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## The spatial and social constructs of creative situations

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# THE SPATIAL AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTS OF CREATIVE SITUATIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper presents an alternative way of considering space in terms of situated activity. We suggest that the activity and human response to space are embodied in the situations we experience. This embodied interaction with space we argue to be an essentially creative act, providing a conception of space that we term the 'creative situation'.

Four characteristics of such creative situations are presented. These are followed by six descriptions of active creative situations with instances of these drawn from the recipes, case studies and papers in this book. These descriptions are a starting point, rather than a complete framework, and are an alternative way of viewing and reconsidering our understanding of space.

## CREATIVE SITUATIONS

### The Situationists

*They wander through the sectors of New Babylon seeking new experiences, as yet unknown ambiances. Without the passivity of tourists, but fully aware of the power they possess to act upon the world, to transform it, recreate it. They dispose of a whole arsenal of technical implements for doing this, thanks to which they can make the desired changes without delay. (Constant, 1974)*

The Situationists were the 'free-radicals' of urbanism – free artists and professional amateurs. They promised that their theories of the urban environment and architecture would one day revolutionise everyday life and "...release the ordinary citizen into a world of experiment, anarchy and play" (Sadler, 1999). Sadler, author of *The Situationist City*, notes their open self-criticism allowed them to always "play the radical card" – no matter how intelligent or useful the contributions of other urbanists outside of the movement might have been.

Sadler recognises that the Situationists almost certainly drew their inspiration for creating and experiencing a situation from Sartre. Sartre argued that life is ultimately a series of given situations which affect an individual and which must in turn be negotiated by that individual. Situationism suggested it was possible for individuals to process or manage such negotiations as an act of self-empowerment.

The Situationists theorised a city of situations that overlap, patch, collide, criss-cross, cluster, and punctuate a city by surprise. In the city, the past, present and future all overlap in a messy configuration (Alloway, 1959), hence all of the divergent factors of a city cannot be fully understood, far less controlled or ordered. This recognition of the complex interplay between elements, interactions and people provides a more dynamic way of viewing and understanding the city.

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## Activity and creativity

From this starting point, space in the city is more than simply the distance between walls. By making use of and interacting with the city, space itself is perceived and used as something greater than the sum of the parts – it has a dynamic property and potential. This free development of space is analogous to Tschumi's *event space*, in contrast to a predetermined or normative understanding of space. For Tschumi, there is no space without event: "[my] relentless affirmation: that there is no architecture without program, without action, without event" (Tschumi, 1996).

The essential ingredient here is the 'active' component and even apparently passive use of space is in some way active when considered from the point of view of the user. Our starting point is a conception of space that relies on the mediation of people and context. This mediation is active, particularly in terms of creativity, and is not the preserve of the specialist. The overlap, confluence and interaction of these active mediations provide the richness of form, activity and narrative in physical environments.

Following on from this conception of space, it is argued that creativity and the creative act are a natural consequence of certain types of space, or that these types of space actually emerge with the creative act itself. In fact, it is proposed that the inter-dependency of the space and the activity are such that there can be no *a priori* cause and effect. In other words, both the space and activity are necessary together, something recognised by Alexander, who defines his city unit as emerging "...both from the forces which hold its own elements together, and from the dynamic coherence of the larger living system..." (Alexander, 1965).

This embodied view of mind and space is important in architecture (see Wilson (2002) for a good review of current cognitive embodied theories of mind). If we accept that creativity is Mayer's summary of 'novelty and usefulness' (Mayer, 1999), then the emergence of the type of space we present here is necessarily a creative act. Space, by this view, we term a 'creative situation'.

## Cities and research spaces

Events at the city scale are also applicable at other scales. Consider the conception of the *polis* provided by Kitto, where the socio-political organisation of the city takes primacy over the scale, size or shape of the city itself (Kitto, 1996). Indeed, some of the city states he discusses are equivalent in terms of population to some university campuses. The boundaries between city, town, neighbourhood, street or building frontage are certainly not fixed by scale. Lynch's (1960) five types of elements: paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks, are as useful inside a research environment as they are in his original discussion of cities (see the *Jump Associates: San Mateo* case study for an example of 'neighbourhoods' for different kinds of work).

