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Ludic Antagonism in the Landscape: Exploring Design Impact and Scale through Human and  
Political Dimensions

ANNE LOUISE LAI  
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Reviewed and approved\* by the following:

Leann Andrews  
Assistant Professor of Landscape Architecture  
Thesis Supervisor

Larry Gorenflo  
Professor of Landscape Architecture  
Honors Adviser

\* Electronic approvals are on file.

## ABSTRACT

Discussions about the role of design in larger social contexts often imply that we (landscape architects) must solve system-level issues—issues like climate change, poverty, food insecurity, and homelessness. To evaluate whether such a task is realistically feasible, we may consider: At what scales can landscape architects have a tangible social impact? At which threshold between prevention and intervention does design yield the most efficacy? What might this look like? And what ensures its success?

Drawing from various ideas in the arts, architecture, cultural geography, philosophy, planning, and sociology, this paper illuminates some conditions of the Everyday (in Northeast American cities) that may influence citizens' relationships with the built environment, in conjunction with a study of contextualizing more humble design strategies in the political dimension. Finally, it concludes that Ludic Antagonism (a coined term for a personality of work) should spawn moments of euphoric ecstasy in everyday life and simultaneously reveal understandings of neglectful structures. This definition is explored through spatial representations of its function, character, and antecedents; and a design-build component that typifies this placemaking approach.

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## **NOTE**

While this thesis allows for the exploration of my own interests and clarifies my journey as an emerging designer, it also reveals sentiments towards landscape architecture as an industry. I acknowledge that a) this work is shaped by personal context and b) it is a living document in which my opinions will evolve with time and experience. Finally, navigating academic idealism under product-driven metrics of achievement is a challenge evident in the body of this work.

## **Chapter 1**

### **What Does Design Do?**

#### **Introduction**

Like many young aspiring designers, I entered my undergraduate career most excited about artistic freedom provided by the field. The promised capacity to paint with plants, sculpt soil, conduct micro-climates, and frame picturesque vistas glued me to the edge of my seat. And in the beginning, I indeed spent many an hour fiddling with geometries, colors, and line weights, mostly for aesthetic pleasure—design choices that now seem less of a priority.

Moving through the program, compounded by the now-fizzling bout of social awareness during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, introduced dazzling new schools of thought, primarily about the political power of design. After a community design studio that challenged us to scrutinize, through a design lens, wildly complex social inequities, I was left wondering the true impact of landscape design on such “Wicked Problems” as planners would say. So, I turned to public policy, nearly changing my field of study entirely.

I had not foreseen that a single conversation with a professor (now my wonderful thesis advisor) would change my mind. She offered the theory of Now Urbanism (Hou, 2015), which countered my prolonged confusion with, “yes, but what can we do right now?” I would later read shared trains of thought from the founders of the Tactical Urbanism movement and the former mayor of Curitiba (crowned one of the greenest cities in the world) who express that waiting for financial resources and bureaucratic policies to align is “a sure recipe for paralysis”

(Sinclair, 2006, p.324). Pivoting from top-down interventionist strategy, I decided to pursue the small-scale, high impact, alternative ways to traditional design.

The following documents my sense-making of the design world through various scales and typologies of placemaking. Although academic stipulations required for this scholarly exploration encourage either traditional design projects or stringent research processes, I aim to blend the two. The distinction between art and design, between research and action, and between think-tanks and do-tanks run parallel to describing the world as it is and how the world ought to be, respectively. Both merit equal attention. Thus, this project includes an amalgam of thought-shaping literature, a preliminary attempt at their interpretations (and a study of its failure), a renewed synthesis—through spatial representation—, and an experiential art installation piece realizing their conglomerate approaches to world building, using the design-build method.

## **Speculations**

In developing a design ethos—or any creative project—one might ask a) what purpose it serves and b) how that is achieved. In this case, these two questions can be interpreted as impact and scale, respectively.

### **Impact:**

As aforementioned, since art differs from design, so too do their impacts. Art—often manipulated by the sole discretion of its artist and viewed only by those to whom it is made accessible—might have a smaller reach and shared ambition. Art can still be Art even if only made for the enjoyment of its creator. Design, on the other hand, can sometimes offer less individuality and subjectivity. In a participatory approach, the



people affected by the design can be stakeholders in the design process. The inverse holds equally true: the more stakeholders involved in a project, the more a design bears resonance with people. While there are exceptions to these trends (such as artists who employ public participation for installations or performances, and ego-driven designers colloquially known as Starchitects) group engagement in the Design of the Built Environment might prompt the success of an intervention.

Additionally, one might ask how a design impacts people, whether on a physical, economic, emotional, or psychological level (although in any case, they tend to intertwine). In my city wandering thus far, I am captivated by work that provokes thought on an individual level—work that hatches cheeky grins and kindles a quiet shift in collective spirit. This beau ideal beckons to be explored in my nascent studies.

Scale:

Geographically, there are various scales at which landscape architects can work, be it at the neighborhood, municipal, county, state, or bio-region level. However, it is sometimes difficult to see where landscape designers should operate for maximum efficacy. Where is the threshold between conventional design and planning or policy? Are landscape architects even equipped to deal with these Wicked Problems that riddle daily dialogue? Has our inferiority complex fabricated a narrative in which we are the sole champions of intersectional environmentalism?!

In relation to design's impact, the feasibility of crowd-sourced initiatives might dictate the physical scale of projects, especially if said group efforts require crowd-funding or more modest financial sustenance. Correspondingly, the resonance of a design's impact might influence a project's scalability and universalist reach.

With impact and scale considered, meaningful design might flourish with participatory processes that yield physically smaller end results than conventional design but achieve a higher impact in the collective. Personally, I seek the former particularly when the design is subversively political and accented by playful elements that elevate morale and atmosphere—Ludic Antagonism if I were to give it a name.

## Chapter 2

### Activity in Public Space

#### Who's it For?

Public space is the center of the urban fabric. From parks and plazas to streets and sidewalks, it can be defined as any place to which the public has access (Oxford University Press, 2022). Despite its commonplace (often taken for granted in more privileged circles), public space in major East Coast American cities seems underused. After our study abroad—in various European cities including the revered Scandinavia—I realized that the use of public space is completely shaped by place-specific ethnography...perhaps a different approach to work-life balance. Domestically speaking, however, the daily conditions of public space can typically be characterized as passive or transitional spaces—besides occasional recreation. Imagine if our mundane journeys to 9-to-5 jobs were punctuated with impromptu sites for congregation, where unfamiliar situations sparked conversation...where the public *activates* public space.

This notion feels instinctive; after all, democracy is intertwined with the idea of public space (Hou, 2010). Kevin Lynch, prolific urban planner, describes five dimensions of spatial rights, which—in this conversation's context—translates to citizens' rights in public space: “access, freedom of action, claim, change, and ownership and disposition” (Carr et al., 1992, p. 137). Inevitably, this worships the wistful impermanence and glorious messiness of the human condition and the manifestations of the individual's everchanging convictions.

But it appears radical for an individual to instigate their will in public space. It feels cumbersome to cut through red tape—from pop-up events to prolonged inhabitation. Perhaps formalized spaces don't feel judgment-free, don't provide ambiances more electric than the comfort of our homes, or perhaps people simply lack the time and energy to dream up various interventions. It may be impossible to pinpoint the origin of the implicit restrictions on public space, but it could be a cultural phenomenon: historically shaped ontological views that define everyday use of the outdoors. Indeed, unauthorized use of public space seems anarchistic, especially in the United States: a developed capitalist democracy (Talen, 2015).

