. Theater relates to architecture on a variety of levels that go well beyond the breadth of this research. In the simplest form spectacle, tactility, transition, and flexibility are the theatrical and material properties that will be explored and applied to architectural context.

Spectacle

Spectacle is a valuable and necessary part of theater that ties in with the 'live' aspect of it.⁶ It is the event. It is the show that people are going to see. However, as architects, we are not event planners. No matter how well designed a space is, we cannot expect that just because we build something, it will be used for glorious and ambitious spectacles every day. We would be doing a disservice to the space and to the people using it to assume that far more people would use a space than is realistic.

This is not to say that spaces should not be designed with ambitions for greater foot traffic than is existing. What urban design often involves is a careful consideration of scale. Rather than planning on spectacles one should design a space that allows for events at multiple scales and for flexibility at the appropriate density and scale given the context. Allowing a structure with design for the possibility that spectacles could redefine the space for their own agenda is a positive way to go. Thinking of spectacle as a fluid material of space is useful in this particular design process. The actors and audience can and should be part of the designer's material palette.

Transition

Many contemporary theaters in the United States compel the audience members to go from a public, 'real' world into a private, 'fake' world with an abrupt transition between those two realms. However, venues such as Garnier's famed opera house or the National Grand Theater of China by Paul Andreu allow the audience a greater chance to connect with the performance they are attending through the extension of the heightened experience. The audience should be able to transition into a theater space through a lively and dramatic urban and cultural context.⁷

The stage typically interacts with the life outside the theater in a reflective way. Renzo Piano's Niccolò Paganni Auditorium in Parma, Italy essentially forces the set to fit inside the building, but one could argue that the set should inform the building much more. The more opportunities of both physical and

phenomenological transitions to occur, the more fluid the space will be and the more heightened the theatrical experience.

Tactility

Touch has always been one of the most significant senses. Now more than ever, buildings want to be touched. A word being tossed around increasingly is 'interactive'. People want their surroundings to interact with them more and more. The understanding of touch is now a little different and often involves technological enhancements but it doesn't necessarily need them. Material and design choices can allow for a flexible and tactile experience.

No longer do materials need to be ornamental purely for the sake of being ornamental. Materials should embrace their history, their purpose, and should stretch as far outside their comfort zone as possible. They can be dynamic, diverse and transformable but still have a tactile purpose. Out with ornamental and in with interactive.

Flexibility

Transformability is the kind of flexibility that is necessary to encourage pedestrians to use their surroundings in new and interesting ways. Recall that multi-purpose is not transformable and this research does not advocate for multi-purpose. People like options but not completely blank slates. By

designing publicly accessible pieces of a building that are capable of changing in a way that has a relationship to the design of the buildings and public spaces, as well as the surrounding context, the greatest number of truly dynamic results are possible. Studies have shown people like less options when it comes to retail and food selections. It has also been proven they use their time more wisely when choices are limited in some way or have a set of rules attached to it.

People embrace and enjoy the ability to work within a certain set of boundaries. Let us go back to the theater relationship again. In theater, most shows work with a certain framework and get creative in how they relate to the audience in that scenario. Shows will be staged differently in a black box than an amphitheater or a 360 degree circular stage with seating. The goal of theatricality in design is to provide the framework while still allowing change.⁸ The best examples of this take design beyond the blank slate and they allow themselves to adapt to the rules of the site while still allowing for continual change.

Theatricality is materiality. If nothing else, remember that the most important of the theatrical qualities is flexibility. All of the theatrical components described are all linked but the driving force is flexibility. Are your materials flexible? Is your design transformable? Is your understanding of the space flexible? Flexibility directly affects the tactile experience and the material qualities of the design for the better. Ironically, flexibility is the rigid framework in which the materials and the design can work.

Architects have talked about the industrialization and compression of architecture in the past, but in a way that is self-contained, like mass produced homes or housing units or cookie cutter houses. That is not what this research is arguing. Many architects who advocate for the use of digital fabrication discuss compactness in a slightly more compelling way.⁹ Zaha Hadid experimented with the design of a room in a house that is to appear as one single form conceptually. While this is compelling, the compactness still tends to be self-contained and not necessarily contextual. Compactness can be used to actually create great feelings of openness and expansiveness. When a compacted piece unfolds, it begins to imply greater things.

