Playability for Cities

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Abstract. Urban design and planning can contribute to the making of enjoyable civic environments. Urban places beloved by the citizens do not only exhibit visual comfort and convenient urban structure, but also provide a feeling of satisfaction and psychological rewards. In the article, urban places like the entertainment zones in the United States and playable places in South Korea are described. A sense of liking, desires for social activities, and immersive environments (mental involvement in urban environment) associated with play and participatory experience are discussed as part of the playable features embedded in cities.

Keywords: Playability, Pleasure, Entertainment, Urban design

1. Introduction

In the 1980s and 90s, Korean society underwent changes that were difficult to reverse in many respects. Outside the country, the era of the Cold War and ideological confrontation began to recede, at least slowly. Within the Korean peninsula, a number of social problems have emerged after the 1980s Olympics and the economic boom. As political democratization took place, it was more urgent to find the identity of the individuals—raising the question of “who am I” and “what do I like”—rather than to fabricate a set of communal values at a regional or a national level. At the same time, a new kind of play culture and a desire for pleasing experience spread into the cities. For instance, in the early 1990s, the ‘karaoke room’ popped up all over the country in a short period of time and was established as a place for entertainment and social gathering. During the period, various ‘love hotels’ and ‘decadent cafes’ mushroomed. At least for some people, they became a place for taboo behaviors and deviation from routine everyday lives.

Cities evolve in response to the emergence of social demands and marketable place-based services. Among them, play and pleasure constitute one of the strong driving forces transforming the urban environment. From a broader perspective, the “quality of life” in cities is not only associated with affordable services and quality living environments, but also is affected by the manner that urban citizens are capable of enjoying the city. As previously proposed in the hedonic treadmill theory, an individual has to keep walking on a treadmill to at least stay in the same place. In the same manner, a sense of happiness and pleasure in cities is accomplished only when the urban environments transform (or ‘walk’) according to the change in social expectation and individuals’ desire. Urban citizens, including us and our nearby neighbors, continue to pursue happiness and pleasure in the city. Once they achieve it, wheels must move again to achieve a new kind of joy and excitement.
In some cities around the world, desire for deviation from the norms has shaped the urban identity. For instance, one can experience a burst of Latin music and liquor shops in the streets of Calle Obispo in Havana, Cuba, which dates back to the late 16th century. Entertainment shows and gambling characterize the experience in Las Vegas, which is often referred to as the capital of the world’s entertainment and casino. Angeles in Philippines—sometimes called the Sin City—is filled with decadent night-time shops, places for prostitution and illegal drugs. As the wheels of pleasure roll, various places infiltrate the cities, sometimes legitimately and in other times illegally.

1.1. The Concept ofPlayable City

Pleasurable experience in cities goes beyond the ambiguous state hanging between the legal and the illegal lines. The concept of “playable city” began to capture the imagination of cities and activists around the world, offering a new insight of connecting people and culture. Kids’ play in a neighborhood park, night-time walking or bicycling along a trail, or even sharing a co-working space with other start-ups constitute playable experiences that attract a large number of urban citizens to more cohesive and participatory environments.

The basic assumption is that some urban problems like loneliness, isolation, lack of liveliness, and social inactiveness should be addressed by communities’ collective action. Here, “play” does not have to be a frivolous experiment or a surprise event as spurred with the temporary installation of a 300-foot water slide in Bristol. Instead, any immersive activities that motivate individual responses or group actions in an exploratory manner are part of the components of the playable city. Through this, urban citizens can stay away from everyday routines narrowly focusing on a functional means to an end and learn to relate to other people in a relaxed, cooperative, and sometimes creative atmosphere.

But transforming cities toward a more playable future is not always a straightforward vision. This is especially true when the efforts of transformation are planned through the cooperation of different social actors and local authorities. This is partly because social perception towards playability in cities vary substantially by people and is often undervalued. Thus, in some places, private entrepreneurs play a prominent role, ranging from renting a small room in a commercial area and converting it into an entertainment place for business purposes. The entertainment rooms scattered across Korean cities illustrate such an effort.

1.2. Entertainment Rooms in Korea

At least over the past 20 years, a number of small-scaled entertainment rooms sprout in Korean cities. The rooms provided diversified programs, such as singing, drinking, resting, studying, relaxing, and being entertained, among others. The origins of the rooms are different, but they offer a wide variety of drinks and beverages, songs and dances, rest and entertainment, and social encounters with strangers or different people. Some showed up in red-light districts, while others were established in a mixed-use residential neighborhood. Until recently, the rooms are continuing their vitality with customized services to the customer's tastes. Frequent renovation of the facility was undertaken to have a new theme or enhanced experience.

