

Mark Schuster

Ephemera, Temporary Urbanism, and Imaging

[Mark began by showing a series of slides of festivals, parades, and special events.]

He defines ephemera as temporary, occasional and fleeting, such as spectacles, pageants, rituals, celebration and events of all sorts. And he argues that ephemera make an important contribution to the life of the city as well as the imaging of the city. He also argues that ephemera needs to be a part of the urban designer's palate.

But it's not normally thought of as an important part of urban planning. We are trained to be instrumental, single-minded, and calculatingly rational in our actions, but not to be playful or experimental or to pay attention to emotions and feelings.

The literature on ephemera begins with festivals. And to do justice to festivals, one has to enter the fields of comparative religion, anthropology, sociology, ethnography, cultural studies, geography, and folklore. The Olympics and Worlds Fairs have also been studied closely. From the urban planning perspective, two literatures predominate. The first is the "Livable Cities" literature. The second is the "Arts and Urban Development" literature, but it is relentlessly instrumental. The arts and culture is seen as a tool for economic development.

Kevin Lynch addressed ephemera in this book "What Time Is This Place" by calling on us to notice things that are temporary and important in shaping or images and experiences of the city: noises, odors,, lighting, events, and physical traces of change.

Daniel Boorstin published "The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America" in 1961 on the American image, arguing that it was being shaped by the media, not the daily actions of its citizens. Boorstin centered his warning on what he called "pseudo-events," events for and structured by the media. Though we may not be familiar with his work, we have accepted the general premises of this argument.

A good deal of the academic literature on ephemera is critical, brooding, complaining, and cynical, much of which is rooted in or refers to the work of David Harvy's 1989 "The Urban Experience." For him festivals and urban spectacles are instruments of social control in societies riven by class conflict.

Not all commentators agree. For example, Harry Hiller found that there was a level of residual support and goodwill among the citizens of Calgary for the 1988 Winter Olympics. And others have demonstrated how disadvantaged and wealthy communities embrace festivals and indulge in class role reversal.

Ephemera also contribute to the image of a city, but it is less the ephemera staged for the media than the events that citizens create that contribute to the image. "Signature ephemera" are temporary urban phenomena that are indicative of and native to a particular place. For example, the Mardi Gras and New Orleans have become "virtually congruent." Examples in Boston include the Boston Marathon, the swan boats in the Public Garden, the Head of the Charles regatta, the Walk for Hunger, and the Fourth of July celebration on the Esplanade. These events for the most part are not generated for or particularly shaped by the media. They may be reported by the media, but do not have the same qualities of true media events. They are shaped by citizens and passed along by local practices, customs, and word of mouth.

City planning has been traditionally associated with the permanent urban fabric, not cyclical events, yet cities regularly have to organize for and deal with cyclical events.

And attention to ephemera has architectural implications. Hallmark events are often remembered for their architectural or planning gestures such as the Crystal Palace, the Eiffel Towers, the Seattle space needle and the Tokyo Olympics swimming hall. In other words, ephemera have spatial implications that planners and designers need to appreciate.

The notion of creating and planning events may make us nervous. The potential loss of authenticity and spontaneity ought to concern us, but we should not let it become an excuse for inaction.

Ephemera can also become the reason for actually getting things done. For example, Barcelona made 30 years of infrastructure investment in 6 years when it was selected as the city for the Olympics. It's often suggested that these hallmark events offer the opportunity to extract considerable funds from other levels of government.

The great value of ephemera is that as Harvey Cox said in "The Feast of Fools," it puts work in its place. Work is not the highest end of life. Festivity is an end in itself. It is not instrumental. And ephemera allow fantasy and social criticism.

The question is not whether planners and urban designers should become involved in the impractical, the extravagant, the extraordinary, the useless, the ephemeral-- but how.

Questions and Answers, Comments

Q: There are a series of values that are in conflict. These ephemera are signs of public life that we like. But there are other sets of values that are running simultaneously. The highest priority of municipal officials is control of the streets, and protection of private property. So these events can make them nervous. Another set of values is...ask yourself who gets to go through the streets with a bullhorn? The answer is commercial enterprises. They are privileged. Artists also are privileged. All these values are in conflict and I don't have a good way to resolve them. In the seminar we thought a good test of successful

ephemera was the number of volunteers who participated -- we weren't too fussy about the sponsors. But how do we make our way through these conflicts?

A: There are no quick and easy answers, but I can cite some examples. First Night Boston had to deal with the police -- no one thought anyone would turn out so for the first First Night, they only had 6 police. It's also worth pointing out that Boston First Night is not City-sponsored. It's run by a private non-profit. The American examples [from the paper] come more from private non-profits initiatives than the European examples. Another example is Providence's Waterfire. The city put in bright lights so that it would be safe, but bright lights interfered with the lighting from the fires so the city rewired the downtown lighting so that it could be turned off.

The sponsor issue is a big issue. How it drives the event is a concern. First Night has had to deal with this. It is directly related to the media. When a sponsor gives money, it is not just for the number people on the streets, but there is a media connection. So the organizers work with the media so that they can go to the sponsor and say the media will be involved. It all interconnected. Where the media is gets more attention and where the sponsors banners are. It makes it more Disney-like, unfortunately. There is a constant tension between the two.

Another example is the Barnam and Bailey circus. To the person on the street, it looks like a spontaneous event. But the same PR firm that does First Night did the circus. They came up with the idea of the parade to raise interest in the circus. It was dollar-driven. It's a constant battle.

Q: I would add to the criteria for successful ephemera, based on Palio in Siena, is that the event changes the city permanently. Ephemera have profound influence on the city.

A: Yes, the Palio is actually a horse race between neighborhoods. It starts the evening before with huge banquets in the neighborhoods that are participating. They hire jockeys and strike deals about who would win. It's much more complicated than just a race that happens once a year.

The impact isn't just in built form. But the other ways are harder to measure. It's also about volunteers and civic participation. For example, Barcelona citizens volunteered, which was not a usual trait. And an extraordinary thing happened. The city published a book, *Civismo y Urbanidad*, that sets out in respect to health, welfare, education, culture, what the city takes as its responsibilities and what it thinks the citizen's responsibilities are. It lays out a different relationship.

Comment: I'm struck between the echoes between what you presented and 1940s work, which included points about architecture and events. There's a risk of happy event architecture to feeding into a singular vision of civic life. The division can't be between civitas and the corporate sponsor. It's more complicated than that.

Krzysztof Wodiczko

The Bunker Hill monument project had 5 participants -- 3 from Charlestown and 2 from South Boston. These five people took a risk because they chose to speak in spite of the "code of silence." There is a code of silence in every city, but in Charlestown it is exaggerated. The five mothers who participated had lost a child to violence. The community turned against them and blamed them for the death of their children. They tried to speak and to help others survive this unspeakable drama. For several hours on three consecutive nights, the southern face of the Bunker Hill monument was illuminated with video image projections. It became a gigantic human figure of a private citizen who spoke freely of her personal experiences and struggles.

Two weeks before the projection, he still did not know who would be speaking or what they would say. There were some who did object to the project because they were afraid that it would convey a negative image about Charlestown, but the Parks Department came to the rescue. The monument does not belong to Charlestown. So they said that the artist may be crazy, but he still has a right to speak.

On the process of participation, he does not include everyone in the process, but wants to save maybe one speechless human being in the city, which may also save the city.

[He also showed a video on a project in Krakow where he projected images of women and children on the tower in the city's main square.]