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STIMULATING THE SENSES

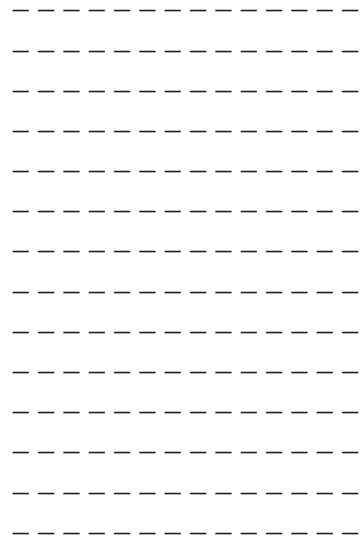
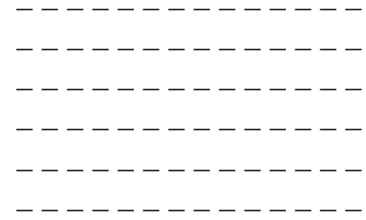
IN THE PUBLIC REALM

IAIN BORDEN

One of the main tendencies in public space has been to minimise risk providing minicities in which risk has been all but removed. These are places of safety and certainty.

However, much of the joy of public spaces comes from their surprising qualities, from not always knowing them or the people they contain. Here, the tendency is to encourage risk, to create places of uncertainty. This, then, is an essential tension in public space:

whether to remove risk, and so erase danger, or to tolerate or even encourage risk, and so enjoy the unexpectedness of our cities and fellow citizens.



THE INTERNALISED AND PREDICTABLE WORLD OF THE SHOPPING MALL

Predominant among spaces that tend to remove risk are shopping malls, particularly large ones, which increasingly provide myriad fashion shops and other retail outlets, ample parking for all, as well as such facilities as multi-screen cinemas, food courts, and even rock-climbing walls or tennis courts. They offer architecture of an apparently high quality, blending wide concourses, historical styles, large sculptures, variegated colours and playful light.

Cover image courtesy of Richard Gilligan | www.richgilligan.com

Spanish translation by Nuria Lozano | www.nurialozano.es

This, many contend, is what public space should be contented, pain-free consumerism where there is always a place to sit down, a drink to be quaffed, a toilet to be found and a new product to be purchased. Such public realms are a Utopia, places where there are no homeless people, wailing sirens or speeding couriers.

Yet while malls are perhaps ideal places to shop, are they really good public space? For they offer few of the qualities of real cities, none of the vitality and downright unpredictability of the full-on urban experience. Rather, as internalised, controlled and sterile arenas —cleared of all litter and “undesirable people”—malls suggest that we are only citizens in so far as we consume. Malls insist that we know what we want and that we do not want to be truly surprised.

Furthermore, we now have museums, galleries, railway stations and airports that are increasingly becoming similar shopping

opportunities. They are part of that process by which it seems all public and semi-public spaces are turning into places of consumerism.

So there are indeed risks here, the risks of losing sight of what a vital civic arena could be. The risk of the city-as-shoppingmall is that public space becomes only for consumerism, that our bodies become passive, that we consume only by purchasing, and that political rights and critical thoughts are replaced by docile and accepting minds.

PLAYING WITH RISK

How then might our public spaces be different? Firstly, we should realise that space is produced by all of us. In short, we all make the public realm and the public realm makes us.

Secondly, it is not only the activities of shopping, walking, sitting and looking that make up public spaces. Everything we do helps make the public realm,

from commuting and driving to using our senses of touch, smell and hearing, to emotional experiences like talking, making music and falling in love.

Thirdly, different people have different ways of using public space. The elderly may think about the public realm differently from those who are younger, or there may be a feeling that White British cultural spaces are at variance with Asian British cultural spaces.

Fourthly, we can also delight in being different within ourselves, so that each of us might be at once a photographer and a scaffolder, old and young... we can take risks with ourselves, with how we create public spaces at various times, attitudes and stages in our lives.

But what does this mean in practical terms? The most obvious way people can have new public spaces to suit their own needs is simply to go out and make them. They can do this through sim-

ple economic activities such as boot-sales and church fairs, or through artistic acts like busking and street performances, or guerrilla-like tactics of “war-chalking” (marking walls with chalk to indicate the presence of wireless internet links). In short, if children can play, why not all of us?

