THE LUDIC CITY
Exploring the potential of public spaces
Quentin Stevens
The Ludic City

Why do we have public spaces in cities? What are they for? What role do they have in everyday social life? The Ludic City argues that one of the fundamental functions of public space is as a setting for informal, non-instrumental social interaction, or play. The concept of play highlights the distinctive character of urban experience: the ways people sense urban settings, move through them and act within them. Play is an important but largely neglected aspect of people’s experience of urban society, and embraces a wide variety of activities which are spontaneous, irrational or risky, and which are often unanticipated by designers, managers and other users. Focusing on the playful uses of public space, this book provides a much-needed counterpoint to the instrumental pragmatism which dominates everyday urban life and the design of city spaces.

Drawing together arguments from the fields of urban design, planning, sociology, anthropology, philosophy and environmental psychology, this book provides a fresh and detailed depiction of play in the specific context of urban public space. By illustrating the forms that play takes, it reveals people’s creativity, curiosity and imagination in using urban space. The Ludic City draws upon extensive observation of behaviors in public spaces, with detailed studies of Melbourne, London, Berlin, New York and Brisbane. The findings suggest that even the most typical street corner or innocuous doorway can be a site for risk-taking, the display of identity and testing the limits of one’s own abilities.

The book will provide urban designers, policy-makers, planners and researchers with an awareness of how a playful, non-reductive understanding of space and social practice can positively shape urban design practice and public policy.

Quentin Stevens is Lecturer in Planning and Urban Design at the Bartlett School of Planning, University College London. He has a PhD in Urban Design from the University of Melbourne and has studied Architecture and Urban Planning in Melbourne, Berkeley and Chicago. He has also worked as an urban designer and planner in both Australia and the United States and is co-editor of Loose Space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life.
The Ludic City

Exploring the potential of public spaces

Quentin Stevens
The city must be a place of waste, for one wastes space and time; everything mustn’t be foreseen and functional...the most beautiful cities were those where festivals were not planned in advance, but there was a space where they could unfold.

(Lefebvre 1987: 36)
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Urban conditions and everyday life</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Play and the urban realm</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 The social dimensions of urban space</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Paths</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Intersections</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Boundaries</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Thresholds</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Props</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: fun follows form, fun follows ‘function’</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgements

Kim Dovey’s contribution to this work has been tremendous. The same goes for my academic development. Kim started teaching me right from my first week of university. Twenty years later, I have a lot to thank him for, and I hope we continue to have heated discussions for many years to come. Special thanks also to Karen Franck for her constant support, critique and insight. Thank you to George Hemmens for introducing me to the ideas of Henri Lefebvre and to the essays in Sorkin’s *Variations on a Theme Park*, and to Dana Buntrock for haranguing me constantly until I finally realized I would never really be satisfied until I did a PhD. You were right. The following people also deserve mention for their useful comments, advice and assistance: Iain Borden, Matthew Carmona, Hans-Peter Dreitzel, June Factor, John Friedmann, Bernardo Jiminez, Sandra Kadji-O’Grady, Ross King, Loretta Lees, Marissa Lindquist, John Macarthur, Kevin McDonald, Donald McNeill, Filipa Matos, Greg Missingham, David Naegler, Daniel Ross, Leonie Sandercock, Louie Sieh, Mark Tewdwr-Jones, Fran Tonkiss, Anna Tweeddale, Stephen Wood and Ian Woodcock. Thanks also to artist Candy Stevens for her excellent work on the book’s cover. Lastly I wish to thank my parents, as well as Simone, Victoria, Sally and Dagmar.

Acknowledgements


All maps and photographs are copyright of the author.
Introduction

What are public spaces for? Urban design often pursues such clear-cut instrumental goals as comfort, practicality and order. But the scope of everyday life in urban spaces is never completely subordinated to the achievement of predefined, rational objectives. People can be capricious and unpredictable. Urban spaces and the activities which occur in them constantly generate disorder, spontaneity, risk and change. Urban public spaces offer a richness of experiences and possibilities for action.

This book explores the playful uses of urban spaces. Play is an important but largely neglected aspect of people’s experience of urban society and urban space. It involves controversial expenditures of time and energy, ‘unfunctional’, economically inefficient, impractical and socially unredemptive activities which are often unanticipated by designers, managers and other users. Play reveals the potentials that public spaces offer.

The ways that people’s needs are expressed through their playful behavior in urban public space both extend beyond simple definitions of function and run contrary to the idea of function. The density and diversity of city life inevitably leads to tensions and contradictions between rational social organization and people’s other desires. Non-instrumental, playful behavior thrives on a continuing negotiation with the various forms of discipline, exploitation and spectacle which constitute the contemporary city. Play concentrates attention on practices which have a dialectical relation to the order, fixity and functional and semiotic determinism of built form.

To date there has been precious little focused empirical study of urban public spaces which can illuminate a ‘non-functional’ understanding of the use and design of public space: Lennard and Lennard (1984), Dargan and Zeitlin (1990) and Borden (2001b) are the few relevant works. Whyte (1980, 1988) and Gehl (1987) study where people choose to spend time in public spaces, and then offer clear and detailed analysis of the features of those environments that make people want to stop there. They thus relate non-instrumental behavior to urban design. However, their interest is mostly space-centered, looking at the general categories of everyday behavior of people in public spaces, the great majority of which are reasonably mundane,
pragmatic and predictable. They illustrate much about how and why public spaces work and do not work, but they only hint at the full variety of unexpected and impractical uses which people make of public spaces.

This book draws together observations of a wide range of everyday play activities in public spaces in a number of large cities – Melbourne, London, Berlin, New York and Brisbane – since the mid 1990s. What counts as ‘playful’ behavior clearly varies between and within cultures. The diversity, leisure and *jouissance* generated by urban life are also constantly being reappropriated and exploited by governments and investors to serve instrumental ends of power and profit. What appears to be play is by no means universal, nor is it always free and benign. Play is contingent, it exists among the tensions and contradictions of urban social life. It is first and foremost the mechanics of behavior, and not the place or social context, which are of interest here. Focusing on the less practical forms of social action sheds new light on the role that urban design plays in action. The kinds of social practices which can be labeled as ‘play’ are a fresh lens for viewing urban settings and for understanding their performance.

The idea that public space is not merely instrumental presents a challenge to those responsible for designing and managing urban space. The discipline of urban design has at its heart a very vague, abstract and potentially ambiguous concept: amenity. The concept of amenity lies at the nexus of two different fundamental issues. The first is the philosophical question of what makes a good environment, the desired mix of potentials and challenges which a setting should provide. Designing the public realm requires calibrating and serving the diverse needs of multiple individuals. Design and management which meet some groups’ needs for physical and psychological comfort can place significant constraints upon the desire-fulfillment of others, and ‘if public spaces prioritise one kind of need, then people not motivated by that need will be inclined to stay away’ (Mean and Tims 2005: 52). It is important to understand all the uses of the city, however unconventional, because the openness and publicness of urban space gain their meaning through the breadth of users and the varieties of actions that are pursued there. The second issue is the question of how spatial characteristics shape people’s experiences and behaviors. Amenity thus presumes an idea of function, in terms of both what resultant actions or experiences are desirable, and the ways physical environments help to make those outcomes possible. However, neither people’s desires nor their actions are sovereign, well-understood and fixed; both are contingent, a product of circumstance, and continually changing. It is difficult to predict the timing or location of unpragmatic activities like play. They tend to confound expectations. The amenity of the public realm thus means more than serving predetermined, practical functions. It can also be about the potential which design provides for expanding people’s experience and their capacities.
The first three chapters that follow provide a theoretical base for defining and understanding play in public space, working from general theories of urban society down to the specific dimensions of the human body. Chapter 1 is a broad critique of urban social life, following a theoretical lineage which stems from Surrealism. This discussion is organized around the idea that people’s experiences in urban space are characterized by a range of tensions: tensions between exchange value and use value, between the needs and actions of the collective and the individual, between alienation and participation, between the instrumental rationality of work and the creative freedom of play. The city is the most intense manifestation of the tensions of modern life, but urban public spaces also provide the conditions for resolving these tensions, by stimulating playful practices. Chapter 2 provides a definition of urban play behavior which draws primarily on anthropological and sociological knowledge. This framework identifies a range of oppositions between play and serious, productive activity, including the kinds of spatial and temporal conditions which set play apart from the everyday. Four distinct types of play are defined, emphasizing different ways that play transgresses norms of bodily action and perception and the body’s relation to space. Encounters with strangers define the public dimension of play. Chapter 3 examines the physical dimensions of sensory perception and social engagement which frame playful possibilities, focusing on bodily relations among strangers in public settings.

Chapters 4 to 8 provide detailed descriptions of play behavior in a diversity of urban public spaces. The chapters are organized around five kinds of settings where most play activities seem to occur: paths, intersections, boundaries, thresholds and props. Various playful acts are made possible by the formal qualities of these types of spaces. The everyday activities commonly associated with these spaces also help stimulate the possibility of play. These chapters examine how each setting relates to the main aspects of play covered in the theoretical chapters which precede them: the bodily mechanics of play actions, the spatial relations between bodies and the scope of sensory perceptions which surround people who play.

The concluding chapter is a consideration of how play might help to shape an agenda for the design and management of urban public spaces and the planning of urban areas. It explores three themes that are crucial to the wider experiential potential of urban space: functionality, access and public performance. These themes focus attention on the ways in which urban design can serve the definitions on play mapped out in Chapter 2, specifically in relation to the concepts of non-instrumentality, spatial separation and publicness. A fourth overarching theme explored is how different elements of urban structure and their arrangement frame particular experiential possibilities, and thereby specific forms of play.

The theoretical perspectives on play, instrumentality, chance, distraction and risk outlined in the early chapters, and the observational findings which
follow, provide ample grounds to reconsider urban design’s core knowledge base regarding the function, amenity and perception of urban space – the work of pioneers such as Lynch, Jacobs, Alexander and Gehl – and to rethink such venerable concepts as The Image of the City; the need for mixed primary uses and buildings of different ages; the distinction between necessary and optional activities; the uses of sidewalks and the need for small blocks; the flexibility of particular urban forms; and the ways in which urban activities, experiences and spaces are related to each other. Existing knowledge about the relations between built form and behavior turns out to also have a certain amount of unexpected usefulness for understanding more complex and unanticipated uses of open space.

Yet play by its nature remains creative, unpredictable and hard to qualify. Rather than trying to provide a definitive answer to the question of what urban public spaces are for, or should be for, the argument put forward in this book is that design and management need to ensure that the question remains open, to allow a certain amount of play. People are all different, and they play differently. No book can pretend to account for the full scope of ways in which people enjoy the freedoms of urban open space. The observations here do, however, illustrate some of the limits of urban design thinking and practice, as well as people’s great capacity to look beyond those limits and discover surprising potential in urban spaces.
Chapter 1

Urban conditions and everyday life

Cities are typically seen as the engines of modern economic life. Cities are thus principally planned to optimize work and other practical, rational, preconceived objectives, and are designed accordingly, with even leisure space serving well-defined functions. But people do not only gather together in cities to meet their basic physiological needs; they also come to cities searching for love, esteem and self-actualization, and to experience the diversity of the world around them and to learn to understand it (Maslow 1943). Cities have a wide range of functions and they serve a wide range of aspirations (Mumford 1961, 1996). Wirth famously defined the urban condition as ‘a relatively large, dense and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals’ (Wirth 1996: 190–91). But this expression misses the heart of the matter: it is the interactions among these diverse individuals, their mixing, which really constitutes urbanity, and which gives city life its special character and possibility. Urbanism without a certain degree of cosmopolitanism is just a mass of completely unconnected, alienated strangers. It is in public open spaces that people are best able and most likely to engage with the social diversity gathered together in cities.

The complexity and breadth of reasons that people are attracted to cities becomes more obvious when focus is shifted from the outcomes of their actions to the qualities of the experience itself. In this book, analysis of the special character of life in urban public space, as a milieu for people’s experiences and actions, focuses on two main elements: the particular dynamics of urban social relations, and a phenomenological account of urban spaces as perceived by people who use them.

The exploration of this theme is guided primarily by the writings of Henri Lefebvre, Walter Benjamin and the Situationist International. These authors all develop definitions of urbanism which they link ‘upward’ to a wider critique of contemporary society, and also ‘downward’ to an analysis of the everyday behavior of individuals in urban space. Their understandings of urbanism also present a conscious critique of the mainstream philosophies that purport to explain urban life.
Both Wirth’s ‘ecological’ model of urban society and its Marxian critique through political economy share two major limitations in their characterization of urban life (Gottdiener 1985). First, they cannot explain voluntaristic actions outside their own conceptual frameworks: on the one hand, instrumentally rational choice and on the other, the social relations of production. Second, they deny that the specific perceptions and behaviors of people within material space have any real significance for their social existence; indeed, they conceive of social relations as existing independently of space. Public space and the events that happen there are epiphenomena of society, or, at worst, a delusion, a false consciousness.

Lefebvre (1991b) argues that all forms of social experience are constituted in and through space. It is in urban spaces that the scope of what people experience as ‘everyday life’ continually develops. Lefebvre identifies three distinct aspects of the experience of urban space as a social milieu, his well-known ‘conceptual triad’. Spatial practices include all the material social interactions occurring within space to produce and reproduce a particular social formation. Put simply, these practices are what ‘actually’ occurs; they have direct physical and social consequences. Representations of space are the social codes through which people discuss and understand material space and spatial practices. These conventions include names and descriptions of places. People’s perceptions of the ‘reality’ of social life in space are filtered through what they ‘understand’, or ‘believe’, and how they come to know it. Representational spaces are spaces as lived by their inhabitants through complex symbolic association and imagery; ‘it overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects’ (Lefebvre 1991b: 39). These imaginings include real locations such as symbolic sites, as well as mental inventions of new possibilities for spatial practices: ideal, dystopian or alternative social and spatial formations. Representational spaces, whether they have material existence or not, are meanings, references to ideas about social space.

Lefebvre notes that these three aspects are always present and interrelated in any space which might be analyzed. Most critics of urban space examine spatial practices; Lefebvre’s concepts of representations of space and representational spaces extend beyond materialist analyses and emphasize the importance of the perception and constitution of meaning to the definition of what space is. However, if the aim is to understand the everyday social reality of the city, examining representations of space presents problems. Representations of space ‘tend . . . toward a system of verbal . . . signs’ (Lefebvre 1991b: 39): they are designed as a form of knowledge, distanced and abstracted from experience. They are shaped to be communicated – with clear purposes in mind – and not to be lived directly, and hence they suppress many of the contingent nuances of practices and inventions. They are also shaped as part of the broader power relations operating in society, and hence they tend to be more sharply ideological than the other aspects of space. Space as conceptualized ‘is the dominant space in any society . . . tied to the
relations of production and to the “order” which those relations impose' (Lefebvre 1991b: 38–39, 33). Such terms as ‘urban’, ‘public’ and ‘open space’ both inscribe and disguise social power relations; they do not necessarily bring closer knowledge of what life in urban space is really like.

