

Cities as Playgrounds: Intergenerational and Inclusive Play in Urban Design

By Marta Rodriguez Fernandez*

This paper explores the transformative role of play in creating inclusive, human-centered urban environments. Drawing on Johan Huizinga's foundational theory that play is essential to culture and social meaning, it investigates how play can serve as a spatial tool for fostering creativity, connection, and care in the public realm. Through a critical lineage—from Aldo van Eyck's postwar playgrounds to contemporary participatory installations—this research examines how intergenerational and intercultural play redefines urban design. It considers historical precedents, speculative visions, and recent design interventions—including a studio-led initiative, Urban Salon: Furniture as Intergenerational Playground—to propose adaptable, small-scale strategies for activating underutilized spaces. These interventions highlight how modularity, improvisation, and participatory design can counteract urban isolation and revitalize community. Ultimately, this paper argues that play is not peripheral to the city, but essential to its livability: a civic practice that blurs boundaries between user and environment, and reshapes the built environment into a shared, evolving, and inclusive playground.

Introduction

Play has the power to transform cities. It invites participation, sparks imagination, and brings people together across age, ability, and background. When embedded into the fabric of urban life—not confined to playgrounds or isolated moments—play becomes a design strategy for fostering connection, spontaneity, and care in public space. In settings where isolation and inequality have rendered cities increasingly fragmented, the act of playing together offers a quiet, radical form of healing.

In many cities across the United States and Latin America, this need for renewal is pressing. Public spaces have grown rigid, car-dominated, or disconnected from daily life. Plazas stand empty. Sidewalks are treated as conduits rather than destinations. Generational and cultural divides manifest spatially, reinforcing social fragmentation. The erosion of shared space is not merely a design failure but a civic one—limiting the possibilities for encounter, mutual recognition, and joy in urban life.

This paper proposes a shift: to recognize play not as leisure, but as an essential urban function. Intergenerational and inclusive play can breathe new life into underused spaces and help rebuild public life by making cities more flexible, responsive, and shared.

This paper asks: How can play reshape the civic role of public space? What strategies support shared, embodied participation across ages? And how can design provoke new, inclusive uses of the city?

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The idea that cities are more than physical structures is not new. Henri Lefebvre described the city as “a medium of exchange, of social interaction”, while William H. Whyte noted that public space offers “opportunities for encounter, creativity, and play”.¹ For Rem Koolhaas, the city is “a dynamic, living organism” that evolves through use and adaptation.² These visions call for urban forms that are open, porous, and shaped by the people who use them.

Designing for play responds directly to this call. As Jan Gehl writes, meaningful public environments are those where “the interaction between people and their environment can evolve freely and unconstrained”.³ Seen this way, play is not a diversion—it is a method for integrating everyday life into the shared fabric of the city.

This approach is also deeply rooted in postwar critiques of modern urbanism. Guy Debord’s concept of the *dérive*, or drifting through the city, framed play as a spatial tactic to resist capitalist standardization and reclaim spontaneous interaction.⁴ Constant Nieuwenhuys expanded this in his visionary New Babylon project (1956–1974), imagining a world built for movement, experimentation, and joy. Aldo van Eyck’s 800 playgrounds across Amsterdam demonstrated how play could be integrated into everyday urban space—treating children as co-authors of public life. Likewise, Cedric Price and Joan Littlewood’s *Fun Palace* (1961) imagined a “laboratory of fun,” where architecture itself could adapt and invite participation.⁵

This paper builds on these precedents to explore a tradition of playful urbanism and examines recent projects where designers and communities have transformed plazas, sidewalks, and underused spaces into inclusive environments for connection and participation. Through historical and contemporary case studies, it identifies how play can foster civic renewal and argues for a city shaped not by control or consumption, but by creativity, care, and shared use.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology grounded in architectural case study analysis, design-led inquiry, and field-based observation. Projects were selected for their emphasis on intergenerational and inclusive public play, drawing from peer-reviewed literature, built precedents, and the author’s own studio-based prototypes. Methods include comparative spatial analysis, evaluation of participatory engagement, and first-hand reflection on the testing of 1:1 scale interventions. These projects function not only as illustrations but as live experiments in civic participation and embodied design.

1. William H. Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (Washington, DC: Conservation Foundation, 1980).

2. Rem Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995).

3. Jan Gehl, *Cities for People* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2010).

4. Guy Debord, “Theory of the *Dérive*,” *International Situationniste* 2 (1958): 1-10.

5. Joan Littlewood, and Cedric Price, “The Fun Palace,” in *Architecture and Play* (ed.) John Smith, 123-137 (London: Routledge, 1961).

