

The Urban Form of Leisure: Amenity as Infrastructure

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INTRODUCTION

Cities, by their very nature, ought to encourage the elevation of human spirit. Anyone who has ever visited the Piazza San Marco in Venice, shared the happy conviviality of Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen, witnessed the temptations of the Reeperbahn in Hamburg, strolled at midnight along the Ramblas in Barcelona, or bicycled on Sunday in New York's Central Park knows something of the potentialities and varieties of urban experience.¹

— Kenneth T. Jackson, in his book *Crabgrass Frontier*

In his book, Jackson also notes that, in many ways, it is the pursuit of leisure that defines the way we form our private and public spaces, and interact with one another. One might go on to say that it is the history of *how* leisure shapes cities that can be identified, studied, and then reinterpreted to fit the expanding and changing forms that urbanism continually undertakes. This paper attempts to define leisure as it commonly exists in most new American cities, and propose an alternative urban form for leisure — what I call “amenity as infrastructure” currently developed in the cities of Scottsdale and Phoenix Arizona. Amenity as infrastructure is the evolution of typical infrastructural elements within the city, such as service alleys and drainage canals into a leisure network of public and private landscapes.

ACTIVE LEISURE

...well into the nineteenth century every community, large or small, in Europe as well as America, retained sizable areas of land where the common people, and particularly adolescents, could exercise and play and enjoy themselves, and at the same time participate in community life.²

The most familiar urban form of leisure activities are those related to what might be termed “active leisure.”³ These activities include various forms of recreation and exercise, such as: organized sports, bicycling, jogging, rollerblading, and swimming. Active leisure is usually a pre-meditated or scheduled activity. Typically, active leisure has a strong urban form, meaning that it has an identifiable spatial relationship within the urban context, such as a park or a connective recreational path.

It is important to note that active leisure is a public event whose urban form currently exists on many scales. Typically cities in the Phoenix metropolitan area (comprising some 440 square miles of area) identify five scales of parks within their city limits: mini-parks, small and neighborhood parks, community parks, regional parks, and conservation parks. Each of these parks is designed to accom-

modate a specific form and region of active leisure activities. Mini-parks (whose size varies between .2 - 1.0 acres) typically provide: benches, children's play equipment, and limited number of picnic tables.⁴ These serve an immediate and specific neighborhood demographic. Thus, the age group demographic will usually consist of small children, parents, and potentially grandparents. Although users probably drive to these parks, most users of these parks could potentially arrive by foot. Conservation parks (parks which utilize protected land), are typically approached via automobile—attracting users from more than one region of the city or state. Here we see two examples of park-scale. As singular organisms at specified scales, these parks function well for their specified programs and demographic, but if they are connected we might see these various scales begin to bridge the demographic communities, thus creating a greater potential for conviviality, and therefore livability. These varying scales of parks, when brought together, can create an archipelago of leisure programs and spaces, that otherwise would not be experienced as a totality.

Like body organs that are not connected by veins or arteries, isolated parks and recreation areas cannot provide the networks that are needed for good health and well being. The ability for an uninterrupted active leisure, experienced from one's front door through a series of landscapes and activities, is one method of providing the social exposure and integration needed to participate in community life.

PASSIVE LEISURE

New attitudes toward leisure and especially the establishment of the home as a self-sufficient entertainment center have also contributed to the weakening of the “sense of community” in metropolitan America. In the nineteenth century, leisure was a precious and rare commodity, and retirement was a little-known concept. But men and women have always had some time of their own, and the use of that time provides one indication of their attitudes toward community life.⁵

