

The other architecture: temporary spaces as tools for communication and social cohesion

Andreea-Snejana Simici¹*

¹ Politehnica University of Timișoara, Romania. *simici_andreea@yahoo.co.uk

Received: September 20, 2025

Accepted for publication: October 6, 2025

Abstract

This paper explores how temporary architecture can foster trust, collaboration, and social cohesion through participatory design and symbolic communication. Based on action research methodology, symbolic interactionism, and play theory, the research examines how spatial practices can support identity-building, in an empathetic community. The paper brings an empirical example, a project carried out near School nr. 7 in Timișoara during *Timișoara Cultural Capital 2023*. The study engaged community members in all the phases of the project, determining a collaborative model. Empirical findings highlight the link between emotional attachment, symbolic communication, and social representation. By framing “The Other Architecture” as both a method and a metaphor, the paper offers a model for inclusive, therapeutic urban interventions that amplify marginalized voices and rebuild social bonds.

Keywords: Action-research, Temporary Architecture, The Ontology of Play, Humanistic social work

Introduction

This paper explores the way temporary architecture can foster social attachment and community cohesion, addressing the conference theme of collaboration and building trust, by exploring the intersection of design, symbolic communication, and participatory urban practices. While physical proximity alone does not guarantee a sense of belonging, temporary architecture can become a catalyst for trust and collective identity when it is co-designed and acted upon within an empathetic community.

Emile Durkheim introduces the concept of social integration, defined as the degree of individuals' attachment to society and their sense of belonging and adherence to shared values (Radulescu, 2015). This theoretical perspective confirms that the lack of an empathetic community leads to the degradation of spiritual, cultural, and relational dimensions (Stefaroi, 2012). Building on these insights, the research investigates the hypothesis that community-oriented spatial practices can serve as a preventive and therapeutic role, enabling the organic reconstruction of social identity and cohesion (Stefaroi, 2012).

This perspective examines the intersection of communication, action-oriented sociology, and temporary architecture within a critical action-research framework that supports vulnerable communities affected by conflict, marginalization, or migration.

Literature Review

The research evolved organically, being guided by a unifying ludic ethos. Drawing on play and avant-garde movements such as Dada and the Situationist International, the paper explores spontaneous creativity within the field of symbolic communication.

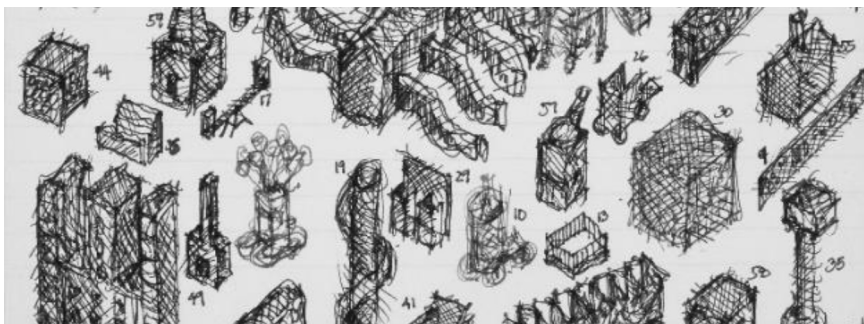


Fig. 1 Sketches for Victims, John Hejduk, Source: Victims-John-Hejduk-09.jpg

"The other architecture" is a possible interpretation of John Hejduk's definition of the „Architectural Ethos", particularly by means of his rich semantical concept of "nomadic theater of memory", contemplated through his architectural characters named *Masks*. John Hejduk created over 400 metaphorical "masques" with anthropomorphic traits, designed to evoke attachment, stimulate imagination, and activate collective memory in public spaces.

Kurt Lewin's model of action research serves as a methodological foundation, being guided by the principle: "No action without research, no research without action." The process unfolds through iterative cycles of planning, action, and reflection, enabling both social change and practical knowledge (Miftode, 2010). Research becomes not only observational but actively engaged within social reality.

Grounded in Symbolic Interactionism, this study understands meaning as being constructed through the process of social interaction. Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model of communication, reinforces this perspective, emphasizing how behavior is shaped by symbolic indicators. Within this framework, temporary structures are seen as communicative devices, capable of scripting new behaviors and patterns of interaction.

The Ontology of Play, along with Gregory Bateson's theory of "framing," are two concepts that can operate together. Play (Schiels, 2015 apud Huizinga, 2016) becomes a transformative frame, similar to a therapeutic setting, encouraging participants to challenge social norms through symbolic and creative engagement.

We can name these structures disruptive devices that operate as counter-processes. They intervene in established social orders to interrupt routines and expose the contingent, constructed nature of social reality. Such devices can take the form of temporary architectures, through participatory practices that break the continuity of reified structures. In this sense, they invite participants to renegotiate meaning.