Play as Method

Play is not a distraction from culture—it is its origin. In *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga defines play as a voluntary, rule-bound act that takes place within its own boundaries of time and space. He argues that play predates culture itself: “Play is older than culture (...) animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing”.⁶ For Huizinga, play is not frivolous but foundational—a primordial condition through which human meaning, ritual, and symbolic systems emerge. It also possesses intercultural continuity, appearing across civilizations as a shared grammar of expression. This view inspire us to see the city not as a finished product, but as a dynamic stage for playful interaction, where space and social life are continually shaped through movement, improvisation, and encounter. Writing in 1938, Huizinga imagined a future where, once machines took over labor, play would remain our defining activity. In today’s era of AI, as both manual and intellectual work are increasingly automated, that vision feels more relevant than ever. What remains for us may, once again, be play.

Aldo van Eyck’s work in postwar Amsterdam provides one of the earliest and most influential built expressions of play as a spatial and cultural force. Between 1947 and the late 1970s, van Eyck designed more than 800 playgrounds, often inserted into leftover urban voids—residual spaces between housing blocks, sidewalks, and plazas. Rejecting the rigid functionalism of CIAM, he developed a modular design language of sandpits, tumbling bars, and climbing domes that encouraged open-ended interpretation. His playgrounds offered a radical departure from the rigid city. Using modest materials and a restrained formal language, they functioned as connective tissue in the postwar urban landscape—embedded into housing estates and plazas, not fenced off from them. His designs framed play as both a civic right and a shared social practice, introducing a human-scale, relational logic to urban design, where imagination, agency, and encounter became fundamental design criteria.

This spatial and cultural interpretation of play was later radicalized by the Situationist International, particularly through the writings of Guy Debord and the speculative urbanism of Constant Nieuwenhuys. In the late 1950s and 1960s, Debord’s concept of the *dérive*—unstructured, aimless drifting through the urban landscape—sought to disrupt the controlled rhythms of capitalist space.⁷ For Debord, play became a form of resistance, reactivating the city as a field of spontaneous, affective association. Constant’s *New Babylon* (1956–1974) expanded on this idea with a visionary project for a nomadic, ever-changing city built for play rather than productivity. In *New Babylon*, architecture is mutable, environments are reconfigurable, and inhabitants live in a continuous state of creative movement. While never realized, the project proposed a radically ludic alternative to conventional urbanism—one in which freedom, not form, becomes the organizing principle of space.

A similar approach can be seen in the unbuilt but deeply influential *Fun Palace* project (1961) by Cedric Price and Joan Littlewood. Described as a “laboratory of

6. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1938).

7. Debord, “Theory of the *Dérive*,” 1958.

fun,” the *Fun Palace* was imagined not as a fixed building but as a flexible framework that could shift and grow with its users. It included movable parts, responsive technologies, and programming shaped by public input. In contrast to static monuments, it embraced change, participation, and improvisation. Littlewood captured this spirit when she said, “ask the children”—a reminder to design with openness, imagination, and trust in the creativity of others. Though never built, the *Fun Palace* continues to shape contemporary thinking on temporary architecture, adaptive public space, and participatory urban design.

In parallel, Japanese American artist and designer Isamu Noguchi was exploring the sculptural possibilities of play. His *Playscapes* (1976) in Piedmont Park, Atlanta, exemplifies the fusion of land art, abstraction, and public space. Smooth hills, tunnels, and brightly colored forms invite unstructured movement across generations. Noguchi’s belief that “play is the most fertile ground for experimentation” is evident in the way his landscapes resist function and embrace discovery. His playgrounds are not circumscribed by age, ability, or narrative—they are invitations to engage. Earlier, his involvement in the Play Sculpture Division by Creative Playthings had already positioned play as a legitimate field for artistic innovation, in dialogue with peers like Egon Møller-Nielsen, whose work blurred the boundary between sculpture and playground.

