

'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 the 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 versatility 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 wastefulness and frivolity. As a designer, play or 'playing' with an idea is integral to the creative process of discovery. Play was a central element to the creation of AIA Rochester's sculptures and fashion pieces.

Yet play can be so much more than that. The Strong Museum has built a national reputation focused on play and allowed their architecture to be representative of that. The iconic colorful angled blocks, the organic whimsical nature



ARCHITECTURALLY SPEAKING

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of the butterfly exhibit and main hall do more than suggest what happens inside. The design is modern, bold and unapologetic and yet it is one of the most beloved structures in our region and beyond. It is as exciting on the outside as it is on the inside. Currently under construction, the expansion of the museum promises to continue its tradition of exciting architecture. The design as depicted in the renderings show breathtaking forms and spaces, blending playfulness and sophistication. It's an architecture that excites. It's creative and different, not practical or serious—truly playful.

Of course, the Strong isn't the only local institution to invest in the idea of play as a design strategy. The city of Rochester also seems to be banking on a city of play.

Kevin Kelley, Rochester's associate city planner who worked on the recently completed 2034 City Comprehensive Plan says the word play is mentioned several hundred times in the document. By comparison, the previous Comprehensive Plan “...only mentioned it twice.” Already in action, the city recently celebrated the opening of the Downtown Play Walk. According to the city, the play walk is a playful sidewalk trail along Chestnut and Court Streets connecting the Strong Museum to the Central Library. Sprinkled along the corridor are games, activities, musical instruments and art.

“Play is critical for the health and development of all children's minds and bodies,” said Jenn Beideman, advocacy manager for Common Ground Health. “Places like the play walk allow for every day spaces to be turned into moments of wonder and learning that any kid or family can enjoy at any time.”

The corridor employs similar

design strategies as the Strong. Colorful, random and engaging—nearly impossible to ignore. This small project injects a level of vibrancy onto our city streets that go beyond the “off the shelf” streetscape elements. For Kelley, injecting play into public spaces creates “...whimsy, surprise and unexpected experiences.” The corridor appears to truly be built for enjoyment and engagement—not serious or practical at all. Perfect.

Shawn Dunwoody who worked closely on Play Walk, was among the panelists at the AIA annual meeting. Dunwoody sees play influencing design so that it can adapt and grow with its environment. This 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.

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 also has the ability to influence our mood and change our behaviors. A 2017 article by Michael Bond published by the BBC explored the hidden ways that architecture affects how we

feel. Social scientists and researchers have begun to study the effects of city living on humans as we become increasingly urbanized yet socially isolated. One such researcher, Collin Ellard, examines the psychological impact of design at the University of Waterloo in Canada. One of his most consistent findings is that people are strongly affected by building facades. Ellard's findings state that facades that are more complex and interesting have a strong, positive affect on people's mood. Alternatively, simple and monotonous facades induce a negative behavioral effect. The basis of these findings resides in our inherent physiological connections to nature and its calming effect on our mood. Bond states “...visual complexity of...environments 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 games or recreation. It can be a strategy or a mission. Play can be the basis of beautiful buildings or influence how we feel walking down the street. As cities and companies constantly search for a winning edge—could play be the differentiator? For architecture, play can be the bold statement for how we create a uniqueness in a sea of “sameness.” If Rochester is truly becoming a city of play, can its architecture be emblematic of that? Following up on a year of architectural celebration, its apparent Rochester's designers are game.

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