Urban experience and social needs are more than mere conceptual abstractions; they can be understood by looking at everyday life on the streets, at its specific and diverse qualities, at the meanings it might have for those who live it, and in particular at the complex tensions which arise between different needs, different meanings and different users in spaces. Lefebvre, Benjamin and the Situationists also all identify social practices of play as key to understanding the dynamic tensions which shape everyday life in public. This chapter explores in turn the way that urban conditions shape particular dynamics of spatial behavior, sensory perception, and needs, closing with an examination of the role of leisure within everyday urban life. The idea of play constantly emerges within this discussion as a key aspect of urban experience, although different facets of its significance are revealed.

**Urban spatial practices**

Both Chicago School and structuralist Marxist thinking on the city focus around the idea that the organization of urban spatial patterns and practices are largely determined by economic forces. These forces aim to optimize production and consumption by different social groups through economies of scale and agglomeration or opportunities for the expropriation of profit. Lefebvre contributes to this argument an analysis of how capital markets and the state organize urban space to produce the social relations of industrial mass production (Gottdiener 1985). However, ‘There is not . . . a strict correspondence between modes of production and the spaces they constitute’ (Lefebvre 1987: 31).

At the base of Lefebvre’s own theorization is an analysis of urban space and urban life as a social fact. He argues that urbanism is not merely an induced effect of rational production. His proof is historical: cities existed in pre-capitalist times and have served a broad range of social functions in addition to enhancing production. Each city can be understood as a comprehensive, distinctive cultural artifact and a complex totality of cultural practices both old and new. These different facets are embraced by his use of the term *oeuvre* (Lefebvre 1996). His critique of ‘functional’ urban planning and his alternative vision can be summarized thus:

[The city] figures in planning as a cog: it becomes the material device apt to organize production, control the daily life of producers and the consumption of products . . . It did not have, it has no meaning but as an *oeuvre*, as an end, as a place of free enjoyment, as domain of use value. (Lefebvre 1996: 126)
Lefebvre goes on to identify two essential ways in which cultural life and social life struggle to find their realization through urban spatial conditions (Martins 1982). The first of these is the assembly of the full diversity of the population and their activities, their focused centrality in space and simultaneity in time, and their participation in the management and development of social space:

The *right to the city* . . . stipulates the right to meeting and gathering; places and objects must answer to certain ‘needs’ generally misunderstood, to certain despised and moreover transfunctional ‘functions’: the ‘need’ for social life and a centre, the need and the function of play, the symbolic function of space.

(Lefebvre 1996: 195, emphasis in original)

Urban culture is not a tidy, static fact, and its practices will inevitably be multiple, contradictory and dynamic. Economies of scale in the city support specialization, which leads to further differentiation of social identities and occupations. Specialization diminishes the significance of the extended family as the locus of social life, and leads to more numerous and complex interrelations between heterogeneous individuals who have no primary ties (Wirth 1996). The processes of growth and differentiation in cities mean there is a certain amount of instability and change in urban living.

Second, ‘The Right to Difference’ means ‘not being classified within pre-established categories’ (Martins 1982: 183). While industrial mass production attempts to homogenize urban spatial activity, urban society differentiates (Lefebvre 1991b). Because of its diversity, urban social life brings about the satisfaction of a wide range of human needs. Yet it also modifies and creates new needs, and people constantly struggle to reshape social space to reflect and to serve these new needs (Lefebvre 1991a, 1991b).

These two themes of concentration and diversity are familiar from Wirth’s formulation of the urban. Lefebvre also highlights a third distinct condition, which relates to the other two, but is something new: the city frames opportunities for play (Lefebvre 1991b, 1996). While a variety of instrumental imperatives may cause people to live together in cities, dense spaces and heterogeneous populations can make a significant contribution to social development only where there are chance encounters, social mixing, exploration of the unfamiliar and risk; when there is an escape from instrumental social relations. These are the part of the social *oeuvre* which finds its fulfillment in the open public spaces of cities. While most productive work and social reproduction occur in carefully framed settings, play thrives on the density and diversity of people and experiences to be found in urban public space. The concept of play embraces many of the forms of urban social life which can be appreciated as having use value, as ends in themselves. Yet at the same time, play is a lived critique of instrumentally rational action,
because it discovers new needs and develops new forms of social life. Lefebvre proposes that it is practices of play which best illustrate the capacities for social action and expression which the urbanization of society has made possible.

The density and diversity of people gathered together in cities give urban social life a distinctive character: it is fundamentally about encounters and interactions among people who are different, and through such interactions the discovery and realization of diverse needs. It is within public spaces that many of these contacts occur. Lefebvre describes the particular social ambience surrounding these urban encounters thus:

> The form of the urban, its supreme reason, namely simultaneity and encounter, cannot disappear . . . as a place of encounters, focus of communication and information, the urban becomes what it always was: place of desire, permanent disequilibrium, seat of the dissolution of normalities and constraints, the moment of play and of the unpredictable.

(Lefebvre 1996: 129, emphasis in original)

Here Lefebvre makes several distinct points about how and why urban encounters are playful. The city is a site for multiplicitous practices of desire and not only of systematic, instrumental necessity. Many social encounters in cities are sudden, unplanned and unpredictable, and this means urban behavior is spontaneous and creative. Urban life means engaging with and developing behavior which is unfamiliar, testing the usefulness of pre-existing social rules and roles (Phillips and LeGates 1981). Thus it is that urbanization weakens the traditions, conventions, rhythms and social structures which generally guide practical action, broadening the oeuvre:

> the development of cities . . . the concentration of different ethnic and/or professional groups in the same space, with in particular the overthrow of spatial and temporal frameworks, favors the confrontation of different cultural traditions, which tends to expose their arbitrariness practically, through first-hand experience, in the very heart of the routine of the everyday order, of the possibility of doing the same things differently, or, no less important, of doing something different at the same time.

(Bourdieu 1977: 233, emphasis in original)

A wide scope of activities, both practical and playful, occur in any given urban space at different times, under different conditions, and often even at the same time or under the same conditions. This dynamic social context affects the way individual acts are conducted. Bourdieu uses a spatial illustration to explain his concept habitus which helps illustrate the impact
of urban space on the conduct of those who use it. He refers to the different social positions and social distances of people brought together in physical space, depicting *habitus* as "so many reminders of this distance and of the conduct required in order to "keep one’s distance" or to manipulate it strategically" (Bourdieu 1977: 82). The proximity and chance nature of encounters in urban public space frequently disturb such expectations, and heighten tensions. As Edensor (1998: 217) argues, ‘disorganized’ urban spaces ‘challenge the physical and mental dispositions . . . by confrontation with different orders of sensory experience, social interaction, regulation and movement’. Sennett (1974: 49) similarly notes that public space is an ‘amorphous milieu . . . where no-one is really sure what appropriate standards of behavior are’, and that the strangers encountered in the city are ‘unknown quantities’. Nevertheless, many of the everyday actions people perform in the city are significantly shaped by their publicness, the extent to which they involve or are consciously directed toward strangers (Lofland 1998). The acknowledgement and mediation of the mutual impacts of people’s actions leads to the development of social graces, ‘behavior which all agree to treat arbitrarily as “proper” and believable’. This gives people ‘means to be sociable, on impersonal grounds’ (Sennett 1974: 49, 64). People must adapt their own perceptions, inclinations and abilities to suit the unexpected, unfamiliar circumstances of urban social space. And yet in the majority of the many potentially tense social situations which arise in daily urban life, people ignore or tolerate the strange behavior of others, and it is this ‘sense of freedom from judgment that many people report . . . as a major pleasure of being “out in public”’ (Lofland 1998: 32).

The processes of growth and differentiation in cities also mean there is a certain amount of instability and change in the individual’s own way of life (Sennett 1971). Mumford portrays the city as an engine of continuous social development:

> In the city, the making and remaking of selves . . . is one of its principal functions . . . each urban period provides a multitude of new roles and an equal diversity of new potentialities. These bring about corresponding changes in laws, manners, moral evaluations, costume, and architecture, and finally they transform the city as a living whole.

(Mumford 1996: 116)

The city provides the opportunity for people to address their various needs by exploring new possibilities in life, by expanding their *habitus*, in large part through their encounters with others. Sennett (1974) points out that the accumulation of surplus wealth in the city engenders a leisure lifestyle, where social relations are released from the burden of functional necessity. In such circumstances, one is likely to encounter strangers in the city in situations where ‘you are not meeting for some functional purpose, but
meeting in the context of nonfunctional socializing, of social interaction for its own sake’ (Sennett 1974: 118). The playful theatricality of roles and masks in urban encounter can thus be understood as an expression of ‘natural passions’ which ‘[transcend] work, family and civic duty’, transgressing and reshaping the rules of social engagement (Sennett 1974: 116). One’s sense of self becomes developed through the manipulation of one’s appearance in the eyes of strangers. It is primarily in urban public spaces that individuals can act publicly, communicate with the public. Some actions, such as performances of identity and political statements, need to be displayed publicly if they are to have any meaning or purpose at all (Arendt 1958). For Lefebvre play between the various parts of the social whole, unfettered, unpredictable, and above all expressive engagement among the full diversity of persons and practices, is a key purpose and outcome of the centralizing function of urban space. This playful function of society can be considered to be just as significant to the constitution of cities as rationality and productivity.

Having presented play as a basic component of use value, as a ‘function’ of cities, Lefebvre also draws upon play as an example when he looks in detail at the impact of capitalism upon urban space. There are three key features of the transformation of urban space by capitalism. It is homogenized and fragmented, so that it can be exchanged as a commodity, and put in the service of accumulation. This fragmented space is a matrix of ‘determinate locations of production and consumption’ (Lefebvre 1991b: 341) which ‘divide life into closed, isolated units’ (The Lettrist International 1996: 44). At the same time urban space is strategically hierarchized and revalorized (both concretely and symbolically) into centers and peripheries which both ‘reflect and contribute to the overall social hierarchy’ (Martins 1982: 178, emphasis in original). Free-time behavior is also subjected to spatial reorganization under capitalism, to serve goals of social domination and accumulation:

witness the predominance of ‘amenities’, which are a mechanism for the localization and ‘punctualization’ of activities, including leisure pursuits, sports and games. These are thus concentrated in specially equipped ‘spaces’ which are as clearly demarcated as factories in the world of work... within a space which is determined economically by capital, dominated socially by the bourgeoisie, and ruled politically by the state.

(Lefebvre 1991b: 227)

The Situationists likewise critiqued city planning’s creation of ‘reservations for “leisure” activities separated from the society’, suggesting that ‘[no] spatiotemporal zone is completely separable’ (Kotanyi and Vaneigem 1996: 117). They presented the concept of ‘unitary urbanism’ as both a critique of and a response to the capitalist city, with leisure providing the best illustration of potential freedom and of refutation:
Even if, during a transitional period, we temporarily accept a rigid division between zones of work and residence, we should at least envisage a third sphere: that of life itself (the sphere of freedom, of leisure – the truth of life). Unitary urbanism acknowledges no boundaries; it aims to form a unitary human milieu in which separations such as work/leisure or public/private will finally be dissolved.

(Debord 1996b: 81–82)

Capitalist fragmentation of the city and its social practices has a negative impact on the potentials which urban conditions provide for leisure and play. Social practices of play are stimulated by the density and diversity of urban populations and their actions, but some aspects of these practices are lost if they become tied to functionally and symbolically determined locations.

A third context within which Lefebvre evokes play is when he describes how the distinct social processes of urbanization and industrialization are linked dialectically. The social relations of urbanism reveal the contradictions of the abstract social relations of production. Lefebvre depicts the central tension in contemporary society’s use of urban space as being between the abstract space of production, structured by exchange value and defined and reified by representations of space, and ‘social space, or the space of use values produced by the complex interactions of all classes in the pursuit of everyday life’: in other words, space as lived (Gottdiener 1985: 127). In terms of social practices,

urban life . . . attempts to foil dominations, by diverting them from their goal . . . In this way the urban is more or less the oeuvre of its citizens instead of imposing itself upon them as a system, as an already closed book.

(Lefebvre 1996: 117, emphasis in original)

Lefebvre thus also presents play as an important tactic in the struggle over space where use value seeks to elude and overcome the strictures of exchange value and imagination tries to surmount the limits of present realities.

In summary, Lefebvre suggests that individuals’ aspirations for urban social practices are enabled by the assembly of social differences and a diversity of activities in space. This concentration brings about conditions of chaos, chance and change, the breaking down of structures and constraints. These conditions encourage and support play as a mode of engaging with difference. The segmentation of social life by capitalism highlights the threat which play poses, as evidence of a non-instrumental, non-commodifiable basis for urban social relations. It also reveals the special potential of play to respond dialectically to instrumentality.
The perception of urban space

The urban social practices which Lefebvre describes are all shaped by the context of actors’ perceptions, understandings and expectations about social rules, about ‘the public’, and about spaces. This perception and interpretation of spaces, practices and meanings is an active process; meanings and rules are not just passively received. The key concept which distinguishes Lefebvre’s notion of representational spaces is symbolism. Representational spaces, which in part exist in people’s imaginations, tends toward non-verbal symbols and signs. Notions about what the city means and what it communicates are also a key focus in the writings of Walter Benjamin. Many themes in Benjamin’s work parallel Lefebvre’s thesis, examining the connections between capitalism and specifically urban social relations. Benjamin’s interest lies in the perception of the city itself; the ways the city frames perception of other objects and aspects of social life; and playful actions which respond to those perceptions. Benjamin, like Lefebvre, is critical of the kinds of cultural messages which are encoded in urban form.

Savage (1995) describes Benjamin’s interest in cities as residing in the relationships between history, experience, memory and the physical environment. The urban built environment is a distinctive symbolic medium. It is encoded and decoded with historical traces and other cultural information in ways which are specific to it, and which differ from the symbolism of other media such as literature and film. People’s perceptions of this information subsequently impact the way they behave in the city.

One significant difference between the city and other media is that even in an age of industrial mass production, mass media and mass consumption, cities retain their specificity. This view reinforces the distinction which Lefebvre makes between urbanism and industrialization. Each city has distinctive character which is linked to local landscape, climate and materials. The built form of each city also retains an historical depth of relations to patterns of social behavior (traditions, conventions, techniques), and social meanings that are continually built up through association with these behavior patterns. Cities retain an aura, and urban experience retains connections to this deep and robust reality. This auratic, individual quality is illustrated in Benjamin’s descriptions of Naples, Moscow and Marseilles.

