Playing in the Shadows

Unedited public space

The people in this image are not photoshopped. They stand in these odd juxtapositions, unnaturally 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-spaces of free space within the square. Some intense, like the confusional space between the band, eye and arm of the table footballers, others changed with unpredictable bursts of movement, ping-ponging 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 arch where the shopper defines a point, whilst the hoop-throwers 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 or long forgotten, taking us to the happy-end.

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 test 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: culture, arts and leisure: An experimental campaign to re-activate and re-cite the city. February - March 2013.

On Monday 13 December 2012, Belfast City Council voted to restrict the flying of the union flag outside the City Hall. A spokesman at Belfast City Council stated the union flag to be taken down altogether, but in the end it was agreed on a compromise from the Alliance Party that it would fly on 15 designated days.

Minister after the motion was passed, loyalist protests emerged inside 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, tourism and leisure, before and after Christmas 2012.

Although the protests gradually declined in number a demonstration was held every Saturday in front of the City Hall over several months. The Belfast Arts Council called for a demonstration 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 of being complicit with a campaign which tries to promote business as usual and a smooth shopping experience, we decided to back 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 would ping pong, bowl a hoop, film screenings, shopping and more, as means to offer people use of public space. Supported by artists who work as commentators and animators, city centre spaces were re-designated for its citizen and spatially filled and explored with choreographed movements, screams, fun and a complete absence of commercial purpose.