One of the most pervasive forms of play in the urban realm is that of skateboarding—practised by millions in just about every country worldwide— which readily demonstrates many questions posed by a truly risky public space: who owns the public realm, who has the right to use it, and with what kind of actions and attitudes?

Skateboarders focus their activities on city streets, office plazas and myriad semi-public spaces such as staircases, park benches, window ledges and shop forecourts. Disaffected both by the harshness of city streets and by the glossy displays of shopping malls, skateboarders have trans-

formed these territories into their own play space.

This is a very different kind of experience of the city to that of, for example, shopping, driving, walking or looking. The skateboarder’s own body becomes alert with touch, hearing, adrenalin and balance. Here then, the dissatisfaction with streets and malls—which both repel the human body and turn it into an instrument of vision—is confronted by a newly invigorated body, multi-sensory, adaptable and alive.

Most importantly, these appropriated skateboarding places are often public. As a result, embedded in skateboarding’s actions are not only transformations of dull space into stimulating arenas of activity, but also implicit critiques of what public space should be. For example, skateboarding suggests that architecture can be micro-spaces and not just grand monuments, that we can produce not only things and objects but also desires and

energies, that public space is for uses rather than exchange, that one should use the public realm regardless of who one is or what one owns, and that the way we use public space is an essential factor in who we are.

Now, there are risks associated with activities like skateboarding, including bodily harm to practitioners and other city dwellers, the perceived threats posed to conventional modes of behaviour, the physical damage skateboarders might cause to the built environment, the noises they make, and the general anti-work, anti-consumerism attitude which they often seem to promote.

Yet the actual damage caused by skateboarding is overstated. Very little damage occurs to benches and ledges, particularly if they are designed to withstand skateboarding rather than to repel it. And I have yet to find a single example of a skateboarder actually colliding with a pedestrian, this surely does happen,

but compared to, for instance, the thousands of pedestrians killed by motorised traffic, as well as all the other problems created by cars, this is not an insuperable problem.

There are enormous benefits from encouraging activities such as skateboarding within particular public contexts. For example, skateboarding encourages active young people who are not watching television, but who are outside, in the fresh air. By taking the risk of skateboarding in public, skateboarders can do something physical and independent, which lets them meet other people, and which can even be entrepreneurial (for example, skateboarders often set up professional teams, clothing companies and video production facilities). And so by us taking the risk of allowing skateboarding to occur, and by skateboarders themselves taking the risk of moving in this way, we can have cities in which these citizens are more healthy, more fit, more

open to real urban spaces than are, for example, many television-fixated and computer-obsessed teenagers.

And even for those who do not skateboard there are also benefits. We get healthy, non-lager-lout, independent-minded fellow citizens; we get something vibrant to look at besides shop windows; we get strange sounds and colours in our streets; and, above all, we get something different, which we might not have expected to come across. If we are prepared to take the risk, these are our rewards: the unpredicted, the alternative, surprising ways of living in cities.

DESIGNING FOR RISK

But how can we design or manage our public spaces to allow for such risks? On the one hand, we can do this by creating a multitude of those different spaces which conventionally make up the public realm. Not just shopping malls but also traditional neighbourhood parks, industrial buildings

turned into bars and restaurants, town halls, and Ferris wheels.

But we need to be careful. In many propositions for public space there is an underlying model of urban life resting on the ancient notion of civilisation as the art of living in cities: the art of painting, sculpture, music, theatre, galleries, grand public squares. Here, while there is often the occasional nod to everyday life and even the appropriation of space, a certain model of polite society permeates through. Such public space is, above all, the city of gentle wanderings and spoken conversations. It is the city of latte coffee, big Sunday papers, designer lamps and fresh pasta.

It is not, however, the city of the disparate activities that people actually do in cities and this is extremely important for, as Dorothy Rowe explains, no two people ever have quite the same experience or view on things. This, then, is not the city of shouting, loud music, running,



Iain Borden,
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architecture and
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2003. 1'5".

