
Gimme Shelter: Implications of the Simple and the Humble in a Cardboard Fort in Context

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Abstract

A small cardboard 'fort'—four low walls and a roof—was used by a team of design students to investigate the relationship between technology, purpose, and meaning. Placed in a busy hallway in a University setting, the simple structure was intended to provide a space for users to respond to a written prompt. It was the structure itself, however, that elicited the strongest reactions, revealing a longing for childhood and a desire to be sheltered from the complexities of their everyday experience. This paper attempts to make connections between such responses to notions of physical simplicity, humbleness, and self-imposed isolation.

Keywords

Shelter; installation; materiality; simplicity; the humble; public behavior; play; childhood; human factors; design research methodology; Erving Goffman

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

General Terms

Design, human factors, performance, theory



Figure 1. The 'fort' *in situ*. The contrast between the simple DIY fort construction and that of its surrounding environment was a key element of its appeal.

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In fall of 2011, a multi-national electronics company presented us with the question, what's an alternative use of video?" 28 students from Indiana University's Visual Communication department at the Herron School of Art and Design used this question as a catalyst for "People-centered Service Experience Design," a 16-week long course. My colleague Youngbok Hong and I were its co-teachers.

Teams conducted user research and the overall finding was that the typical individual from the specified demographic (young adult college students) leads a life that is over-prescribed. They hold down part-time,

sometimes full-time jobs, while taking a full credit load of courses; they typically live with roommates in apartments, are paying their way through school, and must retain their grades to retain scholarships or even stay in their program.

Teams developed their own paths of inquiry in response to these findings. One team's statement was "How might we make life more meaningful?" In their research they convened informal activity groups and produced a journal for written participant feedback, but by far the most productive and revealing method was a small, simply assembled structure made out of cardboard.

Description and Analysis

The structure (or "fort") had a footprint of roughly 5 x 7 feet (1.5 x 2.1 meters), and was about 4 feet tall (1.2 meters). [Fig. 1] It was constructed entirely of cardboard boxes and held together with packing tape. It was installed in two hallways at the Herron School of Art and was up for a total of 3.5 weeks. Inside the fort was written the question "What makes you happy and why?" and a black Sharpie marker.

While the team had low expectations for participation, the fort got an overwhelming response from members of the target audience, faculty and other passersby at Herron. People could often be found huddling inside the fort, alone in silence, or in conversation with each other. Passersby often peered inside to see if there was anybody there. When asked about the fort, responses were immediate and enthusiastic. People recalled childhood experiences constructing and convening in similar structures, and took pleasure in sharing their thoughts. They also seemed to find delight in the act of

crawling into the space and sitting knees to chest or cross-legged once inside, and made further associations with “coziness” and feelings of warmth.

Individuals also responded to the materiality of the structure. The cardboard had a color, texture, and smell that evoked construction projects from childhood. The re-use of packaging material refers to inventiveness and a DIY ethic or hacking that implies a willful control of one’s environment, executed simply using materials at hand.

The Sharpie remained in the fort for the duration of its installation and was used liberally to write on its walls. Two types of responses were noted. While the team intended the fort to afford a place for thoughtful reflection of their prompt, in use it afforded space for illicit language and cartoons. General comments referring to sex and marijuana comprised about 2/3 of the responses. The rest were direct responses to the prompt (“What makes you happy and why?”) which drew comments that primarily referred to food (“A full refrigerator.”) or friends (“Hanging out with my friends”) or sex (“Sex!”). One confirmed that it was the fort structure itself that was compelling. Directly under the question “What makes you happy and why?” someone had written “This f---ing fort!”

Interpretation

Shelter

Everyday 900 students and 150 faculty and staff move through Eskenazi Hall, the building that houses the Herron School of Art and Design. As the only professionally accredited art and design school in the

state, Herron attracts serious art and design undergraduates from throughout Indiana and graduate students from across the US and abroad. In our studio based environment, students work on several projects at a time and labor in shared spaces for the duration of their education. Their work is subject to frequent critique by their peers and instructors and acceptance into a major field of study is determined by formal portfolio reviews. In addition, the use of space at Herron is highly regimented: all classes begin and end at the same time, thus the studios and hallways are either teeming with students or empty. There is no time to wander on you own.

