ARTSTREET:
Taking Place
and Making News

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Most of the central business district in Green Bay, Wisconsin, was torn down during the 1970s and replaced by a generic shopping mall with acres of parking adjacent.

The last to go was Kaap's, a well-worn, slightly eccentric restaurant, where special moments in personal lives had been celebrated in a semipublic setting for at least four generations. It didn't go without a fight—under the banner "Support Your Local Kaap's." But by 1980 a department store corporation in Ohio had won a demolition agreement without any exceptions, not even for Kaap's.

The common ground of the community seemed well on the way to becoming another instance of placelessness, as described by Relph, Smith, and others.[1]

With the conversion of outside space to parking lot, the outdoors became a largely eventless no-where to hurry through, diminishing what might be called the now-here sense of place,[2] as expressed by Pascal: "I . . . wonder to see myself here rather than there; for there is no reason why I should be here rather than there, now rather than then."[3]

With the completion of the enclosed mall, the inside-outside world of store-to-store shopping was all inside, with little of the exhilaration that comes from crossing boundaries. The world outside was emptied, leaving mainly weather without human witness.

With the remote control of the urban environment by several corporations whose headquarters were well beyond the view of local citizens, the sense of local participation in the community was damaged. This situation found visual expression in site-indifferent architecture[4] as well as the conventionally coordinated colors and other shallowly graphic consistencies imposed on the previously more site-specific and pluralistic cityscape.

By reducing the interruptions of the past, the weather, door opening and coat zipping, idiosyncrasies, and visual surprises, planners no doubt speeded up the processing of people through the environment as well as the processing of environmental images through people's minds,[5] turning the downtown into a kind of machine for selling. Instead of managing the local exceptions to the generic idea of marketplace by capitalizing on them and celebrating them as events, the new design managed them by trying to exclude them, by framing them out of the picture. Sense of place was excluded by the very same means.

The Proposition

If the "essence of place lies . . . in the experience of an 'inside' that is distinct from an 'outside,'" as Relph asserts,[6] then being simultaneously aware of both inside and outside should make the distinction visible and create or at least heighten the sense of place.

The situation appeared to call for a frame that would separate inside from outside but not so "successfully" or single-purposefully that it would make the outside (other environments and purposes) unavailable to the senses of insiders—or, for that matter, the inside inaccessible to outsiders. So framing may create place if the framing "leaks."

Primarily to heighten sense of place by experimenting with this concept of leaky framing, and to promote the arts in the region along with a new image of Green Bay, a pointedly nongeneric arts festival was devised.[7] I proposed the idea in the early spring of 1980, planning began a year later, and the first festival was presented on the last weekend of August 1982. It has become an annual event, drawing crowds of more than 30,000 each of the first three years, against the standing assumption that the market for fine arts in this already small football town is microscopic.

The News Frame

The arts had been framed *out* of the public mainstream in Green Bay. Newspaper coverage, when it existed at all, presented the arts as superfluous, often with implied apologies to readers that the paper was giving space to such a snooty subject.

This notion of the absence of public interest drove many artistically inclined people into "the closet," into claustrophobic enclaves that understandably tended at once to reject outsiders and keep artists from going public. Under these circumstances, the audience for the arts in Green Bay was as limited as the environment for artistic creation. The condition is typically made visible in newspapers by departmentalizing or "ghettoizing" coverage under a standing head such as "Art Notes" and is analogously signified "on the ground" by keeping concerts, plays, and exhibits tucked away in avoidable galleries and auditoriums.

The news frame, which tended to exclude all but easily processed events, was parallel in some respects to framing in the other communally shared environment, the physical downtown. By following the proposed place-making principles, we designed the festival to assure leakage between the two frames, to see to it that there was interplay between publication in conventional media and "going public" in the streets. For example, intruding on downtown normalcy, mural painters became newsworthy to the point where talking to reporters and posing for photographers were

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The place-making Kaap's restaurant eventually rose from the rubble to become the third building from the left in 1983 ARTSTREET graphics, which otherwise depicted eight "living" structures and two generics. This composite image of the festival site appeared on posters, postcards, buttons, tee shirts, and tote bags in an effort to enhance the site's significance by reduplication. Detail from poster by Evelyn Teikari.

perceived as parts of the act of painting.

