

Master Thesis

Psychorhythmic Analysis of Public Space:

Plug-in Elements for Urban Furniture

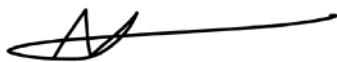
Melih Gürçan Kutsal

2026

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Author

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'A' followed by a long horizontal stroke.A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'T. Edwards'.

Supervisor

Psychorhythmische Analyse des öffentlichen Raums: Plug-in-Elemente für Stadtmobiliar

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Verfasser:

Author:

Melih Gürçan Kutsal

Gutachter

Examiners:

Erstgutachter: Prof. Dr. Frank Eckardt

1st examiner: Prof. Dr. Frank Eckardt

Zweitgutachter: Assoc. Prof. Mark Shepard

2nd examiner: Assoc. Prof. Mark Shepard

Drittgutachter: Dipl. Medienkünstler Hannes Waldschütz

3rd examiner: Dipl. Medienkünstler Hannes Waldschütz

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Weimar, 31.08.2026

Abstract

This thesis investigates how public spaces act as sites of ideological control, operating as mechanical apparatuses that produce “desired citizens” through standardised, affirmative design languages. It argues that contemporary urban design and architecture reinforce systemic order by replacing genuine spatial creation with formulaic, pre-approved frameworks. To counter this condition, the research proposes psycho-rhythmic analysis, a theoretical framework that positions the phenomenon of play not as ornament but as an anthropological language and a spatial countermeasure capable of injecting chaos, encounter and opportunity into otherwise curated environments.

The investigation examines the structural role of play across three distinct media: Jacques Tati's film *Mon Oncle*, the work of the Section d'Or group in painting, and Constant Nieuwenhuys's architectural vision of New Babylon. Read alongside Cedric Price's *Fun Palace*, these last two are examined critically. Both projects identified alienation correctly and turned to play as its remedy, yet both treated play as an event to be staged — an encounter, a situation, a physical interaction — rather than as a psychological rhythm that builds habit and persona through repetition. In doing so, each proposed a new circle of play inside the existing one rather than interpreting the circle already in place, and this thesis argues that such a construction cannot hold, since the surrounding order will not tolerate a working demonstration of its own contingency. The conceptual starting point for the study lies in observations of contemporary media installations by Refik Anadol and Jen Lewin, whose low-threshold interactions demonstrate how physical elements can function simultaneously as architectural elements and as toys that interrupt passive daily routine.

To test the theory in practice, a prototype was developed consisting of plug-in extensions for public benches — an everyday, non-curated urban element. By altering the passive experience of sitting, the prototype evaluates how low-threshold spatial interventions can disrupt subconscious habits, reclaim individual agency and foster spontaneous public engagement. The prototype was deployed and observed on site, and its outcomes are assessed against the theoretical claims that generated it.

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1. Introduction

Public space has never truly belonged to the collective. It functions instead as an instrument for the specific ideologies and interests of dominant authorities. "Authority" is understood here broadly, referring to any entity or institutional structure possessing the power to manipulate systems and personas alike. This power is exercised through legislative shifts or pseudo-legal frameworks that reconfigure civic architecture, societal norms, and the very essence of human rights, education and daily routine — ultimately curating individual choice by controlling the stream of consumed information.

Such authorities take a range of forms. They may be governmental structures, lobbyists or private corporations; they may equally be political and religious movements exercising comparable influence over civil life. Among the former are nationalist and far-right parties such as the Alternative für Deutschland in Germany, which the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution classified in May 2025 as a confirmed right-wing extremist organisation — a designation the party has contested in court, and which an administrative court subsequently suspended pending proceedings¹ — and the Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi in Turkey, a party of the ultranationalist right long associated with the Ülkü Ocakları, or Grey Wolves.² Among the latter are religious orders and congregations such as the Menzil community, a branch of the Naqshbandi-Khalidi order originating in Adıyaman, whose expansion following the 1980 military coup established a network of foundations, educational initiatives and affiliated associations whose influence in political, economic and bureaucratic life has been the subject of sustained debate,³ and the movement associated with Fethullah Gülen, which the Turkish state designated a terrorist organisation under the name FETÖ following the coup attempt of 2016 — a designation that remains contested outside Turkey.⁴ This thesis focuses on the agency to change the current design language of space, or its function, and on how these design elements operate as guidelines for the "expected citizen." In other words, it examines

1 Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, classification of 2 May 2025. See "Germany's Domestic Intelligence Labels Right-Wing AfD Party as Extremist," NPR, 2 May 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/05/02/g-s1-64037/afd-germany-extremist-alternative>; on the suspension of the designation pending judicial review, see "German Court Rules Spy Service May Not Label AfD 'Extremist' for Now," Courthouse News Service, accessed 29 August 2026, <https://www.courthousenews.com/german-court-rules-spy-service-may-not-label-afd-extremist-for-now/>.

2 On the Ülkü Ocakları and their relationship to the MHP, see Diliman Abdulkader, "The Ultra-Nationalist Grey Wolves: A Turkish Government Tool to Persecute Kurdish People," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 23, no. 1 (Spring 2022): 92–98, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/856123>.

3 "Menzil Community," Wikipedia, accessed 29 August 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Menzil_Community. On the broader political rise of the order, see also the Hudson Institute, "The Naqshbandi-Khalidi Order and Political Islam in Turkey," <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-naqshbandi-khalidi-order-and-political-islam-in-turkey>.

4 Haber Merkezi, "İslamcıların yaşadığı kâbus: 15 Temmuz | ABD eliyle örgütlendiler sonra birbirlerine girdiler," *BirGün*, 13 July 2025, <https://www.birgun.net/makale/islamcilarin-yasattigi-kabus-15-temmuz-abd-eliyle-orgutlendiler-sonra-birbirlerine-girdiler-638044>.

how such elements function as apparatuses for the production of a society, shaping not only how space is used but who its users are expected to become.

Public space operates as a site of social production. It functions much like a factory, in which the elements of our environment — the spatial language, the defined functions, the tangible thresholds — orchestrate the rhythms of daily life. These rhythms crystallise into habits, and habits solidify into culture, which then provides a self-justifying framework for the status quo. Within this context, the architectural and urban design professions have increasingly abandoned genuine creation in favour of deploying memorised approaches. These standardised frameworks, perpetuated by those who occupy the titles of expert and academic, have transformed the discipline into a mechanism of affirmation. By designing through pre-approved, formulaic guidelines, architects do not merely build; they reinforce systemic order. Consequently, even interventions such as public art or installations are reduced to bread crumbs — superficial apparatuses against alienation that pacify the public while obscuring the deeper, mechanical control inherent in the design language itself.

This thesis asks two central questions. How can existing public spaces be hacked and transformed into sites of encounter and opportunity, rather than remaining spaces of numbing comfort that produce desired citizens? And how can the phenomenon of play be used — not as a decorative element, but as a linguistic design approach — to create uncurated spaces that leave room for chaos rather than order?

The design agency proposed in answer to these questions is termed by the author psycho-rhythmic analysis. Building on this framework, the thesis examines how play can serve as a countermeasure to the current condition of public space, and argues for why play in particular was chosen as the method of this investigation. A prototype project is then introduced in order to test the theory in practice.

The questions this thesis addresses are therefore the following:

What is the nature of play, and how does it function within the framework of linguistics?
In what ways does public space operate as a site of production rather than as a shared public realm?

In what ways are architectural elements toys?

What is psycho-rhythmic analysis?

Approach & Relations

The questions and key elements discussed in this thesis might, at first glance, appear disconnected and unrelated to one another — particularly given the starting point in linguistics and the choice of case studies drawn from such different fields. Yet this apparent divergence is a necessary path, one that builds the foundation on which the proposed idea rests.

To build that idea, three works from three different media have been chosen. The reason behind this selection is to demonstrate how the idea of play is a core element within each medium, and how each medium is, in turn, interconnected through the idea of linguistics.

Here, the definition of “media” is understood as “in the midst” — situated between physical and abstract space, functioning as a communication apparatus that operates without relying on the oral or the verbal. The film *Mon Oncle* is a critique not only of modern architecture but of the very idea of modernity. It mocks this ideology by locating its critique within the space itself, rather than confining it to situations or dialogue alone. For this reason, *Mon Oncle* has been chosen to discuss space both as apparatus and as media.

The *Section d'Or* brought Cubism together with Orphism, a Cubist offshoot that retained Cubism's fragmented, multi-angle structure while prioritising colour and light over pure form, and which drew that heightened sense of colour directly from the influence of Fauvism. Fauvism takes its name from the French *fauve*, meaning “wild beast” — a name coined by critics to describe the movement's raw, unrestrained use of colour. The relevance to the *Section d'Or* lies in exactly this quality: the palette is deliberately vicious and aggressive, chosen to convey emotion rather than to depict reality. Cubism, by contrast, takes every angle of a view or an object and assembles them onto a single canvas, capturing every angle and moment within one frame in order to summarise a whole situation, and these frames may even represent different spaces altogether. Holding these two tendencies together produces a work with two layers of narrative: the first is the subject the artist aims to share, and the second is a meta-layer, in which the style itself becomes a dialogue between structure and chaos. For this reason, the *Section d'Or* is a strong example through which to explain the relationship between play and structure.

Finally, on the topic of architecture as the toy of civilizations, *New Babylon* is not the only work that could have been chosen, but it is the only one that approaches the idea of play through the lens of polyrhythm. Polyrhythm is a musical concept describing the

simultaneous layering of different, seemingly chaotic notes and rhythms — a chaotic order.

While Cedric Price's Fun Palace approaches game and play as tools for discovery, New Babylon is more abstract in its approach. It, too, encourages discovery and generates encounter and chaos, but does so by creating elements rather than by staging situations. For this reason, New Babylon has been chosen to explain how architecture functions not only as a media tool, but also as a toy shaped by a particular, desired ideology.

Methodology

This research is grounded in an anthropological reading of play, developed through close engagement with the work of two contemporary new-media practitioners: Refik Anadol and Jen Lewin. Both demonstrate how simple, low-threshold interactions can generate entire situations of discovery, and this observation forms the conceptual starting point of the thesis.

Anadol's 2021 collaboration with Nike in Istanbul, Hope Alkazar offers a first case in point. The installation generated particle simulations that responded to the velocity of people's movement, following physical laws so that particles reacted quickly or slowly, much like kicking snow across the ground. Having witnessed the work firsthand, I observed how it drew out spontaneous, childhood-rooted play: people made snow angels, staged impromptu games of football, or tried to trigger the largest possible particle explosion through rapid gestures. What became clear was a two-step process. People first had to understand the space and how it responded to them, and only then did they begin to discover it through play.



Figure 1.1: Refik Anadol, Alkazar Rüyası, 2021, HOPE Alkazar, Istanbul. Source: Aynen Dergi

Jen Lewin's practice offers a more analogue counterpoint. Works such as the Chandelier Harp or Cosmos rely on comparatively simple mechanisms to open up spaces of discovery and interaction. The Chandelier Harp is a laser-based sound installation shaped like a chandelier, its lasers visible at night and invisible by day. Each laser corresponds to a

note on a harp, triggered when an object interrupts its beam. Installed both indoors and in public outdoor settings, the work produces different modes of engagement depending on context: indoors, people discover it through dance and choreographed movement; outdoors, where people move through daily life largely on autopilot, an accidental trigger interrupts that subconscious state and shifts them into a heightened awareness of their surroundings, which is itself a trigger for further discovery.



Figure 1.2: Jen Lewin, Chandelier Harp, 2012. Interactive laser and sound installation; low-voltage lasers projected from a suspended chandelier to the ground, with custom circuitry and sensors producing musical notes when the beams are crossed.

Taken together, these works suggest that play is not merely leisure but an anthropological mode of communication, comparable to language itself. Seen through this lens, media installations in public space function simultaneously as toys and as architectural elements — a duality that motivates the central proposition of this thesis as a Media Architecture and Architecture master's project.

The thesis is structured in three parts in order to develop and test that proposition. The first section lays out the theoretical framework: that architecture possesses rhythms, and that buildings should be understood not merely as functional or aesthetic masses but as rhythmic elements within a larger symphony oriented toward producing an idealised persona. This theoretical foundation is built through case studies drawn from film, painting and architecture. The second section turns to practical application, developing a prototype designed to test the theory directly, whose outcomes are documented on site. The third and concluding section returns to these results and examines them against the original theoretical claims, assessing the degree of alignment between proposal and outcome.

The prototype itself takes the form of plug-in extensions for public benches. This site was chosen deliberately because its use resists curation: a freestanding, individual installation would inevitably become a curated event rather than an organic intervention. By working as a plug-in — a customisation added to an existing, everyday object — the project instead fosters interaction that feels natural rather than staged. The bench was selected specifically because it belongs to the register of passive rather than active daily use, “passive” here meaning actions performed without conscious awareness, much like breathing. This applies not only to the act of sitting but to the object itself: present, used, and yet rarely consciously noticed.

2. Theory-Based Research & Case Studies

2.1 Space as Apparatus

Public space can be seen as a common space, an unbiased space — yet it is in fact the most political and most influential space we have, second only to digital space. Public space is no different from a factory: it is a social space engineered to produce a desired society, a media tool in its own right.

In Jürgen Habermas’s 1962 book *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, translated as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1989, Habermas discusses how public space has functioned as a political space from medieval times to the present day. Every design element, the titles granted to individuals, and the representational objects displayed or worn serve to showcase authority and prevailing ideologies.

Habermas describes a form of publicity in which authority is not argued for but displayed: “the staging of the publicity involved in representation was wedded to personal attributes such as insignia (badges and arms), dress (clothing and coiffure), demeanor (form of greeting and poise) and rhetoric (form of address and formal discourse in general).”⁵ Virtue, on this account, had to be capable of public representation, and it was in the joust — “the replica of the cavalry battle” — that this representation came into its own. Crucially, Habermas notes that this bearing was common as a norm to all nobles, from the king down to the lowliest knight: the whole hierarchy was engaged in the same continuous act of display.

⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 7–8.

Habermas's category of insignia — badges and arms — finds its most vivid form in the figure of the knight. Heraldic arms were displayed on banner, shield and surcoat, so that a knight riding under his lord's arms carried that lord's identity onto the field with him. He represented glory, honour, justice and the ultimate image of human dignity, and in bearing those arms he embedded those virtues directly into his lord's authority. Beyond the knight, architecture served the same function, most notably in castle structures designed to appear high and mighty and adorned with those same arms, much like the knights themselves. Habermas terms this specific form of symbolic authority representative publicness. This theoretical framework of public display extends directly into modern philosophical analyses of power and social structure.

In his foundational work *Finite and Infinite Games*, philosopher James P. Carse addresses how titles of nobility and authority do not possess inherent reality, but exist strictly through public acknowledgement and ceremonial deference. "A title," he writes, "is the acknowledgment of others that one has been the winner of a particular game. Titles are public. They are for others to notice." Their power is therefore entirely a function of their visibility: "the effectiveness of a title depends on its visibility, its noticeability, to others."⁶ To preserve this fragile legitimacy, the ruling classes must develop visible, highly theatrical systems that continuously project their status into the public arena. Carse is explicit about what those systems consist of: the heirs to titles "are therefore obliged to display the appropriate emblems: a coat of arms or identifiable styles of speech, clothing, or behavior," and it is, in his words, "a principal function of society to validate titles and to assure their perpetual recognition."⁷ These emblems serve a theatrical purpose. As Carse puts it, "possession of the title signifies an agreement that competition is forever closed in that particular game"⁸ — which is to say that the emblem announces the political struggle for dominance to be concluded, signalling to onlookers that they must yield and conform.

Expanding on this spatial dimension of authority, Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre examines the same figure in *The Production of Space*. Asking what two bodies have in common, Lefebvre writes: "What is there in common between the body of a peasant leading his working ox, shackled to the soil by his plough, and the body of a splendid knight on his charger or show horse? These two bodies are as different as those of the bullock and the entire horse in whose company we find them!"⁹ What matters for this thesis is the conclusion he draws from the comparison. "In either case," Lefebvre continues, "the animal intervenes as medium (means, instrument or intermediary) between man and space. The difference between the 'media' implies an analogous difference between the two spaces in question. In short, a wheatfield is a world away from a

6 James P. Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 18.

7 Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games*, 19.

8 Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games*, 45.

9 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 195.

battlefield.”¹⁰ Lefebvre, in other words, uses the word media in precisely the sense this thesis will develop: an object standing between a person and the space around them, through which raw presence is converted into an undisputed symbol of class position, and through which two people occupying the same landscape come to inhabit entirely different spaces.

Read together, these three philosophers allow us to understand public space as an apparatus of authority. The examples and findings they offer may focus primarily on the medieval period, but the same patterns persist today, only under different labels

Lefebvre extends this spatial analysis of authority into a temporal register in his later work, *Rhythmanalysis* (*Éléments de rythmanalyse*, published posthumously in 1992). There, he argues that everyday life is organised not simply by space but by rhythm: the interweaving of cyclical rhythms — the rising and setting of the sun, the biological cycles of hunger and sleep — with linear, mechanical rhythms such as work schedules, traffic signals and the repetitive structure of institutional time. Lefebvre calls the process by which bodies are trained into these repetitive, institutionally sanctioned rhythms *dressage*¹¹: the same disciplining, in essence, that turns a chaotic crowd into pedestrians who wait obediently at a red light and cross only when permitted. When these rhythms interlock smoothly, he calls the resulting state *eurhythmia*; when they clash or break down, he calls it *arrhythmia*. Crucially, most everyday rhythm is not *eurhythmic* in a healthy sense but numbing: a repetition so total that it produces the alienated, autopilot state at the centre of this chapter — the same numbing comfort through which public space quietly produces its desired citizens.

