

Article

# Improvisation and Planning: Engaging With Unforeseen Encounters in Urban Public Space

Anne-Lene Sand<sup>1, \*</sup>, Anniken Førde<sup>2</sup>, John Pløger<sup>3</sup>, and Mathias Poulsen<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Lab for Play and Design, Design School Kolding, Denmark

<sup>2</sup> Department of Social Sciences, UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Norway

<sup>3</sup> Department of Global Development & Planning, University of Agder, Norway

\* Corresponding author (als@dskd.dk)

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## Abstract

Despite the significant emphasis in Scandinavian cities on vital urban spaces and creative unfolding in urban development, there is a tendency towards designing for “finished” urban spaces with a pre-defined conclusion. The result is often standardised design and staged play, ignoring the diversity of lived experiences taking place in the here and now. How can urban spaces be generated to accommodate unforeseen encounters fostering moments of intensity, affect, and disorder? In this article, we explore the potential of improvisation in urban spaces by examining how urban public spaces facilitate improvisation in interactions between places, senses, materials, and participants. Improvisation is understood as a productive force in urban development that gives space to what occurs in urban encounters. The article draws on Richard Sennett’s concept of “disorder” and Jennifer Mason’s concept of “affinity.” By using design experiments and sensory and visual methods inspired by ethnographic methodology the article analyses two improvisational practices occurring in public spaces in Norway and Denmark, which emphasise the performative, affective, and sensory elements of urban life. The analysis brings forth a discussion of how improvisation unfolds in multimodal urban encounters, between order and disorder, and sensory and emotional connections. The authors argue for a more place-sensitive form of city-making and more improvisational urban designs that stimulate varied, spontaneous, and changeable use.

## Keywords

affect; affinities; diversity; encounter; improvisation; play; public space; Scandinavia

## Issue

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## 1. Introduction

Although many Scandinavian cities over the last two or three decades have focused on using temporary spaces to revitalise de-industrialised and derelict areas, the result is often a staged space that fails to grasp the diversity of lived experience and the encounters that unfold in the here and now. Through often standardised designed installations, based on a growing discourse of attractiveness, what were meant to be explorative spaces end up as passive urban places. Such designed places are not seen as part of having a local public space repres-

enting the socio-cultural diversity and conviviality in the area. Standardised designs ignore the atmospheres of improvisation, difference, and change (Ingold & Hallam, 2007; Sumartojo & Pink, 2019), that is, the forces of presence, playful, and sudden encounters (Franck & Stevens, 2006; Stevens, 2007) and the use of “disorder” (Sendra & Sennett, 2022; Sennett, 1970). This article is about generating urban spaces which accommodate unforeseen and unfinished encounters.

Within urban studies, we may say improvisation has been part of radical urban movements like the Situationist (Pinder, 2005) and “Non-Plan” planning

(Hughes & Sadler, 2007). Some planning processes have used different kinds of co-creation and co-working like charrette and themed workshops, but often these attempts lack experiments and improvisation, which for example is seen in “re-making urban planning on foot” (Pinder, 2021) and jamming with urban rhythms (Sand, 2017). Jacques (2021) argues that there is a binary opposition within and between improvisation and urban planning, where improvisation in planning is not acknowledged as a practice of value in itself since it collides with the tendency to operate with “a moment of stop, a conclusion for the construction” (Jacques, 2021, p. 24). Regarding improvisation, we argue that we must discuss another form of urban planning—one that is associated with chance and unfinishedness (see Jencks & Silver, 2013; Rudofsky, 1964).

The idea of doing improvisational planning meets its opposition in city planning, spatial planning, and functional designs. The design of urban spaces is not a design for allowing improvisation, exploring plays of fantasy, agonistic meetings, or elaborating and changing the conviviality of public space. Within the article, we answer the following question: How can improvisational urban practices generate encounters, which foster moments of intensity, affect, and disorder?

We choose these characteristics since we argue that they are difficult to grasp, analyse, and integrate into urban planning. This was also an essential argument within the newly published anthology titled *Improvisation. Urban Life Between Plan and Planlessness* (Pløger et al., 2021). This article analyses two cases which foster unforeseen encounters. The analysis brings forth a discussion of how improvisation unfolds in multimodal urban encounters, between order and disorder, and sensory and emotional connections.

The first case explores voluntary citizens and PhD-fellow Mathias Poulsens’ attempt to make design experiments, which to a high extent maintain unforeseen elements and improvisational use of materials, as a common effort to build a temporary playground for children in a suburban town in Denmark. The second case is from a medium-sized city in Norway and Førde studies a museum that was temporarily turned into a space for theatre performance by migrant youths who got the opportunity to improvise in a museum exhibition.