To break into the symbolic world of the day's news, an event must emanate qualities that fit into the broader journalistic frame, which excludes most of reality in order to let a manageable few features into the arena of public attention. Some of these qualities are acknowledged by journalists.[8] Others have been detected by scholars.[9]

In consciously constructing the festival to penetrate the news frame, we incorporated most of the requisite news qualities.[10] We thereby often came across a central conflict in the nature of news and possibly in the nature of place: the tension between novelty and familiarity, or what I've called authority.[11]

Generic Lapse

As Milton Glazer put it in speaking of magazine covers, "The image must be familiar enough to be understandable and unusual enough to provoke interest."[12] In our experience the familiarity side of the equation seemed to have more weight.

It began with naming the event. Like the festival itself, the name would have to place the event in a familiar category and at the same time set it apart from other members of the category so that it wouldn't lapse into an already known generic

festival or an oh-one-of-those events.[13] We considered Gala Nor'easter (for northeastern Wisconsin), Ring Around the Bay Festival, Slow Brown Fox Festival of the Arts (to call attention to the Fox River site), Out-of-the-Closet Arts Festival, Algae Bloom Arts Festival, and at least 200 other possibilities before hitting on ARTSTREET,[14] which caught the importance of the site and the idea that the arts can be a "treet" instead of the stuffy in-group obsession that so many potential audiences imagine and avoid.

As soon as we made it public, the name started to revert to the familiar, generic "Artfair" or "Artfest." People who seized on the generic thought they knew what to do about ARTSTREET because they had already dealt with the widespread arts and crafts fairs; that is, they gained authority by classifying the event as generic: "Well, when you've got an artfair, what you do is, you put it in the mall" or in a park, some thought. In the same vein, the initial festival proposal was misperceived for several months as an ethnic food fair to raise money for the arts council. But the name ARTSTREET prevailed, as did the novelty.

One of our more important "novelties," or distinguishing strategies, was to distribute emphasis quite evenly across the arts, to express their variety and abundance, from classical and folk music to

dance, one-act plays, original poetry, storytelling, cinematic special effects, and the visual arts, from demonstrations of making studio glass in an alley to a walking tour of church architecture downtown.

The emphasis on *all* the arts was newsworthy in the sense that it made ARTSTREET unique among festivals in the state. The almost unmanageable scale of ARTSTREET was newsworthy: 63 performances on three street stages and a half-dozen auxiliary performing areas.

What the television stations and newspapers depicted mainly were the balloons, belly dancers, and clowns, which conveyed neither the particular, nongeneric qualities we had synthesized to create a fresh image of Green Bay nor the enthusiastic new public embrace of the fine arts here. Again, the authority and ease of the generic almost got the best of it.

By the same token, one of ARTSTREET's more uncommon features was a Speaker's Corner, where people were invited to speak out on anything connected with the arts, on the model of the one in Hyde Park, London. Surprisingly, a number of speakers took to the soapbox and stirred a crowd with their feelings about the arts and the aesthetic environment of the city. Although one reporter

listened throughout, Speaker's Corner was the only major feature of ARTSTREET entirely omitted in his story. It didn't fit the news template.

On the whole, however, and with the help of reporters, ARTSTREET was successful in penetrating the news frame to leave an opening for yet more arts coverage in the future. In turn, this incorporation into the symbolic frame of news validated the festival's place-making change in the framing of downtown "on the ground."

Festival Frame

The arts had been framed away into concert and recital halls, galleries, museums, and educational institutions, where environment and audience are rather controlled, especially in the "serious" performing arts, for which the audience is usually expected to sit down and stay put.

ARTSTREET lured the arts from these confines and put them out in the sunlight. There were exceptions, though. Symphony violinists said their instruments could not bear the weather, a pianist said she could not compete with traffic sounds, a visual artist said he wouldn't be able to take the ridicule he expected from an unscreened public audience, an actor said the wind would blow his voice away. These few who found competition with the background


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2 A cardboard **ART STREET sign**, duct-taped to the light pole, disrupts the municipal order, helping to create a public event and, at the same time, making the location meaningful. Such discontinuities are perceptual events in themselves. Photographs by Dean O'Brien.

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3 The more intrusive, equipment-centered media add to a sense of eventfulness at the scene. When the scene is outside, away from the customary sanctums of art, some purity is lost, but publics are expanded and publicity is gained. Again, reduplication authenticates the experience of place. Here television covers a prefestival recital, designed to call attention to the festival and to the courthouse square, a small, overlooked patch of charm near the downtown.