The city, as an object of perception, remains at a distance from the observer. It retains an otherness and does not easily yield to the consumption of meaning. Although it connects to memory, it cannot be fully known. It is both familiar and unfamiliar to the gaze. The city can be a strange and terrifying place. There is difficulty and risk involved in engaging with it and trying to understand it. The difficulty of perception comes from people’s lack of control over the way they encounter history and memory in the city. Benjamin’s writing suggests that urban space and urban social life have a specific impact on how objects (and hence meanings) are presented to the
senses and the kinds of relationships in which things are perceived. He argues that the city transforms the character of experience: it intensifies, stultifies, diminishes, fetishizes and sequesters (Gilloch 1996). The nature of the experience of meaning in urban spaces is best evoked in Benjamin’s depiction of the city as a labyrinth. The city is a collection of objects shoved together in confusion, without any overriding order or purpose to their communication. Urban perception is characterized by multiplicity and complexity: ‘urban spaces are, if anything, “over-inscribed”: everything therein resembles a rough draft, jumbled and self-contradictory’ (Lefebvre 1991b: 42). For the individual walking through the city, images of the past and present are confronted at random and can be freely associated. These images may provide surprise (even involuntary) triggers for memories of a collective history, traditions and rituals which had been forgotten through subsequent physical and social changes (Buck-Morss 1991). Such images are also an important way that culture is transmitted and reproduced (Lefebvre 1991b).

Both Benjamin and Lefebvre had acquired from the Surrealists the view that urbanism is both something objective and something dreamt or mythological (Buck-Morss 1991). Bourdieu’s explanation of the mythological potential of material space is that it becomes structured by ‘objectifying operations which the mind applies to it’, by ‘principles of vision’ framed within habitus (Bourdieu 1977: 91, 1998: 8). The reality of the world is the sense that people make of it. Inhabited space ‘objectifies’ the ‘mythico-ritual’ symbolic structures of the world, and becomes a ‘tangible classifying system [which] inculcates and reinforces the taxonomic principles . . . of this culture’ (Bourdieu 1977: 89). That is to say, material space helps to frame and reproduce structures of meaning. While Bourdieu suggests the ‘symbolic products’ of habitus, including works of art and myths, have ‘an educative effect’ which helps to reproduce habitus (Bourdieu 1977: 217 fn40), the experience of myths and other symbols in the city can lead to learning which is open-ended and not merely reproductive. Benjamin’s arguments suggest that urban space does not entirely make sense. It also often disturbs schemes of perception.

Benjamin and Lefebvre consider two sides of mythology in the modern city. On the one hand, cities are the locus of bourgeois false consciousness: the myths of modernity, including individualism and progress (Gilloch 1996; Lefebvre 1996). The social relations of the modern city are mythologized in part through spatial representations. Framed by the mythic demands of instrumental exchange and mass production and utility, the activities and meanings of life becomes fragmented into separate spaces. One realm is private life, where an individual can supposedly ‘be themselves’ and look inward to constitute meaning, although it is now primarily mass-produced commodities which organize meaning (Benjamin 1997). Leisure becomes confined to specific, separated spaces such as cafés which reinforce and reproduce bourgeois values and social relations (Lefebvre 1971, 1991a,
Urban public life, on the other hand, becomes reconstituted as ‘an immense accumulation of spectacles’ where ‘[all] that once was directly lived becomes mere representation’ (Debord 1994: 12). The city structures new social relations through the collective consumption of mass-produced commodities and experiences, in particular mass media symbolism which provides the false consciousness of social unity, disguising the contradictions at the heart of modern social relations of mass production. In contrast to pre-industrial society, where the specificity of place and action framed and legitimized habitual social practices, the mass production and consumption of commodities and symbols in the modern city engenders instrumental reactions from the individual (Buck-Morss 1991; Gilloch 1996).

Benjamin also considered the modern city to hold the potential for demythification and the creation of new meanings. In common with the Surrealists, he ‘viewed the constantly changing new nature of the urban-industrial landscape as itself marvelous and mythic’ (Buck-Morss 1991: 256). Unlike other auratic forms of art, which are experienced through concentration, the complexity of urban imagery is perceived in a state of distraction. Reading and interpretation of urban form and spatial practices occurs while people are pursuing other intentions. In contrast to the focus of vision, cities assault all the senses continuously. Cities are not locked into specific modes of receiving or absorbed by the conceptual frames of reference which surround other auratic art forms. The viewer thus also retains a critical distance from the medium:

> Cities, as built environment, contain the potential for the recovery of memory which is an essential element in redemption, yet they avoid the conservative, cultic, ritualistic elements which usually wrap around the auratic object.

(Savage 1995: 212)

While historical meanings are encoded in urban form, perception is also the active process of decoding and employing these meanings in practice. A person’s experience of the city triggers memory, but it does not compel them to relate to it in a specific fashion. People’s incidental engagements with urban artifacts mean that memory and meaning (and hence, social conventions) are themselves also encountered in a state of distraction, and it becomes possible to recognize, question and dislocate these conventions.

Benjamin notes that the variety and constant flux of urban experience, the complexity of conceptual relations awakened by the urban labyrinth, shocks expectations. This also leads to the undermining of order, the dislocation of conventional dualisms, including the polarity of tradition and modernity. The city is both old and modern, not only a place filled with memory but also the center of social transformation. The city does not merely evoke the past. Urban images may also gain new power and purpose, and
may evoke and create history as present and future (Gilloch 1996). In this respect, the city is a space for the play of possibility. The detachment of the modern city from traditional spatial practices and representations frees the vestigial symbolic potency of its aural objects. Instead of being organized to sanctify traditional social relations of domination, urban images (whether objects or social practices) exist as residues and fragments of social memories, dreams and aspirations which can be applied to the task of social transformation through the creation of new myths (Buck-Morss 1991). In relation to conventional social behaviors, urban public spaces in general are profane rather than sacred. The city streets are promiscuous, permissive, a quality which Benjamin characterizes through the figure of the prostitute (Brown-May 1998). This freedom which the city inspires can be likened to the rule-bending and rule-breaking of play.

It is in the notion of the modern city as the site for the rediscovery, transformation and redeployment of mythic images that Benjamin’s analysis of urban experience can be linked with his various observations on play and games. A rich material and symbolic world remains available for (re)discovery and creative use. One form of urban play, initiated by the Surrealists, is wandering, free from goals, compulsions and inhibitions, in a heightened state of distraction. Allowing oneself to be led by fate or caprice, one can lose oneself and one’s way in the labyrinth of the city, and can encounter both familiar and unfamiliar objects without necessarily having an instrumental purpose for them. Such activity allows the rediscovery of the world as both old and new through chance exposure to what Benjamin terms ‘dialectical images’, images perceived in fragments, detached from conventional meanings, which could arouse unfamiliar and contradictory juxtapositions of concrete reality, meanings and memories in the viewer (Buck-Morss 1991). For Benjamin, the practice of wandering is personified by the flâneur wandering the streets in a casual but alert manner. The aim of the Situationists in their practice of the dérive (or ‘drift’) was similarly to ‘drop their usual motives for action . . . and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there’ (Debord 1996c: 22). The dérive encouraged situations: the bringing together of aspects of the city which were previously separated in time and space. This convergence created temporary changes in social conditions (Lefebvre 1997a). The Situationists’ aim was to understand ‘the urban environment as the terrain of a game in which one participates’ (Sadler 1998: 120, citing Author unknown 1996b: 84). Their dérive highlights that wandering is not purely a matter of chance, but can also be a practice of intentional experimentation, drawing upon the dynamism and the potential for play which was latent in the urban milieu.

In modern urban space, social boundaries, cues and conventions can be recognized but also disregarded and transgressed (Lyman and Scott 1975). Benjamin saw play, like cities, as ‘both mythic and demythifying’ (Gilloch
1996: 84). The city creates conditions for play because, like play activity itself, it situates objects in new, unconventional relationships, it enhances the recognition of connections which are not about instrumentality or power. It is a center of possibilities which become realized through the decoding and recoding of its images and practices. One way to free mythic images from their status as spectacle and commodity is to intentionally misrecognize their exchange values. The Situationists sought to open up the possibilities of new relationships between social images, to unlock their mythic power, through the process of détourment, ‘the hijacking of commodities (that carry with them a prescribed reading or utility) into heavily coded, unfamiliar contexts. In a word, détourment is the reterritorialisation of the object’ (Ball 1987: 34). The concept of détourment suggests ‘detouring, deflection, and the sudden reversal of a previous articulation or purpose’ (Ball 1987: 32). Détourment is a ‘subversive plagiarism’ (Plant 1992: 88). While it evokes familiar meanings, it undermines their authority, both by turning them against themselves, and by denying any certainty of meaning. In doing so, it makes possible the reclamation of lost meanings and ‘reveal[s] a totality of possible social and discursive relations which exceeds the spectacle’s constraints’ (Plant 1992: 87). As such, détourment offers a critique of the symbols through which people make sense of everyday life. While ‘détourment characterized the upsetting of relationships with people, cities and ideas [through] games, dérives and constructed situations’ (Plant 1992: 89), détourment can also be understood as an analysis of the way urban space functions in people’s everyday perception, reterritorializing every image in new, uncommodified and often irrational relationships.

Contrasting the fetishization of the exchange value of the commodity, Benjamin describes child’s play focusing on the waste and byproducts of the adult world which can be found in the urban landscape (Gilloch 1996). Such objects are already freed from their commodity status. In play, these objects are brought together in new intuitive relationships through a process of ‘playful (re)construction’ (Gilloch 1996: 88). Such relationships may arise from the recognition of similarities among objects or places which are formal rather than instrumental, and this mode of perception becomes possible in a state of distraction, standing outside received myths of origin, purpose and value. Urban space and its symbols are perceived in a state of distraction, outside the focus of people’s vision and outside instrumental frames of reference (Savage 1995; Gilloch 1996).

Another linking theme between cities and play is the richness and heightening of sensory experience, the closeness and concreteness of urban experience. Unlike other auratic forms of art, which are experienced through concentration, the city assaults all the senses continuously, awakening a wide range of meanings and desires. The Situationists saw the dérive as a means to knowledge about what they called psychogeography: ‘the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously
organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals . . . the sensations they provoke’ (Debord 1996a: 18–20). Like Benjamin they believed that such knowledge came to people in a state of distraction while wandering, and that large cities were particularly conducive to this kind of distracted attraction.

The auratic nature of cities also means that they retain a certain sovereign ‘otherness’ in relation to the viewer and user. Objects of play are likewise approached with a sense of reciprocity, and not with an instrumental or fetishistic attitude. The player avoids predetermined hierarchies of value, and this extends to their own relation to things perceived. The spontaneity of exposures and interactions also denies the possibility of instrumental conquest (Gilloch 1996). A third linking theme is the permissive freedom of the anonymous city streets, which can be likened to the rule-bending and rule-breaking of play.

In summary, the city inspires play because people’s movements and perceptions within it constantly arouse a wide range of meanings and memories which do not sit tidily within conventional expectations and trajectories. These loose and unfamiliar phenomena can be employed to create new experiences and new contexts for action.

Benjamin’s perspective on how people perceive meaning in urban space, which is very much focused on modern consumer society, provides a strong contrast to the many critiques which highlight the spectacularization of urban space today: the contrivance of architecture, urban planning, public art and civic ceremony to carefully channel the public’s desires for excitement, exoticism, freedom and awareness of identity into pre-packaged images and increasingly passive forms of leisure, with the aim of serving instrumental agendas of private profit and social order (Harvey 1989; Sorkin 1992; Gottdiener 1997; Hannigan 1998). Lefebvre (1991b) suggests that this domination of spatial representations by capital and governments, achieved in part through the wholesale reorganization of social space and the design of separate leisure landscapes, is just as important as the domination of other, more ‘concrete’ means of social production.

But just as with spatial practices, the oeuvre of spatial representations is not so easily subsumed to functional ends. Unlike television and other mass media, urban space is a representational medium through which everyone’s social life is lived, where its values are continuously being both read and written, often in creative and unexpected ways. Playful acts show people’s continued capacity for the invention, discovery, appropriation, contestation, reappropriation and expansion of the meanings that urban spaces can convey. Because social behavior in public is not purely and simply functional, it can be an active, interpretive and expressive response to meaning. The complexity of the city and the diversity of its users mean that there are often contradictions and tensions between meanings received and produced.
The city and everyday life

When Lefebvre and Benjamin describe the concrete and symbolic dimensions of urban experience, and the impact of capitalism upon this experience, they are focusing upon the plane of individual actions and responses. The terrain of their investigation is things that happen to ordinary people and what ordinary people do. Where their discussion of practices and perceptions has focused on defining urban life in contrast to rural or industrialized life, the concept of everyday life defines a particular philosophical perspective on what the structure and content of urban life is. It provides a useful framework within which to understand how various kinds of social activities and values relate to each other within an individual’s life and, correspondingly, the ways in which the city organizes these experiences in time and space.

Lefebvre uses everyday life in the same sense as he uses the concepts of use value, urbanism and oeuvre, to include the full scope of social acts, in contrast to the ordered rationality of instrumentally productive work. The concept of everyday life addresses several general themes. It attempts to embrace both concrete experiences and conceptual abstractions. The activities of a life are viewed as an undifferentiated, uncategorized totality, and this totality is argued to have a collective style which is locally and historically specific. Everyday life is claimed to have depth, immediacy and authenticity. The concept emphasizes life’s cyclical and repetitive nature, its attachment to seasons and to tradition in general. The concept of everyday life allows a range of sociological oppositions and tensions to be brought together in a temporal and behavioral framework (Lefebvre 1991a, 1997b). But this is not to say that the complex of social pursuits which make up everyday urban life is itself tidily resolved. In their great diversity and change-ability, ‘the social needs inherent to urban society’ are both complementary and contradictory:

Social needs . . . opposed and complementary . . . include the need for security and opening, the need for certainty and adventure, that of organization of work and of play, the need for the predictable and unpredictable, of similarity and difference, of isolation and encounter, exchange and investments, of independence (even solitude) and communication, of immediate and long-term prospects. The human being has the need . . . to see, to hear, to touch, to taste and the need to gather these perceptions in a ‘world’. To these . . . can be added . . . the need for creative activity, for the oeuvre . . . for information, symbolism, the imaginary and play. Through these specified needs lives and survives a fundamental desire of which play, sexuality, physical activities such as sport, creative activity, art and knowledge are particular expressions and moments, which can more or less overcome the fragmentary division of tasks.

(Lefebvre 1996: 147)
Lefebvre’s listing of numerous oppositions suggests that the needs which are served by urban life are not purely instrumental or normative, and that these needs are not pursued in a coordinated and efficient manner. Uncertainty and disorganization are, he argues, just as important to life as their opposites. He also states that ‘ambiguity is a category of everyday life’, refuting the idea that the full scope of different social needs can be adequately catered for or even categorized (Lefebvre 1991a: 18). The Situationists further note that social laws and human needs and habits are not fixed, but change through history (The Lettrist International 1996). Urban conditions make possible a wider range of lifestyles and they also help to increase the diversity of everyday life as it emerges through social processes such as play.