It is argued that such interpretations of space apply equally well to smaller spatial constructs – that the building is nothing more than a small city simply because it is made up of active spatial elements. While we do not propose that the full analogy of city to campus applies in every way, we argue that the creative situations within both are analogous. Both require people situated in contexts and both rely on the activity that arises from such situations. Indeed, it could be argued that it is precisely the activity that arises from such situations in a university that is its very reason for existence.

## Characteristics of creative situations

From the above, a series of characteristics of creative situations emerge. They are necessarily incomplete by their own definition and act more to generate the idea of space, similar to Khan's analogy of the building archetype: "...a recognition of something which you can't define, but must be built" (Wuman, 1986).

*It is the activity (event) that matters.*

Without activity, there is no space. This is not a metaphysical statement, but a situated one. Different spaces allow different behaviours but these are not deterministic. One behaviour may emerge in a space intended for another, clearly indicating that the physical elements of that space are only a part of the place itself. What matters here is the situated activity, that is, activity that emerges or is activated within a context.

*Experiment and play.*

That by engaging in play and experimentation, creativity will naturally emerge (see Williams' paper: *The creative footprint*). From this creativity will arise active spaces as a natural outcome of this situated behaviour: by playing, we create; by creating, we change things. Moreover we must necessarily do this in a context and, as any designer will tell you, the very act of design has the potential to respond, engage, activate and change a context in itself.

*The creative act is also a social act.*

Constant sums up the Situationist difference between artist and situation well: "Among the New Babylonians, on the other hand, the creative act is also a social act: as a direct intervention in the social world, it elicits an immediate response" (Constant, 1974). More precisely, it is essential to realise the relevance of the social aspects of space and place with respect to creativity and to realise that these have an effect on the space itself.

*Creative situations arise from action that engenders change.*

This is, in many ways, a truism that follows from creative situations – by creating, we change things. The potential that any space has for adaptive change should be obvious (just look at the variety and richness of what people do to their homes). What is perhaps less obvious are the other factors that 'permit' change: individual agency, social constructs, economic models, cultural habits, etc. As such, the creative situation relies as much on the wider social context as it does on the immediate physical one.

## EXAMPLES OF CREATIVE SITUATIONS

With these outline characteristics, the following creative situations are presented. They are intended to provoke thought in terms of activity and situations, providing interesting and alternative ways of considering any space. Each is illustrated with examples from this book.

### Improvisational space

The Situationists proposed a new experimental theatre where a universal integration of players and audience, performance space and spectator space, theatrical experience and 'real' experience existed together (Sadler, 1999). Beyond the Situationists, the city as theatre is a well-used metaphor. Mumford suggests: "It is in the city, the city as theatre, that man's most purposive activities are focused..." (Mumford, 1996). Goodman and Goodman's 'carnival' was not simply a zone within a city for entertainment: "No one can resist the thrill of a blizzard as it piles up in the streets" (Goodman & Goodman, 1996).

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Improvisational space emerges from shared human activity in space. Like Jan van Pelt & Westfall's 'theatre: imagining' (Jan van Pelt & Westfall, 1991, p. 160), these are essentially socio-political spaces that shape and are shaped by the social activity enacted in that space. But there is a starting point or event that is characteristic of this space: be it part of the space itself (perhaps a focal point), an activity as starting point (such as a social gathering), or simply a serendipitous occurrence (such as Goodman and Goodman's blizzard).

Improvisational space is by nature loose, formless space. The space arises from social activity around some shared focus. The engendered change is explicitly enacted publicly in an open way – both the performer and audience change in an embodied, mutual space of active creativity.

In this book, the recipes #32 *Serendipity on the back of a napkin*, #22 *Sharing food* and #34 *Popup whitespace hubs* are a few examples with the potential for improvisational space. That is, they rely on emergent behaviour through social interaction around some focal point. In each, the potential is simply waiting for the actors to begin the performance.

### **Stitch space**

For the Situationist movement, labyrinths seemed to be the ideal environment in which to induce the social relationships and encounters necessary to provoke situations. Situationists often used the drawings of Piranesi as a vital source of geographic inspiration, with his fantastical drawings of overlapping and intertwined staircases and bridges. These very interstices offered the emergence of situations.

The overlap and interaction of elements in a city is, like the city as theatre, not a new concept. Alexander (1965) gives us the example of the newsstand and traffic light, where pedestrians stop at the traffic lights and naturally interact with the newsstand that happens to be there. This interaction between two apparently disparate elements (traffic light and newsstand), make up an example of Alexander's 'city unit'.

