"THE CREATIVE CITY...WHEN DO WE ACTUALLY GET TO SEE IT?"

Posted on 09/04/2008 by Naider



Scott Burnham is the curator ofUrban Play and the 2009Montreal Biennale. Between 2003 and 2006 he was the Creative Director for Urbis in Manchester (UK).

"We hear so much about the creative city, but when do we actually get to see it?", Scott Burnham, curator of Urban Play wonders. "Urban Play gives cities the opportunity to show the inherent creativity of its people." The Urban Play project is part of the international design biennial 'Experimentadesign' that will take place in Amsterdam in fall 2008. The biennial was originally a project from Lisbon, but has been transformed to a progressive co-production of the two European cities. The event is strongly supported by the Amsterdam City Council, which considers it to fit perfectly with the city's ambitions to become one of Europe's top 5 cities for businesses. The theme of the biennial is 'space and place', which is exactly what the Urban Play project is about. It encourages people to take back the street, by actively and creatively interacting with the public domain. A special walking route along the IJ-riverfront will be designed for Amsterdam residents and visitors. This route will contain so-called urban interventions - consisting of objects, tools and toys - created by international designers. People will hereby be stimulated to play and be creative with the objects they find on the way. The objects should trigger people to take an active part in the shaping of the environment. According to Scott Burnham this is important, because the relationship between people and the city they live in has changed remarkably over the years.



How has the interaction and relation of people (residents) with the city changed over the years?
"Both the level of interaction between residents and the city, and the relationship between the individual and the city has changed remarkably in recent years. It has increased dramatically. Fundamentally, our relationship with the city has changed in the past two decades. We have gone from a sense of our habitat being in the city to the realisation that our habitat is the city. What has followed is a level of interaction between people and the physicality of the city in ways which blur and at times entirely remove the distinction between public and private areas and objects. Urban objects and visual environments are increasingly expected by the people who use and experience them each day to contain and reflect personal significance, and if they do not do so, spontaneous interventions often step in to correct this and ensure the personal is woven into the public fabric."

Why has this interaction between people and the city changed?
"The reasons for this are numerous. For one, increasing urban density makes the shared space in the city much more of a daily aspect of people’s lives. It has also been argued that increasing property prices forces city residents to live in smaller apartments, so the shared spaces of the city take on an even more vital role in the lives of urban residents than they have in the past.
At the same time, this space is increasingly devoted to commercial messages and advertising – communication that is exclusively one-way: the public is being spoken at, in areas where the social expectation is one of shared interactions between people, so the same is expected of the shared visuals of the areas. So the one-way visuals and communications of the city run in opposition to the

instinctive behaviour of people in the city. Therefore people are increasingly reversing the communication streams of the city and are communicating back.
So far, this process has largely occurred through subversive and marginal activities as people take individual action to shape their own urban spaces, to surround themselves with adapted objects and visuals in the urban environment with the same passion usually applied to domestic spaces."

Why do you think it is important for people to be able to be creative and play in their cities?
"Because it is the individual who experiences the city, who calls it home. His/her own micro locations within the city are part of personal experience on a day-to-day basis. At the same time, an architect, designer, or local planning authority who is responsible for the creation of these areas does not have the daily interaction with these same locations that the average person does. So it is important that individuals feel the ability and the allowance to have a more organic and ongoing sense of creative interaction with their city instead of operating exclusively in the existing framework that you can share the spaces of the city, but you can't physically interact with the space or alter anything about it."

How do you think the public in Amsterdam will react to Urban Play?
"To be entirely honest, I do not know how people in Amsterdam will react to Urban Play – and that is entirely the point of the project. To learn from the project and people's interaction with it at the same time we are creating and realising the project.
At the heart of Urban Play is the notion of exploring an approach towards open source urban design - creating urban objects and areas that exist as the starting point, the catalyst, to enable a direct, open and creative dialogue with people and the design of their city. This is design for the people - developed, altered and enhanced by the people."

Do you think people would react differently in other European cities?
"I do think that people in other European cities would react differently, and that is exactly the point of Urban Play. There are plans to take Urban Play to cities other than Amsterdam, for exactly that purpose – to explore how this open design model would develop differently in other cities, dictated entirely by the residents of that city.

We hear so much about "the creative city", but when do we actually get to see the creative city?
Urban Play gives cities the opportunity to show the inherent creativity of its people."
The borders between legal and illegal are rather thin in the Urban Play project. The message behind Urban Play seems to be rather close to the message of events/movements like 'Reclaim the streets'. In how far does this create problems when it comes to cooperation with the Amsterdam City Council?
"A related question is - why are there movements like 'Reclaim the Streets' in the first place? It is because people feel a need to take action to reclaim a personal sense of connection or contribution to the city, and they know that if it is to be done at all, it has to be done at a "grass roots" level. If you were to do a survey at the number of grass roots organisations and collectives that exist to organise people in reclaiming a personal connection and sense of contribution to the city, you would find that there has been an exponential increase in the numbers of these organisations which have been started in the last decade. This is not a coincidence. Yet instead of trying to work collaboratively with this spirit, cities often move in the opposite direction, enacting zero tolerance policies and enforcing codes of conduct in public spaces. This ultimately only inspires more action outside the control of the city. It is the classic scenario – the more rules you put in place, the more people want to push against those rules.
The only reason that notions of illegality are raised with this action in the first place is because in the current climate of most cities, almost any action done on an individual basis falls outside of the city's zero tolerance policy towards public intervention, so even something as innocent as putting paper cups in a fence to spell out a sentence is technically an illegal activity. Yet I have seen this specific intervention done in several cities, and the response of the public isn't to call the police, it is to walk over to the fence and begin re-mixing the words in the sentence to spell out different

things. If you give people the ability to creatively interact in public spaces, they will. Yet cities rarely do. The city of Amsterdam should be commended for at least exploring a different model of how people can engage with their city."

Many City Councils in the (Western) world now show increased involvement in creativity and culture, because they feel it will make their cities more competitive and attractive. Do you think this rather instrumental approach to creativity forms a problem when it comes to the message behind events like Urban Play?
" There is always a crisis within any city's "creative city" desires. Cities love to promote festivals, design quarters, create 'cultural zones' and so on. But again, this is creativity by municipal committee, which is a very different type of creativity than that which exists at the more organic, individual level of a city's creative development.
A good friend of mine, the late music producer Tony Wilson, was responsible for some of the most influential music acts to come out of the UK in the 80s and 90s. He was once asked by a UK government commission on the creative industries what the government could do to nurture the creative industries, to which he replied, "leave us alone". While I don't necessarily subscribe to Tony's absolute statement, there is an element of truth there, that creativity needs to work in both directions, from the top-down at a government level, but also to be allowed to happen from the bottom-up. Amsterdam has done a very wise thing with Urban Play – they have enabled it to happen, but then allowed it to develop on its own. As they say... watch this space."

http://www.eukn.org/eukn/news/2008/04/interview-scott-burnham_1025.html

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There are no comments yet.