4 Street barricades framed a new context that mediated between artists and audiences, creating common ground, recapturing Green Bay's downtown from generic forces, at least temporarily, and bestowing some sense of place. Kaap's restaurant was on a site at the right-hand side of this scene.

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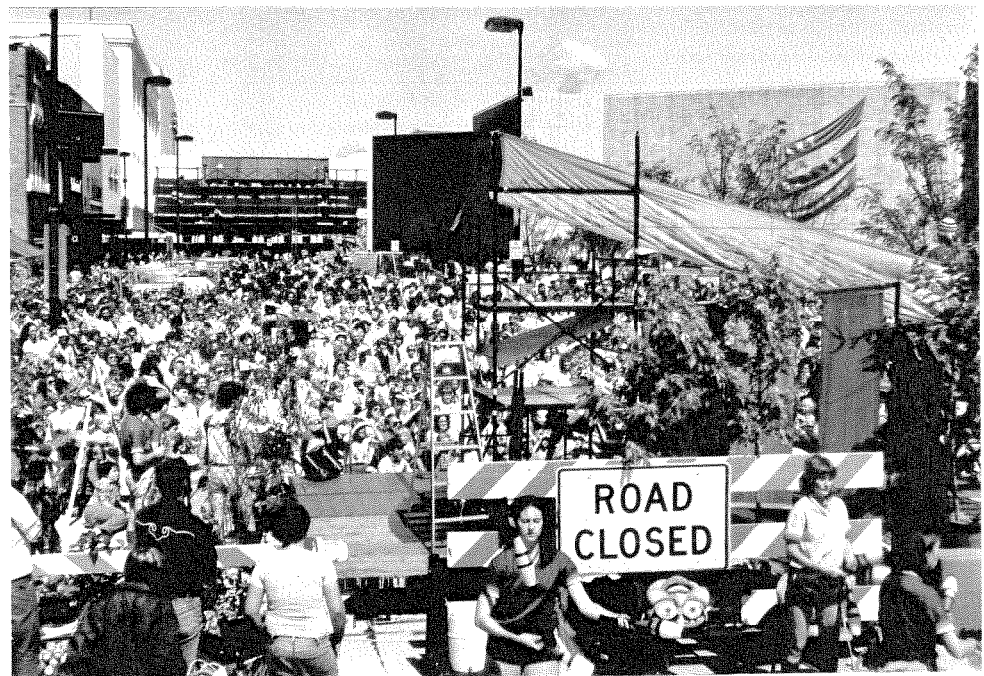
environment too daunting were accommodated in a room where they could essentially fill the frame, as they always had before ARTSTREET.

But many moved outside. Throngs showed up, and the downtown was physically framed with street barricades to include artists with crowds. That is, a subframe was set up to mediate between previously inaccessible performance areas and audiences, just as a good news story gives access to information framed away from public view or intelligibility.[15]

Festival Subframes

Within the broader frame of the entire festival were smaller subframes that recapitulated and thereby celebrated the general leakiness of the festival frame. ARTSTREET generally allowed for public participation in the arts scene, a kind of interaction across the border, or what Appleton calls "penetrability of margins."[16] It allowed access to the "back regions," where tourists and others expect to find "authenticity" behind the slick facades and stagey fronts, according to MacCannell and Goffman.[17] We took that notion quite literally (that is, physically) and provided an accessible back stage. Audiences could wander behind the scenes to see the backs of painted stage flats as well as actors preparing to go on stage or coming off stage in a flush.

Oddly, very few festival goers set foot backstage to see the story behind the story.

Other leaky frames worked better. In Speaker's Corner and a mime workshop, people got *on* stage, *into* the subframe. Similarly, participation was made possible at a booth where a person could glaze his or her own pot and have it raku-fired. The finale of the second year's festival was a pickup chorus of festival goers who were signed up on the spot and sang with the symphony orchestra after an open rehearsal that the crowds could also listen to.

The rehearsal is an example of another form of participation that makes a time and place meaningful, a form described by McLuhan as "cool," wherein an audience participates vicariously in anything incomplete, feeling compelled to complete it themselves.[18] It is another kind of leaky frame, in that the surfaces of a ready-made world are penetrated to get at the processes behind the product.