It can then be deduced that bureaucratic verdict on “sanctioned” use of public space stands in direct opposition to the initial intention of public space. In a humorous reduction, the paternalistic nature of this paradigm might compare to a mother telling her teenage child to wash the dishes (for the umpteenth time) when they have already started the processes, thus discouraging the task's completion. Top-down delegations may restrict the “public” in “public space”; a space's activation may only bear significance if initiated by its citizens.

### **Tactical Urbanism?**

So, if sincere change in the public sphere requires initiation and action at a grassroots level, then it may be true: smaller scale interventions—perhaps humble and impermanent—prove to be catalysts for community-centered progress. Tactical Urbanism is an embodiment of this, described as, “an approach to neighborhood building and activation using short-term, low-cost, and scalable interventions and policies” (Garcia & Lyndon, 2015, p. 2). The most well-known example of this method is PARKing Day, where a parking spot is briefly transformed into a mini

park for a variety of public uses. Other instances include temporary bike lanes, street closures, pop-up plazas, etc. Stimulating in practice, such initiatives can gradually transition from unsanctioned work to sanctioned; this tendency raises further questions about the liminality of tactical urbanism (hence TU). Besides legality, ambiguity surfaces in the issues of land ownership (public vs. private), lifespan (temporary vs. permanent), funding sources (institutional vs. crowdfunded), actors (government vs. citizens), political spirit (protest vs. collaboration), and more. In the search to better understand these dichotomies—perhaps contradictions—I explored mapping TU in a political space in which its function and relationships could be visualized.

## Chapter 3

### Mapping Tactical Urbanism in Political Space

#### Process and Prototype

To see the relationship between two entities, I chose a scatterplot with case studies as data points: TU projects against conventional landscape architecture projects. [See Figure 1].

Tactical Urbanism Case Studies		Conventional LA Case Studies	
 <b>PARKing Day</b> Global, Citizens, 2005 -	 <b>Chair Bombing</b> Brooklyn, DoTank, 2011	 <b>Central Park</b> NYC, Olmsted, 1858	 <b>The High Line</b> NYC, Corner, 2009
 <b>Parkside Park-In</b> Buffalo, Citizens, 2013	 <b>Kit of Parks</b> Boston, Merritt Chase, 2015 -	 <b>The Navy Yard</b> Philadelphia, Corner, 2015	 <b>Lincoln Park</b> Chicago, Nelson, 1860
 <b>Play Streets</b> LA, Kounkuey, 2015 -	 <b>White Space</b> Boston, Merritt Chase, 2015	 <b>US Capitol Grounds</b> Washington DC, Olmsted, 1874	 <b>Prospect Park</b> NYC, Olmsted/Vaux, 1866
 <b>Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone</b> Seattle, Citizens, 2020	 <b>Public Space in the Margins</b> Hollywood, CC&DR, 2002-5	 <b>Bill &amp; Melinda Gates Foundation</b> Seattle, GGN, 2011	 <b>Disney Epcot Center Grounds</b> Orlando, Disney, 1982

**Figure 1: Landscape Architecture Projects Case Studies as Data Points**

I then assigned values to the axes of the Cartesian plane, loosely using a simplified Nolan Chart, a political spectrum diagram which graphs economic freedom (x-axis) against personal freedom (y-axis). Translating economic freedom into funding source and personal freedom into citizen participation, I arrived at an organizational matrix suggesting the type of environmental

government. [See figure 2]. The third element of this inquiry—the dichotomic trends—are added on the z-axis, constructing a tensor that functions as the “political space”. [See Figure 3].

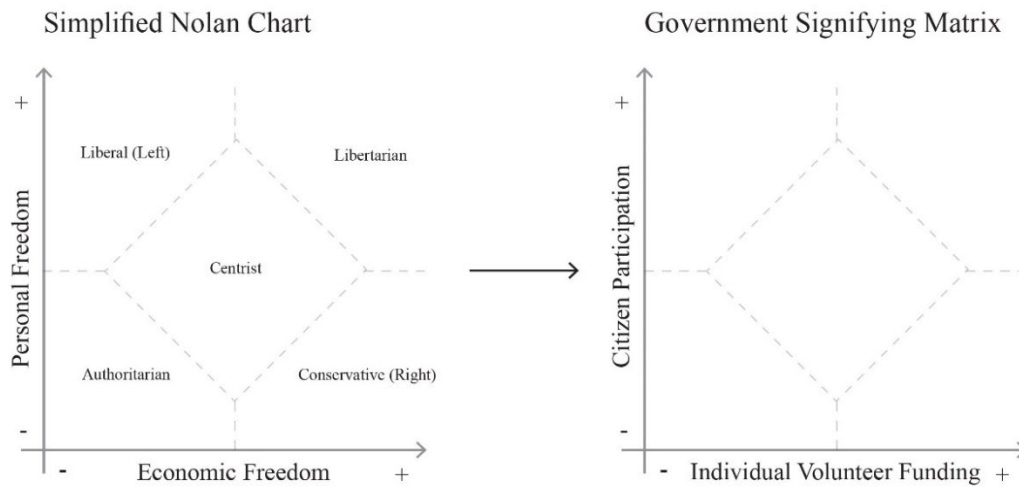


Figure 2: Developing Political Organizational Matrix

#### Dichotomic Trends

- Public vs. Private Land Ownership
- Protesting vs. Collaborative Spirit
- Transience vs. Permanence
- Legality vs. Illegitimacy
- Active vs. Passive Programming

#### 3D Tensor Visualization

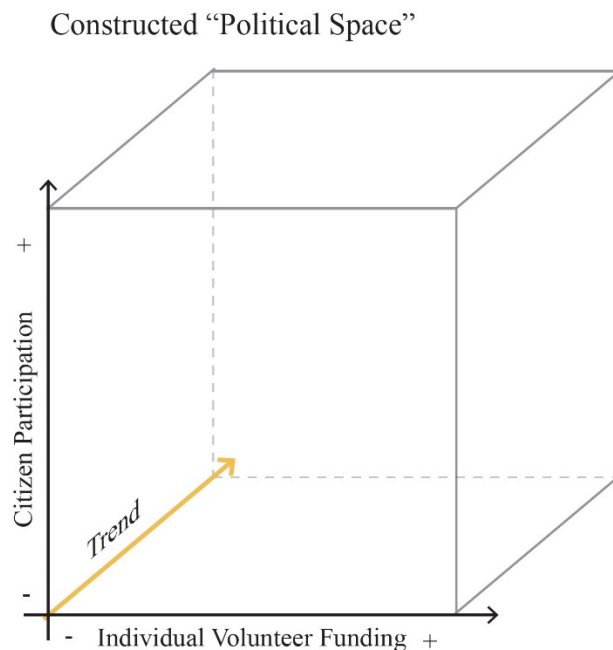
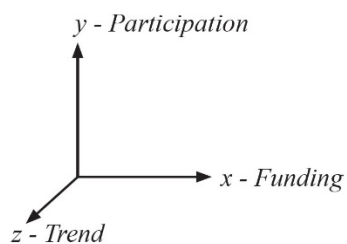


Figure 3: Construction of 3D Political Space

The initial plan included a political space for each trend with the same set of data points. Figure 4 shows an envisioned prototype, made with the help of the application Plotly. Note: The inability to interact with the scatterplot in (simulated) 3D space significantly reduces an accurate interpretation of each case studies' relative locations.

