Playing in the Shadows

Unedited public space

The people in this image are not photoshopped. They stand in these odd masses, weary, not unusually dispersed across the space, not because of image trickery but because of a new layer of ‘fun and games’ that has been added to the cultural activity of the space.

This new layer of programming was applied deliberately, yet the individual activities quite naturally created sub-sets of free space within the square. Some intense, like the confined space between the hand, eye and age of the table footbalists, others charged with unpredictable bursts of movement, pinging off rectangular surfaces along the tangential axis of a little white ball.

Some activities created fluid yet rooted space, caught in the arch of the shopping trolley where the shopper defines a point, whilst the boredom of the hands over their spatial destiny to a free rolling ground survey.

Play in this context becomes a freedom fighter. It stands in opposition to controlled formal space and in support of the child within connect to the adult without. Play disrupts status, brings us to edges we have never been to, long forgotten, taking us to the happy-sad.

Looking again at the image, we might wonder whether it is the people or the space that has been photoshopped. Whether the buildings are not the current, imaginary representation of something beyond our time and need. Perhaps the real seat of a city is whether happy, relaxed, interacting people look out of place or awkward against the thin architectural veneer that we call civic.

This image was taken during ‘Belfast’s’ culture, arts and leisure: An experimental campaign to re-activate and re-claim the city, February - March 2012.

On Monday 10 December 2012, Belfast City Council voted to restrict the flying of the union flag outside the City Hall. The motion at Belfast City Council would see the union flag to be taken down altogether, but in the end they agreed on a compromise from the Alliance Party that it would fly on 18 designated days.

Minutes after the motion was passed, loyalist protest erupted outside the building, quickly becoming violent and spreading to other areas across Belfast. A wave of protests and violence in the following days and weeks led to a significant decline in city centre business, visitors and tourism, before and after Christmas 2012.

Although the protestor gradually declined in number, a demonstration was held every Saturday in front of the City Hall over several months. The Belfast’s culture campaign by Belfast City Council started at the end of January 2013 with the promotion of inner city shops, bars and hotels through an advertising campaign. Part of this campaign was the revitalization of the city centre through arts activities, of which PP was a small contributor.

Although PP can be criticized for living compliant with a campaign which tried to promote business as usual and a smooth shopping experience, we decided to kick up Belfast or more precisely, to gradually reclaim the city and public spaces for the citizens.

‘Culture, arts and leisure’ refers to the wide remit of the Northern Irish Government department which also includes sports. With our broad understanding of culture, PP used ping pong, box, a heap, film screenings, shopping and more, as means to offer joyful use of public space. Supported by artists who work as commentators and actuators, city centre spaces were re-designated for its citizens and spatially filled and explored with choreographed movements, screams, fun and a complete absence of commercial purpose.