Playing in Place: What Planners Can Learn from Play

by

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Abstract

Public participation, though an integral part of Western contemporary planning practice, is largely viewed as lacking by academics, planning practitioners, and the public at large. The obstacles to more effective planning engagement are abundant: while critique from the lenses of academics and practitioners have been focused in the realm of institutional or structural issues or lack of interest or capacity on the part of the public, this thesis argues that a greater consideration of how people understand and engage with place on an everyday level is necessary.

This thesis examines play in the context of planning and place, arguing for play as a component of public participation practice. It proposes play as a participation method that creates space for navigating different understandings of the built environment. Playful engagement with the built environment—whether in the form of manipulation of objects or in movement through space—provides a different lens through which participants view their surroundings. This thesis finds that this engagement with the built environment in this space of play allows for a reconciliation of differing understandings of place and a cultivation of agency within participants.

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# Table of Contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 7

Chapter 1: People and Place .................................................................................................................. 15

Chapter 2: Engagement in Planning ...................................................................................................... 25

Chapter 3: Play ....................................................................................................................................... 39

Chapter 4: Case Studies .......................................................................................................................... 49

  Case 1: Participatory Chinatown ........................................................................................................... 52
  Case 2: Place-It ........................................................................................................................................ 60
  Case 3: City of Play ............................................................................................................................... 67

Conclusion: Directions for Planning ..................................................................................................... 77

Works Cited .......................................................................................................................................... 85
Introduction

In Western democracies, community engagement and public participation have been fundamental to the practice of planning for many decades. However, they are also simultaneously largely recognized as areas that can be further improved upon, and subjects of ongoing critique from multiple perspectives: from the public that inhabit places affected by planning efforts, by academics studying planning from a variety of perspectives, and from practitioners themselves (Albrechts 2002, Bailey et al. 2011). Challenges to participation stem from a variety of causes: some may be rooted in inherent institutional failures or systemic injustices; others may be the result of a lack of engagement culture from community members; others may be largely due to shortcomings in processes.

In a recent survey of municipal officials, the top three topic areas in which cities solicited public engagement were zoning/land use, downtown development, and neighborhood planning (Barnes and Mann 2011). These all pertain to issues of place; however, existing processes of public participation do not address place in terms that are accessible to the public they hope to reach. They fall short in providing a context for the reconciliation of different understandings and relationships with place, instead being recognized as spaces of contention or frustration (Innes and Booher 2004, Graham and Healy 1999).

This thesis argues that there is a disconnect between the aims of community engagement and the way it is practiced. As pointed out in Albrechts’s work, a large portion of the critique of planning has focused on issues of fair process, lack of education, or apathy, with less focus placed on the qualities that make places meaningful to people (Albrechts 2002). To a large degree, critiques of public participation practices carry an assumption that the public possesses an inherent motivation and capacity to participate; shortcomings often lie with the institution or government and their process, rather than being attributed to the stakeholder’s lack of desire to engage.
This thesis examines the role of public participation in spatial planning practice, (including a look at commonly-cited obstacles and shortcomings), and broaches an alternative framing of the mandate for participation. In doing so, it proposes the need for attention to the relationship between people and place, and specifically, to the multiplicity of understandings of the environments around us.

Innes and Booher critique the typical formal avenues for public participation in the US context—public hearings, review and comment procedures, and commissions—which, they argue, fail to provide opportunities for meaningful engagement. They enumerate five purposes for participation, arguing that existing methods fall short in achieving all but the last: 1) for decision-makers to learn public preferences, 2) to incorporate local knowledge to improve decisions, 3) advancing fairness and justice, 4) establishing legitimacy, and 5) to appease legal mandates. They also introduce a sixth and seventh purpose: to build civil society, and to build community capacity (Innes and Booher 2004). This thesis aims to tie these purposes into a consideration of place—a concept that extends beyond physical location or settings, but into consideration of the various meanings that are embedded within them. The meanings embedded in place are largely subjective, and can vary from person to person; they can also present points of affective attachment to a place (Cresswell 2004, Altman and Low 1992). Picking up on threads from authors such as Graham and Healy and Manzo and Perkins, this thesis argues that consideration of these issues should be viewed as a larger component to public engagement (Graham and Healy 1999, Manzo and Perkins 2006). This thesis looks at play as one way to navigate this relationship with place. Play simultaneously offers a framework to re-think this relationship, as well as a source of techniques to enact this new means of relating to the environment.
Play and Place

This thesis examines play in the context of planning and place, arguing for play as a component of public participation practice. It proposes play as a participation method that creates space for navigating different understandings of the built environment. Playful engagement with the built environment—whether in the form of manipulation of objects or in movement through space—provides a different lens through which participants view their surroundings. This thesis provides examples of what it would look like to deploy techniques that incorporate play into planning practice.

Play is a concept that, while widely recognized and understood, is ambiguous and amorphous. Part of this ambiguity is in the establishment of limits, though this is more a concern amongst researchers than the layperson. In the public perception, play is largely viewed as a trivial, frivolous activity, with little productive outcome. However, play theorists and those who study play from the perspective of development and education recognize benefits to play: these range from creativity to social interaction to a sense of engagement.

The value of play to discussions of planning engagement lie beyond the outcomes that play elicits. Rather, it is the implicit qualities of play, and the experience of the player, that are worth taking a closer look at. Play is a medium through which people begin to understand the world around them differently. It enables people to re-interpret their surroundings by introducing alternative meanings and mechanics with place.

Methodology

This thesis aimed to address the question of how play could be used to address shortcomings and obstacles in planning engagement. It was originally formulated in response to both anecdotal accounts and personal observations of shortcomings in existing planning engagement processes: in
particular, of participants being cast as non-representative of the wider demographics of their communities, and the forums of participation themselves being largely characterized by antagonism. This thesis hypothesized that play could be incorporated into planning participation in order to make engagement more accessible and appealing for members of the wider public.

Largely an exploratory project into the overlap between planning and play, this thesis draws on existing literature between seemingly disparate fields. It is further informed by semi-structured interviews with planning practitioners, as well as observations and informal conversations with planning professionals. Practitioners were asked about participation methods currently employed by their municipalities or organizations, as well as goals, perceived shortcomings, and challenges.

Case research was done on three different methods that brought together play and engagement with the built environment. These cases were chosen to illustrate a range of approaches; they are not the only examples of such an overlap, but instead represent a diversity of ways of framing engagement. While two of the methods have been applied to planning processes, another offers a different interpretation of what engagement could look like.

**Roadmap**

This thesis begins with a brief look at the concept of place, and presents a view of place as something that is not fixed or singular, but something constantly shaped and reshaped by individuals, culture, and society. Though the literature on place is much more expansive than could be covered in the scope of this thesis, it is worth engaging with it in order to begin to understand the complexities and multiplicities of place. Taking this concept of place, this chapter examines the notion of place...
attachment, and how different attachments can be seen in how we interact with our environments. As will be noted in this chapter and the chapter to follow, these sometimes-disparate understandings of the built environment come into conflict with and within the formal channels of engagement that are often available to reconcile them.

The next chapter will examine the existing state of community engagement and public participation in city planning literature, as well as findings from conversations with professional planners who employ community engagement processes. It aims to frame the current state of planning engagement, and discuss some of the challenges that arise. Though these certainly vary from place to place and project to project, there are some commonalities. This chapter will look toward the development of participation and engagement as areas of focus nested within the larger umbrella of planning. This thesis argues for the need for engagement processes to be reconciled with the multiplicity that is inherent to the nature of place.

Building on this background, the next chapter takes a deeper look at play, and applies it as a lens to examine engagement within planning practice. While the connection between play and community engagement may seem to be a loose one, this chapter argues that there is a nexus between what play is and what planners desire engagement to be. It will make the case that play is a part of the way we interact with our own communities, In particular, certain qualities of play—such as its ability to include, its ability to engage, and its ability to foster social connectedness—are qualities that are beneficial to the outcomes that community engagement processes hope to foster. This chapter will look to existing knowledge and theory on play, with an eye toward bringing it into conversation with the previous chapter.

The final chapter will present three cases of work in which
play can be integrated into planning processes. These include the Boston Asian Community Development Corporation's Participatory Chinatown platform, James Rojas's Place-It workshops, and City of Play, a project led by Adam Nelson in Pittsburgh, PA. These examples demonstrate a range of ways in which play is used to mediate the way communities think about, interact with, and shape spaces. They approach the notion of engagement with place differently, and achieve different ends. However, they all contribute to making planning—in a larger sense—more accessible to the public.
When we look at the world, as a world of places we see different things. We see attachments and connections between people and place. We see worlds of meaning and experience. Sometimes this way of seeing can seem to be an act of resistance against a rationalization of the world, a way of seeing that has more space than place. (Cresswell 2004)
The field of planning is largely concerned with the shaping of place. As such, critique of planning practice should necessarily bring into conversation the relationships between these three poles: planners, people, and place. Each of these poles is indicative of something larger: planners are the face of institutions of planning; people bring their experiences, values, and unique characteristics to their experience of the built environment; and places are not just physical entities, but encompass a range of embedded meanings. Critiques of planning engagement have often focused on planning institutions and their relationship between planners and the public, and been entrenched in a dialectic of imbalance of power and lack of equity. Discussion of public participation and processes thereof have largely become divorced from the qualities that make communities and places meaningful to those that live, work, and play within them.

This chapter examines the notion of place in order to bring it into dialogue with public participation practice. Stemming largely from the field of geography, the concept of place is a multi-faceted concept that extends beyond physical location. In discussing this, this chapter will also draw on literature on the concept of place attachment, a topic largely rooted within the realm of environmental psychology, but with minimal crossover to planning. This thesis argues that the relative absence of place in participation represents a significant shortcoming in efforts to cultivate a more meaningful sense of engagement with communities, and proposes play as a means of beginning to bridge this disconnect. It will make the case for ludic methods of engaging place that recognize and navigate its multiplicities.

What is Place?

In the field of geography, place is a concept that extends beyond mere physical location. Places are more than points
on a map; rather, places carry meaning. Place is also the lens through which we interpret our surroundings; Cresswell notes, “place is not just a thing in the world but a way of understanding the world” (Cresswell 2004, p 11). Places are differentiated from “spaces,” which are perhaps better defined by what they lack. While places contain meaning, space is conceived as the void within which places exist.