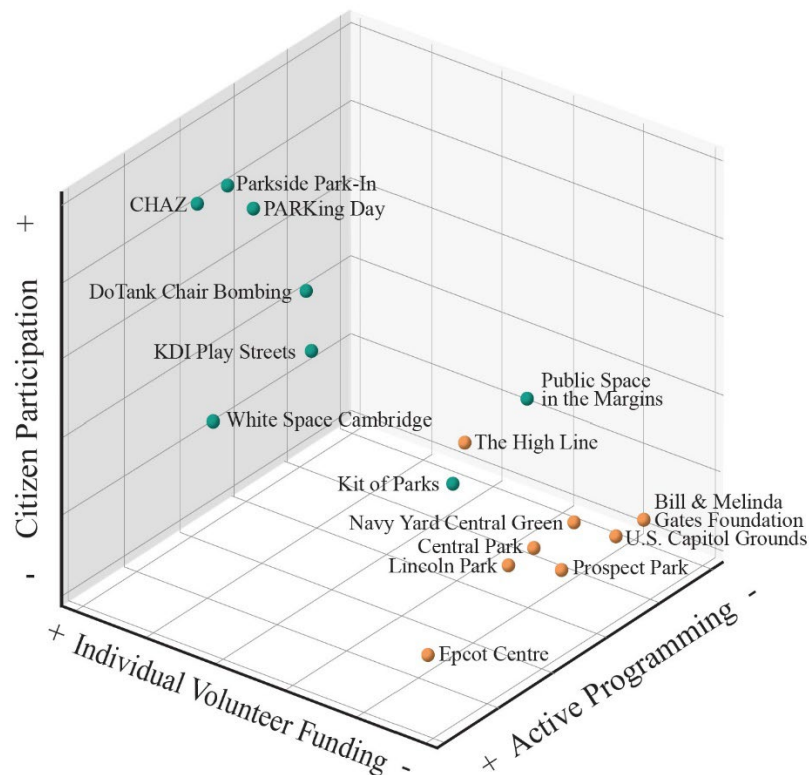


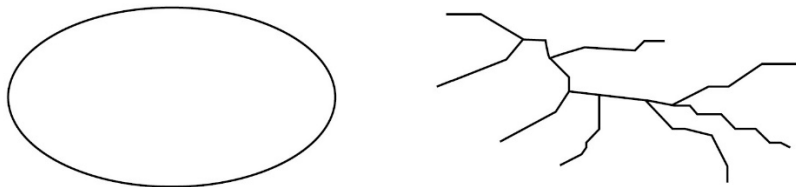
Figure 4: 3D Scatterplot Prototype of TU Compared to Conventional LA

### Critique of the Created Political Space

It became clear after a discussion with some wonderful people at Merritt Chase (design firm) that this linear attempt to interpret TU through a bipartisan political lens leaned on the counterproductive side of meaningful deliberation. Furthermore, the Actor Network Theory explains that everything exists as an entangled network; “grid layering and map making is



another network and not what in which networks are situated” (Latour, 1990, p.5). Some insist that this methodological approach disregards the hierarchy and distribution of power through the equal attribution of agency for each network “node”. But for this project, Latour’s (1990) challenge to dualist understanding means that the created political space—an abstract tensor of sorts—is a Cartesian quantification that heavily reduces the complexity of affairs. [See Figure 5].



*“...[I]t is a change of topology. Instead of thinking in terms of surfaces -two dimension- or spheres -three dimension- one is asked to think in terms of nodes that have as many dimensions as they have connections.”*

-Bruno Latour, On Actor-Network Theory 1990

**Figure 5: Descartes’ (left) vs. Latour’s (right) Method (Latour, 1990)**

If I could not simplify TU’s ontological nuances to a comprehensible level, what could I say about its character? That, too, seemed difficult to digest. The widely accepted spirit for the TU approach asks forgiveness rather than permission, but Garcia and Lyndon (2015) suggest that TU should perform in favor of potential collaboration with government and/or establishments. How would this affect the spirit of an intervention over time? I believe that the transition from grassroots ephemerality to corporate permanence—from citizen-led insurgence to institutional maintenance—may sometimes reproduce structures of power either through physical or symbolic means: manifestations of hegemonic values implied by colonial practices baked into neoliberal political economic order.

I was again reminded that apolitical design simply does not exist. Design—a statement of how the world ought to be—is inherently a demand for something that has not been put in place

by programs and policies that regulate existing conditions, especially if instigated by The People in public space. So, if a) design is political and b) genuine human-centered work in the public sphere should not fall complicit to extractive, austere bureaucracy, then placemaking could look like “counter-hegemonic interventions whose objective is to occupy the public space in order to disrupt the smooth image that corporate capitalism is trying to spread, bringing to fore its repressive character” (Mouffe, 2007, p.5). Other prolific writers such as William Whyte and Jane Jacobs also express their support of nimble, microscale changes that reveal underlying systems through the emphasis of bits and pieces of the urban fabric (Talen, 2015).

Moreover, if our Western democracy promotes “...equality, such that anyone has as much right to govern as to be governed” (Iveson, 2013, p.946), one could then argue that the described approach is the most democratic form of place-making—not one of anarchy and hyper anti-establishment.

## Chapter 4

### Impositions on Time, the Body, and Space

This continued study bears two purposes: to further explore the effects of the aforementioned “corporate capitalism” on people’s public space experience; and to speculate about what Mouffe’s (2007) counter-hegemony looks like in the context of this conversation. Could a lack of time and energy contribute to the underuse of shared spaces? What causes the rapid exhaustion of these two resources?

While I recognize the bias cast over this work by my participation (thus far) in the industry, I lean towards Guy Debord's (1967) *Society of the Spectacle*. In part, it describes daily realizations of a capitalist-driven experience: "reduced to the pure triviality of the repetitive combined with the obligatory absorption of an equally repetitive spectacle" (Saddler, 1998, p.16). Perhaps this working experience is rather universal in the United States.

In an age where time is a financial commodity, the question too easily asked is one of this paradigm’s origin. Our modern time discipline—asserts E.P. Thompson (English historian, writer, and socialist)—evolved from the convenient convergence of Puritanism and industrial capitalism. The culture of obedience and continuous (moral) improvement shaped the work ethos that pulled Industrialized America from its previously destitute economies, hence equating time with valuable progress and stability (Thompson, 1967). Of course, there might be discourse about niche ethnography and conjectures about the direction of time discipline had the Americas not been colonized. Nonetheless, this “restless urgency”, in Thompson’s words, might never ease as the threat of poverty constantly looms in a country without sufficient social welfare. This may have embedded a permanent lack of leisure in our everyday work culture, which tends to take the forefront of our waking hours.

Accordingly, the industrialist lens puppets the body as a machine rather than treating it as a living organism (not unlike the objectification of landscapes as products not complex processes). The body—now an object—is only used for value extraction and we might only care and maintain it for the purpose of economic production, voluntarily or otherwise. A potential remedy may lie in viewing oneself as someone with a body instead of some-body; naturally, exploration of separating person from body could initiate philosophy-riddled conversations about religion, human and nonhuman beings, and Latour's counter-dualist hybrids. But the point in case: without rest and leisure our bodies will deteriorate rather quickly. Silvia Federici, feminist activist and renowned political theorist, writes in her book *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin*, "Our struggle then must begin with the reappropriation of our body, the revaluation and rediscovery of its capacity for resistance, and expansion and celebration of its powers, individual and collective." (LaBelle, 2020, p.1).

The extractive nature of the relationships between time, the body, and a relentless economy does not seem to allow for an embrace of life or a humanist approach to living. Hence, the lack of the individual's time and energy may indeed contribute to the dullness of activity in the public sphere. It seems that in the conditions Debord (1967) describes as the *Spectacle*, instances of Immanuel Kant's *exemplary originality*—in relation to imitation, artistic genius, and aesthetic creativity (Gammon, 1997)—may come few and far between. Marcus du Sautoy—British mathematician—asserts, "The creative impulse is a key part of what distinguishes humans from other animals and yet we often let it stagnate inside us, falling into the trap of becoming slaves to our formulaic lives" (Du Sautoy, 2020, p.4). Perhaps this way of life is beyond address at the policy level, rendering the manipulation of the urban fabric only a tactic for coping with the effects of this established work culture. As previously hypothesized in the

realization that landscape architects are not equipped to “solve” Wicked Problems, ludic antagonism in the landscape is interventionist—escapist even—and depending on its construction may amplify a nihilistic world view, however well-meaning its initial intentions.

