The importance of Bricolage in giving life to cities

by Andrew Kelso

Dear planners, designers and builders of future cities,

This manifesto argues for the implementation of the ideas of adhocism and bricolage in the design of cities as a means of introducing play and bringing life back to urban spaces. Cities today have become focused on effective physical organisation and the efficient movement of people and goods. While progress and efficiency are certainly needed in the world, architects and urban planners should take a step back by balancing efficiency with spaces for play and escape.

Many writers have written about how the machine age affected the creation of the built environment, and one key aspect of cities identified as having been affected is their layouts. Both Charles Jenks and Quentin Stevens identify that, during the 19th and 20th centuries, the organisation of cities became more determined by economic forces and less by social issues. These forces aimed to make the city function efficiently, optimising urban spaces for transportation and consumption (Jencks & Silver, 2013, p. 33; Stevens, 2007, p. 7).The remaining spaces in the city that have been designed for people have also become more privatised and commodified, creating places where people become passive consumers rather than active participators (Franck & Stevens, 2006, p. 4).

This issue is also raised by the *Harvard Project on the City* which draws attention to the fact that movement through the city has become designed for shopping. Links made between pedestrian routes, road systems, car parks, public transport and shops become the priority. Train stations, museums, hospitals, universities, the internet, the military and churches all become shops. (Koolhaas, Boeri, Kwinter, Ulrich Obrist, & Tazi, 2000, p. 125,140) People within this system become cogs in the machine.

Mass production and standardisation is another way in which market forces have affected the built environment. In his book *Adhocism,* Jenks blames this increased standardisation on capitalism, pointing out that, in order to make profit companies are forced to reduce prices through standardisation and use advertising to convince people they need the product. When it comes to the built environment, mass production coupled with increasingly complex materials has led to a disconnect between both the context and programme of a building and the way that it is materialised. Complex systems and materials make it difficult for adaptation or improvisation, forcing the use of mass produced materials in standardized ways (Jencks & Silver, 2013, p. 19,59).

