

## PLAY #5

# IMAGINE THE POSSIBLE

**A**ny livable future city needs to be a place of delight, discovery, play, and pleasure in serendipitous encounter. When future smart cities are imagined by corporations, however, urban experience often gets relegated to responsive and frictionless infrastructure. For smart cities to be truly citizen focused, developers, civil society, and government need to incorporate opportunities for play and creativity as a means of imagining the future city.

## DISCUSSION



While most conversation during the symposium focused on smart infrastructure and public decision-making, the question of how technologies shape social interactions was never far from the surface. This included the kinds of tools, both digital and analog, used for dialogue, augmented reality (the insertion of a data layer onto physical space), and the interactions that urban screens and urban art might provide. Benjamin Stokes shared stories of several efforts by major cities to leverage Pokémon GO for city goals, including encouraging people to visit overlooked neighborhoods and engage with local history.<sup>10</sup> Eric Gordon spoke about the intentional design of playful process as a means of cultivating rich dialogue.<sup>11</sup> Play in these contexts is distinct from “gamification” or “funification,” where games are used as a motivator for participation (in the best case) or a means of placating publics (in the worst case). Here, play means to foreground social interaction in smart design. For example, in 2017 the City of Boston staged a “Robot Block Party” that introduced smart city concepts such as autonomous vehicles and artificial intelligence by massing the “largest collection of autonomous vehicles and robots ever assembled in Boston.”<sup>12</sup>

As smart becomes a dominant frame for

the future city, it will take effort to move the conversation beyond the purely rational and cognitive. In line with Play #1, participants agreed it is strategic to latch onto the enthusiasm around smart, but that in doing so, it is essential to ensure that the term is broad enough to include all the things that make life in cities tolerable, and even desirable. The High Line in New York City is smart infrastructure.<sup>13</sup> The whimsical repurposing of parking spaces into mini-parks, as takes place during the international art event Park(ing) Day, is smart infrastructure.<sup>14</sup> While Play #1 seeks to capture smart for a civic agenda, Play #5 seeks to broaden out civic to include a range of shared experiences in the public realm, ensuring that publics, not just corporations, can actively imagine the future city.

Gabriella Gomez-Mont warns, “What does it mean that corporate agendas have the power to take over our imagination? And what are corporations optimizing for?” Most importantly, how do we enable publics to do the work of imagining possibilities?” Media scholar Henry Jenkins has introduced the concept of civic imagination, or “our collective vision for what a better tomorrow might look like,”<sup>15</sup> as a self-conscious process of negotiating future visions. While he does not explicitly refer to smart cities, his focus on imagination and its connection to art and popular culture is instructive for the civic imagination of the future smart city.

Public art and creative placemaking is part of this play, but the play should not be mischaracterized as “more public art.” Instead, **it is the deliberate design of creative and playful encounters as a means of imagining the smart city.**

## ACTION IDEAS



- Include creative placemaking in smart city projects
- Experiment with new, immersive forms of storytelling, sourced from citizens, to evolve the definition of smart
- Tap into popular culture to provide opportunities for play and delight in the city

<sup>10</sup> For the full report, see: “Cities Remix a Playful Platform: Prominent Experiments to Embed Pokémon GO, from Open Streets to Neighborhood Libraries and Local Data.” June, 2018. Benjamin Stokes, Samantha Dols, and Aubrey Hill. <https://playfulcity.net/go/pokemon-report/>

<sup>11</sup> Gordon, E.; Haas, J.; Michelson, B. “Civic Creativity: Role-Playing Games in Deliberative Process.” *International Journal of Communication*, [S.l.], v. 11, p. 19, Sep. 2017. ISSN 1932-8036. Available at: <<http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/7344>>

<sup>12</sup> See, <https://www.boston.gov/calendar/robot-block-party>

<sup>13</sup> See, <http://www.thehighline.org/>

<sup>14</sup> See, <https://www.citylab.com/life/2017/09/from-parking-to-parklet/539952/>

<sup>15</sup> See <https://www.civicimaginationproject.org/about> for more information about how civic imagination is put into practice.