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ENCOUNTER POINTS: The case of the roadside container

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, October 5th, 2016

Encounter points are those places and occasions in the city when small children feel curious and secure in their exploration, when older kids feel at home in the nooks and crannies they find or make, when adolescents reach for limits – their own as much as the city's – See feature image – and learn how to share these experiences with their companions, when adults feel in full possession of their urbane know-how while accepting to improve it upon being challenged, and when old folks can still find where they went to school or got married, or can feel still drawn mysteriously to the scents of a rose garden and to a good meal in a cozy place, ***i.e. encounter points are those places and occasions when city life is experienced in a fulfilling way … at any age.***

Recently, in the next street parallel to mine, for the second year in a row and for the duration of summer, I noticed a curious container placed inside the parking strip, along and facing the neighbourhood park on one side, and across the street from a private school.

The container had been modified with large openings, and with seats and fixed play equipment installed for **sheltered play** … at least a first glance.

In fact these encroachments on the traditional boundary between vehicular and pedestrian territories have created situations requiring more attention on the part of drivers and pedestrians, while the nature of the encroachment has added opportunities ***for face to face interaction and civility, for playful ambiance and for the increased perceptual awareness and challenge to imagination proper to all changes.***

Observing the goings on in the container has not been easy as I found it most time to be occupied by mothers and their chidren socializing and playing as in a **"public room"** with a strong aura of territorial appropriation.

This weekend late afternoon, however, while taking a walk around the park, I noticed pre-adolescent kids throwing basketballs over the roof of the container and waiting for them to roll back while younger kids played on the fixed equipment inside the container … **no adult in sight!**

What ensued were all sorts of variants on how to get the ball up there, and eventually, to climbing up to the roof as the other kids cleared the fixed equipment play area, but for a few girls sitting on the lone bench.

Given school had already started, I could not help noting a certain gender conditioning of schoolyard play, i.e. girls and boys separately together, in this case the girls were seated on the bench while the boys were going all out vigorously climbing and reaching and helping each other.

We now had a whole new set up for ball playing with four boys on the roof and four on the ground.

Not wanting to overstay my welcome as observer I left after taking that second photo … but I suppose you can get my point: ***what we now had was not just sheltered-play but a radically different type of shelter-exploring play … i.e. playfully exploring a room size "chunk" of the city.*** See image below

Roadside container play-exploration

My friend and colleague D. Johnson remarked about the photos: ***“Creativity, wherever it can be encouraged and cultivated, is fundamental to a soulful and rewarding life.”***
I can’t think of a better definition of an encounter point experience, in this case embodied modestly in the creative play encouraged by the roadside container, set inside the street domain as a **public room:** open to play, inside, around and over!
Photo credit Maurice Amiel
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