The Real Fake

The theatrical approach to design emphasizes spaces being real or at least allowing for real experiences. This is a crucial distinction from how theater is currently represented. Caricatures can be real without being boring and contextually monotonous. Historical context and site context are always design considerations, but experiential context gets muddled during the design process.

An immediate reward is something people crave in many scenarios. Theater offers immediacy as an invitation. It is something that can be experienced in the moment and could not be a memory-based space. It offers unpredictability to a certain degree. This is the strongest connector between theatricality and urban design. This is one of the elements of live performance that cannot be

recreated. Flash mobs have been rising in popularity because their unpredictable nature makes them appealing.

How does this unpredictability influence design? The impromptu is arguably what makes many spaces into places. Predictability could be what brings most people to a space but the unpredictable is what allows the place to grow and develop and it gives people a reason to stay. It creates an image of the place that people desire.

So perhaps the idea is to give parameters to a space and let private enterprises modify their own smaller individual spaces. Is this all that needs to be done by the designer? This change could happen more rapidly than the stagnant pace of typical large developments or government-owned public spaces. Space is a physical term, but place is experiential. Designers should be interested in creating places and developing systems that will allow people to continue to create more places in the future. This research should result in the ability to create an experiential place in any location.

Pedestrian Friendly

Jan Gehl's research over nearly the last half-century has focused on how pedestrians increase the social quality of the public and urban space. Pedestrian friendly urban planning is good for people as well as for the long-term development of cities.¹⁰ An area that Gehl and William Whyte discuss at length in much of their research is the need for people to make objects in a public space their own.

They caress chairs and ever so slightly adjust the location of the chair so that they can take ownership of it. Seldom does an individual just embrace a chair with no change. This reiterates the importance of tactility and flexibility. A fixed bench with an uninviting material quality is going to see far less traffic than a movable piece of public furniture with a comforting texture.

Jan Gehl once said, “Do not look at how many people are walking in the city, but look at how many have stopped walking to stay and enjoy what is there.¹¹” A well-developed city is not just about getting from point A to point B but rather about having a social experience. “It is difficult to design a space that will not attract people. What is remarkable is how often this has been accomplished.¹²”

WhAT Studio

Embedding theatricality in an urban context is a practice that the members of the Warehouse Architecture Theater have been exploring over the past several years. WhAT Studio, as they are affectionately known, is comprised of architects, gamesmiths, graphic designers, playwrights, and thespians. The diverse nature of this amalgamation gives the group a unique perspective to take on new design typologies. The common threads amongst the group have been theatricality and interactivity in a manner aligned with those thoroughly described in the preceding text. As such, it is highly relevant to evaluate their work, both theoretical and actualized, in an effort to determine the validity of using theatricality as a design tool.

Umbrella

With ever increasing accessibility to digital fabrication tools, we are losing touch with materials we already have. Many green materials require some level of processing and have resultant waste.

Recycled contents are typically only a percentage of a given green product. However with the Ragdale Ring competition, WhAT saw an opportunity to embrace a cradle-to-cradle design process. The Ragdale Ring competition is an annual design competition organized by the non-profit artist's community known as the Ragdale Foundation in Lake Forest, Illinois.¹³

The challenge for this competition is to create a temporary, outdoor performance venue that creates a semi-public space and uses sustainable materials as best as possible. WhAT's proposal for the place explored a few other qualities of design while reinforcing theatrical design concepts already being investigated in this research. Tactility was highly important as this is a space people will gather in and remain for extended periods of time. In the context of an artist's community it would also stand as a piece of artwork which the user can touch. The prompt required most of the materials to be used or recycled objects. It also encouraged them to be completely recycled at the end of the project as well for a full circle material use.

An aspect WhAT found interesting was that the theater was a temporary installation. It had to have a temporary, flexible, and if possible, ever-changing aspect to allow for the space to be customized beyond the parameters of the design. And it was an interior private space outside in a park. That

public-private edge is blurred from the start with a space like an outdoor theater or amphitheater. It was essentially an inversion and blending of indoor with outdoor.

WhAT's approach was to begin with the material choices and be meticulous about how they were used. Excluding an obvious need for a small number of metal fasteners, the 4 primary materials were selected. Standard wood pallets were chosen because they are commonplace world-wide. While the standards may vary by country, they typically come in a uniform limited range of sizes and they are significantly less expensive than most building materials, especially ones that come pre-assembled. They weather and acquire a patina that makes their texture and tone vary as they age. At the end of the installation, all of the pallets could be disconnected and placed right back into the existing network of pallet users without having to undergo a factory recycling process. The pallets also lend themselves quite well to vertical planting.