## Chapter 5

### Ludic Antagonism in the Landscape

#### Case Studies



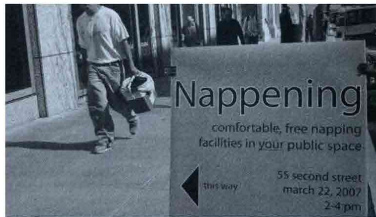
Art Stencil by Candy Chang



"I Wish This Was" Urban Intervention by Candy Chang



paraSITE by Michael Rakowitz, counter-hostile architecture



Pop-up event by Rebar, *Generous Urbanism* exemplar



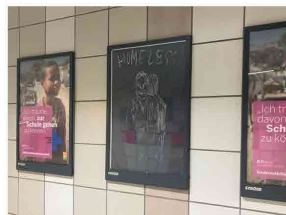
"Double Happiness" Billboard Swingset by Didier Faustino



Trampoline Sidewalks in Copenhagen, Denmark



Cigarette Receptacle in Stockholm, Sweden



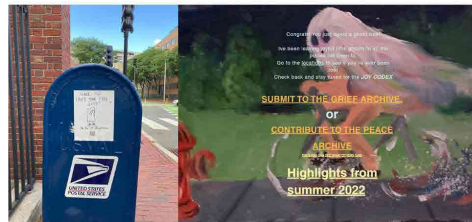
Subway Station in Dusseldorf, Germany



Temporary Tableau in Toronto, Canada



Statue in Bonn, Germany



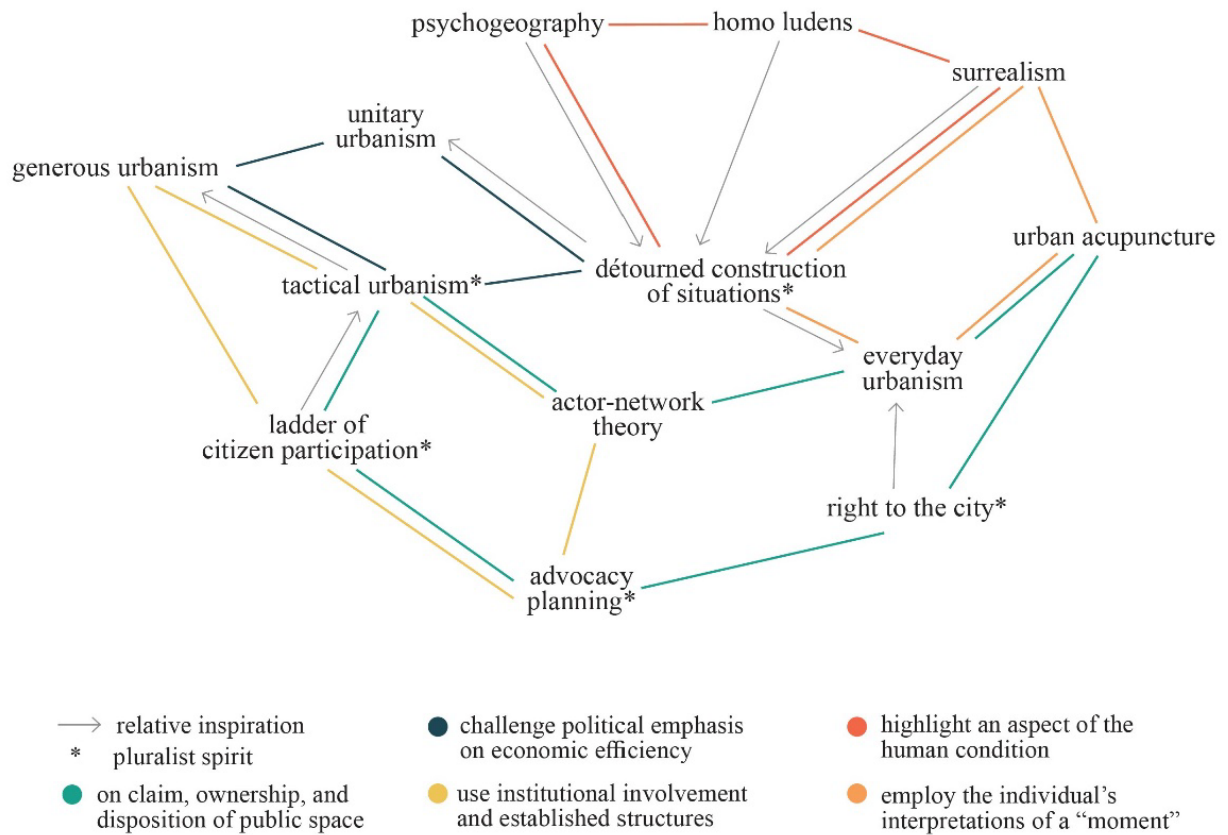
Scavenger Ghost Project, (various American Cities) by Anonymous



Man Blowing Bubbles in Plaza in Cologne, Germany

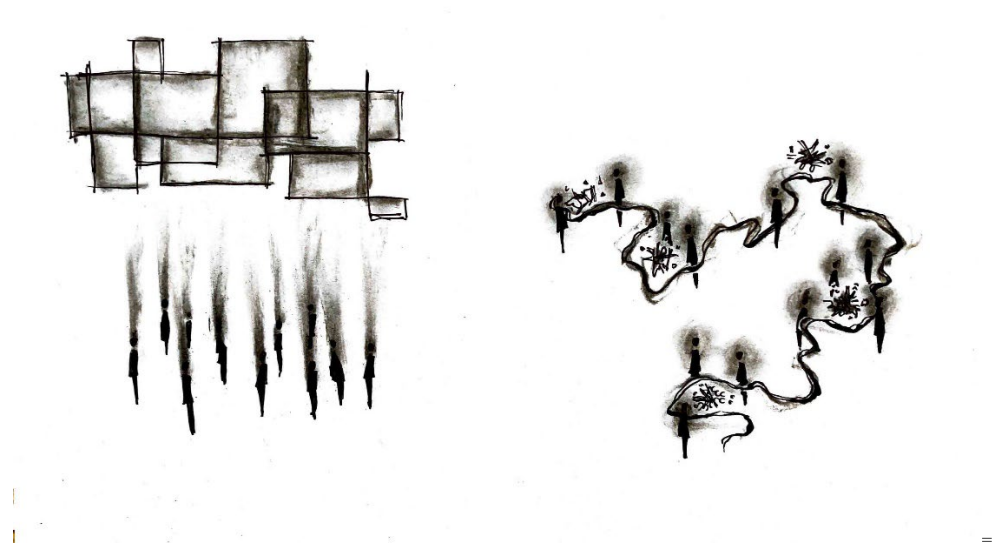
Figure 6: Ludic Antagonism Case Studies

## Spatial Representations of Synthesis



**Figure 7: Network of Common Themes Across Movements and Theories**

The above image illustrates the thematic relationships between the movements and theories that have a) guided the direction I would like to take as a designer and b) shaped the coinage of the term Ludic Antagonism. Although spanning across various (artistic, political, and economic) periods, themes like pluralism, individual agency, anti-establishment sentiment, etc. transcend the finite clock.