Passive leisure has a relatively weak urban form, it is less definable relative to schedule and activity, and is the most social of leisure activities in the United States. Passive leisure has more recently been studied by tourism and resort corporations wishing to fill those few hours during the day between work and other forms of leisure. An example of passive leisure might be seen as the time period between coming home from work and dinner in which one might have a drink, walk the dog, or watch the news on CNN. These times are not necessarily programmed or spatially specific, (although in the late nineteenth century passive leisure was almost always undertaken **outside** of the home) whereas, the twentieth

century has developed the model of the home as the site for passive leisure. Thus, many more people spend the hours between active leisure and work modifying the confines of the site of their single family homes toward a private passive space of leisure — implementing such props as entertainment systems, gardens, and swimming pools. Rather than experiencing the neighborhood and neighbors as the site for these activities, they have turned their homes into sites of passive leisure. Hence, home owners are not helping to develop the potential for communal life by spontaneous interaction with their surrounding culture. The home however, is not the only venue for passive leisure.

Often passive leisure happens outside the residential neighborhood. One will drive to a site of passive leisure to experience it. An example would be going to a local sports bar to watch a game, or reading the Sunday newspaper while having a muffin and a cup of coffee at the nearest Starbucks. Starbucks Coffee is one company that has capitalized upon the desire and need for passive leisure. Starbucks has successfully combined the traditional passive American leisure activity of the “coffee break” with the social construct of the “tavern” and subsequently invented a packaged passive leisure amenity that can be easily inserted onto any city corner, bookstore, airport, etc. Rapidly growing cities and new developments are fertile ground for such institutions as Starbucks (which is, coincidentally, about to open in Italy). These companies provide instant passive leisure amenities that are private substitutes for the cities’ inability to keep up with development and create public urban forms that satisfy this urban need. So, here we see that to experience passive leisure people are actively leaving their neighborhoods in search of “other” experiences and social interaction.

LEARNING FROM SUN CITY

During the later 1950s the Webb company learned from a national television show of the existence of Youngtown, Arizona, located about thirteen miles northwest of Phoenix. A Realtor named Ben Shleifer had founded Youngtown in 1954, as a place where “people back east whose lives have been too much regulated can retire and do as they please.”⁶

An urban lesson can be learned from the development and subsequent limited growth of Youngtown, AZ. Youngtown was marketed as an economical place to live, because Shleifer believed the elderly could not afford very much. The original town provided only the provisional infrastructure for dwelling, consisting of a grid of gravel roads and houses for “low income” retirees. In its inception, Youngtown’s urban form did not include an identifiable leisure landscape. Consequently Youngtown never flourished.

Learning a lesson from Youngtown and other retirement communities, DEVCO⁷ installed the amenities *before* it put Sun City on the market. Purchasers would see the golf courses, recreational facilities, and shopping centers before they decided to buy, rather than waiting for the developer to fulfill some vague promise after they had moved in.⁸

Del Webb Development Company or DEVCO was responsible for the first planned private retirement community, Sun City, which (to this day) is one of the most popular communities among retirees in the United States. DEVCO’s strategy of “build the leisure amenity and they will come” should not be exclusive to **private** communities. Perhaps, DEVCO’s strategy of designing the landscape first is a model for the integration of new developing cities. The ability to initially establish active **public** leisure amenities (in the form of parks and recreational paths that create a strong urban form connecting various socio-economic and demographic groups) guarantees a system of integration and development throughout the urban environment. This method not only integrates the community

through various programmed landscapes, but also establishes an identity that transcends and liberates the built form of the city. If the physical form of the public leisure landscape is strong, tying the city together, then the architecture is free from dependence upon homogeneous development tectonics (a sea of red tile roofs in the Southwestern United States) for establishing an urban identity. The potential of creating an infrastructure of an urban leisure landscape facilitates the possibility of varying architectural typologies, therefore allowing for the greatest amount of difference and cohesion within the urban environment.

