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## Finding Happy

### Abstract

What is happiness? And what does a person need to be happy? These are the core questions fueling this thesis. In my own experience, a sense of harmony with one's environment and circumstances is a major contributor to general happiness and contentment. I am working to define this harmony and create a fusion between natural and man-made environments that will foster pleasure and joy. I want to create happy.

People and the relationships between people and their environment are integral to harmonious pursuits. These considerations have resulted in a physical form that interacts with users and encourages the development of interpersonal connections and relationships. In a modern society obsessed with the individual, such relationships are essential in creating harmony, because harmony cannot exist if one cannot escape the chaos of the everyday.

People need to feel the energy of others and of their environments in order to create and use their own energy. It is a give-and-take relationship that allows us to survive and keep up momentum throughout our lives. Without the constant exchange of energy, our bodies and minds wind down and we begin to crave the sense of belonging and importance that we get when we are an integral part of a community. Some feel this craving much more than others and are diagnosed with depression.

What is it exactly that fuels this need for social and environmental belonging? It has to do with rhythm: the natural rhythms of our bodies (circadian rhythms, rhythms of movement, biological time), environmental rhythms (seasons, weather patterns, geological changes, patterns of life, death and recycling that occur in all ecosystems) and the rhythms of astronomy that dictate our days, months, years, tides and a myriad

of other phenomena that affect our lives. When all of these rhythms are in synch, we have harmony, peace and happiness.

And so this project is about creating such synchronicity. It is about rhythm, movement, contemplation, and the connections between people and between people and their environments. All of these things come together to generate one single experience of harmony, happiness and sustainable culture.

### **Physical Manifestation**

In order to synchronize the rhythms of the body and environment, I have installed interactive dynamic seating in Slusser Gallery. The seats are rocking public benches that communicate the experience of one user to another so that they may enter into rhythmic harmony together. These public benches allow people to interconnect and experience a sense of place through movement. After the piece is taken out of the gallery setting, it will be reinstalled in Nichols Arboretum and remain there throughout the summer.

The act of sitting should not be static. Ideally, sitting should be meditative, soothing, kinetic, social, and personal all at once. The give-and-take, ebb-and-flow relationship that one has with a rocking chair is used as an inspiration for the form of this project, but rocking in a rocking chair is often a solitary act. Public and social seating, on the other hand, allow interaction between people within a larger environmental context. The seating units themselves, however, are physically inert and rob the user of the rhythm and tranquility that a seat in motion can offer. It is my goal to merge these two phenomena of motion and interaction, and to allow the user to be part of a larger social and environmental experience even if he/she happens to be alone. It is important to connect people separated by geography, circumstance, or whatever else, and to connect them to their environment in order to establish synchronicity and ultimately happiness.

I have constructed the benches using wood from ash trees that have been cut due to emerald ash borer infestation. Construction techniques include joinery that excludes the use of nails or other metal fasteners in order simplify installation and de-

installation. Using materials that would otherwise go to waste prevents unnecessary marring of the environment, which in turn strengthens the conceptual framework of harmony and connectivity. Environmental as well as cultural sustainability is vital to the success of the concept. Both environment and inhabitant must maintain healthy rhythms, and neither can encroach upon the other.

In order to fuse connections through use of the benches, the seats are mechanically linked to each other through a barrier. In the gallery, the barrier is a wall, and in subsequent installation in Nichols Arboretum it will be a lattice framework with living plant elements. When the benches are in use, they rock in tandem because of their mechanical connection. As the users rock together in the same rhythm, either rocking or being rocked or alternating control, synchronicity results and harmony is achieved. It is my hope that users will find some joy through the experience. In the future, through further development, the benches will be connected to each other and to their place not mechanically, but with sound recording technology, movement sensors, electromagnetism and an Arduino microcontroller board for information processing. These more advanced benches can then be placed farther apart, and each will record the rhythm and movement of the person rocking them and sounds from the environment. The recordings will then be transmitted via wireless technology to another bench in another place entirely. Here, a different user will experience the recorded sets of movement and sound, thereby linking two users through rhythm and creating environmental connections as each person is aware of the experience he/she is creating for the other. Through this exchange, connections between geographically disparate environments and people can be made.