However, the concept of place is quite nuanced; entire volumes can be written on place and related concepts. For instance, in citing Relph, Cresswell notes that places can be without a fixed location; quoting Pred, they are always “becoming,” always in a dynamic state; citing Harvey and others, they are constantly shaped—not just physically, but in meaning as well—by global flows and movements (Cresswell 2004).

The lens of place is significant to the practice of planning, which is largely concerned with the shaping of and interactions with the built environment. We understand the city as a collection of places in space—these places make up our neighborhoods and our daily routines. This humanistic approach to place finds the starkest overlap with contemporary planning practice in the realm of placemaking. The Project for Public Spaces defines placemaking as the collective shaping of the public realm, in a multi-disciplinary approach to place that looks beyond the physical environment to ways it is used and understood. It is largely oriented toward the shaping of public spaces, with attention to the qualities that make places attractive or appealing to people. It aims to integrate the design of places with attention to factors that draw people to specific types of places, whether it be types of activity or specific features (PPS 2014).

Places can embody multiple meanings. This is perhaps better understood on a societal level: the same place can represent different things to different people. As Hayden notes, the same places can have different meanings to different people;
meanings behind place are socially constructed, and can be embedded with many different narratives that shape their perception (Hayden 1997). These different meanings can stem from personal values, differing worldviews, one’s experiences, historical narratives, or a combination of all of these: the same physical space can mean drastically different things to different people. These immeasurable qualities that shape meaning in turn affect how we interact with the places around us.

Despite this stance of creating place communally, Relph argues that cultivation of sense of place largely lies with the individual. Writes Relph, “places have to be made largely through the involvement and commitment of the people who live and work in them; places have to be made from the inside out” (Relph 1993, p. 34). Sense of place can be enacted—it is not simply the physical characteristics of a place, but the means through which we interact with a place that cultivate a sense of place, thus prescribing it meaning. Perception of meaning in place—and subsequently, attachment to place—is not something that is solely received or imparted, and beyond the realm of the individual, but can be actively developed.

Attachment to Place

Another means of understanding sense of place is through the lens of place attachment. The phenomenon of place attachment—defined by Altman and Low as an affective bond between people and places—is complex (Low and Altman 1992). Place attachment differs from person to person; the triggers of this attachment are variable, as is the degree to which they are expressed.

Attachment to place is not absent the meanings embedded in place as well; as Low and Altman state, “places are ... repositories and contexts within which interpersonal, community, and cultural relationships occur, and it is to those social relationships, not just to place qua place, to which people
are attached” (Low and Altman 1992, p. 7). Riley echoes this, noting that “attachment comes from people and experience, the landscape is the setting. We remember landscapes where good things happen to us. The landscape is part of the experience, it can become a symbol for that experience, but it is not the primary element” (Riley 1992, p. 19).

Hummon provides five typologies of relationships to place: uncommitted placenessness, relativity, place alienation, everyday rootedness, and ideological rootedness—the latter two of which convey strong senses of attachment. Everyday attachment, in Hummon’s view, is characterized by a sense of attachment that is second nature—it is a passive attachment. This is in contrast to those who express ideological attachment to place: their attachment to a place is explicit, a conscious part of their identity, rather than something that is a characteristic of their location. Though both exhibit some sense of attachment, the former is characterized as more socially passive than the latter (Hummon 1992). These typologies were further studied by Lewicka, noting that there were also differences in factors like social capital and levels of trust (Lewicka 2011a).

Lepofsky and Fraser present a dichotomous view of citizenship that serves as a parallel framework to the differences Hummon notes in types of rootedness. According to Lepofsky and Fraser, citizenship can be understood in two ways: the one that is most widely held, is that of citizenship as something that is granted, as in official national citizenship. The other is a citizenship that is enacted: it is this citizenship, they argue, that manifests in performative acts, akin to the behavior of those characterized by “ideological” rootedness (Lepofsky and Fraser 2003).

The question of how place attachment develops is also worth looking into. Morgan applies a developmental attachment model to the cultivation of place attachment in childhood interactions with place; in this model, positive interactions
with place produce a sense of security and identity that evokes attachment to these places, similar to—and in cyclical relationship with—how a child develops an attachment to a parent (Morgan 2010). Though Morgan qualifies his findings that this model is conjectural, it is informative in providing a hypothesis into the mechanics of how place attachment is cultivated. Interestingly, the role of exploratory play and place-play is key to Morgan’s model as the mode of interaction with place; it is this playful interaction with place, repeated over and over, that establishes the positive associations with place in a child.

While Morgan’s model looked specifically at cultivation of attachment in children, it seems that a parallel can be drawn between the enacting of attachment—what Lepofsky and Fraser call citizenship—and the nature of interaction that Morgan cites. Marcus notes the significance in the exercise of control in places. In summarizing observations from case studies of adults reflecting on childhood and adolescent places, she notes, “it seems clear that control over some portion of the physical environment is a critical component of positive self-identity” (Marcus 1992, 88).

A recent review of place attachment literature did not find a direct correlation between place attachment and engagement in place-based affairs; however, numerous articles noted that connections between place attachment and place-related activity were often mediated by other factors, such as social trust or neighborhood ties (Lewicka 2011b). Thus, the mere cultivation of place attachment does not have a causal relationship with higher levels of community engagement; rather, the literature suggests there is likely a more complicated relationship between the two.

Mihaylov and Perkins provide a disruption-response framework describing the influence of place attachment on responses to the threat of environmental disruption. Their
model “begins with an environmental disruption that elicits a response through a dynamic interpretive process influenced by various place-related cognitions, affects, and behaviors on the individual and community level. Residents assess the environmental change by the disruption it might cause to their experiences in the place ... Their attitude toward the changes depends on their [place attachment]” (Mihaylov and Perkins 2014, p. 72). The interpretive process is influenced by factors such as communal place definition and individual place identity, and the perception of threat to each of those that the disruption represents (Mihaylov and Perkins 2014).

Indeed, there is abundant literature on the disruption of place, and the impact on place attachment, particularly through the lens of recollection of past places and subsequent readjustment to new places. This disruption sometimes stems from forces outside of one’s control, such as disaster or eviction, or simply residential mobility (Brown and Perkins, 1992; Gustafson 2014; Lewicka 2014). As such, a framework of disruption through the lens of a threat makes sense. However, this thesis will propose that the mechanics of this framework can also be seen not just through a disruption that threatens loss, but a positively-framed disruption as well. In particular, this thesis will pose that the creation of a play-space can be construed as a different type of displacement—one that is recognized by participants as temporary, and that does not represent loss—but that similarly challenges people to reinterpret both communal and individual definitions of place.

Conclusion

Place is a complex topic, but one that is central to the practice of planning. Places are fraught with meaning, which in turn leads to the cultivation of attachments to place. While the mechanisms for these processes are not clearly established, they can be observed in the ways we conceive and relate to the
Responses to Environmental Disruption

Community Level Variables:

- Place Definition
- Place-Based Social Interactions (Networks, Bonding Social Capital)
- Environmental Disruption
- Interpretive Processes
- Community Response (Mobilization & Action, Adaptation, or Acceptance)

Individual Level Variables:

- Cognition
- Affect/Emotion
- Behaviors

Figure 1.1 Responses to Environmental Disruption Based on Community and Individual Place Attachment (Mihaylov and Perkins, 2014)
environments around us. While these meanings inform and shape our everyday interactions with place, this thesis builds on arguments that the channels in which planning engagement traditionally occur do not acknowledge this complexity of place. While channels for engagement do provide opportunities for a wide range of participants, they simultaneously erect barriers to engagement by effectively requiring technical knowledge as a prerequisite, instead of relying on more personal and experiential knowledge of place as a means of conceiving of planning issues. This thesis proposes play as a means of addressing this disconnect.

In order to do so, it is helpful first to discuss the place public participation has in planning, and the goals and obstacles that underlie it. The next chapter will explore public participation within city planning, and examine ongoing critiques and challenges facing planning participation. Public participation is fundamental the practice of planning, something that has become commonplace within the profession. The mandate to provide channels of participation came after decades of struggle, and methods of public participation in planning continues to evolve. The following chapter traces a narrative of the modern mandate for participation in the profession of planning to its mid-20th century roots. In doing so, it argues for greater attention to place attachment as an objective of inclusive planning practice, and as a component of meaningful engagement. Though a lesser part of the critiques than those that have been brought against the practice of planning, it is an important one to consider if planners are to take the mandate to serve the public interest to heart.
Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody. (Jacobs 1961)
Engagement in Planning

This chapter begins with a look toward the evolution of public participation as a part of planning process, and its situation within planning practice in the Western context. While soliciting community input and providing channels for public participation are standard practice in contemporary planning, this was not always the case. This chapter reviews the emergence and evolution of the role of the public in planning processes. Tracing this thread, it will explore other critiques of participation that are relevant to this day. Particular attention will be paid to the work and influence of Jane Jacobs, whose critique of mid-20th century planning serves to represent a pivotal point in the evolution of the field.

Despite the fundamental role that participation now occupies—it is often mandated as a part of public planning process—it is still the subject of a range of critiques. Much of the ongoing critique of participation has been focused on issues of institutional injustice, discrepancies of power, and fair and just processes, with inquiry into its efficacy and questions into what the actual ends of participation are intended to be. While these critiques are certainly relevant, and challenge the profession to continually evaluate its approach to participation, this thesis aims to bring another element into the dialogue of engagement: the relative lack of attention to the subjective experience of place.

Public Participation: An Overview

Rowe and Frewer define public participation as “the practice of consulting and involving members of the public in the agenda-setting, decision-making, and policy-forming activities of organizations or institutions responsible for policy development” (Rowe and Frewer 2004, p512). In the Western context, public participation is a fundamental aspect of the contemporary field of planning. These values likewise inform the professional practice of planning in the Western context.
For instance, the AICP Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct states:

Our primary obligation is to serve the public interest and we, therefore, owe our allegiance to a conscientiously attained concept of the public interest that is formulated through continuous and open debate. We shall achieve high standards of professional integrity, proficiency, and knowledge. To comply with our obligation to the public, we aspire to the following principles:

... 

e) We shall give people the opportunity to have a meaningful impact on the development of plans and programs that may affect them. Participation should be broad enough to include those who lack formal organization or influence.

f) We shall seek social justice by working to expand choice and opportunity for all persons, recognizing a special responsibility to plan for the needs of the disadvantaged and to promote racial and economic integration. We shall urge the alteration of policies, institutions, and decisions that oppose such needs.