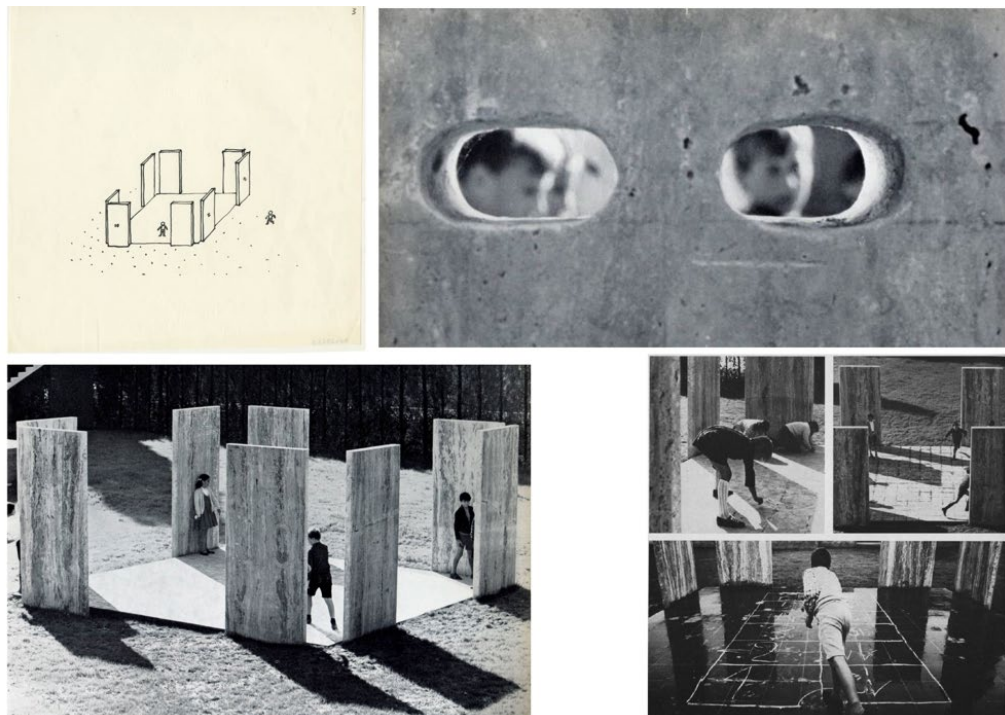


Figure 1. *Big Stone Game*, Enzo Mari’s “*Big Stone Game*”, 1968

This openness is echoed in Enzo Mari’s *Big Stone Game* (1968), designed for the Carrara Marble Exhibition. Constructed from slabs of travertine and slate, the installation creates a quiet, tactile landscape for imaginative use. Mari called it “an allusive space of possibility,” one that resists over-design and encourages physical interpretation. The permanence of stone contrasts with the typical ephemerality of

playgrounds, suggesting that dignity and seriousness should also belong to spaces of play. Mari's political commitment to democratic design permeates the project, offering a counterpoint to mass-produced playground structures.

Meanwhile, the Austrian collective Haus-Rucker-Co. redefined the boundaries of play, architecture, and perception. Works such as the *Mind Expander* (1967) and *Yellow Heart* (1968) used inflatable structures and sensory manipulation to challenge fixed notions of space. The user became both participant and performer, invited to occupy soft pneumatic volumes that pulsed, hovered, or isolated. Rather than controlling behavior, these installations destabilized it, making play an instrument of spatial awareness and subjective transformation. It was play for adults.

At a more localized and socially driven scale, M. Paul Friedberg's Vest Pocket Playgrounds in New York City in the 1960s and 1970s demonstrated how small-scale interventions could activate neglected urban lots. His use of raw timber, ropes, and geometric forms allowed children to climb, hide, and assemble their own environments. The playgrounds were built in collaboration with community groups and often with local labor, embedding design within civic empowerment. Friedberg's work redefined what play looked like in the American city, emphasizing autonomy over supervision and informality over prescription.⁸

Echoing this ethos, Virginia Dortch Dorazio's *Fantastic Village* introduced modular prefab elements that could be rearranged for different ages and contexts—anticipating today's interest in adaptable, intergenerational, and open-source urbanism. Likewise, Robert Winston's abstract steel-frame structure—nicknamed “the monster” by adults—became a ship, a lookout, or a hideout in the eyes of children, underscoring how imagination transforms even the most ambiguous forms into inclusive terrains for play.

The expanded understanding of play also emerges in more confrontational public gestures. In Martina Franca (1979), artist Mauro Staccioli placed a massive concrete triangle in the middle of a narrow street in the city's historic center. Though not a traditional playground, the object interrupts everyday movement, forcing passersby to pause, divert, or engage differently with space. It provokes awareness of the body's relation to form and context—qualities intrinsic to play—and highlights how even minimal, static interventions can generate new social behaviors through disruption and invitation.

These projects span continents, materials, and ideologies, but share a common belief: that play is not a luxury, but a civic necessity. Whether working with marble, rubber, concrete, or air, these designers created spaces—both physical and conceptual—for new forms of encounter, imagination, and shared urban life. They celebrate ambiguity, accessibility, and openness—not as indulgences, but as the foundation of inclusive, vibrant public space.

8. Paul M. Friedberg, “Designing for Play in Urban America,” *Landscape Architecture Magazine* 60, no. 2 (1970): 101-108.