These framing strategies were to let people in on the arts scene and give them a new personal connection with the downtown. A reciprocal strategy, also devised to encourage sense of place, let the downtown into the perception of festival goers. It was to make the festival as site-specific as possible by creating festival features and

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5 **Behind the frame**, in theoretically more authentic "back regions," singers of the Milwaukee Skylight Comic Opera wait to go on again. They are alone. Contrary to expectations, most festival goers preferred the "staged reality" and actually went out of their way to avoid this accessible behind-the-scenes view.

6 **Bits of building and municipal signage** spill onto the stage, where sculptor Kirsten McClintock is introduced as creator of the canopy above her. The canopy was designed as an expression of ARTSTREET's "leaky frame" principle.

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often insisting on works of art that referred beyond themselves to the particular places where they occurred. For example, a choreographer designed a dance that incorporated a fire escape, trash cans, and window bars in an alley. A mural depicted real trees recently planted near the wall. Poster artists, who consistently chose generic imagery in early renderings, were coached into an enthusiasm for the particulars of the site. Souvenir brooches were made from molds of decorative features on downtown buildings, such as an art deco doorplate and a Victorian handle. The popular walking tours called explicit attention to architecture in or near the downtown. Native American artists were situated in the exact location of a forgotten 1746 Sauk village. A sculptor designed a stage canopy to let in glimpses of the surroundings through its numerous gaps, inviting reference to visible realities beyond the stage.

An interpenetration was achieved between the outside and inside of the frames that set the festival apart from life in general but not entirely apart. The interpenetration was meant as a kind of gluing, tacking an event to a location, making sites more humanly significant, less generic, or interchangeable in the memory.

To permit participation and site-specificity, a frame

7 **The "town crier"** often failed to gain attention, probably because he was not framed and his intentions were not clear or familiar enough for festival goers to manage. It was easier to exclude him from their perception altogether.

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probably has to leak, but it should not disappear. In the second year, ARTSTREET had a "town crier" in top hat and tails to make loud public announcements at several spots about what was going on elsewhere at the festival. An accompanying photograph shows that his unframed presence was either ignored or regarded with suspicion as an intrusion on normalcy. A solution still under consideration is to have him carry a simple frame of three boards to put around him wherever he stops, as a kind of portable proscenium. Things in a frame get attention. Even ordinary clothes, as Ann Hollander has noted, "automatically become extraordinary on the stage or screen. The frame around the events invites intensified attention to what is being worn [because] we know it is there intentionally." [19]

View-Finder Framing

Another framing variant was the view-finder of the camera. Most ARTSTREET photographers followed the conventions of newspaper cropping, which "saves space" by filling the frame with a single-purpose figure, crowding out all ground and hence environmental specificity that may compete with the figure. This "tight framing" speeds up the processing of the image in the mind by simplifying it, but it also destroys sense of place.

Most ARTSTREET photographs were disappointing close-ups of a cute child, a tuba, a glass pot, all of which were unmistakable in their circumscribed meaning and could have been taken anywhere at any time. They were generic. They eliminated the interaction between figure and ground that would have created a more experiential meaning, much as the contrast between *in* and *out* seems to create the experience of place.

By separating a particular moment from the general flux, photography frames time as well as space and so has the capacity to declare *event* as well as *place* if it conveys the contrast between the *now* captured within the frame and the *then* still at large. The contrast is made visible when the photograph refers beyond itself to past or future, calling attention to its edges, its artifice, indirectly authenticating the realities still at large beyond the edge.

ARTSTREET flaunted its edges, its limitations, its pretenses. We liked the way the "Osco Drugs" sign mingled obstreperously with the music of Offenbach and the calls from a motorcycle policeman's radio barged into a conversation between Adam and Eve in a staged Eden.

Contrary to the belief that long-time habitation is the only effective way to realize

sense of place, the evidence of ARTSTREET is that limited-term occupation, an eventful *taking place*, has real place-making clout.

Fabricating Reality

When other times and places are allowed to crash into a framed present, an event has happened, a kind of news. There has been an "occurrence," a "running against" the imagined constants of the scene. It may be that *event* and *place* create one another; they certainly validate one another.