... 

h) We shall deal fairly with all participants in the planning process. Those of us who are public officials or employees shall also deal evenhandedly with all planning process participants. (AICP 2009)

However, this was not always the case: contemporary opportunities for public participation in planning were the result of hard-fought battles and constant evolution. The movement to gain access to meaningful channels of participation—and to have community voices truly heard—were tied to resistance to urban renewal in many American cities (Shipley and Utz 2012).

As stated previously, Jane Jacobs's work is viewed as a fundamental part of the Western planning canon. In her magnum opus The Death and Life of Great American Cities, Jacobs critiqued the rationalist approach to urban renewal that takes place in the mid-20th century United States, citing a disconnect between planners in their downtown offices and the on-the-ground realities of the communities that they deemed in need of clearance. She argue that many of the intrinsic qualities of neighborhoods are lost on planners, that the overreliance on reductionist statistics blinded planners to the fact that the communities they deemed “blighted” or “slums” were in fact
thriving communities (Jacobs 1961).

While Jacobs’s work was not the only—or even the first—highlighting the need for participation, it captured and popularized the frustrations of a generation of advocates. Her work, and those of her contemporaries like Davidoff and Forester, aimed to reframe planning practice and to correct the perceived injustices of 20th century planning regimes (Shipley and Utz 2012). It also became a foundational text for the contemporary field of planning as it is; a large part of this critique is rooted in discussions of justice and equity, and of the rights of communities to have a voice in the shaping of their community’s fate.

Subsequent critiques of planning participation largely continued to focus on these institutional shortcomings. These include criticisms range from tokenism (Arnstein 1969), to over-bureaucratization (Susskind and Cruikshank 2006), to conflict styles amongst inter-agency collaboration (Innes and Booher 2007). These critiques and commentaries have led to some meaningful reform and evolution of participation and participatory processes, ranging from mandates to provide forums for engagement (Brody et al. 2003) to alternative approaches to soliciting input, such as community design or participatory design practices (Toker 2007, Sanoff 2000).

The ways planners approach participation is dynamic and constantly evolving. As Rowe and Frewer describe, the ideological framework from which planning is practiced has shifted over the course of the 20th century, and with it, so too have the approaches to and value placed on engagement (Rowe and Frewer 2004). Advances in technology provide new media through which stakeholders can be informed and engaged. However, it is widely acknowledged that planning practice falls short of this ideal. In the previously-cited survey of municipal officials, 95% of respondents reported that their city valued engagement; at the same time, nearly half the respondents noted
that “neither municipal officials nor residents have the skills, training and experience to carry out and participate in effective public engagement” (Barnes and Mann 2011, p. iii). In the same survey, when asked how often engagement processes produced useful results, 53% of respondents answered “sometimes,” 8% “rarely,” and 1% “never.” When asked about obstacles and risks to greater levels of engagement, 69% cited “Public apathy and/or ambivalence” as an obstacle (also telling are the next two highest: “media not paying attention and/or is not fair an balanced” and “youth and other segments of the community are hard to reach”—issues of perception and access, which are likely related) (Barnes and Mann 2011). In a Delphi survey of planning practitioners and academics, Albrechts finds that practitioners and academics conceive of the challenges behind better public involvement differently: while practitioners cited cultural barriers like “lack of education; lack of appropriate skills; lack of confidence of ‘weak groups in their ability to provoke any change,” academics tended to focus on structural issues like “social segregation, marginalization, exclusion” (Albrechts 2002, p. 335-336).

These results bring focus to one of the assumptions of critiques on public participation: that the public is not given enough right to self-determination, and that there is an implicit desire amongst members of the public to have more control than existing channels—and institutions—allow for. Arnstein’s critique of engagement methods, for instance, implies a universal desire for community self-governance and citizen control (Arnstein 1969). Baily et al. note that this is actually shown to not necessarily be true—amongst the public as well as professionals. They attempt to quantify the difference between desired levels of engagement from the perspective of the public and from professionals, terming the disparity the “Arnstein Gap” (Bailey et al. 2011). They find that the desired level on Arnstein’s ladder for both professionals and the public hovers
Arnstein's Ladder of Participation

- Citizen Control
- Delegation
- Partnership
- Placation
- Consultation
- Informing
- Therapy
- Manipulation

Arnstein Gap

- Public
- Professionals

Desired vs. Current Level

Figures 2.1 & 2.2  Arnstein’s Ladder and Arnstein Gap [Arnstein 1969; Bailey et al. 2011]
around the range of partnership, but that both professionals and the public recognize that forums for participation fall short, with professionals believing they are doing slightly better than the public believes they are. This may even be overly optimistic, and should be taken with a grain of salt, as the “public” that Baily et al. polled were of those in attendance at public meetings, as opposed to a larger portion of the population that includes the perspectives of those not already engaged.

Davies studied this from this other perspective of the wider population. In her study, she interviews groups (such as mothers in a playgroup, members of a Parents’ Association, and a Rotaract group) in South Bedfordshire, England, looking to discover their perceptions of public participation in planning. Her findings fall into three themes: “the first is a lack of access to, and awareness of, planning processes allied to a sense of resultant inefficacy. Second, and related to the first, is a subsequent mistrust of planning, politicians and policy communities because of vested interests and a perceived lack of authority. The third refers to a lack of societal space for greater participation in a complex in demanding modern world” (Davies 2001, p 202). She suggests that these are partially related to a sense of distance between the realms of planning and policy; in part, this distance is created through the position and posture of planning process.

Davies concludes by establishing that there is a disconnect between research and rhetoric from the perceptions of planners on the problem of participation and those held by the public, stating that “first, the position [of focusing on mechanisms or process] tends to reduce participation to a technical problem of ‘giving voice’, whereas the research collected here suggests that questions of ‘access’ are intimately related to more entrenched problems of establishing authority and legitimacy. Second, it does not engage with the possibility that people might not want to participate in planning processes even given the time and
the belief that they have power. Last, the type of empowering participation rhetorically envisaged ... in planning theory is not merely about allowing people to speak, but also about dealing with the content of what they have to say” (Davies 2001, p212).

Burns (in Sanoff 2000) provides a helpful framework that sheds light on this disparity. Though focused on the community decision-making process, it also reflects the larger planning process, as suggested by the looks into perceptions of planning engagement as a larger enterprise. The categories Burns enumerates are awareness, perception, decision-making, and implementation. In contemporary practice, there is a presumption of the first two categories—awareness and perception—that may be true of some participants, but may stand as an obstacle or hindrance for others that may otherwise engage as well. However, as Davies’s study suggests, there is a need for greater emphasis on these categories. Further, it suggests not just the provision of channels for engagement, but for channels that encourage the cultivation of civic capacity and civil society, the lack of which represent obstacles to more effective planning engagement (Innes and Booher 2004, Barnes and Mann 2011).

Participation in Place

The lens of power and politics is not the only one through which we can understand shortcomings in planning engagement. Absent is another aspect of Jacobs’s critiques: that attention to the intrinsic, immeasurable qualities of place are just as important to understanding the vitality of a place and the community living in it. The everyday experience of place is the manner in which most people relate to their communities, their places, and the capacity in which they serve as experts through lived experience. In Jacobs’s critique, many of the qualities that made places worth preserving—the qualities that made cities the great places they are—were highly subjective, and outside of
the consideration of planners at the time.

Despite this body of work into the complexities of place, Graham and Healy note that planning practice has been slow to evolve alongside emerging conceptualizations of the city. “Space, distance, and the city, in effect, were reified as automatic and determinating forces directly shaping the social and economic world in some simple, linear, cause and effect way. The desired socio-spatial order of the city, and hence its associated socio-economic world, was then expressed and promoted in a master plan (comprehensive plan/development plan)” (Graham and Healy 1999, p. 625).

Graham and Healy discuss the emergence of increasing theory that points toward a multiplicity of place, and the challenges that this brings to the practice of planning (Graham and Healy 1999). “Many different notions, experiences and representations of space-time continually collide and resonate within individual places; indeed, this is the very essence of contemporary urban life. ... We must quickly throw off the idea that places can be simply, and singly, represented in plans and planning discourses” (Graham and Healy 1999, p. 629). This is likewise the case for engagement practices, which both shape how people perceive space, and the manner in which decisions about space are made. This thesis proposes that methods incorporating play as one means of addressing these multiplicities. Though not the only type of methods that can do so, as the following chapters demonstrate, the space of play creates a context that allow for members of the public to explore and re-interpret together disparate understandings of place.

Attention to the multiplicity of meanings within place and place attachment are critical to planning engagement because they mediate how we interact with our surroundings—the very surroundings that planners aim to affect, and that we want to change or preserve. However, existing participation methods do not engage with these productively; at best, they
### Burns’s Categories of Community Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Awareness</strong></td>
<td>This experience involves discovering or rediscovering the realities of a given environment or situation so that everyone who takes part in the process is speaking the same language, based on their experiences in the field in which change is proposed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perception</strong></td>
<td>This entails going from awareness of a situation to understanding it and its physical, social, cultural, and economical ramifications. It means people sharing with each other so that the understanding, objectives, and expectations of all participants become resources for planning, rather than hidden agendas that may disrupt the project at a later date.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Decision Making</strong></td>
<td>This phase concentrates on participants working from awareness and perception to a program for the situation under consideration. At this point participants create actual physical designs, based on their priorities, for professionals to use as a resource to synthesize alternative and final plans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Implementation</strong></td>
<td>Many community-based planning processes stop with awareness, perception, and decision making, often with fatal results to a project, because this ends people’s responsibilities just when they could be of most value—when the how-to, where-to, when-to, and who-will-do-it must be added to what people want and how it will look. People must stay involved, throughout the process, and take responsibility with the professionals to see that there are results.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 2.3  Burns’s Categories of Community Participation (Burns in Sanoff 2000)*
aim to limit this complexity into a language of objectivity, and at worst, lead to hostility. Channels of participation that provide limited opportunities to explore these potentially conflicting understandings of place—and perhaps more importantly, to discover common perspectives—can instead lead to engagement that is antagonistic and unproductive (Innes and Booher, 2004).