DIVERSITY

How can the needs and desires of this demographic group be facilitated without ghettoization and contribute to an integrated community? Ostensibly, both active and passive leisure landscapes are sites for demographic integration and overlap. For example, community centers that combine recreational programs such as a gymnasium, competitive swimming pool, aerobics, and weight training with a public library and meeting center cater to both the young and the old, providing both passive and active recreational and cultural leisure activities. Swim meets and water aerobics, basketball games and bridge tournaments, story time and reading rooms are all provided through the mixed programming of dedicated facilities, allowing the community center to serve the entire community, young and old. The challenge for rapidly growing cities will be to anticipate and control the city’s growth patterns so that community centers, cultural centers, and educational centers are woven into a network of outdoor public leisure spaces. These centers are an integral part of a complete urban leisure circuit, capable of connecting the diversity of neighborhoods, business districts, cultural centers, shopping and entertainment zones and recreational parks.

CONNECTIVITY

Connectivity of active leisure amenities allows the individual to be part of a greater whole while encouraging individual exploration and knowledge of one’s immediate and extended urban environment. The everyday routine of driving from home to work and back limits both the interaction and exploration of one’s neighborhood and community. More than any other type of leisure, active leisure has the physical ability to connect greater distances and socio-economic environments than other systems of leisure. The city of Scottsdale, Arizona (for example), has developed a connective multi-modal recreational path through out the entire city that ties together various housing, civic, and recreational zones. As a response to the low density form and programmatic separation of uses found in Scottsdale, the linear park has evolved as the active leisure system of choice. This type of active leisure amenity has replaced the more conventional “central park” typology because its form allows it to connect a variety of distant urban conditions along a continuously programmed path. The linear park represents a less visible social space embedded in the physical fabric of the city. It is not necessarily comprehensible as a space, but is experienced as part of an increasing mobile daily itinerary.

SYSTEMS OF SCALE

The connection of various systems and scales of leisure is essential to establish an integrated web of leisure. Smaller active and passive neighborhood forms of leisure such as: mini-parks, strolling streets, and outdoor cafes provide immediate and localized venues for conviviality. These smaller forms can be tied into the next larger community scale of leisure amenities such as: community parks, branch libraries, strip shopping centers, schools, cinemas, and art galleries, which serve and link neighborhoods and local businesses. The community scale in turn, can be linked to larger regional leisure

amenities such as: regional parks, public libraries, museums, science centers, theaters, and regional malls. Connectivity of leisure systems in all of their various types, programs, and scales can provide an urban infrastructure. This web of leisure and civic amenity can help to connect functions within cities, cities to one another, and therefore can potentially create a cohesive region.

SCOTTSDALE, AZ: A CASE STUDY

Situated on the sterilized ground of the Arizona desert, Scottsdale is a laboratory for the invention and testing of a purely American Lifestyle: tourism and the culture of leisure. Scottsdale is the second largest city in geographic area in Arizona's famed Valley of the Sun. Located in Maricopa County, Scottsdale maintains the eastern border of the Phoenix Metropolitan area. It was founded in 1888 by U.S. Army Chaplain Winfield Scott. From a tiny farming community occupying one square mile with a population of 2,000 in 1951, Scottsdale has grown into a vibrant city of more than 140,000 people in an expansive region of 185.2 square miles. The city's median age is 39, its median household income is \$49,522, the average median temperature is 70.3 degrees and the average days of sunshine is over 300. The distance between the most extreme north and south points in Scottsdale is 31 miles; the distance between the farthest east and west points is 11.5 miles.⁹

Growing from south to north along Scottsdale Road, the city began with 'The Old Town' consisting of "Western" store fronts along a "Main Street", and evolved into a series of packaged residential *subdivisions*: McCormick Ranch, Scottsdale Ranch, and Gainey Ranch respectively. The city's urban form evolved as a result of market forces, technology, and the increased desire for tourism. Tourism is Scottsdale's number one industry and largest employer, providing jobs to one fourth of the city's population.

