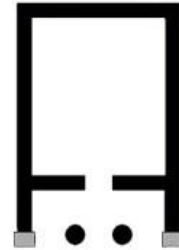


Stratford Centre: Reimagined Playground

Carla da Silva

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Stratford Centre: Reimagined Playground

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[...] for all the importance and power of recent “end of public space” arguments, what makes a space *public*—as space in which they cry and demand for the right to the city can be seen and heard—is often not its preordained “publicness”. Rather, it is when, to fulfil a pressing need, some group or another *takes* space and through it actions *makes* it public. The very act of representing one’s group (or to some extent one’s self) to a larger public creates a space for representation. Representation both demands space and creates space’.

– Don Mitchell, *The Right to the City*¹

Introduction

Public spaces, as sites of chance encounters, rich experiences and possibilities for action, play a vital role in urban life. On a daily basis, people use public spaces in a large multiplicity of ways: they sit, eat lunch, meet, enjoy leisure activities or simply pass through them. For social scientists, these everyday urban spaces serve as barometers of the social and democratic well-being of contemporary cities. Regrettably, the public realm is becoming more and more privatised and exclusively designed for consumption and profit. As a consequence, other essential needs of everyday urban life such as creativity, improvisation and play are being discarded and neglected by urban planning and management.

With Henri Lefebvre, the dialectical nature of the production of space can be asserted: space produces social experiences and identities, and, in turn, people’s interactions and reiterative practices create space.² Because the meanings of a space are socially produced, they are not fixed but rather temporally established, and its normative usages can thus be contested and negotiated through originally unintended actions: ‘To say something is socially constructed is to say that it is within human power to change it’.³ Performance art and recreational activities might, therefore, be powerful catalysts for social change in their ability to suggest non-functional ways of engaging with urban public space and living in the city.

This ethnographic photo-essay will aim to describe how, through their playful and creative actions, youth countercultural groups collaboratively resist their exclusion from urban public spaces and convert a commercial centre into a recreational and genuine public place. The study will consider the Stratford Centre, which complex status as both a privately owned shopping centre and a public right of way makes it an interesting case study. Situated opposite the Stratford bus, underground and train stations, this commercial building also operates as a 24-hour public thoroughfare, used by pedestrians as a shortcut between the transport links and

¹ Don Mitchell, *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space* (New York, NY: Gilford Press, 2012), p. 35.

² See Henri Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne, I: Introduction* (Paris: Grasset, 1947).

³ Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 30.

Stratford Broadway. Once the shops close, around 8pm, roller skaters, skateboarders and street dancers illegally occupy the space. The present essay will describe and analyse how their physical presence and the use of their bodies through this space becomes a vehicle of their dissatisfaction and protestation for a more participatory culture. It will argue that their performative transgression allows them to subvert and reappropriate this underused space, in order to meet their needs, desires and rights—which are all too often unrecognised by the capitalist city. The intention here is to give these young people voice and visibility in their transgressive acts.

This paper will initially review the main theoretical concepts on which its arguments are based, namely the loss of the common right to the city and the marginalisation of youth countercultures from urban life, as consequences of the growing process of privatisation of urban spaces. It will be followed by the socio-historical contextualisation of the peculiar place under study and the description of the research methodology. Through the combination of ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, informal interviews and photography, the narratives of reclamation and reappropriation of this urban space will be finally presented in the form of an ethno-photographic essay.

Literature Review

For a better contextualisation and understanding of the meanings of those dancers, skateboarders and rollerbladers' presence in the shopping centre, it would be judicious to start by analysing the effects of the process hitting many cities worldwide: the privatisation of everyday urban spaces.

Determining what public spaces are, or should be, is complex and often controversial. Historically, public spaces have been defined as 'publicly owned and managed outdoor spaces, as opposed to the private domain of housing and work'.⁴ However, the concept of "public space" has evolved over time and new designations such as 'pseudopublic spaces',⁵ 'quasi-public spaces',⁶ or 'private-public spaces'⁷ are used to refer to open or enclosed spaces, privately owned by individual landlords, but freely 'accessible and open to everyone'.⁸ Typical examples of modern urban public and 'pseudopublic' spaces are streets, plazas, transport stations, parks and the one that is of most interest here: commercial centres.