The intersection of this complexity with the relatively limited level of subjectivity in how planning practice engages with place sometimes leads to contentiousness. This is perhaps best exemplified through contestations over proposed change in places, and especially in organized opposition to planned change. The expression of this opposition outside of the context of formal planning engagement (and sometimes within) can sometimes be viewed critically—and derided—as NIMBYism (a shorthand for “Not In My Back Yard”).

Viewed through the lens of Mihaylov and Perkins’s disruption-response framework, it can be argued that actions of this nature are a response to the threat of change that diminishes or alters place—to which activists have formed an affective bond. From the critic’s perspective, of course, this would be considered a misplacement or over-zealous expression of place attachment. However, Burningham notes the widespread use of the term—and along with it, the pervasiveness of its negative connotation—ignores the complexities of the reasoning behind the positions opponents take. Instead, the invocation of NIMBYism becomes shorthand to dismiss opposition as selfish and motivated solely by self-interest (Burningham 2000). Their views are considered irrational, when in fact, the views they hold may be reached under different—but equally legitimate—rationalizations.

Indeed, in Schively’s review of literature in this area, she points to dueling perspectives as they pertain to NIMBY activists and their relationship with democratic process. Noting that NIMBY activists are charged to be a vocal minority of the population they purport to represent, and that they tend
to be older, wealthier, and highly-educated, some authors purport undue influence on—and undermining of—democratic participation for self-interest. As a counterpoint, though, she also points to perspectives that NIMBY activists are exemplifying grassroots democracy in action (Schively 2007). Smith and Marquez note the mutual distrust of experts that is present amongst both project opponents and supporters (Smith and Marquez 2000).

In some contexts, conflicts over meanings of space—whether manifest through NIMBYism or otherwise—can also be understood as conflicts in meaning or understanding of place. They can be seen as the result of differing narratives of a place, and of conflicting points of attachment and self-identity, forced into conflict with a system that forces a singular, more limited understanding of place. They also suggest the opportunity for means of engagement that are able to more effectively navigate these differing narratives.

Conclusion

This chapter reviewed the role of public participation in planning in the Western context, and the critiques that have shaped it, showing its emergence to be largely in response to the lack of ability to influence large-scale projects being imposed upon communities. In doing so, it has shown place attachment as neither a goal of nor motivating factor toward engagement. Though strengthening ties to place or building civic capacity may be alleged goals of engagement, existing channels for participation are primarily oriented toward fulfilling legal mandates or soliciting feedback for specific projects.

Legally-mandated channels for public participation are certainly an improvement over a situation in which participation was not an option. However, they are largely reliant on voluntary action or desire to participate. Open access laws and posting requirements for public meetings do just that: they ensure access, which helps to a degree; however, there is little
motivation, incentive, or attempt to attract people for whom there is no perceived reason to participate. Existing channels for engagement tend to draw those that either already have interest and capacity to engage (specifically, knowledge or expertise), or those with something at stake (for instance, those who feel threatened by a particular change). There is a presumption of skill or knowledge as a prerequisite to meaningful participation: as noted by Davies, lack of awareness or perceived effectiveness is an undercurrent amongst those who do not self-identify as involved in planning and policy participation.

Rowe and Frewer’s definition of planning participation (noted at the beginning of the chapter), though broad-reaching, frames participation as largely purpose-driven. As is reflected in this definition, forums for participation are often oriented toward specific projects, or work already underway that the public is to respond to. They also aim to reduce the multiplicity that is inherent in the way people understand place to one that treats it in an allegedly objective manner. Meanwhile, individual engagement with place—and the shaping of meaning and attachment—is ongoing, but often occurs in isolation. These chapters posed the need for more attention to place attachment as a part of both processes and critiques. Though a recognition of place was fundamental to Jacobs’s critiques of the way planners practiced, it has not been carried through as a thread in the ongoing evolution of participation processes. Existing modes of participation neither cultivate nor leverage this place attachment.

Introducing subjectivity to the largely rationalist practice of planning would understandably elicit hesitation. After all, when everybody’s meanings behind places are acknowledged, whose meaning wins out? When a multitude of values collide, whose are the most valuable, and thus, inform decisions?

The remainder of this thesis will look to the concept of play, arguing that incorporation of play into public engagement
methods can help planners begin to address some of these challenges. The next chapter provides a review of research on play, and an alternative view of how we interact with the built environment. It looks into the concept of play, and of ludic interactions with place as a means of joint meaning-finding. While it is certainly not the only means of doing so, nor is it a panacea for challenges facing the field, it does bring a different approach to conceptualizing how people engage with place, and how planners in turn can learn from play.
Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing. (Huizinga 1955)
The previous chapters presented an argument for more attention to place as a vital—but underrepresented—aspect of planning engagement. They posited a need for a different means for planners to frame the role of engaging with place, one that is based on a foundation of a recognition multiplicity of meanings embedded in place. This chapter argues for ludic interactions with the built environment as a means of addressing this multiplicity, and in a manner that is in a shared context.

In attempting to bridge the concept of play with the practice of planning, it is helpful to better understand play from the various frameworks and approaches through which it has been examined. This chapter will serve as introduction into a rich and extensive literature. Play can be looked at through an outcome-based perspective, with a focus on the benefits that arise from play, as well as through a look at the intrinsic qualities of play. This chapter aims to do both: while the former is helpful in understanding benefits of play—both generally and, as this thesis argues, to planning practice—the latter helps us understand the perceptions and experience of the player.

While at first glance, the concept of play seems at best tangentially related to planning practice (for instance, in looking at spaces for play in the public realm), this chapter will present play as a means of conceptualizing everyday interactions with the built environment, as well as a means of reconciling the multiplicity of meanings that are embedded in places. This chapter will also take a brief look at the relationship between play and place, and the physicality of play in contemporary society. This discussion necessarily begins with the playground, but as will be seen, this presents only a limited view of play that is reflective of its misconceptions. It will then expand to the larger notion of play as a universal experience, and the city as a space and medium for exploration through play.
Understanding Play

Play is a complex concept, one that evokes different sentiments and has borne a range of connotations throughout history. During colonial times, play was largely looked down upon; the adage “idle hands are the devil’s workshop” captured attitudes of children’s play at the time (Chudacoff 2007). Today, play is perhaps looked upon with less distrust, but still with a critical eye. Play—at least in a contemporary American viewpoint—is largely pigeonholed, and popularly considered to be the realm of children, suggesting frivolity. Even in the realm of sport, there is an understanding of it as separate from more “serious” endeavors; sports are largely considered hobbies or fun activities, though professional athletes and teams—and even those caught in a moment of competitiveness—may argue otherwise. Thus, we see that play is a concept that, though widely understood on an instinctive level, is quite complex.

As suggested by Huizinga, play occupies a larger role in society than is commonly conceived—even beyond the perceived positive outcomes that stem from play. This chapter will review definitions of play, as formulated by Huizinga and other theorists. It explores this expansive view of play, providing a look into some of the ways play is conceptualized. These will inform the analysis of the cases that are to follow.

Play is a multifaceted activity, one that is easy to perceive and recognize, but one that is difficult to clearly delineate the bounds of or define. It is something that we know when we see, but in talking about it as an abstraction, it is challenging to narrow down what is—and isn’t—play. For instance, we recognize sports as play, but what do we make of professional athletes for whom it is also their occupation? What do these players make of their own actions? On one hand, attempts to study the outcomes of play lead to a fundamental issue in the research of play: the challenge in identifying a definition of play that is operationally researchable (Burghardt 2011). On the other, they invite an
even more expansive question of how to begin grasp a topic that spans disciplines as diverse as communication, mathematics, mythology, and more.

Brian Sutton-Smith, a play theorist, sheds light on different framings of play, organizing them into what he terms “rhetorics of play.” In his work *The Ambiguity of Play*, Sutton-Smith provides a framework through which we can begin to understand the complexity of discussing play. He argues that the characterization of play within a particular rhetoric—for instance, a rhetoric of play as progress—does not reflect the intrinsic qualities of play so much as the larger value systems informing and surrounding the research of play.

Of the rhetorics that Sutton-Smith enumerates, perhaps the most prevalent in shaping how we conceive of play is the rhetoric of frivolity. He notes, “none of [the other rhetorics’] assertions makes much sense unless seen as a denial of the proposition that play is essentially useless” (Sutton-Smith 1997, p. 201).

Indeed, there has been a recent trend that aims to dispel the notion of play as frivolous or purposeless; particularly when these arguments are presented for a wider audience, they are framed in opposition to this perception. As stated previously, in popular contemporary thinking, play is largely set aside as largely trivial. While it connotes a sense of conviviality, it is often conceived of as having to eventually give the realm of the “serious.” However, proponents of play cite a “play deficit,” claiming that the demise of play in contemporary society contributes to anxiety and social depression (Gray 2013). Others point to the positive outcomes of play, such as health (through increased physical activity) and socialization (Milteer et al. 2012, Bekoff 2011). It has long been viewed as fundamental to child development (Gordon 2014).

Play has also taken on a utilitarian purpose, and as something that can be deployed for specific ends. For instance,
play is noted for benefits in spurring creativity in the workplace (Mainemelis and Ronson 2006). This thesis, too, arguably draws on this thread, previously framing Morgan's developmental model of place attachment through a utilitarian lens, and looking to play for its potential usefulness to the field of planning and practice of public participation.

As Sutton-Smith notes, though, there are also multiple levels of understanding play: “When the adult says play is a developmental experience, for the child it may be nothing but hide-and-seek. What the Puritan says is character-destroying gambling may be, for the player, the one satisfying experience in the week” (Sutton-Smith 1997, p. 216). In essence, while the act of play lends itself to understandings outside of play that assign functionality (or vice), intrinsically, it is still play. This duality should be applied to this examination as part of planning process as well: perceptions and arguments for its usefulness do not undermine the intrinsic qualities and experience of play, an important distinction to carry forward in examining play’s utility to planners.

Johan Huizinga, a preeminent scholar of play, describes play as “a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious’ but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings that tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress the difference from the common world by disguise or other means” (Huizinga 1955, p. 13).

