

From Playable to Playful: The Humorous City

Chamari Edirisinghe^(✉), Anton Nijholt, and Adrian David Cheok

Imagineering Institute, Anchor 5, Mall of Medini, no 4, Lebuh Medini Utara,
Medini Iskandar, 79200 Iskandar Puteri, Johor, Malaysia
{chamari, anton, adrian}@imagineeringinstitute.org

Abstract. This writing is focusing on the concept of play in the city. In pursuit of ideal city, the concept of play has been neglected, pushed to labelled corners, assigned to certain age bracket. Playable city movement has brought the play in to the dialogue on city, the contemporary smart city, underlining the factors such as humor, spontaneity and pleasure. This paper introduces taking the playable city a step further towards a playful city, where play is a continuous process of city living, seamlessly integrated into the smart structure of the city, where citizens can reinvent the infrastructure for humorous purposes.

Keywords: Playable · Playful · Humor · Urban spaces · Smart city

1 Introduction

Until Industrial Revolution, the city was considered as an image of the society rather than a distinctive form of social living [1]. Sennett considers city as a “... one of the oldest artifacts of civilized life” [1]. Today, 54 % of the world population are living in urban areas and expected to rise to 66 % by 2050 according to the 2014 UN report on Urbanization. Although the city is expected to be permanent and stable, it is a constantly changing entity. Mumford [2] believed that the city is a facet of human potentials and social actions. Jane Jacobs [3] has underlined the capability and flexibility of both city and its people to create change, emphasizing on the inclusiveness.

According Lefebvre [4] spaces are created socially through interactions. Thus, a city is not merely about policy and planning but also what varied interactions have created, freely or intentionally. The global communication, powers of multi-national corporations and increased mobility define the primary functions of the contemporary city, making distance and place inconsequential. Although some argued that the smart city, Information Communication Technology (ICT) integrated urban solutions, is an affixation of a label to a city [5], people are part of the system by means of their interactions [6] and communication devices.

The contemporary city is hyper-connected, over populated, divided, polluted and socially active, and still connected through mutual practices, such as friendship, sociality and pleasure. Mumford’s “theater of social action” [2] or Jacobs’s street dance [3] is in essence an emphasis on these mutual practices, and Lefebvre’s social production of space is a discussion on experiencing the city through these mutual practices. Play is a practice of experiencing pleasure and grounded on sociality, humor and freedom. Play is not new to the city or vice versa. Cities are centers for playing various

games, such as conventional marathons, extreme bull runs or hilarious *La Tomatina*, the tomato throwing festival. Through playing, the city becomes the center of participation, producing pleasurable spaces of humor and play. According to Jane Jacobs [3] ‘casual social interactions’ create public trust, thus strengthening the activities, and enhancing the experience and joy.

Every city has designated places for play, a clearly drawn out borders, frequently associated with children rather than adults, neither encouraging Jacobs’s ‘casual social interactions’, nor evoking spontaneous humor. Play is associated with that specific space, within those specific boundaries, with clearly expressed interpretation of what play should be. With the city planning employing networks and sensors to create a systemic smartness within city living, play signifies a practice that makes city a joyful and humorous experience, spontaneous and unpredicted. The objective of this writing is to understand the concept ‘play’ in the city and how a city can be a playful and humorous space, encouraging spur-of-the-moment joy, unexpected experiences and participation.

2 City as a Playroom

In the contemporary city, governments and tech corporations are conjoining to make cities ‘smart’. While the city is going through this digitizing process, citizen dialogue, and the engagement with the city is increasingly becoming impeded [5] due to perhaps the nature of the technological smartness of the city [7]. Play and humor are suggested as an extension to the smart city, an alternative to the lack of human-centric approach and citizen engagement with the city. It is being suggested to combat the impending distress of inhabitants over the alienating city. Smart city has redefined the ‘right to the city’, the right to change the city and change ourselves within the city, and play as part of the city falls within this claim, especially when the play is being discussed in a holistic manner.

There are number of perspectives as concerns, when discussing city as a playroom. Firstly, play needs to be a seamless integrated to the cityscape and infrastructure and be part of the city activities. Human Pacman [8], a wearable interactive entrainment system, that transits between virtual and real world in an urban setting, is an attempt at this compelling to scale the cityscapes and create and share. Shadowing [9], a project that makes the city lights alive by giving it a memory of people that passed by as shadows, and then reflecting them on passers-by, is a an integration of play into night time cityscape.

Secondly, humor and fun is an important factor when considering a city as a playground. Nijholt [10] has extensively discussed the advantage of integrating humor into digital environment and internet of things, especially utilizing technology to generate humor. Humor has a tendency to lighten up an environment, create unexpected sense of balance in interactions, and gives pleasure that even in retrospective brings a smile. In 2012, 25 years old Singaporean artist Samantha Lo, decided to spray paint the streets of Singapore with messages, and attached stickers on roadside crossings, creating a nationwide controversy [11]. Her musings were humorous and her play with the smart structure of the city is by evoking satire of the smartness itself.