Animals occupy a unique position within this rhythmic structure, because they are the one element of public space that has not been subjected to *dressage*. A pigeon does not wait for the crossing signal; a stray dog does not follow the mall's choreography of footfall; a bird's sudden flight through a plaza answers to no institutional schedule. in a wholly unplanned and unauthored way, the same function that play is later argued to perform by design.

Precisely because animals remain outside the disciplined rhythm imposed on human bodies in public space, their presence introduces a small, localised *arrhythmia* into an otherwise *eurhythmic* — and numbing — system. This disruption is minor and momentary, but it is exactly the kind of interruption this thesis is interested in: a break, however brief, in the autopilot state that pulls a passer-by out of numbed repetition and back into conscious awareness of their own space and time. In this sense animals anticipate,

¹⁰ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 195.

¹¹ Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, trans. Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore (London: Continuum, 2004).

Reading these patterns across history into the present reveals a continuity: the current situation is no different from the medieval age. Today, high-rises, billboards, smart billboards, and the thousands of pieces of information and structural advertisement we consume passively every day occupy the same role. The high-rise buildings of corporations and governments, with their mighty architectural language, are no different from castles and their banners in displaying the might of those who occupy them. In doing so they showcase not only a corporate image but, on a subtextual level, feed a particular image of what it means to be a modern human.

Shopping malls and coffee shop chains extend this same apparatus into spaces that appear voluntary and leisurely rather than imposed, while performing a specific act of exclusion: they build a bridge into socialising that only functions if one can afford the toll. Money becomes a prerequisite for participation in public sociability itself — the mall and the café do not merely sell goods, they sell access to company. This is most visible in the way different coffee shop chains sell what is functionally the same product at different price points. The price difference is not primarily about the coffee; it is about curating who can afford to sit at the table, ensuring that those who can pay a given price socialise only with others who can pay that same price. The same logic organises the mall. What results is a diversion system that runs directly against cosmopolitan ideals of open, mixed public encounter: rather than bringing a cross-section of the public together, these spaces sort people by income before a single conversation takes place.



Figure 2.1: Murad IV, by Konstantin Kapıdağlı, turn of the 18/19th century

This represents a historical inversion. The coffeehouse was once, for long stretches of its history, a genuine centre of cosmopolitan and political life — precisely because it enabled the kind of open, cross-class public discourse that today's price-segmented coffee shop forecloses. The most striking precedent comes from the Ottoman Empire: in 1633, Sultan Murad IV banned coffee and coffeehouses across the empire, with

consumption punishable by death, largely because coffeehouses had become sites where public opinion formed and political dissent circulated freely.¹² Where the Ottoman coffeehouse was feared by authority precisely because it produced unregulated public opinion, the contemporary coffee shop has been re-engineered by the market into a space that produces regulated, class-sorted sociability instead. The apparatus has not disappeared; it has simply changed which mechanism — price rather than prohibition — does the work of control.



Figure 2.2: Ivan Aivazovsky, *Coffee-house by the Ortaköy Mosque in Constantinople*, 1846.

Billboards do not only show a product; the key point is who is showing the product. The person holding it — their expression, their racial profile — becomes the representation of the modern man, even though the definition of modern has itself been authored by the storyteller: the one who holds power over these apparatuses. What makes this representation so effective is its capacity to adapt and evolve. As the trends or dominant content of an era shift, so too does the politics of aesthetics: the representation adjusts to match whatever aesthetic is currently most consumed. This creates the impression that the representation is simply following the current narrative, when in fact it is actively paving the way for that narrative.

Lefebvre's account of the medieval knight points to a public sphere shaped around military-based opinion, in which dominance and military presence are romanticised. In the present day this same romanticisation has shifted onto consumption — but the process at work is not simply that consumption is good. It is the normalisation of

¹² Ralph S. Hattox, *Coffee and Coffeehouses: The Origins of a Social Beverage in the Medieval Near East* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985).

consumption as an ethically neutral, even virtuous act, one so thoroughly absorbed into daily life that its underlying structure goes unquestioned. This normalisation produces its own form of alienation: not alienation from the product itself, but alienation from any understanding of how the surrounding economic and structural system actually works, since the everyday act of buying is stripped of any visible connection to the mechanisms that produce the demand for it in the first place. Contemporary narratives and representations are built around lack, improvement and acquisition — the sense of not yet having, of working toward having, and of finally having — and advertising manufactures this sense of lack by targeting a specific psychological pressure point: the fear of missing out. By romanticising acquisition and dressing it in the language of self-improvement or belonging, advertising is able to justify its own agenda while appearing simply to reflect what people already want.

Dependency is the outcome of this operation. Military presence is romanticised because it produces dependency — a felt debt incurred through the promise of safety, much as a father who protects and provides for his children is, by virtue of that protection, elevated into a figure whose word carries added weight. The modern age reproduces this same structure: it too offers a sense of safety and manufactures dependency, except that this safety is now constructed through ethics rather than military strength. Advertisements and representations, deployed through architecture and other media tools, project an image — an image of the modern human, of what an ethically good or civilised person looks like — without ever specifying whose ethics that image is actually built on. The safety this produces operates through self-respect: we are made to feel comfortable and secure in the belief that we are modern, civilised people, and it is this feeling, reinforced cycle after cycle by advertising built on the fear of missing out, that generates the dependency.

Taken together, these points establish that public space is not a neutral backdrop but an apparatus in its own right. And if public space is an apparatus, it requires a media tool through which to communicate — a question taken up directly in the following section.

2.2 Space as Media

Habermas's claim that public space is a space of communication is correct, but it undersells the range of that communication: it spans not only oral communication, but economic exchange and social interaction as well, each operating through its own linguistic register. The word media itself comes from the Latin *medius*, meaning "in the midst," or "in between" — a poetically fitting origin, since media has no physical form of its own, yet its agency produces very physical effects on us. It changes how we behave;

it sculpts our ideas and opinions. Media is, in this sense, precisely in the midst: it lacks a body, but its consequences are bodily. This returns us to Habermas's statement that public space is a space of communication — except that public space is not only a space of communication, it is a medium in its own right. The events staged within it, planned or unplanned — from cultural festivals to protests, from circuses to revolutionary acts — are one clear example of how public space communicates. But public space has more to it than the events it hosts: space itself acts as an influencer, guiding how we behave even when nothing is being staged at all.

Let us move from basic examples toward the more abstract effects public space has on us. To discuss how space affects behaviour, we first have to discuss its basic design principles — and by that we do not only mean green areas or public squares, but also privatised public spaces such as coffee shops. Consider first the public square. The general design of public space tends to centre around a landmark, leaving a large open area around it and lining its edges with benches. This design principle has been used across ages and across the world, so what, exactly, is the problem with it? There are both legal and cultural problems with this methodology.

The first, legal problem concerns the planning of events in these spaces. An open public space does not just provide room, it provides the opportunity for different kinds of events — but executing any such event requires legal approval, and without it, the event is labelled illegal activity. This is where the problem begins: what looks like a neutral bureaucratic process is in fact a mechanism of gatekeeping, since approval is granted by a municipality governed by a particular party and its interests. When an event's ideology does not correspond with that of the governing body, it will not be approved. These refusals are political in character: a peaceful protest, for instance, is unlikely to be allowed, and the authorities will typically construct justifications framing it as not only contrary to public opinion, but actively harmful to the public.

Several examples make this pattern visible. Palestine solidarity protests have faced sustained suppression across Western Europe in the period following October 2023, through police intervention and administrative restriction alike.

In the spring of 2024, campus occupations spread across Switzerland — Geneva, Lausanne, Zurich, Bern, Basel and Fribourg — and across Belgium, while at the University of Amsterdam riot police were deployed repeatedly and some two hundred people were arrested. The administrations at Bern and Basel responded by threatening restricted access to their campuses and declaring that no tolerance would be shown. The same period saw a Palestine conference in Germany prevented from proceeding, with the former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis and the Irish parliamentarian Richard Boyd Barrett barred from attending.¹³

¹³ Haber Merkezi, "Filistin'e destek eylemleri Avrupa kampüslerinde yayılıyor: İşgal, boykot, dayanışma!", *soL Haber*, 14 May 2024, <https://haber.sol.org.tr/haber/>



Figure 2.3: Police remove a demonstrator during a pro-Palestinian occupation at the Freie Universität Berlin, 7 May 2024. Photograph: Markus Schreiber / AP.

A different but related mechanism appeared in Halle an der Saale, in Saxony-Anhalt, where the Heidebad, a lake-side public bathing facility, introduced a requirement in June 2026 that visitors demonstrate sufficient command of German to understand the bathing rules, on pain of being refused entry. The measure was introduced following a rescue operation and justified by the facility's operator on safety grounds, the lake reaching depths of thirteen metres. It was immediately criticised as discriminatory: the Left Party city councillor Hendrik Lange described it as "clear discrimination" and a transparent manoeuvre, and the Network of Migrant Organisations in Saxony-Anhalt objected that participation in public facilities should not be conditional on language ability.¹⁴ And the 2026 NATO summit in Ankara offers a third register of the same logic. Ahead of the summit the Turkish authorities imposed sweeping restrictions on the city, closing Mevlana, Özal, İsmet İnönü, Dumlupınar, Anadolu, Sakıp Sabancı, Ankara and Atatürk Boulevards along with sections of the ring road, banning heavy goods vehicles from the city for five days and restricting motorbike couriers along the summit routes, and enforcing a comprehensive parking ban across residential districts, businesses, universities and shopping centres.¹⁵ Alongside these security measures came a second

filistine-destek-eylemleri-avrupa-kampuslerinde-yayiliyor-iskal-boykot-dayanisma-393348; Çağdaş Gökbel, "Avrupa'dan demokrasi manzaraları: Filistin konferansı yasak, nükleer misilleme hazır," soL Haber, 15 April 2024, <https://haber.sol.org.tr/yazar/avrupadan-demokrasi-manzaralari-filistin-konferansi-yasak-nukleer-misilleme-hazir-392938>. On police responses to solidarity protests beyond Europe, see also Haber Merkezi, "BM, ABD'deki Filistin'e destek eylemlerine polisin müdahalesini eleştirdi," BirGün, <https://www.birgun.net/haber/bm-abd-deki-filistin-e-destek-eylemlerine-polisin-mudahalesini-elestirdi-525777>.

14 "Sicherheit: Freibad prüft Sprachkenntnisse am Eingang," Migazin, 23 June 2026, <https://www.migazin.de/2026/06/23/sicherheit-freibad-prueft-sprachkenntnisse-am-eingang/>.

15 Haber Merkezi, "Life in Ankara Will Come to a Standstill for the NATO Summit," BirGün, 3 July 2026, <https://www.birgun.net/haber/life-in-ankara-will-come-to-a-standstill-for-the-nato-summit-722019>.

set of preparations of a different character: public parks, among them the Botanik Parkı, Dikmen Vadisi and Eymir Gölü, were closed to residents for the duration, reportedly in order to accommodate the French president's morning running routine, and informal dwellings along the delegations' routes were concealed behind panels on the stated grounds of "visual pollution."¹⁶ Nothing was repaired and nobody was rehoused; the houses were simply put out of sight. All of this proceeded while the state promoted an image of Turkish hospitality that stood in visible contrast to its own domestic record. Each case restages the same core operation: public space is curated into a simulacrum, a display staged for a particular audience, at the cost of the ordinary public's access to and use of that same space.



Figure 2.4: Turkish Government covering "visual pollution" with NATO Billboards, Photo by: Adem Altan, 2026

The second problem with public spaces lies in their universal design approach. In architecture, universalism was introduced and defended from what appears, on the surface, to be a romantic and egalitarian position. The idea originates with Le Corbusier, who framed it as something close to a moral responsibility: designing in a single, universal language so that architecture would be approachable by everyone, everywhere. The intention behind it, however, was rooted less in universal generosity than in a narcissistic, colonial ambition. Le Corbusier was, by most historical accounts, deeply invested in his own name and legacy; he wanted to be remembered as the person who designed the world, and his proposals were defended as though they were the only path to a modern life for everyone. In pursuing that goal, he championed universalism as a public ideal, while the underlying motive was closer to an unchecked, self-serving ego.

¹⁶ "NATO zirvesi öncesi Ankara'da 'Macron' hazırlığı: Parklar kapatılıyor, gecekondu panellerle gizleniyor," Cumhuriyet, 24 June 2026, <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/turkiye/nato-zirvesi-oncesi-ankara-da-macron-hazirligi-parklar-kapatiliyor-gecekondu-panellerle-gizleniyor-2515133>.

This is visible in his own historical record. On 19 August 1936, only months after Italy's invasion and conquest of Ethiopia, Le Corbusier wrote to the Italian ambassador in Paris — asking, in the same letter, for a meeting with Mussolini himself — offering his services to design new cities across Italian East Africa, and proposing models “so severe, that one might think the colony was a space without time, and therefore, without history, and without any particular geographical meaning.”¹⁷ Whatever term one uses for this posture — and “Euro-supremacist architect” captures its spirit as an apt characterisation, even if it is not a phrase drawn verbatim from the letter itself — the underlying logic is unambiguous: he was offering himself as architect to a colonial power for territory that same power had just invaded. The poetic ideal of universalism, in other words, has a colonial intention at its root.

There is a second way in which universal design functions as an instrument of influence, and this one targets culture directly. Public space cannot be identical from one country or city to the next: its structure is built from the culture of the place it occupies, and that specificity is precisely what makes a given public space unique to that place. If the design of public space collapses into a single universal language, it severs the cultural and historical connection between a civilisation and its own space. What is the benefit of severing that connection? The answer is simple: cutting a civilisation off from the roots of its own space makes it far easier to dictate, from outside, what counts as modern and what does not, what is just and what is not, who is friend and who is enemy. Public space is, in this sense, one of the oldest media tools we have possessed — a technology of influence that predates recorded history.

Having covered the public square, we can now turn to how privatised public spaces function as a tool for constructing ideology in their own right. The key operation of a privatised public space is the construction of class: the commodity itself becomes the line that divides those who are low from those who are high. In this scenario the commodity is not really the product sold in the store — the commodity is the purchasing power required to afford what the store offers.

Take, for simplicity, the example of a coffee shop. One cannot socialise there without first buying a cup of coffee, which means paying an accepted price simply to be permitted to use the space. This price functions as a precondition, a kind of entry affirmation. What is actually being purchased, then, is not coffee, and not socialising as such, but a constructed identity — a specific social category one gets to be part of by paying that particular price. Many coffee shops and restaurants sell essentially the same product at different price points, and the purpose of that difference is not to create a shared, common space but to sort and classify the people who use it.

17 Le Corbusier to the Italian ambassador in Paris, 19 August 1936, quoted in Rixt Woudstra, “Le Corbusier's Vision for Fascist Addis Ababa,” *Failed Architecture*, 9 October 2014, <https://failedarchitecture.com/le-corbusiers-visions-for-fascist-addis-ababa/>.

The irony here is difficult to overstate. As established in the previous section, the coffeehouse was once so effective a cosmopolitan meeting ground — a space where public opinion took shape outside state control — that the Ottoman state moved to ban it outright, under Sultan Murad IV, in 1633. What history built as a shared meeting ground has, in the present, been repurposed by the market into a labelling and classifying tool that divides the very public it once brought together — the same apparatus, now working through price where the Ottoman state once worked through prohibition.

A natural counter-argument might run as follows: you could simply bring your own coffee or beverage into these public spaces and consume it there with friends or strangers, effectively creating your own event without paying the toll of the coffee shop. This counter-argument, however, does not merely fall short — it is a comfortable evasion, one that trades on romantic imagery while refusing to reckon with either the legal or the psychological machinery that makes such an act far harder, and far more fraught, than it sounds.

I will not dwell at length on the legal dimension, since it varies too much by country to generalise usefully. Drinking alcohol in a park is prohibited across much of the United States under open-container laws that vary by state and municipality; wearing clothing that exposes skin can draw a warning from public authorities in Turkey; and, as far as I am aware, neither is an issue in Germany. Because this legal gatekeeping is so dependent on local context, I will instead focus on the psychological and normative dimension of the counter-argument, which applies more broadly — and does more damage.

Yes, one can in principle bring one's own equipment into public space to counter its centralised structure of socialisation. But doing so surfaces an uncanny feeling rooted beneath the act itself. The scenario sounds romantic in the abstract, but attempting to stage it in a vast, otherwise empty public space is not unlike placing a single chair in the middle of a desert: a singular presence in that much open space produces an uncanny, unsettled feeling rather than a comfortable one. Even a successfully executed version of this counter-act carries an underlying psychological cost — a form of guilt rooted in the idea of the norm. We have been taught a specific ideological version of modernity, and using public space in a way that departs from it registers, in our own minds, as somehow unmodern or improper.

This is close to what Michel Foucault, drawing on Jeremy Bentham's earlier architectural design, describes through the figure of the panopticon: a structure that produces discipline not through active, visible enforcement, but by making its occupants feel perpetually watchable, and therefore perpetually self-monitoring, whether or not anyone is actually watching at all. An open public space works in much the same way — one need not be formally observed to feel judged, because the possibility of judgment has already been internalised. And if one wanted to stage this counter-act at any significant scale, one would in any case need to apply for permission, which returns

the counter-argument to the very system of legal gatekeeping it was meant to bypass. For this reason the counter-argument fails on its own terms: it postures as radical resistance while asking nothing of the reader but good intentions — the laziest, most self-congratulatory form of resistance there is, and precisely the kind of resistance the system has nothing to fear from.