Fundamental to Huizinga’s treatment of play is the emphasis on the universality of play. As indicated in the quote that opens this chapter, play predates human civilization. It is elusive in its ability to characterization or categorization: it
cannot be framed as an opposite to wisdom, nor to seriousness, nor can it likened to beauty or grace. Particularly noteworthy in his definition are the separateness of play, and of the space of play. According to Huizinga, play operates within its own boundaries, but necessarily is layered above a physical reality. These qualities will be examined further in the cases that follow in the juxtaposition of play with place in the form of a playspace.

Play in the City

Despite the universality of play, however, the manifestation of play in the built environment very much reflects popular conceptions. The built manifestation of play primarily takes the form of playgrounds; they are often pockets, set aside from the rest of the city, designated spaces for play to occur while the more “serious” city happens around them. They are a space that you enter for the purpose of play, and leave when play ends. They also are designated for a particular segment of the population; in some communities, adults are discouraged, or even explicitly prohibited from entering playgrounds unless they are accompanied by young children.

Multiple authors have traced the history of playgrounds, play spaces, and play objects, linking them to changing attitudes about play. Chudacoff provides a particularly helpful history of play contexts, and traces the shaping of spaces for play, as well as play culture at large. He applies a lens that is focused on the players themselves, in addition to the spaces that were designed for them, shaped largely by adult attitudes about play. Tracing child play culture, Chudacoff notes the transition from play in the realm of exploration of physical space toward more prescribed “play,” structured both temporally with dictated play times—as well as “play” times, such as recreational sports leagues—and materially, through toys whose use is increasingly prescribed (Chudacoff 2007). Solomon surveys European
and American playgrounds from the post-World War II era, tracing a subsequent decline in playground design toward more standardized, uniform designs in the name of safety, signaling a decline in the societal value of play (she notes that this trajectory paralleled similar indicators of devaluing of play, such as attempts to remove recess from the school day). She leaves the issue on an optimistic note, though, as recognition about the benefits of play—approaching it from an outcome-based perspective—are triggering a modest movement toward the more thoughtful and creative playground design of the past (Solomon 2005).

It is also not a large leap to draw a parallel between play and the built environment: the physical forms of our cities are reflective of societal values. As the societal value of play changed, so too did the environments for play. However, though the physical nature of the environment may be fixed, our interactions with it are not. Quentin Stevens takes a larger view in his approach of examining the city as a space for play. He examines the city—and particularly, public spaces—as collections of playful forms, in the sense that they elicit negotiation with the tension of functionality and potential. Play is aspirational, subversive, and utopian; in Stevens’s view, it simultaneously “is a product of possibility, but it is also a driver” (Stevens 2007, p196). Play—physical play—in the public realm is a reinterpretation of that space, and a means of finding and imparting meaning beyond function. It is a mode of imbuing a narrative into a place.

**Conclusion: Play as Hedonic Engagement with Place**

Many cities and places brand themselves as great places to “live, work, and play” — a cursory web search will reveal no shortage of places bearing that slogan, or some variation of it. Different cities interpret the notion of play differently: some frame it in terms of cultural offerings, while others use it to
suggest a family-friendly place to raise children.

The juxtaposition of play with these other two factors suggests that cities and places serve more than a functional role, but a hedonic one; the city is more than residences and workplaces, but also a place for play. While this may seem like an obvious point, there is a disconnect between how play spaces are incorporated into the built environment from this more encapsulating view of the city. Though the physical shape of a place falls largely within the realm of the work land use planners do, it is informed by social values that lie far beyond the scope of planning. The image of the city in the eyes of community members—and as a result, their own relationship with place—is much less fixed.

The previous chapters made a case for greater attention to place attachment as an objective of planning engagement. This chapter introduces play as a means of moving toward that end. At first glance, the link between the apparent frivolity of play and the formality of public participation may appear specious. However, it is this very nature of play that enables it to be a powerful mode of engagement. Place attachment occurs on an individual level; it is not solely driven by narratives, but also one’s personal engagement and experience in and with a place. Play allows for the re-interpretation of physical environment, which creates space for the communal reshaping of relationship with place.

This chapter provided an overview of the concept of play, not just from a popular lens, but from that of a range of disciplines. In doing so, it looked to establish links between qualities of play and engagement with place. The following section will present cases which bring together play and the built environment. As can be seen, these cases exhibit many of the descriptive qualities of play that have been discussed throughout this chapter, and create a space for an alternative mode of engagement with place that is based more on exploratory or playful approach to
understanding place. Though they are not all formal planning engagement processes, they can be incorporated into the learning that planners do about communities. They can be leveraged to allow community members to engage and shape space on an individual level, and encourage and learning and re-learning about place through affective engagement.
The previous chapters examined the state of community engagement in planning practice and provided an introduction to the concept of play. Through a review of literature, this thesis has presented an overview of public participation in planning and the challenges that arise when looking to foster greater levels of community engagement. Planners engage with communities in various capacities; however, in most contexts, engagement is largely function-driven and related to specific projects and not an ongoing process. It is relatively inattentive to matters of place, engaging with place in the context of physical location and setting, but not in the realm of subjective meanings, understandings, and attachments. To this point, this thesis has argued that, on the individual level, it is in this latter realm that our interactions with the built environment are ultimately framed.

With all of this in mind, this chapter will provide three cases that exhibit the intersection of place and play. The relationship between planning engagement and play appears at first glance to be a tenuous one. Indeed, looking to play as a source of ideas for engagement is not empirically derived. Rather, play was chosen as an area to explore perhaps because of this apparent disconnect. It is simultaneously something that few would associate with planning engagement, and yet, something that few would also fail to recognize or understand. Given the challenges that persist with regard to public participation—and the engaging, universal nature of play—a look to areas and activities further outside what is typically imagined to be the scope of planning is worthwhile.

While not based on a comprehensive survey of methods involving play, each of these cases brings with it different interpretations of what “play” means in the context of planning engagement. They are by no means the only examples of this overlap, nor are they panacea in their attempts to foster meaningful community engagement to a larger audience.
However, they are successful in illustrating a move toward bringing awareness of planning issues into consideration with everyday space. It is important to note that these cases are largely outside of the range of formal modes of engagement that typically occur; rather are represent creative means of engaging the public in discussions of the built environment, or in the case of *City of Play*, outside of the realm of formal public participation entirely.

Each case approaches the notion of engaging place differently, and represent the range of approaches that can be taken in bringing issues of place to light. Despite these differences, they share commonalities in their playful approaches to engagement. Elements of play can be seen in each: not only are they engaging and immersive activities, but they exhibit a separation from immediate reality, instead creating a space of play. They introduce an alternate set of rules and mechanics that alter how participants engage with the space of play, and with each other. They are detached from immediate objectives or profit, instead pursued for the sake of the activity itself.

Perhaps most importantly, with regard to planning engagement, they provide means for social exploration of place, the way participants move through the city, and how they interact with the built environment. They elicit—and cultivate—affective bonds with place, and raise awareness of the built environment. In doing so, they provide an opportunity for planners to meet participants and the public at large where they are: not to hope the public seeks out channels of participation, but to engage with those who are already readily engaging in these playful ways.
Case 1: Participatory Chinatown

Participatory Chinatown, a project of the Boston Asian Community Development Corporation (ACDC) and Engagement Lab at Emerson College in Boston, MA, is a game that places participants' digital character into the space of Boston's Chinatown. Deployed in May 2010, the game was a part of a master planning process for Chinatown.

Participants were assigned a character to role play; this includes being tasked to fulfill various objectives, such as finding housing within the community or finding a job. The tasks were drawn from experiences that residents or community members in the Chinatown neighborhood may encounter, and informed by—the—sometimes conflicting—goals or obstacles that reflect those faced by the community.

Participants could play as one of fifteen different characters, each with unique characteristics that were modeled on those that would be members of the community. For instance, participants could play as Mei Soohoo, who “moved to the United States 15 years ago on a family visa to help take care of her three grandchildren. She has been living with her son’s family in Quincy, but would like to move to Chinatown to gain more independence and socialize with other seniors. She is on a fixed income, so finding an affordable unit is important. She would also like to move into a building where there are other seniors so that she can live close to friends” or Derrick Borden, “a finance professional, [who] is looking to relocate to Chinatown. He recently completed his MBA at MIT, and was promoted to a new position downtown. In the past, he has lived in one-bedroom apartments, but would prefer to have an extra room to entertain his extended family, who often come to visit on the weekends” (Participatory Chinatown 2011).

Deployed on a virtual platform similar to Second Life, the game was used as a community engagement tool as a part of a larger master planning process. According to Janelle Chan,
Figure 4.1  Participatory Chinatown gameplay screen
a member of the Asian Community Development Corporation, the platform was used as a means of bringing to the forefront issues that were priorities to the community. It was also used a tool for education, which is also a part of the ACDC’s mission to inform and provide services for community members.

The process was followed by a facilitated session in which participants were invited to reflect and contribute feedback for the plan based on their experiences during the role playing simulation. By prefacing the larger discussion with this activity, the organizers were able to largely frame the conversation on the topics covered during the simulation, rather than an open-ended discussion that would risk devolving into an opportunity to simply air grievances or further specific agendas. The discussion that followed provided an opportunity for participants to debrief on the session, and to reflect on their experience moving through the community in different shoes.

*Participatory Chinatown* provides an example of bringing elements of play into the planning process. In this case, play—in the form of a game—was brought into a master planning process, and was a part of a set of tools that was used to solicit feedback and engage the Chinatown community. It was deployed specifically for this process (rather than being a method that is used in different contexts). The digital medium allows for it to be used on a larger scale, and in other contexts, though some of the benefit of engaging with the place, characters, and objectives specific to that place may be lost when it is used in other places.

The *Participatory Chinatown* digital simulation game was used as an education and capacity-building tool to illustrate the wide range of issues that fell under the scope of the master planning process. It was used to teach participants about the issues that rise largely from the shared nature of the city, and the impacts that the planning process could have in alleviating—or aggravating—those issues. Perhaps just as
The Characters

Janette Chang

A native of New York City, Janette is looking to move with her husband and two school-aged children into a new residence in Chinatown. She and her husband are both college educated and have professional jobs in the Financial District. She needs at least two bedrooms, but would love separate rooms for each of her kids and space for a home office.

