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Urban Play as Catalyst for Social Wellbeing Post-Pandemic

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The modern science of urban planning emerged in the 19th century in response to public health crizes caused by cities due to the constraints of their medieval urban design. In cities like Barcelona, each deadly epidemic would kill a significant portion of the population due to overcrowding and chaotic infrastructure. This shift was characterized by urban planning that moved beyond the need for fortified, walled cities to focus on industrialization and free movement, communication and trade that led to urbanisation.

During the 2017 Smart Cities Expo in Barcelona, the 150th Anniversary of Cerdà's urban planning concept was celebrated with the claim that Barcelona's Eixample was the "original smart city"–pre-digital, big analog data that informed Cerdà's general theory of urbanization (Cerdà, 2018). This was part of a larger global movement that led to modern urban planning, with public health a key reason for the organization of cities. Cerdà's 1859 plan for the expansion of Barcelona responded to the need for natural lighting and ventilation in homes, greenery in public spaces and waste disposal infrastructure based on data collected on the movement of disease in the cramped conditions of Barcelona's old city. The current global pandemic has created another moment to reimagine urban life.

Within contemporary cities, public space plays a critical role in providing opportunities for people to come together. However, contemporary cities are also contested by competing future visions–the smart city, the capitalist city. Starting with efficiency and productivity driven by technological determinism, over the past decade these visions have been challenged by other value systems that focus on play, people, place and community.

Public spaces will play a key role in restarting our cities after the COVID-19 pandemic by providing environments for community connection and social wellbeing (Daly et al., 2020). Currently, during periods of lockdown, these spaces typically appear empty and strange, as people's interactions are governed by social distancing rules that literally reconfigure urban spaces via constraints imposed by rules such as keeping 1.5 m away from others, avoiding physical contact and limits to the number of people allowed to meet in one place. Critical urban play (Flanagan, 2009) can reimagine public spaces and reframe public art–connecting people and place in creative ways. This can start by responding to the ways people have been reconnecting to these spaces during the pandemic.

One of the few positive impacts of the pandemic has been a renewed connection with local neighbourhoods and community–largely through the simple act of walking (Franks, 2020). While there is much epidemiological research on the impact of walking and urban play on physical health and on mental health through the restorative power of nature and green spaces, there is less attention to their significant impacts on social wellbeing.

Walking presents a range of possibilities, from the political to the social. We are interested in the ways that an increased focus on public spaces during the pandemic has drawn attention to the lived experience of cities, particularly the interaction between urban design–cities' rules and structures–and urban life–how people respond to and play with these as constraints and opportunities. Urban play during the pandemic has an immediate impact on wellbeing through

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renewed connection to place and the emergence of playful forms of engagement, often shared on social media, happening spontaneously as part of urban life. It also has the potential for impact in the longer term in reshaping urban design as these playful, public actions become part of the "new normal" and are adopted by local government, or through increased awareness and popularity of longstanding tactical urbanism initiatives. The pandemic has put into motion connections between urban design and urban life, social wellbeing and critical play.

In cities that have been built around car culture and increased productivity, being a pedestrian is a radical act. Slowing down, being present in the street, and taking the scenic route all mean occupying public spaces for sheer enjoyment and in protest against cultures of accelerated consumption. Playful and reflective wandering in the modern city has a long history, from the Nineteenth-Century *flânerie* of Charles Baudelaire (Benjamin, 2015) to the post-war *dérive* of the Situationist International and the millennial psychogeography of Iain Sinclair (Sinclair, 1999). While data on walking such as searches for directions on Apple's mapping services show a net decrease in walking to a specific destination, the anecdotal evidence tells the story of increased walking for recreation or within local neighbourhoods.

At the intersection of localism and urban play lies an increased social engagement that can engender a sense of connection with place and with community that supports social wellbeing and neighbourhood cohesion. In the short term this is often spontaneous and self-organized–chalk rainbows, bear maps, spoonvilles and GPS doodles (Lund, 2020)–and in the longer term can develop through joint initiatives between local government, creative communities and neighbourhoods.