⁴ Stéphane Tonnelat, 'The sociology of urban public spaces', in *Territorial Evolution and Planning Solution: Experiences from China and France*, ed. by Hongyang Wang, Michel Savy and Guofang Zhai (Paris: Atlantis Press, 2010), pp. 129-139, p. 129.

⁵ Don Mitchell, *The Right to the City. Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space* (New York, NY, and London: The Guilford Press, 2003), p. 139.

⁶ Penny Travlou, 'Teenagers and Public Space, Literature Review', *OPENspace: the research centre for inclusive access to outdoor environments* (2003). <<http://www.openspace.eca.ed.ac.uk/pdf/teenagerslitrev.pdf>> [accessed 16 October 2016].

⁷ Anna Minton, 'The privatisation of public space', *RICS* (2006), <<http://www.annaminton.com/privatepublicspace.pdf>> [accessed 16 October 2016].

⁸ Setha M. Low, 'The Erosion of Public Space and the Public Realm', in *Urban Sociology Reader*, ed. by Jan Lin and Christopher Mele (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), pp. 401-413, p. 402.

The question of access—which is the free right of entrance and use for all—is the sociological *sine qua non* condition of a public space. Public spaces are the quintessence of sustainable and equitable cities; they are a place for everyone to equally exercise their civil rights and freedoms and to democratically participate in city life. Its success relies on its capacity to bind together the social mix of urbanites and to respond to this diversity by offering a wide range of both formal and informal, predictable and unpredictable experiences and activities.

Over the past four decades, the local government's cession of urban public spaces and infrastructures to private companies has considerably increased in Britain. This neoliberal tendency illustrates the shift of priority from public life and culture to economic interests having occurred under Thatcherism. With the urban regeneration at the core of its agenda of reforms, New Labour followed a similar path and privileged the partnership with private companies, predominately investing in the construction of finance centres, luxurious housings and shopping centres.

Recently, the last-named have incredibly proliferated British town centres, becoming the archetypal contemporary (quasi-)public space. The “publicness” of shopping centres is nonetheless questionable. Through the application of strict regulations and the reinforcement of securitisation through high-tech video surveillance, the private owner and manager has the authority to select and control their accesses and uses.

Shopping centres are business places where their principal function is one of consumption. They are built or bought by private companies with the aspiration of generating profit through commercial transactions. The prosperity of a shopping centre depends hence on the attraction of determinate users: the consumers. As a consequence, other activities than the purchase of goods are seen as worthless and users with different intentions than spending money are excluded. In his examination of the politics of production of space, Lefebvre established that in capitalist societies, private-public spaces have become brutally instrumental: by imposing a set of dominant ideologies and normative behaviours on users, they reinforce the hegemony of the elite over the subordinated groups.⁹

Homeless people, beggars and young people are among the most popular groups denied access to shopping centres because of their ‘non-participation’ in the profit-making process. Businessmen do not want ‘undesirable users’ interfering with their customers and so, young people are often quickly evicted by security staff when gathering and loitering in these urban settings.¹⁰ Specific youth recreational activities like skateboarding, rollerblading and street dancing are explicitly banned from most of these neither private nor public spaces, through the display of prohibition signs at their thresholds.

Thus, through discrimination and rejection of people who cannot participate in consumerism, these presumed *public* spaces have become enclaves for the middle class. The homogenisation and social order that characterise these sites limit the possibility of unexpected face-to-face encounters with strangers, discourage improvised actions and erase the social diversity and vitality of the urban everyday life.

⁹ See Henri Lefebvre, *La Production de l'espace* (Paris: Editions Anthropos, 1974).

¹⁰ Mitchell, p. 2.

With the prevalent pseudopublic spaces being shaped after the ruling class values, needs and desires and becoming more and more inhospitable for young people, the possibilities for youth *countercultural* and *subcultural* groups to engage in enjoyable and constructive activities remain poor. It is important here to define what this essay understands with the use of these terms.

Subcultures are groups of people whose lifestyle is distinct to the one of the larger hegemonic group. When groups' norms, values and beliefs not only differ, but also reject or contradict the dominant ones, and when its members '[...] act in opposition to the dominant culture', they are referred to as countercultures.¹¹ Despite the first term being more common, *counterculture* seems less depreciative and more accurate to designate the young people and their oppositional actions under study here.