The Modernist movement within architecture embraced these characteristics of efficiency and mass production, as well as disregarding the past and the historic significance of buildings which were not built by these principles. In the past, buildings were constructed on and built within the existing built environment, however, today it has become cheaper to reconstruct whole buildings rather than adapt the existing structure. This adds to the creation of monotonous cities built in similar forms and material, regardless of typology or context. These qualities of modern-day cities are well visualised in the sketches of Leon Krier.
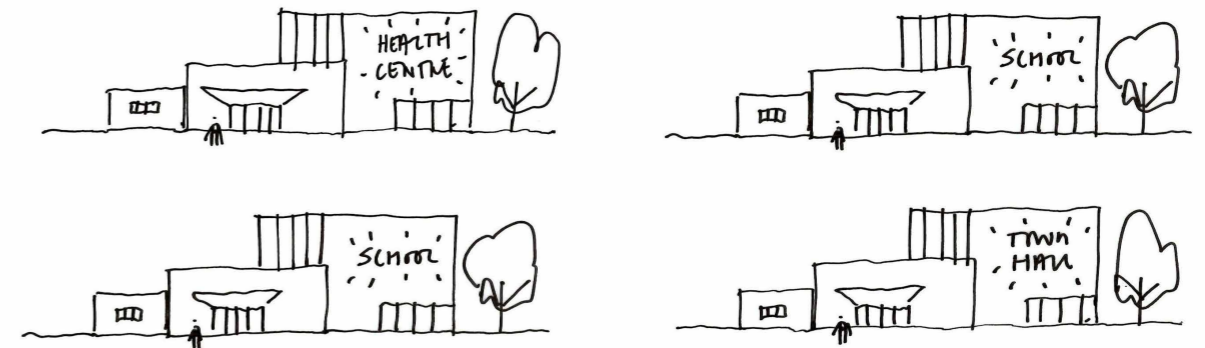
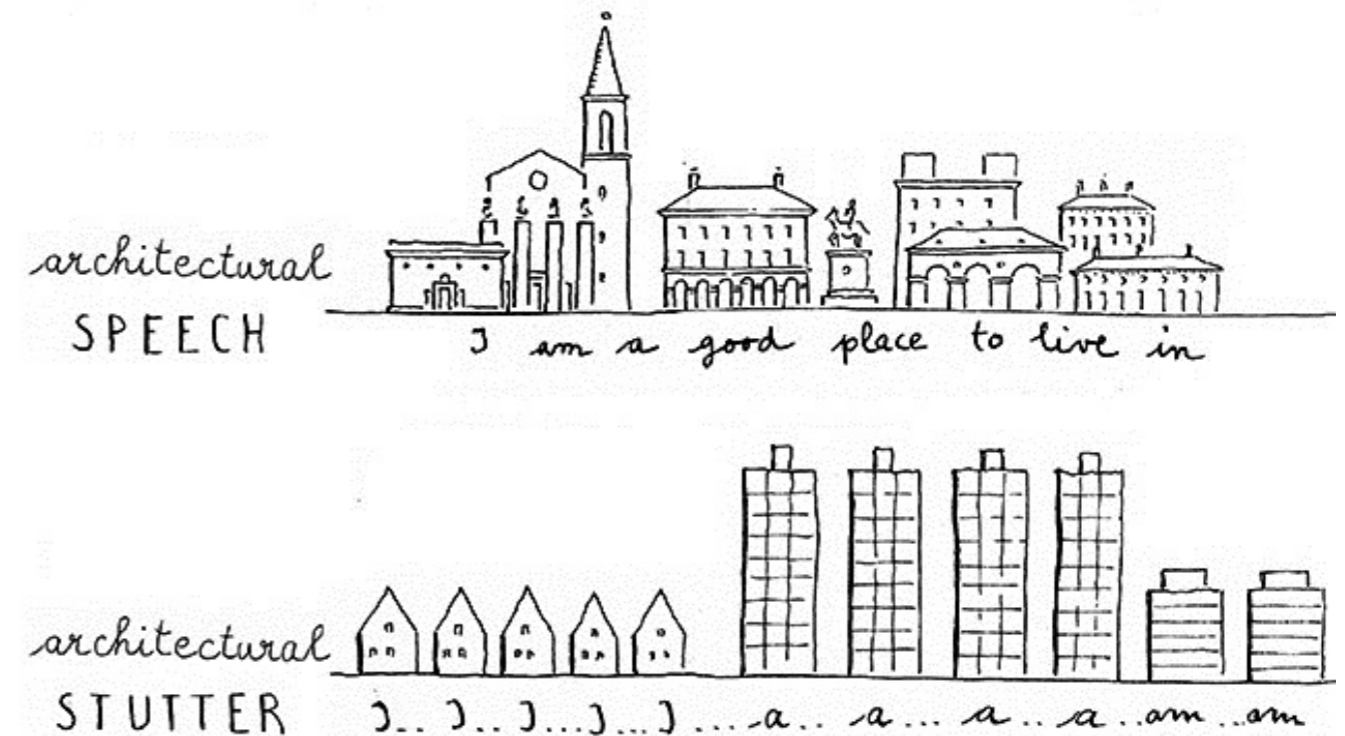

Fig 1 - Sketches by McGinlay Bell architects, 2017

Fig 2 - A sketch by Leon Krier commenting on architectural speech, 2014

These characteristics of modern construction have led many to describe cities of today as blank, dull and monotonous, for instance Gordon Cullen uses the term "desert planning" to describe modern planning (Cullen, 1961; Gehl, 2011, p. 21; Jencks & Silver, 2013, p. 23). Another fierce opponent to modern architecture was Norman Miller who described cities as converted into monotony in a search for simplicity, adding that factories look like mental hospitals and that the outcome is a scaleless, "empty landscape of psychosis". He also adds that this form of construction fails to fill the human desire for shelter which is pleasurable and rich in character (Mailer & Scully, 1964).

This idea of creating spaces that are pleasurable and rich in character introduces the idea that architecture should be joyful and embrace and encourage moments that are inefficient and rich in potential. Through play people within urban spaces act in spontaneous ways, often making the most of urban spaces full of unforeseen opportunities. In this way, the study of urban play can be used as a tool to reconstruct spaces that enable people to escape from the serious and efficient world built around them. (Stevens, 2007, pp. 1–33).