**Figure 8: Extraction vs. Contribution of Human Energy in Economy of Efficiency**

Ludic Antagonism harbors an affinity to Rebar’s Generous Urbanism (Hou, 2010, p.51): “the creation of public situations between strangers that produce a new cultural value, without commercial transaction”. Continuing the rather pessimistic perspective on the existing work culture—exploitative corporate practices extend into the non-profit world. In some instances, such non-profit organizations (however noble on paper) shift the responsibility of complex issues onto individual volunteers instead of administrative or governing bodies. Additionally, several case studies of American open-source funding models behave only as theoretical ideals or fail shortly after their launch from lack of sustenance. Therefore, the grassroots level approach of ludic antagonism might rely heavily on what is domestically categorized as philanthropic support.



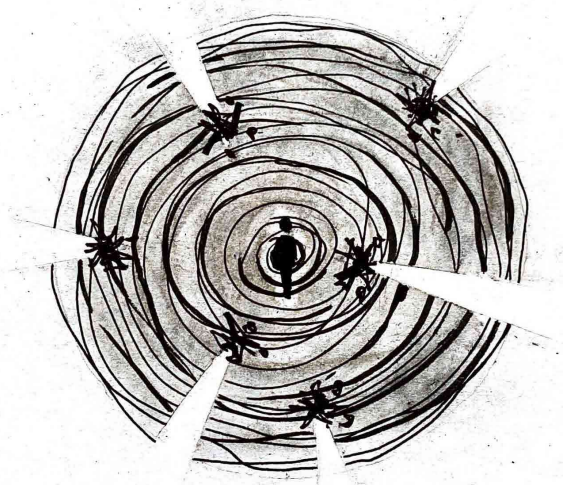


Figure 9: Effect of Ludic Antagonism in the “Society of the Spectacle”

"Situationist architecture would revolutionize everyday life and release the ordinary citizen into a world of experiment, anarchy, and play." -*The Situationist City*

Similarly, our work culture (shaped by the aforementioned time discipline) deems idleness a waste. Ludic Antagonism in Debord’s Spectacle might provide an escape from the continually churning rhythm of what we have classified as “livelihood”.

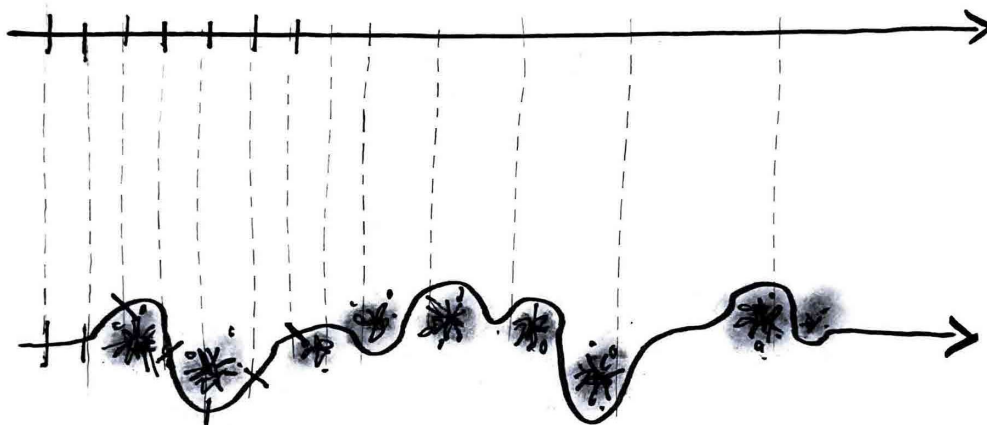


Figure 10: Escaping the Clock’s Tyranny with Element of Play

"Landscape is...a space deliberately created to speed up or slow down the process of nature...it represents man taking upon himself the role of time." -*J.B. Jackson, cultural geographer*

An interpretation of this quote might aid in the creation of playful interventions that challenge our modern understanding of time discipline by dilating the “timeline”.

### **Defining Ludic Antagonism**

Through the reviewed literature and case studies, I have identified several unifying themes that define ludic antagonism and will be employed as design principles for the built component:

- Encourage the individual’s claim, ownership, and disposition of public space
- Highlight shared aspects of human condition with pluralist spirit
- Challenge political emphasis on economic efficiency
- Grow conventional definitions of leisure, play, and rest

Ludic antagonism in landscape architecture should spawn moments of euphoric ecstasy in everyday life and simultaneously reveal understandings of neglectful structures.

Cautions about the physical execution of playful visions: The Situationists were unable to construct anything from their values. Even when leaving the movement, Nieuwenhuys stated that it was merely a critique on urbanism, not a redefinition (Sadler, 1998). Similarly, with *Homo Ludens*, when its ideals take physical realizations, the purity of the concept dwindles. One example is the Alice in Wonderland City Experience, where huge mushrooms flash fantastical colors and other articles of the sort engulf users in a dreamlike world. To me, the appeal immediately dissolved as it was no longer an imaginative, surreal experience, but a

concretely defined tool for commercial purposes. I'd like to be conscious of this paradigm in future conceptual developments of this project's built component.

Cautions about the practice of transgression: I draw parallels between the ways ludic antagonism works in public space and the way romantic irony works in poetry. In his *Letter to a Young Poet*, Rilke (1903) advises to employ irony sparingly since embracing it as the entire character of a work may undercut the depth of subjects the artist wishes to deconstruct. Irony—or ludic antagonism—can be the fear of very human melodramas disguised as superiority and nonchalance. While acknowledging that ludic antagonism potentially magnifies nihilism and settling for temporary interventions to existential, Wicked Problems, I find myself in a feedback loop that typifies a different irony: ontological irony.

Nonetheless, Rilke's argument, in addition to those of Kant and Du Sautoy, refer to *art*—though not necessarily exclusive of design—hence suggesting that ludic antagonism might be both art *and* design: a reflection of the current world and a declaration of what it should be.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Phase I Design Data Collection**

The week-long installation titled “Stuckeman’s Secret Spots” and its subsequent design interventions aim to address the spatial underuse of the Stuckeman Family Building (SFB) fueled by studio students’ social dynamics. It aims to reveal and share people’s secret spots in a fun way: students are invited to fill out prompts on sheets of paper to pin up in a shared space.

#### **Stuckeman’s Secret Spots!**

##### **Site Analysis:**

Both the familiarity with the SFB microculture and guaranteed legal compliance for an academic paper influenced the project “site” choice. Spatially, The SFB does not have many common areas (“public space” as proof of concept). Those noted from observation include staircases, elevators, bathrooms, the administrative office, the library, and the corridors at the floor entryways. Socially, I observe a lack of connection between disciplines (Landscape Architecture and Architecture), between cohorts, and between floors. Burnout may be exacerbated by the cubicle culture inherent in desk organization and other pandemic recovery related factors. Overall, the framed problem: the SFB conditions may make it difficult for students to engage with their studio space in a way that facilitates their wellbeing.

##### **Design Impact and Scale:**

This intervention is targeted towards the microculture of students who work in the SFB (i.e. Architecture and Landscape Architecture students). It promotes ownership of “public space”, encourages the display of vulnerability in shared areas, and offers a playful opportunity

for rest apart from studio work. By expanding the use of a space that some only view as a workplace, it counters restless business through idle reflection and acupuncture play.