Intergenerational Play

This section addresses Research Questions 1 and 2 by analyzing contemporary examples of public play that invite inclusive and age-diverse use.

In response to the isolation and fragmentation of contemporary urban life, a growing number of design strategies are embracing *play for all*—a practice that fosters social exchange, imagination, and cross-generational participation. While these designers may not explicitly label their work as intergenerational play, their interventions propose new ways for people of all ages to share space, time, and meaning. Rather than assigning fixed uses, these projects invite open-ended engagement, allowing users to co-create and co-inhabit the public realm.

Such an approach reframes play as an ongoing social practice—an instrument for dissolving boundaries and reshaping the relationship between body, environment, and community. Through informal gatherings, shared gestures, and spontaneous use, these interventions expand the role of urban design into a catalyst for empathy, openness, and civic life.

The construction of play is not universal, but shaped by local rituals, gestures, and rhythms. In Japan, public play often centers on contemplation and tactile engagement, as seen in Nishizawa's Fukita Pavilion, while in Latin America, collective play unfolds in streets through music, dance, and social proximity. These cultural nuances shape how space is perceived and activated across age and context.

Intergenerational play helps bridge the growing divide between age groups in the city. It creates opportunities for empathy, shared joy, and collective memory. When it happens in the open urban space, it challenges generational segregation and reclaims space for care, presence, and coexistence.



Figure 2. *Centipede Cinema*, Colin Fournier and Marysia Lewandowska, 2012

A performative encounter unfolds in *Centipede Cinema* (2013), a temporary installation by Colin Fournier, Marysia Lewandowska, and NEON Studio.⁹ Participants crawl into a segmented tunnel to view short films while their legs protrude into the street. The absurdity of the position produces laughter and mutual curiosity, turning the passive act of watching into a shared public event. The structure's low-tech, tactile form resists spectacle and instead cultivates awkwardness, vulnerability, and connection—qualities often missing in urban life.

9. Colin Fournier, Marysia Lewandowska, and NEON, "Centipede Cinema," in *Urban Play and Participation* (ed.) Karen Franck, 95-100 (London: Architectural Association, 2013).

Similarly, Nacho Carbonell's *Social Bench Pods* (2012), with their cocoon-like wire mesh forms, create intimate shelters in plazas and public spaces. Rather than dictating use, they offer a gentle invitation—to sit, hide, talk, or simply linger. Their ambiguity allows users to navigate between solitude and sociability on their own terms.

Ryue Nishizawa's *Fukita Pavilion* (2013), located on Shodoshima Island, invites quiet forms of engagement. The project consists of two thin, curved metal sheets—one hovering, one resting—intersected by a tree. Users remove their shoes and recline beneath the canopy, with no explicit function directing them. While not formally a playground, the structure's openness to bodily occupation, rest, and improvisation allows it to be generationally inclusive, accessible to children, elders, and everyone in between.

Raumlabor's *Küchenmonument*, a translucent, inflatable bubble deployed across European cities, offers a mobile platform for communal cooking, conversation, and play. It resists architectural permanence, instead fostering ephemeral occupation and process-based gathering. By hosting open-ended events—meals, workshops, performances—the bubble becomes a living room for the city, prioritizing experience over object.

Openfabric's *Pavilion for Public Engagement* (2019), a vibrant, modular installation built in Milan, exemplifies how scaffolding and fabric can create adaptable urban stages. The pavilion was designed for spontaneous use—hosting lectures, protests, performances, and informal gatherings. Its structure invites reconfiguration and reinterpretation, making the public not just its audience but its co-authors.

The annual *Concéntrico* festival in Logroño, Spain, synthesizes many of these themes in a city-wide experiment in urban play. Each year, designers from around the world construct temporary pavilions, walkways, towers, and interventions in streets, plazas, and rooftops. These installations transform the ordinary into the extraordinary, often involving local residents and passersby in acts of sitting, wandering, climbing, and reflection. Though temporary, their cumulative effect reshapes public life by inviting moments of joy, wonder, and new collective memory.

Budling on this context, Izaskun Chinchilla's *100 Sillas y 3 Salones Urbanos*¹⁰ transformed streets and plazas into temporary living rooms, encouraging rest, conversation, and reappropriation of public space without commercial obligation. Chinchilla continued this exploration with *Bojagi Lounge* (*Anyang Public Art Project*, South Korea, 2023), a vibrant, fabric-wrapped installation inspired by traditional Korean wrapping cloths. Incorporating circular economy principles and textile techniques, the structure weaves comfort, color, and shade into a flexible public living room. Suspended panels create pockets for seating, gathering, or quiet pause, while the lightness of the materials allows for permeability and ecological awareness. Like a fabric canopy for urban intimacy, *Bojagi Lounge* reframes public space as gentle, biodiverse, and responsive to collective use.