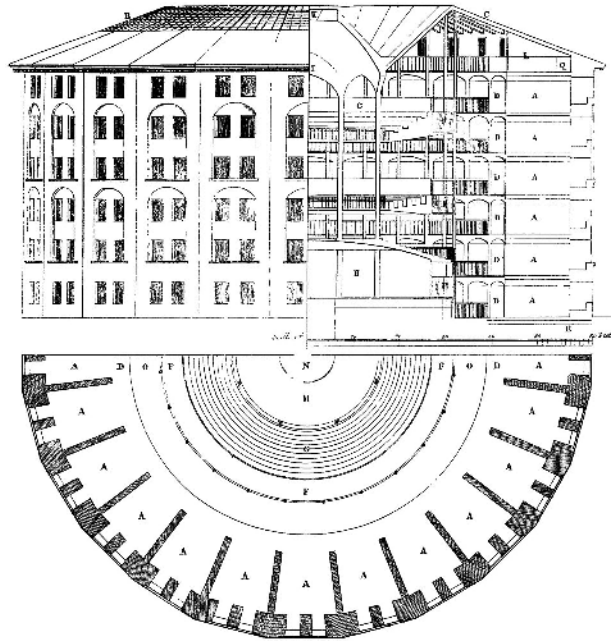


Figure 2.5: Elevation, section and plan of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, drawn by Willey Reveley, 1791

There were, however, architects who proposed different approaches to public space — architects who understood that space itself is a media tool, and that it does not need to be a vast, empty area requiring formal permission before any rhythm can take place within it. The Fun Palace, by Cedric Price, is the best example of what public space could have been. The project was designed by Price, a British architect, and developed with the theatre director Joan Littlewood. Its aim was to create a public space that could be customised by the public itself, for a shifting range of uses and sustained interaction — a space requiring no monetary transaction, focused purely on creation and cosmopolitan encounter. In Price's design the structure would use panel walls that could be repositioned and moved, allowing users to construct their own spaces within it, served by a travelling gantry crane, and it was conceived without doorways, so that visitors could choose their own route and their own degree of involvement. Among the activities proposed for its interior was an idea put forward by the cybernetic artist Roy Ascott for an "identity bar," where visitors could dress up, modify their identity and try out new social roles.¹⁸ The design also included a theatre stage, but one whose entrances con-

¹⁸ Juliet Rufford, "What Have We Got to Do with Fun?": Littlewood, Price, and the Policy Makers," *New Theatre Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (2011): 317.

nected directly to the surrounding walking paths, so that passers-by could accidentally join a performance already in progress. The whole concept was built around generating unexpected interactions and unplanned scenarios within daily life — an attempt to counter alienation through pure customisability and chance encounter.

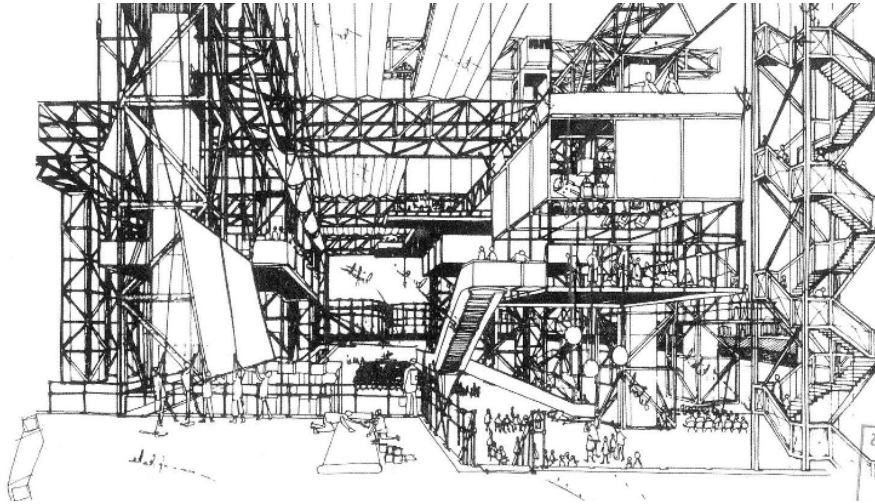


Figure 2.6: Cedric Price's Fun Palace, 1964

The project was never built, but its rejection was not the result of a single veto. Instead, the Fun Palace was slowly choked by a collision between its radical, cooperative vision and the rigid, class-conscious machinery of British planning, public funding and local politics, operating across three distinct fronts. The first blow came from local planning authorities: the London County Council's Parks Commission had already denied Price and Littlewood's earlier application to build on a derelict, bomb-damaged site on the Isle of Dogs, and years later, as planning for the project's intended site at Mill Meads, on the banks of the River Lea, was nearing completion, Newham Borough Council's planning office halted the project at the last moment, claiming the site was urgently needed for a stormwater retention system that, in the end, was never built — while simultaneously voicing support for more conventional facilities on the same land, such as a teacher-training college. The second blow came from the cultural establishment itself: on 1 April 1965 the Arts Council of Great Britain formally rejected the Fun Palace's grant application; its Head of Drama, Jo Hodgkinson, scribbled "What have we got to do with fun?!" on the internal assessment memo, and its General Secretary, Nigel Abercrombie, concluded that the proposal contained "no trace of artistic work such as might call for Arts Council interest." In other words, the very institution charged with funding culture rejected the project precisely because its open-ended, popular, multi-use character refused to respect the boundary the Council quietly policed between high art and popular entertainment. The third blow came from the ground up: when Price and Littlewood attempted to launch a scaled-down, temporary pilot version of the project in Chalk Farm, Camden, they met fierce resistance from the parish and school of Holy Trinity Church, who warned of unbearable noise and "rowdy and hooligan" crowds; from the Clearance Way Estate Residents' Association, who filed formal objections with the

London County Council to keep out what they characterised as “undesirable elements”; and from the Lymington Community Association, whose chairman accused the project of being a purely commercial venture that threatened the voluntary spirit of the existing community-centre movement.¹⁹ In the end the Fun Palace did not fail because any single authority vetoed it; it failed because it did not fit the rulebook of any of the systems it depended on — rejected by municipal planners who wanted permanent structures, by a cultural elite unwilling to subsidise popular pleasure, and by defensive, class-conscious local groups who wanted no part of it. As the theatre scholar Juliet Rufford argues, the project’s rejection is best understood not as straightforward ideological hostility but as “a collision between anarchy and bureaucracy” — a form of programme censorship in which the Fun Palace was refused not because policy makers opposed what it stood for, but because none of the categories available to them, whether theatre, architecture, amusement or education, could accommodate what it actually was.²⁰ Over time the project came to be regarded, retroactively, as an anarchist proposal — not because it advocated the abolition of authority, but because it refused every category authority required it to fit into.

Whichever body one blames, the irony does not end there. The same radical, anti-commercial logic that a coalition of planners, cultural gatekeepers and local residents rejected as unworkable and anarchist would resurface, within a decade, in one of the most celebrated buildings in Europe. The Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, designed by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers and completed in 1977, directly adopted the Fun Palace’s logic of flexible, movable, infrastructure-first design, its exposed structural and mechanical systems built explicitly to allow interior space to be reconfigured at will; both architects credited Price’s project as a direct influence. What London’s planners, funders and residents’ associations killed as too radical for a public park was, a few years later, celebrated as visionary once it had been rebuilt as a monument. The irony never stops.

2.3 Space for Whom

As established so far, public space is not only a media tool but also an apparatus for profile construction. If it is a production tool, then a question follows: production for whom? Once the desired citizen has been produced, what does public space become — who is it for, and how does it function afterward? The same logic that animated Cedric Price’s Fun Palace, the idea of space as a vast theatrical scene, applies here as well.

Public space is never truly for the public; it is instead a vast display, a stage for the greatest show on earth. To understand this claim, the clearest path is through Banksy’s

19 Rufford, “What Have We Got to Do with Fun?,” 313–328.

20 Rufford, “What Have We Got to Do with Fun?,” 313.

latest work. From there we can turn to a broader critique of installations in public space: how they function as the same kind of bread crumbs introduced in 2.1, and how they market a particular image of the modern world.

The primary work under discussion here is Banksy's most recent piece, installed without prior announcement in central London. Widely referred to as *Blind Patriotism*, the sculpture appeared in Waterloo Place in the early morning of 29 April 2026.²¹ The timing matters: 2026 has seen a marked resurgence of nationalist and far-right ideologies across the West, alongside a genocide carried out by the Israeli government against Palestinians that has, by this point, continued for well over a year, with only a small number of Western states taking any concrete action against Israel in that time. The sculpture depicts a suited man stepping down from a plinth, holding a large flag that blows back across his face and blinds him — a flag that carries no emblem, no colour scheme, no identifying mark of any kind.



Figure 2.7: *Blind Patriotism*, statue by Banksy, Waterloo Place, London, installed 29 April 2026

Many viewers have read a specific flag onto that blank canvas, imagining an American flag, an Israeli flag, or another flag of their own choosing, and have taken that imagined reading as the sculpture's critique. What is actually interesting, however, is the blankness itself: why does the flag carry no image at all? One could defend this choice on the grounds that a blank flag lets every government be implicated at once — but if that is the defence, then the sculpture is, in effect, talking without saying anything. The present moment is not short of urgent, nameable causes, including an ongoing genocide, and yet the artist chose not to name any of them. So why does this sculpture say nothing?

Reporting on the piece has never established that it was authorised: it remains unclear whether the artist obtained any permission, no planning application was filed, and Westminster Council reportedly did not even know how the plinth was anchored to

²¹ "Banksy Confirms Creating 'Blind Patriotism' Statue in Central London," CGTN, 2 May 2026, <https://newseu.cgtn.com/news/2026-05-02/Banksy-confirms-creating-blind-patriotism-statue-in-central-London-1MND54j6SRi/p.html>.

the ground. Whether or not that is the full story, what happened next is not in question. Within days, and without any visible internal debate, controversy or hesitation, Westminster City Council announced: "We welcome Banksy's latest sculpture in Westminster, which makes a striking addition to the city's vibrant public art scene. While we have taken initial steps to protect the statue, at this time it will remain accessible for the public to view and enjoy." The Mayor of London's office went further still: "Banksy has a great ability to inspire people from a range of backgrounds to enjoy modern art. His work always draws great interest and debate, and the mayor is hopeful that his latest piece can be preserved for Londoners and visitors to enjoy."²² A full-scale sculpture appears overnight in one of the most heavily monitored, security-conscious squares in Europe, steps from Parliament, and the institutional response is not suspicion, investigation or removal, but immediate, uncomplicated celebration — no public debate, no controversy, nothing resembling the friction one might expect around an unauthorised structure appearing in a space this sensitive. That speed and uniformity is, at the very least, worth noting.

This is precisely the mechanism Guy Debord called recuperation²³: the capacity of the spectacle to absorb even its own critics, and to resell their critique back to the public as proof of the system's own openness and tolerance. It does not actually matter, for this argument, whether the piece was secretly sanctioned from the start or genuinely appeared without warning. Either way the state's response performed the same function: a piece marketed as guerrilla dissent against blind patriotism was, within days, folded into the city's own self-image as a tolerant, culturally vibrant, art-loving democracy — the very desired-citizen apparatus this chapter has been describing, now operating at the level of an entire city's brand. And this is only possible because the sculpture never named anyone. A flag bearing Israel's colours, or a specific government's insignia, could not have been absorbed this cleanly; it would have forced the council either to explicitly endorse or to explicitly reject a specific political claim. The blank flag makes recuperation frictionless, because there is nothing in it for the state to actually answer for.

The significance of this episode is that it demonstrates, concretely, that public space is not neutral and is not for the public in any meaningful sense. Public space belongs to ideology, and it belongs to a performance. This scenario, in which a sculpture is designed for a busy public square, says nothing in particular, and is nonetheless marketed and received as a piece of political criticism, is direct proof that public space functions as a stage for a grand theatrical performance rather than as a site of political reality. The subject of that performance is the staging of democracy itself: how modern, how democratic, how civilised a society can appear to be. It is, at bottom, a masquerade. To be clear, this is not an argument against democracy as such; it is an argument against the specific governments currently running Western states in 2026, which are engaged in a hollow competition over who can appear the most modern and democratic while doing the most, in practice, to undermine democracy — competing, in effect, over who can

²² Anastasia Tsioulcas, "Banksy Confirms New Statue Installed in Central London Is His Work," NPR, 2 May 2026, <https://www.npr.org/2026/05/02/nx-s1-5808871/banksy-statue-london>.

²³ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (London: Rebel Press, 2005).

hide it best. These observations are the basis for this chapter's conclusion: that public space is a media tool, that it functions as an apparatus of production, and that, in the end, it is not for the public at all.

The film *Mon Oncle* offers the clearest summary of everything argued in this section, and closing with an account of it is, for that reason, the most fitting way to end this discussion of space before turning to the question of play.

Mon Oncle, Jacques Tati.

The film *Mon Oncle*, released in 1958 and directed by Jacques Tati, follows the fictional character Tati created across several films, Monsieur Hulot. Across this series Tati uses Hulot and his daily interactions with the world as a running critique of modernity and modern architecture alike. In *Mon Oncle*, Hulot's sister and her husband, the Arpels, take it upon themselves to improve him: they set about finding him both a wife and a job, neither of which he has requested. This detail matters. Hulot does not seek entry into the modern order; the modern order decides that he must be brought into it.

While his sister lives in a house designed in the modern architectural style, Monsieur Hulot lives in a crumbling, labyrinthine old building on the other side of town, reached by a winding sequence of staircases, landings and shared courtyards that only a local — someone who has learned the building by heart rather than by blueprint — could navigate without hesitation. Tati stages this contrast within the first minutes of the film: the camera follows Hulot's ascent through his own building, a route that bends around other people's windows and doubles back on itself before arriving at his garret, and then cuts to his sister's house, the Villa Arpel, approached in a single, direct line from the street. Where Hulot's building is illegible to outsiders but perfectly legible to its inhabitants, the Villa Arpel is the reverse: a house designed to be looked at, admired and explained, rather than lived in.



Figure 2.8: *Mon Oncle*, Monsieur Hulot's House, 1958

The Villa Arpel is the film's clearest embodiment of this thesis's argument that architecture functions as a stage for the performance of modernity rather than as a space of genuine dwelling. Its most famous feature, a fish-shaped fountain in the sterile, geometrically manicured garden, runs as a recurring gag through the film: Madame Arpel switches it on only when visitors of the right social standing arrive, and switches it off again the moment they leave. The fountain performs exactly the same function as Banksy's flag or the billboard discussed earlier in this chapter. It is not there for the people who live with it day to day, but for an audience whose presence justifies the display. The house's automated gadgets, its circular stepping-stone path across the garden that guests are obliged to negotiate single file, and its all-white, echoing interior turn everyday domestic life into a kind of choreographed performance — one that Hulot, with his instinctive disregard for the correct way to move through a space, continually and comically disrupts.



Figure 2.9: Mon Oncle, Villa Arpel, 1958

The Arpels' son, Gérard, prefers his uncle's company and his uncle's neighbourhood to his own home, precisely because Hulot's world still contains the chaos, encounter and improvisation that this thesis has argued public and private space alike have been engineered to eliminate. When Monsieur Arpel attempts to correct Hulot by giving him a job at his plastics factory, Plastac, the resulting sequence of slapstick failures is not simply comic relief. It dramatises the argument already made in this chapter: that a person shaped by unplanned, informal, playful space cannot be smoothly absorbed into a system built entirely around planned, formal, productive space. Tati sharpens the point by showing that the factory does not really function on its own terms either — its workers sit idle and rouse themselves only when Arpel passes — so that Hulot's disruption exposes a performance of productivity rather than productivity itself.



Figure 2.10: Mon Oncle, Fountain scene where all standing and sitting areas are predefined.

The film's ending is instructive precisely because Hulot is never corrected. He is removed. Having proved unassimilable, he is dispatched to a job in the provinces, and the modern order restores itself by exporting the problem rather than by solving it. What survives is not Hulot but his influence: in the closing sequence, Arpel and Gérard find a connection with one another through a prank of exactly the kind Hulot has spent the film modeling, and the father briefly plays. The order that could not absorb Hulot has, without noticing, absorbed something of the way he moves through the world — and it has done so through the child, who had not yet been trained out of it.

2.4 What is Play

The idea of play is a deceptively interesting concept. For most of its history it has not been taken particularly seriously, and only recently has it become an increasingly academic subject rather than something dismissed as childish. The main reason behind that shift is, in fact, economic. For years play and games were treated as leisure — activities for relaxation, or for wasting time — while what actually mattered was work itself. In the twenty-first century, however, the video game sector has become one of the major entertainment industries, promising enormous profit. Play, in other words, was finally taken seriously, but largely for reasons of profit. This is not to say that play received no serious philosophical or sociological attention before this; many thinkers, particularly across the twentieth century, engaged deeply with the concept. The most famous of them is Johan Huizinga, whose *Homo Ludens* — Latin for “man the player,” or “the playing human” — remains the foundational text on the subject.

Huizinga approaches play along an anthropological path. He begins by asking where play comes from, and arrives at his most important observation by looking not at people but at animals. *Homo Ludens* opens with the claim that “play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals

have not waited for man to teach them their playing."²⁴ He illustrates this with young dogs, who, in his description, "invite one another to play by a certain ceremoniousness of attitude and gesture," who "keep to the rule that you shall not bite, or not bite hard, your brother's ear," who "pretend to get terribly angry," and who — most importantly, in his view — "plainly experience tremendous fun and enjoyment"²⁵ in doing so. The dogs are not preparing for anything, and they are not being taught. Huizinga's broader argument follows from this: because play predates human culture, it cannot be explained as a by-product of culture or of rationality. It must be treated as a foundational category in its own right.