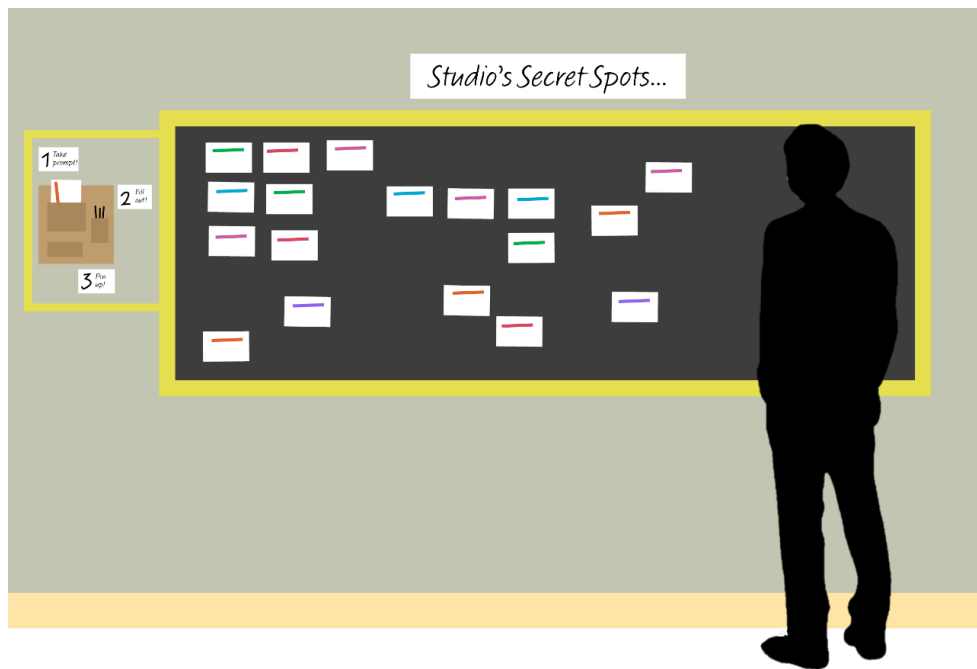


Figure 11: Draft Mock-Up of Installation

I also wanted to use other limited public space to advertise the happening. The maintenance crew mentioned that Penn State's Office of Physical Plant would not allow hanging posters in SFB bathrooms or elevators, so I resorted to posting advertisements on bulletins boards. As engagement was relatively high, I did not need to distribute prompts on people's desks to increase participation.

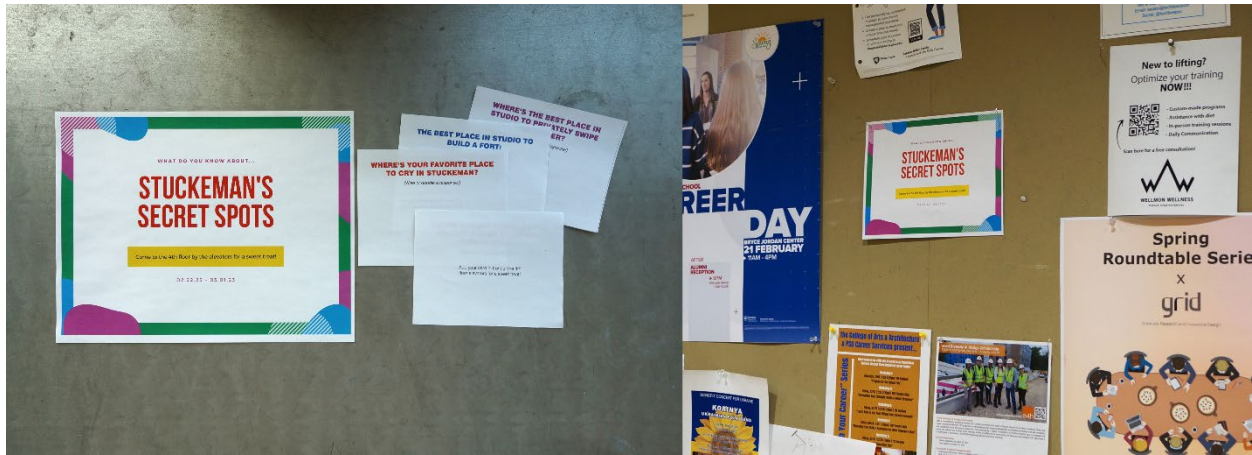


Figure 12: Installation Advertisements and Prompts

Prompts were piloted with a small group of friends, then printed on letter-size paper and cut accordingly. The list of questions below:

1. Where's your favorite place to cry in Stuckeman?
2. The best place in studio to have an imaginary argument with a professor:
3. ~~Where's the ideal location in this building for a hammock set up?~~
4. The best place in studio to build a fort:
5. ~~The best place in studio to have an arm wrestle:~~
6. Where in Stuckeman would you go to have a private dance party?
7. ~~A place in studio I'd host a summoning circle:~~
8. ~~A place in Stuckeman I'd have a jam session:~~
9. Where's the best place in studio to privately swipe on Tinder?
10. ~~A place in Stuckeman I'd leave passive aggressive notes:~~
11. Which floor and stall number have you designated for pooping?
12. ~~The place in Stuckeman I go to sulk after desk crits:~~
13. ~~Where's the best place in studio to host a runway show?~~

## Photographs of Stuckeman's Secret Spots



Figure 13: Location of Installation (Entry/Bathroom Corridor)



Figure 14: Students Filling Out Prompts





Figure 15: Installation Details



Figure 16: Installation Final Result

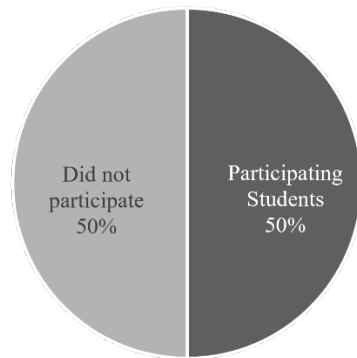


## **Phase I Reflections**

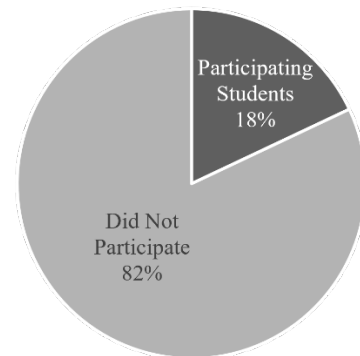
The installation received over a hundred responses over the course of a week. Contextually, the chosen week was right before the Spring Break, which might have impacted the level of participation. I noticed people were inclined to add their piece in group settings or with friends—only if they saw others contributing. Individually, there was a lot of pausing to read responses on the way to the bathroom and head turning at the novelty on the way into studio. At the end of the set-up, someone discreetly wrote, “We need stickers so we can ‘heart’ them like Instagram/Facebook!” This was a great suggestion (probably undertakable mid-way through the process) and a technique commonly used as a community engagement strategy and in pin-up peer-critiquing.

As my outreach methods did not extensively encourage students on other floors, relying heavily on word of mouth, the primary clientele includes the studio cohorts with desks on the fourth floor. In hindsight, I also would have specified the target group (i.e. fellow Stuckeman Architecture or Landscape Architecture students) as there were a couple responses from a professor and someone who didn’t work in the SFB. With a) around 180 students on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor and b) around 90 responses—reduced from 105 to account for people that responded to more than one prompt—the participation rate is 50%. Extended to all students with desks in the SFB, it becomes approximately 18%. This sample group (student participants) represents around 35% of the SFB population, excluding passive engagement from curious observers.