These rocking public benches allow people to enter into the experience of another person, in another place. Through this sharing of emotion, mind and body, lasting connections and memories are created. Putting one's own experience into the hands of another is an act of trust, faith and vulnerability. Relinquishing control creates intimate bonds between participants as they let themselves feel what the other is doing and, later, hear the sounds of another place. It is my hope that those who use these seats will feel themselves part of a larger social context and will become better

connected to the world around them. Explanatory posters accompany each bench in Slusser gallery to ensure that users understand the project, and similar, smaller plaques will be placed in the Arboretum. They read as follows:

Bench 1: You are here... but you are not alone.

The Rhythm of your rocking influences someone else's movement. You are connected. You are an integral part of something bigger than just you. This is a community, and you belong.

Welcome to harmony. Welcome to happiness. We missed you.

Directions: Have a seat and relax. Rock in a rhythm that suits you. While you rock, you may feel the rhythm of someone else's swing. You can either coax that person into your own rhythm, or abandon control and allow yourself to be rocked. Either way, the rhythms of your bodies will be in synch. You are creating harmony and connections with another, which in turn creates community. Energy is exchanged, which is the foundation of life.

Congratulations, you are bringing life back into city life. You are an active member of the human race. Keep the energy flowing.

Bench 2: Rock... and be rocked.

Get out of your car. Stop working so hard. Don't buy anything today. None of it matters unless we have each other anyway. Make an effort to be happy. Relax and be part of something. Go ahead, try it.

Welcome to your life. Welcome to community. We missed you

Directions: Have a seat and relax. Rock in a rhythm that suits you. While you rock, you may feel the rhythm of someone else's swing. You can either coax that person into your own rhythm, or abandon control and

allow yourself to be rocked. Either way, the rhythms of your bodies will be in synch. You are creating harmony and connections with another, which in turn creates community. Energy is exchanged, which is the foundation of life.

Congratulations, you are bringing life back into city life. You are an active member of the human race. Keep the energy flowing.

### **The Work in a Larger Context**

Though I have thought a lot about what this project is supposed to mean and how it will affect social and environmental interaction, many aspects of this project still need clarification. How the benches are perceived is an ongoing concern, and how they will relate to the natural rhythms of the environment and the body requires further research and development, which I intend to do in my post-graduate career. The subjects I am dealing with, connections with the environment, community, cultural sustainability, and natural rhythms are all very important to me, and I hope I have conveyed them in a way that is not trivial, off-putting, or discombobulated. It is here that I will introduce precedence research in order to contextualize my thoughts.

One of the most important sources of inspiration for this work is a book written by John Thackara: *In the Bubble: Designing in a Complex World*. The goal of the book is best stated in its introduction: “This book is about a world in which well-being is based on less stuff and more people. It describes an approach to innovation in which people are designed back into situations,” (4). Thackara describes sustainability in terms of culture and negates the notion that more things and better technology will make people happy. But, he counters, “being skeptical about technology does not mean rejecting it,” (4). Instead, new technologies should be used to incorporate human actions and interactions and to encourage the preservation of our natural tendencies and environments. This is what sustainability is all about.

The journalist and world peace advocate Norman Cousins also had something to say on the issues of harmony, community and well-being: “Human unity is the fulfillment of diversity. It is the harmony of opposites. It is a many-stranded texture, with color and

depth,” (Bartenieff, 127). Cousins supported the notion that happiness and joy could be used as medical treatments and treated his own illness by watching Marx Brothers films and laughing for temporary relief.

As precedence for the physical aspects of my work, I have looked at sculptor and public artist Jim Gallucci, who has undertaken many public art projects that aim to integrate human interaction and encourage social exchanges. One such project employed public benches that function in a way that is similar to my work: “My benches are publicly placed objects that invite interaction with the passers-by. The benches are playful objects that invite the public to sit and talk with a friend or acquaintance. Though each can function as a ‘seat,’ there is an impracticality of form [that] lures viewers to explore each bench and try to discover what they are about,” (Gallucci). It is my hope to build on this work and encourage interaction not only between friends but also strangers.

### **Conclusion and Further Work**

Because the foundation of this thesis is that of concept rather than form, further research must be done to better understand the influences that natural rhythms and harmony have on our lives. I must be able to clearly articulate how and why the physical form and the function of the project will enrich the spiritual experience of the user. With that said, form is not to be entirely ignored because of the work’s proximity to the body, and I will gain knowledge by seeing the work perform in the public sphere. There are many questions yet unanswered in this work, and I intend to explore each of them to the best of my ability in my postgraduate career. I intend to find happy, and so I will.

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