Huizinga also describes play as taking place within a specially designated space, set apart from ordinary life. He lists such spaces together — "the arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice"²⁶ — and characterizes them all as "forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain."²⁷ It is worth noting that the specific term "magic circle," as it is used today in play and game studies, was not coined by Huizinga himself: as the list above shows, the phrase appears only in passing in his work, as one item among several related examples. It was Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman who, in their 2003 book *Rules of Play*, took Huizinga's underlying concept and formalized it into²⁸ "the magic circle" as a defined theoretical term. For this thesis, the accurate way to credit the idea is therefore to attribute the concept to Huizinga — a bounded, hallowed space in which ordinary rules are suspended — and the vocabulary used to describe it to Salen and Zimmerman.

Consider, for example, a game of hide and seek. The players designate a corner as the seeker's base. Physically, that corner is nothing more than an ordinary corner; within the game, however, it becomes a special and marked point. To an outside viewer it carries no meaning at all, while to a participant inside the game it carries a great deal. This is what the magic circle describes. From marking a goalpost with two stones to any other element that exists identically in physical space while carrying an entirely different meaning inside the frame of play, this transformation of ordinary space into meaningful space is the operation of the magic circle.

This dynamic is not limited to games. The same operation is at work in art forms such as theater, in religion, and in cultural events held for communal reasons. Newroz, as celebrated in Kurdish culture, offers one example: participants jump over a bonfire as a ritual act. To an outsider the activity carries no meaning, and may even look simply dangerous. To the participants it carries enormous meaning, precisely because they are

24 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 1.

25 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 1.

26 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 10.

27 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 10.

28 Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

operating inside the magic circle — the same flame that an outsider reads as a hazard is, inside the circle, a symbol with centuries of significance attached to it.

A further example can be found in the Kazakh equestrian tradition known as *kyz kuu*, or “girl chase.” In its traditional form a young man on horseback chases a young woman, also on horseback: if he catches her before the finish line he wins a kiss, while if she outruns him she is permitted to turn and chase him back, marking her own victory with a whip. Even in this form, the practice raises real questions about gender and consent that many people today, rightly, recognize as troubling. Yet the fact that it persists as a valued cultural tradition — defended and celebrated rather than abandoned — is itself an illustration of the power of the magic circle. Inside that circle, practices that would otherwise be judged as sexist or coercive are instead treated as meaningful, valuable, even beautiful, precisely because they take place within a frame the participants collectively agree to inhabit.



Figure 2.11: Riders in traditional Kazakh dress play *Kyz kuu*.

There is one more condition worth adding to the magic circle: an audience. Huizinga himself counts “performances and exhibitions” among the forms play takes, and in discussing display he reaches for an example from the animal world, observing that “the peacock and the turkey merely display their gorgeous plumage to the females, but the essential feature of it lies in the parading of something out of the ordinary and calculated to arouse admiration.”²⁹ Admiration, by definition, requires someone to admire. Building on this thread of his argument, it seems reasonable to extend the claim a step further and propose that the magic circle cannot fully form without spectators. Consider the example of theater — *Hamlet*, for instance, a tragedy centered on *Hamlet*’s revenge against his uncle and an extended exploration of human madness. The production involves an enormous amount of set design, costume, and mask work, and for the actors themselves these are not merely costumes: within the performance, they are the characters. Yet even though the actors are the ones playing, they cannot generate the magic circle by themselves. Consider it this way: if a group of children

²⁹ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 13.

played a game, or a group of actors performed a story, in a vast empty space with no one present to witness it, would you still call it a game, or a performance, in any meaningful sense? The magic circle requires an already-existing world in which to form, because the magic circle is fundamentally a dual structure — a bounded space defined against, and in relation to, the ordinary world that surrounds it. A circle drawn where there is nothing to be outside it is not a circle at all. For this reason the idea of play cannot be reduced to mere leisure. It is an anthropological, cosmological, and timeless concept.

2.5 Play as Linguistics

As established in the previous section, play is not merely a leisure concept but has deep anthropological roots — not only for us, but for all the animals we share the world with. Animals, however, do not play purely for leisure; they also use play as a form of communication. Bees perform a dance, known as the waggle dance, through which they communicate both the direction and the distance of a food source to the rest of the hive. Birds perform small, ritualized mating dances to communicate with potential mates. This communicative function is not limited to exchanges within a single species, either: the most basic example is the way humans engage dogs in a friendly game in order to signal that we are safe and pose no threat. In each of these cases, something is being said without being spoken — and it is said through the form of play itself rather than through any language available to both parties.

This dialogue created through play does not only exist between organisms; it also exists in abstract form, through play with objects. We use such objects to increase the interactivity of play itself. Here it is worth drawing on Eugen Fink's distinction, in "Oasis of Happiness," between natural and artificially produced playthings³⁰ — a distinction that can usefully be framed, for the purposes of this thesis, as one between organic play, which draws on objects found in nature and invested with meaning by the imagination, such as a stick becoming a sword, and inorganic play, which uses objects made specifically for the purpose, such as dolls. Taking the organic case as the clearer of the two: when, as children, we take a natural object such as a stick and let it stand in for something else in our imagination, that object becomes a bridge between the abstract and the physical world. We are, in effect, conducting a dialogue with space itself — assigning meaning to what is materially there, and then acting on the meaning rather than on the material. This dialogue, formed in childhood, is part of what teaches us to read and understand the space we inhabit as adults. Nor does it end there: it continues into questions of existentialism.

30 Eugen Fink, "Oasis of Happiness: Thoughts Toward an Ontology of Play," in *Play as Symbol of the World and Other Writings*, trans. Ian Alexander Moore and Christopher Turner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 23–24.

Friedrich Schiller's concept of the *Spieltrieb*, or "play drive," is relevant here. Schiller's own argument is that the play drive mediates between what he calls the "sense drive" — our material, sensuous nature — and the "form drive" — our rational, formal nature — producing what he terms "living form" and, with it, free aesthetic experience.³¹ To make this abstract idea concrete: a child does not become a sculptor simply by deciding to be one. A child must first play with clay, unstructured and without any communicative goal, simply to learn how the material behaves — how it resists, how it yields, what it will and will not hold. Only through this exploratory, playful relationship with material and tools does the child eventually gain the skill to shape the world around them, and only then can that skill be turned toward communicating their own concerns in artistic form. Play, on this reading, is not the opposite of serious work but its precondition. This suggests that play can also serve as a bridge toward self-realization and existential understanding — one more form, among several, of the dialogue this chapter has been describing.

If play is to be understood as a cosmological concept rather than a trivial one, then it should be visible not only in childhood and in nature but in the way we make art. The group of artists known as the *Section d'Or* offers a particularly clear example.

Section d'Or

The *Section d'Or* — "the golden section" — was a collective of painters, sculptors, poets, and critics working in Paris between roughly 1911 and 1914, as well as the name of the exhibitions they mounted together. Its members, among them Albert Gleizes, Jean Metzinger, Robert Delaunay, Fernand Léger, Marcel Duchamp, Juan Gris, and František Kupka, took their name from the golden ratio, invoking mathematical harmony in order to present their work as a continuation of a long tradition rather than an isolated experiment. Their landmark exhibition, the *Salon de la Section d'Or* of 1912, presented over two hundred works and did much to establish Cubism publicly as a recognized movement.³² The group's work stood at the meeting point of Cubism and Orphism — the latter a Cubist offshoot, sometimes called "Orphic Cubism," which retained Cubism's fragmented, multi-angle structure while prioritizing color and light over pure form, drawing that heightened sense of color directly from the influence of Fauvism.

The relevance of this for the present argument lies in what those two tendencies each contribute. Cubism, as established earlier in this thesis, seeks to compress a single moment into one frame, taking every angle of a subject at a given moment and reflecting them together onto the canvas; it is an art of analysis, structure, and deliberate construction. Fauvism, for its part, takes its name from the French *fauve*, meaning "wild beast," and its guiding idea is the reflection of strong emotion through strong, unrestrained color. In holding these together, the *Section d'Or* is a collaboration between technicality

31 Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man, in a Series of Letters*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), Letters 12–15.

32 "Section d'Or," Wikipedia, accessed 29 August 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Section_d%27Or.

and sentimentality — a mixture of order and chaos, in which neither is permitted to overwhelm the other.



Figure 2.12: Jean Metzinger, 1911–1912, *La Femme au Cheval*, oil on canvas

The connection to the idea of play follows directly from this. Play, too, is a form that moves between chaos and order. It requires enough restriction to construct actual lines and rules, since without them there is nothing to play within; yet it cannot become pure order either, since total order would eliminate its imaginative space entirely. Nor can it become pure chaos and abstraction, since without any boundary at all, play has nothing to exist against. Play lives in the tension between the two, and it is precisely this tension that the *Section d'Or* makes visible on the canvas.

The *Section d'Or* is therefore the clearest physical example of this relationship. It demonstrates the point not only through its shifting balance of line and color, but by exhibiting the same kind of dialogue this thesis has already discussed through Schiller's play drive and Fink's "Oasis of Happiness." The *Section d'Or* is itself a dialogue: not only between technicality and sentimentality, but between physical reality and abstract creativity.

2.6 Play as Systems

The presence of play, as discussed so far, is not limited to our biological structure, nor to religion and culture. It extends further still — into our governmental structures, our laws, and our civilizations themselves. Huizinga makes precisely this argument: these, too, are a form of play, and nothing about them is as sacred or as inevitable as they appear to those living inside them. The laws we establish are, in effect, the rules of a game we have agreed to call civilization.

Break those rules, and you are removed from the game. In this case, removal takes the form of imprisonment, which is consistent with Huizinga's own reasoning: he holds that the figure who damages the play itself, rather than merely losing within its rules, must be ejected for the sake of the game as a whole. He calls this figure the spoil-sport, and distinguishes him carefully from the cheat. The cheat breaks the rules while still pretending to accept them, and in doing so leaves the game intact; the spoil-sport refuses the illusion altogether, and by refusing it exposes the fact that the rules were only ever agreed upon. It is the spoil-sport, not the cheat, who cannot be tolerated, because it is the spoil-sport who reveals the game as a game. None of this is intended to undermine laws or civilization. It is simply an observation about their structure.

Since this chapter has already established that a magic circle requires a viewer in order to exist, the same logic applies here. In this case the magic circle is civilization itself, and its viewer is nature. We draw abstract borders across the ground, we form nations, and we require documents to move from one piece of land to another — with the difficulty of that movement determined not by the land itself but by the geopolitical position one happens to have been born into. Yet for a bird crossing the same ground, none of these borders carry any meaning at all. The line exists only for the players who have agreed to recognize it.

Huizinga is not the only theorist to make this case. James Carse's *Finite and Infinite Games* offers a parallel argument for the way civilizations function as a form of game. Carse distinguishes between two types. Finite games are designed to be finished: they have fixed goals, defined endpoints, and a winner — football or basketball, for instance, games built around competition and a final result. Infinite games are played for the sake of continuing to play rather than for the sake of reaching a conclusion — storytelling, theater, and, in our case, government itself. A government does not seek to win and end; it seeks to continue, and the object of its play is the continuation of the play.

Why does this distinction matter here? As established in the discussion of play as linguistics, toys function as the apparatus through which dialogue happens within a game — the bridge between abstract rules and the physical world, and thereby the bridge that connects one magic circle to another. If civilization is an infinite game, designed

above all to keep being played, then it too requires such an apparatus. Architecture, this chapter argues, must be understood as the toy of this larger civilizational game.

2.7 Architecture as Toy

The preceding sections have established that play is not confined to childhood, to leisure, or to the space of the playground. It is a form of dialogue, older than culture and shared with the animals we live alongside; it is the mechanism through which we first learn to read the world around us; and it extends upward into the largest structures we inhabit, into our religions, our cultures, our laws, and our governments. Civilization itself, on this reading, is a game: governed by rules we call laws, enforced by the removal of those who would break the game rather than merely lose within it, and bounded by a magic circle whose borders exist only for the players who agree to recognize them. If play is everywhere, and if civilization is one of its largest forms, then the question that follows is the one this section takes up. Every game requires an apparatus through which its abstract rules meet the physical world its players actually inhabit. What, then, is the toy of this game?

As established in the discussion of play as linguistics, a toy is what increases the interactivity of play. It is the object through which an abstract, imagined relationship becomes something graspable — something a person can hold, act on, and act through. Whether the object is found in nature and invested with meaning by the imagination, as when a stick becomes a sword, or produced specifically for the purpose, as with a doll, its function is the same: it makes an abstract idea physically available. The toy is the bridge between the invented rules of a game and the material world in which those rules are played out. Without it, the game remains an idea; with it, the game becomes something the body can perform.

Architecture is the toy of civilization's game. Governments and their ideologies are, like all games, built from abstract languages — law, national identity, "modernity," "civility" — none of which have any physical form of their own. Architecture is where those languages become physical: an occupiable, walkable, photographable expression of claims that would otherwise remain purely verbal. In the same way that a piece of wood becomes a sword only once a child's imagination designates it as one, a building becomes the proof of a nation's claimed values only once it is inhabited, viewed, and used as such. This is what distinguishes architecture from a slogan or a poster. A poster illustrates an ideology from the outside and asks to be believed; architecture is the object through which that ideology is played, and it asks instead to be used. Its argument is made not by persuading us but by giving us something to do.

This is precisely what strengthens the magic circle. As already established, a magic circle requires a viewer in order to exist — but it also requires continual reinforcement in order to remain convincing to the very people playing inside it, since nothing about its borders is inevitable or natural. Architecture supplies that reinforcement physically and repeatedly, simply by being there and by being used. Banksy's *Blind Patriotism* sculpture, discussed earlier in this thesis, demonstrates the mechanism at the scale of a single object: an installation that does not argue for the state's tolerance and openness so much as perform it, allowing that tolerance to be pointed at and displayed rather than debated. The Villa Arpel in *Mon Oncle* demonstrates it at the scale of an entire building. Its fountain, its automated gadgets, its choreographed geometry are not incidental features of a house but toys in the fullest sense — objects whose entire function is to allow the Arpels to play at being modern, civilized people, and which are worth switching on only when there is a guest present to witness the performance.

This is where the argument returns to the dependency described in the opening chapters of this thesis. Public space and its architecture do not merely present us with an image of the modern, civilized citizen and ask us to admire it. They let us play at being that citizen — physically, repeatedly, and with our own bodies. We walk through the right kind of square, we are seen in front of the right kind of building, and in doing so we perform a label rather than receive one. This is what makes the dependency so effective and so difficult to see from the inside: we are not simply told that we are modern and civilized, we are handed a toy through which we can act it out and feel it confirmed by our own movement. Architecture, in this sense, is not only the toy of civilization's game. It is the mechanism through which the game continues to be played — the thing that keeps its players playing, not by compelling them, but by making the game feel worth remaining inside.

2.8 Architecture as Media

Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* opens with the claim that "the medium is the message"³³ — that the significance of a medium lies not in the content it happens to carry but in the medium itself, in what this thesis has already described through the word's own etymology as the *midst*: a form with no physical body of its own, yet one that produces entirely physical effects on those who move through it. The message, in other words, is not what is said within the medium; it is what the medium does to us by existing at all.

³³ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

McLuhan devotes a short chapter of that book specifically to games, and what he says there matters for the argument this chapter is building. He describes games not as private amusements but as extensions of what he calls our social selves — as “situations contrived to permit simultaneous participation of many people in some significant pattern of their own corporate lives.”³⁴ A game, on this reading, is not something we watch from outside; it is a pattern of collective life that we enter into and enact together. This is what separates a game from most other media. We receive a poster, a broadcast, or a slogan; we do not receive a game, we inhabit it, and in inhabiting it we perform the very pattern it models. The message of a game is therefore not delivered to its players but carried out by them.

Architecture works in exactly this way, which is why it must be understood not only as the toy of civilization's game, as the previous section argued, but as one of its media. Architecture does not merely house our movement; it directs it. As discussed in the opening chapters, it defines where we may walk and where we may not, where we may sit and where we may only pass through, and it does so continuously, without ever stating a rule aloud. Over time this direction becomes habit, and habit becomes the frame through which we perceive space itself. A seating element that departs from the language we have been trained to expect produces hesitation, sometimes even discomfort — not because it cannot be used, but because it does not speak the vocabulary our habits have taught us to read. In this sense architecture limits our perception as human beings: it narrows what we are able to imagine space being, by endlessly repeating what it has already taught us space is. Because architecture is a toy, in the sense already established, it is inseparably also a message tool. The same object through which we play at being modern, civilized citizens is the object instructing us in what modern, civilized behavior is supposed to look like.

Le Corbusier's *Ville Radieuse* makes this mechanism visible in its most explicit form, and for that reason it deserves to be examined critically rather than admiringly. Le Corbusier remains among the most cherished figures in modern architecture, and yet the *Ville Radieuse* was not offered as one possible answer among many, suited to a particular place and a particular people. It was offered as an absolute plan: a single ideological model of the city that could, by its own claim, be built anywhere. Its logic did not answer to any local culture, and this was presented not as its limitation but as its virtue. Le Corbusier proposed versions of this same model, with only minor adaptation, to the Soviet Union, to Fascist Italy, and to Vichy France in turn — regimes that shared almost nothing with one another beyond a willingness to build at scale. What was being advertised in each case was not a solution to a city's needs but an ideology of modernity and progress, packaged as self-evidently correct and therefore exportable everywhere. This is what it means to say that architecture, as a medium, can be used to build romanticism into colonialism: the plan does not argue that one culture's way of living should replace another's, it simply presents its own way of living as the universal shape of the modern, and lets the buildings make the argument on its behalf.

34 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, “Games: The Extensions of Man.”

