Serendipity and the City

Book of Abstracts

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Organised by the Serendipity Society
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Cities have been the stage for both serendipity and serendipity lost. While their diversity makes them the ideal places for making discoveries and are therefore known as “serendipity engines”; the modern city has been critiqued for ‘designing out’ the accidental of urban environments. The notion of an urban flaneur is metaphorically used to describe information seeking behavior and renowned urban scholars like Jane Jacobs plea for designing streets to facilitate meeting strangers.

The public space is of ever-growing importance. With personalized technologies and customized services, it is considered to be one of the few spaces that still affords diverse and serendipitous encounters. The value of serendipitous encounters in cities is not only acknowledged on an individual level, but also from a macro perspective, as serendipity is considered a main driver in cities’ innovativeness and resilience.

We have invited people to reflect upon these questions in the Serendipity and the City symposium. In this book you will find an overview of their contributions!

Symposium Program Chairs: Annelien Smets & Maja Naumczyk
Serendipity Society Symposia Chair: Wendy Ross

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Fostering serendipitous situations in smart cities: A sociomaterial approach

SABRINA SAUER

Keywords: situated serendipity, sociomaterial practices, smart cities

Serendipitous insights and experiences in urban settings are valued: unplanned encounters in this sociomaterial context (Orlikowki, 2007; Hultin, 2019) can spark new ideas, can be a source of innovation and are even recognized as helpful in maintaining the social fabric of an urban environment. Contemporary developments to realise “smart cities”, wherein insights into big data help optimize urban processes have led to ethical concerns about the role of “smart citizens” in these environments. For what does reconfiguring citizens as “smart” imply about citizens who are currently “not smart”, and what will it mean to be a smart city dweller when the digital and actual merge to reflect a person’s identity? Will the discrepancies between our experienced selves and our digital twins lead to positive unexpected insights, or will it accelerate the development of technologies that support disposable identities (Van Kranenburg, n.d.)? And how will traversing smart environments subsequently shape city dwellers’ serendipitous experiences?

If urban life is to be “managed” by processes of digital pattern recognition, how to ensure that these practices of management and recognition are based in ethical, responsible design and decision-making? For instance, part of responsible governance of smart city development is stimulating media literacy to alert people about the workings of algorithms. Another route is to involve city dwellers in the design of smart city technologies, for example by means of citizen science or co-design practices. This involvement is not only crucial in terms of responsible smart city development, but also offers the opportunity to better understand how continuously shifting human-technology interactions shape serendipitous urban experiences.

This paper presents a new methodological approach to investigate how sociomaterial practices involving people, digital media technologies, and data shape serendipitous urban experiences. The approach uses participatory design, artistic research, and sensory ethnography to investigate urban, mediated serendipity. It looks at three different sociomaterial and emerging “situations”: the physical, media, and data situation. This method therefore focuses on collecting serendipitous experiences that city dwellers experience (1) in the physical urban space/place, (2) with media technologies or devices
and (3) with digital data (via media technologies, and in the urban space). This leads to insights into experienced serendipity in the citizen-technology-data-urban context (Sauer & Copeland, 2021). As these experiences emerge, they are harnessed and reflected upon by involved citizen-research participants, to gain a better understanding of how sociomaterial - and therefore emergent - serendipitous experiences are informed by media technologies and data. This leads to insights about how to design smart sociomaterial situations that afford serendipitous experiences in a responsible manner.

Sabrina Sauer is Assistant Professor Media Studies at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. She has a background in Media Studies and Science and Technology Studies, and trained as an actor prior to writing her dissertation about user-technology improvisations as a source for ICT innovation, at the University of Twente. She has published about audiovisual narrative creation, exploratory search, user research, digital materiality, social innovation, and serendipity. Her current research focuses on the use of Big Data in media production and creation practices, interdisciplinary brokering, and serendipity in smart cities.

References


What if I told you there was a way to break the monotony of the work-from-home grind. A way to bring chance encounters, new perspectives, and a breath of fresh air into your day... in just one hour. Close your laptop, change out of your slippers, join the Zoom call on your mobile, and discover what your street has in store for you.

**Lily Higgins** is a learning experience designer, facilitator, and founder of The Intervention Bureau & Urban Playwalks Rotterdam

Lily runs Serendipity Walks for teams and retreats, and it has become one of her most requested (and loved) team-building activities. Join her and others around the world to explore your neighborhood with new eyes and reconnect with curiosity and play.
Keywords: sub/urban play, improvisation, collaboration, public art, nudnik, serious games