Many writers have discussed the importance of play within the city. Stevens develops the argument that one of the fundamental functions of public space is as a setting for informal non-instrumental social interactions, or play. He argues that play is neglected as part of the urban experience within cities, which instead focus on creating efficient spatial patterns driven by economic forces (Stevens, 2007, p. 7). Henri Lefebvre also wrote about the importance of considering urban spaces as social ones. In arguing this point, he points to cities that existed pre-capitalism where a greater diversity of social functions occurred balanced with economic prosperity. He saw the city as a place for pleasure and enjoyment not solely focused on economic forces. This interaction between various groups of people through a variety of activities he saw as one of the key purposes of centralised urban forms (Lefebvre, 1996, pp. 65–85). More recently this argument has been made by Lain Lefaivre in *Ground Up City Play* and Stevens in *The Ludic City*. Both argue that a city's urban fabric should create opportunities for play. Play enables connections between people and diverse communities to form, preventing communities from becoming a collection of strangers. In this sense, the playful function of cities becomes just as significant to architecture and planning as rationality and productivity (Lefaivre & Döll, 2007, p. 56; Stevens, 2007, p. 5,11).

Johan Huizinga, in *Homo Ludens*, defines play as a wide-ranging concept that provides a step out of real life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition of its own. He sees the act of playing as something that is fundamental to being human. He addresses the fact that play can sometimes be seen as opposite to serious life, however, he goes on to argue that play can be both serious and non-serious. Child's play can operate at a level below the serious, however in other forms, play can move above it to the realm of the sacred (Huizinga, 1949, pp. 4–19). Both of these forms are similar in that they allow the player to escape everyday realities (Stevens, 2007, p. 29). Play can be seen as "a voluntary departure from the mundane world of involuntary

routinization".(Lyman & Scott, 1975, p. 147) Stevens argues a similar point by acknowledging the importance of child's play, but emphasising that adult play, often overlooked, is a serious topic in its own right that can be used to stimulate and reconstruct space allowing for escape from surrounding social rules. (Stevens, 2007, pp. 1–28) This need to take play more seriously in the design of cities is echoed by Lefaivre in *Ground Up City Play* (Lefaivre & Döll, 2007, p. 71).

Play can be categorised into two forms: "paidia" and "ludus". *Paidia* is a freer play that refuses to accept limits and is instead a willing transgression of them. This form of play escapes societal constructs and explores new social connections. Ludus on the other hand is a more institutionalised and controlled play that presents itself as a game. These games follow rules and routines that are universally accepted by the players (Stevens, 2007, p. 33).

This idea of *ludus* is aligned with Stevens' definition of leisure within *The Ludic City*. He sees leisure as a more specific and controlled form of play, associated with a social construct that presents play within the confinement of particular practices - normally demarcated in certain spaces and times. The term "leisure" also has connotations with passive activities and attention to private life, self and family (Rojek, 1995, p. 16; Stevens, 2007, p. 28). This idea of leisure includes recuperation from work and the dissipation of accumulated recourses. In this sense, the term "leisure" has been partly occupied by capitalist ideas of time for workers to rest and spend their earned money through more passive forms of leisure which focus on consumption, including cinema and amusement parks. Stevens argues that this idea of leisure lacks the diversity and complexity that the city needs and that a freer play - or *paidia* - is capable of highlighting the urban experience (Stevens, 2007, pp. 28–33).

Fig 3 - Middle ages businessmen in suits - a toy maker and a potential buyers - showing the business behind play.

The idea of leisure as a more controlled sense of play may provide a way to build on an improved adult play which has become more controlled within society compared with child's play (Dargan & Zeitlin, 1990, p. 31). Adult play is seen as more acceptable if it occurs as a more controlled version of child's play. In the book *City Play*, Amanda Dragan and Steven Zeitlin identify that adults have taken games developed on the streets such as double dutch, street art and breakdancing, and have standardised rules and increased control. Children's response to increased control from adults can be to break the rules or to think of creative ways to misuse play equipment (Dargan & Zeitlin, 1990, p. 162). Even if adult play is more controlled and defined in comparison to child's play, Stevens argues that it occupies a broader range of behaviour and has a greater capacity to affect the urban environment. This is because adults have more knowledge, freedom and resources available to them than children (Stevens, 2007, p. 27).