The improvisational perspective within this article nuances how children and young people improvise from the sensorial, social, and spatial connections made by the encounters with others (materials, spatial surroundings, co-workers, and spectators) creating moments of intensity, affect, and disorder. Based on the analysis of children and young people’s improvisational practices in an outdoor and indoor public space, we interrogate how the two forms of interventions generate improvisational encounters. Both the children and young people get to know a place within the city and see themselves as part of it, by entering various public spaces with their performances.

## 2. Improvisation

In Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold’s book on creativity and cultural improvisation, they argue: “There is no script for social and cultural life. People have to work it out as they go along. In other words, they have to improvise” (Hallam & Ingold, 2007, p. 1). Hallam and Ingold (2007) define improvisation as being generative, social, temporal and the way we work in everyday life. Improvisation is often understood as taken by surprise and pure spontaneity. But practitioners who work in the field of music, theatre, and dance acknowledge that improvisation is more than just being confronted with a sudden incident (see Bigé, 2019; De Spain, 2014). Improvisation entails rules and techniques, but it also fosters the unforeseen through creative disruptions and encounters. Improvisation is “the creation of something new, yet which doesn’t exclude the pre-written framework that makes it possible” (Derrida, 2004, p. 322). This double side of improvisation is challenging because it affects a co-existence amongst strangers expressing their difference also through everyday encounters. Improvisation is a key feature of cities, in a permanent tension between the fixed and rigid on the one hand and sites of the surprising and unexpected on the other.

Müller and Trubina (2020) argue that improvisation should be understood as a practice of inhabiting the in-between of pre-given structures at one end and multiple fluidities at the other. Improvisation unfolds at the encounter of rigidities and unexpected flux, where structures and material articulations meet unanticipated events that disrupt constraining structures. They see improvisation as:

The precarious bringing-into-being of the city multiple: the actualisation of the potentialities immanent in urban life and its material spaces. It is omnipresent as a creative practice that allows not just navigating but, more crucially, tapping the potentialities of the urban as an always unfinished, open project inhabits the in-between spaces. (Müller & Trubina, 2020, p. 666)

The attempt to create new openings and possibilities through improvisation can never escape existing structures of power. But as the pre-written and pre-planned and the creative and spontaneous come together, a new space might be created.

The work *Noise Orders, Jazz, Improvisation and Architecture* by David P. Brown (2005) uses improvisation and jazz theory to analyse architecture and city planning and argues that city planning should contribute to the emerging environment rather than predetermined spaces. An ambiguity in Brown’s work with improvisation is that he has a primary focus on architecture, which overlooks how improvisation relates in-between encounters, which is the focal point of this thematic issue.

Improvising does not just mean being able to move outside the pattern, but to be critical of it. Provocative

competence through improvisation is a skill that means challenging conventional forms of practice, searching for unfamiliar terrain and experimenting on the breadth of the unknown (Steinsholt & Sommerro, 2006, p. 18). Improvisation is often experienced from a sudden incident, challenging our body and mind to react. Incidents may also, and most likely, happen when one is part of a staged action such as creating a physical installation or being part of a theatre play that wants to challenge people socially, mentally, and bodily. Thus, improvisation is not only about maneuvering in unexpected situations but also about the capacity to perform and experiment in situ.

Before presenting the cases, we will expand our theoretical approach to improvisation, understood through performativity, affinity, and encounter. In our analysis, we show how flexible spaces—where children build their playgrounds and youths perform theatre activities—relate to a multitude of connections that force them to improvise. We conclude by advocating for a more unforeseen and place-sensitive form of city-making and more life-enhancing urban space designs that stimulate varied, spontaneous, and changeable use.

### 3. Performativity, Affinity, and Unforeseen Encounters

A city is “a complex of things and activities connected in space and time, formed and managed by many different actors” (Tonkiss, 2013, p. 14). We see urban planning as the production of socio-spatial relationships through form, function, and spatial design. Planning sees urbanity as being about “physical surroundings” and “the intensity in urban life and the use of the city as it follows from density and multi-functionality” (Plan- og bygningsetaten, 2019, p. 7). On what some see as cities “third places,” informal gathering places, Henri Lefebvre says: “As a place of encounters, focus of communication and information, the urban becomes what it always was: place of desire, permanent disequilibrium, seat of the dissolution of normalities and constraints, the moment of play and the unpredictable” (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 129).

Art practices and the micro-urbanism of co-creative or unforeseen encounters are crucial forces in creating the informal third spaces not only as processes of community making but also to make a temporary agonistic space (Bosman & Dolley, 2022).

