Art for Play: What, Where, and For Whom?
Open-ended play is essential for human development throughout life. It is also part of the creative process, whether one is an artist or a scientist or mathematician. Yet if the built environment tells us what a culture values, the built environment in cities around the country tells us that play is something that only young children do within playgrounds and park fences. We live in a time when more and more people are moving to urban centers. We also live in a time when there is a named disorder for lack of play – play deficit disorder.

So the question arises: How can we make the public realm more playful for all generations in daily life?

What is play? Who plays? Where do we play?
• Assertion 1: Play is player-defined and directed.
• Assertion 2: Everyone needs to play.
• Assertion 3: So that play becomes a part of everyday life, opportunities for play should occur throughout civic space, for all ages, in places minute and large.

Moving beyond the idea that play needs equipment and structures, play also occurs when people encounter surprise, wonder, or humor in a daily moment, on their way to work or school. Art can bring play into public places. The beauty of civic space is that spontaneous play can occur socially, when a creative intervention prompts us to play, sometimes anonymously, sometimes indirectly, with someone we do not know.

Join us on Thursday, March 26, at 6:00PM, at BSA Space, for a workshop on art+play+ improvisation. Led by Lillian Hsu (Cambridge Arts Council), David Robert (Center for Speculative Children’s Design), and Sarah Carrier (landscape designer), workshop participants will begin with a group brainstorm, and then be given materials to create one example of a playful activity that each can take home and multiply in her/his neighborhood or city, the next day or any day.
Before getting into the workshop’s major activities, Lillian Hsu opened by introducing participants to the concept of "Art for Play," or, as she put it, “ways to prompt spontaneous play in public space.” In that light, some of her recent work with the Cambridge Arts Council has included the development of new kinds of “playgrounds,” aiming to overcome what could be called a “play deficit disorder.”

In responding to a question from one of the participants -- “What problem are we solving?” – Lillian made the following point:

*Play is what we hope kids do because we know it’s important. At the same time we know there’s a society-wide problem of play deficit as a consequence of environments and opportunities for free play being severely reduced over several decades. Play is also important throughout life and our cities ought to be more playful for all generations.*

With this as a frame, and mc’d by David, participants proceeded to brainstorm examples of “art for play,” jotting down their ideas on Post-It notes and then pasting them on a large piece of butcher paper tacked to the wall. (Among the photos taken that evening are several showing the proliferation of ideas and the more than 125 examples that came to mind.)

While the brainstorming and posting of ideas was going on, David started to look for patterns and categories among ideas as varied as:

- “Giving Tree” - hanging notes on trees
- “Cove of silence” - entering a quiet space in public
- “Flashlight Tours”
- “Joke Machine” - a vending machine that serves jokes
- “Hop-Scotch Crosswalks”
- “Picto-Message” - confirming deliveries by completing pictures
- “Adult Sprinkler Time”

Participants contributed to the task of naming and filling categories with the Post-It notes, allowing David to create a spreadsheet as a common-on-line resource to be used and added to by everyone. The spreadsheet could also be used by anyone wanting to seek collaborators to implement any of the interventions. (Click this link to get to, check out, or add to the roster.)
The final categories included:

- Social games
- Found games using urban infrastructure
- Theater/dance/performance games
- Contemplative play
- Events
- Nature play
- Light play
- Movement play
- Sound play
- Word play
- Visual art
- Tech play

The final activity gave participants the opportunity to create their own “Play Signs” (with #playsigns as the tag...) on primed pieces of wood, using paint markers and plastic ties with which to attach them to convenient light or parking poles. Participants were encouraged to take home extra panels and share with friends. Some examples of their work show up in the photos, as examples, again, of how to prompt play in a public space.