Other interventions explore ritual, softness, and community engagement. Frida Escobedo's *Civic Stage* (Lisbon Triennale, 2013) blends the ceremonial with the improvised, providing a public structure for speaking, resting, or watching. Similarly,

10. Concéntrico Festival, *Concéntrico 08* (Logroño: Fundación Cultural de Arquitectos de La Rioja, 2022).

Shared Beds (2019), a project by David Costanza and Piergianna Mazzocca for the Ragdale Ring, introduces oversized, tilting wooden platforms into a garden landscape—some stable, others mobile. These ambiguous “beds” function between urban furniture and ephemeral room, encouraging rest, interaction, and awareness of bodily presence in relation to others. Rather than prescribing use, they prompt an embodied negotiation of balance and proximity, turning the act of lying down into a shared, playful encounter with public space.

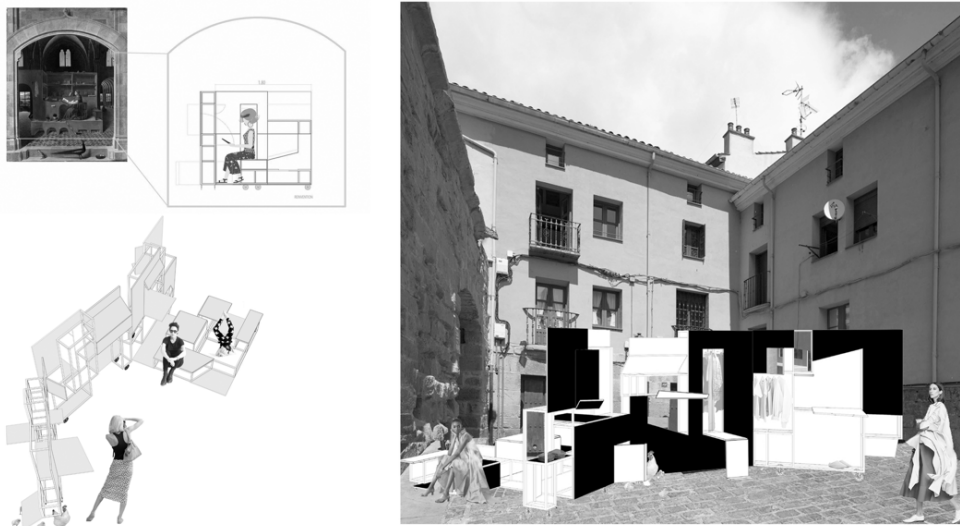


Figure 3. *Urban Biombo*, Marta Rodriguez & Dijana Handanovic, 2019

My own projects, such as *Urban Biombo* (2019) and *Ludens Prototype* (2020), extend this line of inquiry by treating the city as a canvas for mobile, reconfigurable structures that fold domesticity into urban life. *Urban Biombo* is designed for spontaneous use, turning plazas into places of rest and play through its lightweight, folding-screen structure that defines intimate spatial enclosures. It explores how domestic gestures and suggested interiority can reshape urban space, allowing citizens to define and redefine their environment. Prioritizing experience over object, it becomes an urban living room and invites reconfiguration and reinterpretation. *Ludens Prototype* similarly invites collective movement and sensory exploration through open-ended forms. Like *Shared Beds*, these works resist fixed function and propose instead a performative, relational architecture—one that transforms space through action, perception, and play.

As Maurice Merleau-Ponty proposed through the notion of reversibility, the body is not separate from the world but actively intertwined with it—both perceiving and being perceived.¹¹ In playful urban settings, this becomes clear: when someone climbs, rests, or touches a surface, they’re not just using space, but shaping it. Play reveals that space is never neutral—it’s constantly made and remade through our bodies.

Takk Architects’ *ARCA Portable Garden* (2022) proposes a rewilded urbanism—its movable garden units blur boundaries between infrastructure and organism,

11. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

creating adaptable micro-ecosystems for play and interaction. Meanwhile, Selgas Cano's *Pavilion in Cognac* (2017) evokes furniture-scale urbanism with its soft, translucent curves. Both architectural and tactile, it fosters curiosity, movement, and exchange—qualities that make it as much a playground as a pavilion.

Together, these projects show how play can transform cities from static systems into living frameworks for connection. Whether through inflatable domes, modular gardens, translucent pavilions, or sculptural benches, each intervention opens space for encounter, new meaning, and shared invention. These are not simply playgrounds, but invitations to cohabitate—tools for imagining the city not as a finished object, but as a collaborative and ongoing act of play. Collectively, they inspired my *Urban Salon* studio, where students were challenged to create public furniture and small-scale interventions that invite joy, care, and spontaneous interaction in everyday urban life.