When people make “stuff” outside of their houses, in the public spaces of their cities, it’s as if they have taken up Paul Auster’s advice to “pick one spot in the city and begin to think of it as yours. It doesn’t matter where and it doesn’t matter what”. Human(e) use of cities is messy and spontaneous, but it is also a creative response to the built environment, and a reflection of personality, livelihoods, society, culture, and traditions. As Peter Wilsher and Rosemary Righter note in Exploding Cities “It is important to understand... user contributions to urban order because this is a potentially revolutionary aspect of the city’s structure.” Perhaps the most powerful way to improve sub/urban environments, then, is to devolve control to those that have the stake, knowledge, and ability to do so. Creative use of the general environment leaves traces and fragments; remnants that layer up and decay over time. These traces are fine-grained evidence of life, human(e)-scale attachment, action and care, affection, love, pride, and ordinary magic. They are like scattered oases, tacitly accepted, actively protected, ignored, or begrudgingly left alone. We can refer to these as “small spaces of anarchy”, an idea we have modified from Mohammad Bamyeh’s book Anarchy as Order. These spaces are zones of human-scale action, attachment and care that can replace state control with regards to an aspect of city life, take away that aspect from the requirement of majority rule, and promote unimposed order as a style of working (modified from Bamyeh, 2009). In this way, it is possible for slim segments of the population to generate their own environments scattered over vast cities.

Under this understanding, Chris Berthelsen and Adam Ben-Dror created the NEWS Programme in 2020. NEWS Programme is a free self-learning environment that runs on streets, parks, private homes, community centres, public art galleries, department stores, public schools, in the sea, and anywhere else. It uses only things that have been thrown away or can be found for free. We then play and experiment with them to make fun, pleasurable and (sometimes) useful objects, services, activities, etc., in domains including but not limited to electronics, sewing, ceramics, sound/music, micromobility, gaming, landscaping, food/drink, poetry, and love. A core activity of the NEWS Programme is the Katamari Kart, a real-time prototyping and “team-melting” (not teambuilding!) exercise where people roam industrial areas
collecting waste materials and progressively build a large and mobile public sculpture. Rumen Rachev will provide an overview and examples of this method and discuss the role it can play in making public art and our cities more serendipitous, playful, and friendly. Subsequently, Alex Bonham, Auckland University Doctoral Candidate and author of the book Play and the City: How to Create Places and Spaces To Help Us Thrive, will discuss the Katamari Kart method in the context of play and wellbeing and draw out future directions for research and discussion.

Rumen Rachev holds an RMA in Media and Performance Studies from Utrecht University, the Netherlands, and is actively engaged in practice-led research in Art and Design (AUT), since 2017. As well, he is co-founder of the NEWS Programme (Negative Emissions and Waste Studies Programme) and is Creative Guest, Wairua Awhina (Helping Spirit), and Director of 希望学 (Hope-ology) at Activities and Research in Environments for Creativity Charitable Trust. Currently he holds the position of research assistant at Auckland University of Technology.

Chris Berthelsen explores environments for creative activity, resident-led modification of the lived environment, and alternative education(s). He runs multi-layered public projects throughout Aotearoa (New Zealand) and Japan which experiment with public/private space, Making Friends, trust and hope, and making-do with resources at hand. He is a co-founder of Activities and Research in Environments for Creativity Trust (Tāmaki Makaurau, Aotearoa aka New Zealand) and Tanushimaru Institute for Art Research (Fukuoka, Japan), and was Deputy-Chairperson of the Mairangi Arts Centre Trust (2017-2021). Watch a short interview with Chris about “Making Friends with Junk” here.

Alex Bonham is an elected member of the Waitematā Local Board, Auckland New Zealand. Her position is that the council can deliver action on climate change and pollution by the choices it makes, and she stands for better transport choices and forward-thinking urban planning that leaves space for local business, parks and nature, libraries and community facilities where everyone is welcome. Alex supports enhancing our shared spaces and offering many opportunities to participate in exciting and diverse ways. Alex graduated from Cambridge with a degree in Law then went into publishing. She left publishing in July 2010 to have two children and is currently working on a doctorate on the role of play, including sports, recreation, and the arts in maintaining quality of life in Auckland.
Tactical urban serendipity
JAN ADRIAENSSENS

Keywords: tactical urbanism, urban serendipity, tactical urban serendipity, urban catalysts

Bicycle lanes painted by inhabitants in their own street. Neighbours installing chairs, benches, tables, large planters, or even complete terraces on parking spots. Community workers placing bollards to widen the pavement. Local governments organising car-free days, or car-free streets. Interventions like this, used in tactical urbanism, don’t have to be expensive or structural to have significant impact. It’s rather the opposite: “tactical urbanism refers to a city, organisational, and/or citizen-led approach to neighbourhood building using short-term, low-cost, and scalable interventions to catalyse long-term change.” [1, p.11]

These interventions are usually very local, on the level of a street or smaller, and aimed at improving safety and accessibility for pedestrians or cyclists, economic revitalisation, or offering opportunities for citizens to connect with one another. [2, p.4] It is even argued that such catalysts can accomplish more by starting a dialogue around issues of shared spaces and accessibility than any one-off, site-specific solution ever could. [3, p.335]

There is a growing interest in the role of the built environment in fostering serendipity. In addition, tactical urbanism is an inspiring, thought-provoking, engaging, experimental, community-building and at times even activist way of revitalising the use of this built environment. So there appears to be value in the study of techniques, insights and outcomes of tactical urbanism to experiment with urban serendipity; let’s call this ‘tactical urban serendipity’.