A number of writers have also discussed the types of urban space that enable play. For instance, loose space is defined by Stevens as urban space that facilitates a rich variety of activities that the space was not designed for. Activities that generate loose space are not carried out for functional purposes. He defines them as being carried out for "leisure, entertainment, self-expression, political expression, reflection, and social interaction". (Franck & Stevens, 2006, p. 3) Loose spaces within the city can therefore be seen as spaces that allow enough freedom of use to be ideal places for play. The link between loose space and the category of *paidia* within play mentioned above are made clear when Stevens states that "looseness may serve as a 'time out' from everyday routines, as is apparent in spontaneous and optional activities, which are typically irregular in timing, duration and structure" (Franck & Stevens, 2006, p. 15). Alison and Peter Smithson (1953) add to this by describing how social groupings and interactions between people cannot be predicted and are instead a result of loose spatial organisation. They suggest that architects should aim to create spaces that allow for unexpected and spontaneous interactions between people.

This concept of loose space is investigated further by Stanford Anderson in *On Streets*, where he discusses the idea of latent space in architecture. He argues that the potential environment seen throughout the city is experienced by the city occupants as individual influential environments unique to individual interpretation. The gap between the potential environment and the influential environment then creates the unutilised latent environment. Anderson argues that spaces that have less defined uses provide more latent space and therefore allow more individual interpretation on how the space is used. (Anderson, 1978, pp. 7–11) This individual interpretation creates loose space and enables play to occur. Loose space provides people with the possibility to escape from everyday life.
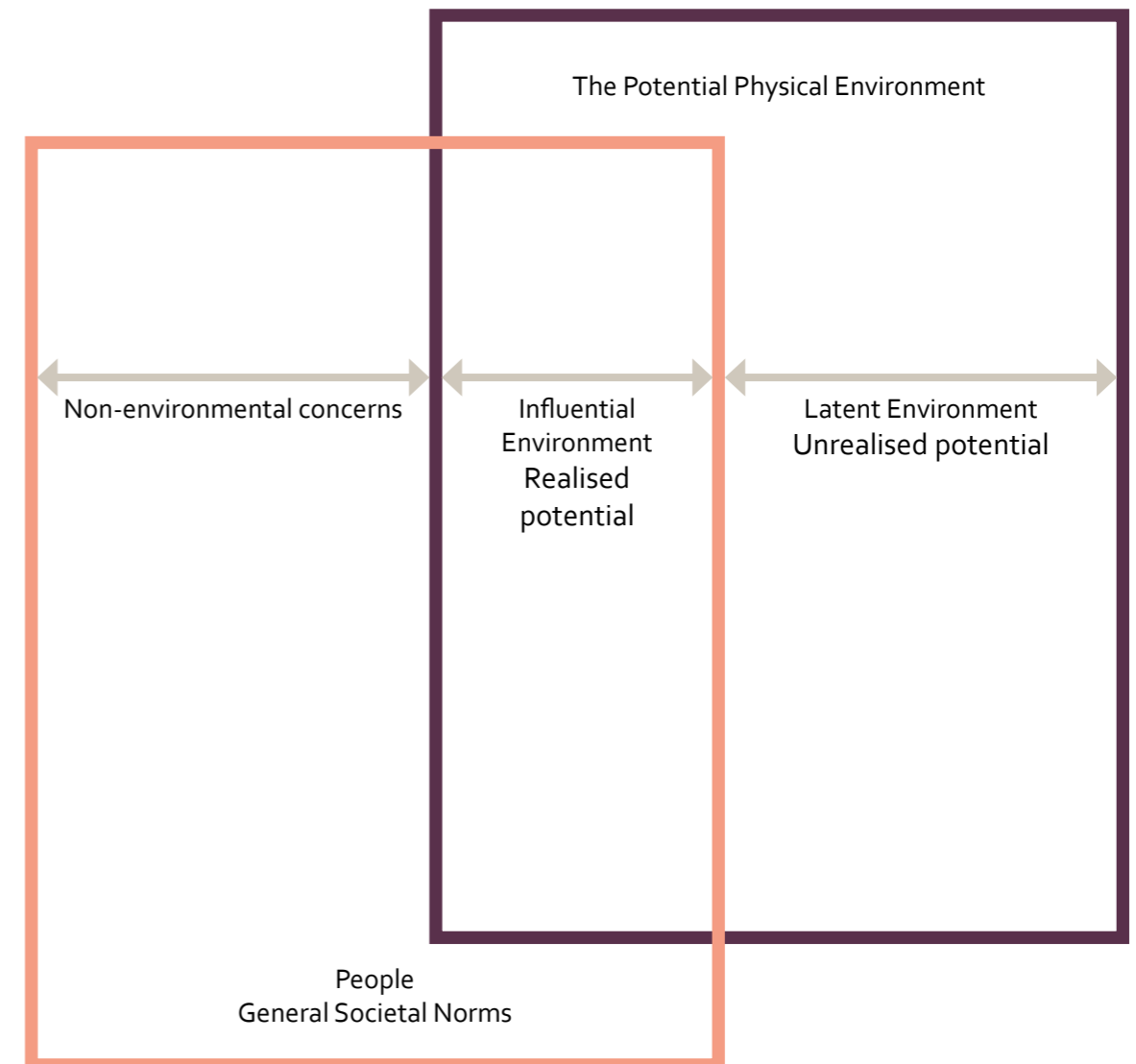