City planners are aware of this micro-urbanism and encourage citizens and artists to make performative and forming engagements in cities’ third spaces. They do, however, have difficulties in accepting the spontaneous and improvisational appropriation of these spaces. Cities want discipline, control, and predictability, while social encounters rather are “the production and negotiation of difference” (Simonsen & Koefoed, 2020, p. 48).

Seeing third-place encounters through children’s improvising performativity (case 1) and using an art space to make affinity to cultural otherness (case 2), we explore temporary appropriations of space by turn-

ing fixed spaces into an encounter with improvisation. Improvisation in third spaces provides an optic to see how encounters happen and take place perhaps constitutive to an emplacement (case 1) or how a performing theatre project temporarily fosters a cultural convention by inviting people to take part in a play (case 2).

The sudden incident or experience is expected to be met by an adaptation to the experience based on embodied experience, but it is still also a presence reaction. The improvised performativity effect is experienced in a presence situation either by sensing or a signifying sensation and both create energies, flows, sparks, trembling, or other reactions. A sudden improvisation is an experience that is difficult to grasp or recognize by individuals themselves or from participatory analysis.

A way to understand the forces of both adaptation and sudden improvisation is to draw on Mason’s (2018) concept of affinities. Mason describes sensations as interactions that are full of sensory information and kinesthetics. Within sensations, affinities are generated as:

Energies, forces and flows that can take shape in an ineffable kinship as well as in ecologies and the socio-atmospheric of life, and they articulate and resonate with time and with their times. Their potency can come from the frictions, charges, alluring discordances and poetics that animate and enliven everyday personal lives. (Mason, 2018, p. 200)

According to Mason, affinities should not be interpreted as relational or symbolic, but viewed as sparks that set loose an energy or force that might limit or push an encounter in a particular direction. Thus, affinities can have characteristics such as feelings, appearances, smells, voice, gestures, physicality, habits, rhythms, etc. (Mason, 2018, p. 51).

The use of affinities as an entry point to understand improvisational encounters enables us to explore how encounters happen not only through encountering materiality and objects but also by how sensations spark or intensify by enchanting, provoking’s or hindering the ordinary use of place.

### 4. Methodological Approaches

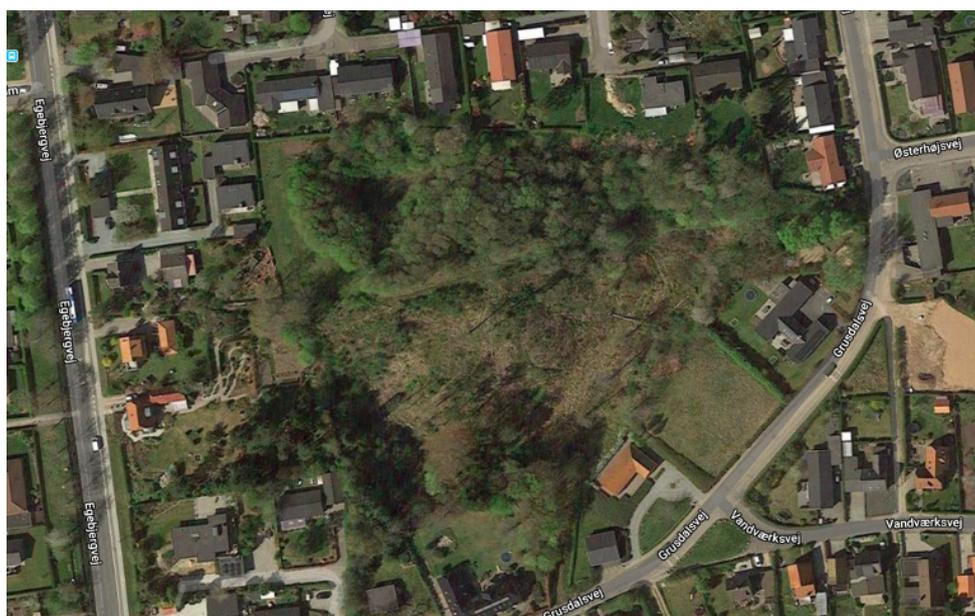
The empirical cases discussed hereafter consist of ethnographic methods such as participatory observation (Spradley, 1980) and sensory participation (Pink, 2011). The first case provides insight into local citizens’ effort to make a children’s playground in a local gravel pit in a small Danish town. The second case illustrates how a group of young people from multicultural backgrounds entered public spaces with theatre performances in Tromsø, Norway.