Completely constructed on the barren desert floor as a series of "planned instant developments," Scottsdale was without the traditional tourist attractions: beaches, mountains, lakes, etc. Creating a virtue out of necessity, developers turned to the required infrastructure as sites for potential tourist amenities. In the hope of defining a place for market consumption, typical infrastructural needs such as water drainage, vehicular access, and utility easements were transformed and reprogrammed as lakes, golf courses, landscapes, and recreational paths. The largest and most far reaching of these infrastructural amenities is Indian Bend Wash. What might have been a concrete channel, similar to the Los Angeles River Canal, was developed by the Army Corp of Engineers as a recreational greenbelt.

The economy of these multiple programmed infrastructures facilitated the tourist desires for cleanliness, cost, and nature. As a result, residents became tourists who could afford to live near the attractions associated with the "American Dream." As a pure product of market forces and tourism, Scottsdale's true program was so outrageous that in order for it to be realized it could never be openly declared — *amenity as infrastructure, the tourism of the everyday.*

"Scottsdale boasts a quality of life which includes well-planned living, working, and shopping areas; pleasant neighborhoods and residential areas protected from traffic and noise."¹⁰ Scottsdale has developed tools that create an imaginary lifestyle predicated upon the American compromise between the necessity of a city and the desire to live in a non-urban environment.¹¹ Through the promotion of a privatized lifestyle, Scottsdale targets a diverse demographic culture of leisure with security and land value. Scottsdale provides everyday reality as a utopian image of leisure.

Traditionally, urban development is visualized as a set of multiple, de-centered processes.¹² Similar to the way the steel mill symbolized the company town or the downtown skyline identifies a particular city, the Ranches at Scottsdale discover their own image in the ideological production of the imaginary landscape as real. This strategy is implemented by a naturalizing process. By "natural-

izing," I mean the process of transforming traditionally undesigned urban situations into imaginary landscapes. For example, in an attempt to differentiate itself from the un-bucolic nature of the Jeffersonian grid that permeates and delimits Phoenix, the planned Ranch developments deny the straight road. "The curved road creates a variety of perspective and heightens one's sense of isolation and uniqueness."¹³

CAMELBACK WALK

Another example of the naturalized landscape is the transformation of the utility easements into public landscapes. This is achieved by burying the "visual pollution" of the telephone cables, and electrical wires, and homogenizing the trash receptacles so that they may be relocated to the street. Scottsdale has strategically modified what it perceives as "negative" programs into highly manicured public landscapes which imitate the tourist lifestyle of golf course living. The most evolved of these conditions is Camelback Walk. Designed as an "activity spine" in 1971 by Gruen Associates for the Kaiser-Aetna, McCormick Ranch development, Camelback Walk in Scottsdale is neither a private recreational amenity, nor a sanitized residual space. Camelback Walk was planned as a linear public landscape that at its minimum connected the resort community to the residential community. Gruen Associates described the other amenities as follows:

Other experiences on the Walk have been the resort area with its variety of hotel facilities, the expansive open spaces of the golf courses, the shoreline walk along the boating lake, the sidewalk cafes, outdoor exhibition areas, the churches, the clubs, the bridle paths, the show rings, the stables and the Indian hogans. As Camelback Walk moves into the regional center, the character changes to that of an area of serious research and high intellectual productivity. All this intense activity will be enhanced by continuing the gardens and water themes of Camelback Walk into this area of highest density.¹⁴

Today, Camelback Walk weaves its way through the back of a multitude of both public and private programs: Scottsdale Memorial Hospital, Mustang Public Library, a bank, parking lots, a supermarket, a strip mall, a park, a lake, and various densities of planned housing subdivisions. So named due to its visual alignment with Camelback Mountain, a major natural landmark, park, and tourist attraction in Phoenix, the walk is a realignment of the route of the main north-south wash channel. This wash channels heavy rainfall into Indian Bend Wash. The scale of the walk is a mean of the recreational path and the golf course. It is programmed with a biking/roller blading path, cut grass lawns for picnicking or sun bathing, benches for sitting, and shade trees. The section of the walk is sunken allowing it to double as a water retention area during monsoon season. This sunken section also allows the walk to continue through the urban landscape without interruption much like Frederick Law Olmsted's sinking of the roads through Central Park in New York City. This hybrid condition represents the potential role of a leisure landscape as infrastructure. The success of the walk is accomplished not by its provisional landscaping, but by its ability to achieve an urban density through programmatic association. It operates as a boundary between diverse developments, a path connecting both public and private development, and as a programmatic facilitator of leisure activities.