Playful approaches to urbanism have an important role in supporting social wellbeing—by imagining new forms of engagement that can support the post-pandemic recovery of cities. These include public art that encourages exploration, stimulates action, and triangulates social encounters. Play introduces low-risk, low-stress, innovative ways of interacting with other people and building social connection. It can also involve creative and enjoyable ways of adapting social life to the constraints of social distancing such as giant circles painted in parks (Strauss, 2020) or finding other ways to share connection such as chalk messages and drawings on streets (Murray-Atfield, 2020).

A new public art project outside V&A Dundee (**Figure 1**) has started exploring this concept. Inspired by pavement chalk drawings and simple games such as hopscotch, it creates a set of public conditions for play that comply with social distancing and create opportunities for social connection (One Play Thing, 2020). Apps that are situated around urban exploration can take on new significance as people explore and rediscover places close to home, through recreational play and random exploration. Analog games can encourage playful mappings of place such as the many ways that people have created a sense of connection on their daily walks during lockdown such as chalk drawings and messages, makeshift installations of toys and crafted objects. Now that people can go out to play again, playing with the thresholds and boundaries of social distancing protocols offers strategies for playful compliance.

Transforming public spaces is often a slow, bureaucratic process. However, with the increased pressure on local governments to reactivate these places comes curiosity and support for new approaches. This can be small changes such as reprogramming pedestrian crossings to slow down traffic, encouraging communities' own playful efforts at tactical urbanism, or large-scale re-allocation of urban spaces for new forms of socialization and play. Park (ing) Day began as a playful form of tactical urbanism to convert on-street parking spots into more green and sociable spaces, now it has become commonplace with semi-permanent parklets throughout Melbourne supporting al fresco dining over summer as part of local government initiatives (City of Melbourne, 2020).

These initiatives include converting parking bays into bike lanes and walking trails, opening up streets to outdoor dining, and supporting temporary public artworks that experimentally transform spaces. Such moves can open up opportunities for what play makes possible–structuring ideal social relations, overcoming transactional social interactions, and seeing cities as places for connection and experience rather than instrumental function or prevention.

Politicians in Australia and elsewhere have been emphasizing the essential importance of playing board games at home and exercising alone outdoors. We need to ask how we can bring together artists, urbanists, designers and policymakers to develop public play with a social purpose. Using Melbourne as a model, the real city outside the home offers a much richer context for playful interaction with others, combining social and physical engagement, and including playful engagement with strangers, which is so important for the sense of social wellbeing beyond our own social circle.

Public spaces are critical for community connection and social wellbeing. While Melbourne is currently the epicentre of Australia's second COVID-19 wave, it also has the potential to lead the return to a re-imagined social life in urban spaces post-pandemic-through its vibrant street life, arts and culture, local government expertize in place management, unique urban DNA and playful community spirit. Urban play has found a new sense of purpose in daily connection and as a methodology for speculative design (Dunne and Raby, 2013) in our rapidly changing cities through critical play that challenges accepted norms and conventions (Leorke and Wood, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic raises broader questions around the role and function of cities in relation to society. What are they for? Do we have enough open spaces and green areas? Do we need cities at all? Through a renewed focus on the capacity of urban public spaces to drive community connection and social wellbeing, our cities may be remade and reconfigured post-pandemic. Urban play

FIGURE 1 | Oneplaything @ V&A Dundee: Slow dance.

can have a creative, productive, critical role in this reimagination of urban life.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Written informed consent was obtained from the individuals for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

During the COVID-19 pandemic a renewed interest and focus on responsive and adaptive urban planning policies has emerged. QS has articulated a particular focus on local community, pedestrian and bike-friendly planning initiatives and strategies that encourage reconnection with place. TI has researched and collated examples of urban play and playable cities in response to the pandemic. TI and QS developed the proposition that urban play acts as a catalyst for change in public spaces to enhance social wellbeing and community engagement. This article draws upon the knowledge of TI and QS in relation to playful and tactical responses to the impact of COVID-19 on public spaces to propose future directions for urban play in shaping cities post-pandemic.

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