Approximate Participation on SFB 4th Floor



Approximate Participation across SFB

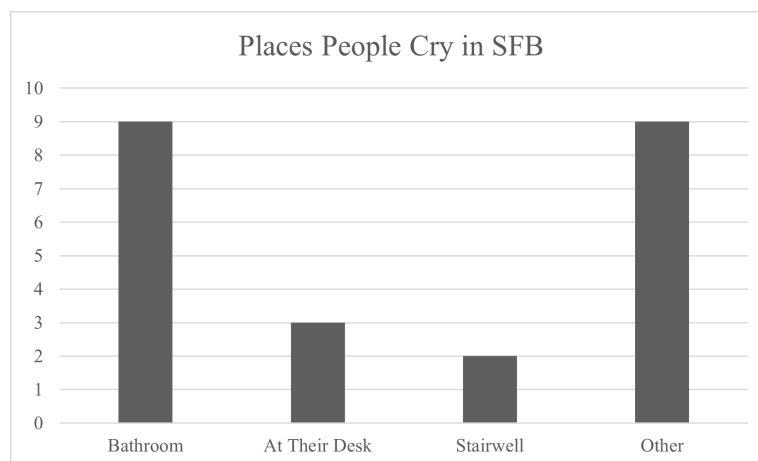


**Figure 17: Phase I Installation Participation**

Below are the prompt replies, ordered by popularity. Some students wrote more than one option in their response; this is reflected in the discrepancies between the written and graphic number of participants.

1. *"Where's your favorite place to cry in Stuckeman?"* (22 responses)

9 respondents indicated that bathrooms were the prime spot (some specifying floor and stall number).



**Figure 18: "Where's Your Favorite Place to Cry in Stuckeman?" Results**

2. *“Which floor and stall number have you designated for pooping?”* (20 responses)

11 students mentioned the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, with the majority also citing the 2<sup>nd</sup> stall. In the SFB, the third floor has no studio desks, just a mezzanine and pin-up and lecture spaces; students cite this as a quieter floor. The remaining responses were humorous. For example, “I go where I please!!!”



Figure 19: *“Which Floor and Stall Number Have You Designated for Pooping?”* Results

3. *“Where in Stuckeman would you go to have a private dance party?”* (19 responses)

There was not much consensus here, but several mention the bathrooms and the shower change rooms in the first-floor bathrooms, which are a well-hidden secret; barely anyone knows of their existence and even fewer use them.

4. *“The best place in studio to build a fort:”* (17 responses)

The results varied greatly here too, but a few students say an ideal spot is under their desks.

5. *“The best place in studio to have an imaginary argument with a professor:”* (15 responses)

The responses to this prompt were more humorous. For example, “Imaginary? Lol, let’s have a real argument at my desk! (No shame),” and “Nowhere. You can hear everything in this building”. Several others joke that they would rather have a real-life argument.

6. *“Where’s the best place in studio to privately swipe on tinder?”* (11 responses)

Though there were fewer respondents for this prompt, the majority chose their desks or the bathrooms.

Overall, Stuckeman's Secret Spots sparked playful discussion among students through reflection on shared experiences and collected quantitative data to inform the subsequent interventions in the SFB (as proof of concept for implementation in public space). The prevalence of bathrooms in students' responses may indicate a need for more intimate, private spaces...or just a repurposing of existing underused spaces.

## Chapter 7

### Phase II Design Intervention

In the final stage of the design-build portion of this project, I resolve to install three interventions based on student responses. None of these sought explicit permission from building management but were installed for one day and taken down before nightly maintenance.



Figure 20: Locations of Phase II Interventions



Figure 21: Conceptual Renderings of Phase II Interventions



Figure 22: The Crying Fort (Phase II Installation)

The first intervention responds to the flocking of crying students to the bathroom and the interpreted need for more private, intimate spaces. It combines a “designated crying spot” with building a fort underneath a desk—pulling from another prompt’s responses—to achieve this. Using a “vacant/occupied” sign and a dark sheet as a curtain, it resembles a bathroom stall. The inside features a tissue box, blankets, pillows, cushions, houseplants, candles, fairy lights, and an anonymous “What Makes Me Cry” journal. This installation was observed as popular with students, with a wait line at times and social media appearances at others.

A couple weeks afterwards, another pop-up installation appeared in the lobby of the SFB—sharing similarities with Stuckeman’s Secret Spots Phase I—with the prompt, “What makes you upset?” Although I would later discover this was the thesis work of a close peer, with whom in-depth critiques of studio culture are shared, the reoccurrence and willing commentary of participating students reaffirms the desire for the outlined design objectives. In similar fashion, I observed a few more guerilla-style, hand-written notes posted on the promotional bulletin boards typically only used for academic purposes—this reminded me of an innocuous

version of the broken window theory, where once someone breaks a “rule”, others feel more comfortable doing so as well. In this case, the courage to claim ownership of public space is contagious!



**Figure 23: The Designated Stall (Phase II Installation)**

The second reacts to the overwhelming number of students who have chosen the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor bathroom—majority in the 2<sup>nd</sup> stall—as their routine bowel movement spot. Street signs, for humorous effect, delivered the message, “Designated Pooping Stall,” and were hung on the 2<sup>nd</sup> stall doors of the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor bathrooms. I also fixed to the back of these signs the according prompts from Phase I for context and reference. Exemplifying observational comedy (a type of humor frequently seen in stand-up comedy that comments on rarely discussed common knowledge), this installation also reveals the commonplace of everyday habits. In a culture of unyielding labor, this type of generous frivolity serves as a point of relief.

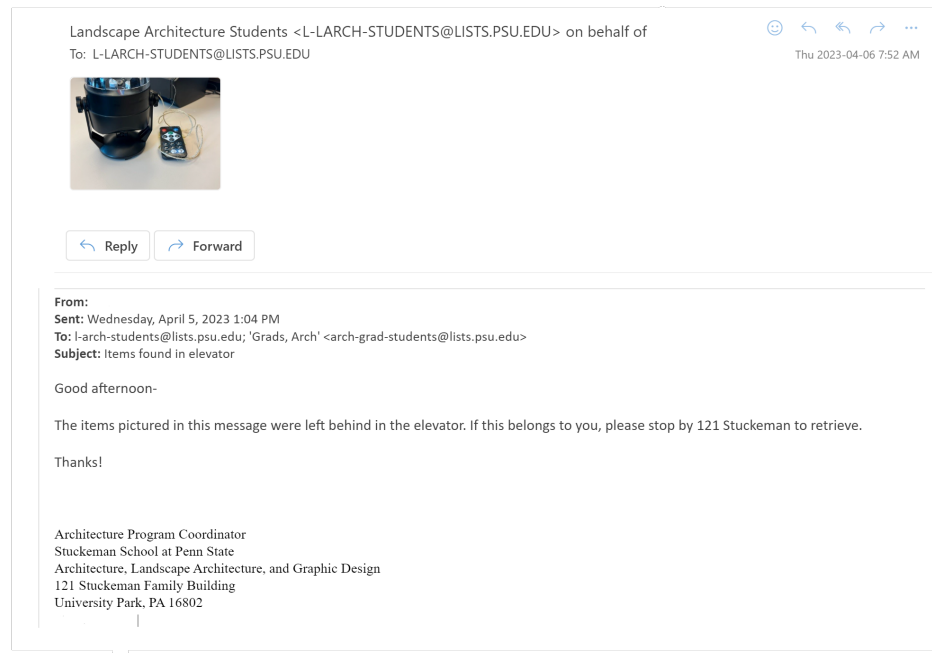




**Figure 24: The Dance Party Elevator (Phase II Installation)**

The last intervention transforms an elevator (one of the few “public” areas of the SFB) into a private dance party, with music from a Bluetooth speaker, disco lights, black light, and fluorescent decoration. It aimed to reveal the endless possibilities of even a small space in a transgressive and playful manner. In the spirit of “ask forgiveness, not permission,”—but not placing burdens on maintenance staff—this installation was set up during the night (after the cleaning crew finished) with the intent of remaining active for one workday and being dismantled before their return the following day. Unfortunately, it was taken down before the day began without warning. The building administration mass emailed the following message the day after:





**Figure 25: Email of Dismantled Intervention**

This urged me to speculate about similar problems that might arise for implementation in public space, although I could only think of fire hazards, egress obstruction, or other related regulations. It might occur less frequently in public space due to the true publicness of the place and the absence of constant administrative scrutiny and/or security. Even without concrete answers, this reaction to the intervention suggests unspoken rules in shared spaces, or could be a testament to the interpretation of the elevator as a “public space”.