With Singapore's strict laws on street art, the artist was promptly arrested. However, the citizens found this humorous as an act of play that should be encouraged and allow citizens to reinvent and hack the infrastructure for their own humorous purposes.

As the third point in this discussion in city as a playroom, is the arbitrary and involuntary participation which promotes the qualities of freedom and choice. Jane Jacobs [3] recounting a successful city, underlined the idea that there should be a clear separation of public and private spaces. It is similar with play in a city; the participation needs to be arbitrary and involuntary, neither forced nor unfairly manipulated. The Smart Car Company has started an initiative to make pedestrians mindful of traffic through entertaining them while waiting for the red light to turn green, discouraging them from crossing across a red traffic light [12]. This initiative used humor, in the form of red manikin dancing in its small window, and voluntary participation by providing the dance moves to the manikin, thus evoking public participation and a joyful experience.

3 From Playable to Playful

Play is not supposed to be a formalized activity. It should be open, free, impulsive, humorous and joyous. In the city with sensors and actuations systematizing, monitoring and controlling activities, and city planning and policy methodically mapping the city while erasing urban histories and memories, play is an approach to recapture the city.

The 'Playable' city movement explaining their objectives stressed the need for city infrastructure to be part of connections: both interpersonal and person to city connections. Thus, it encourage to create spaces of interactions while integrating with the city's infrastructure, making 'playable' city an extension of the digital city, with joy, humor, and play as leading themes. At this juncture, after deliberating on the city as a playroom and objectives of playable city, the authors would like to enquire why playable city not becomes an everyday experience, an everyday interaction that is part of the city itself. De Lange [5] has mentioned that the playful city is a city that stimulate citizens with play while the playable city is a city that becomes smart at infrastructure and institutional level, thus indicating certain dependency. However, the authors would like to avoid providing definitions to differentiate playable and playful city, with the knowledge that definitions will constrain its flexibility as a practice, putting it in to a certain framework. Since play is described according to the context, the authors would like the playful city to be understood by stakeholders according to the city context.

The 'Playable' city movement has already established the importance of play being part of the contemporary city. It established that the playable city is, to a certain level, a bottom-up endeavor and also established that city can be playable, spatially and through social interactions. However, there arises the question why the city is considered only as a place appropriate to play, rather than city itself is a play. The shift from playable to playful may possibly appear to be rhetorical, yet it reveals certain realities in contemporary smart city living. One aspect is the safety of the existing security measures in city infrastructure. To contemplate creating playful spaces in a smart city as an everyday experience, without obstructing the everyday functions of the city, needs careful planning, because our discussion here is not about conventional

spaces for play, but involving digital sensors and actuators. Nijholt [10] was discussing the integration of humor into this digital environments as a community initiation; nonetheless this concept needed essentially to be part of city planning for seamless integration and security.

However, the concept of playful city being absorbed into the policy and planning will signify certain constraints on somewhat bottom-up approach enjoyed by the playable city and particularly pleasing and popular experiences, such as spontaneity and unexpected joy. Nonetheless, as Lefebvre has stated, human interactions create social spaces, thus the top-down playful city will be appropriated by individuals who interact with its playful arrangements, creating new playful experiences. The perception of the city as a playful city will encourage individuals to be humorous and create their own play environs on smart city platforms.

Another aspect of playful city concept is understanding the limitations of play. The playable city is experimenting with the notion of city as a possible playroom to improve the everyday experiences of city life, thus it undeniably has limitations on play and joy of impulsive participation. Conversely, playful city requires maintaining the playful ideals. The city itself is play, thus presenting complex concerns such as new interpretations to certain concepts such as humor, spontaneity, participation and plays itself. Humor and spontaneity will be interpreted by the participants to suit the context of their choosing. Those interpretations will be user-centric, which will seamlessly flow with the rest of the city's trappings.

This writing is not a proposal for playable city vs playful city, but considering the notion of changing the perception of the city as a place that could play to a place that is engaged in the play in a continuous process, as part of its psyche. As Lefebvre [5] expressed space is produced through social interactions, thus any initiation on play, whether it is bottom-up or top-down, will be interpreted, changed, modified, and adjusted with societal interactions. Thus, a continuous process of play or playfulness in a city will continue to grow with participation and interactions of people. Playable city conducts to playful living, but playful city will be part of the living experience.

4 Conclusion

In the quest for ideal city, the concept of play has been neglected, pushed to designated corners, assigned to certain age bracket. Playable city movement has brought the play into the dialogue on city, the contemporary smart city, underlining the factors such as humor, spontaneity and pleasure. This paper is introducing taking the playable city a step further towards a playful city, where play is a continuous process of city living, seamlessly integrated into the smart structure with freedom to reorganize the infrastructure for humor and joy. Undoubtedly, the concept of playful city will present its own challenges; however, as a continuous process, playful city will become a humorous part of city living with rich social interactions.

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