Lefebvre’s and the Situationists’ critiques of the modern world center around the total occupation of everyday life by capitalism, ‘the concentration-camp organization of life’ (Author unknown 1996a: 118). Even non-productive sectors of the economy, such as leisure, aesthetics and urbanism, are reorganized to serve the reproduction of the social relations of mass production and consumption and instrumental exchange (Martins 1982). Lefebvre (1991a) draws upon Marx’s analysis of the commodity to explain the implications of capitalist reorganization for everyday life and social practices. The key theoretical concept he employs is alienation. Under the terms of capitalist exchange, places, objects and practices which at one time may have formed an enduring core for the individual’s sense of themselves and their place in the world have become external to them, detached. In particular, ‘the mysterious, the sacred and the diabolical, magic, ritual, the mystical’, which were originally the most immediate and intense aspects of everyday life, have become demoted and displaced under capitalism (Lefebvre 1991a: 117). Benjamin’s writings also document the disenchantment of everyday life in the modern metropolis: ‘It is here that play is transformed into toil, curiosity into fetishism, reciprocity into tyranny, spontaneity into drudgery’ (Gilloch 1996: 91). The Situationists go so far as to claim that ‘urbanism makes alienation tangible’ (Vaneigem 1996: 127).

Lefebvre’s discussions of everyday life and urbanism both center around the contradiction between use value (everyday life and the city) and exchange value (modern industrial production) and the dialectical tension between them (Lefebvre 1971, 1991a). This leads to the oppositional definition of everyday life as what remains of social experience after specialized activities, in particular instrumental labor, have been disregarded (Ball 1987). The hours of a life become fragmented, isolated into pledged time for labor, compulsive time which is filled by the demands of social reproduction, and free time which is used for ‘leisure’. Lefebvre’s analysis of everyday life in modern society focuses largely on leisure because it is defined as something other than instrumentality and obligation, and hence it reveals something of the broader character, objectives and needs of life. Lefebvre perceives leisure in a dialectical relation with instrumental work. Industrialized
production and consumption meet certain human needs, but they also create new needs. People consciously and continuously reshape their leisure activities in relation to the provisions and demands of work. In this way leisure is ‘the critique of everyday life from within: the critique which the everyday makes of itself, the critique of the real by the possible and of one aspect of life by another’ (Lefebvre 1991a: 9).

There are three aspects to Lefebvre’s dialectical characterization of leisure. The first two are that leisure is one distinct part of everyday life, and that it is a critique of life’s other dimensions. The third important aspect of leisure is that in its critique it ‘reflects’ other dimensions of life. The forms leisure takes draw upon the conventional forms of everyday social behavior (Simmel 1950). The first aspect of leisure, its definition as a distinct realm of life, emphasizes the idea of a separation or liberation from other aspects of everyday life. Escape can be spatial, where people physically distance themselves from instrumentality. Lefebvre uses the café as an example of an urban leisure space which provides a liberation from professional and familial structures. He employs the following definition of the domain of leisure:

An occupation to which the worker can devote himself of his own free will, outside of professional, familial and social needs and obligations, in order to relax, to be entertained or to become more cultivated.

(Lefebvre 1991a: 32 fn52)

One way to achieve escape is through distraction, which links back to Benjamin’s phenomenological observation that the city is both experienced in a state of distraction and also distracts people from teleological actions and prescribed meanings. But the separation between play and other everyday actions may be an issue of content and not just form. Any activity may have the appearance of being everyday, yet not be rational: it may not meet goals, address material concerns or comply with role responsibilities. The fact that leisure rids life of its typical content underpins the observation that play is primarily studied as a matter of form or style (Lefebvre 1991a). It makes more sense to examine the playfulness of any activity, rather than attempting to definitively categorize it as play or not.

Various forms of relaxation, leisure activities characterized by passivity, are ways that people release themselves from the pull of instrumental social purposes, both formally and in terms of content. Benjamin suggests that the passive reception of images such as movies allows people to fantasize about other ways of living, distant from reality. While leisure can be passive, Lefebvre points out that this potentially establishes an alienation from full engagement in the richness of everyday life, that it is particularly susceptible to commodification. He notes that some other kinds of leisure activities are more active and involved, requiring exertion and the development of specialized technical skill or knowledge. This active, intense, engaged side
of leisure has many themes which parallel Lefebvre’s depiction of urban life generally, such as the importance of encounters with difference and the need for appropriation of space through use. Hence it is highly likely that urban play assumes many active forms.

The different forms of leisure arise in response to different social needs; needs which are not met by the social conditions set by capitalism as well as needs which are a direct product of those conditions. As the Situationist Constant observes, ‘once the functions are established, they are followed by play’ (Constant 1997: 110). Passivity is a response to instrumental compunction, while involvement is a response to the alienation of commodified processes of exchange. Both modes of leisure attempt to broaden the scope of human experience, to test and stretch the specific constraints set down by mass production and consumption. This is the second aspect of leisure: its role within everyday life as dialectical critique:

leisure appears as the non-everyday in the everyday. We cannot step beyond the everyday . . . There is no escape. And yet we wish to have the illusion of escape as near to hand as possible. An illusion not entirely illusory, but constituting a ‘world’ both apparent and real . . . quite different from the everyday world yet as opened and as closely dovetailed into the everyday as possible . . . Thus is established a complex of activities and passivities, of forms of sociability and communication . . . they contain within themselves their own spontaneous critique of the everyday. They are that critique in so far as they are other than everyday life, and yet they are in everyday life, they are alienation . . . Thus leisure and work and ‘private life’ make up a dialectical system, a global structure.

(Lefebvre 1991a: 40)

Lefebvre writes at length about various aspects of this critique of everyday life (Lefebvre 1971, 1991a, 1997b). Leisure is an expression of free will, a critique of compunction and the predetermination of one’s lot in life. Leisure admits exposure to a richness and closeness of experience: tactility, sensuousness, even eroticism and vulgarity.

Another theme Lefebvre addresses is the critique of economy and efficiency, the rational expenditure of energy. Objects and actions are treated as valuable in themselves, and are not treated as instrumental to other objects and actions. Because leisure’s aims are something other than economy, it can also be excessive, using up resources without renewing them. Much leisure is based around intentional loss or wastage. In other cases, leisure centers on activities whose outcomes are indeterminate, subject to fate, and thus leisure also critiques the myth of progress through work, of making sacrifices today for later gains (Lefebvre 1991b). None of this is to suggest that leisure, as a critique of work and other instrumental, alienated social
relations, is itself completely free from the effects of fragmentation, homogenization and revalorization by capitalism. Leisure, like work, is regulated, and it is practiced with varying degrees of restraint. It has private and public sides, and it inevitably serves purposes beyond itself. Lefebvre notes that some forms of leisure are difficult to distinguish from other aspects of everyday life. This is because leisure is not itself ‘other’, not a fully autonomous activity like dreams, art and philosophy (Lefebvre 1991a). It is a critique of everyday life from within and by those who live it. As a critique, play both illustrates and seeks to promote those possibilities of urban life which are endangered by instrumentality. Lefebvre sees industrialization and urbanization as a ‘double’ dialectical process: each critiques and provides grist for critique by the other. He argues that industrialization is an instrumental enterprise whose ultimate goal and justification can only be ‘a fruitful urban life’ (Lefebvre 1971: 47).

Edensor suggests that the city can be a heterotopic space, ‘an alternative system of spatial (dis)ordering where transitional identities may be sought, sensual and imaginative experimentation indulged’ (Edensor 1998: 219). He argues that western tourists visit Indian streets as a form of leisure which expresses ‘the contemporary need to reinstate desire, disorder and unpredictability into life’ (Edensor 1998: 217). Playful activities which occur in urban public space often arise as a dialectical critique of the stability and rationality of much of contemporary urban life; such activities are not absolutely spontaneous, voluntary or creative. Their diversity is stimulated and given shape by the complex habitus of everyday urban social life (Bourdieu 2000). Playful actions are shaped by the dispositions of actors, including their comprehension of the social context, their expectations, the desires that motivate them and their bodily competencies. Individuals draw upon this schema of dispositions as the basis for their adaptation to new and diverse situations (Bourdieu 1977). Like Lefebvre, Bourdieu highlights that habitus, the conditions which people encounter in their everyday lives and their creative, playful responses all exist in a dialectical relationship. Individual playful experiences lend meaning, form and potential back to people’s objective situation, expanding the possibilities of their everyday life. Play is at one and the same time a product of the process of everyday life, a contradiction of that process, and a producer of it. De Certeau characterizes society as consisting of both foreground practices and institutions which give stability, and ‘innumerable other organizing discourses which exist in a state of tension’: these discourses ‘refract’ the foreground order, ‘bringing new meanings and practices into play’ (de Certeau 1984: 48). Focusing on play foregrounds these practices, the ‘structuring’ structure of habitus under urban conditions.

Some leisure activities offer a critique of everyday urban life through an inversion or heightening of the intensity of more alienated aspects of that life (Lefebvre 1991a). Inversion and intensification in leisure operate as
critique when they stand in spatial or temporal opposition to the everyday. Such forms of opposition include dialectical images and places set apart for play. Although the experience of such playful sights and sites is temporary, the most interesting aspect of the temporal dimension of leisure is that it implies the possibility of the inversion or intensification of life within a given space, and not only apart from it. This may lead to the critique of meanings that have become fixed in space; for example, through the profaning of sacred space (Lyman and Scott 1975). The idea of play as something which transforms everyday experience within everyday spaces is one illustration of Lefebvre’s contention that urban space is multifunctional. People appropriate spaces for use as they see fit, and uses overlap.

In order to critique contemporary life, its focus on progress and its alienations, one way that leisure emerges in the guise of everyday activity is by drawing upon the memories and traditions of everyday life in the past and ideal visions of future society (Ball 1987). Benjamin’s analysis of child’s play suggests ways that play engages both the past and future in a dialectical confrontation (Gilloch 1996). On the one hand, play is repetitive. Play activities express the eternal recurrence of society’s aspirations in each new generation. It is grounded in imitation of both the social practices and the material world which surround the child. Play is ‘an archaic, magical mode of relating to things’ and to practices, which precedes the instrumental and fetishistic life of adults (Gilloch 1996: 86). The child collects and operates upon fragments of the past loosened from predetermined social hierarchies and values.

Play also contains utopian impulses. It is non-exploitative and non-hierarchical. Play is subversive of social order and the mythologies which sustain it. The disruptive capacity of play is the opportunities it presents to unravel the mythic from within. This dialectical potential is illustrated by Benjamin’s description of his own play as a child as aiming ‘to renew the old by making it my own’ (Benjamin 1974: 286). Through play the ‘old-fashioned’ is ‘rescued’, ‘reassembled’ and ‘redeemed’ (Gilloch 1996: 88–89). This is true not just of objects, but of traditional practices, whether games or serious social relations. Benjamin draws on the example of Fourier’s utopian vision, where children’s play provides a model (i.e. a form) for all human relations, and for the expression of passions (Gilloch 1996). In this context, play critiques not human work per se, but its exploitative nature.

Lefebvre, Benjamin and the Situationists all highlight that everyday life includes something more than regularity, obligation and calculation in the pursuit of rational objectives. Their arguments refute the common association of the adjective ‘everyday’ with ‘mundane’ and ‘habitual’. Social practices, perceptions and needs continuously develop dialectically, through a critique of the concrete and the rational by the possible and the desirable. The diversity and creativity of practices, the demythification of perceptions, and the critique of instrumental need within everyday life all give rise to the
transgression of social constraints, the exploration of the social world and of one’s own body and imagination.

The density and diversity of the city provide a stimulus and a milieu for this exploration. The continuing specialization of tasks and differentiation of spaces also continuously expand human potential, often in unexpected and improbable ways. The publicness of space and people’s anonymity to one another encourage the development of roles and masks and encourage the expression of self. The surplus wealth which is a product of the city’s diversity makes possible non-instrumental interactions, and the complexity of urban social space also stimulates such interactions. The disorder of symbolism in the city reawakens memories, demythifies them, and arouses the imagination. All these conditions can potentially override social order and control. The experience of urban space is characterized by multiplicity, ambiguity and contradiction, the unpredictable and the unfamiliar. In these ways, urban public space provides a special realm for play.
Chapter 2

Play and the urban realm

Any attempt to define play runs into the question of whether clear distinctions can be drawn between play and other social practices. Play is typically understood in terms of oppositions. It is contrasted with long-term purposes, productive work, and serious consequences (Goodale and Godbey 1988). Such oppositions have a role in framing people’s beliefs and their actions; however, the definitions, intentions and effects of play remain varied and imprecise. Most definitions of play themselves remain ‘at play’, continuously binding or unraveling. What makes something play and what play ‘means’ to culture continues to be redefined through changing social practice. The strength of the concept of play relies on the binding together of many different social conditions which people may understand as play, but which cannot be collectively defined by any firm set of rules or boundaries. Because play is not a distinct, discrete set of activities, but rather a characteristic which is present to varying degrees in many different kinds of human behavior, it is necessary to look at play from multiple perspectives, drawing together threads of analysis.

Scholars and players use the term ‘play’ to describe a great variety of practices and objectives. The meaning and purpose of play differs between individuals and between situations. Play is always a rhetorical construction, and the reasons why someone chooses to use the term ‘play’ to describe a certain range of behavior depends on their wider values and objectives (Sutton-Smith 1997). Very frequently, play is used to provide a contrast to other aspects of behavior – what is done and how and why it is done – although the opposition itself has varying focus and dimensions. In general terms, ‘play’ is used as counterpoint to behavior which is ‘normal’ – everyday, conventional, expected, calculated, practical, constant. Which impacts of play are noteworthy depends on professional interest. Play is in some way unusual, special and different, either in form or in outcome. In this book, play stands principally in contradistinction to people’s assumptions about the everyday functionality of the urban built environment. It is a rhetorical device to focus attention on uses of public spaces which are not practical and other than what the spaces were designed for. The definition of play
that follows thus does not seek to be exhaustive, but rather to focus on four
interrelated ways in which playful behavior can be experienced as an escape
from other aspects of everyday life in the contemporary city:

- play involves actions which are non-instrumental;
- there are boundary conditions and rules which separate play from the
everyday;
- play involves specific types of activities through which people test and
expand limits (competition, chance, simulation and vertigo);
- play in the city very often involves encounters with strangers.

The analytical concept ‘play’ is most often applied to the experiences of
children. Play is seen as largely opposite to the behavior of adults. Children’s
playful behavior in cities has been examined from a variety of critical per-
spectives: historical, sociological, ethnographic and autobiographical (Lynch
1977; Nasaw 1985; Dargan and Zeitlin 1990; Benjamin 2006). Such focused
studies emphasize the many significant differences between children’s expe-
riences in cities and those of the population as a whole. To understand
the breadth of potential offered by the urban condition, it is necessary to
examine how the population as a whole uses public space for play. However,
there are a number of substantive reasons why children’s play, and existing
research into children’s play, is generally disregarded in this book.