In the first case, local citizens were invited to participate in imagining and exploring new possibilities within a local gravel pit. The gravel pit was used as such in 1960,

and since then a city has developed around the pit. Today the gravel has 10-meter-high slopes covered with trees (Figure 1). Since 1990 the gravel pit has been a place for play and since 2020 local citizens have organized social and playful events there. Poulsen and Sand made three design experiments with local children and their parents. The first experiment gathered around 50 participants and the second and third between 15 and 30 participants. Each experiment lasted for four to five hours. As illustrated in Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4, the participants could use different kinds of discarded materials and tools for their exploration of the place. The experiments generated multimodal research documentation created by the researchers and participants, for example, GoPro camera recordings and observations. During the three experiments nine children used the GoPro and so did one of the authors. The cameras produced 12 hours of video footage, which the authors transcribed and analysed. The GoPro cameras allowed the authors to “trace of the route that was taken through the world and the immediate environment” (Sumartojo & Pink, 2019, p. 41). The experiment was a part of Mathias Poulsen’s PhD project based on constructive design research (Koskinen et al., 2011) and artistic research (Hannula et al., 2014). The authors designed a framework for a series of experiments inspired by the Danish tradition of “junk playgrounds” (de Coninck-Smith, 2022), and they used the “junk playground as agora” and a space for bodily-material inquiries into possible futures for the gravel pit. Poulsen and Sand did not seek to produce permanent constructions, but rather to encourage and study the dynamics of improvisational and material participation in urban spaces. The authors were active participants, arguing that it is “acceptable, desirable and required to be embodied and affected” (Østern et al., 2021, p. 14), both in terms of creating conditions for the experiments

and for deploying a sensory ethnography (Calvey, 2021). GoPro videos, photographs and observations were transcribed and analysed through individual open codings and joint codings, readings, and selection of the empirical material (Charmaz, 2006).

In the case of the performing art youth project in Tromsø, Førde has followed Here I Am! since 2018, as part of the research project Cit-egration where this creative art company was a partner. Førde has assisted in rehearsals, preparations, and theatre performances. Participant observation was combined with qualitative interviews with some of the young participants, and reflection dialogues between artists, instructors, and researchers, where we throughout our collaboration sat down for two-three hours sharing experiences, reflecting on the interventions and methodologies. The approach was based on mutual collaboration, where artists and young migrant participants contributed to the research, and researchers contributed to the art interventions (see Aure et al., 2020). Together we have explored the activities as here-and-now interventions in urban spaces, how they are planned and organised, and how they transfer into participation in other public arenas in the city. Such participatory arts interventions constitute vulnerable spaces of improvisation in our knowledge co-production, where perspectives and categories are constantly challenged in the multiple encounters among artists, researchers, and participants (Aure et al., 2020). The analyses of the specific case presented in this article is written by the researcher, but the theatre instructor, the museum curator, and the young participants in Cora and I have all read and commented on the text. This kind of dialogic exchange (Nunn, 2010) is crucial to collaborative research and contributes to expanding the understanding of the improvisations taking place and how they are conditioned.



**Figure 1.** The old gravel pit located in the middle of the city and its potential to bring citizens together.



**Figure 2.** Different materials and tools used to build and play.



**Figure 3.** Several building projects being shaped by children and adults.

## 5. Improvisational Practices: Case Analyses

### 5.1. *The Gravel Pit: Playful Materials and Encounters*

In 2021, citizens of a small Danish city received public funding to develop a green area into a space for the purposes of play and gathering together. In the 1960s, the place functioned as a gravel pit but has been left unused for years. Due to dissatisfaction with the limited involvement of citizens in the process, the local council decided to work with PhD fellow Mathias Poulsen to engage the local community in a different way.

In his doctoral research, Poulsen developed the speculative concept of “the junk playground as agora” as his research program, which he was substantiating through a series of empirical design experiments. With this program, he built upon the longstanding traditions of public deliberation in public space but then suggested that these traditions could be reconfigured in a shift from rational deliberation towards affective experiments, from the traditional talk-centric notions of democratic participation towards participation through materialist assemblages and improvisational practices. Rather than inviting local citizens for a more formal meeting to deliberate on the future of the gravel pit, they were invited to use the junk playground as a means of experimental, open-ended inquiry. Three workshops were designed as a laboratory for exploring new possibilities in the gravel pit. The workshops were inspired by

the concept of “loose parts” (Nicholson, 1971), which is often used in adventure playgrounds to stress the importance of “variables”—objects and materials that can be moved, modified, and combined in new ways. The place itself was considered one such “variable,” along with several discarded materials, such as wood, fabrics, tarps, tubes, old tires, and rope, available for everyone to use in combination with relevant tools. On the first day, the participants were told that the purpose was to use the materials to explore the space and that there were no limitations as to how these materials could be used. There was no shared beginning or introduction as the participants arrived at different times and immediately started building and playing. Children and adults were encouraged to figure out and decide what they wanted to do and build, where, and with whom.