Some entertainment rooms caused a social controversy, and much of that controversy is still ongoing. For example, protests against the development permission of love hotels in the vicinity of a residential area and a school in Ilsan, Korea has started in the late 1990s. The subsequent denial of property tax payments by the residents continued until quite recently. Nevertheless, for at least some building uses, the regulation has been relaxed or sometimes converted into a legitimate use, as shown in karaoke. In the early 1990s, karaoke was first introduced in Busan, and then spread across the country with the emergence of related businesses by companies like ASSA, Taejin Media (now TJ Media), and Geum Young. As a result of the popularity of the karaoke, the government enacted the "Act on the Regulation of Customs" in 1992, and banned night-time operations and the access of minors to the karaoke. However, in the late 1990s, the regulation was stigmatized as a policy to unnecessarily restrict the freedom of enjoying entertainment. As the ban on business hours was abolished and the
admission of youths was permitted at least until the midnight hours, the controversy over the harmfulness of karaoke did not last more than ten years.

It is also noteworthy how deviant behaviors violating informal social norms are accepted in cities. For example, talking to an unfamiliar guest or asking for a service that is not on the menu is allowed in some places. In other places, abnormal behaviors like yelling, high-spirited shouting, violent actions, and drunkenness are accepted to be less unpleasant. French philosopher Michel Foucault labeled the "heterotopias of deviation" for a space in which individual behaviors are accepted at an appropriate level even though it falls outside the typical norm of a society. Foucault exemplified spaces like a prison and a psychiatric hospital, where those who committed deviations are accommodated. But if relatively less serious deviations or spontaneous pursuits of pleasure are included, small-scaled entertainment rooms in Korean cities are good examples of the heterotopias of deviation (Figure 1).

1.3. Entertainment Zones in the United States

Professor Daniel Campo at the Morgan State University conducted a study on the "Entertainment Zone" in the US, where heterogeneous behaviors of drinking, dancing, entertaining, and gambling take place at night. Although not well known to the people outside the country, the entertainment zones are located across many cities in the US, such as in the Alston district of Boston, Chicago's Rush Street, or in the corner of the Philadelphia Old Town. The zones often “occupy the margins of downtowns in former commercial and industrial areas, underutilized retain corridors or underdeveloped waterfronts” and were progressively formed without being master planned [1].

The district is formed with the agglomeration of pubs, clubs, restaurants, and motels in urban blocks that have lost the original function. The uses settle down in a run-down, mixed-use neighborhood to avoid high rents in the city center. Buildings inside the block are relatively old and small with a width of about 6-15 m. Commercial activities take place along the street but the whole block is often comprised of a number of different uses rather than being monopolized by a single business. According to Campo and Ryan (2008), this kind of entertainment district is a rare place for experiencing authentic urbanity, although it is difficult to achieve commercial successes unlike the casinos in Las Vegas or the Disney World in Orlando. In the US, a large portion of actual living or
working space is located away from urban centers and often around the suburbs. Thus, spending time in an entertainment zone exposes urban citizens to immerse in the atmosphere of congestion, noise, intense interactions, and crowdedness, enabling temporary escape from the suburbia (Figure 2).

The implication is that while enjoying in a contemporary shopping mall like the Jamsil Lotte World or Yeouido IFC Mall in Seoul is one type of urban entertainment, a neighborhood with a mixture of small-sized commercial, manufacturing, shopping, and amusement spaces also serves as a vital urban experience. The entertainment zone is a messy but fresh site that individuals can find a place with great playability. In this way, neighborhoods in Seoul like Mullae-dong, Haebang-chon, Seo-chon, Seongsu-dong, or areas near the Cheonggyecheon exemplify a Korean entertainment zone, where places of amusement, entertainment, and consumption are mixed with residential, industrial and educational uses. The spaces are not organized according to one narrative or a theme. Rather, it is a mix of unpredictable elements, and this mixture can vary to some extent depending on the will of the operators and the consumers. It does not mean that a carefully designed place by an architect is less playable. But it is necessary to think about how to accommodate the elements of pleasure and playability in the cities.

2. Discussion

Outside the entertainment zones, virtually all of the urban spaces are potential candidates for playable urban activities. For instance, an outdoor space for active physical activities or a street suitable for biking can be part of the pleasant urban places. Although there may be differences depending on the individuals, the activities represent a state that a high level of liking and wanting induce both physically and mentally healthy activities.