In this paper we will not investigate the ways in which the build environment tries to foster serendipity. It will however attempt a first analysis of a methodology of tactical urbanism in relation to urban serendipity.

First categorisation is ‘intent’. Lennart Björneborn argues that “we cannot “engineer” nor “design” serendipity per se, but can design affordances for serendipity. Serendipity may thus be intended by designers, but must always be unplanned by users.” (1) How do the traditional forms of tactical urbanism unintentionally increase the propensity for urban serendipity? Indeed, tactical urbanism interventions by itself might not intend serendipity, but they might evoke it. (2) And on the other hand, how can urban serendipity be intentionally
evoked using tactical urbanism methodologies? Indeed, it warrants further investigation whether tactical urbanism approaches might be adopted with the specific intent to establish a serendipity-rich local neighbourhood.

Second categorisation is ‘process vs outcome’. (1) The process of tactical urbanism refers to “starting a dialogue” enabled by the initiators of the interventions. You start a conversation with the people painting guerrilla bike lanes. You join the neighbours building a terrace with plants and benches further down your street. (2) The outcome of tactical urbanism refers to the new (temporary) situation as-is, encountered by visitors without prior knowledge of the process. You enjoy the new guerrilla bike lane as it gives you more space and safety. You go and enjoy some afternoon sun on this inviting terrace down your street, and start a chat with a neighbour doing the same.

This paper therefore proposes looking into tactical urbanism as a way of bottom-up “designing back in” the accidental of urban environments. [5]

Jan Adriaenssens is director of “City of Things” at the research center imec in Belgium. His department investigates the possible role of technology in addressing wicked problems, where his focus is on cities, mobility and environment, in a quadruple helix approach.

References


Big and small village serendipitousness
IAN KENNEDY

Keywords: serendipitous discovery

There is no published method of measuring the degree of serendipity for comparing say encounters in the city and village. Such a measure would be useful. The purpose of this work was to study serendipity as a function of community size and to establish a measure for the degree of serendipity. This work reports on city serendipity and village serendipity as they are likely to reveal the extremes possible. These can serve as two end anchor points on a scale for measuring graduations of serendipitousness. This variable measures the degree of value that the event had to the researcher. This work reports on the perceived monetary value of serendipity to a researcher seeking Information. It does not report on the value of other findings such as a valuable idea or an individual’s name, or any other unknown-about desiderata. This work first considers the following Likert scale for rating the value of Information in the form of an unknown research paper. 5. Must cite it (legally and ethically required, as a quote or paraphrase is reproduced). 4. Should cite it. 3. Could cite it. 2. May cite it one day. 1. Don’t ever cite it! E.g., it contains false, fake, misleading or poor research that must not be given any positive mention. (This would include, for example a paper that has the word “serendipity” in the title, but not in the paper.)

The above scale is already used by the author to sort papers in his personal digital library. Contrasting cases of serendipity in the city and serendipity in the village are presented as exemplars of big serendipity and small serendipity. These cases can serve as anchor points on a scale to measure the value of serendipity. The impact of serendipity depends on the degree of surprise as well as the usefulness of the discovery. That is, serendipitousness is an increasing function of the value of the unexpected and useful discovery. The big city has many more connections than does the small village. Thus it is advisable to seek serendipity in the biggest community. The most serendipitous and the least serendipitous events of the author are recounted and connected with the size of the community.

Serendipitousness was greatest in the bigger community. General wisdom can be extracted from the case studies. A practical suggestion is given, supported by a published law. According to Metcalf’s law, the utility of a
network increases with the square of the size of the community. This is consistent with our results.

A second way for operationalising the value of a serendipitous discovery uses the estimated life worth of the discovery in monetary terms. Serendipity seekers are advised to seek out the largest possible community (such as the world wide community).

Ian G. Kennedy PhD MSc(Eng) BSc(Eng) (Wits) is retired from the University of the Witwatersrand. He started researching serendipity in 2012. For more than two decades, he has lectured on how to do research to industrial, business, commerce, accounting, engineering, mining, financial, management, medical CPD, and academic audiences. He has supervised students to successful doctoral degrees – in more than one faculty – and has advised master’s students in most faculties. He has six dozen publications to his name and has presented in a dozen countries for more than two dozen academic organizations. He has served as guest lecturer, program committee member, paper referee, book editor, guest editor, and keynote speaker. His ResearchGate Score was 343.26 on 2021-11-28.
Space syntax and serendipity

ALAN PENN

Alan Penn is the Chief Scientific Adviser at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). A Professor in Architectural and Urban Computing at the Bartlett, University College London (UCL), Alan’s research focuses on understanding the way that the design of the built environment affects the patterns of social and economic behaviour of organisations and communities.

Before joining MHCLG, Alan was Dean of The Bartlett Faculty of the Built Environment at UCL. He was Chair of the Architecture, Built Environment and Planning sub-panel for REF2014 and for RAE2008. Alan is a board member of Space Syntax Ltd, a technology spin-out from UCL, and a founding trustee of the Shakespeare North Trust, a charity which is constructing a new Shakesperian theatre and educational centre in Prescot, outside Liverpool.