A boy (Figure 4) found a yellow knitted material, which he hammered into the roots of a tree. The other children wanted to borrow the hammer, but he insisted on finishing what he had started. He found a small wooden stick and expressed, “Wuhuu, we can use this stick as a nail,” which he hammered onto the knitted material. It took a long time, and the other children became impatient; but to the boy, this was important and required time. Poulsen and Sand made these observations as they participated in the building process and noticed several examples of how children and adults picked up materials without any intention and explored the potential material uses. These encounters



**Figure 4.** A boy seen making and combining materials that he finds.

between people and material were followed by expressions such as: “Can we use this for something?” “Can we borrow something?” “What is it that you are building?” “Could we use this as a flag?” “I am just considering what we shall build now” (Fieldnotes, 05.04.2022). The statements indicate that the children explored materials, potentials, and functionalities as they traversed the gravel pit and touched and picked up junk materials. Mason (2018) argues that, within sensations, connections can be triggered or evoked, which makes them potent—that is, power, energy, or sparks that bring forth strong emotions. In other words, they constitute “affinities” (Mason, 2018, pp. 47–48), potent connections that arise and matter (Mason, 2018, p. 1). The children’s expressions when they found and touched the materials had the character of an energy that allowed for improvisation, exploring the potential of materials, and bringing new materials together. The children’s actions were not spoken of as deliberate practices but as having been generated within the specific socio-material encounter. Within improvisation, this is called retrospective sense-making (Barrett, 1998) and constitutes a part of a process where people explore combinations and later discover the meaning of what is going on.

Another empirical example from the gravel pit illustrates how the open-ended design of the experience allowed for sensory encounters leading to heightened intensities (Figure 5). One child was dragging the blue drain tube up the hill, while another was sitting further down with the other end of the tube. “I’m ready,” the boy at the top said as he held the end of the tube up to one ear and stuck a finger in the other. He made a concentrated attempt to hear something, while the other kid shouted into the tube. It seemed that the shouting travelled better outside the tube than inside, and the boy dropped his end of the tube, which slid down the hill.

Here, five children gathered in the middle of the steep slope in a space circumscribed by the long blue tube. In the vivid imagination of the playing children, the tube was transformed into a wild ocean with dangers lurking everywhere:

“There are bombs and missiles and lava underneath the bombs, and there is fire and COMBATMISSILES!”

“Save yourself. Don’t save other people. Just save yourself. THE SHIP IS SINKING!”

“We must hurry to the helicopter.”

“The rescue helicopter will take us away from this sinking ship.” (Transcripts of the GoPro video, 05.04.2022)

The intensity of the situation continued to increase as they all ran up the hill to what used to be a fort and is now—conveniently—a helicopter that quickly takes them away from danger. This went on for a while, with the group scattering and reassembling, using the “helicopter” as a rallying point and a narrative device. The children seemed to be improvising based on their collective repertoire of physical and digital materialities, including experiences with ships sinking in the digital game Roblox Titanic, the available materials, their own bodies, and the specific qualities of the site. The gravel pit had a wild topography, with steep slopes that required great effort to climb. The observations provided insights into how the wild nature of the gravel pit triggered the children’s improvisational use of the surroundings. Between the intense outbursts of euphoric play energy, the children kept returning to the collection of materials. They occasionally went through the piles, seemingly looking for specific items and materials, but more often, they were



**Figure 5.** A group of children playing on the steep slope, trying to get to the “helicopter” on the plateau.

simply “browsing,” randomly letting their hands assess whether or not a particular artefact could be used for “something”—as if the materials became a catalyst for imagination and play, something with which to improvise new play situations (Figure 6).

In analysing these play situations, it seems that the children were using the available materials, the site, and their bodies to create “precarious circumstances” (Henricks, 2015, p. 214) whereby they could oscillate between order and disorder, between having and losing control. Andersen et al. (2022) suggest that players chase surprising situations because they can then observe their own capacity to resolve the surprise. When the children were playing in the gravel pit, they were not merely looking for existing opportunities for surprises; they were also altering the environment to make new surprises possible, followed by an improvised reaction to those surprises. To use Mason’s (2018) terms, the children sought to generate sparks that could destabilise them and push them towards a new play experience.

The materials in the gravel pit played an important role in the way in which the children figured out what was going to happen, a characteristic of improvisation working within minimal but clear structures, allowing for maximal flexibility (Barrett, 1998, p. 611). The gravel pit was structured by a range of deliberately chosen materials as well as by the topography, which in itself generated a physically defined space.