The fort enabled individuals a measure of freedom from the *pressures* of being a college student in a studio-based field of study, and the *complexities* of being in a state of constant social engagement. Removed from the realm of Goffman’s ‘observable behaviors’ in public spaces, the privacy afforded by the fort meant that individuals could escape from the gaze of others. While in the structure, one denies others the opportunity of viewing, interpreting, and passing judgment. As we saw in the graffiti responses to the structure, the fort afforded an anonymity that encouraged illicit, socially contestable expression. A willful removal from spaces of “situational proprieties” seems key to the appeal of the fort. [Goffman]



Figure 2. A typical studio space. Close proximity to other students and the continual assessment of work and work-in-progress by faculty and peers makes for a complex environment, dense with Goffman's "situational proprieties."

This form of shelter has implications for social situations in networked environments as well. While one might choose to 'unplug' from Facebook and Twitter, and swear off email or text messaging for a day, the conceit of a fort-like barrier may provide a measure of detachment from the networked social environment akin to that experienced in a space separated and physically apart.

Goffman traces a resistance to engage in public spaces as a resistance to social attachment in general. The word attachment is a useful one for extending the metaphor of the fort into networked social interaction.

Attachment in human development refers to a survival mechanism that bonds individuals to each other, particularly to one's family or social unit. In human development, attachment is about the quality and depth of relationships. In a networked environment, however, being attached or detached from the network is a measure of your access to others. Rather than indicating a depth of connection to others, it refers to its breadth (the potential to use the network to access more people, regardless of the quality of the interaction). Perhaps this shifting meaning of the word attachment can give us clues to the difference between shelter in the physical world versus shelter in the networked one.

In addition, the humble materiality of the fort stands in contrast to the glass, brick, terrazzo, and wood paneling of the interior of Herron, which reinforces the idea that one is apart and sheltered from the overall University environment.

Playfulness

Artists and architects have used cardboard as a gesture toward elevating the mundane. (See Robert Rasuchenberg's work from the 1960s and Frank Gehry's chair designs). For those encountering the fort in the school, the immediate connection was not to contemporary high-culture but to childhood play. The re-use of discarded materials brought to mind pretend play from childhood and social interactions that were

grounded in the make-believe, in itself a retreat from everyday experience and existing social roles.



figure 3. The fort provided students with shelter from the complex art school environment into a simpler time associated with childhood play.

In the context of the school, such evocations might be interpreted as a move into interiority, a personal well of experience that is out of the purview of peers and the University. The clearly evident, barebones construction methods speak not of special skills, tools or materials, but instead a DIY aesthetic that implies that 'anyone' can make it. Its humbleness democratizes a potentially alienating structure in a conventional exhibition context and extends to the viewer a welcoming and homey address.

In addition to the construction materials and methods, it's conjectured that a subtle detail in its design

enhanced the play aspect of the structure. The entrance of the fort was a 3 foot (0.9 meter) tall by 1 foot (0.3 meter) long passageway made from one large bottomed-out box. It forced participants to crawl hands on knees for a few feet to enter the structure, releasing them into a larger spatial volume once inside. The passageway also further obstructed the view of passersby to who was inside the structure, and reduced the amount of incoming light. This subtle manipulation emphasized playfulness through references to childhood, forcing participants to crawl (like a toddler) and providing a spot seemingly built for playing hide-and-seek.

Implications

This paper attempts to associate a simple, humbly constructed structure with a desire to retreat from complexity. Further inquiry into this topic might include the following questions:

1. What might be an equivalent to shelter, 'simple architecture' and 'humble construction' in the digital realm? What might be its affects?
2. How might one ground retreat in technologically mediated environments to human development and psychology?
3. What are the aspects of human experience that re-define technology and its uses, and re-situate it as a tool that changes the conditions of human existence rather than an object that follows its own trajectory of development?
4. What are other potential outcomes of simply constructed structures, and how are they provoked?
5. What are the sensory aspects of the simple?

6. What is the connection between perceived simplicity and the idea of a unified self?
7. How might we measure our capacity to engage with social networking technology?
8. How might technology provide security, warmth and coziness?
9. How might the simple be an emergent theme in response to technological omni-presence.

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Citations

Goffman, Erving. *Behavior in Public Places*. The Free Press of Glencoe, New York, 1963.