Fig 4 - Anderson's description of Social and physical environments yield influential and latent environments. Drawing by author after Anderson, 1978

In considering loose and latent space as ways to provide space for play within cities, we are confronted with how such spaces could be created or designed. The ideas of adhocism and bricolage can be looked to for ways of overcoming the standardisation of modern construction and in turn providing spaces in the city that are suitable for play. This is clear in Jenks' description of the aim of adhocism as "to personalise what was becoming globally homogenous" and "provide an environment which can be as visually rich and varied as actual urban life" (Jencks & Silver, 2013, p. viii,73). Both practices focus on using the materials and systems at hand instead of creating specific materials for a construction (Jencks & Silver, 2013, p. vii; Lévi-strauss, 1966, p. 17).

Bricolage is presented by Lévi-Straus in the book *The Savage Mind* as an instinctive way to discover and create. He cites the origin of the word from: "Bricoler - applied to billiards, to hunting, shooting and riding. It was however always used with reference to some extraneous movement: a ball rebounding, a dog straying or a horse swerving from its direct course to avoid an obstacle."(Lévi-strauss, 1966, p. 16) This description gives a sense of the intuitive nature of bricolage that can be contrasted with the highly reasoned world of science.

Lévi-Straus uses the instinctive nature of "the savage" to argue that bricolage is a fundamental human quality (Lévi-strauss, 1966). Using the same comparison Huizinga also sees "the savage" (along with the child and the poet) as occupying the world of play. He uses the rituals of the savages to form his argument that rituals are also a form of play - a set of rules that create an escape from reality (Huizinga, 1949, p. 26). These associations with the savage are used to demonstrate the fundamental nature of both play and bricolage within humans.

The role that the engineer and science has played in architecture is discussed by Colin Rowe and Koetter in *Collage City*. They argue that total design has begun for some time to appear as a rather dubious and fruitless enterprise. In contrast, they suggest a more intuitive approach influenced by a multiplicity of stimuli, aligning with the ideas of the role of the bricoleur (Rowe & Koetter, 1983, p. 51,53). Jan Gehl in *Life Between Buildings,* argues that the city structures of medieval times - which grew slowly on top of what came before - create more opportunity for life than the planned city that was introduced during the renaissance (Gehl, 2011, p. 41).

Bricolage proposes, instead of a top down total design approach, that the remains and debris of events in culture should be used to produce structure (Lévi-strauss, 1966, p. 22). This can be seen as a need to move away from the top down design of effective physical order and efficiency in the city and consider balancing this with more loose and latent space inspired by what is already found in local culture. Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown demonstrate this approach of observation and learning from our surroundings in *Learning from Las Vegas*. They propose enhancing what already exists in our environment instead of the modernist approach of changing environments (Venturi, Izenour, & Brown, 1977, p. 3).

In the same light as the bricoleur versus the engineer, Jenks describes Adhocism as a loose approach to a problem rather than a tight and systematic one. It is due to this loose way of combining parts that are not specifically designed for the job, that ad hoc creations are characterised by not being purely efficient and containing an element of redundancy or unused potential. Jenks argues that because of this, ad hoc creations are more open, suggestive and rich in possibilities compared to engineered solutions. These characteristic qualities of ad hoc products mean that they align with the ideas of latent space discussed by Anderson, enabling individual interpretation of how to engage with redundant characteristics. The extraneous material allows the user to imagine possible additional uses when compared with a perfectly engineered construction that only fulfil one purpose. (Jencks & Silver, 2013, pp. 15–37).

