

Positioning 'Play' In Context: Playfulness Can Be a Vital Catalyst for Communal Well-Being in Indian Urban Environments.

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Abstract- *Salubrious urban spaces in any part of the world are one of the positive signs of their region's healthy community and presence of social well-being. In order to create such healthy urban spaces, environments are now being designed rich in the landscape. This article explores the overlap findings of scholarly research that indicates that if environments are designed to include 'playfulness' in environments along with landscape, they can improve the users' physical and mental health. However, these aspects of including playfulness in urban environments are largely ignored, especially in India. Recently, 'Play' has held the attention of architectural theorists. Several case studies are studied to identify the efficiency and functioning of 'play' in the urban environment. Finally, this paper provides a few recommendations for urban designers, policymakers, municipal government officials, well-being researchers, and architects to encourage the largely unexploited potential for urban environments to act as a space for wellness for all to breathe amidst the cacophony.*

Indexed Terms- *play; architecture; urban environment; urban designing; well-being; India.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Architecture profoundly influences our well-being. That said, most of the global population living in urban areas spend approximately 95% of their time indoors. (Spence, 2021). In the modern era, we have nearly 3.3 billion people worldwide belonging to the working population. Out of which, India occupies the second most position in having a high labour force worldwide.

Nearly 67% of the country's population is said to be in employment. Furthermore, approximately 14% of people in India regularly suffer from severe mental health disorders. (Sanyukta Kanwal, 2022)

The WHO (2022) indicates that depression and anxiety are the most typical mental problems faced by people, which are relatively higher in urban areas of the country. These problems can be mitigated through an active and healthy lifestyle and social interaction. If the concept 'Play' can be introduced into the urban scenario, which might promote public interaction, it can help with the active lifestyle and lively nature among people and the environment. According to (Bloomer & Moore, 1977; Gallace & Spence 2014; Garg, 2019; Spence, 2021; Ward 2014), places are more immersive and engaging and provide multisensory experiences that congruently engage our senses. While at the same time, people can be better able to enhance their quality of life by having such design experience. Researchers similar to Caillois (1961) suggest that the play provides an escape from the conventions of social life. Kerr and Apter (1991) (p. 168–173) state how play contributes to the learning process and can tangibly enhance our mental well-being, creativity, self-actualisation, and coping strategies.

Therefore, it is evident how approaches to the concept of 'play' will acknowledge the fundamental connections between our environment and people's physical, mental and social selves. This study highlights the importance of playfulness in Indian urban spaces as a primary need than an amenity. Finally, it is hoped that imparting the concepts of 'play'

will increasingly engage people in India. By doing so, our urban spaces will promote social, cognitive and emotional well-being.

II. NOTIONS OF PLAY IN AN URBAN ENVIRONMENT

Apart from conventional pedestrian systems, urban fabrics must inspire social connections and provide innate playful interaction within their environment to thrive and sustain the existing global scenario. Stevens (2004) expresses that the study of urban play psychology can encompass movements contrary to monotonous pedestrian activity.

According to SoulPancake's (2013) Chatterbox, the 'Urban, ludic interventions' inspire the current social connections. For instance, the project invited pedestrians into a ball pit to converse with the users. Other interventions use similar ludic concepts, such as the unique Piano Staircase, to encourage physical activities in an urban place (The Fun Theory, 2009). Rather than using the escalator, the subway passengers are encouraged to use the stairs to exit, which creates a moment of play. In addition, the pedestrian pathways can employ 'play' similar to the design of stepping stones crossing a restored stream based on Roombeek, The Brook (Sant en Co., 2010). Based on research and real-world observations, society needs an alternative way, such as 'Urban-ludic intervention', and inspire ludic behaviour in the public spaces of developed cities. (Donoff & Bridgman, 2017).



Figure 1: The Fun Theory: Piano Staircase

Source: advertisement:
https://shsnorsenews.org/staff_name/photo-courtesy-goodadvertisement-site (December 08 2020)

Likewise, pedestrian behaviours encourage us to choose our routes and move beyond boundaries.

Urban interventions help induce curiosity and motivate us to explore our socio-ecological environments. However, the gap is that most literature about play concentrates only on human playful behaviours, whereas ludic inspiration through urban design implementation is required. The 'actor' in a theatre play must have the power to 'change the composition of an encounter by altering expressions' (Thrift (2003) p. 104). Similarly, a playful space is a product of human determination and invention, which will act as a catalyst for communal well-being. The concept of play can not only emerge in the design of an intervention but also its execution. Hence, the requirements are understood to elaborate the scope of urban play opportunities in India.