### *5.2. A Performing Art Youth Project: Improvisational and Scripted Plays*

In Tromsø, a city in Northern Norway, a theatre project for youth called Here I am! (Hær e Æ!) often intervened in the city’s public spaces with theatre events. The project, run by Rebekka Brox Liabø’s creative art company, gathers youth recruited through introductory school classes for non-native Norwegians once a week for theatre workshops. They use art expressions such as theatre plays, texts, film, music, and dance to address themes depicting



**Figure 6.** Screenshot of GoPro video. A child’s hands “browsing” through materials laying on the ground of the gravel pit.

their concerns. Like most Scandinavian cities, Tromsø is becoming increasingly multicultural. Here I am! was established as a response to reports of low participation rates among migrant youths in leisure activities and public spaces in the city (Liabø et al., 2022). An important part of the project, Liabø explains, is thus to actively make use of the city streets, public squares, shopping malls, art museums, and cultural scenes. By improvising in place through multimodal encounters, the youths are given the possibility to create their own rhythms and compositions in both outdoor and indoor public spaces (Figure 7).

One of the public space interventions of Here I am! is their performance *Cora and I* in collaboration with Perspektivet Museum. The performance is based on the museum's exhibitions on the life of the famous Norwegian writer and artist Cora Sandel (pseudonym for Sara Fabricius, 1880–1974). The museum gave them an introduction to the exhibition, focusing on Sandel's fight to become an artist and writer. The youths then wrote texts connecting Sandel's story with their own life experiences. In figure 7 a girl is reading her story to the others. Over two weekends in the spring of 2022, people in Tromsø were invited to join a guided tour through the museum, where the young actors' stories and bodily performances weaved together multiple life stories. The project is an interesting case of improvisation across time and space, bringing together the past, present, and future. It also emphasises how public space such as a museum can be turned into a space of improvisational performance.

As the audience entered the museum, we were met by 11 youths welcoming us in many languages: Kurdish, Russian, Tigrinya, Filipino, Tongo, Spanish, Syrian, Turkish, and Norwegian. "We come from all over the world, but we live here, in Tromsø." Mohammad explained that they had spent time getting to know the museum and the life of Cora Sandel and how they had written their own texts based on their encounters with Cora's life and art. As they walked us through the exposition, they told stories, sang, played music, and danced (see Figure 8). One story was inspired by a parrot made visible in a photo of the Sandel family. Mohammad told how the parrot continuously tried to escape the cage—it wanted to be free. "Cora also wanted to be free," he continued, and Farida asked the audience whether we were free as a bird. They were allowed not only to interpret the art and objects of the exposition but also to intervene in the physical rooms. Thin curtains hung between Sandel's paintings. As we walked around, between the curtains and looking at the artworks, we also looked at and sometimes touched each other through the textiles. This way of playing with materials and bodies created a special atmosphere of intense sensory presence and engagement and is characteristic of how Perspektivet Museum works. "Look at these birds, they have flown out of this picture....The birds are landing in your hands," said Farida, as the audience was all given a paper bird in their hands.

Cora Sandel's right to become an artist was used as a base for the youths to express their own fights and dreams for the future. Violetta reflected on what we could learn from Cora's life, ending with "we can learn



**Figure 7.** Preparing for the performance, Liomary reads a text about being a free girl. Photo by Camilla Erenius.



**Figure 8.** Under the empty birdcage, Violetta shares reflections on what we can learn from Cora Sandel’s life. Photo by Camilla Erenius.

that we must fight. Fight despite what the society and people around us says.” Adiam read a poetic text about her dreams, of how steep a mountain she must climb to reach her goal, of being afraid of failing: “I have started to climb. A life, a chance. At the top lies what I dream of, and I need to get there.” Encountering the artworks and objects of the expositions, along with the youths’ interpretations and performances, life stories across time and place were connected, and the audience became strongly engaged in the stories of this diverse group of immigrant youths.

A series of objects were displayed in the last room. “In this room are some of Cora’s things. Things from her childhood that tell us something about who she was,” Christine explained. “I don’t have anything from my childhood. I don’t have any pictures. I don’t even know what I looked like when I was a child, but I think I was very pretty,” she exclaimed, making us all laugh as we struggled with tears. She went on to explain how she had moved around plenty of times since she was a child, and how difficult it was to make new friends, and learn new languages: “I see Cora’s life in mine when she moved to Tromsø. I also moved to Tromsø. In sandals and a jacket. It was cold here. I was freezing. Who was I now?” Christine ended by inviting us all to dance with her: “My grandmother in Zambia was a strong woman, and she wanted me to be happy and free here in Norway. Dance....So, listen to my grandmother and dance.” Bob Marley’s *Three Little Birds* was turned on. We all danced around the big desk with objects from Cora

Sandel’s life (Figure 9). As we left, Adiam reminded us to take good care of our (paper) bird and remember to let it go.

