

“There are so many paradoxes associated with graffiti, but whether it’s good or bad for society or good or bad for kids who do it, it’s a tangle that can never be untangled or reconciled...there is no judgement that can be made, it (graffiti) just is. And the ‘is-ness’ of it, it is poetry and it is beauty.”

(Silver 2006)

These closing words from Tony Silver’s interview about his making of *Style Wars*, arguably the most important documentary about hip hop culture to date, suggests that the graffiti phenomenon in New York City during the 1970s and 1980s could be two things; firstly, a phenomenon so complex that it cannot be explained, and/or secondly that it is a highly subjective and creative practice, much like poetry, that requires no explanation. This chapter takes this quote as a point of departure; not in order to argue against these two points of view, but rather to challenge and make sense of the phenomenon of graffiti within socio-spatial and spatio-political contexts, explored through ideas about occupation, identity, appropriation, diversion and consumption.

It is important at this point to state that this chapter frames graffiti not as what graffiti has come to represent, that is, an art discipline; but rather as a socio-spatial political act. It argues that the pioneers of graffiti were primarily graffiti writers and visual activists, and not graffiti artists. The substance of creativity, although integral to graffiti culture, evolved secondarily, almost as a by-product of graffiti’s consumption of the city, rather than being of primary concern.

Intrinsic to the above, this chapter also examines the cultural relationship between the emergence of graffiti culture during the 1970s and the context of the modernist architecture, planning and urban design strategies, begun in the 1920s under the direction of Robert Moses, New York City’s master planner, and interrogates the tensions between the conceived city and the lived city space via the framework of current spatial and architectural discourse, utilising Lefebvre’s spatial triad - the model that proposes that space is conceived (authoritarian design and planning), perceived (how one considers the conceived) and lived (social engagement, *détournement* and occupation) as a continuing point of reference (Lefebvre 1991: 38-39). The main aim of this chapter is not purely to provide justification of the socio-spatial practices that occur within conceived city space, but to unearth a counter-culture which evolved, through inhabitation of the conceived city, its own set of spatial values, language and identity through a new paradigm of spatial praxis.

Appropriation, diversion and territorial control of urban space are spatial and political actions that consume the city. In terms of ownership and identity, the unrelated movements of graffiti culture and modernist master-planning provide an unexplored arena for interrogating the consumption of space via appropriation/diversion and occupation, and subsequently identity, language and ownership; not in the manner that these spaces were conceived, but through the evolution of a counter-culture that over the past forty years has ironically produced the largest selling music genre in the capitalist music market of global record labels, growing from a minority subculture into a mainstream consumer culture.