

Teaching playfulness of public space through participation

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In the context of the growing need for architecture to ‘fit’ diverse social practices and spatial conditions, this paper examines the importance of physical play in public space as a fundamental method of creating spatial experience and learning for all age groups. In contemporary society, such forms of engagement are increasingly threatened by the lack of accessible public spaces and by the shift of play and exploration into the digital realm. The paper considers the role of architects as mediators who, through participatory engagement with users, develop small-scale spatial interventions in locations that simultaneously present spatial challenges and offer potential for playful interaction. Through careful interpretation of user input and having in mind the playfulness, spatial interventions are proposed.

This approach resonates with Aldo van Eyck’s experiments with abstract spatial structures that provoke unstructured and unexpected physical activity in playgrounds. Drawing on Rudolf Laban’s theory of movement, it also emphasizes spatial configurations that allow for multiple patterns of use. Such openness enables public spaces to function as inclusive platforms for interaction, fostering shared experiences and a stronger sense of community.

In collaboration with the Museum of Contemporary Art in Novi Zagreb and the Goethe-Institut, this method is explored pedagogically through the elective master’s course Participatory Design of Space, structured as a short experimental design workshop. Focus was put on the Museum’s southern plateau, a transitional zone between public urban space and a cultural institution, with the potential to function as a place of encounter, gathering, and orientation.

The paper provides insight into this pedagogical experiment, as a case study of participatory design methods grounded in play and movement together with various student creative approaches for small-scale public space interventions.