Perhaps the answer for integrating successful passive leisure spaces within the urban/leisure context of the city lies in a public/private development strategy that is implemented in Camelback Walk. Shopping streets as well as outdoor cafes are classic examples of passive leisure programs. The physical location of these activities could operate as nodes along an active leisure system — allowing for a more seamless connection between these two forms of leisure.

Thus, someone rollerblading can stop and have a coffee with someone passively watching people skate by. The potential for spontaneous social interaction is one of the strongest forms of community shaping. The connectivity of passive leisure amenities with other systems of leisure is an effective method of promoting the social and psychological health of the community.

CONCLUSION

Constructed on either a barren desert floor, or over an agricultural field as a series of “planned instant developments,” the cities of the greater Phoenix metropolitan area are typically without the traditional leisure attractions such as beaches, mountains, lakes, etc. This does not preclude the possibility of the region defining its own identity through alternative types of leisure landscapes. Washes, agricultural fields, orchards, and irrigation systems are among the existing landscapes that have not been exploited for their ability to facilitate leisure activities as well as provide typical infrastructural needs such as water drainage, vehicular access, and utility easements. Part of challenge will be to incorporate the history of specific locations as they are reinvented as a venues for community activities. How can the strong history of agriculture found in the West Valley be redefined as a potential leisure amenity? The incorporation of the past with the future can give the city an identifiable sense of place based upon the connectivity of its diverse urban settings and the history of how the place was once used. A strong leisure landscape is a method of creating an identity and sense of place without relying upon imported homogenous architectural styles. Thus, the leisure landscape has the ability facilitate an archipelago of places—connecting diverse social and demographic groups by allowing the greatest amount of difference within the city as a whole. If cities begin to look at leisure as a form of urban design, they will have the ability to foster a richer community life based upon connections and integration’s, and utilizing mechanisms that are already in place such as active and passive leisure.

Scottsdale’s transformation of infrastructures into amenities has foreshadowed the latent potential of these landscapes. These new amenities have become more than physical infrastructures, controlling flooding and drainage, they have become a form of social urban infrastructures that provide an additional service to the city, that of integration and connection. These linear public programmed leisure amenities operate independently from the transportation grid, seamlessly transitioning between public and private developments, thus creating a leisure network capable of facilitat-

ing both active and passive forms of leisure. For lower density cities like Scottsdale and Phoenix, this alternative infrastructure establishes a new urban condition whose intensity increases with each new layer of the city.

NOTES

- ¹ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 279.
- ² J.B. Jackson, *Discovering The Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University, 1984), p. 128.
- ³ Here I am indebted to Prof. Ignascio San Martin of Arizona State University for his aid and insight in helping to define the multi-faceted character of leisure.
- ⁴ <www.Glendale.com>.
- ⁵ Kenneth T. Jackson, p. 279.
- ⁶ David Finley, *Magic Lands: Western Cityscapes and American Culture after 1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 172.
- ⁷ DEVCO is the Del E. Webb Development Company.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p.173.
- ⁹ City Street Map Scottsdale Arizona.
- ¹⁰ City Street Map Scottsdale Arizona.
- ¹¹ Alex Wall., *Periphery, AD*.
- ¹² Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).
- ¹³ Ingersolt.
- ¹⁴ Gruen Associates. *Kaiser Aetna-McCormick Ranch Scottsdale, Arizona Master Development Plan* (January 1971), p. 28.

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