The story of Cora’s life and encounter with the city of Tromsø resonated with these youths’ participation, their memories and experiences of migration and being new in the city, some of them painful. Through the many objects and lyrics, the life of Cora Sandel and their own lives were weaved together. “Sensations,” Mason (2018) argues, flow through and are generated in encounters. They emanate and flow in things that happen and things coming into contact (Mason, 2018, p. 9). The encounters at the museum allowed both the young participants and the audience to activate their own memories, affection, and experiences. Sharing this affective experience connected everyone present for a short while as we laughed, struggled with tears and danced together. Like in the case of the gravel pit, these encounters involved potent connections that came to matter, where we could identify sparks as intensified and enchanting. We certainly left the event somewhat changed.

Through working with the performance, the museum changed for the youths. One of the girls told of how she used to find the museum a dark and dull place. Perspektivet Museum’s way of working to create spaces for creative unfolding allowed the youths to write themselves into the place and the exhibitions. Such interventions where youths are invited to enter and play with various public spaces in the city changed not only their perceptions of the specific place; as public spaces



**Figure 9.** Christine urging the audience to dance with her. Photo by Camilla Erenius.

became familiar places, their perceptions of and ways of moving about in the city also changed. Many of the youths are now active users of the city’s cultural institutions and other public spaces. They have made the city their own and become active participants in the urban fabric of Tromsø.

The audience encountered a scripted play, and the youths prepared well and followed a set structure. However, there was a great deal of improvisation involved in the process of creating the performance. While the exhibition served as a frame, the youths were allowed the freedom to play with it, interpret it, and use it as materials for their own stories. Liabø explained that this is how they work. All the activities of *Here I am!* are based on improvising in place and then making new scripts. Working with the ongoing unknown is part of the art and culture actors’ everyday practice and working methods. Whenever they begin a project, they only have vague ideas of what it will become. This was a scripted event, but it still sought to include the multitude of experiences played out in the here and now.

*Here I am!* aims at offering the youths tools to claim a voice in the city—and a space of their own. Through entering various public spaces with their performances, the young immigrants get to know the city and see themselves as part of it. Strengthening their presence in the urban space in ways relevant to them, participation in these events also facilitates broader participation in the city. Performances like this one in the museum voices experiences rarely heard, and often missing in urban planning. Although diversity is given priority in municipal plans, the immigrant population to a little extent partici-

ates in municipal initiatives to engage the citizens in participatory planning processes. Municipal planners express the need for new methods to involve a broader spectrum of the population (Førde, 2019). We argue that this way of working with active engagement with place, with the ongoing unknown as a crucial element, can inspire and inform planning in diverse cities.

## 6. Discussion

Because urban planning uses spatial planning to stay in control of urban development, it has difficulties in “embracing the idea of improvisation” in planning (Jacques, 2021, p. 659). Temporary or improvised use of space is not seen as experimental or inspirational to urban politics and planning. Cities do not favour contexts of “agonistic urbanism,” that is, “the capacity to bring people together for cultural and emotional exchange” (Mostafavi, 2017, p. 13).

Now, urban politics and planning claim they pay attention to cultural diversity and socio-spatial intensity and atmospheres. They also claim the democratisation of the use of space is vital to them and they plan for places for cultural exchange or informal meetings between strangers (Plan- og bygningsetaten, 2019, p. 7). Still, the places the city calls informal (in Norway *allmenning*, in Denmark *torvet*) are ordered through spatial design guidelines that make passive spaces rather than enhancing improvisation. There is no place for an “agonistic urbanism”; the strife about values, understandings, politics, gender, racism, and so on by using performative action, dialogues, or theatre.

The analysed cases exemplify two aspects of this problem: A community appropriating a local space by letting children experiment and improvising on how to make a children's playground an informal meeting place. The other case exemplifies how a youth theatre project uses a city museum, to acclaim its presence by reworking the public formality of the museum into a more informal space.

The analysis sees both events as performative experiments. They were experiments that placed participants into an empty space (children) and a high spatial and value-ordered space (youth). The nature of the gravel pit and loose materials forces children to improvise to make it their place and museum guests were faced with an embodiment of the young people's narratives and their use of words, aesthetics, and affinities. The young people wanted to make an affective, reflexive effect on participants by demonstrating the relationship between Cora Sandell's life story and their own multiple experiences. Hereby, they claim a voice in a public space within the city. The young people get to know the city and see themselves as part of it, by entering various public spaces with their performances.

Rihcard Sennett (1970) has long called for planning and cities that consider "the uses of disorder." "Unzoned urban places" (Sennett, 1970, p. 142), like the children's playground gives a place experimenting with disorder, and the museum ruptured, and hence expanded, the order of their exhibition by inviting the youths to improvise within it. An enabling space is a space allowing performativity, experiments, and improvisation. The cases show how disorder can be something positive, but if a city should make experimentation possible, it has to allow for spatial planning and urban design that is "incorporating principles of porosity of territory, incomplete form, and non-linear development" (Sendra & Sennett, 2022, p. 35).

