Playful Perspectives and Everyday Spaces: Imagining a Bus Stop as an Intergenerational Contact Zone

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This chapter looks at the Intergenerational Contact Zone (ICZ) framework as a way to not only transform spaces, but also to enhance the human processes of (re)creating those spaces. These processes include chances to get caught up in enchanting visions, to experiment with risky ideas, and even to make mistakes that help us reflect and recalibrate (Akama, Pink, & Sumartojo, 2018).

Collaboration and inclusion in ICZ design provides a chance to try to see the world from the point of view of a person of a different age, but not only to gain a kind of knowledge about that person's limitations (as in the case of wearing an "age simulation suit", e.g. Kullman, 2016), but also about their capabilities; not according to fixed assumptions about what generations are, but also about how generations could be. ICZ can teach us that taking perspective also means playing with perspective.

What do the built environments we move through feel like to a seven-year-old child or an 87-year-old adult? What happens when these perspectives are brought together into a shared cognitive and communicative ecosystem (Hydén, 2014) like an ICZ? I suggest that ethnographic approaches may offer some insights for cultivating this multi-perspective approach.

As a cultural anthropologist specializing in ageing societies and the care of older people, I was immediately drawn to ICZ and the idea of translating notions of well-being, relationality, play, and community into real designs for living. Critics of the "ageing-in-place" model of later life point out that simply staying put does not automatically mean that one retains a healthy sense of community, as people and environments are not bounded and static (Andrews, Evans, & Wiles, 2013, for example). Connecting generations is a potentially much more complex (Hopkins & Pain, 2007), but the benefits to health and well-being are clear (Portacolone, 2015). Who wants to age-in-place all alone?

The sense of belonging and mattering that make a place feel like a community is central to the notion of "dwelling," or being-at-home-in-the-world (Ingold, 2000) such that one is capable of caring for and being cared for by others (Zigon, 2014). Yet what happens to a community's ability to dwell when different generations embody and inhabit places

differently and exert uneven influence on the work of building those places and the kinds of actions they afford? ICZ approaches suggest a solution through building new designs for living, rethinking fundamental concepts like welfare, well-being, and com-munity in ways that open up new possibilities for dwelling.

American cultural anthropologist Ruth Benedict famously remarked, "The purpose of anthropology is to make the world safe for human differences." Anthropologists take as a fundamental starting point the idea that while each individual composes their own unique world of feelings, memories, and ideas, there are nonetheless ways in which we share in each other's worlds, the same way members of a speech community share a common tongue but do not (usually) speak wholly in unison. Other gestures, like the giving and receiving of gifts, feasting, and dancing are all ways humans have developed to cultivate sustainable connections between culturally distinct communities who might otherwise ignore each other, or even come into direct conflict.

ICZ must also supply a set of norms and conventions that utilize and enhance shared experiences while minimizing the disruptive effects of cultural barriers. But how does one do this without creating something so constrictive that it is only engaging for a select few, or so boring that it fails to enhance life?

Then It Came to Me: Best to Ask the Experts

Which is why I asked my seven-year-old son, Auden, what he would do.

The day after I attended a workshop on ICZ, I told Auden about a group of people I met who wanted to come up with all the ways for grannies and grandpas and little kids and everyone to do more things together.

It was a glorious spring afternoon, the sunlight dappling the pavement with warm golden pools of light. People were brushing past each other running errands, rarely making eye contact as they went on their way. Auden and I walked past a small bus shelter. I pointed to the shelter; an older woman sat with some shopping at her feet, a teenager with leaning on the Plexiglass, thumbing her phone, some bored-looking children waited slumped against their father. Here were several generations brought into proximity by their common mode of transportation, biding their time as they waited for the weekend bus.

"What about a bus stop?" I asked. "How could we redesign a bus shelter to be an Intergenerational Contact Zone?"

Auden loved the idea. "I know what I would do," he said, building my curiosity like a good salesman. "I would make a chess set that could come out of the side, so you could just pull it out."

