

MIXITY: Fostering Play in the Urban Sphere

PATRIZIO MCLELLAND

Mixity (Mixité): social diversity ([ReversoDictionary](#))... culturally speaking: of or relating to artistic or social pursuits or events considered to be valuable or enlightened ([Collins Dictionary](#)).

As the initial brunt of the ongoing pandemic comes to a close, we are left with a world that will have changed drastically. Public spaces, and the ways in which we collectively interact with them and one another alike, will need to be redefined. Harmoniously balancing form, function and value across stakeholders is a necessity in the public environment, and investigating outcomes in the shifting nature of these spaces has always been the quest of both their *maker* and their *user*.

Montréal-based designers *Atelier Daily tous les jours* have had widespread success in creating experiential spaces of *play* offering unique interactions for the individual. Continually striving to learn from every project, these designers of public spaces must have one eye on critical past outcomes, and one eye on how the future can and will force them to *unlearn*— an even more pressing issue in the context of the pandemic. In the following interview excerpts, *Daily tous les jours'* director, Mouna Andraos, offers a glimpse into the core tenets of the studio, the realities of dealing with cities as clients and how important it is to identify the parts of our practice that are essential to our *making*.

Excerpts from an interview with Mouna Andraos, co-founder, Daily tous les jours, June 2020.

Patrizio McLelland: Thank you for taking the time to meet with me, I know that you and everyone must be busy these days.

Mouna Andraos: My pleasure.

PM: Before we get started, I wanted to give you some background. My name is Patrizio McLelland. I was born and raised in Montreal and I am a musician, artist and now student. I started in [Design and Computation Arts, Concordia University] last Fall [2019], and the program has really re-shaped and redefined the way I think about systems, interactions, urban spaces and design in general.

Having grown up [in Montreal] and looking at your practice over the past 10 years, there is a reflection between city life values and the studio's core tenets. *Daily tous*

les jours have such a keen eye when it comes to public spaces. How they can be transformed and reimagined, and how elements of curiosity, fun, reconnecting with nature, and accessibility can greatly improve the quality of life for citizens. This is my personal experience as a user-interactor. So, in summary: I've been a big fan for a long time.

MA: Thank you!

PM: There is accessibility value in creating complex output that is attractive from very simple user input. How important do you think ease-of-use is in these scenarios?

MA: There are a few principles we try and apply with our work, what we call the *invitation* and the *clarity of invitation* (also called affordance of an interface): how clearly it communicates what is expected of it from the user's point-of-view. One can choose to obscure the invitation, but then communicating that becomes the purpose of the installation itself. For most of the work we try to put out in public space, this is critical for its success.

But at the same time, it does not mean that everything needs to be instantaneously understood. There could be a ramp up of learning and teaching and that happens through various feedback mechanisms that we have to give the user.

Start with the clear invitation. I do something that is expected or I understand what is expected, and I get feedback on that (positive or negative) to slowly teach me what I am supposed to be doing (see Fig. 1.). Depending on the context you are in, you want to make sure that the duration of the first exchange is pretty short because you might lose their attention. However, if you are in the context of a gallery space where people want to engage, you can anticipate a longer moment to give feedback, to be a bit more sophisticated, and then build up. I think it's also interesting to take into account more advanced users and usages, as long as you can reward everyone.

PM: How willing do you think people are to learn through an installation? In a public space where there are allowances and considerations, unlike a regulated gallery space, how willing are people on the street to really go the whole way?

MA: I think there's a conscious learning. There might be unconscious learning as well. People are willing to engage. And as long as you give them feedback and show them that they are moving forward, most people are willing to give you part of their attention before they can really jump on board.

But then you ask the question of the *whole way*, and the whole way is another thing. You can design different depths, complexities and the more you do that, the more

the number of users willing to go the whole way drops. But that is okay. It does not mean that we shouldn't plan for them. But there might be some features that are for less than 10% of your users.