I believe that a well-designed urban space can serve as a powerful trigger for enjoyment in relation to the motivations of ‘liking’ and ‘wanting.’ From the perspective of liking, let's look around the space that urban citizens visit and enjoy with others. Some places are frequently used for specific purposes even though a sense of liking is lacking. It is difficult to judge whether a sense of 'liking' prevails in some place by simply checking the frequency of uses or the pedestrian movement. This is because the frequency of use is not always proportional to the degree of entertainment (especially liking). Additionally, a space aimed only at stimulating sensorial pleasure or unexpected surprise is not sustainable from the perspective of entertainment. Some people will be excited by the first encounter of such a place, but the next experience will fail unless far more intense stimulus is prepared. An urban space loved by many people for a long time exhibits a signal of both 'liking' and ‘wanting’, which is an
emotion that is instantly experienced (= liking) and a feeling of long-term satisfaction and reward (= wanting), respectively.

Unfortunately, it is not well known how people experience psychological rewards and satisfaction in an urban space. This is particularly prominent in a neighborhood experiencing decreases in adaptability and cohesive environment of the neighborhood [2]. Here, some hypothetical ideas are proposed as follows. Compared to a space where the whole area is planned and operated by a single person or an organization, a space where collective values and perspectives of many people permeate is better. A space that is open to change, adaptation, and having a room for layered accumulation is better. A space with ambiguous boundary between the nature and the artificial may provoke a sense of discovery and emotional attachment. A space that allows people to experience a different person or a new cultural value is better (Figure 3).

In contemporary cities, visionary ideas about the walkability, the bikeability, and the age-friendliness of cities are proposed. Many meaningful attempts have been made under the name of the walkable city or bikeable design. But the approaches often focused on the quality of convenience and functional usability. For instance, the walkable city is defined in studies like Southworth (2005) as having an environment that “invites walking by means of a richly connected path network” and “provides access to the everyday places people want to go…safe and comfortable with streets that are easy to across [3].” But we need to look back at the essential meaning of pleasure in cities. Professor Bohyeon Lee from Ewha Womans University, for example, pointed out that the term “walkability” is a compound word of “walk” + “usability.”

Based on the definition, attempts of making the walkable and bike-friendly city are overloaded with the notion of improving usability and efficiency of mobility infrastructure, such as building a safe pathway or a bicycle road, and installation of street furniture and storage facilities. Without doubt, they can make walking and bicycle riding safer and more convenient. However, beyond this usefulness, the notion of 'playability' or 'gamification' of walking/biking in cities needs to be better
highlighted. How to amplify a sense of playability in our city should be discussed along with physically expanding the walkways and providing street furniture.

For example, how do you feel the sense of accomplishment in cities by walking/riding a bicycle, how to share the emotion of activeness with others, how to perform an unusual mission with biking, and how to explore new places through a team play are examples that the notion of playability in cities can be accounted for. An example of traffic mimes in Bogota, Colombia sheds light on the playable method for managing the city (Figure 4). In the city, traffic fatality rates became extremely high and the roads were chaotic. About 420 mimes were hired to control traffic on the roads by mocking reckless drivers and performing the frustration experienced by pedestrians moving through the traffic.

![Figure 4. Traffic mimes in Bogota, Colombia](https://solutions.thischangeseverything.org)

3. Conclusion

The article discussed many aspects of pleasure and playable experience in contemporary cities. Overconfidence should be avoided as the feature of playability will not be a silver bullet that will cure all forms of urban problems and the inactiveness of cities. However, playable cities provide an insightful vision for revitalizing an urban area.

Moving on to a far broader topic of the quality of life and sustainability, the following idea is proposed. Previous discussions on urban sustainability have largely been limited to a few narrow areas, such as conserving energy and reducing carbon dioxide emissions. But I believe that much more debate is needed about the pleasures in the city - especially a sense of likes, desires, playfulness, and immersion (including mental involvement in urban environments) associated with play, experience, and commitment. A city that consumes less energy and less CO₂ comprises one of many important aspects of a sustainable city. But cities should provoke a sense of "liking" and "wanting" across a number of citizens to meet the diverse needs of urban society. In other words, a city that seeks to increase its eco-friendliness while seriously limiting a sense of playability is difficult to sustain. Matthias Sauerbruch, a German architect, proposed that cities that enforce environmental sustainability are not fun.
As narrow-minded environmentalism should be avoided, efforts should be made about how to reshape the urban spaces more pleasant and playable. Urban design professionals have to understand diverse aspects of playability in cities. Here, the term pleasure does not only mean a sensual appeal to some people. The spectrum of pleasure is very wide, such as a high level of playfulness, an accessible enjoyment to a multitude of people, spatial flexibility accommodating changes and collective memories over time, and an appropriate level of anonymity allowing for activities by different generations.

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