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Insites

The Good Life

Have we forgotten how to make good use of our public space? A growing list of grassroots organizations and young designers are putting the idea of fun back into the way we use our cities.

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To play is to assume roles, to tell stories, to pretend, explore and test limits. Play operates beyond conventions and opens our world to multiple futures. The Good Life--New Public Spaces for Recreation, a recent exhibition hosted by the Van Alen Institute in New York, explored play as a method of reinventing and revitalizing our cities.

The Good Life exhibition marks a point in post-industrial societies where cities are seen as more than places to merely live, worship and work. Public spaces in cities have been places of transport, religious festivals, political demonstrations, executions, warfare, and revolutions. The exhibition celebrates a new revolution in our public spaces; a revolution of play, recreation and culture.

Curator Zoë Ryan gathered over 70 international projects to mount a comprehensive exhibition at Pier 40 on the Hudson River in Manhattan. The spirited exhibition highlighted how former industrial waterfronts, brownfields, infrastructure and forgotten lands are being reclaimed for new recreational and leisure uses. Ryan's curatorial decision to include temporary public art projects with visionary, designed, and built public space projects illuminated the connection between public action and public space. Mobile phone games, parkour, psychogeography, and parking space reclamations were shown side by side with waterfront plazas, linear parks and recreational trails.

The dialectic constructed by situating actions beside the designed and planned emphasized the importance of people and their participation in public space. Public spaces find their meaning through their occupation. These temporary projects reappropriate overlooked or badly designed places and bring them back to life.

One of the temporary projects in the exhibition was a project in Alexanderplatz, a vast plaza in Berlin. Pulska Ravn and Johan Carlsson, members of the art group RACA, created an installation by dressing up in uniforms and setting up 100 blue deck chairs in the middle of the concrete square. Every day for one week the artists arranged the chairs in a regular pattern in the square. The public would move the chairs throughout the course of the day and create their own territories and spaces. This simple furniture facilitation provided more for the plaza than any design intervention, and was a lot more fun.

We are spending increasing amounts of time indoors in our homes, cars, offices, and malls, and have forgotten how to use public space. But events, actions, and groups like RACA not only remind us how, but also bring value back to spaces that are underappreciated, causing enough public attention to create the political will to revitalize a place. Many of these projects are self-organized, mobilized and publicized. The internet is playing an important role for these projects in community building, idea exchange and promotion through the blogosphere. To play means to choose between two realities. These temporary events have chosen an optimistic future, one that is independent of physical design. They

rediscover public space in a playful way and open up new possibilities for public acts.

A Good Life project that bridges the temporary with the permanent is Bathing Ship in the River Spree by AMP arquitectos with Gil Wilk and Susanne Lorenz. A result of a competition by Berlin's Public Art Association, this semi-permanent public space was created by reusing a former shipping barge in designing a contemporary urban marine bath. The resulting public space revitalized an industrial waterfront, brought people there for the first time, and was so popular that an air-filled plastic membrane was added to provide a year-round sauna and lounge. Much like RACA's seating in Alexanderplatz, the Bathing Ship shows that the addition of considered urban furniture sets the stage for public space with minimal investment or design intervention.

The Riva-Split Waterfront project was shown in the exhibition as an example of a minimal public space intervention. The waterfront site on the edge of the city of Split was already a popular public place with a rich history of year-round events. 3LHD Architects decided to create an informally planned, neutral stage of subtle paving, seating and fountains that would support public events that were already happening. The resulting built project has a subtlety of meaning that is directly derived from the architects' understanding of the public culture of the city.

Four of the 70 projects in the exhibition were by Canadian artists and designers, and all four projects originated in Toronto which is well known internationally for grassroots public space initiatives like Dufferin Grove Park and Spacing magazine. The Toronto projects were Guerilla Gardening by the Toronto Public Space Committee, Pillow Fight by Newmindspace, P2P--Power to the People by Gorbet Design and Velo-city, my own project.

Guerilla Gardeners helped reclaim the overlooked edges of public spaces by planting gardens that bring life to our hard cities. Pillow Fight was a seemingly spontaneous pillow fight in public space where Newmindspace organized time, place, and other particulars through e-mail, and participants subsequently gathered for public play. Power to the People was a temporary installation in the square in front of Kitchener City Hall comprised of a simple pixel board of 125 bulbs that allowed the public to write their own messages. Velo-city is a visionary proposal for a high-speed bicycle highway for Toronto. Beyond the gaze of supervision, play is used to test limits and build communities, and these four Toronto projects help to change our cultural aspirations towards public space.

Although The Good Life juxtaposes the ephemeral together with the tangible, it is rare to see these projects act together in practice. One example from Toronto that demonstrated the interaction between the temporary and the designed is Quay to the City, a week-long event planned to enact a part of the winning entry for the Toronto Central Waterfront Competition led by West8 and duToit Allsopp Hillier (DTAH). Quay to the City took over one side of an existing waterfront road to create a temporary kilometre-long stretch of bicycle lanes, sculptures built with bicycles, 12,000 red geraniums and a picnic lawn.

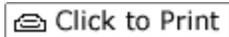
Quay to the City was inspired directly by the cycling culture of Toronto and the collective desire to connect the waterfront and give it back to the people, an event revealing the transition from culture to design. In striking contrast, another element of the West8/DTAH proposal was a large floating maple leaf proposed for the Toronto harbour. This syrupy gesture shows no relationship to the active culture of the city, and the maple leaf replaces public space with a disconnected symbol, leaving authenticity behind and entering a realm of pastiche and fantasy. Fantasy is a place where the public is passive and expects to be entertained and amused. In play, the public is active, participating within an accepted structure and engaging in a collective future.

By putting together temporary urban occupations of space with design propositions, The Good Life

exhibition suggests a new possible relationship between designers and the public, one where design helps set the stage for public space activities and where temporary installations help our culture understand the value of public space. Play is a necessary part of maturation; The Good Life shows us that playing in public space is a serious part of our urban evolution.

Chris Hardwicke is an artist, urbanist and associate with Sweeny Sterling Finlayson & Co. Architects in Toronto. His project Velo-city, a proposal for a high-speed bicycle highway for Toronto, was part of The Good Life exhibition.

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