According to a global survey conducted by a German brand called 'Vaay', it is observed that Mumbai and Delhi are ranked among the five most stressful cities to live in (Sharma, 2021). Widespread vibrant urbanisation and diverse contemporary lifestyle can sometimes come with challenges that are unpleasant as they seem. At times, unpleasant claustrophobic environments, a fast-paced lifestyle, and numerous factors jumbled to overstimulate and increase stress levels. Mishra (2017) expresses that the global human phenomenon of being glued to phones and technology makes it hard to connect with outdoor environments. Therefore, cosmopolitan urban life can be exhausting and stressful. However, positive alterations such as 'play' in the urban fabric can facilitate healthy environmental well-being.

In a study called "Harley therapy – urban stress", Jacobson (2013) states it is essential to identify green spaces and enhance and use them. For example, instead of having lunch at the desk, it is recommended to identify the nearest park for a 'lunch stroll'. These simple lifestyle changes to increase physical activity can lower stress and uplift cognitive abilities and the work performed (Jacobson, 2013). Moreover, spaces to increase physical activities need not be a gym. Alterations and provisions of greenways promise interactive pedestrian pathways and facilitate an active urban lifestyle. Therefore, identifying the role of play in Indian cities is an essential primary need for well-being, optimising healthy lifestyle and enhancing the urban environment for all people.

III. IMPLEMENTING THE CONCEPT OF 'PLAYFULNESS' & 'LUDIC INTERVENTIONS'

3.1 Concept of Playfulness, globally:

Adapting play at such scales in a few instances holds boundaries as mere choices. They can be characterised as self-involvement and disinterest. Time consumption during play can border playfulness in work. This time consumption can leave a gap under work parameters as 'separation' where it "...allows people to forget their everyday roles, conventions, demands and restrictions." (Stevens, 2007, p. 35).

Simple elements of play in the workplace can also affect productivity. For example, Brower (2019) states that by incorporating play in workplaces, productivity increases by 20%. This information was initially examined by Keith et al. (2018), who found that including gaming in workplaces increased productivity by 20% (Fig 2).

So, play possibilities challenge the duality of limits for hostility and commitment between need and fancy, productivity and unproductivity. At this point, play generates a neutral condition. Where play is described "...as liminal and 'amphibolous' [having two meanings], existing on the threshold between reality and unreality" (Sutton-Smith, B, 2001. as cited in Donoff & R, 2017, p. 296).



Figure 2: Instagram HQ in Menlo Park, California.
Photo by Christophe Wu

Furthermore, identifying this interest in all age groups is essential as "it is about creating...[interventions]...where the inherent playfulness of people of all ages can be expressed." (Donoff & R, 2017, p. 305).

Architectural design often practices forward objectives like functionality, ease and regulation. Playfulness and liveliness are significant yet, ignored characteristics of an architectural setting. (Donoff & R, 2017) pens that play creates 'happiness' which: "...arises from feeling connected to and supported by our physical and social [urban] surroundings." (p.304).



Figure 3: Mario Bike kart lane at North Portland, Oregon; Vittoria Ntarelli — August 24 2010

Play being a choice for people, it is well sought in architecture at the scale of the body, even in the urban setting. This translation of play on a human scale can accelerate "...curiosity and encouragement to move beyond boundaries..." and helps people choose and 'explore'. (Donoff & R, 2017, p. 295). The translation of elements can be made to communicate with activities. An anonymous street artist's work illustrates play-induced activities at the ground scale (Fig 9).

The wider possibility of play at a human scale can be a tool to make people look for an element of interest under monotony. As these interventions offer "...element of surprise and novelty inspires playful behaviours." (Donoff & R, 2017). When formality is absent, play can expand the comfort level, provide a sense of belonging and widen opportunities for community interaction (Fig 10). 'Formal' refers to 'power' where it provides "...freedom from the instrumental pursuit of social purposes." (Stevens, 2007, p. 30).

