

the fun theory... changing human behavior

Blog by Ana Manzo on her site place of dreams, an architect's thoughts, October 13, 2010

In a time where everything goes into fast motion, people do not take the time to appreciate the little things of everyday life unless, for some reason, they are removed from their comfort zone, or caught by surprise with something unexpected which make them take a pause on the road.

This is the idea proposed by the project / contest / campaign “*the fun theory*” (2009) (Rolighetsteorin), an initiative of Volkswagen Sweden, created by DDB Stockholm, that can be seen on their [web page](#) in which they explain their vision:

“This site is dedicated to the thought that something as simple as fun is the easiest way to change people’s behavior for the better. Be it for yourself, for the environment, or for something entirely different, the only thing that matters is that it’s change for the better”.

A simple, unique and innovative concept that is able to produce many ideas, many metaphors of everyday situations, but each and every one of them with a single purpose: to positively change human behavior through fun design interventions to common elements, such as street furniture, always keeping in mind the element of reward.

There are several ideas developed by this project. Here are a few of them: “***The world’s deepest bin***“: a rubbish bin in a park, to which have been added speakers that produce an effect of “*deep well*” turning littering into something fun, “***Bottle Bank Arcade Machine***“: a bank of bottles tuned into an arcade game with sound effects that includes scores in visible places and “***Piano stairs***“: the stairs of a subway station in Stockholm, Sweden, are converted on a giant piano, making people choose them over the escalator or lifts (similar to the giant piano in the film “big” with Tom Hanks).

The project involves the development of the concept of emotional or affective commitment. Each user gets an experience that is designed to evoke an emotional response, encouraging participation through enjoyment and pleasure.

But the issue of affective commitment in architecture is not a recent discovery; nor that of game or fun theory. The first one was developed by people such as the French Architect Etienne-Louis Boullée (1728-1799), creator of the *Newton’s Cenotaph* who defended a neo-classicism with an emotional commitment in his treatise “*Architecture, essai sur l’art*”.

More recently, the *situationist theory* (1957-1972) appears proposing the creation of situations, referring to the deliberate creation of life moments with the intention of directing events in favor of collective organization; a similar idea to the one approached by “*theory of fun*”. The artist Constant Nieuwenhuys was a member of the situationist movement. He

developed the concept for a utopian city called *New Babylon*, in which its inhabitants would live in an atmosphere of leisure, free to develop creative ideas and search for new sensations.

It is also possible to find examples of the *game theory*, such as the book called "*homo ludens*" or "*man the player*" (1938) written by the historian Johan Huizinga, in which he discusses the importance of the element of play in culture and society. The creator of *New Babylon*, proposed that the city would be inhabited by *homo ludens*.

Also in the same area, we can find the books "*Play As Emotional Survival*" and "*The Ambiguity of Play*", both on the cultural significance of play in human life, written in the years 1990 by Brian Sutton-Smith, another game theorist.

It is also important to note that even though the concept of "*the fun theory*" is very creative, is not the only one in its area. It is possible to find similar proposals, with a similar concept, such as:

"Glassphemy!". Defined as "*a psychological recycling experiment*". The idea is to turn the experience of recycling into something more visceral and direct, and that also serves to purge the aggressiveness of the City of New York.

This installation, built in a private space in Brooklyn, consists of a large transparent cube, with high walls made of steel and bulletproof glass. A group of people is raised on a platform at the upper part of one side of the cube. From there, they throw empty glass bottles inside, which are directed towards another group of people placed in the lowest part of the other side of the cube, safely outside the onslaught area. Inside, thanks to this game of aggression, a beautiful sculpture is constructed with crushed bottles and a set of lights on the bottom of the installation.

"30 Seconds of Awesome"; another example similar to "*the fun theory*". The idea is that, at an intersection in LA, California, during the thirty-eight seconds of pedestrian time, and without interfering with car traffic, a group of students appropriate the intersection and play in the street. The idea is to promote the use of existing urban infrastructure in a physically attractive way. Participants exercise while occupying a public open space.

http://youtu.be/R1E_SPxVlaY

<http://youtu.be/S56nqj9dR7Y>

<http://youtu.be/ceygdFbmPDw>

Noting all these proposals and assuming that human behavior can be directed and oriented according to certain sensory experiences in the environment, it can be said that the designer must go beyond forms, program and colors; must go from *creative* to *interpreter* of

the emotions and feelings of people, with the intention to act as a guide to a better urban environment. If in the process, he also begins to appreciate the fun and starts bringing childhood to adulthood, the architecture might move towards a new direction. So,

why not take a step forward in the profession and make our jobs more fun?

These next projects show that we have already begun to move towards a fun architecture:

“Dumpsters pools”. Pools created from trash containers, placed in semi-secret places in New York. The idea is to create mobile pools, from objects commonly used for storing and transporting garbage, and put them in unexpected places, always with the intention of reusing the space and provide entertainment to their users.

“Dispatchwork”. A project previously reviewed by *arkinnet*, which was created with the idea to fill with colorful patches of Lego, the scars of the buildings that were produced during World War II. The plan has grown and its creators express their intention to place these fun toys in all the scars of the buildings in the world.

“Pothole Onomatopoeia”. Another project also reviewed by *arkinnet*, which reflects the intention of a group of people from Toronto called *Urban Repair Squad*, to exert urban consciousness by using humor. They use typography templates, to paint onomatopoeic words like in comics, on the bumpy streets. Their intention is to *“provide warning with humor; suggest danger with comedy; invite caution without frightening... and most importantly, appeal to our fine city to remember that potholes aren’t just uncomfortable, they really, really hurt”*, referring to the danger of potholes for bikers.