

## **Urban Design as a Physical Experience**

**By James Rojas**

SPUR hosted a Re-Imagine a Street Event on November 20, 2014 that examined the relations between streets and urban design. I facilitated a hands-on workshop that transformed urban design objectives into a tactile, participatory process where everyone had an opportunity to design a street. This was achieved by applying art-making: imagine, investigate, construct, and reflect, to urban design. The workshop helped the public understand that urban design is not a formula but rather how their bodies connected with the natural and built environment beginning with their childhood memories.

Streets are shaped by their visual and spatial knowledge. It's a physical place of reactions, and a mental space of imagination. This method made it possible to engage this spatiality in rich and subtle ways that aren't possible in other settings or via other methods.-Through the 60-minute interactive workshop participants went on a journey of self-discovery of streets in their lives starting from childhood.

SPUR's second floor conference room was transformed into a temporary design studio and was laid out with six tables and several chairs. Construction paper was placed on six tables and thousands of small objects such as hair rollers, buttons, yarn, shiny beads, pipe cleaners, and blocks were placed on two tables.

### **Icebreaker: Build Your Favorite Childhood Memory**

As an icebreaker and an introduction to urban design the participants were asked to build their favorite childhood memory in twenty minutes. This exercise created a safe space and revealed who the participants are, where they come from, what they value, and it underscored the need to validate these experiences. More importantly this activity helped participants understand how scale help us connect to the build environment at different stages of their lives.

The participants thought first about the physical details and social connections that created their memory. To do so they were given construction paper to build it on and hundreds of small objects to choose from. Once the builders started to seek, touch, and explore the materials on in front of them, the creative process began as they choose pieces based on color, shape or texture. These objects created a visual reference point to helped them reconstruct a personal activity or experience.

The builders gather their pieces and brought them back to their tables. The design process began once they laid out a few objects on the construction paper. Their hands began to move furiously as their memory became to take shape. For the next ten minutes the participants were in a meditative state of building a powerful memory.

Once everyone completed building their memory, the group was told to stop building. The fun and informative part of the exercise began when everyone presented their childhood memory to the group. They stated their name, the place and activity of the memory all in a minute. The builders spoke with conviction as they told compelling, entertaining stories illustrated through the objects, colors, and model layouts. Everyone intently listened to these visceral details that engaged the group visually, orally, and emotionally.

At the SPUR workshop participants came from all parts of the world yet their childhood memories were similar because they involved intimate connections to the nature, and people. From swimming on the island Guernsey to roaming the suburban streets of the peninsula most memories took place outdoors. Most memories involved seeing, smelling, hearing and touching the world around them. Despite geographical, racial and economic difference as children most of the participants sought fun, intimacy, shelter, and knowledge of the environment around them.

Many of the memories involved physical activities like riding a bike, exploring a demolished building, tapping toes in a pond, or swinging from tree. Many of the participants had “free range” childhoods where they roamed and discovered the wonders of nature from plants, animals, and places. The world was full of possibilities, discovery, and happiness, so the most mundane places like a patch of dirt, mud, a creek, or a flower became a cherished interaction.

Once each presenter finished, their memory was synthesized into the urban design process. Through this activity participants learned that urban design began with their childhood connections to the world around them.

### **Build Your ideal Street (Group Activity)**

For the next activity people at each table worked in teams to create their ideal street in 15 minutes. For the first half of this activity team members discussed, and chose their street. Once the teams decided on their street, they began to layout strips of colored paper and started to build solutions.

Through building with objects new street designs emerged as participants negotiated the visual and spatial nature of the street. Team members could quickly test their

street design interventions with others. Proposed ideas became elaborate with the help of others and in no time the street models began to take shape and fill out the tabletop.

Once the time was up each team presented their ideal street with conviction and enthusiasm. Below are some of street design highlights from each Team:

- Team One designed a street with incorporated water run off into the bay.
- Team Two designed a street for play.
- Team Three designed a curved street with amenities.
- Team Four designed a street with a bike lane.
- Team Five designed a street with a roundabout
- Team Six transformed Geary street with bus rapid transit.

Participants brought a lifetime of urban design experiences beginning with their childhood memories to design their ideal street. They utilized their innate visual and spatial knowledge of streets in order to generate their designs.

Their solutions were complex and nuanced, treating the street as both a mobility system and a physical experience. Most of their solutions began with the pedestrian, cyclist or environmental experiences rather than with the motorist's. The teams generated numerous reasonable design possibilities that encouraged unique urban design possibilities.

In this particular workshop at SPUR, people were freed from the roles, biases and preconceptions they came with and together were able to explore their ideas about the urban design in a fluid way. This process allowed people to physically and directly engage with the street with their bodies and hands by causing them to change their vantage points and posture, focus and stand back, and touch and change things. As people built their street new ideas and opportunities emerged that hadn't been visible at the beginning.

These ideas were generated by real experiences that helped participants develop a sense of ownership and attachment to their street. This can inspire them to move forward on making their ideas a reality.

Participants learned that urban design is a living, breathing part of their lives and not a set of guidelines. It begins with personal interactions with the environment around us. The urban design conversation needs to be expanded to including diverse audiences in order to develop plans that work for all.