The second primary material was a similar one: wooden apple crates. These crates are slightly more refined, smaller and usually made of a different type of wood than pallets. This makes for a nice contrast between the two materials. There is a slightly higher initial cost but the crates would be used as more of an accent piece. During de-construction of the installation, visitors could take a crate with them, pick apples at a nearby farm and take them home. Or the crates could be returned to a wholesaler to recover some of the money spent on them.

The third material was one that WhAT hoped to obtain mostly for free: umbrellas. Umbrellas are the number one item at most lost and found departments. With the proximity to Chicago and places like O'Hare International Airport, a large number of umbrellas could be obtained at little to no cost. Umbrellas provide little structure significance but are a fantastic contrast to the existing materials. The canopy, made almost entirely of umbrellas, has a magical quality that plays with light. The rendering shows a minimal number of color variations but the variety of different umbrella textures and opacities would make for a unique canopy and ceiling surface.

Le Corbusier famously stated, "Space and light and order. Those are the things that men need just as much as they need bread or a place to sleep."¹⁴ WhAT agrees with Corbusier, but believes that a small drop of chaos and darkness must balance out the light. Junichiro Tanizaki's "In Praise of Shadows" highlights shadow as an important detail and material in its own right.¹⁵ Shadows, in addition to the unexpected material choices, add a nice contrast to the order and formalism of the design and the well-known typology of a theater. Armed with light as the final primary material, WhAT utilizes all its tools to create a warm and inviting space. (Figure 1)

As an audience member, much of the experience is about the material properties of the space. Two high walls open to you, welcoming you to an inner sanctum housing a simple stage made whimsical by an undulating, scaly canopy. The scales cast textured shadows on the grass beneath and the backdrop to the stage is a verdantly planted vertical wall. The walls of the structure have apertures, and hung in the openings are wooden lanterns that glow in the spaces like fireflies in jars on a summer night.

You have seen them all before, but never in a collective language as this project presents them.

Imagine musicians beginning to play and the acoustics of the wooden space reverberate warmly, as the engrossing sound takes you into another world entirely, one of pure music. The lighting lends everything an over-arching sense of theatricality and wonderment. The space is both adaptable and substantial; the audience never feels like they are merely in a field watching a show, but enveloped in an artistic experience.

Not only does Umbrella provide a dynamic and flexible space to showcase and experience live art, but its component construction allows for its constituent elements to be eventually separated and re-used.

With layered umbrellas providing a canopy over the stage and much of the audience, there is an immediate understanding of the spectacle about to occur. But what is equally thrilling are all the mini-spectacle possibilities abound. There are small areas backstage and around the audience where the many artistic residents of the Ragdale Foundation can perform in their off hours.

As you walk across the site, transition is of the utmost importance and the view around every new bend and corner has been considered until eventually the main stage is revealed. Flexibility and compactability work in tangent with this concept at its core. These materials dominate the scene and it

is clear that the various arrangements of them are nearly endless. Using these materials, a language has been created which can then be applied to other parts of the larger site area.

Dramatic Threshold

The Stages of Transition competition at California Polytechnic State University was a new competition, once again encouraging both theatricality and material reuse at the scale of a small public space on the campus. The competition asked applicants to address one of several high traffic choke-points with a theatrical and interactive installation idea that used a small and odd assortment of trashed, donated, or abandoned materials. After being given very specific and detailed information on those materials and the various sites, WhAT sought to design a competition entry that used the materials to their fullest potential and with as little waste as possible once again. An small example of the elegant level of detail was the use of odd lengths of metal tube as hardware instead of requiring the purchase of additional screws or nails.

WhAT's entry, entitled "Dramatic Threshold" was a simple concept but an idea that was repeatable, adjustable and a bit mysterious while also using the most materials in the least wasteful way. For this reason, the submission advanced beyond the level of theory and into reality. It was built and installed by volunteers at the university. Once completed, it was clear that the installation combined the elements of suspense, proscenium, and performance.