Hong Yee

Hong, a recent immigrant from China, is looking for a new place to move with his wife and two daughters. For the past year, they have been living in a cramped apartment with his sister, her family, and his grandparents. Tensions are running high, so he is under a lot of pressure to find a new living arrangement. Because of his salary, low-income housing is a welcomed option. He needs at least two bedrooms, but his kids are tired of sharing a bedroom.

Mei Soohoo

Mei moved to the United States 15 years ago on a family visa to help take care of her three grandchildren. She has been living with her son's family in Quincy, but would like to move to Chinatown to gain more independence and socialize with other seniors. She is on a fixed income, so finding an affordable unit is important. She would also like to move into a building where there are other seniors so that she can live close to friends.

Derrick Borden

Derrick, a finance professional, is looking to relocate to Chinatown. He recently completed his MBA at MIT and was promoted to a new position downtown. In the past, he has lived in one-bedroom apartments, but would prefer to have an extra room to entertain his extended family, who often come to visit on the weekends.

Neha Patel

Neha is a second-year medical student at Tufts University looking to move out of the dorms and live with two other med students in Chinatown. She wants to be able to wake up and roll to class. She is also looking to take advantage of the local nightlife and have some fun after long, tedious weeks of studying. Neither she nor her roommates want to share a room, so she is seeking a three-bedroom place, but, if necessary, she can share a room with her female roommate. She is hoping that splitting the rent three ways will help her save some extra cash to go out on the town.

Figure 4.2 Examples of Participatory Chinatown Characters
important, another benefit of the process is that it encouraged empathy; by experiencing the obstacles and pursuing the objectives that people with different backgrounds, participants were able to understand the trade-offs and broader implications of their decisions. According to Ms. Chan, this was evident in the discussion that followed. Ms. Chan credited the activity with disarming some of the contentious or agenda-driven comments that are sometimes characteristic of public engagement.

As was discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis, existing channels of participation do little to allow for the development of mutual understanding. Rather, they serve as venues for people to bring their viewpoints—and their understandings of place—to be presented to others. It is a not a space for shared meaning-finding or dialogue, but for monologue. Those whose views are not incorporated may feel alienated, or may feel that they were not heard in the process.

The ability for the Participatory Chinatown game to encourage a space of conversation and negotiation was apparent very early on in the process. Ms. Chan credited the activity with disarming some of the potential conflict or contention to how participants engaged with each other: participants were paired off—often with a stranger—and given name tags of an avatar assigned to them. The gameplay that ensued was not just an experience of navigating the space of the community as a character with a different background, but also a space of negotiation between the two partners, and opportunity for empathy-building.

This cultivation of empathy is something that is noteworthy, and absent in many of the traditional forums of public participation that are available and utilized by planners. The characters presented represent a range of people that share the same space, and whose immediate goals were at times vastly different from those of participants. To navigate these issues requires trade-offs, and Participatory Chinatown provided
participants with a platform to understand and internalize alternative views in addition to their own.

The game was effective in challenging existing perceptions with the built environment. It did so by creating a separate game space—one that was ostensibly similar to that of the actual environment participants were looking at—that had a different set of rules. The medium of a digital simulation provided residents and community members with a means of detaching from their immediate concerns and perspective, and understanding this space through the eyes of another person, who could hypothetically be somebody that the participants would encounter on the very streets they see in the game. “What’s cool about the game,” noted Ms. Chan, “is that people saw in it their own homes. ... They saw, ‘this is where we hang out,’ or ‘this is where I go with my grandma every morning to go eat dim sum.’ That was what made the game unique, and really spoke to people” (Chan 2014).

The setting of the game in an environment participants themselves moved through and experienced is a key aspect of the game, and indicative of one of the notion of a game space that will be expanded on in looking at the other cases. This game space provided a layer of abstracted meanings—one that is different from the participants’. The portrayal of characters in a digital space also creates a space for the reinterpretation of reality through the introduction of game mechanics. Because this digital space represents an alternate reality, it allows for participants to experiment and engage in trial and error. Specific to Participatory Chinatown, it also allows participants to cultivate a greater sense of understanding and empathy by allowing them to experience the space through the eyes of another.

In the broader context of the ACDC, the Participatory Chinatown platform is one tool of many that allowed for engagement with members of the public about place-based
issues. Many of these engagement opportunities are to serve the ACDC’s mission of enabling people from the neighborhood to shape their own community. The ACDC sees part of its role largely as a capacity-building organization, enabling members of the community to advocate and negotiate toward their goals, rather than simply serving as a voice for the community.

It allowed for organizers to engage populations that had no prior knowledge or expertise in planning, doing so through a medium that is more engaging—and more accessible—than traditional forums for engagement like public hearings. The immersive digital platform was an equalizer as far as individual knowledge of place-based issues was concerned. Any variation in skill level was largely relegated to the use of technology, and this too, was leveraged to foster greater levels engagement: more technology-literate youth in the community were paired with elderly residents, using the activity as a means of cross-generational exchange. This exemplified the project’s ability to bring together populations that are typically underrepresented to the table, and into the same room and discussion with each other.

The development and deployment of the game itself was a capacity-building experience for community youth as well. They were integrated into the process, and worked as paid facilitators, playing a vital role of translation—not just with regard to language, but of technology as well. They were also brought closely into the process of development, interviewing members of the community to develop avatar profiles and selecting meaningful places in the community. The development process invited the youth to see their neighborhood in a new lens, and was a means of intentionally including a portion of the population that is typically underrepresented in formal planning participation.

Ms. Chan highlighted the notion of capacity-building, and the role of the planner in enabling members of the community
in negotiating for their own goals. Part of this is understanding the goals and challenges of those who are negotiating the same space of the city, and Participatory Chinatown, as a space of play, enabled this by cultivating community understanding and empathy. It was an educational tool that cut across barriers—language barriers as well as cultural barriers—in creating a smaller realm of experience in place shared by participants.

While the following cases will speak to the notion of imagination and creativity in enabling and governing this shared space, players of Participatory Chinatown were given a more “tangible” space—that of an immersive digital platform. The space was one outside of physical reality—one that mirrored physical places participants were familiar with—but did not ask participants to actively suspend reality and imagine a separate space.

In this specific context—that of an engagement exercise tied to an ongoing neighborhood planning process—the closer tie to reality is an important quality. Its dual purpose as an education tool meant that some of the ability for free exploration was curtailed, and instead, participants were tasked with fulfilling set objectives that were pre-determined by the game’s creators. This does not limit its efficacy, however, and for its specific purposes, was likely more effective than the provision of a platform for free exploration would have. It enabled participants to play the role of another—in different senses of the word—in a hedonic, engaging way, and learn more about their own world as a result.
Case 2: Place-It

*Place-It* is a methodology developed and employed by James Rojas, a Los Angeles-based artist and planner. Participants in the workshops use found objects to build models in response to a prompt. The participants are given a short period of time to build, and following the building session, the moderator (usually Mr. Rojas) invites each participant to briefly talk about their models.

This method has been used in a variety of contexts, both within existing long-term planning projects, as well as isolated workshops and in educational contexts. This highlights the ability to use this method with a wide age range, and with an audience that may not be typically engaged in planning processes. It can also be used as part of a larger event; for instance, it was also used as part of a larger event in Riverside, CA, where it was a part of a larger event. As described by Gustavo Gonzalez, a planner for the City of Riverside, the *Place-It* workshop served as a “hook,” capturing the attention of community members that were there attending the festival. According to Mr. Gonzalez, many of the attendees were part of a community that was characterized as typically “disengaged;” the use of a *Place-It* workshop allowed planners to engage with members of the community that would not otherwise be represented in discussions about issues of place (Gonzalez 2014).

The methodology invites participants to construct scenes using found objects. The practice is reminiscent of constructing buildings and towns using building blocks; however, a key distinguishing feature of this methodology is the use of found objects that do not resemble infrastructure or objects found in urban spaces. Participants draw from an eclectic assortment of objects such as pipe cleaner, miscellaneous small plastic objects, and ribbon—most of which do not resemble objects found in urban spaces. This grants participants a “blank slate” of sorts. According to Mr. Rojas, this invites participants to use creative
Figure 4.3  Place-It workshop in action
approaches to represent the ideas they are constructing. It does not constrain them to a specific set of parameters, and instead, allows for imaginative responses.

The prompts that are given usually solicit a sense of idealism, and models tend to encapsulate the values of the participant. For instance, common prompts used are “build a favorite childhood memory” or “build an ideal city.” The benefit to this approach is that it allows for the representation of values that underlie the physical designs that are constructed, rather than responses that are rooted in opposition to a particular proposal. It also creates a situation in which there are no learning curve or skills to acquire before being able to participate.

Following the construction period, participants are invited to briefly explain their models aloud. Participants are generally given up to two minutes to describe their designs, after which time the facilitator will summarize the description into a concise statement of values. An important factor in the use of this method is the ability of the facilitator, in most cases, Mr. Rojas, to infer the values that are informing the models participants design.

According to Mr. Rojas, the element of focusing discussion around a physical model facilitates meaningful discussion. It disarms those who may have attended to further a singular agenda or simply to voice opposition by constraining their discussion to something that they’ve had the opportunity to construct themselves; it also provides those who may not otherwise speak up at a meeting with a medium to present their ideas. (It is important to note that when these workshops are deployed as part of a formal planning process, they are usually accompanied by other modes of contributing input).

Thus, the role of the facilitator is important in this exercise. In addition to guiding participants through the activity, it is incumbent on the facilitator to distill the values that were presented by each model. While this may be evident in
Figure 4.3 Examples of on-site Place-It model
the participants’ explanations, this may not necessarily be the case. These are often recorded and used to inform any further work that may result from the exercise; they are also announced out loud for other participants to hear. It allows for the sharing of ideas, but also, provides participants—some of whom may not have thought critically about the built environment—interpretations and narratives about space that may be different from those they conceive or experience.

Following the initial exercise, participants are then prompted to combine their models; this allows for a space of collaboration and negotiation of meanings of place. Though some opt to simply place them together, others attempt to weave their ideas together or recreate models that represent a shared conception of an idealized space.

The process invites people to think creatively about place through the representation of places using non-realistic objects. It enables participants to read narratives and values into physical spaces, and establishes a link between the aspects or qualities of a place of the built environment with the essential elements that contribute to them.