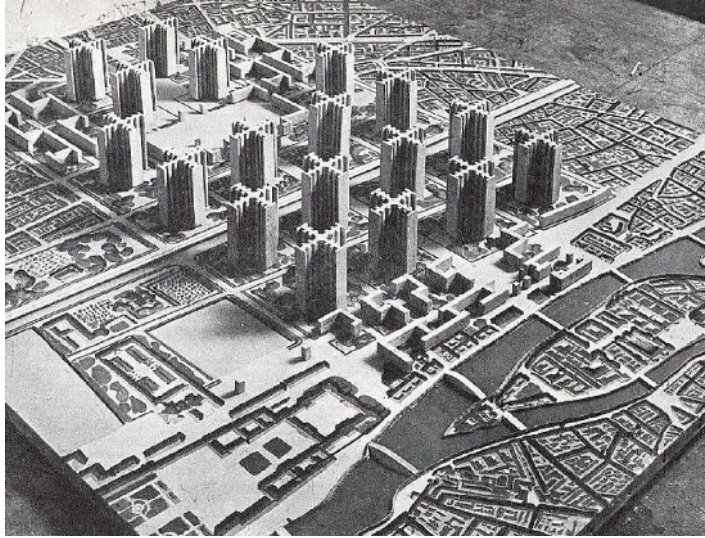


Figure 2.13: Ville Radieuse, 1930

The mechanism here is no different from the one this thesis has already drawn out of Habermas. In his account of representative publicness, the medieval nobility did not argue for their virtue and honor through debate; they displayed it — through insignia, dress, bearing, and above all the joust, “the replica of the cavalry battle,” in which the representation of virtue became indistinguishable from the virtue itself. Banners and coats of arms did not persuade anyone of a lord’s honor; they advertised it, and the advertisement was the honor. Le Corbusier’s proposal operates by precisely this logic, substituting “modern” and “progressive” for “noble” and “honorable.” Its claims are not defended, they are staged — built at scale, repeated across continents, and thereby made to appear inevitable. This is consistent with what this thesis has already established regarding Le Corbusier’s 1936 letter to the Italian ambassador in Paris, in which colonial urban planning in Ethiopia was framed in the very same vocabulary of rational, modern order. In both cases architecture functions as the medium through which a particular political ideology is made to look like a universal truth rather than the claim of one place and one moment.

Architecture’s role as a medium is not limited, however, to shaping ideology, habit, and persona. It also curates the rhythm of our lives. Different spaces are built to carry different architectural languages — a plaza speaks differently from a corridor, a space designated for leisure speaks differently from a space designated for transit — and each of these languages, once learned, labels its space as being for one kind of activity and not another. This curation of space becomes, in effect, a curation of time. Spaces built for specific uses draw us into specific rhythms, and those rhythms, repeated daily, harden into precisely the habits described above. It is this relationship between curated space, rhythm, and habit that the following chapter takes up directly.

2.9 Architecture as Curator

The previous section closed by observing that architecture does not only shape ideology, habit, and persona, but also curates the rhythm of our lives. This section takes up that claim directly, and the clearest place to begin is with an image made by people who were trying to describe exactly this problem.

In 1957, Guy Debord, working with Asger Jorn, produced *The Naked City*, a map assembled shortly before the founding of the Situationist International. It is a map of Paris, but not a map in the ordinary sense. Debord cut the city into fragments and kept only those districts that carried some emotional or experiential charge, linking them with arrows that represent, in the Situationists' own description, "the spontaneous guiding tendencies of a subject that crosses through this milieu without practical considerations."³⁵ Everything between those fragments — the streets we pass through without registering, the distances we cross without noticing — is simply gone. What remains is not the city as it is built but the city as it is actually lived: a record of where consciousness switches on and where it does not. The map is, in effect, a map of urban consciousness.

The observation this thesis draws from that map is the following. If it is possible to map where consciousness activates in a city, then it is worth asking who determined the location of those points, because someone designed them. The fragments Debord preserved are not natural formations. They are squares, arcades, and quarters that were planned, built, and given their character by someone, which means that the map does not only record where attention falls — it records where attention was intended to fall. To map the consciousness of a city is therefore also to map its curation. Somebody wrote the narrative of how this space is to be used, and the map is that narrative made visible in the pattern of our own attention.

This is where the previous sections become directly relevant. If architecture is the toy of the game of civilization — the physical apparatus through which an abstract ideology becomes something we can act on and act through — then curation is what that apparatus is used for. The narrative does not need to be stated anywhere. It is enacted through the placement of a bench, the width of a passage, the decision that this quarter is for leisure and that one is for transit. Through these decisions a rhythm is written for us, and through that rhythm a particular kind of citizen is produced: not by instruction, but by arrangement.

The rhythm itself is the mechanism, and here Lefebvre's rhythmanalysis, already introduced in this thesis, gives the argument its shape. Our daily lives are structured by

³⁵ Guy Debord and Asger Jorn, *The Naked City: Illustration de l'hypothèse des plaques tournantes en psychogéographie* (Copenhagen: Permild & Rosengreen, 1957).

rhythm — the places we go, the order in which we go to them, the tasks we perform once we arrive. These rhythms are experienced as personal, but they are largely determined by spaces designed to produce them, and because they are designed, they tend toward the monotonous: a rhythm built for one purpose will keep producing that purpose. What interrupts monotony is almost always the unplanned — the random encounter, the unexpected interaction, the thing the design did not account for. Everything else repeats.

What makes this more than a matter of scheduling is that these rhythms do not only organize our daily events; they also shape our daily reactions. A rhythm repeated long enough becomes a habit, and a habit is not simply a routine — it is an embedded code that determines how we respond before we have consciously decided to respond at all. This is the point at which curation becomes something more serious than arrangement. Within a rhythm we did not write, responding through habits we did not choose, we become viewers of our own daily lives rather than participants in them. Agency is not taken from us by force; it is quietly obtained in advance, through a consent we never gave to a narrator we never met — who is, in this case, the designer of the space.

This problem was not identified only here. A number of architects and artists across the twentieth century arrived at versions of the same analysis, and the Situationist International built its entire practice around it, aiming not to design better buildings but to create situations — moments of constructed disruption intended to break the inherited rhythm rather than to refine it. In this respect their project might be understood, by way of comparison, as something like a permanent revolution conducted at the scale of daily life: not a single decisive break after which the new order settles, but a continuous refusal to let any rhythm harden into the ordinary. Two architectural projects in particular attempted to build this refusal into physical form: Cedric Price's Fun Palace, already discussed in this thesis, and Constant Nieuwenhuys's New Babylon, which the following chapter examines in detail.



Figure 2.14: Models for New Babylon, Constant Nieuwenhuys, 1958–1967. Reproduced from Constant: New Babylon (Museo Reina Sofia), 158-59

Both projects deserve examination on their own terms, and both will be given it. But the criterion by which they should be measured follows directly from the argument made here. If architecture curates by writing rhythms, and if those rhythms produce habits that operate beneath the level of conscious choice, then any project claiming to return

agency to the people who use a space must do its work at that level. It is not enough to make a space physically flexible, or to multiply the number of available actions within it. The question is whether the rhythm itself is altered, and whether the habits built on top of that rhythm are reached at all. It is with this question in mind that the following chapter turns to New Babylon.

Fun Palace and New Babylon

Cedric Price's Fun Palace and Constant Nieuwenhuys's New Babylon were developed independently, but they begin from the same diagnosis. Both identify alienation as the central condition of modern urban life, and both propose that public space might be made more interactive in order to produce a less alienated society. More importantly for this thesis, both arrive at the same instrument: play. Each project treats play as the means by which random, organic interaction can be reintroduced into a city that has been organized to prevent it. This instinct is correct, and it is worth stating clearly why. Play reaches us from childhood, before we are taught anything else, and as this thesis has already argued through Huizinga, it is older than culture itself. It is, in that sense, one of the few genuinely universal languages available — a form of exchange that does not require a shared tongue, a shared class position, or a shared set of cultural assumptions in order to function. If the problem is that people no longer meet one another, then play is a reasonable place to look for a solution.

Constant made this inheritance explicit. He worked on New Babylon for close to two decades, and described its inhabitants directly in Huizinga's terms: the city would be populated by *homo ludens*, man at play, freed by automation from the obligation to work and therefore free to spend life in continuous creative activity rather than production. The formal expression of this was the labyrinth. Constant conceived New Babylon as a giant labyrinth raised above the surface of the earth, and he was explicit about its purpose: "the labyrinthine form of New Babylonian social space is the direct expression of social independence."³⁶ Disorientation, in his hands, was not a failure of planning but its point. A person who cannot predict where they are going will encounter what they did not plan to encounter, and the labyrinth is the most efficient device ever devised for producing that condition. Constant's models, deliberately abstract, are proposals for a machine that manufactures the unforeseen.

36 Constant, quoted in Paula Burleigh, "Ludic Labyrinths: Strategies of Disruption," *Stedelijk Studies*, no. 7 (2018), <https://stedelijkstudies.com/journal/ludic-labyrinths-strategies-of-disruption/>.

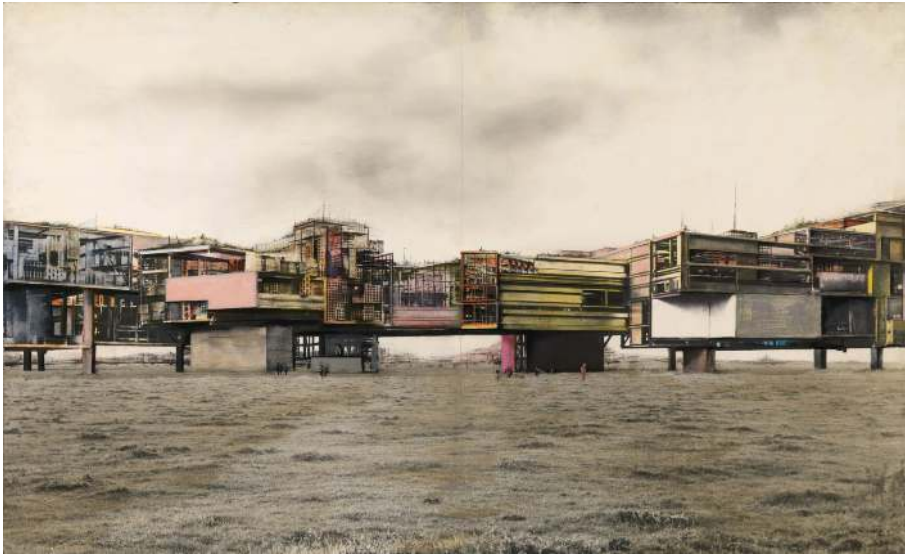


Figure 2.15: View of New Babylonian Sectors. Reproduced from Constant: New Babylon (Museo Reina Sofia), 222.

Price approached the same problem from the direction of customization — of space, and of the self. The Fun Palace was designed with no doorways, so that visitors could, in its own promotional language, “choose one’s own route and degree of involvement,” moving through ramps, catwalks, and moving walkways past enclosures assembled from movable panels and repositioned by a permanent travelling gantry crane. Nothing in it was fixed, because nothing in it was meant to prescribe. Among the activities proposed for the interior was Roy Ascott’s idea for an “identity bar,” where visitors could dress up, modify their identity, and try out new social roles.

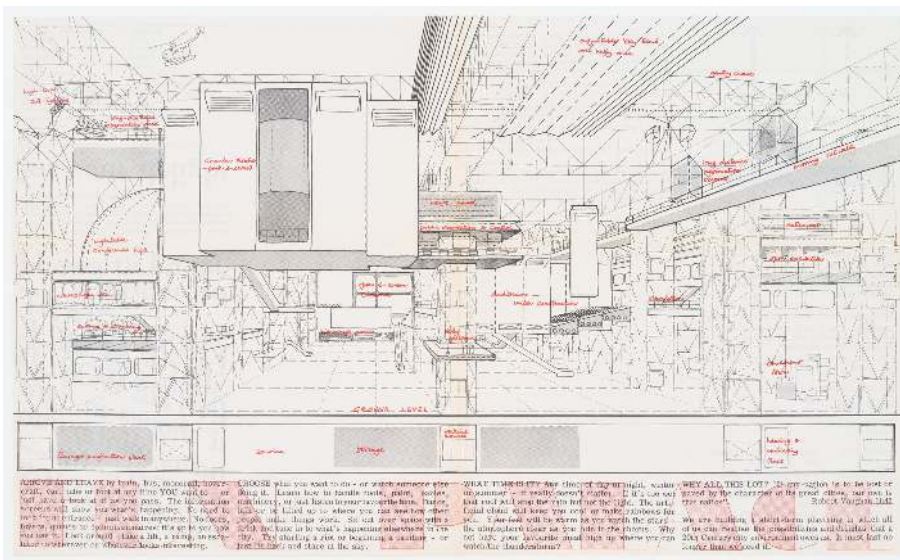


Figure 2.16: Fun Palace brochure by Cedric Price and Joan Littlewood, 1964

The significance of this becomes clear when it is set against the argument made earlier in this thesis. As discussed in the critique of the shopping mall and the coffee shop, contemporary socializing is mediated by material value: to meet someone, one must

go somewhere, and to be permitted to remain there, one must purchase something. Access to company is sold, and priced. The Fun Palace refuses this arrangement entirely. There is no need to enter a coffee shop and pay for the right to sit, no need to petition a municipality for permission to gather, no need to search for a venue that will accommodate an event. The space is simply reconfigured into whatever its users require. In this sense, Price's proposal is a direct answer to the apparatus this thesis described in its opening chapters.

Both projects, then, are aimed at the right target. Yet in my view, both share a common misunderstanding of the thing they had chosen as their instrument.

Price and Constant both approached play as an event. They understood it as an encounter, a situation, an occasion to be constructed — something that happens at a particular moment, in a particular place, between particular people. Play, in both projects, is a physical and interactional phenomenon: you go somewhere, you do something, you meet someone you had not expected to meet. What neither project treats play as is a rhythm — a sentimental and psychological pattern that persists whether or not any particular encounter takes place.

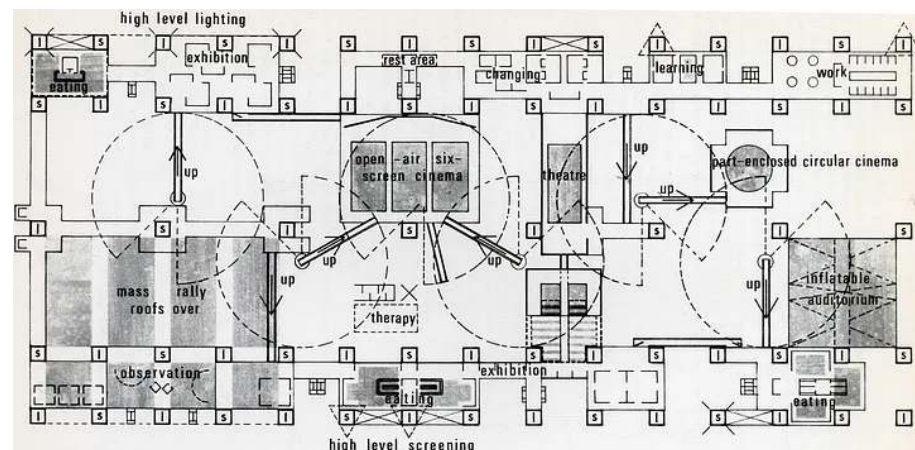


Figure 2.17: Fun Palace Plan, Cedric Price, 1964

Constant comes closer to this than Price does, and the distinction is worth drawing precisely. New Babylon can be understood as a polyrhythmic proposal: polyrhythm, in music, describes the simultaneous layering of different and seemingly incompatible rhythms, producing not disorder but a chaotic order in which no single tempo governs. This is what the labyrinth is for. Rather than imposing one route, one pace and one sequence upon its inhabitants, New Babylon layers many at once, so that the city carries several rhythms simultaneously and none of them dominates. Constant, in other words, did think in rhythmic terms, and thought in them more ambitiously than the Fun Palace ever attempted.

The difficulty is where that rhythm is placed. Constant composes his polyrhythm inside a new structure, for new inhabitants, on ground that does not yet exist. The rhythms are written into the architecture rather than drawn out of the people who would live in it, and the person entering New Babylon is expected to arrive already free of the rhythm that formed them. Nothing in the project reaches the pattern a person carries in from the world outside, because the project assumes there is no longer any outside to carry it in from. A polyrhythm composed for a city that has not been built cannot alter the rhythm of a person walking through the city that has.

This has a structural consequence that is best described in the vocabulary this thesis has already established. Both projects accepted the existing civilization and its elements as given, and attempted to construct a smaller magic circle inside it — a bounded space, operating by different rules, in which alienation would not apply. I do not oppose this ambition. The difficulty is that the surrounding magic circle will hardly permit such a thing to exist, and for a reason that follows directly from Huizinga: a magic circle constructed inside another magic circle is a spoil-sport. It does not break the rules of the larger game while pretending to accept them, as a cheat would. It demonstrates, by functioning, that those rules were only ever agreed upon — and that is precisely the offence Huizinga identifies as intolerable. The larger game cannot permit a working demonstration of its own contingency.

The Fun Palace's history bears this out. As documented earlier in this thesis, the project was refused not once but repeatedly and from every direction — by Newham Borough Council, by the London County Council and its successor's Parks Committee, and by the Arts Council of Great Britain, which declined funding in 1965 — until it was never built at all. It was not rejected because it was unworkable or because its costs were prohibitive. It was rejected because it did not fit any existing category of what a public institution is supposed to be, and because it declined to specify in advance what would happen inside it. The spoil-sport is ejected for the sake of the game as a whole, and that is, in effect, what occurred.

What both projects missed, however, runs deeper than the question of whether they could have been built. Play itself is a rhythm in our lives. It is a psychological rhythm, and the circles we participate in — whether the largest one, civilization, or the smaller and more specific ones we move through daily — are not merely places where things happen to us. They build our habits and our image. They construct our personas through the act of participation, and the longer we participate in the same circle, the more thoroughly that participation hardens into a production cycle: a pattern that no longer merely shapes what we do, but reproduces what we are.