Urban Salon

This section responds to Research Questions 2 and 3 through a design studio lens, testing experimental urban furniture prototypes in real-world settings.

In the spring of 2025, I taught a studio titled *Urban Salon: Furniture as Intergenerational Playground* at the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture and Design. The course invited students to rethink the city through the lens of interior architecture, using urban furniture as a tool to transform plazas, sidewalks, and underutilized spaces into collective, playful environments. We asked: What if furniture could foster urban imagination?

Inspired by 18th-century European urban salons—particularly Madrid's *Salón del Prado*, a tree-lined boulevard designed as a space for strolling, gathering, and social display—the studio reinterpreted the idea of a urban “living room.” These historic salons, rooted in the French model, extended domestic rituals into urban space. They were places to see and be seen, to flirt, converse, and linger. In this spirit, the Urban Salon becomes an open-air room for civic life—an urban commons that blends interior comfort with public participation.

The Urban Salon is both a pedagogical experiment and a spatial prototype. It reimagines the city as a dynamic site for creative conversation, civic gathering, and intergenerational play. Rather than reducing urban life to movement or spectacle, the Urban Salon cultivates conditions for lingering, listening, improvisation, and inclusivity.

Echoing Miranda Dixon's observation that “the boundaries between play and work, public and private, are fluid and permeable”,¹² the Urban Salon challenges rigid typologies. It treats seating as invitation, shade as gathering space, and modularity as a form of hospitality. It is not a fixed form, but a changing constellation—one that welcomes multiple bodies, voices, and stories into public space.

By integrating furniture, color, scale, and materiality, the Urban Salon offers a new grammar for participatory urbanism. Material choices—bamboo, textile, inflatable plastic, recycled paper—are not merely aesthetic but relational. They determine how

12. Miranda Dixon, “The Art of Play in Urban Spaces,” *Journal of Urban Design* 23, no. 6 (2018): 875-890.

the body meets the surface, how heat or softness is felt, how a structure bends or resists. The projects embraced tactility, sound, and temperature as core design parameters, transforming abstract play into an embodied, affective experience. It is a design approach rooted in care, openness, and the belief that public spaces can be as warm, flexible, and intimate as the rooms we return to at the end of the day.

Among the studio proposals, *Urban Sensuality* explores how web-like structures allow biodegradable mycelium to grow into spaces of discovery, activating underused plazas. Designed to wrap around isolated trees and forgotten corners, the intervention encourages sensory play and physical awareness through simple, reimagined elastic band games from the 1980s. “We feel like animals,” one participant noted—a reminder of how bodily engagement can restore connection in the urban realm. A 1:1 scale prototype was built, allowing students to test ideas of transformation, decay, and tactility. The structure is designed to grow, evolve, and eventually decompose, blurring the line between architecture and living matter.

Living Lattice proposes a pavilion that grows over time—a lightweight, evolving structure that supports biodiversity and shared urban life. Like a woven basket scaled up for humans and animals alike, it invites multiple species into its dappled shade. The bamboo elements can rotate and adapt in response to trees and nearby buildings, creating playful patterns of light and shelter throughout the day. *Evoking the leisurely gatherings in Georges Seurat’s A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, it creates soft edges that welcome spontaneous moments—picnics, rest, and conversation—right in the heart of the city.

Urban Distortion, submitted to the Mextropoli 2025 competition, reimagined Diego Rivera’s mural *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in the Alameda Central* through a kinetic bamboo pavilion designed for Mexico City’s historic Alameda Central. The project incorporated mirrors that reflected and distorted the city, inviting passersby to play with their own image—an act of self-recognition and reinterpretation in the digital age. Built with cables and local fabrics, the structure could be pulled and shifted like a marionette, returning to its initial form after each engagement. It embraced play and allowed for acts of appropriation—even vandalism—while questioning the static condition of architecture and the fixed nature of monuments. Constructed from local fabrics and inspired by Mexican puppetry traditions, the pavilion used movement and transformation to offer a contemporary, cubist reading of Rivera’s realism. It is a living invitation—open, playful, and shaped by every touch.

The Hugging Wall builds on Shigeru Ban’s temporary paper architecture, adding a layer of woven textile to create a soft, foldable structure that embraces and encloses. It formed rooms within public space—offering privacy without exclusion. By altering the scale of the city, it introduced a domestic sensibility to the streetscape. Like taking an umbrella and towel to the beach, this portable curtain could be carried to create a personal refuge—transforming shared spaces into emotionally resonant environments. It framed the body in unexpected ways, sometimes revealing only the feet, drawing inspiration from the Tokyo Toilet Project. The Hugging Wall imagines future urban amenities: mobile showers, changing rooms, or quiet retreats woven into the city.