Children’s play occupies a more narrow range of behavior than the
play of adults. Play is just one component of the complex social existence
of working adults, and one that is rarely analyzed. Adult play is not merely
a remnant of childhood forms; indeed, ‘the full variety of play forms only
appears with the achievement of a certain maturity’ (Mouledoux 1977:
52–53). Adults may play less often than children, yet adults have knowledge,
abilities and a freedom of action which permit them to play in times and
places and in ways which are not available to children, and this is particu-
larly true of public spaces in the inner city. It is also only within the complex
context of adult social life that play’s dialectical qualities become apparent.
The density and diversity of urban settings intensifies the tensions and con-
tradictions between the serious world of adults and their playful escapades.
Thus adult play provides far better illustration of the transformation of
everyday life and of lived space into new experiences and new forms. It is
the play of adults which can lead to a reconsideration of the ways in which
urban space might stimulate and facilitate unexpected and impractical
behavior, and how space can be utilized for escapes from serious meanings
and uses and to critique the normal social order.

Another limitation of examining children’s behavior is that theorizations
of children’s play tend to circumscribe the freedom, creativity and diver-
sity of human agency rather than open it up. Because children’s skills and
ambitions are limited, their play is of only certain kinds. Following the work
of Piaget, the field of developmental psychology views children’s play as a process which aids learning and socialization ( Spariosu 1989). For children, play lies at the center of their experience of the world. Play is the primary ‘function’ which they are supposed to pursue. Children’s play activities are generally accepted, even encouraged. They are also supervised. In these ways, child’s play generally reproduces the habitus which defines childhood itself. A concomitant belief that play is a sign of immaturity leaves Piaget’s theory unable to explain how and why adults play ( Huizinga 1970). While play can bring about desirable social outcomes, ‘[it] does not take place because it is functional or useful’ ( Goodale and Godbey 1988: 174). Interpreting play acts in terms of their utility ignores those intriguing dimensions of play which are most characteristic of urban life: the stimulus of accident and caprice, deliberate exposure to difference and to risk, and the potential which such experiences provide for the continual diversification of social practice.

Benjamin has a distinct theorization of the relationship between children’s play and urban experience. He suggests that ‘the child in the city is a figure of utopian dreaming’ ( Gilloch 1996: 91). Benjamin uses child’s play as an analogy for various social desires and ideals which are frustrated by the instrumentalism and spectacularization of urban life. Benjamin’s view of the potential for adult play in the city is generally pessimistic: ‘To recognize yet disregard the invisible boundaries of the cityscape – this is the desire of the child and the regret of the adult’ ( Gilloch 1996: 85). Here Benjamin’s thinking tends, somewhat ironically, towards essentialism and ideology: he reifies children’s play as ‘archaic’ and ‘magical’. Benjamin’s characterizations of the city and play also have a very contrary dimension, examining how they subvert prohibitions; their capacity for innovation; the new juxtapositions and tensions they constantly produce. As Benjamin noted, ‘playfulness and dreaming are part enchantment, part disenchantment, of the adult world’ ( Gilloch 1996: 92). The play of adults in urban space can enable a re-enchantment of their world; taking advantage of conditions under which toil may be transformed into play, fetishism into curiosity, tyranny into reciprocity, and drudgery into spontaneity ( Gilloch 1996).

A second major distinction which is important is that between leisure and play. Leisure and play are closely related concepts, and critical analyses of leisure can certainly aid a better understanding of play. Leisure can most broadly be understood as the luxury of passing time free from compulsion, and in particular from the need to engage in productive activities ( Goodale and Godbey 1988). Nevertheless, leisure is a rather precise social construct which is codified in particular practices, and which tends to be demarcated within special spaces and times. It carries connotations of rest and recuperation; of bodily passivity, escape from the busyness and tensions of the social world, and attention to the private life of family and self ( Rojek 1995). These circumstances renounce the diversity, intensity and complexity of the city, rather than embracing them. Play, by contrast, is a concept which highlights
the potentials of urban experience for promoting and framing active, creative, and above all public behavior. While play can often arise in a context of leisure time, it does not depend upon it. Indeed, the social segregation and ordering of leisure serves to undermine the playful potential of every social experience, by limiting the prospects for confrontations and creative engagements between necessity and caprice, intention and accident, productive effort and waste.

Play is defined not merely oppositionally, but dialectically within everyday life, and in a dialectical engagement with the inherently contradictory ‘social needs’ which life experiences reflect. Practices of play are a critical response to specific historical sociospatial circumstances; this response can most easily be encapsulated by the idea of escape. Lefebvre (1991a) identifies the dialectical tension underlying escape through play: escape is impossible, illusory, but this illusion in itself constitutes a perceptual and social reality. The concept of play embraces a variety of ways in which people test and transgress the limits of their social existence. In terms of play within the urban public realm, Lefebvre’s (1991b) critique of modern city planning suggests that play means encounters with difference, encounters which contest the fragmentation and alienation of contemporary social experience.

**Non-instrumentality**

Play is presented in western metaphysics in opposition to seriousness, morality, and productive work, and the social power relations these value structures help reproduce (Spariosu 1989). Play is quite contrary to these values: ‘Play is spontaneous and creative, a counterpoint to the tedium and exploitation inherent in instrumental labor. It is the domain of freedom from compulsion’ (Gilloch 1996: 84). Play activities are irrational because they are not shaped around conscious, preformulated ethical and pragmatic goals. Play often runs against orthodoxy, ignoring the systematic organization of human activity, and transgressing the boundaries of seriousness, including taboos. Play illustrates Lefebvre’s (1971) view that the practices of everyday life are far richer and broader in scope than rationalism and morality can explain and provide for. Lefebvre’s (1996) use of the term *oeuvre* conveys the sense of everyday life as being a work in itself, not a series of means toward predetermined ends. Lofland (1998: 121) writes about ‘the sacrilegious frivolity of uncontrolled play’ in urban space: ‘In the public realm . . . the unquestioned virtues of sobriety, industry, rationality, diligence and so forth are not only challenged, they are discarded.’

Play’s opposition to instrumentality embraces the issues of purpose, functionalism and productivity. Play is purposeless, free from the ‘pitfalls of teleology’ (Spariosu 1989: 90). People accept the instrumental organization of much of everyday life as being necessary to meet human needs. Gratification is deferred in the name of future pleasure or comfort. When
viewed in terms of these kinds of conventional social purposes and needs, play often seems irrational. Play actions thus offer a critique of conventional understandings of purpose and need, calling for a different way of thinking about these matters (Rojek 1995).

Instrumental social practices and relations themselves present contradictions, because while they meet needs, they also engender alienation from aspects of the self and from other people. Hence they establish new needs dialectically. Although human needs have a foundation in biology, they are themselves a product of social life and human consciousness (Lefebvre 1991a).

Rationality suggests people should pursue optimal fulfillment of needs within a given ethical framework. Yet it is precisely when people’s actions are not locked into the service of future goals that their actions are free to explore human values, and can thereby constitute meaning: ‘What [life] allows in the way of order and reserve has meaning only from the moment when the ordered and reserved forces liberate and lose themselves for ends that cannot be subordinated to anything one can account for’ (Bataille 1985: 128). Thus play, as a pleasurable end in itself, arises as ‘liberty from every social, erotic and psychological constraint’ (Castle 1986: 53). Ethics sets rules and boundaries which conserve and protect social structure. Play ignores these boundaries. Nietzsche argues that human behavior is not inherently based in ethics, and in fact can be ‘justified only in aesthetic terms’ (Spariosu 1989: 80–81). As Nietzsche suggests, the whole world is ‘eternally self-creating, the eternally self-destroying . . . “beyond good and evil,” without goal . . . without will’ (Spariosu 1989: 89, citing Nietzsche 1968: 549–50). What Lefebvre proposes is the importance of pursuing a richer understanding of the self and one’s needs and desires, outside the framework of rationality and ethics: ‘The more needs a human being has, the more he exists. The more powers and aptitudes he is able to exercise, the more he is free’ (Lefebvre 1991a: 161). This sense of play as the exploratory pursuit of pleasure is captured in the figure of Baudelaire’s urban flâneur:

The flâneur is defined as a constant seeker of impressions and stimuli . . . But he does so in a spirit of idle curiosity, without any object of learning anything or reaching understanding . . . the flâneur, then, cultivates polymorphousness and discontinuity in leisure . . . He makes a virtue out of idleness and values the senses above reason.

(Rojek 1995: 91)

Play is defined as freedom from the instrumental pursuit of social purposes. But this freedom does not arise naturally through environmental and technological opportunity. Freedom is not wholly defined by an absence of power, by finding gaps within the instrumental structure of everyday life. Huizinga (1970) notes that play is freedom. Practices of play constitute,
rather than merely reflect, freedom. Freedom takes place in dialectical relation to power. The more a form of play is defined as immoral, outlawed and restricted, the greater its attraction as an escape from, and confrontation of, the social order (Rojek 1995). The boundaries of freedom get established through action and reaction, rules and the transgression of rules. Everyday actions in the city are so many and so various that they resist any totalizing control or any overall schema.

In terms of function, play runs contrary to the idea that each human action is designed and performed to effect a predetermined change in the material or social world. Play behavior is gratuitous, it does not achieve ethical or material social outcomes. Benjamin’s interpretation is that acts of play are timeless, repetitive rather than developmental, removed from the myth of history as progress (Gilloch 1996). Bauman (1993: 171) concurs that ‘to play is to rehearse eternity . . . Nothing accrues, nothing “builds up”, each new play is an absolute beginning’.

Writing about the social value of the city, Lefebvre (1996) notes that urban play is part of a broadened conception of human needs. He also points out that ‘functions’, by which he means the full diversity of human actions, do not just meet specific needs, but are themselves needs, and also that functions of play help to develop the concept of human needs. To contrast with capitalist relations of instrumental exchange, which fragment life into specialized techniques, locations and spheres of meaning, Lefebvre (1997b) presents his conception of the oeuvre, the totality of undifferentiated everyday urban life in a particular sociohistorical setting. Social practices are diverse, contradictory and ambiguous. Practices of play exemplify the transfunctionality of social life.

A third way of understanding how play resists instrumentality is through its critique of the idea of productive output. In contrast to the rational organization of human activity based on production, everyday life presents ‘the opposite thesis . . . according to which waste, play, struggle, art, festival – in short, Eros – are themselves a necessity’ (Lefebvre 1991b: 177). Play, as part of the ‘Dionysian side of existence – excess, intoxication, risks (even mortal risks) – has its own peculiar freedom and value’ (Lefebvre 1991b: 178). Rather than producing material wealth, play consumes; ‘Play is an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often of money’ (Caillois 1961: 5). Play takes advantage of the surplus which exists in the natural world and which is made possible by human work. Excess arises from production which is greater than necessary consumption for reproduction of the organism (Bataille 1988). The accumulation and discharge of surplus energy is a necessary and defining characteristic of living bodies (Lefebvre 1991b). This analysis fleshes out Lefebvre’s concept of the oeuvre as necessarily combining productive and unproductive acts. In the case of non-productive acts, ‘[surplus] allows the organism a measure of leeway for taking initiatives (these being neither determined nor arbitrary)’
That is to say, the use of surplus is an issue of gratuitous choice. Bataille (1985) argues that a society is defined primarily by how it chooses to use or ‘waste’ its surplus, and not by its mode of production. Waste is a path of escape from the cycle of acquisition, productivity and conservation, which leads to an act being understood as an end in itself. The meaning of a culture’s various unproductive acts arises in this unrecouped consumption: these acts become the chosen ends for which people willingly subsume practical actions as means: ‘luxury, mourning, war, cults, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity, the construction of sumptuary monuments – all these represent activities which, at least in primitive circumstances, have no end beyond themselves’ (Bataille 1985: 118). The intense human significance of such activities highlights that play is ‘not time wasted but time filled with profound and rich experience’ (Clark and Holquist 1984: 303). Material abundance makes freedom from productive work possible, because instrumental needs and demands are not constraining people’s actions. The city is an engine of wealth, and the reserves of surplus energy that the city produces are reflected in the scope or oeuvre of urban life. Urban public open space itself is one of the luxuries afforded by excess productivity, but little seems to be known about how people take advantage of this luxury, or how the urban environment in general frames experiences of excess, intensity and exposure to risks. One clear distinction that has been identified is that people tend to do instrumental tasks in public space as quickly as possible, whereas they linger over ‘optional activities’, if there are public spaces which are comfortable for doing them in (Gehl 1987; Gehl and City of Melbourne 1994). In a sense, good public spaces are always used inefficiently; the space is always wasted.

Productive and unproductive activities have an important relation to each other, making up a ‘transfunctional’ totality of social practices:

The human being has the need to accumulate energies and to spend them, even waste them in play . . . play, sexuality, physical activities such as sport, creative activity, art and knowledge are particular expressions and moments, which can more or less overcome the fragmentary division of tasks.

(Lefebvre 1996: 147)

Various modes of play escape the production of surplus and the routinization of function in different ways. Leisure, as an escape from work, ‘embraces opposing possibilities and orientations’, and it has distinct passive and active forms (Lefebvre 1991a: 32). Passive forms of leisure halt the process of production and reproduction. They allow for the dissipation of accumulated resources, in particular the wasting away of time. Passive activities include reading a novel and attending the cinema. Lefebvre uses the same concepts
to characterize passive leisure as Benjamin uses to characterize people’s
general experience of cities: distraction, alienation through the creation of
a vacuum, and the illusion of escape from the everyday. Active forms of
play, such as hobbies and skills, redirect people’s excess productive potential
to tasks which are not purely rational. These forms of play involve the
exertion of energy or the intellect and the control of muscles. They provide
for the rapid and dramatic consumption of resources.

A second way of differentiating between the various forms of play
comes from consideration of play as an escape from ‘the localization and
“punctualization” of activities’ (Lefebvre 1991b: 227). Capitalism tends to
restructure all social relations, both productive and consumptive, in time
and space so as to maximize instrumental functionality. Play can be seen as
‘a voluntary departure from the mundane world of involuntary routinization’
(Lyman and Scott 1975: 147). This escape also leads in two different
directions. Caillois (1961) suggests that all play activities can be evaluated
along a continuum between paidia and ludus.

Play as paidia is characterized by diversion, destruction, spontaneity,
caprice, turbulence and exuberance. Paidia is human will acting without
ethical deliberation. This enhances one’s awareness of being a cause, a free
and active force which shapes reality. Paidia is both a refusal to accept limits
and a willful transgression of them. It has no civilizing ‘function’ (Spariosu
1989, 1997). Paidia is improvisatory action, an escape from routine which
explores other possibilities of social experience and which develops new
social forms. Paidia is typified by the play of children, who are unsel-
conscious about their feelings and actions. Yet adults retain an attraction
to undisciplined behavior and exposure to risk (Mouledoux 1977).