In many ways, this interaction creates a 'third space' and it is what we propose to call *stitch space*, arguing that it applies to buildings and even rooms just as it does cities. Stitch space has no landmark quality, meaning that it is not explicitly defined in itself. Rather it arises from the convergence, confluence and overlap of other spaces and activities, creating a situation through the relationships it brings together.

The social creativity of this space is vital since without the 'agreement' of its users it simply cannot exist. To recognise stitch space, the user has to agree to it existing by actively engaging with it. #59 *Attractor spaces*, #45 *Lowbrow powwow*, and #49 *Get into the zone* all present grounded examples of stitch space, where the overlap of different active spaces induces a potential 'third space'. Each of these spaces also depends on an agreement or 'contract' between users that the behaviour and activity can take place. For example, someone might use the *Attractor spaces* recipe as it was originally intended – without actually engaging with the extended use it offers. For others, the space is a stitch space that emerges from what else they do with it.

### **Cloud space**

The Situationists recognised that technology is an indispensable tool for realising an experimental collectivism. Without a fixed physical space, a fluctuating creative community can still be maintained through intensive virtual communications (Constant, 1974). Situationist social theory proposed that social groups are not only created by location, but by community of interest and through physical and psychological interdependence.

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As before, this is not only a Situationist idea. Smithson and Smithson (1970) noted that a family can still be tight-knit and possessive even when its members are thousands of miles apart. They argued that real social groups cut across geographical barriers and the most important factor of social cohesion is the looseness of groupings and the effortlessness of communication, rather than the isolation of arbitrary portions of a community with exceedingly difficult communications. Therefore, Smithson and Smithson argued that the creation of non-arbitrary groupings and providing means of effective communications are the primary functions of the planner.

Cloud space is the 'space' created by these social groupings, relying on the interaction of people around some organising identity. The shape of cloud space is formed by the active situations that emerge. As with many other active themes, the interaction with and within the space necessarily engenders change in that space – indeed, it may be that the cloud space offers the greatest potential for such change. Whether these spaces are simply groups we associate ourselves with, an online social network or remote working research groups, the active spatial component cannot be ignored.

*#20 Share what you made, #25 Research group as extended family and #19 Digital scholarship – start here* are all recipes that make active use of cloud space. Some of these make use of social identity that overlaps with physical location and some of them are independent of the physical. But they all share the same active, creative element – the people that make up the groups coalesce around some shared, active identity.

### Play space

The Situationists described a play-spirit – the freedom to *dérive*, or drift. The free spirit is also described by Benjamin (2002) in his *Arcades Project*, as the *flâneur* for whom strolling in a locale is essential to experiencing it. Play spaces are free, unhindered sequences of spaces that allow for playful constructive behaviour to occur within a context (situation).

Turning to Alexander once again, he provides an important understanding of play: “[the asphalted and fenced-in playground] has nothing to do with the life of play itself” and that “play takes place in a thousand places – it fills the interstices of adult life. As they play, children become full of their surroundings” (Alexander, 1965).

This suggests that play can (and perhaps should) take place anywhere so we present play space as any space in which this occurs. Its essential ingredient is the active, creative mind that brings to it the activity of playfulness, whether this is simple observation and curiosity or physical experimentation with the space itself. In many ways, play space is a state of mind: an attitude and approach rather than a set of physical properties.

Many of the recipes in this book require an element of play in some sense or other. Play is essentially a creative activity and one that lends itself to the enquiring researcher. The recipes *#40 Creative spaces for interdisciplinary research, #61 Workshop space and #41 Idea room* are all direct examples of play spaces, providing the space is approached with the attitude of play itself. In each of these, we 'allow' ourselves to play, perhaps an indictment of current places of research by Alexander's warning.

### Regenerative space

In *New Babylon*, use must be made of every empty space (Constant, 1974). Sadler observes that the need for creation has always been intimately associated with the need to play through the elements of architecture, time and space (Sadler, 1999). The need for constructing situations was one of the fundamental desires on which the next civilisation would be founded – therefore the architecture of tomorrow should be a means of modifying present conceptions of time and space (Ivain, 1953).

