

Programming play into public space?

Sonia Curnier

With the rise of the “ludic city”, the work of Roger Caillois and Marc Breviglieri allows us to question the paradoxical character of planning and “programming” playfulness into public spaces, which should allow room for manoeuvre and encourage improvisation on the part of users.

Over recent decades, the theme of playfulness has been eagerly integrated into the development of public spaces in Western cities. The staging of play-related practices by developers raises the question of how much room for manoeuvre this kind of “planned playfulness” truly offers for future users of a given place. With this in mind, a certain number of “ludic” measures that have recently appeared on our urban landscapes deserve to be examined in detail. To this end, we shall borrow certain characteristics from the principle of the “guaranteed city” announced – and denounced – by the sociologist Marc Breviglieri (2013). Dialectically, we shall also turn to a fundamental work of research on the subject of play, *Les Jeux et les Hommes* (Caillois 1967), in order to explore certain essential traits of play such as latitude and uncertainty.

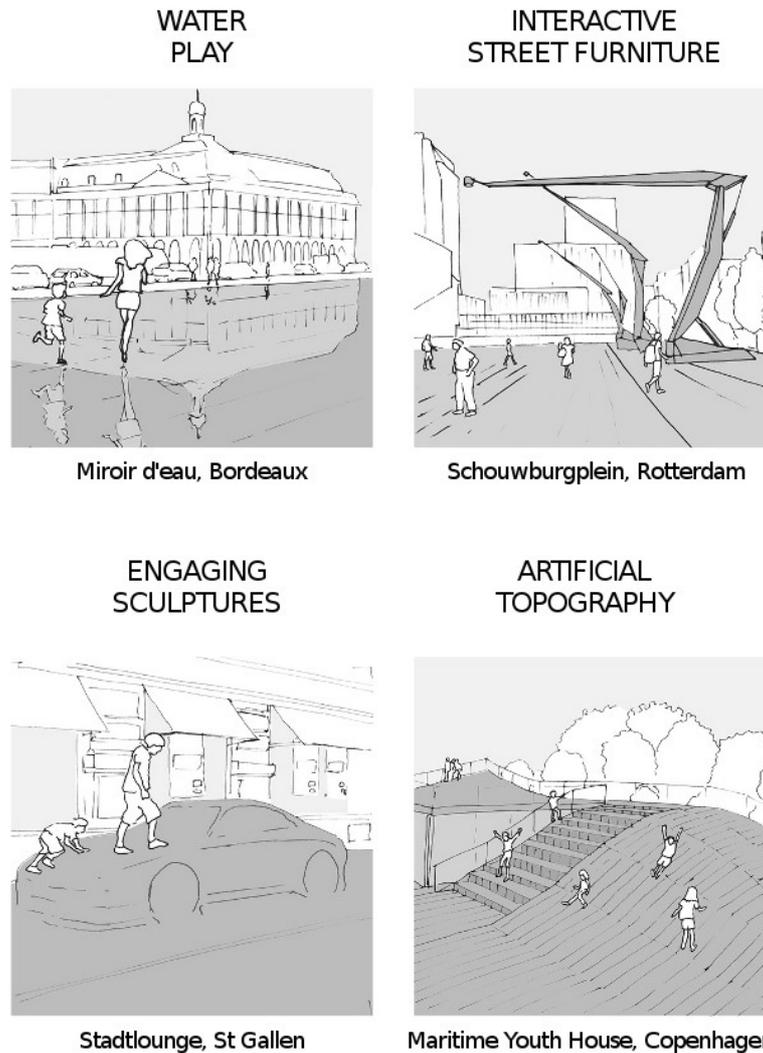
When the everyday city becomes a playground

Among those who design public spaces – architects, landscapers and artists alike – a growing tendency to adapt developments to more leisurely urban practices has been observed. In concrete terms, this has resulted in a proliferation of new types of spaces explicitly intended for play and urban sports. But the incorporation of a playful characteristic is also illustrated in more ordinary places in the city via what we shall call artefacts. By artefacts, we mean all features – street furniture, fountains, sculptures, surfacing materials – that encourage, and thus permit, the kind of hedonistic and playful attitudes that until quite recently might have been considered marginal, provocative or disrespectful, such as climbing, jumping, sliding, skating, paddling, swimming or simply lazing and relaxing (Crunelle 2013). Accordingly, in this article, the term “ludic city” shall be used to designate the phenomenon whereby the city is transformed into one big playground.

Building on work undertaken as part of a forthcoming doctoral thesis,¹ we propose a categorisation into four families of the most common artefacts that have recently appeared in our cities and which encourage ludic practices and behaviours. These families are: water play, interactive street furniture, engaging sculptures and artificial topography (see Figure 1).