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pure contemplation, demonstrations, subterranean subterfuges. It is not the city of intensity, of cab ranks, boot-sales, railway arches or street markets; nor is it the city of monkish seclusion, crystal-clear intellectualism or ephemeral art interventions.

By contrast, in the Netherlands, Adriaan Geuze and West 8 have created a series of provocative public spaces. Carrascolein Shadow Park¹, placed below some elevated railway tracks on the outskirts of Amsterdam, is made up of what initially appears to be little more than an artificial wooded landscape: grass and asphalt surfaces littered with cast-iron tree stumps lit up from within. At night, the latter glow and cast shadows over the concrete columns and undersides of the overhead bridges. The effect is at once calm and unsettling, at times empty and eminently ignorable (especially during the day), and at others (particularly after nightfall), ambient, moody and

almost unsettling in the way that light, shadows and colour flicker across the site.

Although this might now appear to be a successful artistic intervention, it was not an easy park to create. The designers and local planners were at first concerned that they might be creating a terrain even more threatening than the already alienating nature of the underpasses. They were also concerned that the peripheral location of the park might mean that it was invisible to all but local residents.

However, they consciously took the risk that these qualities could be manipulated into something new, just as the looming presence of a wood at night can be transformed into a welcoming camp-site by the introduction of a campfire. As a result, the Carrascoplein Shadow Park has been welcomed by local pedestrians, many of whom now feel much more willing to traverse the space, as well as by those seeking

an alternative urban experience, in this case, a dance of light and shadows. The risk of doing something quite strange in an out-of-the-way location has been repaid by improvements in the quality of the place and its attractiveness to people living elsewhere in Amsterdam.

More monumental is the Schouwburgplein in Rotterdam,² a large square divided into different surface textures such as perforated and box-section steel, timber and rubber. This composition encourages different activities, such as football on the timber, rollerblading on the epoxy and, of course, the general walking that crisscrosses wherever people wish, but particularly along a long rubber strip. Overhead, spotlights on giant crane-like “anglepoises” respond either to coins inserted by members of the public, or to a pre-programmed random sequence, in this way the spotlights spasmodically energise the square, creating another layer of light and co-

lour. Those using the Schouwburgplein thus do what they wish, their actions being at once subtly encouraged, highlighted, guided and flexibly accommodated. The park is a kind of informal game, a playground for movements and experiences of all kinds. Here the designers have again taken a risk, but a different one to that at the Carrascoplein Shadow Park. At the Schouwburgplein, the design itself was well understood from the start, and the risk has been in letting those who use the space do with it, within certain constraints, as they wish. The designers have created a multi-purpose board game in which we as urban citizens are the pieces on the board, free to make up our own rules and actions.

If the risk of the Carrascoplein Shadow Park was being able to control the character of the park, and the risk of the Schouwburgplein is in letting users act in uncertain ways, then another way of taking risks in the public realm is

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www.west8.nl/projects/public_space/schouwburgplein

in the very process by which it is created. That is, by taking risks with who is involved and what they want. In this context, it is instructive to consider Royston Road Parks in Glasgow,³ an initiative far less monumental or arduous in appearance than the Dutch projects already described.

This was not an easy area in which to operate, for not only is Royston Road Parks situated at an historically significant location—the point where the Molendinar Burn (around which Glasgow evolved) flows above ground—but, more importantly, it is also a place where there are pressing social issues that need to be addressed urgently. In particular, Royston Road passes through priority areas for every social funding strand from the regeneration of housing to alcohol and drug rehab. Risk here, then, is about creating public realms which are not simply agreeable or stimulating, but which are also involved with community and local concerns.

In order to address these issues, the constructed scheme has not just preserved a local landmark known as the Spire but has also brought training and employment to the area. The idea here has been to involve the arts in real community development, creating the Parks using a local workforce and six artist residencies hosted by local groups, operating collaboratively with landscape architects Loci and artists Graham Fagen and Toby Paterson (incidentally, a noted skateboarder). Such a process can never be quick, and to bring the community along with the project, many meetings, consultations, workshops and public displays of proposals were undertaken. At each stage, the risk was always that the very local community which Royston Road Parks was intended to benefit might become alienated from the project.