This is to think of space and places as a process and to have both contrasts and irreducible differences surface. An open space of disorder—improvising a temporary building or use of place or confronting the public with differences—provokes "negotiation, agreements" (Sendra & Sennett, 2022, p. 103). Experimental disorder and improvisation, however, imply uncertainty and indeterminacy that is so difficult to accept within planning and politics. The improvisation we have focused on here may stimulate both uneasiness, an affective attachment to place, or further politically uncontrollable activism. Our analysis insists on demonstrating that improvisation is: (a) an effect of sensing places and imaginary doings (children) and (b) that the "embodied dynamism and embodied communication" from playing and facing performative strengths "are the most important sources of situations" (Schmitz, 2019, p. 73). Or to use Sendra and Sennett (2022), to experience disorder as an eye-opener. Both cases show the potential if cities encourage more informality and have spaces for improvised informality.

## 7. Conclusion

The play design experiment in the gravel pit and the theatre performance in the museum showed how improvisation can be enhanced in urban encounters in outdoor and indoor public spaces. As the museum curator emphasised, the intervention required facilitation and time as well as the courage to "let go." Both events were framed as open-ended, encouraging the exploration of new possibilities by playing with what lay at hand in specific places and situations. The results were flexible spaces, allowing improvisational and surprising use and multimodal encounters that created new connectivities and engagement.

Despite an increased commitment to affective urbanism and diversity in urban development, the atmospheres of place and the choreography of bodies described in these cases are often absent in the understanding of urban public space (Amin, 2015). In line with Sendra and Sennett (2022), we believe that it is possible to design urban spaces that accommodate disorder as a form of power and at the same time stimulate openness, tolerance, and curiosity. By emphasising the performative, affective, and sensory elements of urban life, our analyses showed how a gravel pit and a museum could become charged as public spaces as people were pulled into the same affective space, forming a public of shared concern (see Amin, 2015). These are temporary events, but such occasions where differences are crossed do not end without a trace. Such temporary navigations can promote the city's transformative potential as a result of our capacity to give urban spaces new meaning and, thus, change our actions within them.

What if any informal public space was seen, as Sennett (2018) suggests, as a *Phyx* (a theatre, an amphitheatre) and any spatial design could consider space as "a semicolon" (a half-stop of movement implying the stimulation of curiosity; Sennett, 2018, p. 214), "a membrane" (a place to be permeated by movements, permeable, porous and yet interweaving relations, practices, movements, relations; Sennett, 2018, p. 222), and "incomplete" (unfinished and unfinishable; Sennett, 2018, p. 230)? The cases presented here show that cities need to have spaces for "seed-planning," spaces that have an openness to improvisation and events rather than using a spatial design that works as a passivating choreography (Sennett, 2018, pp. 234–241). The rupture is an accretion to the experience of place, which we have tried to exemplify with two expressions of co-creation: building by imagination and having reflexive memorization between cultural differences through art and art space.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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### About the Authors



**Anne-Lene Sand** is an associate professor and a member of the Lab for Play and Design from the Design School Kolding, Denmark. She is specialised in urban improvisational practices using methodologies such as sensory and visual ethnography. She is interested in how to design maker spaces for young people who are uncertain, playful, and oriented towards making. Pløger, Førde, and Sand have published a Scandinavian anthology titled *Improvisation. Urban Life Between the Planned and the Unplanned*. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0617-8913>



**Anniken Førde** is a professor in urban and community planning at the Department of Social Sciences at the UiT The Arctic University of Norway. Her research interests are place transformations, contested landscapes, and urban encounters. She has published improvisational methodologies and policies with a special emphasis on cross-cultural encounters and the right to the city.



**John Pløger** is a professor emeritus at the Department of Global Development & Planning, University of Agder, Kristiansand, Norway. He has published on urban and planning theory and planning practice, and he has worked together with architects in Norway and Denmark on urban renewal, regeneration, and spatial planning projects. He is currently finishing a book *The Dispositif City* (in Danish) and has published *The Vital City* (in Norwegian) co-authored with professor Jonny Aspen, School of Architecture & Design, Oslo.



**Mathias Poulsen** is a PhD candidate and a member of the Lab for Social Design, Design School Kolding, Denmark, with the project Designing for Playful Democratic Participation. He is particularly interested in how play and spaces for play contribute to more vibrant and inclusive modes of democratic participation. He founded the CounterPlay Festival to cultivate a community, where researchers and practitioners could explore play in both theory and practice.