‘Architecture of play’ dances across streets and structures of Rochester

To clarify, this isn’t a piece on the Strong National Museum of Play—at least not completely. Last week I hosted the American Institute of Architects Annual Meeting in Downtown Rochester. This was the first meeting held downtown in over a decade and yielded the largest attendance ever for the Rochester Chapter. The event highlighted the huge success of the organization’s Centennial Celebration, which featured Architecture Sculpture Installation at Midtown Commons as well as the Architecture Fashion Show that kicked off and head-lined the Friday night show at Fashion Week.

These initiatives, while not directly architectural in nature, showcased the talent and veracity of architectural designers outside of their traditional brick and mortar realm. Both massive undertakings were first of their kind for the organization as well as the city. However, it was another first-of-its-kind feature that stole the show that day. The feature presentation—a panel discussion that included a diverse group of speakers—spoke on a multitude of design-related issues relative to our city. The most unusual and surprising element to come out of that discussion was the importance and impact of “play” on our built environment.

By definition, play means to engage in activity for enjoyment and recreation rather than a serious or practical purpose. As professionals, the word play can easily be thought of as exclusively a children’s activity, whereas play in the context of adults conjures activity, whereas play in the context of adults conjures

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to echo that sentiment. At its core, the undulating landscape of organic shapes and features is designed intentionally for active play and use for all. For Dunwoody, the most exciting aspect of the skate park design is its potential to attract people from all backgrounds and neighborhoods. Active, accessible and interactive—a public destination for all to play.

Fellow panelist Kate Mariner, a cultural anthropologist with the University of Rochester studying placemaking in historically segregated areas of the city, agrees. “Play does not discriminate…. play includes all ages and races.”

Mariner believes that Rochester’s investment in play-driven design creates spaces that are inclusive and compassionate and above all form connections. Playful design can offer more than iconic buildings and exciting city streets. It can produce positive affect on people’s moods, influence our mood, and change our behavior. Bond states “...visual complexity of...environment acts as a kind of mental balm.” Playful facades coupled with architectural variety have been shown to encourage congregation in urban areas. Something developers are noticing and investing in.

“Necessity may be the mother of invention, but play is certainly the father.”

—creativity expert Roger von Oech

Play does not fit easily into one defining category. It isn’t limited by age or demographic. The idea of play extends beyond the simple notion of childlike fun. As cities and companies constantly search for a winning idea, play can be the bold statement for what we mean when we want to change the environment...to more ‘soft, programmable’ thinking, he believes, can lead to more ‘soft, programmable’ spaces within the city. By this he means designing around the idea of exploration --- giving users the ability to self-program the space, truly making it their own.

Another city endeavor, the Roc City Skate Park, appears to echo that sentiment. At its core, the undulating landscape of organic shapes and features is designed intentionally for active play and use for all. For Dunwoody, the most exciting aspect of the skate park design is its potential to attract people from all backgrounds and neighborhoods. Active, accessible and interactive—a public destination for all to play.

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