Fig. 1. *Musical Shadows*: An investigation into how our bodies can be invited to find new ways to move within space, *Musical Shadows* sonifies our movements, using shadows cast by the sun to trigger sonic events. Pictured here at Ars Electronica 2019, *Musical Shadows* has found a permanent home in Mesa, Arizona. Photograph from Knowledge Capital. Used in accordance with Creative Commons License Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.0 Generic ([CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/)).

PM: It's almost as though you add elements in to attract those people who are willing to go further.

MA: Definitely. One thing that we design in our work is what we call different levels of engagement. From the beginning, ensuring there is an opportunity that engages both a viewer and a passerby who doesn't stop, but who is witnessing this in the presence of their environment. Then, there is the user who stops and doesn't want to engage. There's the one who stops and gives you ten seconds of attention and observes others, all the way to the one who comes back often and explains to others how things work. For us, it's important to design for all types of participation. We also try to value all of them and not cast judgement. It's not the repeat user who is the most valuable because it's the diversity of experiences that will create a more vibrant public space. You don't

necessarily want to create a place that's going to be completely closed for external people because it's just hard-core users who know how to engage with it.

PM: That creates such a varied group of stakeholders.

MA: That's what we want to encourage in the public realm. You want to encourage that mixity and cohabitation in general, and it translates into our user groups.

PM: The end result of a project can often be worlds away from the initial spark of an idea. How do you manage expectations with clients and regulatory bodies? What core tenets do you hold onto against the changing nature of these projects?

MA: Projects are a constant reshuffling, redesigning and readjusting. And, although it would be fantastic to have zero constraints, they are often positive in the sense that they challenge us to consider what the essence of a project is, and that is the one thing we have to fight for. Everything else should be up for discussion, if it needs to be.

So, in a funny way, constraints are a good editor -"that part isn't so useful, maybe we could do something else instead. But that element, that is the essence that we're trying to keep. Let's defend it while circling around the rest."

PM: Do you feel like that defence works? You're able to reduce a project to its most essential reflection of the values of the studio. Do you feel like you get a lot of pushback from municipal entities?

MA: It's complicated. We have a project right now that we have been trying to develop for a while, and the city is hiring us. But then 'the city' is never one cohesive thing. You could have one organization or champion within the city who is trying to bring a designer on board, who is trying to address some questions pertaining to a group of citizens or an area in the city. Then there are all sorts of legal, engineering, health and safety stakeholders. To be honest, I still think we haven't nailed the right balance. We've had to redesign three times; the concept is the same, but the execution has changed quite a bit.

Sometimes it can be long and painful. For temporary work, it's easier. Depending on the situation, you don't have to follow all the rules or directions, and the city— not the political body but the physical city— is a mix of authorities: one sidewalk is owned by the city, the other is a private consortium, the other is federal, and so on. If you say "we're going to take our flag and move it 100 metres this way" suddenly you fall under a whole new set of regulations. We try all the different angles, and hopefully we make it through (see Fig. 2.).

PM: The studio has helped shape the landscape of public spaces in many different cities. Given the impressive work that you've contributed, would it be safe to assume that you have a clear idea as to what the client expectation is, both in a project and proposal sense? What elements do you feel they prioritize in a proposal? Is there a winning combination of factors?



Fig. 2. *Musical Swings*: By far one of the most popular activations from *Daily tous les jours*, this installation has seen permanent and touring status in over a dozen cities across the globe since 2011. The swingset, something most people have built memories on, is coded with rich emotional attachments, creating an attractive invitation. With the swingset as the catalyst, this installation creates a kind of feedback loop; using fond memories as a basis to forge new ones, and music to amplify the collaboration – the latter a recurring theme in their practice. Photograph from Cushy Creative. Used in accordance with Creative Commons License Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International ([CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)).

MA: It depends on which jurisdiction you fall within. If you want to work in public spaces in Montreal, you're going to be dealing with the city, but sometimes there are bodies which are given the authority to manage and decide, and they have their own constraints.

Now we're working with [*Société de développement commercial*] on specific areas, and they have their own rules. If you're in a park it's going to be completely different than the *Vieux-Port*, where it's not even the city who is involved anymore. It very much depends on who and where.