¹ This work concerns the contemporary production of public spaces as analysed from a design and materiality standpoint, based on a comprehensive survey of public-space development projects in Europe.

Figure 1. Categorisation of recent “ludic features” into four families



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At first glance, all these artefacts could be considered ludic features. Indeed, if we consider the general definition established by Roger Caillois (1967), the artefacts identified suggest practices that *a priori* bear similarities to play, in that they enable escapism and provide pleasure. The author also describes play as a free activity in which no one is obliged to participate; in this sense, the measures in question can also be considered to be ludic. However, a detailed examination of these same artefacts in terms of the “guaranteed city” (Breviglieri 2013) reveal that, in reality, they do not all offer the same opportunities for play.

The “ludic city” versus the “guaranteed city”

Marc Breviglieri (2013), intrigued by the forms in which European metropolises have tended to be presented in recent years, proposes a critique of the principle he calls “the guaranteed city”. This term refers to a planning trend that involves determining a normative and predictable use for urban spaces by eliminating any grey areas in terms of usage and any possibility of experimentation. One particular characteristic of this principle is that it encourages the city-dweller’s empowerment – a term that Marc Breviglieri uses to designate the feeling of independence that certain recent urban-planning strategies produce. This notion can be applied to ludic measures that encourage individual autonomy, in that these measures constitute access points that enable users to interact with their

spatial environment, thus providing them with a sensation of freedom and power. However, Marc Breviglieri (2013) considers this notion of empowerment to be harmful when it is nothing more than a decoy and when the feeling of autonomy produced corresponds in reality to a non-existent power. This initial caveat shall lead us to question certain forms of ludic measures. In particular, we shall consider two specific features of the “guaranteed city”, which will guide our analysis of measures implemented: the disappearance of ambiguity in the way urban spaces can be used and appropriated, and the desire to control the unpredictable.

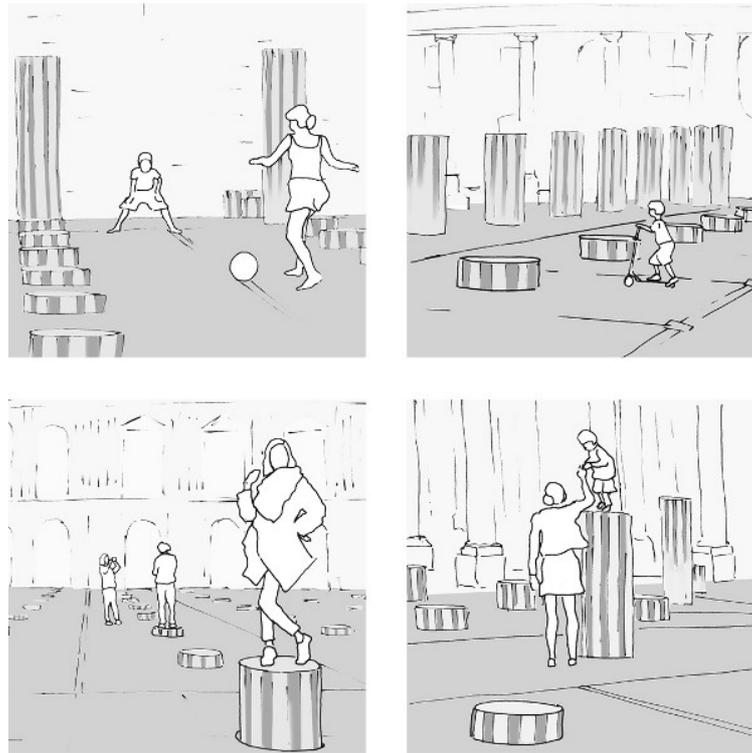
Unequivocal, controlled measures – or the absence of latitude and uncertainty

Individuals who engage in interaction with a ludic feature feel inhabited by a sense of control over their spatial environment. In the example of *interactive street furniture* illustrated above (Figure 1), the passer-by is suddenly given the power to light up a public square by activating giant articulated lamps. Although it produces a sense of freedom, escapism even, this type of measure in reality offers only a limited and legitimised experience of the city. Playful behaviour is channelled and any creative dimension is smothered. For, as Roger Caillois reminds us, in order for a ludic feature to be enjoyable, there must be some room for manoeuvre and exploration. In other words, the need to invent, improvise and create is an inherent characteristic of play.