Dramatic Threshold was installed for one week and the interactions people had with it were evaluated from a distance over the course of the week. By testing the Dramatic Threshold on site, principles of theatricality were once again able to be tested in real space, but this time the test was able to be done in a physical way. This test, though at a far smaller scale than Umbrella, was appropriate in terms of the content of the winning entry. (Figures 2 & 3)

The analysis of this site compared to the original data is astounding. At first, it seemed that very little had changed. Very few people engaged with the installation at all while observations discretely occurred during the day. In fact, the first day was also a gloomy day, the first rainy day in San Luis Obispo in weeks. The observers left the site having not witnessed a single person passing through the frame. But when they returned the next morning, footprints could be found inside the frame. A few people ventured through the threshold. Perhaps they were inebriated, mischievous, or simply curious, but nonetheless a few people walked through the frame.

There is something about the threshold that intrigued people enough to draw them in. After conducting more thorough observations at a greater variety of times, and eventually adding a text graphic to the box, more intriguing results were recorded. By comparing behavior maps from before and after, movement of people through the space can clearly be seen as different. The currents have changed. There were a higher number of interactions and the number of people who used the box was also higher following the text graphic invitation. Additionally, the number of students who reacted

positively to the box with a smile, giggle, etc. was even higher as many who didn't walk through still smiled out of curiosity.

Ultimately, most of the research has shown that while people like to engage in activities like this one, they are more hesitant when uninvited. The drastic increase in users once signage was added is so significant that it means this box did not succeed enough on its own to force use. If however, the box was installed in the location that its creator originally suggested, it is believed that it would have forced users to respond differently, as they would not have been able to walk around it. If everything is clearly interactive or the interactivity is highlighted in some way, it seems to aid in the encouragement of people to use the prop, whatever prop or object it may be. The same could theoretically be applied to larger spaces or different context.

Epic Kickerman

In an effort to more thoroughly explore the possibilities of theatricality as defined in this text, WhAT ventured into a competition at a different level of complexity. A pair of organizations known as 72 Hour Urban Action and Invisible Playground teamed up to hold a 72 Hour Design-Build Competition in Witten, Germany. This event was called the World Championship of Gameful Architecture. The title enticed the diverse minds of the WhAT team and further investigation revealed a competition practicality designed for the combined exploration of theatricality, architecture, and interactivity. WhAT was selected as a finalist team to join one of the five composite teams that would. Each team

consisted of typically twelve people who were selected from around the world. Each team of twelve would work towards a different goal that was an urban installation that was both gameful and architectural.

WhAT made up six members of an eleven person team and as such their work was combined with some additional effort. At the time each site was given to each team, the teams also received a design goal that was specific to their site. The site, known as Avantgardeplatz, was paired with the goal of creating an intercultural communication zone. The biggest take-away is that the site was already home to nearly twelve non-German minority groups and while they all seem to get along just fine, the local German people would not engage the site. Immediately it seemed that the real goal was to unite the German natives with the minority groups. The site also neighbored a few small shops, a restaurant, and two small betting halls.

The design process was rapid fire. The team sped through initial site considerations, game mechanics, design ideas and after a lot of discussion ended up with an idea of installing a mega-foosball table. The core idea was that it related to the casinos on the site and that in Europe, soccer is a uniting force. Even in an antagonistic environment of playing a game against someone, inevitably a conversation is usually sparked because of the game. The idea had a strong connection to the goal of a great zone for communication.

Over the course of the competition, the design evolved as concerns arose about making it more than a mega-foosball table and creating a more serious architectural component in the design. The game was actually designed to consist of five separate tables, each with its own mini-game element. In addition, all five tables could be played together as one gigantic and wild game. It is a game that is playable at multiple scales and with multiple people. Flexibility is inherent in the design.

One of WhAT's mini-game ideas was to have a one-sided table, meaning that two players would play against each other from the same side. This lends itself to a blank space on the opposite site where no one would be standing. What if the side of the table turned into a bench and folded out and onto the ground, opposite a pre-existing bench on the site. It starts to have a site relationship, a small architectural move and a relationship between the game and the site. Another mini-game involved a table that was transparent on the bottom and solid on the top meaning that you would have to either play blinded or play on the ground. This table lends itself to an experience on the ground. These are two examples that eventually ended up in the final version to some degree which allowed for increased tactility and a different kind of experience from a standard table.

In a high speed scenario such as this one, the building process is actually a huge part of the design process. They reflect back on each other and direct the project on a path it may have not gone otherwise. For efficiency, the frames of the tables were built first. This was because they could build the frames very quickly and without knowing all the details about the fields, which were not all completely resolved early on.