"Oh, so then you could just start a game with whomever is there, right?" "You don't have to play, you could just watch too. That would be cool." I encouraged Auden to think about it more, and he decided that since pieces would get lost, you could have an electronic chess set. His imagination was fired up, and he was starting to get excited about all sorts of features he would add, like holograms and audio announcements of the moves. His vision

was full of unencumbered enchantment, possibility rather than practicality, each thought leaping to the next in expansive strides. The idea that an everyday bus shelter could be fun was making him think differently about the place where he lived. I suggested the he draw the idea up (Figure):
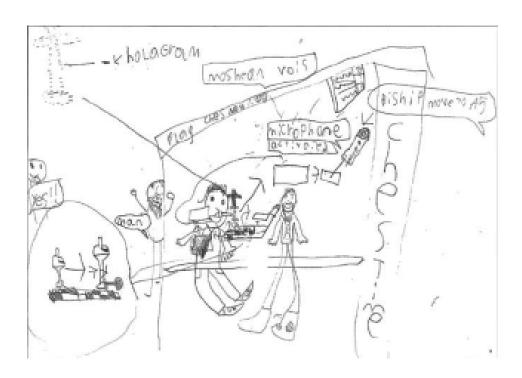

FIGURE Auden's (age 7) proposal for converting a bus stop into an Intergenerational Contact Zone

Even in this plain pencil sketch, the scene is lively and people are engaged. For people who use buses to make a regular commute, familiar faces appear every day, each attending to the grim task of waiting without interacting. But this scene was bursting with activity and more importantly, imagination, which seeped out beyond the game itself and into the spaces and relationships all around it. The crude figures were almost dancing with joy; a child who has just made a good move shouts "yes!" as his bearded opponent raises his arms in defeat. Was this their first game together or one they play every week? Were they neighbors or did they just meet? The drawing captured a moment that invited possibilities not present before.

Auden and I talked about the picture he drew and the kinds of alternate possibilities he thought it afforded. Older people and children could teach each other about new technology and ancient strategy, onlookers might become players as a bus arrives and disrupts a game, children might be more motivated to get out of the house quickly just to use the special bus shelter. Some players might even appear when they do not have a bus to catch. There were chances for encounters both subtle and dramatic. The idea that all of this

could happen at the most mundane of public spaces, places that were not explicitly marked for play, didn't seem odd at all from the point of view of a seven-year-old. Now what if some seven-year-olds and some 70-year-olds collaborated with designers and social scientists?

Chess seemed an odd choice to me when Auden came up with the idea (he was not in a chess club or anything), but it seemed like the sort of game adults and children could both enjoy. The game itself involves playing with perspective, envisioning possible futures, seeing lines of movement and counter-movement on field of imagination. In big cities in the US, I had always seen chess players of different ages and ethnicities enjoying games in public parks. Growing up on the outskirts of Detroit, these scenes always caught my eye when I visited downtown; they stuck with me because they challenged my assumptions about inner-city blight and danger. Chess wasn't something that only belonged to highly educated white adults, but it crossed borders, claimed public spaces and created relationships. Unfortunately, recent years have seen the disappearance of these scenes in the US, with increased policing of the places where children play. Even in parks with built-in chess tables, men have been arrested for occupying a park unaccompanied by children. While some have risen to defend the accused, concerned parents have called for the elimination of chess from parks. While these legal challenges to intergenerational contact reinforce a notion of public moral responsibility for safeguarding the vulnerable, the discussion must not end there; we must also consider how the separation and restriction of generational play-worlds affects the ability for communities to dwell, to explore multiple generational identities and positions as a fundamental basis for building empathy and mutual concern (Pain, 2005).

But bringing games into otherwise game-free spaces was only a small part of what I learned from talking to a seven-year-old. For him, imagining an ICZ was all-encompassing project – it was not about simply completing some discrete task, like improving measurable health outcomes – it was about the playfulness of imagining a cultural world where anyone could join in. The insight of the chess bus shelter was that any ICZ could have an element of play that calls us out of our everyday age-segregated worlds and invites us to establish new relationships, unfolding in unexpected ways but without any genuine risk. This is an insight found in the new field of gerontoludics, which explores the importance of play in old age. Gerontoludics brings together a growing body of literature that breaks down stereotypes of older people (yes, older people do play video games) and calls our attention to new design principles, like "playfulness over usefulness" (de Schutter & Vanden Abeele, 2015). This is a wonderful lesson to apply to an intergenerational/life-course rich environment.

Search through books on intergenerational place-making and "fun" is rarely mentioned except as a part of "function" or "fun-ding." Is it too much to aspire to make places not only "age-friendly" but also "age-fun"? But having fun comes natural to experts in play, both young and old. What these interlocutors remind us is the fun of becoming unstuck from socially determined categories of age, place, and well-being. By transforming a utilitarian bus shelter into a setting of play, by subverting the default attitude of "killing time" with an activity that is both engrossing and spontaneous, different generations not only tolerate each other's differences, but also thrive because of them.

The insight of the chess bus shelter may be that ICZ is about play.

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