This is why a new circle placed inside the existing one cannot do the work. If the aim is to address the alienation produced by the rhythm we currently inhabit, then constructing an alternative circle beside it leaves that rhythm entirely intact — a person visits the alternative, plays within it, and returns to the same daily pattern that produced their

alienation in the first place. The Fun Palace and New Babylon both offer somewhere else to go. Neither alters what happens when one comes back. To work at the level where alienation is actually produced, one cannot propose another circle within the circle; one must interpret the existing circle itself. That requires mapping the psychological rhythm of the participant's daily life within civilization, and then attempting to shift it from inside.

It is this operation — the mapping and shifting of a rhythm rather than the construction of an alternative to it — that the following chapter sets out as psycho-rhythmic analysis, and which forms the core concept guiding the proposal model of this thesis.

3. Proposal

3.1 Psycho-Rhythmic Analysis

This thesis has argued that space is a media tool: that it participates in the production of society, that it idealizes favored ideologies, and that it can be used as an instrument of manipulation by working on our sense of dependency and of debt. It has also argued that the mechanism through which this operates is play itself. Play is a form of communication, and not only for us — it belongs to every living thing that shares this world with us. It is, in that sense, a cosmological subject. It was here before we were.

The argument then turned to architecture. Architecture, this thesis has proposed, is the toy of the magic circle we call civilization: it represents ideas and determines the actions available within the game, curating our movement and, through that curation, building our habits. Lefebvre argues in *Rhythmanalysis* that the actions of daily life determine the rhythm of that life. What I propose to add to this is the following: the daily language with which we continually interact in our surroundings determines not only our rhythms but our habits, our behaviour, and ultimately our personalities.

Psycho-rhythmic analysis, the term I introduce here, focuses on precisely these behaviors. Each architectural element represents an idea. Every element carries its own language, and each of these design languages descends from a specific ideology. It follows that these elements do not simply organize our bodies in space — they represent, and produce, our psychological behaviors. There is a rhythm to those behaviors, and it is a rhythm that architecture writes.

What I mean by this can be described very simply. When we walk, the pathways have already been defined for us. When we buy a cup of coffee, the places where we may sit have already been decided. When we cycle or run, the routes are laid out in advance.

None of these definitions is a problem in itself. The difficulty is that when everything in our lives has already been defined and labeled, the result is a lack of event. Existence in such a space becomes redundant, and redundancy produces monotony. This monotony, repeated daily, generates an alienation not from other people but from the condition of being in space at all — one might say that it kills our being-there itself. And because it is redundant, this condition reflects back into our psycho-rhythm, where it begins to define our habits and our personas.

There are, however, structures that interrupt this. The Hundertwasserhaus in Vienna, built between 1983 and 1985 to Friedensreich Hundertwasser's design, refuses the straight line as a matter of principle: its floors undulate, its facade is irregular and colored, and trees grow out of its interior rooms with their branches extending through the windows. Mr. Hulot's house in Mon Oncle, already discussed in this thesis, works by the same logic in the opposite register — a ramshackle, illegible accretion of stairs and openings set against the Villa Arpel's choreographed geometry. The Collage House in Mumbai, by S+PS Architects, assembles its facade from doors and windows salvaged from demolished buildings, hundred-year-old wooden columns, metal drainpipes, and rusted plates riveted together. Each of these buildings produces a different rhythmic effect, because each is unorthodox — avant-garde relative to the architectural language surrounding it — and therefore expresses a different atmosphere into the space it occupies.



Figure 3.1: Hundertwasserhaus, Vienna, designed by Friedensreich Hundertwasser with architects Josef Krawina and Peter Pelikan, 1983–1985.

The crucial point is that this effect is not confined to the people who use these buildings. It reaches the ordinary passer-by who merely shares the path. This is what distinguishes such structures from the projects examined in the previous chapter. The Fun Palace and New Babylon were destinations: one had to go to them, enter them, and choose to participate, which is precisely why they constituted a separate circle rather than an alteration of the existing one. A building that interrupts the language of the street interrupts it for everyone who passes, including those who never chose to encounter

it and who are not aware of having been affected. It does not ask for participation. It changes the rhythm of a route that people were already walking. This is what I mean by psycho-rhythmic analysis: an account of how architectural elements exert rhythmic effects on our emotional and psychological health, and of how those effects accumulate into habit, behaviour, and persona.



Figure 3.2: Collage House, S+PS Architects, India, Navi Mumbai, 2015

Figure 3.3 is a collage I produced in order to express this idea in visual form. Its outer border is built from paintings, with political events registered along its side edges through the human silhouette — society reflected back at itself — and it is this border that constitutes the circle within. Inside that boundary, dancing figures taken from Henri Matisse's *Dance* mark the rim: here dance stands for play and for culture, the two things that establish a magic circle in the first place. Moving inward, the *Unité d'Habitation* occupies the whole of the lower ground, representing the demand for a single universal language and, with it, a single universal ideology of character. Further in still are fragments of *The Naked City*, the *Villa Arpel*, and drawings by Lebbeus Woods — an architect who approached the discipline as a political act, and whose work stands here for refusal. These are the reaction against the circle: a demand for a change of rhythm, set against the unconsented construction of character that modernism requires. Running through the composition is a classical column, order attempting to hold its position while remaining in dialogue with the chaos around it — the same duality between order and chaos that this thesis identified earlier in the *Section d'Or*. The image is organized in depth, and its depth is the argument: constitution at the border, imposition at the inner line, refusal at the center.

As I argued in my critique of Constant and Price, their proposals could not be established within the current structure. What I would propose, in order to establish this psycho-rhythm in small and incremental steps, follows only the logic of Price's approach rather than Constant's. My project proposal focuses on designing and creating extensions to elements that already exist in public space. It would be both tactical and beneficial to concentrate on hacking those existing elements so that they become more

interaction-based — providing the foundation not only for random actions to occur, but for the elements themselves to be turned into toys within the public space.



Figure 3.3: Psycho-Rhythmic Collage

This is the difference in method. Rather than proposing a new circle in which play might take place, the aim is to work on the toys the existing circle already contains, and to alter, one element at a time, the rhythm those toys currently write.

3.2 Plug-In Furniture

If psycho-rhythmic analysis holds — if the elements of public space and their design language function as the guideline for our actions — then the most direct way to test the theory within my own capabilities is to work on the public furniture that already exists, and to ask how it might be adjusted, or hacked.

The reasoning behind this begins with a limitation and ends with a principle. I cannot construct a Fun Palace or a New Babylon; the scale is beyond my capacity. But if I were to construct a single structure that worked entirely on its own terms, the result would not be a piece of architecture at all — it would be an installation. And the problem with an installation is precisely the problem this thesis identified in the previous chapter. An installation produces a curated action rather than an organic one, and a curated action is a magic circle constructed inside another magic circle: a bounded space one must choose to enter, operating by its own announced rules, and therefore subject to the same fate as the Fun Palace. The way to avoid this is not to build something new alongside the existing rhythm, but to plug into the elements that already carry it — benches, walls, poles. In my case, the focus fell on benches, and the reasoning behind that choice comes from Don Norman's *The Design of Everyday Things*.

Two of Norman's arguments shaped my approach.

The first concerns the distinction between conscious and subconscious action. "Most of the brain's operations are subconscious," Norman writes, "hidden beneath our awareness. It is only the highest level, what I call reflective, that is conscious."³⁷ Skilled, everyday performance runs almost entirely on that subconscious level. Conscious attention, he argues, "is necessary to learn most things, but after the initial learning, continued practice and study, sometimes for thousands of hours over a period of years, produces what psychologists call 'overlearning.' Once skills have been overlearned, performance appears to be effortless, done automatically, with little or no awareness."³⁸ For experts, only especially difficult or unexpected situations require conscious attention at all. This is what happens when we encounter a familiar object. We do not consider how to interact with a door or a chair; we simply use it, without any awareness of the space we are using it in — a movement closer to muscle memory than to decision. I would describe this, in the terms of this thesis, as being a passive participant in space rather than an active one: present in the space, but not registering it.

From this, and here I am extending Norman's observation rather than reporting his advice, follows the design problem I set myself. If a designer wants users to shift from passive to active participation, the design must be altered in a way that is unfamiliar — but only slightly. The change has to be sufficient to catch attention and provoke curiosity, and no more than that, because there is a fine line between triggering curiosity and producing unease. If the alteration is aggressive, no one will interact with the object at all, or those who do will approach it cautiously, and cautious approach is itself the

³⁷ Don Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, rev. and exp. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 44.

³⁸ Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, 44.

failure: it converts the object into an installation to be regarded rather than a piece of furniture to be used. My proposal therefore has to be radical enough to shift participants into active engagement, and familiar enough that no one hesitates before touching it.

Norman's second argument concerns what he calls opportunistic actions. "For many everyday tasks," he writes, "goals and intentions are not well specified: they are opportunistic rather than planned. Opportunistic actions are those in which the behavior takes advantage of circumstances. Rather than engage in extensive planning and analysis, we go about the day's activities and do things as opportunities arise."³⁹ Such actions, he adds, "are less precise and certain than specified goals and intentions, but they result in less mental effort, less inconvenience, and perhaps more interest."⁴⁰ Norman's own illustration is telling for the present argument: we may not have planned "to try a new café or to ask a question of a friend," but if we find ourselves near the café or encountering the friend, the opportunity triggers the activity. Trying an unfamiliar coffee shop is exactly this: the stated aim is to get a coffee, or to sit somewhere, but that is rarely the whole of it. The real aim is to open the possibility of something happening — meeting someone, encountering something unplanned. The actual goal, in other words, is a change of rhythm, and getting a cup of coffee in a new place is the sub-goal that carries it. Norman writes that "the brain is structured to act upon the world, and every action carries with it expectations, and these expectations drive emotions."⁴¹

That statement is what makes opportunistic actions valuable for my purposes. These actions are not undertaken at random, nor out of boredom. We initiate them out of a social need. We need a change of rhythm, and we are too lost within the existing one to articulate what it is we actually want. Together, these two arguments — conscious and subconscious action, and opportunistic action — form the foundation of my design approach.

As I began to sketch, it became clear that the proposal had to work on opportunistic action directly. The structure must generate opportunistic events within people's daily lives; but in order to do so, it must itself shift between conscious and subconscious engagement. The reason is that both states are necessary, in sequence. A user must reach a conscious state in order to take up an opportunistic event, since an opportunity that goes unnoticed is no opportunity at all. But the initial engagement has to happen subconsciously, because engagement that begins in a conscious state is engagement that has been prompted — the person knows they are being invited to participate, and participates as someone responding to an invitation. Engagement that begins subconsciously is natural. It is not curated, and it is not triggered.

From these conclusions, the public bench emerged as the element that made the most sense. It is a structure of daily life that sits directly in front of us and that we do not consciously observe. Since the aim is to have people engage with it, designing a plug-in for a bench that already exists does two things at once. It signifies the object as something to be interacted with, rather than merely sat upon. And because a plug-in can

39 Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, 43.

40 Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, 43.

41 Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, 47.

take multiple forms and can be connected to other plug-ins, it opens a range of possible variations — which is to say, it produces different rhythms under different scenarios.

3.3 The Plug-In Bench

Site and Object

The test site was the open area behind the main building of the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, in front of the Atelier. Three benches stand there, all of the same common municipal type: a run of weathered timber slats carried on a galvanised steel frame, 120 cm long and 45 cm high, of which the timber itself accounts for 5 cm.

The ordinariness of this object is not incidental to the choice; it is the reason for it. As argued in the previous section, an element of public furniture that we encounter daily is precisely the kind of object we handle without conscious attention. Nobody at the university looks at these benches. They are sat on, walked past, and used to hold a coffee cup, and none of these actions requires any awareness of the bench as a designed thing at all. If the aim is to test whether an existing element of public space can be altered enough to shift a person from passive to active participation, then the correct test case is not an interesting object but an invisible one. A bench that already attracted attention would prove nothing.

The dimensions of the bench also determined the dimensions of everything that followed. With the timber accounting for 5 cm of the 45 cm total, the underside of the seat sits at 40 cm, and this figure became the governing unit of the entire system. Rather than beginning with a form and adapting it to the site, the site set the module.



Figure 3.4: Selected site and Bench, behind Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, Main Building

The first study was made digitally and then 3D printed: a scale model of the bench itself, produced from its measured dimensions, against which module arrangements could be tested physically before any full-scale work began. Working with a printed model rather than on screen allowed each configuration to be assembled, dismantled and rearranged by hand — which, given that the subject of

the proposal is reconfiguration by hand, was the appropriate way to study it.

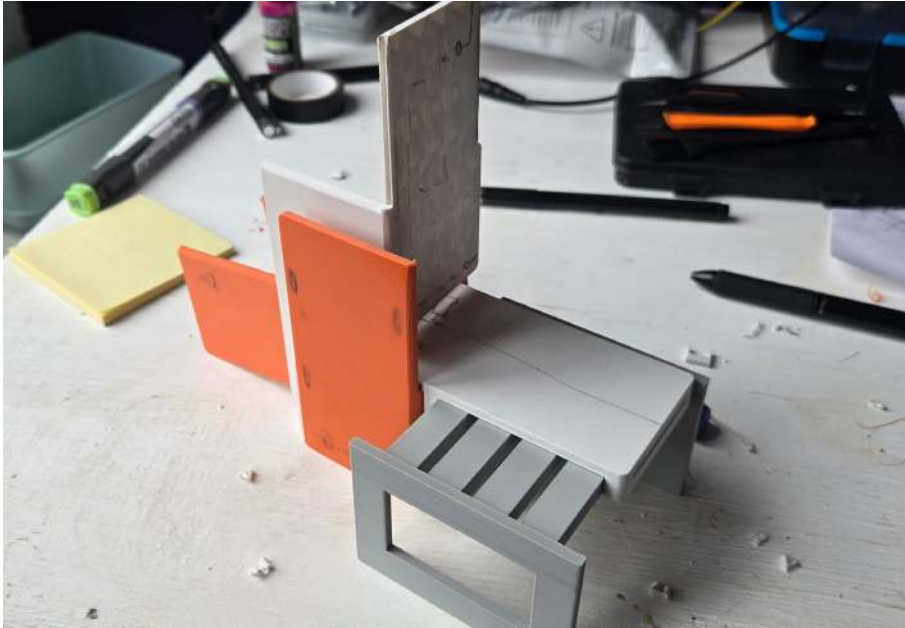


Figure 3.5: 3D Printed Model



Figure 3.6: 3D Printed Model, assembled

The Modular Grammar

The proposal required a language of parts rather than a single designed object. If the intention is to produce different rhythms in different scenarios, then the system has to generate more than one arrangement, and it has to do so without any part being redundant. This led to the adoption of a tetris language: a family of modules whose

plan geometry is derived from tetromino shapes, so that pieces of different form share a common grid and can be combined in a large number of configurations.

The unit of that grid is a 40×40 cm square, taken directly from the 40 cm underside height of the existing bench. This means that any module, in any orientation, meets the bench at its own height. The tetromino logic then extends this unit into a set of module types — straight runs, L-forms, S-forms, seat-and-back combinations, and stepped pieces — each occupying a different footprint on the same grid.

Figure 3.7 sets out this vocabulary: each module is drawn in axonometric alongside its tetromino footprint, so that the full catalogue of parts and the grid that governs them can be read together. It is this drawing, rather than any individual module, that constitutes the design proposal. The parts are not a set of objects but a system for producing arrangements, and the number of arrangements available is a function of the grammar rather than of the number of pieces.

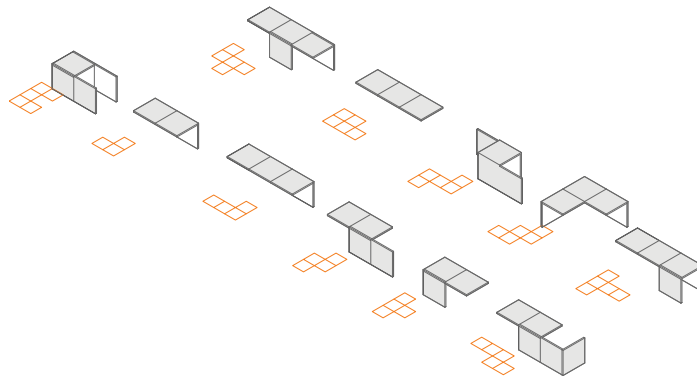


Figure 3.7: Module Vocabulary

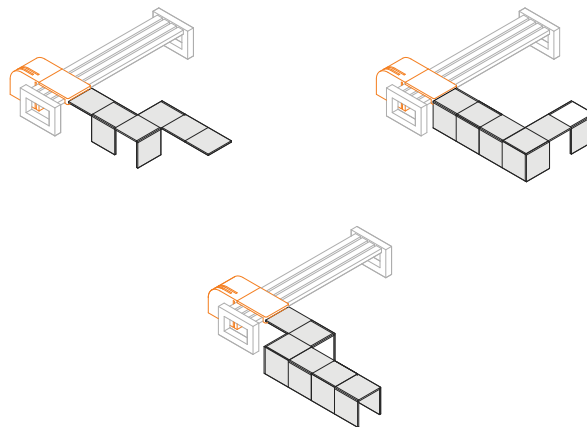


Figure 3.8: Different Variations

Connection and Movement

Two things had to be resolved for the system to function: how modules connect to one another and to the bench, and how a person moves them once connected.

The first attempt at connection used a rail inserted directly into the material — a channel routed into the 16 mm MDF, into which an adjoining piece would slide. This failed. As Figure 3.9 shows, the MDF tore along the wall of the channel: with a groove cut into a 16 mm board, the material remaining on either side of the channel is too thin, and the fibre gives way under the load of an inserted rail. The failure was in the material rather than the principle, and the principle was worth keeping, since a sliding connection is the one a person can operate without instruction.