In the end, despite several contentious debates and heated moments, the project has emer-

ged as a highly beneficial public realm, one where people can sit, walk, skateboard, cycle, cogitate and converse. The result of risking the commissioning and designing process has been a series of zones of safety and play, created by such entities as a church spire, a burn of water, and intense local activity. Emphasised on this site is the immediate, the bond of people and their common effort. In particular it shows that the process of creation of public space can often be as important as the final product itself.

DIFFERENCE AND RISK

Where then does this leave our understanding of the public realm and risk? Above all, we must realise that new kinds of public realm can be designed not just to make us more efficient consumers, but to encourage us to be healthy physically, mentally and artistically. These are public spaces which stimulate our actions, feelings and attitudes to the world. Using de-

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sign to stimulate people—but without trying to wholly determine their actions—means that we take risks with our fellow citizens, accepting that we should let the public realm not only reflect but encourage the full range of positive human actions and qualities.

There are of course different kinds of risk involved in creating these kinds of public space. On the negative side, there is the possibility that the public spaces might be dangerous and become centres of drug-taking or mugging. Alternatively, such spaces, particularly the more artistic ones, might be misunderstood by the public, and be castigated as a waste of money. They might soak up economic and other resources, and worse still, might not be used at all.

On the other hand, there are also huge positive benefits to be gained, risks that pay off massively in terms of culture, community involvement and even economics. In this way, we can have

public spaces that are different to the shopping mall, museum or urban plaza; they create new uses by members of the public, and new understandings of what the city might be all about; they involve the community and help bring in new skills and work; and they can yield results long after they were first constructed.

Above all, then, we must realise that public space—space that is truly public—acknowledges four kinds of difference. These differences are all about risk-taking, about allowing for the uncertain, unpredictable and not-wholly-programmed to occur.

The first of these differences means accepting that people of different backgrounds, races, ages, classes, sexuality, gender and general interests all have different ideas of what public space is, and that they make their own places to foster their own identities. This difference requires the risk of recognising that we are not all the same, even that we ourselves

might not be quite who we think we are.

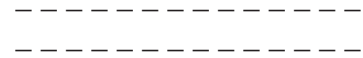
The second kind of difference is physical, visual and designed, and means realising that public spaces should not all look the same. Beyond the piazza and avenue, cities need hidden spaces and exposed spaces, rough spaces and smooth spaces, loud spaces and silent spaces. Spaces where people remember, experience, contest, appropriate, get scared, make things, lose things, and generally become themselves. This difference requires the risk of having true diversity in city spaces, and that these spaces should encourage or tolerate—not exclude or repel—all that people do.

The third kind of difference is about times, about allowing for certain parts of the city to be used differently at various times of the day, week or year. We need times that are slow and times that are fast, times given to us by our bodies and times controlled by machines. This means

allowing people to go faster on pavements than the speed of the slowest pedestrian, or to hang around in parks. It means letting skateboarders use office plazas on the weekend; it means taking the risk of allowing people to do things outside of the conventional time patterns of the daily sleep-work-rest cycle, or the weekly and annual work-weekend-work-holiday. It means letting people remember private thoughts as well as national events, responding to local actions and not just global trends.

And the fourth kind of difference is the experience we have of spaces, the way in which we approach our cities and architecture. We need spaces in which we encounter otherness and sameness, where we are at once confirmed and challenged. And this comes from not being certain, from not knowing everything around us, from a degree of surprise and the unusual as we go about our everyday lives. We need a city

that we do not know, that we do not understand, that we have not yet encountered, that is simultaneously, strange, familiar and unknown to us. This is public space which is always a surprise, a unique place, a stimulation. This difference requires the risk of not always knowing what lies around the corner.



About the article

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About the author

Iain Borden is Director of the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London, where he is Professor of Architecture and Urban Culture. An architectural historian and urban commentator, his wide-ranging historical and theoretical interests have led to publications on, among other subjects, the history of skateboarding as an urban practice, boundaries and surveillance, gender and architecture, body spaces and the experience of space, and Renaissance urban space.