With ARTSTREET, we broke into a cityscape of generic constants to make things interesting, much as a linebacker might break through the offensive line to interrupt the perfect play and make a game of it. The seal-tight framing of the downtown was penetrated by artists, art, and audiences drawn from separately framed venues.

In turn, the homemade eventfulness repossessed the downtown for the community. Direct and vicarious participation by rank-and-file citizens offset simple, generic definitions of the city by absentees at distant desks. For a time the place was cluttered with the exhilarating jostle of complex human purposes and meanings. Green Bay got a kernel image around which it can cultivate a fuller, more evocative idea of itself and

the human possibilities in its urban setting.

Ultimately, then, ARTSTREET was an experiment in the social construction of reality. As such, it succeeded in disrupting a serious case of "reification," that condition in which people see the world as inexorable and victimizing, "forgetting [their] own authorship of the human world" and losing sight of "the dialectic" between producer and product. [20]

We can continue to yield the initiative to advertisers and remote professionals who unilaterally assert the kernel images, or common body of allusion, around which we construct the social reality that permits us to be intelligible, visible, to one another, however imprecisely and briefly. Or we can accept our freedom, give it a mature embrace, and collaborate openly, self-consciously, and audaciously in constructing social reality—rank-and-file citizens joining with journalists, public artists, publicists, politicians, and environmental designers.

ARTSTREET indicates that public place-making might be the best arena for it. And a promising "technique" would be framing, with appropriate leaks to create a humane convergence of intention and attention.

NOTES

1 Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion Limited, 1976); and Peter F. Smith, *The Syntax of Cities* (London: Hutchison & Company, 1977).

2 Dean O'Brien, "Hitting the Nail on the Thumb," *Wisconsin Improvement Program Reporter* (School of Education, University of Wisconsin), (November 1964), p. 6.

3 *Pensees of Pascal* (New York: Peter Pauper Press, 1946), p. 36.

4 According to a source in the city planning office, the construction of at least one new anchor store followed, without significant variation, the blueprints drawn for a branch built in a suburban shopping center.

5 Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 25; Jerry Mander, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (New York: Morrow Quill, 1978), pp. 328–331; and O'Brien, "Framing the Pseudoenvironment," *Landscape*, Volume 26: Number 1 (1982), pp. 26–32.

6 Relph, *op. cit.*, p. 49. A prior point, that "the distinctive quality of any man-made place is *enclosure*," is made by Christian Norberg-Schulz in his *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1980), p. 58.

7 The festival is sponsored by the Northeastern Wisconsin Arts Council, Inc. It was brought into the world by the labor of the Planning Committee's eight members, including the author and his wife, Polly O'Brien, who was appointed festival director in December 1981.

8 A typical explication can be found in Curtis D. MacDougall, *Interpretative Reporting* (New York: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 114–120.

9 Edward Jay Epstein, *News from Nowhere: Television and the News* (New York: Random House, 1973); Herbert Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek and Time* (New York: Pantheon, 1979); Gaye Tuchman, *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1978); and Max Ways, "What's Wrong with News? It Isn't New Enough," *Fortune* (October 1969), pp. 110–113, 155–161.

10 We created what Daniel Boorstin called a pseudo-event in his *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1964), pp. 7–44. As a maximum mix of media, though, the pseudo-event can also be seen as the art form of our time. Twentieth-century masters of the form are familiar enough: Gandhi, Christo, Martin Luther King, Jr., Jerry Rubin.

11 O'Brien, "The News as Environment," *Journalism Monograph No. 85* (Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications) (September 1983).

12 Interview with the magazine designer on "The Importance of Being Rockwell," *Columbia Journalism Review* (December 1979), p. 40.

13 John Fowles identified the same phenomenon in botanical studies, according to his article "Seeing Nature Whole," *Harper's* (November 1979), p. 61.

14 The name was contrived by Colin D. O'Brien.

15 O'Brien, "Toward a Context Theory of Journalism," *Journalism Quarterly*, Volume 44 (Autumn 1967), pp. 491–496.

16 Jay Appleton, *The Experience of Landscape* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 1975), pp. 102, 105, 165, 200–202, 208, 215, 224, 270.

17 Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), pp. 91–107; and Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday/Anchor, 1959), pp. 144–145.

18 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), pp. 22–32.

19 Ann Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (New York: Viking, 1978), p. 239.

20 Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise on the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Penguin, 1979), p. 106.