Bernard Tschumi's concept of "Event in Space" (Tschumi, 1996) emphasizes this idea, that architecture should not merely serve as a backdrop for social life, but provoke action and meaning. His view of spatial rupture, moments that disrupt conventional interpretations, aligns with the research use of temporary structures to catalyze critical reflection in public space. Jacques Derrida's "architecture of the event" further supports this concept, as he interprets *événement* as something that emerges and disrupts the ordinary, favoring difference and ambiguity over fixed meanings. His deconstructive philosophy promotes designs that welcome fragmentation, dissonance, and reinterpretation. Influenced by these theories, the research embraces disruption and dissonance as design strategies.

This cross-disciplinary theoretical foundation gave rise to the concept of "the other architecture," situated at the intersection of temporary architecture and communication.

Methodology

The empirical component was carried out in a real urban context, in the spatial proximity of School nr. 7 in Timișoara, using action research as a methodology in urban design. The fieldwork, part of the *Community Places – DARE! See You Where We Want! Project (Timișoara Cultural Capital 2023)*, applied a participatory design approach through stages of active research (surveys, observation, interviews), co-design workshops, and implementation. Parents, teachers, students, and local residents helped identify problems and proposed context-sensitive spatial solutions.

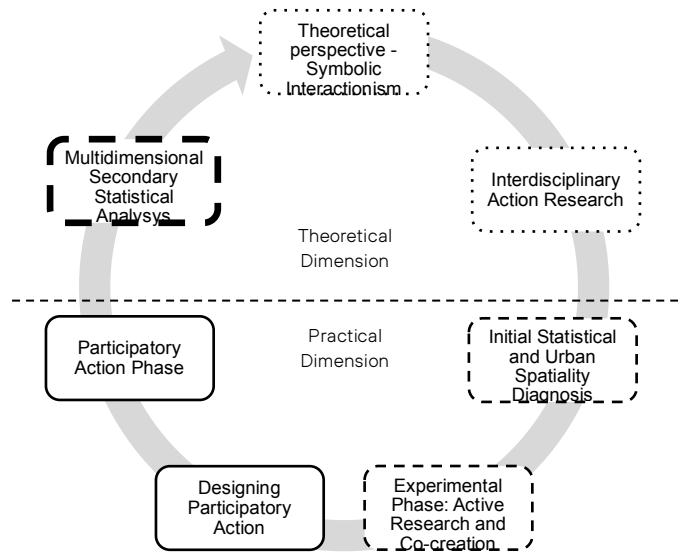
While the focus group was not a marginalized community, the methodology remains relevant and applicable to such contexts because of its symbolical dimension, theoretical fundamentation and practical references.

The action research model bridges theory and practice, treating social change and knowledge production as parallel goals (Văduva 2012). Intervention and analysis evolve together as seen in Fig. 2.

This paper focuses mainly on the *Multidimensional Secondary Statistical Analysis* (see Fig. 2, in bold). This approach introduces an innovative way of framing the items within complex dimensions, enabling an understanding of how indicators co-vary, mutually influence one another, and generate a multidimensional analysis of the social space associated with School No. 7. Within the qualitative research, the concept of the *Multidimensional Significance of Space* is first of all theoretically grounded, and subsequently each item assigned an indicator to be observed during the participatory action stage.

Method: 575 questionnaires and 15 interviews.

Fig. 2 Action Research
Model adapted to Dare!
See you where we
want!(CCTM2023)
context, author



Observation was the central instrument for research, documenting social interactions, behaviors, spatial qualities, and group dynamics through video journals. Semi-structured and unstructured interviews provided participants perspectives, while focus groups explored practical solutions. Visual and symbolic tools, like models and drawings, enhanced group cohesion. Online content analysis of articles, monographs, and digital texts contextualized findings. Together, these methods created a multi-layered dataset for interpreting social interactions, symbolic spaces, and community perspectives across the research process.

After structuring the theoretical concepts that ground the study's hypotheses, items were organized into spatial dimensions to examine attachment, affective space, safety, and accessibility. The research proposes a tool for measuring identity markers through multidimensional statistical indicators, validating concepts such as memory, participation, and co-creation, thus framing community as a

space with therapeutic and preventive value (Ștefăroi, 2012). Questionnaire responses, collected during the *Initial Statistical and Urban Spatial Diagnosis* Phase, were subsequently thematically grouped into spatial dimensions (Table 1) to serve as the basis for the *Multidimensional Secondary Statistical Analysis*.