In addition, the process of creating in an ad hoc manner can also be considered as a form of play, as well as producing parts of the built environment that are rich in qualities that enable play. Jenks argues that creativity in finding new uses for items is an important characteristic of adhocism (Jencks & Silver, 2013, p. vii; Stevens, 2007, p. 218). This is something that adhocism shares with play, as argued by Dragan and Zeitlin in the chapter *Transformation* of the book *City Play*. In the introduction to the chapter, they state that "Transformation is the process of taking the rules, boundaries, images and characters of the real world and recasting them within the boundaries of play. At the heart of play is this process of taking a given space or object and devising a new use for it" (Dargan & Zeitlin, 1990, p. 106). The difference between bricolage, adhocism and play is therefore that play is not limited to the manipulation of just the physical environment but also social rules. Bricolage and adhocism also enable the creation of space for efficient purposes that are not playful, but with enough surplus space and material that play is possible.

Fig 5 - Go-cart made from a police barricade, Lower Manhattan, 1978 (photo by Martha Cooper)

Throughout the rest of the chapter *Transformation*, images of children engaging in bricolage are presented. It is noted that in poorer areas of the city, creating toys and play spaces from what can be found was more common than in wealthier areas. The improvement in wealth and availability of new technologies such as TV and computer games has clearly had an impact on how people play in urban spaces (Dargan & Zeitlin, 1990, p. 5). However, the availability of spaces for play in the urban setting is also a factor in how streets have changed from those seen in photographic studies of play and streetscapes.

Through modernisation, both the importance of re-use in construction of the built environment as well as in play has been lost. This is illustrated by a quote from Henry Callejo interviewed for the book city play:
"Henry Callejo of Astoria, Queens, saw his grandson discarding some used kitchen matches. He asked him to bring over the matches and explained to him what something as simple as a match might mean to a small child in Italy half a century ago; Callejo made a miniature house of match-sticks to demonstrate the importance of conservation" (Dargan & Zeitlin, 1990, p. 115).
Modernisation and standardization have certainly brought a better quality of life to a great number of people, helping to improve living conditions. However, at the same time this has reduced the need for people to harness the ideas of bricolage and to use what is at hand. A return to the world before the machine age is not wanted but there are certainly lessons to be learnt from the ways society functioned in the past.

The ideas of bricolage and adhocism raise the question: what is the architect's role in the design of the built environment? In *Adhocism*, Jenks argues that hierarchy in society, which architects are a part of, can have a negative force on allowing individuals to have full control of the built environment around them, adding that "the architect, bricklayer and occupant should be the same person"(Jencks & Silver, 2013, pp. 19, 65). This idea leaves less room for the architect and perhaps means that your role as a designer is to provide support and encourage others to create the spaces around them. Your role perhaps becomes largest in public projects that have the potential impact to inspire society and require someone to moderate and balance the many considerations involved.

Jenks also suggests that industrial items used in their intended context stifle individual development, but implementing new uses for such items can become refreshing through the contrast created (Jencks & Silver, 2013, p. 27). Perhaps in this way the architect's role is to implement bricolage and adhocism in their own work to create environments that stimulate people's creativity and show them that their own ideas are possible, breaking up systematic notions of use and opening society up to the endless possibilities available. The implementation of the ideas of bricolage and adhocism will create cities that provide greater looseness and opportunity for play, in turn allowing people to test their creativity and build social connections.

Fig 6 - Boy with a toy gun, Williamsburg, Brooklyn, 1986 (photo by Martha Cooper)

Image References

Figure 1 - Sketches by McGinlay Bell architects. From New Typologies, by McGinlay Bell, 2017. Retrieved 27
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Figure 2 – A sketch by Leon Krier commenting on architectural speech. From Leon Krier on sustainable
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from Architectural Review website: https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/leon-krier-on-
sustainable-urbanism-and-the-legible-city

Figure 3 - Middle ages businessmen in suits - a toy maker and a potential buyers - showing the business
behind play. From Play the system. *Architectural Review* (p.8), by Smith, M. , 2021

Figure 4 - Anderson's description of Social and physical environments yield influential and latent
environments. Drawing by author after Anderson, from People in the Physical Environment: The
Urban Ecology of Streets. In *On streets, by* Anderson, S., 1978, Mass: MIT Press.

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Fig 6 - Boy with a toy gun, Williamsburg, Brooklyn, 1986 (photo by Martha Cooper). From *City Play* (p.112),
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