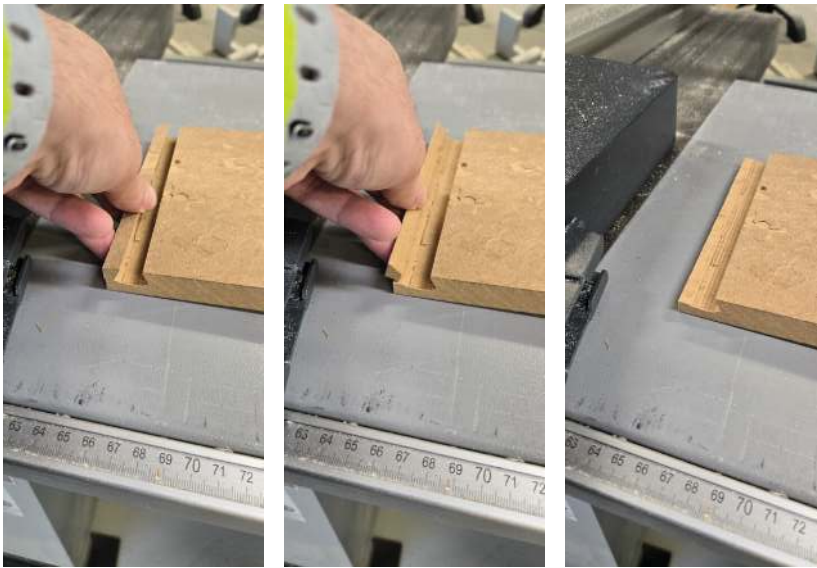


Figure 3.9: Groove cut railing failure

The solution was to move the joint out of the middle of the board and onto its edge. Rather than routing a channel into the full thickness, half the board's depth — 8 mm of the 16 mm — was removed along the connecting edge, producing an L-shaped rebate. The adjoining piece carries the matching rebate on its own edge, so that the two step into one another and close flush, forming a half-lap. Nothing thin is left to fail, because the material that remains is a full 8 mm across the whole width of the joint rather than a few millimetres either side of a channel.

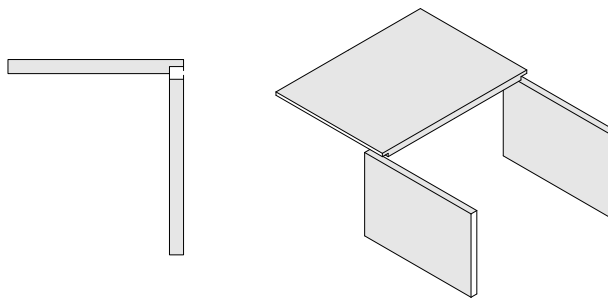


Figure 3.10: L-Shaped rebate for railing and fixing

The significant point is that the rebate is itself the rail. A module brought up against its neighbour follows the L-profile down into position, and can only seat one way; the geometry does the locating, so a person assembling the piece does not need to know how it goes together in order to put it together correctly. This was supported by 3D-printed guides, shown in Figures 3.11 and 3.12, which register the pieces as they come together, and as materials Carbon Fiber PETG and ABS has been used for sun resistance and structural reliability. Structural fixing was handled separately, with L-shaped brackets and M5 bolts securing the connection once the pieces were seated. Guidance and fixing were, in other words, deliberately separated: the rebate and the printed guides tell the module where to go, and the bolts hold it there.

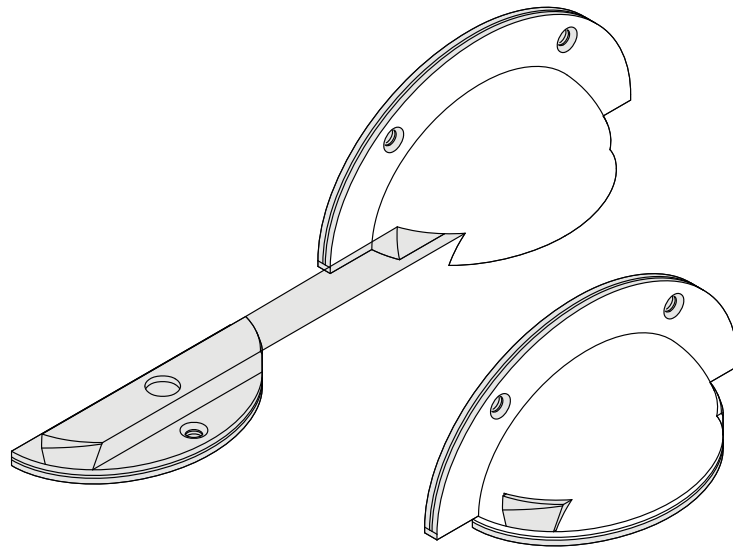


Figure 3.11: 3D Printed railing connection guide

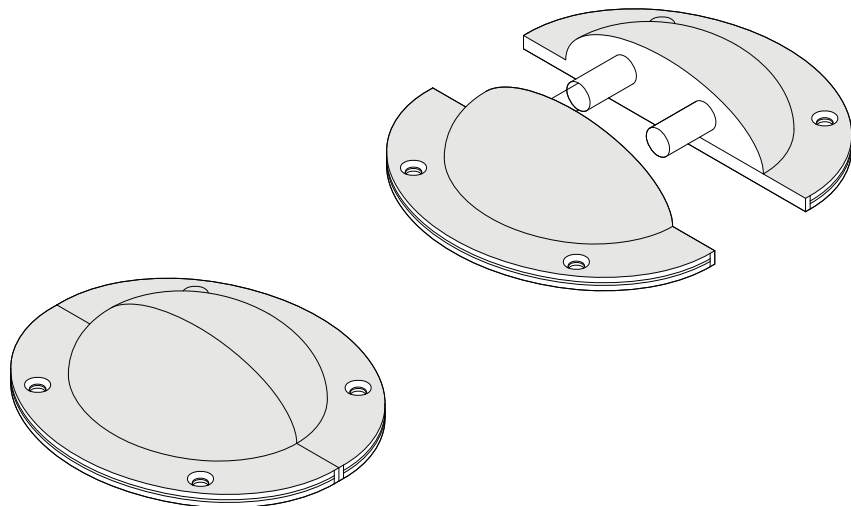


Figure 3.12: 3D Printed direct connection guide

The relationship to the bench itself is different in kind, and this is the point at which the proposal is at its most direct. The large curved module runs on wheels, which allow it to slide along the length of the bench and be set wherever the user chooses, as indicated in Figure 3.13. Nothing is fixed to the bench, nothing is removed from it, and no tool is required. A person can move the module to one end, to the middle, or off it entirely, and the bench beneath remains exactly as the municipality installed it. This is the plug-in principle at its simplest: the existing element is neither replaced nor damaged, and yet its configuration — and with it the arrangement of bodies it produces — is now determined by the person using it rather than by whoever specified it.

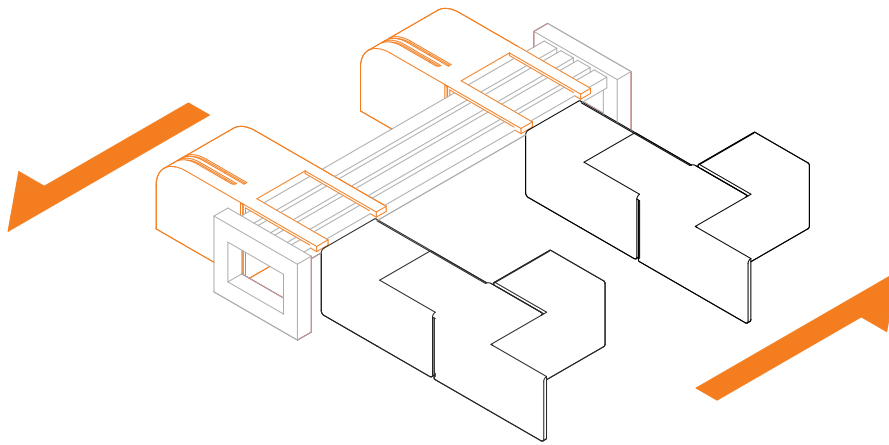


Figure 3.13: Movement sequence

The same modularity governs how the system is put away. Figure 3.14 shows the storage sequence, in which the modules nest into one another and against the bench, so that the system occupies a compact volume when not in active use. This matters practically rather than theoretically: any proposal for public space that cannot account for its own dormant state is incomplete, since public furniture spends most of its life unused.

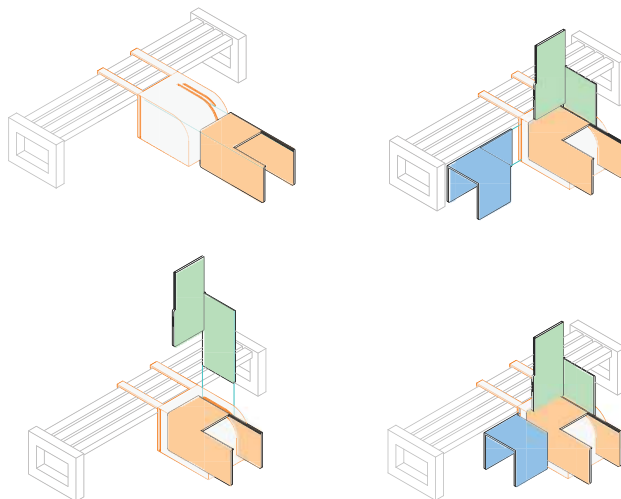


Figure 3.14: Storage sequence

Fabrication

The modules were built from 16 mm MDF, cut into 40 × 40 cm and 80 × 40 cm panels according to the grid established above. Into each panel a slot was cut to serve as a hand hold. These openings are visible in Figures 3.15 and 3.16, and they perform two functions at once: they allow a module to be lifted and carried by one person, and they announce, before anything else about the object is understood, that the object is meant to be picked up. A fixed piece of street furniture has no handles. An element that does is already saying something about itself.



Figure 3.15: 80 × 40 cm MDF panels with holders



Figure 3.16: Two constructed modules joined together by railing

The largest component of the system is the curved module that seats three tetris pieces, and it was formed by kerf bending — cutting a series of closely spaced grooves across the inner face of a plywood sheet so that the remaining material can be drawn into a curve. The first attempt failed. The kerfed section was cut short of the span required for three modules, and the piece could not be completed as drawn; the technique was sound but the setting-out was not. The second attempt, made at the correct length, worked without difficulty, and the finished curve holds its radius unsupported. Both are shown in Figure 3.17, and the pair is worth reproducing together: the difference between them is not a difference of method but of measurement, which is the more common way that a fabrication step fails.

Because the structure was intended to stand outdoors, the assembled modules were finished with two coats of a combined primer-and-topcoat lacquer (2-in-1 Buntlack), applied first in white, to protect the MDF against moisture and against ultraviolet degradation over the exhibition period. Colour and graphics were applied only afterwards, once the electronics had been installed, so that the painted surfaces would not have to be opened again.



Figure 3.17: (Left) Failed curved module, (Right) Remade module

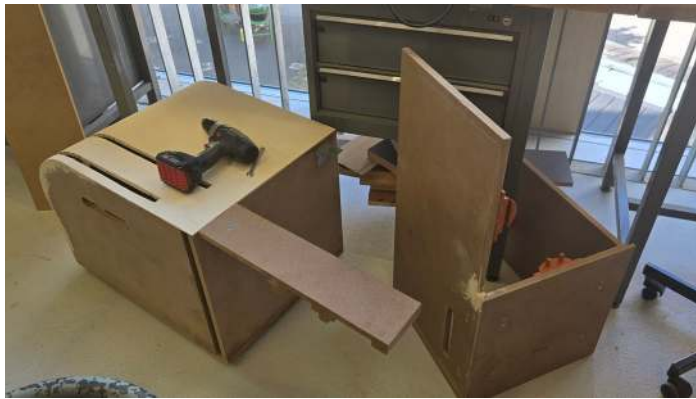


Figure 3.18: Installing bench guide and creating module store areas on curved module



Figure 3.19: Primed and painted modules



Figure 3.20: Installing electronics on modules

Electronics and Interaction

Each module carries its own power supply and its own behaviour. Nothing is wired between modules and nothing is connected to mains power, which is a requirement of the proposal rather than a convenience: a plug-in element that depends on a fixed power source is no longer something a person can pick up and put down where they choose.

Power in each module comes from two 18650 lithium cells, held in battery holders bonded to 3D-printed housings that mount them to the interior face of the panel. From there the supply passes to a circuit board assembled for the purpose, carrying a voltage regulator and a lithium battery charging module, which delivers a regulated 5 V output and is itself enclosed in a printed cover. That 5 V line then feeds one of three things, depending on the module: an addressable LED strip, an Arduino, or a Hall effect sensor. Of the three modules built, two were configured for sound and one for light. In the sound modules, the Arduino drives a DFPlayer Mini and an amplifier mounted on the same board; in the light module, the regulated supply drives the LED strip behind a printed diffuser cover, shown in exploded view in Figure 3.21, which seats into the face of the cube so that the light reads as part of the surface rather than as a fitting attached to it. Figure 3.22 shows the modules illuminated on site after dark.

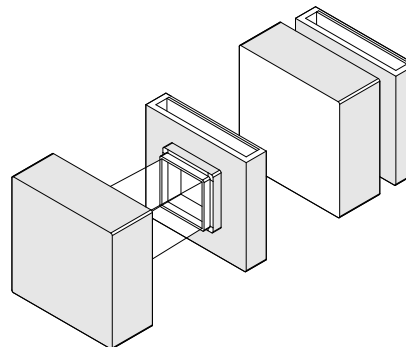


Figure 3.21: LED light cube, 3D model



Figure 3.22: LED lights turned on

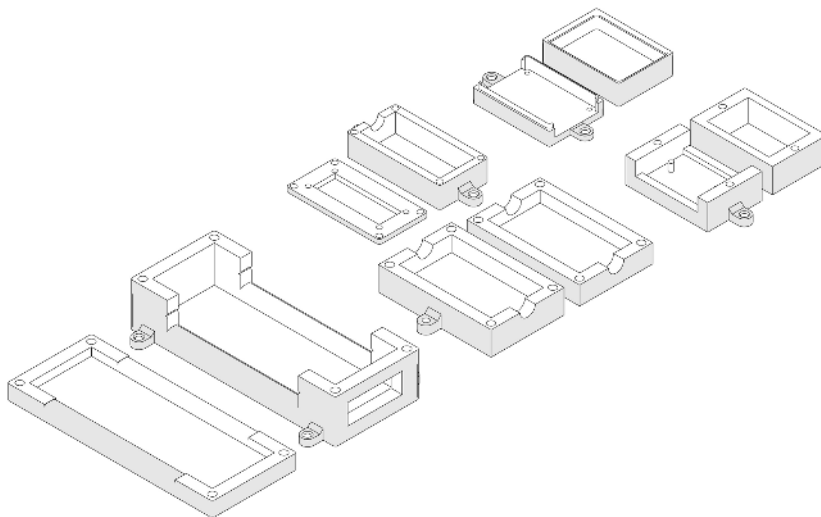


Figure 3.23: Electronic covers, 3D Models

The switching logic is the part of the electronic system that carries the most meaning, and it was designed deliberately. I did not want the modules to run continuously. I wanted them to turn on at the moment of connection, so that the user receives a reaction to something they have just done. Each module therefore holds a magnet and a Hall effect sensor, and powers on only when its sensor detects the magnet of an adjoining piece. There is no switch, no button and no timer.

The consequence is that a module standing alone does nothing at all. It produces no sound and no light, and gives no indication that it is capable of either. Only when two pieces are brought together does either of them begin to behave, which means that the electronic response is not a reward for approaching the object but a reward for

configuring it. The system stays inert until an act of assembly has taken place — until, in the terms this thesis has been using, someone has played with it.



Figure 3.24: Electronics assembled on third module, music module

The content of the audio follows the same reasoning. The sound modules play nature recordings and soft music: quiet, unremarkable material chosen specifically so that it would not startle anyone, and so that a person might register it without necessarily identifying where it was coming from. This was not a limitation of the equipment but a decision about register. As argued in the previous section, the alteration has to be sufficient to catch attention without producing unease, and an unexpected sound in public space can very easily cross that line. Background sound sits on the correct side of it. It changes the atmosphere of the space around the bench while remaining, for many of the people passing through it, beneath the threshold of conscious notice — which is precisely the sequence the proposal requires. The engagement begins subconsciously, in the ambient condition of the space, and only afterwards, if at all, does it become a thing the person consciously attends to.

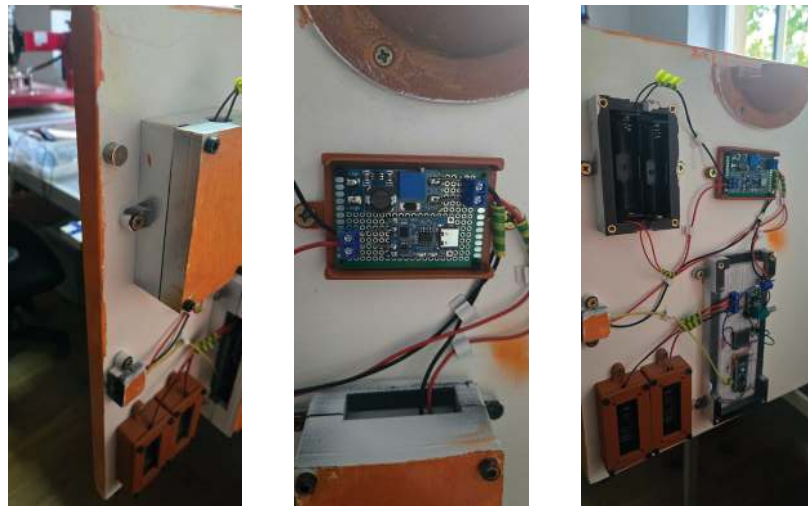


Figure 3.25: (Left) Hall effect sensor and magnet for opposite sensor reading, (Middle) voltage regulator module, (Right) whole electronic assemble for first module

One fault recurred during the exhibition, and its diagnosis belongs in this account. The modules intermittently failed to power on. The cause was traced not to the circuit design but to the wiring: the cable used at the board connections proved unsuited to soldering, and the joints were separating under handling and movement. Replacing it with a solderable cable and re-making the connections resolved the problem entirely. The failure is worth recording because it is characteristic of the difference between a circuit that works on a bench and one that works in a public space: the design was correct, and the assembly method was not, and only movement by users revealed the difference.