Ludus is play institutionalized as a game. It follows rules and routines
which are purposely contrived to be tedious and arbitrary. Such play is
‘a secondary and gratuitous activity, undertaken and pursued for pleasure
. . . in a word any occupation that is primarily a compensation for the injury
to personality caused by bondage to work of an automatic and picayune
caracter’ (Caillois 1961: 32). Subordination of individual will to the rules
of ludus is imperative. It requires effort, patience and skill. The pleasure of
ludus lies in the development and mastery of technique, the psychological
satisfaction which comes from discovering solutions within a set framework
which is external to the demands of instrumental function.

Caillois’ concepts of paidia and ludus highlight that escape from instru-
mentality and compunction can be found either in resistance to rules or in
observance of different, and in many cases more constricting rules. Scientific
analysis has generally focused on the instrumental utility of such forms of
play as a biological function. Ludus has been viewed as an aid to cognition
and learning, through the imitation and repetition of physical skills. This
spirit of discovery and testing is seen as a higher form of work: its creative
role assists humankind’s evolutionary adaptation to change (Spariosu 1989). Through play one also acquires social skills such as cooperation and collective discipline. People learn that they are the cause of certain outcomes, but they learn this in a context of control. Peaceful play as ludus emphasizes order and continuity. It situates play as a part of the routine rationality of everyday life (Rojek 1995).

Caillois argues that social practices of play follow a general progression from paidia toward ludus, but he retains a dialectical view of practices of ludus as freely determined and non-instrumental. He suggests experiences gained through paidia stimulate the desire to ‘invent and abide by rules’ which ‘discipline and enrich’ it (Caillois 1961: 28–29). He gives the example of the theatre, where imitation ‘becomes an art rich in a thousand diverse routines [and] refined techniques’ (Caillois 1961: 31). Caillois suggests that the instituting of rules does not necessarily restrict behavior: ‘what to begin with seems to be a situation susceptible to infinite repetition turns out to be capable of producing ever new combinations’ (Caillois 1961: 30). Ludus allows people to purposefully utilize and develop their skills and knowledge in tasks which are of their own choosing and under their own control.

Drawing on Caillois’ work, Mouledoux (1977: 54) concludes that there is both repetition and variation in games: ‘every play activity is simultaneously individual and social’, as it draws upon cultural knowledge and is adapted to changing context. Indeed, rules of play themselves provide a constant stimulus to diversion, resistance, and transformation through paidia. In Wittgenstein’s words, ‘we play and make up the rules as we go along . . . and . . . alter them as we go along’ (Wittgenstein 1958: §83). The notion that there is a continuum between paidia and ludus, that unstructured play becomes institutionalized over time, and that play forms are derived from serious elements of life, also highlights Lefebvre’s (1996) characterization of a continuity of work and play within the oeuvre of everyday life.

**Boundary conditions**

Play activities are distinguished from instrumental labor by a range of physical, psychological and social conditions (Huizinga 1970). Prime among these is freedom: participation in play is by necessity voluntary. Play is elevated to be something more than instinct, rationality or social obligation because ‘for the adult and responsible human being play is a function which he could equally well leave alone. Play is superfluous . . . it is never a task’ (Huizinga 1970: 26).

A second characteristic is that play is always undertaken with a certain air of disinterest. This is possible because ‘it stands outside the immediate satisfaction of wants and appetites’ (Huizinga 1970: 27). Play allows people to ‘step outside themselves’ and their everyday instrumental goals (Lennard and Lennard 1984: 67). Lennard and Lennard (1984) argue that because of
the air of disinterest, social relations in play are rarely exploitative. All participants must have freedom of participation; ‘In principle nobody can find satisfaction [in genuinely sociable interactions] if it has to be at the cost of diametrically opposed feelings which the other may have’ (Simmel 1950: 48).

The idea that play requires a disinterest in everyday life leads to Huizinga’s third major distinction between play and seriousness: it is ‘a world apart’ separated in time and space. This separation allows people to forget their everyday roles, conventions, demands, and restrictions. When considering the case of urban public space, it is perhaps more accurate to say that separations are created for instrumentality rather than for play. Lefebvre’s analysis is that the *oeuvre* of everyday urban life is creative and playful, and that rational labor is a special, fragmented domain entered into. Work carves out a rational space and time for itself, with its own special, practical rules and role relations. Through history, elements of natural space and time, their daily and seasonal rhythms, have been regularized, commodified, organized. This can be said not only of work, but also ultimately of leisure: the consumption of all time has become bounded. All boundaries and rules are historically situated, and hence the social structuring of play is continually being redefined by both technological opportunity and social convention.

Many forms of play necessarily occur in places which are physically or socially defined as ‘forbidden, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain . . . dedicated to the performance of an act apart’ (Huizinga 1970: 28–29). The physical boundaries of spaces can be very definite, obvious and determinant of people’s actions. This is not always a necessary or desirable context for public play. Physical boundaries are also not always enough to prevent play. Boundaries of various kinds frame limits to human experience; but these limits are part of what get tested through play. Understanding the ways in which urban space both collects people together and separates them, how it shapes the arrangement of serious and frivolous activities, and how it helps supports particular roles for players is crucial for understanding what makes urban space playful.

The social acceptance of the separation of play from seriousness also means the acceptance of rules which structure it. To play successfully requires participants to respect the illusion and the behavioral constraints which set the play world apart from everyday life. Cheating is bad because it involves breaking play’s rules of fairness in order to win, but being a spoilsport is worse because it actually destroys the fragile basis of play itself. The need to respect the play world gives rise to the special mood in which people undertake play: simultaneously aware that things are ‘not real’ and yet willing to believe and participate. Successful play with others relies on ‘metacom- munication’: the message ‘this is play’ is continuously being communicated between participants, although what is happening may appear serious. The spatial and temporal framing of the message ‘this is play’ becomes part of
this message (Bateson 1987). Thus a place and occasion of play is constituted
not merely as a boundary which circumscribes actions, but also as a context
of signals which make those actions meaningful.

People choose to participate in play for hedonistic reasons. They receive
psychological benefit from the activity as an end in itself, rather than obtaining
material benefit as a result of sacrifice and the deferral of gratification.
Activities which are not emotionally pleasurable to all participants are not
playful. This is to say that play events cannot inspire emotions such as fear, sadness, tension or boredom. In fact, play is significant in arousing
and providing outlet for such feelings when they are otherwise lacking or diminished in everyday life. People enjoy exposing themselves to intense
experience, so long as they can choose the limits of the intensity and consequent
iality of their exposure. The origin of the word ‘play’ is in the Old
English _plegen_, the meaning of which includes taking risks and exposing
oneself to danger of injury or failure. Play includes the freedom to attempt
something and to fail (Goodale and Godbey 1988). Taking risks adds strength
and depth of people’s experience in the world. They know play is not reality,
yet within the delimited context of play events they allow themselves to believe
and to act as if some aspects of risk are real and large, and to experience the
tension and thrill of handling such risks.

The idea that play occurs in a time and place apart suggests tensions.
Because play is often stimulated as a response to serious reality, it also often
arises in a physical or temporal proximity to seriousness. Such proximity
always involves uncertainty; limits are always to some degree unknown.
Particularly in urban public settings, people at play are always to some degree
in real jeopardy, because they are bodily present, and events are linked in
complex ways (Goffman 1982). Not everyone present necessarily has the same
understanding of the rules that apply, and the level of different people’s
involvement in play cannot easily be predetermined or controlled.

A typology of play forms

The various aims and contexts for play underscore that it is a strongly
personal, subjective experience. However, rather than psychology, the focus
here is on the role of built form in framing a class of spatial events which
come under the rubric of playful behavior. Caillois (1961) defines four basic
forms of playful activity: competition, chance, simulation and vertigo (his
terms are _âgon_, _alea_, _mimicry_, and _ilinx_). This typology gives useful insight
into what characteristics make practices of play different to the instrumentality
of work and consumption. These differences include the sets of rules and
roles assumed by various participants. Each of the forms of activity also
illustrates something about what makes play enjoyable, and hence why people
might choose to play. Urban settings frame particular kinds of opportunities
for each form of play. Urban public space brings together and multiplies
the diversity of social life and social values, and thus public play in cities usually combines several forms.

**Competition**

In competitive play people seek ways of utilizing their knowledge and skills. Competitive play in urban space includes all manner of individual displays and tests of strength, agility, refinement, intellect and allure. Open conflict aims for mastery over others, but the true goal of competitive play is to foster mastery of the self, the testing of human limits. Such playful engagements with difference force people to reach outside the self and overcome the feeling of omnipotence, by helping people understand their limits. Such actions have some playful element: they are exploratory, and not based on existing power relations (Sennett 1971). The playful form of competition differs from combat for survival or success in that 'equality of chances is artificially created' (Caillois 1961: 14). In contrast to 'open' competition, competitive play follows rules which typically restrict the techniques or attributes which players can employ. The presence of a public audience helps to verify and enforce the rules of fairness.

Public play gives each individual the opportunity to demonstrate, to realize and to expand their capacities for excellence. The city brings together people in all their diversity, each with different abilities and trajectories. Competitive displays occur in urban settings which draw potential players together in front of an appreciative audience. Promenading, dancing and simply being seen in public can be competitive when people show off, aware that others are judging them. Physical space and the arrangement of activities are part of the social context which regulates and inspires playful competition. The city frames the widest range of people to compete against and a great diversity of settings for their struggles. Meanings embedded in public spaces can also help shape the contests which occur within them.

**Chance**

In contrast to competition, the appeal of chance is that it negates the benefit of any kind of effort, experience, or skill. Chance allows people to escape from human rationality by abandoning themselves to incalculable forces (Lyman and Scott 1975). Benjamin's analysis of gambling foregrounds the dialectical relation between chance and instrumentality:

> In refusing to equate labor, time and money, the gambler appears to resist the discipline of capitalist production . . . Indeed, the gambler denies the financial importance of gambling itself, purporting instead to relish the game for its own sake . . . 'The more that life becomes administratively regulated, the more people must learn waiting. Games
of chance have the great charm of liberating people from waiting' . . .
Gambling is fundamentally immoral . . . To have abundance without
toil is the utopian promise extended by gambling. It denies scarcity and
the need for rational calculation . . . Each game is independent of the
one that preceded it. The world is repeatedly encountered ‘for the first
time’. The role of memory is negated.

(Giloch 1996: 157–60,

Children and animals do not play with chance:

[Being] very much involved in the immediate and enslaved by their
impulses, [they] cannot conceive of an abstract and inanimate power,
to whose verdict they would passively submit in advance of the game.
[In addition] the child is immune to the main attraction of games of
chance, deprived as he is of economic independence, since he has no
money of his own. Games of chance have no power to thrill him.
(Caillois 1961: 18–19)

Chance can be playful when people understand and accept the limits of risk.
Children lack the critical faculties for foresight and objective calculation
which get tested in games of chance. Chance offers a momentary possibility
of breaking free from the predetermined cycle of production and consump-
tion. Chance is captivating for adults because of the tension brought on by
the risk of loss and the possibility of gain.

Urban spatial form creates conditions of chance which engender various
kinds of playful activity. Life in the city is itself a large game of chance. As
Benjamin noted, the public spaces of the city are a labyrinth within which
wandering flânerie exposes people to seemingly haphazard patterns of new
events. Chance encounters in the city provide opportunities for escape from
predetermined and ritualized courses of action. Many social activities in
public are playful because they are spontaneous, derived from dynamic
conditions of the place, occasion and individuals present (Lennard and
Lennard 1984).

Urban life suggests meetings, the confrontation of differences . . . as a
place of encounters . . . the urban become what it always was: place of
desire, permanent disequilibrium, seat of the dissolution of normalities
and constraints, the moment of play and of the unpredictable.

(Lefebvre 1996: 75, 129)

The continuous system of public spaces which constitute a city, people’s
freedom of movement through it, and the density and diversity of activity
patterns found there all bring together different people in urban spaces,
and thus increase the likelihood of unplanned and unpredictable social encounters. Chance contacts expand the individual’s experience of life, drawing upon the potential of differentiated individual capacities, and this stimulates further diversification, the development of new values and new social behaviors. Thus chance adds to the citizen’s freedom from fixed ways of inhabiting the city (Sennett 1971).

Competition and chance are often brought together in play. Spontaneous human interactions in public places are tests of human behavior between individuals who do not know each other’s standards or limits. These interactions hence become games about the negotiation of social rules, for example regarding who is the focus of attention. On the other hand, the controlled nature of playful competition suggests the possibility that other uncontrolled external factors may actually determine the outcome of such games. Competition and chance are also the two forms of play which engage with material spatial circumstances and specific social conditions. They represent people’s attempts either to take more control over their world or to abandon themselves to the circumstantiality of that world. They best illustrate play’s critique of social practices and the ways in which play contributes to the breadth of urban social life.

**Simulation**

Simulation is that form of play which institutes a dialectic by counterposing perceptions of the imagined and the real. Simulation is the fabrication of a different character or situation. This involves forgetting, disguising or otherwise escaping one’s usual self and one’s place in the world: ‘the mask disguises the conventional self and liberates the true personality’ (Caillois 1961: 21). In contrast to instrumental domination through differentiated roles, this mode of play pursues a sense of reciprocity with things in the world, by becoming like them (Gilloch 1996). Simulation includes any game where people pretend; ‘its realm is by no means limited to what one person can imitate in another’ (Benjamin 1974, vol. II: 210, quoted in Buck-Morss 1991: 266). It may also involve the creation of new meanings or a new reality, and for this reason the term ‘simulation’ is more appropriate than Caillois’ ‘mimicry’. Illusion, theatre and spectacle are all forms of simulation, and urban space assists in the practice of each. Urban conditions help to serve people’s needs ‘to see, to hear, to touch, to taste and the need to gather these perceptions in a “world” . . . the need for creative activity . . . for information, symbolism, the imaginary and play’ (Lefebvre 1996: 147). Simulative acts create the impression of the logic of a world, but a world which is never real, because the simulated actions do not carry real consequences.

Of all the modes of play, simulation is most structured around the idea of an audience, although it also includes solitary pretending and imagining. The design of urban space can reinforce the notion that a simulative play
event is occurring by structuring roles of participant and audience (Lennard and Lennard 1984, 1995). Many successful urban spaces are enclosed like a room, limiting the view out, and focusing attention on people and events within. Seating and relatively passive activities such as dining are often arranged at the periphery of public spaces, and this encourages people to linger and watch activities in the space. People will use steps, planters and window ledges for the same purpose (Whyte 1988). Doorways and paths which open onto or next to a public space create opportunities for players to enter and leave the scene. The organization of people’s activities in and around public spaces contributes to their theatrical quality, by furnishing a broad range of potential actors and framing their interactions. Numbers and diversity of people using urban public spaces maximize the likelihood that there will be something interesting to watch. Where space is open to public use and there is free movement to and from the spaces surrounding it, it is also easy to make transitions between the roles of observer and participant.