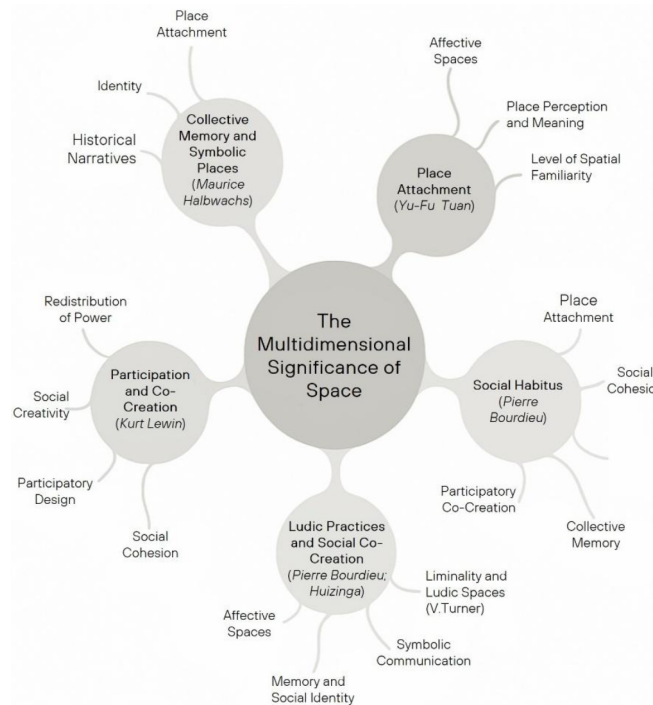
Dimension	Indicator	Index (some examples)
Aesthetic & Environmental	Space overall quality	Level of Satisfaction – Rating Scale Q15.2 Cleanliness
Utilitarian	Infrastructure & Maintenance	Q15.23 Waiting areas around the school (benches, tables, chairs)
Protective	Safety & Security	Q15.27 Children's safety in the area of the School
Spatiality	Accessibility & Mobility	Q15.12 Access for people with reduced mobility
Behavioral	Activities & Daily Routine	Q8. What do you do during the time you spend in the proximity of the school?
Emotional	Generated Feelings	Q4. What emotion do you associate with the school proximity ?

Table 1 Some of the Dimensions and Indicators of the School's Social Space, author

For the qualitative research, the next step was operationalization, where concepts are translated into measurable indicators and observable items. Based on the hypothesis that, *without a symbolic connection, social communities do not develop attachment to their spaces or community*, this research introduces a tool for measuring

such identity markers, by constructing multidimensional statistical items that validate the key theoretical concepts represented below.

*Fig. 3
Operationalization
Framework for Key
Concepts of both
qualitative and
quantitative data,
author*



Statistical indicators were applied to the dimensions in Table 2 to ensure rigor, reliability, and interpretability. Measures such as Mean and Standard Deviation capture central tendency and dispersion, while ANOVA and F-Test enable group comparisons and significance testing (alpha level, Confidence Interval). Cronbach's Alpha verifies internal consistency, and sampling with Spearman correlation supports generalizability and relationship analysis. Together, these indicators establish a coherent analytical framework, reinforcing evidence-based conclusions and enhancing the credibility of research findings.

Results

This research validates the development and application of an action research methodology that integrates the concept of *social representation of space* in urban design practices. The study confirms that space is not only experienced physically but also constructed symbolically, through rituals, emotions, and shared narratives.

The social and symbolic dimensions of space were highlighted through both secondary statistical and qualitative analysis. Past experiences, emotional memory, and local infrastructure were shown to shape individual and collective perceptions of space. The research also empirically confirmed that playful interaction promotes emotional engagement, creativity, and co-creation. Proximity to school and feelings of pride about the institution were significantly correlated with attachment and perceived spatial quality. Demographic factors influenced willingness to participate, and past experiences predicted a stronger sense of community. The participatory approach proved essential, as community members were actively involved in identifying issues, generating solutions, and implementing interventions. The model worked as a reflective communication tool during student workshops, enabling narrative exploration (Chinchilla, 2016). Symbolic communication, through storytelling, drawings and models, emerges as a powerful tool for group cohesion.