Assembly

The system is assembled in sequence, and that sequence is set out in Figure 3.26. The curved module is first located onto the existing bench, where its wheels allow it to be positioned along the length of the seat. From there the tetris modules are added one at a time, each seating against the last by way of the stepped lap and the printed guide rails, until the arrangement is complete. The drawing shows 5 stages, ending in a fully connected configuration; it also shows that the sequence can be halted at any stage, since every intermediate state is itself a usable arrangement rather than an unfinished one.

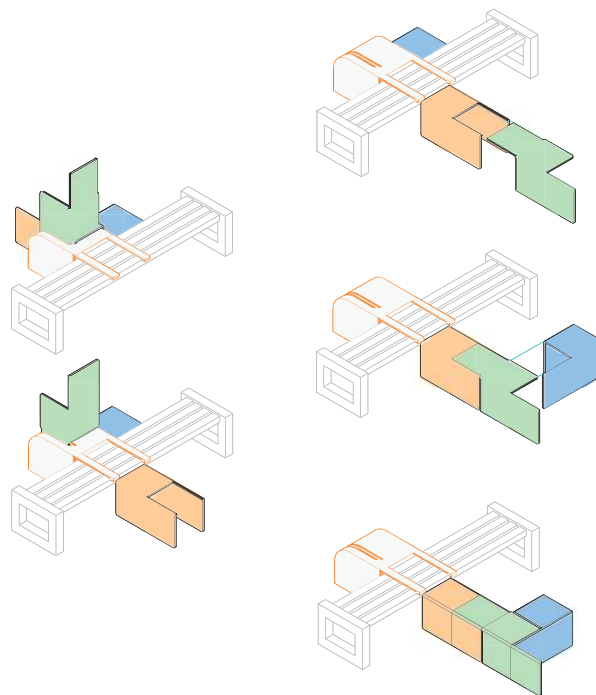


Figure 3.26: Assembly sequence

This last property is a consequence of the tetris grammar rather than an additional feature. Because every module meets the grid at the same height and connects by the same detail, there is no privileged final form and no correct number of pieces. A single module beside the bench is a complete configuration. So is the full assembly. What changes between them is not completeness but the arrangement of bodies each one produces.

Deployment at summaery2026

The structure was tested during summaery2026, the annual exhibition of the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, at which work from across the university is shown. This provided the appropriate conditions for the test: a period of several days in which the site behind the main building carried far more foot traffic than usual, drawn from a mixed public of students, staff, visitors and families rather than from a selected group of participants.

The observations recorded here are informal. Over the course of the exhibition I watched how people approached and used the structure, and spoke with a number of them about what they had done and why. No formal protocol was used, no participants were recruited, and nothing was measured. What follows is therefore an account of what was observed in a public setting, not the result of a controlled study, and it should be read as such.

Before installation, arrows were painted onto the module faces and the insertion points were picked out in specific colours, so that the connections and the direction of assembly would be indicated on the object itself. No written instructions, diagram or tutorial accompanied the structure on site; the assembly sequence described above existed in the drawing set but was not displayed to visitors.



Figure 3.27: Photos from area, summaery 2026

A substantial number of people used the structure, and a substantial number hesitated in front of it. The most consistent use was as seating. People sat on the modules and on the bench together, and the arrangement produced by the assembly — modules set at an angle to the bench rather than in line with it — brought people to face one another rather than to face outward in a row. Several of those I spoke with said they had enjoyed sitting this way, and described the effect as being like a conversation pit. This occurred without any prompting, and in most cases without the people involved having reconfigured anything: they used the arrangement they found.



Figure 3.28: Curious children at the structure, summaery 2026.

Children behaved differently from adults, and did so consistently. Children approached the structure directly and explored it without hesitation, looking into the tunnel formed beneath the connected modules, climbing onto it and playing around and inside it.

Adults, in general, did not do this. They looked, and in many cases they waited.

The hesitation itself took several forms. Some people said they had been unsure whether they were permitted to sit on the piece because the painted surfaces looked wet. Others said they had hesitated because there was not enough guidance about what they were supposed to do with it. Others assumed the structure was an artwork of some kind, and treated it accordingly — as something to be looked at rather than used.

No one attempted to assemble or disassemble the structure. Over the whole exhibition period, no visitor tried to detach a module, add one, or alter the configuration in any way. When asked, people said that they had not known this was possible, and that nothing had told them so.

Findings

The criterion set out earlier in this chapter was specific. If architecture curates by writing rhythms, and if those rhythms produce habits operating beneath the level of conscious choice, then an intervention claiming to return agency to the people using a space has to work at that level — not by offering a separate place to go, but by altering a rhythm people are already inside. The deployment should be assessed against that criterion rather than against whether the object was liked.

Measured that way, the clearest result concerns where the intervention took place. Nobody travelled to the Plug-In Bench. It stood on a route people were already walking, attached to a bench they already passed, and the people who encountered it did so in the course of doing something else. This is the distinction drawn in the previous

chapter between the Fun Palace and New Babylon on one hand and an alteration of the existing fabric on the other, and it held in practice. The structure did not ask anyone to enter it, and it did not constitute a bounded space with its own rules of admission. Whatever else the test showed, it did not reproduce the problem this thesis identified in Constant and Price.

Within that, the most substantial positive result was the seating arrangement. Because the modules met the bench at an angle rather than in line with it, people sitting on the assembly faced one another instead of facing outward in a row, and several of those who used it described the effect as a conversation pit and said they had enjoyed sitting that way. This is a small change with a specific consequence: the existing bench produces a single row of bodies all oriented in the same direction, which is an arrangement that permits sitting beside a stranger but not speaking to one. The altered arrangement produced conversations that the original geometry would not have supported. In Norman's terms, it created the conditions for opportunistic action — behaviour taking advantage of circumstances — without instructing anyone to perform it. The ambient sound worked in the same register, altering the atmosphere of the area for people who never touched the structure at all, including those simply passing through.

The difference in behaviour between children and adults was the most consistent observation of the exhibition, and it is the one most directly relevant to the argument of this thesis. Children approached the structure without hesitation, entered the tunnel beneath the modules, climbed on it and played around it. Adults looked, and waited, and in many cases asked whether they were allowed. This thesis has argued throughout that play is anthropologically prior and that adults are progressively disciplined into rhythms that foreclose it — that we become viewers of our own daily lives rather than participants in them, through habits we did not choose and a consent we never gave. The behavioural split observed here is consistent with that argument. The children had not yet learned that an unfamiliar object in public space requires permission before it can be touched. The adults had.

Two results count as failures, and they share a cause.

The first is that some visitors read the structure as an artwork and treated it as something to be looked at rather than used. This is the failure mode predicted in the design principle set out earlier in this chapter: that an alteration which is too assertive converts the object into an installation to be regarded, and that a person approaching cautiously has already been lost. Having stated that risk in advance, it would be dishonest not to record that it occurred. The painted surfaces, in the colour and graphic language chosen, appear to have carried the object across the line the principle identifies. A related and smaller version of the same problem is that several people did not sit down because the paint looked wet, which is worth recording in its own right: surface finish operates as a signifier independently of anything the graphics say, and a finish that reads as unfinished says the object is not ready to be used.

The second failure is more significant, because it concerns the central claim of the proposal. Over the entire exhibition, nobody attempted to assemble, disassemble or reconfigure the structure. The modularity that the whole system exists to provide was never exercised by a user. The reason is documented above and is not mysterious: no instructions, diagram or tutorial were displayed on site, and when asked, people said they had not known reconfiguration was possible. The assembly sequence had been fully resolved — it exists as a six-stage drawing — but it existed in the drawing set rather than at the point of use.

This is precisely the distinction Norman draws between an affordance and a signifier. The structure afforded reconfiguration: the modules were liftable, the handles were cut, the connections were designed to be made and unmade by hand without tools. What it lacked was anything telling a person that they were permitted to do so. Arrows and coloured insertion points indicate how parts join, but they do not communicate that joining is an action available to the viewer. The consequence is that the reconfigurability claim was not disproven by the test; it was not tested. It remains an open question, and the correct response is not to redesign the object but to supply what was missing at the point of use.

One further limitation should be stated plainly. The test took place during summer, which provided the footfall the observation required but which also placed the site in an atypical condition. During the annual exhibition the campus is full of unfamiliar objects that visitors expect to encounter as work on display, and the ordinary rhythm of the space — the rhythm this proposal exists to interrupt — is itself suspended for the duration. This cuts two ways. It very likely contributed to the reading of the structure as an artwork, since that was the correct reading of almost everything else on the site that week. More importantly, it means the deployment tested the object's reception under exhibition conditions rather than its effect on an everyday rhythm over time. A proposal about habit cannot be fully evaluated in several days, and certainly not during the one week of the year when the habit in question is not operating. What was demonstrated was that people used the structure, sat differently because of it, and spoke to one another as a result. What was not demonstrated, and could not have been under these conditions, is any change in the rhythm of the site once the exhibition ended and the ordinary week resumed.

These findings suggest a clear direction for the work rather than a revision of its premise. The immediate requirement is a means of communicating, at the object itself, that the parts are meant to be moved — whether through printed guidance, through more explicit signifiers in the form of the connections, or through an initial state that is visibly incomplete and therefore invites completion. A longer deployment, outside of exhibition conditions, would be needed to say anything about rhythm.

Beyond this, one extension of the proposal is worth setting out, since the electronic system was built with it in view. If more than one structure were installed at different

points within the same site, the modules could be made to communicate between structures rather than only within one, so that activity at one bench produced a response — in sound or in light — at another. The intention would be to make the presence of other people elsewhere in the space perceptible to those at each structure, and thereby to give strangers a shared occasion, an opening for contact that neither party had to initiate on their own. This has not been built or tested, and is proposed here as the next step rather than as a result of the present work.

4. Conclusion

This thesis began with two questions. How can existing public spaces be hacked and transformed into sites of encounter and opportunity, rather than remaining spaces of numbing comfort that produce desired citizens? And how can play be used — not as a decorative element, but as a linguistic design approach — to create uncurated spaces that leave room for chaos rather than order?

The answer this thesis has developed is that both questions run through rhythm. Public space produces citizens not by instructing them but by writing the rhythms they live inside, and any intervention that hopes to return agency to those citizens has to work at that level rather than at the level of the event.

Getting to that answer required establishing four things in sequence. The first was that public space is not a neutral backdrop but an apparatus: Habermas's account of representative publicness, Carse's argument that titles exist only in their visibility, and Lefebvre's observation that the animal standing between a body and its landscape is a medium, together describe a space that has always been used to display and reproduce authority. The second was that this apparatus communicates — that space is itself a medium, and that from Le Corbusier's universalism to the staging of a city for a summit, its message is delivered by arrangement rather than by argument. The third was that play is not the trivial category it has long been taken for. Following Huizinga, play is older than culture; following Fink and Schiller, it is the means by which we first learn to read space and later to act within it; following Carse, our largest institutions are themselves games. And the fourth was that architecture is the toy of that game — the physical object through which an abstract ideology becomes something a person can act on and act through — and, by the same token, one of its media.

From these, the argument arrived at its own proposal. If architecture curates by writing rhythm, and if rhythm hardens into habit beneath the level of conscious choice, then

reading and altering that rhythm is the work that matters. This is what I have called psycho-rhythmic analysis.

The case studies sharpened rather than confirmed this. Cedric Price's Fun Palace and Constant Nieuwenhuys's New Babylon both identified alienation correctly and both turned to play as its remedy, and what I take from them, beyond the critique I have made, is that the impulse to create sits at the centre of both projects. Neither designed a place for people to be entertained; both designed a place for people to make something. That instinct is right, and this thesis inherits it. The difficulty is that both treated play as an event to be staged — an encounter, a situation, an occasion — rather than as a psychological rhythm that persists whether or not any particular encounter occurs. In doing so, each proposed a new circle inside the existing one, and, as this thesis has argued, the surrounding order will not tolerate a working demonstration of its own contingency.

The Plug-In Bench was built to test whether the alternative could be made to work. Measured against what it set out to do, the result is genuinely mixed, and the mixture is worth stating precisely.

What the prototype established is that the site, the scenario and the instrument were correctly chosen. The bench was the right object: ordinary enough to be invisible, public enough to be shared, and small enough to be altered by one person without permission. The aim of producing a seating arrangement rather than an attraction was the right aim, and it worked — people sat differently because of the modules, faced one another rather than facing outward, and described the effect without prompting as a conversation pit. The intervention entered a rhythm people were already inside rather than asking them to travel to it, which is precisely the distinction this thesis drew between its own approach and the projects that preceded it.

The clearest evidence for the underlying hypothesis came from the children. They approached the structure without hesitation, entered the tunnel, climbed on it and played around it, and in doing so produced exactly the unplanned, uncured interaction the whole proposal exists to generate. The chaos the thesis argues for was, in their case, simply there. That is not a small result: it demonstrates that the object was capable of producing what it was designed to produce, and that the obstacle lay elsewhere.

The obstacle lay in the design. The adults did not do what the children did, and the reasons are mine to answer for. The structure is technologically simple and its interaction narrow: sound and light responding to connection is a thin repertoire, and it gives a user very little to discover after the first encounter. More seriously, the piece contains real errors of use. People hesitated to touch it. Some believed the paint was wet; some found no indication of what they were permitted to do; some read it as an artwork and therefore as something to be looked at. The colour is likely part of this. In attempting to signal that the object was interactive, I used more colour and more graphic marking than the object needed, and the result may have pushed it across the line I identified

in advance — assertive enough to be regarded rather than used. The failure mode was one I had named before building, and I built it anyway.

There is also a limitation of scale that only became visible once the piece was on site. A single module attached to a single bench cannot demonstrate much about rhythm, because rhythm is a property of a route rather than of a point. Two modules on two separate seating areas, at different positions along a path people habitually walk, would have produced a different kind of evidence altogether — not one object encountered once, but a pattern encountered repeatedly. That is the test I did not run.

The honest assessment of the central claim follows from this. I was not able to document psycho-rhythmic analysis to the extent I had hoped. The deployment was short, it took place during the annual exhibition when the ordinary rhythm of the site was itself suspended, and nobody reconfigured the structure, which means the modularity the entire system exists to provide was never exercised by a user. But I cannot say that I saw nothing. The change in how people sat and spoke to one another, the ambient effect of the sound on those who never touched the piece, and above all the difference between how children and adults approached it are all consistent with the argument, even if none of them proves it. What the work produced is a direction with evidence pointing along it, not a demonstration.

What would be needed is not a different premise but a better object and a longer test. The immediate requirement is a means of communicating, at the object itself, that the parts are meant to be moved — printed guidance, more explicit signifiers in the form of the connections, or an initial state that is visibly incomplete and therefore invites completion. Beyond that, more modules distributed across more than one location, a quieter and more restrained finish, a wider interactive repertoire, and a deployment long enough for a rhythm to form and be measured. The electronic system was built with a further extension in view: if several structures were installed at different points within the same site, they could be made to communicate with one another, so that activity at one bench produced a response at another and the presence of other people elsewhere in the space became perceptible to those standing at each one. That would give strangers a shared occasion neither party had to initiate. It has not been built.

Two constraints stand between this proposal and any real deployment, and they should be stated plainly because this thesis did not solve them. The first is that an object placed in public space without supervision is subject to theft and damage, and nothing in the current design addresses that. The second is durability and sustainability: MDF, batteries and printed plastic are appropriate to a prototype and inappropriate to a piece of street furniture expected to survive weather and years of use. Any serious version of this proposal would have to begin from materials and a maintenance model rather than from form, and that is a different project from the one presented here.

What this thesis contributes, then, is not a finished object but a way of reading. Psycho-rhythmic analysis proposes that the elements of public space act on us through

rhythm rather than through instruction, that those rhythms build habits and personas beneath the level of conscious choice, and that an intervention wishing to interrupt them must work inside the rhythm that already exists rather than constructing an alternative beside it. The Plug-In Bench is an argument for that proposition made in material rather than in text — an incomplete argument, but one whose failures are as informative as its successes, and which points clearly at what a better attempt would need to do.

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Source: CCA, <https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/articles/issues/2/what-the-future-looked-like/32737/1964-fun-palace> (accessed 29 August 2026).

Figure 2.17. Cedric Price, Fun Palace, plan, 1964. Cedric Price fonds, Collection Centre Canadien d'Architecture / Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal.

Source: CCA, <https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/articles/issues/2/what-the-future-looked-like/32737/1964-fun-palace> (accessed 29 August 2026).

Figure 3.1. Hundertwasserhaus, Vienna, 1983–1985. Designed by Friedensreich Hundertwasser with architects Josef Krawina and Peter Pelikan. Photograph by Mich-nguyen. Source: Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hundertwasserhaus_view_4.jpg (accessed 29 August 2026).

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