The design of public spaces also supports and encourages memory and fantasy: the complexity of architecture and space in a city provides a myriad of settings and props which can catalyze imaginative play. Throughout history, urban space has been used for cultural ceremonies which evoke other historical and spatial contexts that give legitimacy to social practices. Spectacular effects of scale and intensity amplify such messages; in doing so they play with reality. Ceremonies add social meanings to the spaces where they take place, particularly when they are repeated regularly. Through changing practices, the meanings and functions of a place remain open to reinterpretation and innovative use.

Simulation differs greatly from both competition and chance in terms of the control individuals have over the rules which circumscribe play actions, and the contexts of meaning within which they are framed. Public expression through simulation enhances individual freedom, and people’s experience of otherness and of the social whole:

Public places provide the setting and the opportunity to relate in a variety of modes with friend and stranger alike, both as spectators and performers. All who participate learn that others like themselves are capable of a rich repertoire of social behavior and reactions, and are gifted with some ability to be joyous and to give pleasure to others. Consequently it becomes less likely to confuse persons with a particular role function. This learning carries over into other settings and more structured relationships.

(Lennard and Lennard 1984: 18)

Unlike competition and chance, simulation is not bounded by precise rules. Simulation requires measures of both reproduction and deception, the
invention of new codes of meaning. It gives each individual opportunities to invent roles, which means transcending predetermined social relations and conventions (Sennett 1971, 1974). Simulation relies on the constant substitution of something for something else. In simulation people test the connections between perceptions and the meanings which society has assigned to them. People break these connections willingly, and suspend their disbelief: 'The rule of the game is unique: it consists in the actor’s fascinating the spectator, while avoiding an error that might lead the spectator to break the spell' (Caillois 1961: 22–23).

**Vertigo**

Vertigo includes a wide variety of behaviors through which people escape normal bodily experience and self-control. Caillois characterizes vertigo as 'surrendering to a . . . shock . . . which destroys reality' (Caillois 1961: 23). In vertigo, people ‘lose themselves’ and are transported to new forms of experience. Some experiences of vertigo come through bodily actions which generate intoxicating physical sensations of instability and distorted perception: 'mad, tremendous and convulsive movements' such as falling, sliding, jumping, climbing, dancing, spinning and moving quickly. These acts ‘inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind’ (Caillois 1961: 25). This category also includes such activities as skiing and tightrope walking: bodily encounters with space which provoke vertigo in the commonly accepted sense. The common feature is ‘the voluptuous experience of fear, thrills and shock that causes a momentary loss of self-control’, which allows one to step outside normal, stable perception of the world and bodily practice within it (Caillois 1961: 169). The classification of physiological vertigo embraces a wide range of direct confrontations with the physical environment, including any activity which is a bodily competition framed by the risks the environment presents, including height but also scale, speed, and traction. The feeling of vertigo is often achieved with the aid of equipment, which in public space includes skateboards, bicycles and in-line skates.

Because play has to remain separated from seriousness, experiences of vertigo remain pleasurable when they are calculated risks of limited duration. The surrender to shock cannot be total, because ‘the danger lies in not being able to end the disorder that has been accepted’ (Caillois 1961: 78). Vertigo often involves a tension between the desires for risk and control, creating a world without rules in which the player constantly improvises . . . The person lets himself drift and become intoxicated through feeling directed, dominated, and possessed by strange powers. To attain them, he need only abandon himself, since the exercise of no special aptitude is required. (Caillois 1961: 75, 78)
However there is also a desire for *ludus* underpinning dangerous vertiginous play like skiing and tightrope walking, when people concentrate their attention on ‘training in self-control, an arduous effort to preserve calm and equilibrium . . . to neutralize the dangerous effects of [vertigo]’ (Caillois 1961: 31). Rather than uncontrolled motion, such play relies on ‘elaborate maneuvers’, ‘natural creativity’ and strength of nerve, the ongoing mastery of one’s exposure to dangerous circumstances. For example, an acrobat succeeds ‘only if he is sure enough of himself to rely upon vertigo instead of trying to resist it. Vertigo is an integral part of nature, and one controls it only in obeying it’ (Caillois 1961: 138). The thrill of vertigo comes about when people control their own encounters with the uncontrolled, the irrational, the extreme and the violent.

A second distinct category of vertiginous play is psychological or ‘moral’ vertigo. This takes such forms as breaking objects, making loud noises, fighting and pressing oneself into a dense crowd. ‘This vertigo is readily linked to the desire for disorder and destruction, a drive which is normally repressed’ (Caillois 1961: 24). Although they generate intense sensations, these crude acts focus on the disruption not of perception, but social propriety. They are expressions of individual agency ‘in rebellion against every type of code, rule and organization’ (Caillois 1961: 157). Through such acts, people seek to experience a sense of release, freedom ‘from the burden of memory and from the terrors of social responsibilities and pressures’ (Caillois 1961: 51). Practices of moral vertigo frame ‘the abdication of conscience’ (Caillois 1961: 44). People engaged in playful forms of vertigo experiment with deviance; they ‘toy with violence and tease repressed passions’ (Darnton 1984: 101).

Vertigo most clearly characterizes the Nietzschean idea of play as being outside ethics (Spariosu 1989).

The primal, Dionysian impulse to vertigo remains tempting, despite its real, life-threatening dangers, and despite the regular sublimation of desires into the more organized, ‘cultural’ forms of play, namely competition and chance. Chance is ‘a mockery of work, of patient and persevering labor, of saving . . . in sum, a mockery of all the virtues needed in a world dedicated to the accumulation of wealth’ (Caillois 1961: 157). In a similar sense, the exuberance and excessiveness of vertigo persists as a dialectical response to the overbearing physical and psychological security provided by the social order, which alienates the individual from direct engagement with the material world and from a sense of agency within the social world. This is borne out in Benjamin’s view of children’s play as disruptive and subversive, overcoming prohibitions and inhibitions (Gilloch 1996), and in Caillois’ evaluation of why Huizinga ignores games of vertigo:

He no doubt holds them in disdain, because it seems impossible to attribute a cultural or educative value to games of vertigo . . . They are
regarded as destructive to the mores. According to a popular view, culture ought to defend itself against seduction by them, rather than profit from their controversial revenues.

(Caillois 1961: 169–70)

The controversy regarding the revenues of play as vertigo is that it is linked to conceptions of value and need which are non-instrumental: ‘Aberrant disciplines, heroic feats accomplished to no purpose or profit, disinterested, mortally dangerous and useless, they are of merit in furnishing admirable witness, even if not generally recognized, to human perseverance, ambition, and hardiness’ (Caillois 1961: 138). Vertigo negates instrumental benefit and embraces risk for its own sake and the affirmation of human bodily experience. By allowing for the arousal, exposure and satiation of forbidden desires, it helps people to more fully be themselves.

Play as vertigo most clearly illustrates a general emphasis within this book upon the more active forms of playful engagement with the built environment. Many different kinds of people use the city for play, and focusing on the more kinetic, risky and transgressive forms of play tends to also draw attention to the practices of those social groups who have the capacity and disposition to pursue them, in particular young men, a group who have the enthusiasm and the time to explore new-found bodily potential. It is in many cases from the play of ‘able-bodied’ young men that inferences can be drawn about how people in general might explore the physical and social limits of urban spaces.

There are many ways in which the city frames disturbing sensations which stimulate vertigo. The following extract is from Caillois’ analysis of funfairs. Rereading this account as a description of cities highlights many ways that experience in urban space can inspire vertigo.

These physical sensations [of vertigo, from rides] are reinforced by many related forms of fascination designed to disorient, mislead and stimulate confusion . . . this is the function of labyrinths of mirrors ( . . . the disconcerting reflections that multiply and distort . . . ) and of freak shows exhibiting giants, dwarfs . . . creatures that are . . . half-woman and half-octopus, men whose skins have dark spots like those of leopards. The horror is compounded by being invited to touch them. Facing these attractions are the no less ambiguous seductions of phantom trains and gloomy haunted houses filled with apparitions, skeletons, entangling spider webs, bat’s wings, trap doors, drafts, unearthly cries . . . a naïve arsenal or miscellany of terror, adequate to exacerbate nervousness grown complacent and generate a fleeting horror . . . everything that is strange or disturbing is of use here.

(Caillois 1961: 134–35)
Caillois’ litany of phenomena suggests the sheer intensity of sensory stimulation in the city. Urban space is physically extreme, consisting in part of giant forms and dark and compressed spaces which contribute to a sense of the sublime, ‘the awe-filled pleasure of submission to that which overwhelms us – a mixture of reverence, fear, and an almost phallic pleasure inspired by grandeur’ (Dovey 1999: 120). Such mixture characterizes the ‘ambiguous seductions’ which the city presents. The sublime also implies an inability to rationally apprehend. In the city, perception is constantly destabilized by sudden shifts in scale, views of tall buildings and rapidly moving vehicles as well as views from them, and contrasts of light and darkness and of noise and quiet. Unknown spaces suddenly become revealed; similarly, familiar routes, places and meanings become obscured and lost. The city is disordered, a ‘labyrinth of mirrors that multiply and distort’. Benjamin and the Situationists suggest that wandering through the labyrinthine spaces of the city brings perceptions of people, places and memories together in strange, random juxtapositions, dislocated from their conventional frames of reference:

walking . . . is a substitute for the legends that used to open up space to something different . . . Things extra and other (details and excesses coming from elsewhere) insert themselves into the accepted framework, the imposed order.

(de Certeau 1993: 160)

The social and physical complexity of urban public space frames disturbing ‘dialectical images’ like the half-woman-half-octopus, images which shock the senses and also one’s sensibility about the order of things (Gilloch 1996).

The fear of touching freaks which Caillois mentions generates moral vertigo. In urban public space, a great many people who are strange and different are gathered close together and encountered by chance. A myriad of social activities overlap and interpenetrate (Sennett 1971). Caillois writes of ‘the pleasure, thrill and excitement engendered by fraternization with an anonymous multitude’ and adds that ‘collective turbulence stimulates, and is in turn stimulated by, [vertigo]’ (Caillois 1961: 40). Thus play in public also feeds upon the disorderly behavior of crowds of other people.

Vertigo ‘is a game-characteristic which Caillois appears to have “discovered” and which has received little attention from others’ (Lancy and Tindall 1977: 12). The conception of play as vertigo has strong resonances with urban conditions. This is particularly clear where Gilloch points to the origins of Benjamin’s phenomenology in Baudelaire, who saw the city as:

a site of intoxication . . . home to the unexpected, to novelty and distraction . . . a space to be explored with joyous abandon. It offers
the excitement of the anonymous crowd, the exhilaration of freedom and the ecstasy of losing oneself. It is a place of shock.

(Gilloch 1996: 171–72)

Vertigo and simulation are closely linked and often occur together. This can be seen in many kinds of performance and costumes: the alternative world created through play draws on memory and dreams, but it also distorts and intensifies; it is both strange and larger than life. People often combine disguising themselves to assume another personality with special kinds of movements, such as dancing, which not only lend them another character but also transform the way they experience the world around them. Amusement parks are play spaces which draw together themed environments and the thrill of rides. Play as simulation and play as vertigo are shaped in response to the atmosphere of the city and the tension generated by its coincident familiarity and unfamiliarity.

Caillois’ four categories have some claim to being a comprehensive delineation of play behaviors (Mouledoux 1977). Each is a different way in which life is lived more intensely, and each suggests forms of heightened bodily and mental engagement with the rich specificity and strangeness of urban space. Competition and simulation focus on increased personal control over the body and over communicated meaning. Chance and vertigo involve escape from behavioral and perceptual controls. In each case, play is experienced as an emancipation from the routines, constraints and preconceptions of everyday social existence. While competition and chance relate primarily to material relations between people and urban spaces, simulation and vertigo are forms of activity which primarily reflect Benjamin’s interest in play as a transformed mode of perception in the city.

Competition and simulation, the two more ludic forms of play, clearly have an analogic role in inculcating and reproducing social habitus, both for children and for adults. However, Caillois notes that playing with chance depends on an adult’s capacity for rational foresight, and that vertigo lacks any educative value. The emphasis by psychologists such as Piaget on the developmental function of cognition fails to explain why adults remain attracted to chance and vertigo – reinforcing the fact that different scholars use the term ‘play’ differently to convey and explore disparate aspects of human experience (Mouledoux 1977; Sutton-Smith 1997). Chance and vertigo suggest something other than rational instrumentality as a driver of social behavior.

Caillois’ four forms of play help to elucidate the dialecticity of play, because each of these forms expresses social ideals which are difficult to achieve in everyday life. Equalization through competition or chance emphasizes a negation of predetermined, unequal social roles. Simulation and vertigo occur in an improvised world which is without fixed rules; players either create an illusion or are dominated by it. The focus in
Simulation and vertigo is on liberation from power relations, from typical methods and from normalizing constraints, whether these be psychological, social or natural. Freedom from predetermination, a certain improvisation of practice, is a basic condition of play. In public places, people can fully ‘be themselves’ and can transcend the roles which have been defined for them by work and domestic life. The four forms of play act out and amplify the potentials for freedom, equality, individual control and transformation which are only latent in the diversity, intensity and reduced social structuring of urban public space.

There does not appear to be any previous research that specifically examines the spatial conditions that frame Caillois’ various types of play. However, each of the types would seem to be suited to very different kinds of physical settings. Urban spaces can heighten people’s control over their own bodily action and their presentations of self. Urban spaces can allow people to slip out of the modes of social and bodily control which normally govern everyday life. And urban space clearly frames unexpected experiences and unplanned encounters with strangers.

The publicness of play

Play in urban public settings has a distinctive phenomenology and sociology. Caillois’ four types of play highlight that play activities define special ways of perceiving and certain modes of interacting with other people, objects and spaces. Play is shaped by urban social conditions: the density and diversity of people, the mixing of their activities, the unpredictability of their behavior, their differing expectations and the unfamiliarity of their expressions all contribute to instability and ‘the dissolution of constraints’ (Lefebvre 1996: 129). Lofland (1998: 77–98) places the pleasures of public life into two main categories, aesthetic and interactional. Her list of aesthetic pleasures includes the experience of historical layering and physical juxtaposition, and the diversity of stimuli this frames, very much paralleling Benjamin’s focus on urban perceptions. Lofland also lists unexpectedness (chance), crowding (vertigo) and whimsy (simulative fantasy). These aesthetic perceptions are triggers to play through a combination of sensory stimulation and memory. The forms of interactional pleasure which Lofland outlines are public solitude, people watching, public sociability, and lastly what she categorizes as playfulness, frivolity and fantasy. Because of the extensive freedom of movement and action in the city, there are many different levels of involvement which people can take in public play.