4.2 Concept of 'Playfulness' in India:

In India, play is often preconceived as a notion of physical activity—playing rather than defining 'play' as an element of joy or fun. For example, Government provisioned parks in urban neighbourhoods are the agents to incorporate physical activity of the citizens, thereby taking care of their physical health. However, there is a lack of research while curating such parks to the mental needs of the users/citizens. Existing parks build play-templates parks such as swings, see-saws, slides and joggers track in parks. Instead of these

templates, insights from precedents could be included to examine how the concept of 'play' caters to mental health and well-being. However, the concept of 'play' in Indian urban spaces is still developing.

In the recent initiative instigated by the Bernard van Leer Foundation and WRI India, The Ministry of Housing & Urban Affairs announced a few winners in the Nurturing Neighbourhoods Challenge. One such winner is the Kohima (Fig X), where the residual corners of the park were road painted in such a manner as it invited people of all age groups to enjoy the moment of play which enabled physical and emotional relief. Furthermore, in this mountainous range, the community is involved in converting the dumped waste-area park lot into a play space for the neighbouring community. Smartnet (2022) states that this project "...has provided play opportunities for around 200 children in the community and enhanced safer access along the connecting streets."



Figure 4: Reclaiming residual corners for the pocket park at Forest Colony

Source: <https://smartnet.niua.org/> (January 2022)

From the above precedents, it is observed that we need to use digital intelligence and community participation in the creation of 'play' for an urban environment. The playful spaces then go beyond the effective management of our environments to those that enable affective, social, entertaining, fun, and amusing social interactions. Sensors and actuators can use digital smartness in private, public, and urban environments. This aspect is aimed to highlight what we want to achieve with playable cities, where citizens can use the city and use the information and technology of the smart city for their needs and uses. Wherever possible, people of both smart and rural cities can take advantage of the opportunity to develop their local community network to accommodate the playful applications of their own choices.

IV. REFLECTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The literature and precedent studies inform a few findings, and there are a few recommendations for urban designers and architects to consider while designing or altering urban environments. They are:

1. Incorporating 'play' in any scale environment can induce physical activity and personal comfort. Thereby it positively impacts the physical and mental health of the users.
2. Although, an environment cannot generate conversations between users. However, it can be a fertile ground for social interaction through the medium of playfulness and ludic interventions across the urban fabric. These interventions act as catalysts to communal well-being for the overall community.
3. Ludic interventions are not required to be newly designed or created. Mainly, due to the political, economic and socio-regulative factors can slow this process of creating new interventions in urban environments. However, interventions or elements of play can be included through existing open spaces, wastelands and inactive parks. With the observation from the precedents above [The Fun Theory (2009); Brower (2019) & Smartnet (2022)], it is evident that empty spaces have potential and provide the opportunity to create such interventions.
4. This study, however, generically addresses the issues and leaves the opportunity for further research to address the gap in identifying the individual needs of various age groups.

Finally, the issues explored in this research emphasise the need to increase communal well-being in India's cosmopolitan urban cities. This paper has demonstrated that societies' well-being issues can be mitigated by using 'play' as an element or 'ludic interventions' that specifically facilitate their well-being, i.e., the idea of restoring an existing park. Therefore, future urban designers, government officials and architects can mitigate these issues by assisting the urban design process with a heightened awareness of catering to citizens' personal and social well-being. Furthermore, it is found that play can enable users to relax, interact and be themselves with nature, outdoor and green spaces. Therefore, applying

all these recommendations and theories to situate urban design is a quick and efficient way to improve a healthy urban lifestyle for an individual.

CONCLUSION

A city and an urban environment bring the society together with diversity and trajectories. However, at times, living in an urban environment can bring stress to an individual. This research identified that any environment or space could "promote or hinder mental health" (Sullivan & Chang, 2011). Therefore, altering the urban environment could be a beneficial start to generating solutions for communal stresses. Especially being a developing country, the Indian urban environment should well inform a healthy urban environment that can benefit its residents.

Improving physical activity and well-being is crucial for creating healthy urban environments. This research recognised that notions of 'play' could be included while designing urban environments to increase individuals' comfort and wellness. Public play allows individuals to demonstrate, realise and expand their capacities for excellence. Because rules and social conventions are suspended when playfulness is employed, it is suspended to give way to fun, joy, fantasy, redundancy, and quirkiness. Therefore, incorporating 'playfulness' can be a vital catalyst for communal well-being in Indian urban environments.

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