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Places to play

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How interactive is architecture? Networked computer systems, tablets and smartphones foreground the issue of interactivity amongst people, and between people and objects. Mikael Wiberg outlines some of the technologies and concepts that might contribute to an interactive architecture. The list includes virtual reality (VR), 3D worlds, video games, mobile and ubiquitous computing, intelligent environments, location-based services, augmented reality, and the newer "mobile augmented reality, notions of proxemics/proxemics interaction, device ecologies, and— at architectural scale—interaction design for smart buildings, interactive architecture, and even smart cities and urban computing" (Wiberg, 2015).

In this article I wish to pick up on the theme of play as emblematic of interactivity, and in particular an idea central to play -- that of *contest*. Contest is a form of interaction that pervades sport, video games, play in general, and commerce. Urban environments provide a play arena, as individuals, political parties and factions contest territory, and position themselves as leaders and winners. I want to emphasise the idea that interaction involves *public life* -- productive interactions amongst people (groups, residents, citizens, and the wider world) through whatever medium is available to them, including urban spaces. I argue that rather than technologies that respond to touch, gestures, commands, and behaviours, the starting point for thinking about interactive architecture is those legions of complex interactions between people. In this sense architecture lays claim to be amongst the most "interactive" of disciplines.

Computer gaming and contest

Computer gaming is highly interactive. I'm drawn to the word (*agon*) as one of the game patterns identified by Roger Caillois in his classic book on play *Man, Play and Games* (Caillois, 1961). Theorists of computer game design have certainly picked up on Caillois' writing. There are video games of vertigo (rushing about, spinning, and jumping), mimicry (dressing up, presenting yourself as an avatar), chance (rolling dice, taking risks), and *agon* (battles, fights),

and of course any game may have these in combination. Caillois says that *Agon* is "a question of rivalry which hinges on a single quality (speed, endurance, strength, memory, skill, ingenuity, etc.), exercised, within defined limits and without outside assistance, in such a way that the winner appears to be better than the loser in a certain category of exploits" (14). Caillois could have been describing any number of interactive video games from *Pac-Man* to *Assassin's Creed* or *Splatoon*. The case for *agon* in interactive computer gaming is easy to make. But if we can establish a role for *agon* in architecture and the city then that provides a good theoretical basis for thinking further about interaction design and architecture.

Contested places

It's also helpful to read what architectural theorists have to say about architecture on themes that intersect obliquely with interaction design. In an essay in a book, *Phenomenologies of the City*, architectural theorist Wendy Pullan draws attention to the role of *agon* in understanding architecture and urban environments (Pullan, 2015). She makes no reference to interactive computer games, and scant reference to play, but her insights signal an architectural interest in the primacy of contest. Interactivity as contest already pervades city life – long before interactive computer systems.

Pullan explains the ancient term *agon* as used by Aristotle, and from which we derive the words *agony*, *antagonism*, *antagonistic* and the less familiar words *agonism,* and *agonistic.* By her reading, cities, and the architecture of which they are composed, are at their most vibrant and intense when they are *agonistic*. Certain contested and/or divided places, such as Jerusalem, Beirut, Nicosia, Sarajevo and Belfast bring the agonistic city into sharp relief. But she argues that contest is embedded in any city, as part of the "urban order" (214). She's keen to distance *agon* from the conventional view that it inevitably involves antagonism between factions that have entrenched positions. Nor do cities with *polarised* populations present the best examples of the agonistic city.

Pullan emphasises the *constructive* aspect of city conflict. In ancient Greece, *agon* was most often associated with the polis and the city state. She identifies notable "agonistic practices" that still incorporate and spatialise conflict in the city: "ancient cults of sacrifice; Dionysiac theatre; the division of Italian towns into rival *contrade* (quarters) that still culminate in ritualised competitions such as the biannual Palio horserace in Siena; widespread and elaborate hunting procedures; military ceremonies that supplant fighting, as in the daily border

rituals between Pakistani Lahore and Indian Amritsar; and sports of various sorts, especially football." She also notes that courts, assemblies and parliaments, are "based upon agonistic principles and practices" (215).

Pullan's account reminds me of classic narratives of urban contest as found in *Romeo and Juliette*, and more recent science fiction novels such as the *Divergent* trilogy by Veronica Roth, in which a post apocalyptic city is divided into factions defined by human virtues: selfless, peaceful, honest, brave and intelligent. You belong to one faction or the other, unless you are one of the outcast "divergents" who defies categorisation. It's now an action film and will soon be a video game. In this and other respects the kind of contest we see in popular film and video games provides a limited account of *agon*, as they typically define and pit opposing factions against one another, missing out on the subtle and fluid interplay of actors in any urban context. How can we ever be sure who is on the side of right, or of the categories to which people are supposed to belong? At best, such presentations extend the simplified and ritualised treatment of contest, but limit the interactive possibilities of *agon*.

Play spaces

Play exaggerates in any case. It has several characteristics (Winnicott, 1991). Some scholars think play is low risk preparation for encounters with high risk situations further down the line. It's a means of exploring and developing trust. Some think of courtship as such a game. Play is also a way of socialising and bonding. Sometimes play has rules (e.g. chess and tennis). Sometimes it's just messing about, in solitude or in company. It can be competitive and/or collaborative. Play is not always combative, nor is the contest between players obvious, but there's an attempt to excel at something, not least to beat oneself, or trump the designer of the game.