According to Mr. Rojas, these workshops allow for the exploration and engagement with the built environment in a creative, unrestricted way. It allows for a tactile experience with the built environment, reconnecting participants with the sensory elements through which people experience and remember places, rather than through the realm of abstractions that land use planners typically occupy. This is seen as a means of leveling the playing field—everybody experiences place through a variety of senses, and nearly everybody is able to express themselves through this methodology, something that cannot be said of traditional channels for engagement. The workshops, he has noted are able to cross age and language barriers, obstacles that are a challenge to many planners. The tactile element of the methodology is one where minimal skill is
involved, and the resulting model serves as a conduit for people to communicate their understandings of place. There is little sense of barrier to engaging through this method.

This occurs through the creation of a shared game space—one of suspended reality, in which players are able to realize ideals or recall past places to which they hold an attachment. It is a space where meaning is prescribed through the participants’ imaginations; the physical models carry no meanings in of themselves. Yet the physicality, Mr. Rojas notes, also serves to focus conversation on what is literally at hand; rather than providing a pulpit from which to opine on any matter they see fit, participants have the opportunity to share with others the values that they see—or want to see—realized in the built environment. The temporary suspension of reality in the shared game space reorients the space of the city from one of competing meanings to one in which all these meanings can coexist.

It is also a method that is engaging, perhaps because of how far a departure it appears from what people image public participation to look like. As noted previously, these workshops can also serve as a “hook” for conversation at community events. They are able to attract passersby, and engage them in a dialogue about their community. While the Place-It workshop are not the primary focus of the events, they serve as a means of engaging in dialogue about issues pertinent to the built environment. Like Participatory Chinatown, participants of Place-It are able to engage with issues of place in a fun, engaging manner. In this instance, the emphasis is not on empathy, but creativity and seeing embedded narratives and meaning and physical environments.

In addition to constructing models completely detached from identifiable place, Mr. Rojas's Place-It methodology is also deployed in specific contexts. This sometimes entails the development of an abstracted version of a place, either through
large-scale simplified street grids or a physical model of a place (using the same found objects). While the street configuration or landmarks orient viewers to the place being represented, the models are still largely an opportunity for imaginative play with the place. The tangible nature of the models—and the variety of objects that make up the cityscape—invite participants to physically rearrange objects. Players are literally able to reshape the built environment presented in the models.

This is especially powerful when the model or exercise is deployed in a space undergoing a planning process, or that is facing change. In addition to being a medium through which participants can communicate the values—and even physical features—they'd like to see in a space, it reinforces the notion that change is not necessarily bad, and that it can be guided and shaped to express one's values. The deployment of the exercise in a social context means, too, that this understanding is understood mutually; that the shaping of place is not just an encapsulation of an individual's meanings, but those of a multitude, including those with different understandings of place.

The altered perception of the physical environment in this space of imagination provides a sense of possibility, and an understanding of the built environment as changeable and malleable. It invites participants to ask, “What if?,” knowing simultaneously that they are engaging in a space of suspended reality, but also opening participants up to the notion that the built environment is not as fixed as it appears. It encourages participants not just to focus on the qualities of place that draw them—arguably reinforcing attachment to place—but also provides a space to see what others value in a place.
Case 3: City of Play

*City of Play* is an organization based in Pittsburgh, PA. Founded in 2009 by Adam Nelson, the organization is centered on the idea of bringing play to public spaces. The organization holds regular play events throughout the city, in addition to an annual *Best New Games Festival*, a day-long event consisting of public games. At these events, participants play games that were designed by Mr. Nelson or other partners in the organization; many of these games have the effect of changing how people interact with space, or with each other. An example of such a game—and one that was featured at a *Best New Games Festival*—is *Super Secret Spies*, a game of moving hide and seek in which players aim to keep a number on a hat hidden. The game challenged players to move through the city in a new way, discovering new paths and hiding spaces in order to fulfill the game’s objective.

*City of Play* differs from the other cases presented in that it was not conceived around planning issues or engagement with built environment. It presents an example of bringing issues of place and the built environment into a process of play, rather than the inverse, as was the case with the previous cases. Rather, according to Mr. Nelson, it was created as a “selfish pursuit,” a project to create opportunities to play for the sake of play. However, as the organization grew, a nexus emerged between public play and issues of the public spaces and the built environment.

The introduction of altered game mechanics provides participants with alternative objectives in understanding, moving through, and interacting with the built environment. What was once simply an anonymous object, typically overlooked, could now be a vital part of a game. Game mechanics also provide a sense of equalization, in that all participants are bound by the same universe of rules. This, Mr. Nelson hypothesizes, provides an increased sense of agency, not just within the confines of the
game, but ultimately within one’s experience of the city at large. Reframing the mechanics of how participants interact with the game space simultaneously alters how participants interact with the built environment, which is a physical part of the game space, whether in its existing form, or reimagined as a game object.

This emphasis on play first does not preclude any opportunities for learning about how members of a community perceive place. There is knowledge to be gleaned from how people engage with the city within the framework of play, and games can be designed so as to provide useful information. For instance, one of the events organized by City of Play is the City Spree, described as a “city-wide race ... without a course.” Unlike a typical road race, where runners run through a fixed course, the participants in this event start from one central location and run to various checkpoints around the city. The checkpoints are spaced apart such that, after reaching a specific number of points, the participant has completed the equivalent of a 5-kilometer race. During the event, runners are to collect points at each checkpoint; meanwhile, the information about routes chosen enabled race organizers to infer about perceptions of different areas that were chosen. Mr. Nelson noted that some of the checkpoints were placed in a neighborhood that was perceived as unsafe, or a “no man’s land,” the intention of which was to discover whether the perceptions held true. After interviewing some participants after the event, he found that for the most part, they did not think much of the fact that they ran through that particular neighborhood, suggesting that the perceptions may have been overstated. While this in of itself is not enough to make generalizations about the particular neighborhood, it provides an example of how play can provide a context to challenge existing perceptions and meanings of a place.

Since its inception, City of Play has moved into the
Figure 4.5  A participant of City of Play, engaged in a game of Super Secret Spies
space of civic engagement, leveraging play as a medium and means of bringing improvements to the city. While City of Play is primarily focused on encouraging play, it has spun off two initiatives that take on a more focused approach to addressing issues in the built environment. The first, entitled We Are Here, builds on the concept of third places and encourages participants to map them, identifying a network of places throughout the city of Pittsburgh. The project hearkens to Ray Oldenburg's concept of third places—those places outside of home and work—that are the sphere in which much of civic and social life is enacted. These included places like coffeehouses and public squares.

Though a departure from play as through the lens of games, We Are Here reframes the built fabric of the city through that of the social sphere. Like City of Play, it understands the city as a whole as a different type of space; the network of places that participants aim to build through We Are Here can be interpreted as a layer upon the city, one created and envisioning a shared alternate viewpoint of the city fabric.

Another initiative, currently in development, is called Community Lawns. The project looks to reactivate vacant lots throughout Pittsburgh by providing space for lawn games, as well as the equipment needed (stored in on-site lockers). These reinterpret sites that would perhaps be viewed as blight as places for play; social games are leveraged as a means of re-understanding a space that would otherwise be considered an eyesore in a community. This is reminiscent of the tactical urbanism movement and practitioners' efforts in reclaiming underutilized space, though in this case, it is dealing largely with private spaces rather than space that is strictly publicly-owned. Nevertheless, there is a somewhat subversive nature to this project, in that it challenges the hegemonic view of what these spaces represent, and repurpose them for uses that are playful and engaging.

City of Play is predicated on bringing play into the public
Figure 4.6  City of Play's We Are Here initiative
realm; the initial motivation behind this is almost entirely for the sake of play and social engagement. Unlike the other cases presented, for *City of Play*, the purpose of play is simply for play itself. Nevertheless, this does not mean that there is nothing that planners can take away from these activities. *City of Play* provides a means for the engagement of a physical space that Quentin Stevens posits in his *Ludic City*. It hinges on a more integrative view of the city. This is built upon reframing of the city as a space for play; despite inroads into the sphere of planning issues through the aforementioned initiatives, any overlap, though intentional, is also secondary to the purpose of play.

Any inquiry into the manner in which *City of Play* reframes participants' interaction with the built environment must begin with the name of the organization. It positions the city as a space for play—the city is literally turned into a playground, a position that is jarring to those who consider the city as anything but that, and that view play as an activity relegated to set-aside spaces.

*City of Play* creates a shared game space—one that physically overlaps with real urban space, but that is made separate by altered rules of interaction. Players within this alternate reality operate within the specific rules of the game, and game mechanics that empower them to move within the game space differently than they would outside of the game space. As noted in the example of *Super Secret Spies*, this means the movements within the confines of the game are enacted in physical space.

This provides an interesting analog to the other cases, in that the play occurs physically within close proximity to the built environment, and with the environment sometimes a part of the game itself. Objects in the non-game space become game objects, and relationships established in the context of the game are able transcend this divide. Mr. Nelson relates a personal
anecdote about this:

“There’s a memory that I have that is indelible at this point, because it was in the lens of play. Play gives you these opportunities to be little heroes, by winning a game you get to feel heroic. I was playing a game on a field... and I ran and jumped and swung around a lamppost and hit a ball back into the field of play. It was like an action hero sort of scene, jump, grab, swing, hit. And I know the lamppost—I can imagine it right now, I can envision it—and now I’m now very intimately tied to this inanimate thing, this object, because I had a memory associated with it. And if that lamppost is going to get torn down, it’ll affect me. I might not stop it, I’m not going to chain myself to it to preserve this memory, but I’m certainly going give more of a damn than I did if I had no visceral human connection to it.” (Nelson 2014)

This anecdote reveals an attachment that was specifically cultivated through interaction with that object within the space of play. City of Play provides a context for this to occur in the space of the city. It turns what Stevens views as a subversive act into a shared social context. In doing so, it reveals an altering of the meaning of space, through a combination of the mechanics of the game and one’s interaction with objects in space.

As with the other cases presented, this play reframes how participants interact with their communities. The exploration of places through a different perspective—one of play—allows for affective bonds and alternative meanings to otherwise unremarkable spaces and objects. As with Mr. Nelson’s anecdote, the manifestation of this attachment is not necessarily profound or life-changing—increased attention to a lamppost pales in comparison to many of the larger issues that arise—but that nonetheless moves the participants toward greater awareness of the built environment.