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We live in an era where the pace of change is increasing. We are designing spaces for professions that do not yet exist, hospitals that require change as soon as construction is complete and homes that 'want' to adapt, just as they always have (Brand, 1995). Therefore space must be created, and allowed to be recreated, continuously. In order to respond to dynamic, shifting and evolving creative communities, we must develop different ways of viewing our physical built environment as an adaptive rather than static object (Schnädelbach, 2010). This also requires a fundamental reconceptualisation of what such adaptation might be. For example, instead of updating a research building every 10 or 15 years, dynamic and agile spaces should allow a reformulation of current models of research in collaboration with the space itself. The question changes from 'what space do we need to do research?' to 'how might the research and space adapt together to engender an embodied research space?'

Regenerative space is limited by its physical nature but this constraint is still eclipsed by social, economic and psychological barriers, where change and unpredictability are difficult. The recipes #50 *Make do and mend*, #51 *Work that space* and #52 *Rebel space* all present examples of adaptive space and behaviour that can be applied by anyone. Perhaps the key to regenerative space, as with play space, is the state of mind required to recognise that it is possible.

### **Informal settlements – (favela space)**

For the Situationists, the concept of the *dérive* (or drift) existed not in city centres, but on the margins of the city. The labyrinth became a metaphor for a meandering maze of organic paths negotiated by the drifter, as opposed to the logic of rationalist planning and modern urbanism (Sadler, 1999). The word *favela* comes from the unplanned settlements that emerged in Brazil, created by the inhabitants themselves without formal planning systems.

The notion of peripheral elements in a city is not new, whether this is Sassen's marginality, where "economic globalisation has contributed to a new geography of centrality and marginality" (Sassen, 1996) or Edge Cities (Garreau, 2011). Inhabiting the edges in a city blurs the boundaries between planned and emergent development. Marshall's 'border crossings' mediated by 'free radicals' occupy a similar function – interstitial elements where the crossing of boundaries can be achieved physically and culturally (Marshall, 2013).

Favela space emerges in boundary spaces (edges, overlaps and 'in-between' spaces) and is constructed from local, diverse, and meaningful organisational identities. It is a creative space where its occupants can: 1) react to a given structure – accept it or reject it; 2) bypass the presence of the structure; 3) displace the structure; or 4) create a new structure that displaces or transforms the original structure. In some ways, favela space is the ultimate regenerative space. Favela space is the antithesis of the planned city, so the social creative activity becomes essential in creating the space against the 'grain' of the deterministic context, analogous to Alexander's 'unselfconscious design' (Alexander, 1965).

In this book, recipes such as #52 *Rebel Space* and #34 *Popup whitespace hubs* are favela spaces, where the use of these spaces is determined by the activity of the group using them. Even at a personal level, the favela space can still be created as an individual 'space within a space': #53 *Bus as research environment* and #54 *A mobile thinking shrine* both demonstrate examples of this. In all of these examples the use is applied to the existing space, which in turn changes the space itself.

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## CONCLUSION

Through this brief set of examples we have introduced a potential spectrum of themes for creative situations. It is important to realise that these are themes only – they are necessarily descriptive rather than prescriptive. In that sense, they are more akin to Alexander’s patterns (Alexander, 1979) or, interestingly perhaps, Jan van Pelt and Westfall’s socio-political types (Jan van Pelt & Westfall, 1991). They describe the underlying human value of these spaces through their situated use, highlighting the importance of activity over form or intended function.

What we might conclude is that the spatial constructs of creative spaces and situations must amplify, enable, and elicit the complexity, contradictory, difficult and interesting – the diverse and conflicting, the inconsistent and ambiguous nature of modern thinking and problem solving. Echoing what Robert Venturi described as complexity and contradiction in architecture – that which has a richness of meaning based on the richness and ambiguity of a modern experience: “I prefer ‘both-and’ to ‘either-or,’ black and white, and sometimes gray, to black or white. A valid architecture evokes many levels of meaning and combinations of focus: its space and its elements become readable and workable in several ways at once” (Venturi, 1984, p. 16)

It is also the charge of creative individuals (planners, architects, and occupants alike) to re-invent, re-interpret, and propose alternative constructs of creativity that do not yet exist. The very emergent nature of these themes requires that this is so. The responsibility for these allowances is not simply in the hands of the designer. By viewing space as an active situation, every user has an opportunity to effect change.

But the most important summary point might be that considering space in terms of creative situations allows us to rethink space itself – as an embodied conception of active and creative situations. That the space we inhabit is as much a product of ourselves is an empowering alternative conceptualisation of it. At the very least, space should allow the emergence of such situations – not prevent them.