In contrast to interactive street furniture, other, more equivocal measures, such as engaging sculptures, have a high level of creative potential. They offer different opportunities for play alongside more functional uses as seats or podiums, as exemplified by Daniel Buren’s work in the courtyard of the Palais-Royal in Paris. Visitors to this installation have used their imagination to reinterpret *Les Deux Plateaux*, turning it into a football pitch, a scooter obstacle course, pedestals for statues or a climbing frame, among other things (Figure 2). These appropriations correspond to such diverse instincts as the pursuit of competition, the pursuit of thrills and the pursuit of pretence, which are three of the broad categories of play identified by Roger Caillois (1967).²

² The fourth and final category was the pursuit of games of chance.

Figure 2. Various forms of appropriation and creative reinterpretation of the artistic installation *Les Deux Plateaux* by Daniel Buren, in the *cour d'honneur* of the Palais-Royal in Paris



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This critical angle reveals that certain kinds of features offer a greater degree of freedom and more varied opportunities than others. This room for manoeuvre provided by the equivocal nature of certain measures corresponds to what Marc Breviglieri theorises as “potentiality” and what Roger Caillois calls “latitude”. As the latter points out, the notion of latitude or flexibility is, moreover, rooted in the polysemy of the term “play” in the expression “to have a degree of play (in it)” when referring to the tightness or looseness of a mechanism,³ for example. But this kind of play must not be excessive, otherwise the mechanism runs the risk of no longer working properly.

This risk factor is, furthermore, at the heart of the second characteristic of the concept of the “guaranteed city”. According to this urbanisation principle, every eventuality should be anticipated, calculated and standardised in order to achieve precise, certified objectives, but above all in order to eliminate any uncertainty that automatically prefigures the ideas of disorder and insecurity. And yet uncertainty is another fundamental characteristic of play (Caillois 1967).⁴

The transposition of this factor to the analysis of the ludic city may give rise to fears that the measures implemented in recent years exclude a whole series of “rebellious” forms of play that presuppose an idea of impetuosity and danger. These bothersome attitudes tend to be proscribed from the planning and development of our cities. But how can the city be made a more playful place without including the dimensions of risk and disorder that are inherent in play? As things stand, we have to accept that it is difficult, if not inconceivable, to incorporate such aspects into the design of public spaces.

³ It is amusing to note that this polysemic use of the word “play” is also highlighted by Marc Breviglieri: “It [the varied city] fails, at least from the standpoint of a usage relationship that appropriates space in a familiar manner, occupies it and uses it in those places where it becomes inhabitable, and enhances exploration, thus creating a degree of play and therefore a place for play” (Breviglieri 2013, p. 231).

⁴ By this, Roger Caillois means that we cannot predict either the way in which it will occur, or its outcome.

However, this depends on the definition of risk that is used. While exposure to the danger of injuring oneself is indeed a risk that public officials should be aiming to reduce, risk-taking can also be understood as exposure to failure without consequences. In his book *The Ludic City*, Quentin Stevens illustrates this interpretation by citing the example of the risk of crossing a fountain without getting sprayed by one of its unpredictable water jets (Stevens 2007). With regard to the question of disorder, water play also allows for a degree of hustle and bustle and improvisation, albeit in a controlled and clearly delimited form. Other devices such as artificial topography also produce play areas that inspire unexpected and risky practices, for which only users could be held responsible (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Hustle and bustle linked to *water play* and risky practices associated with *artificial topographies*



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Encouraging creativity, and accepting the unpredictable

This brief analysis of the four families of ludic artefacts from the critical perspective of the “guaranteed city” reflects the difficulty involved in planning for diverse recreational uses of spaces. However, as we have seen, certain urban environments, as a result of the way they are planned, offer more opportunities for play than others. Interactive street furniture, for instance, stands out from the other families of devices in that it offers no degree of latitude or uncertainty in terms of the way it is used and appropriated. At first glance, the unconventional use of public space suggested by such street furniture gives the illusion that these are ludic installations. In reality, though, the true extent of the potential for play on offer is quite limited, as its use is both planned and expected. As a result of their prescriptive dimension, planning strategies that employ such devices differ from

projects that transform an ordinary urban territory into an area for play through sculpture, through alterations to relief, and through the mobilisation of sensory elements such as water.

These latter kinds of features reflect a different attitude on the part of their designers with regard to the theme of play, as they seek to elicit playful behaviour without prescribing specific uses. More specifically, they leave room for disorder, risk and, above all, the unexpected creativity of the city-dweller – in other words, they configure a certain potential for appropriation and misappropriation into their design. After all, isn't recreation all about re-creating, and more particularly about (mis)appropriating objects and twisting their primary functions?

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