Several overarching principles guide and structure public face-to-face interactions so that everyone can cope with the city’s social intensity and complexity. The principles of ‘civil inattention’ (Goffman 1980) and ‘civility toward diversity’ embody the freedom and social distance to act playfully in the midst of multitudes of strangers: people either ignore or tolerate
Another principle of public interaction is that ‘inhabitants of the public realm act primarily as audience to the activities that surround them’ (Lofland 1998: 31). People watching is a pleasure in itself. It allows people to fantasize about the lives of others. This form of play relies on the visibility of strangers in public spaces, and to a lesser degree the viewer’s own exposure. Being seen in public is just as important as seeing. The presence of an audience is an important part of many play practices, most notably competitive displays. The reactions of all those present during play activity in some way define and legitimize or invalidate its boundaries, even bystanders who apparently just observe or turn away. ‘Games generally attain their goal only when they stimulate an echo of complicity... games... seem to reflect stimulus and response... and effervescence or shared tension. They need an attentive and sympathetic audience’ (Caillois 1961: 39–40). The mere presence of other people raises the stakes of contests. Audiences help judge the fairness of play, and often enforce it, as well as its success. The public are the context of public play and they are an integral part of the activity’s meaning (Lutfiyya 1987).

Play events in public can encourage bystanders to join in, taking on a more active level of public engagement, or they can inspire related events. The most distinctive feature of interactions in the public realm is that the majority of people are biographically unknown to each other. What urbanites know about each other is generally only categorical, limited to such characteristics as their age, race and gender. Urban play thus primarily involves relatively impersonal interactions among strangers. The diversity, anonymity and unfamiliarity of other persons encountered in the city lend public play a distinctive character (Lofland 1998). The limited scope of knowledge and involvement allows people to escape from their normal social status and responsibilities with a low level of exposure risk. As people in public do not always know enough about each other’s status, capacities and motivations to know the ‘appropriate’ way to interact, play provides a relatively low-risk way to test the boundaries of the other. People’s playful responses constantly test, dissolve and invert established behavioral cues, strategies and meanings. The presence of others encourages and shapes this play. Other people can be a source of wonderment and fantasy; they can be the basis for competition and simulation and engender the collective turbulence of vertigo. ‘Much behavior in public is not confined to specific tasks’: in public play, the common purpose is merely to be with and to experience other people as ends in themselves (Lennard and Lennard 1984: 9).

Play is often interactive, especially in public places. The separateness of play from people’s everyday life heightens their awareness of others who are participating with them. Freedom from social responsibilities allows for the broadest expression of people’s individuality. Others can experience different aspects of a person’s personality through their play, and it then becomes less likely that their personality will be conflated with the specific...
social roles they fill in everyday life, and less likely that they will be treated instrumentally (Lennard and Lennard 1984). Interactive play in public places can help to build feelings of connectedness and community; it can draw heterogeneous people together. It is ‘pure’ sociability which is not distorted by conflicting individual goals (Simmel 1950). Public play relations do not have a thoroughly predetermined structure. Play’s voluntary nature means people are free to interact on openly negotiated and hence more equitable terms. Informal and chance interactions can build over time into more permanent relationships.

Lutfiyya (1987) articulates three hierarchical levels of play at different scales of the social: individual play which develops cognition and the imagination, social play which develops solidarity within social groups, and public play. For Lutfiyya, the distinctive characteristic of public play is the extent and impact of the players’ acts of ‘fanciful recontextualization’. Fanciful recontextualization means the critical redefinition of serious social contexts, and so provides a link to the general dialectical character of play.

The dialecticity of play in the public realm

Play can be understood within Bourdieu’s (1984) framework of *habitus* as a practice which is ‘structured’ and also ‘structuring’. Acts of play arise within a cultural context and help to reproduce it, and play can thus become ‘an instrument of fecund and decisive culture’, serving material and ideological outcomes and becoming ‘diffused to reality’ (Caillois 1961: 27, 64). Both Caillois and Huizinga compare play to a range of ritual social forms including art, war, poetry, myth, philosophy and religion; both see the whole of culture as played. Play can also impart new meaning and potential to society: ‘Play form emerges from the contents of ordinary or serious life situations, but ultimately is not bound in these contents. Play as a transformational process develops an “autonomous existence”’ (Lutfiyya 1987: 10; see also Simmel 1950). But rather than treating play as a completely separate category of human experience, it is more useful to use it as an analytical construct for understanding how everyday life unfolds dialectically.

One of the main defining characteristics of play is its tension with everyday life: ‘Play forms typically involve testing . . . Through play homo ludens lives out emotions which are either repressed or diverted by the rest of life’ (Rojek 1995: 185). The four-part definition of play laid out in this chapter points toward several oppositional tensions between play and various ‘serious’ features of everyday social life. These include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>morality</th>
<th>desire</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>order</td>
<td>disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intention</td>
<td>surprise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>production</td>
<td>destruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>deferred satisfaction</td>
<td>immediate pleasure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>control</td>
<td>release</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Play provides opportunities for critiquing, transforming and expanding social practice because of its diversity and creativity, its testing of limits, the absence of instrumental gain and its separation from the roles, rules and expectations of everyday life. Two further aspects of the dialecticity of play pertain to the particular relations between social action and physical space. The first is that the built environment in general is a particularly durable part of habitus which inspires and gives structure to the actions of everyday life. Built forms tend to suggest what behavior is ‘appropriate’ or ‘desirable’:

the understandings that prevail among all socialized persons present at the occasion, the territorial plan, the physical objects present, and the social usage of any or all of those objects and spaces constitute criteria for understanding what is going on, what is supposed to happen.

(Lyman and Scott 1975: 149–50)

Spatial habitus constrains play because it defines ‘appropriate’ times and places which help to organize and codify social action, and because it has representational contents that reinforce social norms. However, built space also ‘contains potentialities – of works and of reappropriation . . . responding to the demands of a body’ (Lefebvre 1991b: 349). Space offers certain points of escape and resistance. New forms of social practices arise in critical response to the conditions of space. Practices are spatial in a dialectical sense; they also produce space: ‘a body . . . putting up resistance inaugurates the project of a different space’ (Lefebvre 1991b: 349).

Social experience in urban public space has its own specific tensions. The habitus of urban life is not neatly structured. Urban space confounds expectations; it lacks clear order, it is constantly being used in a variety of ways by others (not all of which appear logical), and it lends itself to new forms of behavior. Exposure in urban public space illuminates contradictions within social life, because it exposes people to the concentrated diversity of the oeuvre. In doing so, it also heightens those tensions, and brings about ruptures, where people’s experience of life is transformed. When people have unexpected encounters with others who are different in public places, they typically have to actively negotiate their engagement, because they cannot follow predetermined rules of conduct. Sennett (1994) suggests that the liberty of public life is defined not by an absence of constraint, but by this active, heightened engagement with possibility and its inherent difficulties: ‘Freedom which arouses the body does so by accepting impurity, difficulty, and obstruction as part of the very experience of liberty . . . The body comes to life when coping with difficulty’ (Sennett 1994: 9–10).

A multiplicity of practices of play, discovery, and negotiation continuously re-shape everyday urban life, through a dialectical engagement with spatial and social discipline which undermines the possibility of order:
urban life increasingly permits the reemergence of the element that the urbanistic project excluded . . . the city is left prey to contradictory movements that counterbalance and combine themselves outside the reach of panoptic power . . . they are impossible to administer . . . a proliferating illegitimacy . . . discipline is manipulated . . . spatial practices in fact secretly structure the determining conditions of social life . . . multiform, resistant, tricky and stubborn procedures that elude discipline without being outside the field in which it is exercised . . . The surface of this order is everywhere punched and torn open by ellipses, drifts, and leaks of meaning.

(de Certeau 1993: 155–57)

The social experiences framed by urban space can reveal, and indeed stimulate, new needs and new possibilities; they create, reawaken and resituate meanings. Lefebvre’s (1996) formulation of the dialecticity of everyday life is captured in his conception of ‘moments’. Moments are temporally limited social experiences, characterized by conditions under which the oppositions and contradictions of social life are intensified, thereby raised to consciousness, and engaged. Lefebvre’s idea of play as a moment is thus far more dialectical and creative than Huizinga’s formulation of play as occurring separated from the everyday:

A moment defines a form and is defined by one. The everyday is composed of a multiplicity of moments, such as games, love, work, rest, struggle, knowledge, poetry and justice, and links professional life, direct social life, leisure and culture . . . when playing, one accepts the rules of the game and each time recreates and reinvents the usage of the game.

(Kofman and Lebas 1996: 30)

In their capacity as transformative moments within the everyday, acts of play are akin to a broader class of dialectical social practices, rituals. Anthropological knowledge about the ritual process, which is itself often defined in terms of play, can shed much light on play’s causes and outcomes, how it is conducted and experienced, and its social and spatial context. Many social rituals unfold in time in a process which Turner (1982) describes as being *liminal*, from the Latin *limen* for threshold. The ritual process is, like play, a dialectical moment:

an interval, however brief, of margin or limen, when the past is momentarily negated, suspended or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun, an instant of pure potentiality when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance.

(Turner 1982: 44)
The concept of liminality charts the unfolding tension between the passage of a social ritual and enduring cultural definitions of rationality and value. Liminality, like play, frames escape from social convention and the exploration of new possibilities. The dissolution of social order within the liminal process is always temporary: ‘forms of reversal . . . occur during interstices between periods of intense or serious activity’ (P. Stevens 1991: 238).

The first phase of the ritual process is separation. The ritual has an ‘antistructure’: it ‘inverts or dissolves the normal (and normative) structural order prevalent in the rest of the community’, destroying the truth and power of this order (Spariosu 1997: 33). The bonds of the past are negated. There is the active transgression of rules, an experience of escape or release. In acts of play this is often manifested in the risking of limits and or exposure to intensity and excess. At the same time, liminality also blurs distinctions: it ‘brings together dichotomous elements of life’ and ‘[combines] the ordinarily uncombinable’ (Lyman and Scott 1975: 151). Play admits the possibility of bridging the binary oppositions which normally define social life, and engaging dialectically with the tensions inherent in them.

In the second, transitional phase of ritual participants are freed from their usual roles and status relations and from behavioral norms. Other people, symbols and objects are all encountered outside cultural frames of reference and ordinary instrumental relations. The dissolution of norms leads to a leveling of status, as well as ambiguity and an ambivalence regarding purpose; that is, a disinterestedness. People go through ‘an ambivalent social phase of limbo’ (Spariosu 1997: 33). Goals are unknown and undefined. People rediscover a reciprocal relation to objects and to each other as all things are set free of their cultural coordinates and once again become auralic: very much as in child’s play (Gilloch 1996). The transitional phase of ritual is one of heightened awareness. Experience and gesture are sensualized and enriched. The heightening of perceptions and the need for personal orientation stimulate both memory and fantasy. Similarly in play: ‘Participants often experience a heightened awareness of others and their surroundings, and are reminded of their connectedness and continuity with the past’ (Lennard and Lennard 1984: 53).

The unstructured and unfamiliar conditions of the transitional phase encourage a spirit of inquiry, ingenuity and flexibility. Ritual liminality is crucial to identity formation because it encourages the discovery and development of new understandings of the self through performance. Similarly, ‘play is like education of the body, character, or mind, without the goal’s being predetermined’ (Caillois 1961: 167). People seek to explore options, to establish new meanings and new correspondences between things through metaphorical reinterpretation. Lutfiyya (1987) calls this exploration ‘fanciful recontextualization’; Benjamin uses the term ‘playful reconstruction’ (Gilloch 1996). Radley’s (1993) formulation is that liminal acts of ritual or play ‘refract’ aspects of society rather than merely reflecting them.
In the final, incorporation phase of ritual, the initiate is reabsorbed into the social whole, and so are the experiences and values born of their transformation. Turner argues that forms of social life developed amidst the liminality of play become incorporated into the social structure: ‘Turner in effect sees liminality as a game of disorder out of which new orders emerge. He defines liminal situations as “seeds of cultural creativity” that generate new models, symbols, and paradigms’ (Spariosu 1997: 33).

Certain actors exemplify liminality, including children, teenagers, elderly people and those getting married. Teenagers are in a transitional phase of life where they try out new kinds of social roles and test limits, and they have a lot of free time. Strangers and new spaces that they encounter provide a measure for their explorations of identity (Sennett 1971). Teenagers respond to opportunities for play which the city presents, but they also tend to create opportunities by working against the established order of the world. Male teenagers in particular engage in play which involves social confrontation, exhibitionism, and displays of bravado.

There are also recognized liminal times including rush hour and smoking breaks, and special occasions such as public holidays and celebrations. Goffman (1980: 21) observes that the decorum of serious everyday life ‘is typically subverted momentarily by parades, convention antics, marriage and funeral processions, ambulances, and fire trucks . . . for a brief time’. Many of these ruptures are themselves serious, but all momentarily tear participants and observers away from their normal role responsibilities, suddenly bringing them to focused attention and a heightened state of action. Liminal actions at these times and by these people are generally publicly tolerated because they are not seen as lasting or threatening; indeed, these liminal stages of release and transformation are necessary for the stable reproduction of the wider society (Bakhtin 1984).

Play too can become formalized through rules and bound up in other more instrumental patterns of practice; the path from paidia toward ludus can be viewed as a continuing process of institutionalization which forms the basis of cultural life and cultural progress (Caillois 1961). In contemporary secular society, liminal experience has become closely associated with everyday leisure (Cohen and Taylor 1978; Rojek 1995). Since the late 1970s, a large amount of public space in western cities has become carefully restructured and managed to provide leisure landscapes with the appearance of permanent festivity (Hannigan 1998; Dovey 1999). The city’s oeuvre and the sense of escape into ‘pure sociability’ have been captured to serve the interests of power and profit, coupled with continued efforts to suppress play’s dialecticity, its potential for social transformation.

However at the heart of leisure activity remains ‘a constant vacillation between tension and release’; even socially designated ‘liminal zones’, where transgressive behavior has become legitimized, ‘can never be areas of either
genuine freedom or genuine control’ (Rojek 1995: 87–88). Even though the ritual conduct of play, with its sense of release, its negations, and its apparent risks, might ultimately serve a progression ‘from turbulence to rules’ (Caillois 1961: 27), what remains of interest is that conditions of turbulence and desires for disorder persist, and that the most complex of human creations, the city, provides a wealth of these conditions. Liminality is an intrinsic characteristic of urban social experience, if not always recognized as such. The city’s sensory intensity and unfamiliarity, the unexpected juxtapositions of people’s activities in time and space and overlaps of meaning all help to constitute liminality. People’s encounters with difference and the unexpected in public space are escapes from the everyday which continue to transform their sense of self (Cohen and Taylor 1978). The liminal, transformative potential of play in urban public spaces cannot easily be suppressed because it resides within people’s everyday bodily experiences. Everyday actions have a role in the continual structuring of the social world, developing people’s understanding of who they are and who they want to be and their understanding of how they relate to spaces and to other people around them, and expanding their capacities to act.