## Chapter 8

### Reflections

During Phase I of Stuckeman's Secret Spots, it felt heartwarming to witness the willingness—and excitement—of students to contribute and publicly (but anonymously) share their thoughts. I learned that with the novelty of such installations, promotional activity via word of mouth was likely more effective than printed advertisements. Although, I do wonder if that would differ if the advertisements were created to appeal to the individual as a curiosity lure (say, a note slipped on a desk, or post-it notes on the backs of bathroom stalls). It was also surprising to see students revisiting the installation to have written conversations—humorous banter—with other unidentifiable students. The cloak of anonymity in public space plays a juxtaposed role in opportunities for self-expression.

During Phase II, I must admit I felt rather discouraged that the Dance Party Elevator didn't survive to be a shared experience, which painted a greyer lens on other installations set up during the same period. However, I am glad to have witnessed a hiccup—with no legal consequences, might I add—that grounds me in real-world practice! Because of this bias, I was surprised at the popularity of the Crying Fort, even though the gesture reacted to student needs. Most people, to my knowledge, didn't even use it for crying: they used it as a quiet getaway—a moment of relief found *inside* the Spectacle, embraced for its observational comedy.

Needless to say, it was a thrilling process that I desire to imitate later in my career. In recognizing the contrast between this approach to the built environment and the ways in which the program educates us, I (again) began to worry as I couldn't clearly see myself content in the industry. But in revisiting this lengthy, exhilarating thesis, I came to the reaffirmation that this

revolved around the built environment. Phase I—public data collection—was art, a reflection of the world as it is today. And Phase II was design: a reaction, a statement of how the world ought to be. I am eternally grateful to my professor, Peter Aeschbacher, who, in my early academic career explained the difference between art and design, although it would take me more than a year to wrap my head around its meaning.

In the future, I aspire to continue this vein of design, but perhaps complementary to learning industry skills; I recognize that visionary approaches also require practical grounding and execution. Nonetheless, time is a friend in a world where I can immerse and express myself in new, exciting microcultures. Wherever the universe takes me in this relentless machine of a world, there will be space and need for playful transgression, for ludic antagonism.

## Appendix

### Glossary

Actor Network Theory – “a change of metaphors to describe essences: instead of surfaces one gets filaments...[M]odern societies cannot be described without recognizing them as having a fibrous, thread-like, wiry, stringy, ropy, capillary character that is never captured by the notions of levels, layers, territories, spheres, categories, structure, systems” (Latour, 1990, p.2).

Advocacy Planning – “represents a departure from scientific, objective, or rational planning, which was the dominant paradigm of the post–World War II era. It is premised upon the inclusion of the different interests involved in the planning process itself” (Feld & Pollak, 2010, p.2).

Construction of Situations – “the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality” (Debord, 2006 translation).

Everyday Urbanism – “a guide to investigating the “as-found” character of the city [identified by]...a rich and complex public realm created by the multiplicities of daily experience– trips to supermarkets, the commute to work, journeys that included wide boulevards and mini-malls, luxurious stores and street vendors, manicured lawns and dilapidated public parks” (Craghead, 2013).

Functionalism – “Functionalism in the philosophy of mind is the doctrine that what makes something a mental state of a particular type does not depend on its internal constitution, but rather on the way it functions, or the role it plays, in the system of which it is a part” (Levin, 2018).

Generous Urbanism – “the creation of public situations between strangers that produce a new cultural value, without commercial transaction.” (Hou, 2010, p.51)

Homo Ludens – “a study of the play element in culture...[suggesting that] the instinct for play as the central element in human culture and examined the role of play in law, war, science, poetry, philosophy, and art” (Play and Playground Encyclopedia , 2022).

Ladder of Citizen Participation – “Arnstein's ladder is a model for understanding how the degree of citizen participation in government can affect public perceptions of legitimacy, authority and good governance” (Kusi, 2022).

Psychogeography – “the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals” (Debord, 1955, p.23).

Right to the City – “a call to action to reclaim the city as a to-created space — a place for life detached from the growing effects that commodification and capitalism have had over social

interaction and the rise of spatial inequalities in worldwide cities throughout the last two centuries” (theienzo, 2019).

Surrealism – “the principles, ideals, or practice of producing fantastic or incongruous imagery or effects in art, literature, film, or theater by means of unnatural or irrational juxtapositions and combinations” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Tactical Urbanism – “An approach to neighborhood building and activation using short-term, low-cost and scalable interventions and policies.” (Garcia & Lyndon, 2015, p.2)

Unitary Urbanism – “opposed to the temporal fixation of cities, [leading] instead to the advocacy of a permanent transformation, an accelerated movement of the abandonment and reconstruction of the city in temporal and at times spatial terms” (Chardonnet, 2003).

Urban Acupuncture – “a design tactic promoting urban regeneration at a local level, supporting the idea that interventions in public space don’t need to be ample and expensive to have a transformative impact” (Cutieru, 2020).

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## ACADEMIC VITA

*Anne Lai*

### Education

Schreyer Honors College, at The Pennsylvania State University *Graduation: Aug 2023*  
Bachelor of Landscape Architecture (B.L.A.)  
Royal Conservatory of Music (Toronto) *2017-2019*  
Associate Diploma in Piano Performance

### Work Experience

Penn State Teaching Assistant | Design II: Spatial Design *Jan 2023 – May 2023*  
-Guided core design studio for cohort of over 50 students  
  
Landscape Architecture Intern | Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates Inc. *Summer, 2021, 2022*  
-Aided submittal of Toronto's Port Lands Flood Protection (PLFP) Issue For Construction (IFC) drawings  
-Conducted site planting, materials, and furnishing inventories  
  
Penn State Research Assistant | Williamsburg Lower Trail Study *Jan 2022 – May 2021*  
-Produced masterplan guidebook for developers, stakeholders, future studio classes  
  
Penn State Research Assistant | Human Health in the Chesapeake Bay *Aug 2021 – Dec 2021*  
-Collected, consolidated NHGIS and additional biophysical datasets for GIS processing  
  
Penn State Research Assistant | Racial Equity, Social Justice, and the Arts *Aug 2020 - May 2021*  
-Developed Virtual Transformational Leadership Development Experience  
-Guided 5-month research study on role of arts and AI in engaged scholarship

### Achievements and Awards

American Society of Landscape Architects Honor Award (PA-DE Chapter) *2023*  
Departmental Excellence in the Study of Landscape Architecture *2020, '21, '23*  
Departmental Excellence in Planting Design, Materials, Professional Practice *2022*  
PSU College of Arts & Architecture Alumni Society Scholarship *2022*  
Design Achievement Valley Family Scholarship *2022*  
The Phi Beta Kappa Society - Top 5% of graduating class, foreign language education *2022-*  
Brian Orland Award for Excellence in Geospatial Analysis and Design *2021*  
PSU College of Arts & Architecture Talent Scholarship *2019*  
Schreyer Honors College Academic Scholarship *2019*

### Cocurricular Involvement

University Park Undergraduate Association, Dept. of Sustainability *May 2020 – Sep 2021*  
-Served as Director of Sustainable Waste Management  
-Authored 3 pieces of zero-waste legislation to advance holistic approaches to waste crisis  
-Challenged structural issues through collaborative advocacy and networking  
Research at the PSU's Sustainability Institute *May 2020 – Dec 2020*  
-Orchestrated campus-wide survey on pro-environmental behaviors  
-Analyzed 35 behaviors using Impact-Probability Matrix to advance advocacy of existing environmental advocacy groups