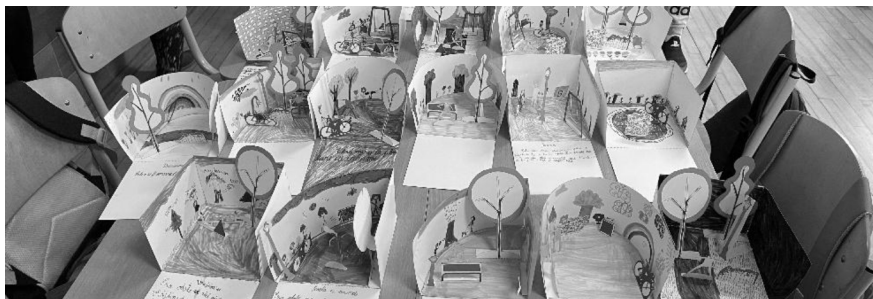


Fig. 4 Action Research
Phase-Exploring
Symbolic
Communication, S.
Tătaru 2023

Discussion

Although the project improved road safety and green spaces, it inadequately addressed urban furniture, cultural activation, and inclusive evaluation. Unequal community involvement, administrative limitations, changes in the design brief, and non-random sampling (excluding marginalized groups), undermined outcomes. Within this context, equitable power-sharing in research and action groups is crucial. Collaborative governance fosters trust, collective ownership, and sustainable, context-based solutions, while the interdependence of individual and collective goals shows that a lasting change requires transforming group norms through equal distribution of power. Even within these limitations, the project may be regarded as a success, as it addresses the most significant issue identified through the research, namely, ensuring the safety of children and other pedestrians.

The convergence between the action-research framework and urban design is still in its early stages of development, as is the association between symbolic communication and humanist-oriented social action projects. Although this model is still emerging within social sciences and urban design research, there are references that demonstrate its social relevance, which will be briefly presented below.

MIT's Action Learning Program (MIT 2016) promotes action-research in urban design and narrative as tools for cohesion. Practical initiatives such as *Design Your Neighborhood (DYN)* and the *Dream City Workshop* in Nashville illustrate how participatory design can counter racism and empower youth to reimagine urban space (Anderson et al., 2024). These interventions reshape both physical and symbolic spaces, granting marginalized communities a voice and an identity.

On a methodological level, symbolic communication research is central. *Journeys in the Imaginal Realm* (Reeves & Timokhina, 2025)

demonstrates how fairy tales, used as metaphors in participatory projects, encourage reflection and foster social change. Through writing and symbolic analysis, participants reinterpret experiences and critically reframe social reality.

In marginalized contexts, temporary architecture provides a low-risk, high-impact platform for experimentation and empowerment. Integrating symbolic interactionism, action research, and play, it becomes a catalyst for relational transformation and collective identity-building.

Conclusion

Rather than enclosing or delimiting space, “the other architecture” can explore its capacity for social rehabilitation, by opening up symbolic spaces capable of communicating the groups identity. Thus, the emphasis falls on the symbolic value of these spatial devices and the way in which they emerge from social action and negotiation. “*The Other Architecture*” becomes a symbol representing „the other”, the stranger, the marginalized, and the unrepresented within public space.

References

- Anderson, K. M., McCormick, M. L., Morgan, K. Y., Gibson, M., Harper, A., Clark, M., Christens, B. D. (2024). *Youth Participatory Action Research for Equitable Urban Design*. Journal of Participatory Research Methods
- Chinchilla, M. (2016). *The Role of Narrative in PAR*.
- Huizinga, J. (2016). *Homo ludens*. Angelico Press.
- Participatory Action Research at MIT <https://ocw.mit.edu/courses/11-237-practice-of-participatory-action-research-par-spring-2016/>
- Rădulescu, S. M. (2015). *Devianță și probleme sociale: Anomie și sinucidere în societățile postcomuniste*. București: Tritonic.

Reeves, M. W., Timokhina, E. (2025). *Journeys in the Imaginal Realm: How Writing and Sharing Fairy Tales With Groups Can Generate 'Moments of Magic.'* Journal of Participatory Research Methods.

Schiels, R. (2015). *Play's Relationship to Language, Cultural Forms, and Transformative Politics.* American Journal of Play.

Ștefăroi, P. (2012). *Paradigma umanistă a asistenței sociale sau scurtă introducere în asistența socială umanistă.* Social Work Review.

Tschumi, B. (1996). *Architecture and Disjunction.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Cealaltă arhitectură: spații temporare ca instrumente pentru comunicare și coeziune socială

(rezumat)

Acest articol explorează modul în care arhitectura temporară poate promova încrederea, colaborarea și coeziunea socială prin design participativ și comunicare simbolică. Bazată pe metodologia cercetării-acțiune, interacționismul simbolic și teoria jocului, cercetarea analizează modul în care practicile spațiale pot susține construirea identității într-o comunitate empatică. Articolul prezintă un exemplu empiric, un proiect realizat în apropierea Școlii nr. 7 din Timișoara în timpul evenimentului "Timișoara Capitală Culturală 2023". Studiul a implicat membrii comunității în toate fazele proiectului, determinând un model colaborativ. Constatările empirice evidențiază legătura dintre atașamentul emoțional, comunicarea simbolică și reprezentarea socială. Prin încadrarea „Celeilalte Arhitecturi” ca metodă și metaforă, articolul propune un model pentru intervenții urbane inclusive, terapeutice, care amplifică vocile marginalizate și reconstruiesc legăturile sociale..