Not all players bring the contest into their conscious awareness. One of the further characteristics of play is that players are absorbed in the process, a state known well to musicians and performers. We are most at play when unselfconsciously engaged. In a self-help book on adopting a playful attitude, psychologist Stuart Brown says: "When we are fully engaged in play, we lose a sense of the passage of time. We also experience diminished consciousness of self. We stop worrying about whether we look good or awkward, smart or stupid. We stop thinking about the fact that we are thinking. In imaginative play, we can even be a different self. We are fully in the moment, in the zone." (Brown, and Vaughan, 2009, p.17)

This idea of unselfconscious engagement supports further the importance of *agon*, contest, as involving a surreptitious array of complex interactions.

What is the role of devices and technologies in this place of play? As well as architecture we can turn to music for insight into interactivity. In writing about music in everyday life, which inevitably involves smartphones and other mobile media devices, musicologist Tia DeNora says, "to play is to dream in the medium of action" (DeNora, 2013, p.42). She adds, "play furnishes the lifeworld with opportunities for action, with things (roles, riffs, possibilities, personae, scenarios, postures, action chains, styles) that one can play, replay and play over and play around with, together in ways that access forms of experience and ways of being in the world" (42-3). It's about "making a place." Technologies inevitably come into play in this place making. DeNora says, "If play is engagement with the world, then the features of the world can be understood in the broadest sense as toys" (43). This is not to trivialise those sophisticated and enabling technologies that surround us. It's to position them as components of an architecture in which people interact with each other, as children might share toys in a nursery.

Divergence

Lest we think that contest is easily subsumed within a polite urbanity of mutual game play, then it's helpful to consider how cities play host to a range of spatial activities that are at the edge of civility. There are practices inconvenient to some, often hazardous, opportunistic, unofficial, and occasionally entertaining. Think of graffiti, skateboarding, rooftopping, parkour, free running, begging, busking, sleeping rough, demonstration, and occupation. Such marginal spatial practices claim places and city paraphernalia in ways other than their sponsors, designers, legislators, and polite civilian users intended. In fact these contested practices challenge the concept of intentionality in the design of streets, buildings, parks and malls, and put architecture as an intentional practice in its place. Some people, for some of the time and with different motivations, will find ways to subvert the normal, sanctioned and official usage of a thing. They see different affordances in everyday objects, and different ways of interacting with them.

It's worth thinking a little about parkour, a particular spatial practice that also appears in video gaming. Think of protagonists leaping across parapets and clambering over roofs in *Assassin's Creed* or *Divergence*. In an academic article about parkour, Jeffrey Kidder notes how: "individuals appropriate physical space and transform it into something useful from their perspective. Handrails become slides; gridlocked streets become mazes" (Kidder, 2012, p.244).

He recounts his own foray into the pastime of parkour (PK). After a while you start to develop "PK vision": "Suddenly, the low and wide wooden posts that lined the parking lot jumped out at me. They were about two feet off the ground and five feet apart, and they would be an ideal place for practicing precision jumps" (246).

For the neophyte *traceur* (parkour practitioner) new relationships between objects, and their affordances, start to assume prominence. I assume such transformations come with acculturation to any urban practice: the jogger who starts to see the world in terms of uninterrupted paths and circular routes, the cyclist who assesses the city in terms of gradients and congestion, the rough sleeper who thinks of the city in terms of shelter, security, and invisibility.

There's a sense in which we city dwellers are all traceurs. For Kidder, "traceurs are remaking the city—turning bland structures like ledges and walls into objects of play. And this play is not only enjoyed by traceurs; it is consumed by others as well" (247). So those of us who know about parkour, chance upon groups of traceurs, who see their representations in film and online, and in particular designers who reflect on its spatial implications, are all under the influence of parkour, along with many other marginal urban practices. Such remakings of the city are not just foibles in perception by individuals, but are a feature of the shared perception of a group: "PK vision does not solely reside in the eye of the individual traceur. It is a collective process that comes about as traceurs interact with each other" (247).

Kidder relates the practice to online videos, which are after all the main source of inspiration for parkour: "the traceur's imagination is inspired from images and texts circulating within the virtual world" (248). Such marginal urban practices are in wide circulation and colour the way many of us see the city. They also bring into question our usual ways of seeing and interacting. The city is after all made and remade through many perspectives and interactive possibilities. No doubt there are other perspectives yet to find expression, and yet to provide overt influence on the design of cities.

Public design

In her advocacy of *agon*, Pullan is keen to point out that there really are no rules for agonistic play. Identification of the protagonists, their differences and causes are fluid, contingent and subject to the workings of interpretation, and rightly exercised, debated and worked out in public life. So an architecture that provides space for public life is crucial for the working of *agon*.

She concludes: "Place, by being structured in everyday activities rather than regulatory systems, can begin to open a territory where the necessary flexibility of *agon* can exist, with all of its paradoxes and ambiguities. It is in the combination of the two, rooted in both the everyday life and political possibilities of cities, that agonistic practice may find a home" (Pullan, 2015, p.222).

So *agon*, contest, as a set of rich urban practices provides a good place to think about "interactive architecture," in which networked digital technologies and digital content are inevitably complicit, and which bring interactivity to light in new ways. It's an architecture that gives space to public life and the workings of *agon*.

To follow this line of argument is to emphasize two main propositions about interaction design. First, interaction design is primarily concerned with interactions, collaborations and even conflicts between people within communities, rather than just individuals interacting with machines and technical systems. Interaction design within the setting of the city as a site of contest brings this communal nature of interaction into sharp relief. Second, as well as providing tools and technologies that facilitate social interaction in cities, there's scope for designers to make their presence felt as active and conspicuous participants in city life. Citizens interacting with networked parking meters, environmental monitoring and surveillance systems, and distributed rich media entertainment are like savvy video game players. They are interacting with design teams and those sociotechnical systems of which the designers are a part. There's a message here for the consumers of such systems to engage with the design of their interactive environments, and also for designers to be open to the contest and play of co-design.

References

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