Nevertheless, it is an example that can be instructive to planners, in that it provides an alternative understanding of engagement with place. Given this, it would be a mistake to discount City of Play as frivolous or unproductive. To be sure, it would likely be a far stretch to imagine planners taking on the role that Mr. Nelson does in organizing these events and activities in public places. However, initiatives like these open
the door for planners to meet halfway. As per Mr. Nelson, one of the areas in which *City of Play* as it stands is “incomplete” is the leveraging of social capital created through *City of Play* toward more concrete social impact. This is not so much a shortcoming of *City of Play*, however: civic engagement was not—and is not—the objective of the organization, nor are those ends the reason people choose to participate. That *City of Play* is expanding into the realm of tangible impact on the built environment through initiatives like *Community Lawns* is indicative that public participation in planning does not necessarily have to be the result of attracting a latent population toward existing processes, but can begin at the other end. While it may be a stretch to assume that this will result in a flood of participants at community meetings, it is nonetheless a movement toward a more engaged populace.
“Finally, in this multiplex world, planning practice should recognize how the relations within and between the layers of the power geometries of place are actively negotiated by the power of agency through communication and interpretation.

This focuses attention in part on the development of skills in the kind of conflict mediation and consensus-building which leaves behind mutual understanding of different points of view, rather than increasing the more entrenched divisions between winners and losers.

It also emphasizes the importance of recognizing the many value systems at play in mediating the times and spaces of the city.

Planners need not only to facilitate the recognition of these but to use plan-making exercises to help build a new layer of relational resources at the level of the ‘place of the plan’, to provide social resources, widely-linked to the diverse relational webs which transect a place, through which to foster relational innovation and richness, discard outdated assumptions and mediate inevitable conflicts without allowing one-dimensional viewpoints to regain their dominance.”

(Graham and Healy 1999)
Conclusion: Directions for Planning

This thesis, largely exploratory in nature, spoke to a need for greater attention and emphasis on the public's relationship to place as a focal point in community engagement methods. However, these relationships are highly subjective and realized on an individual level; as Graham and Healy note, existing channels of engagement are limited in their scope to address this level of subjectivity (Graham and Healy 1999).

This thesis proposed playful methods of engagement as a means of addressing this. The cases reviewed demonstrated the possibility for exploration of the subjectivity of place in a social context through play-based methods. It is the hope of the author that looking at engagement through the lens of play is not perceived as a means of trivializing planning processes, or the issues and reasons that bring people to the table to engage. Rather, it should be indicative that addressing the complexity facing participation is an endeavor worth improving, to the point of drawing from fields that seem far removed from planning engagement. Given the perceptions of apathy and lack of awareness, it is sensible to look to methods that are more engaging in nature.

At the same time, it is important to be realistic about the scope of what these methods can achieve. In of themselves, they will not transform planning participation. Even with these methods in place, there is still the task of translating what is learned from these methods into knowledge that can be directly applied to practice. This act of translation is a complex one, and one in which the professional continues to play a large role. These methods do not necessarily make that task easier—rather, they provide an even wider base of knowledge and information to draw from. However, they do provide a space in which participants can learn from each other, and understand others' views about the same places—ones that participants may have assigned completely different meanings to themselves. As the cases have shown, the context of play allows for an exploration
of these complexities of the built environment in a communal context. That said, they are modest in scope relative to the challenges that planners face with regard to participation, and there are still a number of areas through which understanding of the impact of play can be uncovered through future study.

Nevertheless, there are things that planners can learn from play. These cases provide a range of approaches to bringing people into deeper engagement with the built environment through the medium of play. While play is certainly not the only means of achieving these goals, these cases show that methods incorporating playful elements can be leveraged to promote qualities that are lacking in more traditional channels of public participation. These cases can be instructive to planners, not simply as templates or models, but in spurring thought toward how to better translate issues of place and planning into formats that are more accessible and conducive to widespread participation. They all present a different view of what it means to engage with place, and provide accessible, creative avenues through which planners can learn more about the public’s interactions with place.

There are some common elements between the cases, though, that are worth drawing attention to. One important feature is their ability to draw people together in a shared game space. As discussed in Chapter 1, meanings of place can be shaped and affected by social forces, but ultimately, recognition of the meanings of place occur on an individual level. The meanings embedded in a place are subjective.

This multiplicity of meanings is problematic in the context of rationalist planning, in which the complexities captured by this subjectivity are reduced to a single frame of viewing place. The particular forums currently employed do not help in this regard: rather than creating safe spaces for sharing and learning other meanings in the form of dialogue, engagement often happens in the context of public comment in
response to proposed changes—changes that can be interpreted as an imposition upon a place that is meaningful to participants. Though forums for public engagement are shared in the physical sense, they are often collections of a variety of different microcosms, overlapping in common physical space, but not a substantive common understanding of place.

The notion of the game space is particularly powerful, not just as a shared space, but as a space that is partially removed from immediate reality. The game space provides a temporary suspension of meaning embedded in the built environment. This includes not just others’ understandings, which may be in conflict with our own, but our own individual understandings as well. Social structures, power dynamics, and other factors are replaced by a set of game mechanics that govern what is possible in this space. Whether they are mechanics that reflect how others experience the same space, objects that reframe the built environment as malleable, or even an altered set of rules of movement through physical space, these mechanics challenge—and empower—participants to experience place in a different way.

In each case, the alteration of mechanics had another important outcome: it leveled the playing field, providing a context in which those with no background in issues of place are able to engage. Indeed, each of these examples is accessible to nearly anybody; knowledge or expertise in particular areas render no advantages. This is a departure from many public engagement channels, in which there is often a minimal level of knowledge needed for engagement to be meaningful, and where—to apply a cynical lens—power or other factors may bear undue advantage.

Is engagement a means to an end, or an ends in of itself?

In rethinking public participation through the lens of play, it is worth asking again what the aims of participation truly
are. Returning to the objectives that Innes and Booher laid out, those of cultivating civil society and community capacity stand out. The reality is that forums of engagement do not foster those ideals; rather they are characterized by a purpose-driven nature (Innes and Booher 2004).

Posing the question of the role of engagement also implicitly asks whether engagement is a means to an end, or an end in of itself. The latter is closer to Arnstein’s ideal of citizen control, which has largely informed thought and evolution of planning practice. To achieve this would involve methods that not only help community members have a voice and have a role in the decision-making process, but to build capacity through community learning to sustain engagement.

While the cases presented in this thesis can be—and have been—leveraged toward answering planning questions, they are more suited in their capacity toward these latter goals. Unfortunately, this is in large part beyond the scope of planning participation as it exists today.

It is also worth noting that the context in which these methods can be deployed are limited. Given their emphasis on perceptions and experiences of place on the individual level, they are geared much more toward reaching and engaging a larger public than technical problem-solving or gauging public reaction that typical forums of participation provide. Albrechts posed the notion of preparatory forums in which “knowledge can be acquired and viewpoints can be determined through deliberation and in mutual trust” (Albrechts 2002, p. 338). These are separate from any particular initiatives or projects, but rather, opportunities for capacity-building, and engagement for engagement’s sake. Nevertheless, as Innes and Booher suggest, there is a role for this type of engagement as well. While they do not serve immediate ends, they provide a foundation for wider engagement in the long term.

That said, this is simply a means of moving the needle
on the barometer—in a positive direction, certainly—but one that does not fully address some of the major obstacles to more effective and wide-reaching public engagement: apathy and lack of awareness. Toward this end, of the three cases presented, *City of Play* is particularly instructive. It presents a view of engagement with people in the context of place. We see negotiation with the meaning of place—effectively, challenging nearly any and all conception of place—and instead reimaging it purely as a place for play, even if just for a moment. We see semblances of the cultivation of civil society and agency, arguably the roots of movement toward a sense of enacted citizenship. Most of all, though, we see a priority on play first, a focus not on the utility of play, but on play for the sake of fun, for the sake of play.

Likewise, this leads us to question what engagement for the sake of engagement would look like. The challenge to cultivating this type of participation is not necessarily one of methodologies and knowledge—there are certainly other means of educating the public on issues of place, and though this thesis looked to play as a source of engaging approaches, it is certainly not a prerequisite. Rather, it is a matter of whether engagement is a high enough priority for planners—and planning as a field—to invest in such efforts, and to move from waiting on the public to engage on planners’ terms to meeting the public where they are, where they live, where they work, and most importantly, where they play.

*Directions for further research: What can planners learn?*

This thesis proposes play as a source of ideas toward approaching planning engagement differently; however, it is certainly not the only source of potential ideas. Given that the notion of play may elicit suggestions of frivolity, a larger investigation into the feasibility of incorporating playful methods into channels for planning participation is necessary.
A comprehensive survey of a breadth of playful methods and strategies would be helpful in better understanding how such methods can be applied to the practice of planning, and the limitations to their applicability. While it is certainly not a panacea, this thesis argued for the potential usefulness of play in certain applications, and particularly early in community planning and decision-making processes. Though anecdotally, they were considered successful in mediating dialogue about place-based issues, longitudinal examinations of planning efforts that incorporate these methods could speak more toward their efficacy in affecting project outcomes.

These methods also nod toward broader themes with regard to public involvement and engagement. Many of the ongoing critiques of planning participation channels noted are certainly valid, and still issues facing the field and practice. While this thesis does not speak directly to those, it aims to draw attention to another lens of framing participation, focusing instead on attention to how people engage with place. As Manzo and Perkins (2006) and Graham and Healy (1999) note, place attachment and the complexities of place themselves, respectively, are worth greater examination not just broadly within the field of planning, but as they apply to practice. Further, there is still much that planners can learn from engaging with the topic of play, and much that can be learned from further study in the intersection between play and planning. Looking at engagement with the public and place through the lens of play provides an alternative understanding to engagement—ones that challenge planners to re-evaluate the purposes behind engagement, and whether existing processes truly fulfill those ends.


Figure 4.1: via http://www.participatorychinatown.org/
Figure 4.2: via http://www.participatorychinatown.org/
Figure 4.3: Courtesy of James Rojas
Figure 4.4: Courtesy of James Rojas
Figure 4.5: via http://www.cityofplay.org/
Figure 4.6: via http://www.wearehereproject.org/