The process expanded to a full scale assembly line of people building frames, then playing fields, painting, assembling the fields, and then eventually moving them to the site. Each of the five mini-games had its own complexities. Four out of the five were built and everything other than the table which would envelope a tree was near completion. Not wanting to waste any material, we used scrap material to create a winners stand that would also double as additional seating.

The final result was a fusion of mini-golf and foosball with a terrain based game, a one-side game, a game around a tree and on a slope, an upside-down game with intentional limited visibility, as well as a game with none of the players in alignment, but instead in a spiral. It was remarkable to see how many people gravitated towards it instantly.

Epic Kickerman created an interior feeling despite being completely outside. At the game test, many players cited how much they loved the unfinished wood quality and how quiet this game is compared to a traditional foosball table. Admittedly, this was initially incidentally, but we were pleased with the difference and decided to highlight that as a selling point of the finished version at the end.

Even before the tools were put down and the construction was complete, visitors were flooding the site, trying to play. They were so eager. While WhAT did not win the design competition, they were officially granted the award of 'Best Engagement with the Community' for making what used to be a

transitory zone into a true “center of the city.” Speaking with some of the judges afterwards, apparently the Epic Kickerman was unofficially granted the award of ‘Best Craftmanship’ since the judges were impressed that five functioning interconnected foosball tables (one around a tree!) were able to be constructed in such a short time with no prior experience at making them.

“There’s no way to describe the satisfaction in seeing people smile and laugh and engage with our built design mere moments after we put it in the space. There’s nothing quite like that in standard architecture or game design; it took a marriage of the two,” said Alex Coulombe, one of the WhAT team members following the competition.¹⁷

The question was asked, “why the ‘mini-golf’ quality in the tables?” WhAT answered that it sought to strike a balance between the familiar and the unexpected. A great way to break down barriers between people is with friendly laughter. The slightly silly quality allowed people to be more playful than competitive and gave permission to be friends. Antagonistic design creates friends in a situation with a greater level of communication.

And the audience was just as engaged as the players. There is something about taking sides that almost immediately happened as people entered the site. They began cheering for friends or a random team because they like one game over the other. And people on one side of the table often had incentive to cheer for their side to get the ball. If that happened, the ball would transition into their mini-game and

they would get a chance to play at their table. And once the idea of multiple balls in play came up, people seemed to very much enjoy the chaos. (Figures 4 & 5)

Look at the pictures. Look at the range of ages and cultures playing with each other! Even though these are all Witten locals, many of these people had never previously spoken to each other, let alone played an epic mashup of foosball and mini-golf. Interactivity and user engagement was everywhere because WhAT remained true to the principals of theatricality in the design of this public urban space.

Coulombe reflected on the overall experience after having time to evaluate its merit. He stated, “Architecture has a tendency to be dreadfully academic, and ‘fun’ usually translates as ‘gimmicky.’ It was a true blessing to be free of that stigma and actually make something that is first and foremost, a pleasure to interact with.¹⁸”

Conclusions

All the research points to one thing: there is clarity and vision in a project that adheres to these principles of designing with the four elements of theatricality as your guide. This is a design strategy perhaps best suited for public projects, hence the pedestrian-friendly urban spaces disclaimer discussed at great length by Jan Gehl and countless others. Theatricality can mean much more than solely an application of something fake slapped on as an afterthought or an over-the-top, flashy bit of attention-grabbing silliness.

The research does not aim to be a definitive way to design public spaces. It is the framework and a set of guidelines that can better a place in the long run and push architectural designs to do things they have previously ignored. People and place are already theatrical by nature, so why fight against that nature. Use the actors and focus on the story, not merely the set.

Ultimately, the conclusion that has been made is that there is something more powerful than the framework alone. Theatricality in the form of transition, spectacle, tactility, and flexibility is certainly important as a framework, but the most important part of the design is how those elements integrate with the story and the characters. It is always how the people, actors and audience of spectacles, interact with a public space in ways that are tactile, transitory, and highly flexible. The reason for much of the success of the design projects highlighted in this article can be seen in how the designers adhere to the core of theatricality and always kept in mind the people and the ultimate user engagement over all else. With theatricality as our tool, we can battle spatial stereotypes and continue to enrich the pedestrian experience of public space.

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