Wanted Sound developed *Promenade of Public Orchestras*, an installation that transformed sidewalks into musical instruments played by both pedestrians and the

weather. As people walked through downtown American cities, their footsteps generated sound—turning everyday movement into a choreography of rhythm, resonance, and surprise. The project experimented with recycled materials and weather-responsive surfaces, inviting people to play the built environment with rain, wind, and motion. It offered a new auditory experience of the city, layering urban life with sonic discovery and shared delight.

These projects are sensual, sonic, and tactile. They are designed for everyone—proposals of petite architecture: habitable furniture with the power to transform urban space.¹³ They blur the lines between furniture, architecture, and public infrastructure. A bench that lights up, a seat with a roof, a wall that folds—these are micro-gestures that reimagine urban life. Each of these student works emerged from a shared goal: not only to make space more inclusive, but more alive. Through modularity, temporality, and embodied play, they propose new ways of shaping the city through touch, memory, and joy.

Students reported surprise at the spontaneity of public engagement. One elder lingered beneath the canopy of Living Lattice, remarking it reminded her of childhood orchard gatherings. Children interpreted the Hugging Wall as a tunnel, fortress, or stage—indicating the open-ended nature of the design. These unscripted interactions demonstrated the interventions' capacity to support co-creation and imaginative reinterpretation.

What emerged most clearly was how quickly public audiences engaged with the prototypes, often transforming their meaning beyond what students predicted. Children climbed structures meant for rest; elders claimed shaded corners for storytelling. These unscripted interactions affirmed that playful design invites not only participation but co-creation. As a professor, I saw how working at 1:1 scale encouraged students to move beyond abstraction and embrace human-scale empathy—learning to design not just for users, but with them.

Design to Play

Designing for play is not just about entertaining children—it is about building the conditions for a more inclusive, relational, and creative city. When we treat play as a urban value, rather than a marginal activity, we unlock its power to reshape how we live together. Across the case studies and precedents explored in this paper, a common thread emerges play invites openness. It refuses single-use zoning, fixed meanings, and hierarchical access. Instead, it supports a pluralistic and imaginative engagement with the city.

Moreover, play often disrupts established sensory hierarchies. In many Western urban traditions, vision dominates spatial experience, while in others—such as Andean or Southeast Asian contexts—sound, touch, and movement are central to navigating space. Play reintroduces bodily plurality to design, privileging proprioception, balance, rhythm, and touch over spectacle, and foregrounding movement as a mode of understanding space.

13. Marta Rodriguez, "Petite Architecture," In D. Jones (ed.), *Architecture: The Whole Story*, 460-461 (London: Thames & Hudson, 2014).

Across the Americas and beyond, cities like Bogotá, Medellín, and Seoul have embraced participatory, playful urbanism. Bogotá's *Ciclovía* transforms major streets into temporary pedestrian playgrounds each Sunday, inviting people of all ages to bike, dance, or rest. Medellín's hillside escalators and co-designed parks embed social infrastructure in previously disconnected neighborhoods. In Seoul, interactive light and sound installations in public plazas combine technology with traditional games, creating multi-sensory, intergenerational engagement. These civic programs show how play can be both culturally specific and universally resonant—anchoring public space in lived experience and collective joy.

The projects discussed—whether Mari's stone slabs, Dorazio's modular village, or Raumlabor's soft architecture—each demonstrate that physical design can become a platform for social invention. These works do not dictate how a space must be used; they create opportunities for people to make meaning collectively. They invite improvisation, spark curiosity, and enable encounters that cross age, background, and ability. Play becomes a way to break isolation—not through spectacle or consumption, but through co-presence, movement, and choice.

Many of today's most pressing urban challenges—loneliness, polarization, disconnection—are not simply infrastructural, but relational. Reframing play as a civic tool allows us to address these conditions not by prescribing more programs or enforcing order, but by softening thresholds, opening possibilities, and inviting participation. Whether through temporary interventions like *Concéntrico* or permanent works that reinterpret public space, like *Fukita Pavilion*, play can dissolve barriers and activate the in-between spaces of the city.

Play also supports learning—not only in childhood but throughout life. As Mitch Resnick argues in *Lifelong Kindergarten* (2017), creativity and experimentation are lifelong tools for societal participation. Public play environments thus foster not only connection but growth, making cities into sites for communal learning.

