Energising the city : play

Pleasing everyone

Working for a community, a city, a neighbourhood, a local authority, a school or a company, means trying to please everyone. By definition, it is somehow an impossible mission, since everybody is a different person. However, one can at least imagine making a consensus on one point when making a gift. A gift is always a nice thing to receive and to give. Let's say we want to please the whole family. We shall celebrate all together with a Christmas tree and toys for children. Let's imagine now we want to please an entire neighborhood. We do the same with an original playground for kids, and it shall be even better with a bit of lights. Like a Christmas tree with its garlands.

by
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If there are no children involved, things might be slightly more complicated. You would need a gift for adults. A collective gift. Something that pleases everyone. Something that precisely gives pleasure to everyone. Mainly meaning: that can help you eat or sleep, laugh with your friends, play sports.

Apart from that, the design consists of organising circulations and functions, connections, at best. Pleasing every individual adult is harder by solely doing this, without adding the gift on top of it.

Children's imagination is free and powerful. It doesn't absolutely need explicit inputs to develop, like ours does. My example is a spontaneous and never-ending play for children of all ages: the cabin.

We know the cabin in different shapes: the tree house, cave, forest, etc. There is also a more urban and interior version of it that works as well: Sunday afternoon in the room, a hut made of mattresses, poised between a chair and a broomstick, made out of sheets or towels. One moment it can be a boat, or

a car, the next moment it's a castle, it lends itself to interpretation and abstractions: It is intelligent.

In the same perspective, we seek in our playgrounds proposals to address children's intelligence, specifically in order to mix storylines and super-impose different possible evocations and use of the element.

This is to offer different scenarios, different interpretations, different worlds, that may consequently seem abstract and unrealistic for us adults. "This looks like nothing", here, is a desired quality. Or even better: "this is like nothing specific", as it takes minimal effort for one to detect similarities with what is known.

Risk taking

Risk taking is a fundamental educational concept in the approach of play as a learning and development tool. It is also a great one for building up the cities. It is by taking risks that children learn and push their limits. It is through taking risks that children compare to one another, and stimulate further. On a playground, risk taking may be framed, thoughtful and predictable. It must be visible and obvious for children: falling heights and slippery surfaces are the most explicit examples. Risk taking is a game indeed. Risk of falling and scratching one's knees, tripping, slipping. It is a game in itself, and a pattern of individual and collective emulation factor. Smaller kids take on bigger risks and seek to push their limits. The dangers are clearly identified. The difficulty of play is assumed.

Infantile sociability (& parental as well)

It is striking for us how playgrounds are now mostly used by children along with their parents. This implies a strong influx of parents but also new issues: parents now want to look over their children at any time. Children's sociability implies that they should be able to play together, meet, and develop their own relations though. Many of our games are rather designed as interiorities, spaces to travel and explore. It seems appropriate to us to provide children with places that are reserved for them with comfortable conditions and specific access, as long as these areas are clearly identified and located.

Among the many urban actions that can contribute to give some value to an area, a town or a district, whether old or new, poor of totally gentrified, one seems more powerful and efficient than any. Straightening streets, aligning and rehabilitating facades, planting trees for the future, renewing sidewalks. All these take time, cost money, and the results are uncertain, if one seeks to measure its impact on the lives of people. In contrast, a

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playground beast, that looks like nothing known, will arouse curiosity and the interest of families in a very large area, which is likely to literally open up a neighbourhood. Apart from a new shopping centre, we haven't found a more efficient way to move up crowds daily. In addition, the exclusive, unique and improbable nature of this public equipment can be a source of local pride, a sign of uniqueness that may be what is often lacking. The playful and infantile dimension, like sports, has indeed a tremendous potential for urban development, as it acts directly on the image and projection that people make of their own environment. •

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