I think that everywhere there are trendsetters; people who understand the objective of these kinds of interventions at the city level. These objectives are about creating places for people to gather and create healthy lifestyles. But then there are others who resort to the tactics to do that, and make it a requirement instead of an objective; this is where I think we lose opportunities for innovation. Suddenly the brief is no longer about ‘what can we do to get residents to occupy specific locations’, it becomes ‘can you create an audiovisual interactive thing?’ When we are putting forth the solution ahead of the problem, this is when it becomes a challenge.

Sometimes the audience will think they know what they need exactly, ‘we need video mapping projection here’, but it doesn’t always mean that’s what the place requires.

PM: Have you noticed any major discrepancies when working with other municipalities, in relation to the proposal processes in Montreal?

MA: When you work with bodies like [*partenaires du quartier des spectacles*], they’ve already established a *modus operandi* with the city, so they can accelerate the production. In Montreal there’s been an increasing open mindedness to the kind of work that we do. Still, at the end of the day, you are going to have safety concerns; the firefighters have to approve it, engineers etc. But the more projects for every party that succeeds the easier it gets for the next one.

PM: How important is sustainability to the city of Montreal? Is it more attractive to these regulatory bodies to present something eco-didactic with a clear intersection along the lines of sustainability?

MA: Environmental sustainability as a theme is anecdotal. It comes once and a while. Occasionally, you’ll have themes in general in the calls for work and interactive installations, probably 50% of the time. Is your question because you’re interested in seeing more of these? Curious if they’re out there?

PM: I’m curious if they’re out there. Environmental sustainability is presented to [Design and Computation Arts] students as a very important parallel. Meaning there’s a lot of work to do. Dr. Carmela Cucuzzella’s¹ work for instance resonates with me. We

¹ Dr. Carmela Cucuzzella is a Professor in the *Design and Computation Arts* department and is holder of the Concordia University Research Chair in *Integrated Design and Sustainability for the Built Environment* (ideas-be.ca). She is founding co-director of the *Next Generation Cities Institute*. She is also a member of the inter-university and interdisciplinary team of the *Laboratory for the Study of Potential Architecture* (LEAP; concordia.ca).

could zoom out and look at the materials and processes, but I think I'm looking more at the messaging.

MA: I think the [Design and Computation Arts] emphasis on sustainability has been a really important move that happened in the last few years. In a way, it's a reaction maybe to policy makers not making the moves that we as a society need to see coming through. This unfortunately is why you don't see a lot of calls for projects coming through that have that as a top criterion. They are mostly economically-driven. I think this is a major problem that we have as a society at large, that our politicians are not making the moves that are needed. It's a really interesting path [for the program], to try and foster a generation of designers that will bring about change themselves, with the projects and proposals they make. There's a reality that's still out there, no support system to encourage these things or facilitate them.

PM: How do you foresee the environment of installations changing, post-pandemic? How do you think the very nature of public spaces is changing?

MA: We spent quite a bit of time thinking about that, and what the impact is going to be. We put out a research summary (*Better Together: Reflections for pandemic times*) about a month or two ago. It showcases our own understanding of how all of this is going to impact our work.

There are opportunities for change. I don't think we're going to move into a completely touchless society. However, I think that touchless will be an attractive element in an artwork. So, that's one thing to keep in mind. I think we're going to become more creative in what function we can give to public space, because for a while the public space will remain the safest space. For sure we will have some challenges in this city, in the Winter, but for now we can all remain outdoors.

In terms of hybrid spaces, places that are able to be both functional and recreational, gathering will be useful. Very localised experiences, mobile experiences; the notion of the giant big event is going to be probably challenged for at least another year. This means that being able to do more localised experiences will be relevant.

Overall, I think our role as designers for the public sphere is to encourage the public to regain a sense of safety when being in a space. We need to ensure they're out there reclaiming them. Spaces that are free for all that offer an opportunity to do whatever activities one wants to do.

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