Recent research in developmental psychology and neuroscience shows that play is vital for cognitive growth, emotional balance, and social connection. Imaginative play activates the brain's prefrontal cortex—the center of empathy, planning, and decision-making.¹⁴ These findings highlight the need to embed play into everyday environments—not just for children, but also for adults facing stress and isolation. Beyond aesthetics, play in public space supports mental health. Reports from the World Health Organization and the CDC point to rising loneliness, especially in aging populations. Playful environments—through movement, touch, or shared experience—can lower cortisol and boost belonging. Temporary playgrounds and interactive installations act as small-scale mental health infrastructure, offering everyday moments of connection and joy.

In this sense, a city that plays is a city that listens. It responds to difference by making space for its expression. It encourages multiple tempos of urban life—fast and slow, solitary and communal, loud and quiet. The interventions documented here show that play can happen on benches, in plazas, under suspended metal sheets, or in mirrored pavilions. It does not require large budgets or permanent infrastructure.

14. Sergio M. Pellis, Vivien C. Pellis, and Brett T. Himmler, *The Playful Brain: Venturing to the Limits of Neuroscience* (New York: Oneworld Publications, 2010).

What it needs is intention: to design with imagination, with empathy, and with trust in the creative capacities of everyday users.

Play also resists extractive and efficiency-driven logics. It is non-linear, excessive, often seemingly purposeless. Yet this very inefficiency is what allows it to create new meanings and relationships. A city that values play is one that values its people not as users or consumers, but as co-authors of the urban experience. It supports freedom without chaos, intimacy without enclosure, movement without displacement.

This paper has argued for a shift in perspective: from seeing play as peripheral to recognizing it as central to spatial justice and urban renewal. In doing so, it proposes a future in which playgrounds are not isolated destinations but distributed invitations—woven into sidewalks, walls, courtyards, and everyday rituals of public life.

The new city as a playground is not childish. It is courageous. It takes seriously the emotional, social, and creative needs of its inhabitants. It blurs boundaries not to erase difference, but to foster contact. It encourages design that is sensitive, experimental, and alive to the evolving rhythms of communal life. And it reminds us that the most transformative spaces are not always the loudest—but the ones that quietly make room for joy, for connection, and for becoming.

Conclusion: Cities as Inclusive Playgrounds

What would it mean to take play seriously as a foundation for city-making—not as an afterthought, but as a principle of design, care, and connection? This paper has traced a lineage of inclusive, imaginative interventions that challenge the rigidity of conventional planning and offer an alternative: a city where participation is welcomed, ambiguity is embraced, and meaning is made through use.

From Van Eyck's postwar playgrounds to Nishizawa's contemplative pavilions, Raumlabor's soft infrastructures, and the ephemeral gestures of *Concéntrico*, each case shows how play can foster co-presence, spark curiosity, and blur social boundaries. These are not spaces defined by fixed programs, but by openness—inviting users of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities to inhabit, reinterpret, and shape the city together.

In this vision, play becomes a spatial strategy for inclusion. It makes space for rest, ritual, and gathering. It invites wonder, slows us down, and softens the edges of urban life. It allows for coexistence: for elders and children to share a bench, for strangers to linger under shared shade, for public space to feel personal through use.

This vision is not limited to historical examples or speculative proposals. In *Urban Salon: Furniture as Intergenerational Playground*, a recent studio I led, students designed small-scale interventions that brought this ethos to life. Their projects—developed for sites across the Americas—transformed plazas and sidewalks into collective spaces of play, listening, and connection. By working at the scale of furniture and gesture, they showed that inclusive design is not about scale but sensitivity—to people, context, and imagination.

To design the city as an inclusive playground is to recognize that infrastructure alone doesn't build community. What builds it are gestures of hospitality—furniture

that invites rather than repels, surfaces that can be leaned on or climbed, forms that allow for discovery. These are the spaces that make a city feel habitable.

Play is intercultural because it invites openness and participation across difference, rooted in its primitive condition—the connection to the animal part in us that transcends culture and separation. Design must listen. Participatory and interdisciplinary methods are essential. In my dialogues with the Institute of Urban Studies in Chile and their cross disciplinary research, I saw how listening to children, for example, transformed underused plazas next to schools into living, inclusive spaces. This paper calls for urban designers to embed play not as imposed decoration, but as dialogue—one that questions the authority of design on its own.

Ultimately, this is not a nostalgic return to childhood, but a forward-looking proposal: to embed creativity, freedom, and care into everyday urban life. The inclusive playground is not a single destination—it is a dispersed network of invitations. It lives in thresholds, vacant lots, shaded corners, and moments of pause. It lives wherever design dares to step back and let people shape what happens next.

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