Highly influenced by Marxism and French structuralism, Dick Hebdige's analysis reveals that youth subcultures and countercultures emerge in objection to subordination.¹² As a consequence of their attempt to remain independent from mainstream society, these young groups are victims of misconceptions, being depicted as irresponsible, aggressive and anti-social, and their activities are generally categorised as deviant. According to David Sibley, if urban dancers, skaters or other youth countercultural groups often endure persecution and exclusion from everyday urban spaces, it is precisely because they are seen as deviant and, consequently, as a threat for the order of the society and the city.¹³

'From a sense of common fate, from having to face the same problems, grows a deviant subculture: a set of perspectives and understandings about what the world is like and how to deal with it and a set of routine activities based on those perspectives'.¹⁴

This statement of Howard Becker, another pioneer of the sociology of youth subcultures and countercultures, mirrors Hebdige's idea that youth countercultural groups arise as solutions to societal problems and contradictions, collectively experienced by its members. Social exclusion, unemployment, loss of community spirit, urban boredom and capitalism failures are the most usual issues against which they try to represent an alternative.

Referring specifically to the skateboarding counterculture—but also applicable to street dancing and roller skating ones—Iain Borden writes: 'in its direct interaction with the modern architecture of the city, lies the central critique of skateboarding—a rejection both of the values and of the spatio-temporal modes of living in the contemporary capitalist city'.¹⁵ The values that are referred to are the taken for granted ones of work and capital accumulation—both repudiated by those different countercultures. Through creative and experimental engagements with urban spaces and subversions of its existing material elements, skaters and

¹¹ George Ritzer, *Introduction to Sociology* (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, 2012), p. 119.

¹² See Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York, NY: Routledge 1988).

¹³ David Sibley, *Geographies of Exclusion: Society and Difference in the West* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 1995).

¹⁴ Howard Becker, *The Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York, NY: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), p. 38.

¹⁵ Iain Borden, 'A Performative Critique of the City: The Urban Practice of Skateboarding, 1958-98', in *The City Cultures Reader*, ed. by Malcolm Miles and Tim Hall (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), pp. 291-297, p. 292.

street dancers redefine anew a city in which leisure and recreation still have a place. They reimagine the city as a playground.

Because recreational activities are generally economically inefficient, they have been too often ignored in the process of contemporary urban planning. Yet, in his book devoted to the practice of play, Stuart Brown notes: ‘remembering what play is all about and making it part of our daily lives are probably the most important factors in being a fulfilled human being’.¹⁶

This quotation considers regular recreational activities as an essential aspect of everyday life and therefore as a preeminent function of public space. In opposition with the seriousness and obligation of work, play is a choice: it encompasses the ideas of enjoyment and freedom, and it releases one from social everyday responsibilities. Followed by numerous psychologists and sociologists, Lev Vygotsky emphasised the value of collective play: through ludic activities, individuals develop social competences such as self-control, tolerance, cooperation, solidarity and conflicts resolution.¹⁷ Conversely, the deprivation of play might have negative consequences. According to sociological studies about juvenile delinquency, the lack of leisure opportunities and boredom are among the most important factors conducting to delinquency.

Pleasure-driven activities such as skateboarding, rollerblading or street dancing allow people to escape monotony and routine in a healthy way. They are accessible to almost everyone: they do not engender expensive costs and they do not necessitate professional skills. Glen E. Friedman, famous for his photographs documenting different countercultures, praises the benefits of skateboarding for social realisation: ‘Skateboarding gives the individuals the confidence to excel on their own’.¹⁸

Briefly, the self-organised nature of informal street sports like skating and dancing seems to bridge social divides and contribute to the performers’ identity-building and development as an autonomous citizen. Moreover, Lefebvre’s utopian vision of the city reminds us that ‘the right to the city is not simply a right to consume, since human beings also have a need for creative activity, for the oeuvre (not only of products and consumable material goods), of the need for information, symbolism, the imaginary and play’.¹⁹

Hence, young people (and also less young) should be entitled to the right to play and freely access recreational areas. The following case study will illustrate how, in East London, a youth community of skaters and dancers took back this right, by disobediently colonising and recreationally transgressing the limits of Stratford Shopping Centre.

¹⁶ Stuart Brown, *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul* (New York, NY: Avery, 2009), p. 6.

¹⁷ See Lev Vygotsky, ‘The Role of Play in Development’, in *Mind in Society*, ed. by Lev Vygotsky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 92-104.

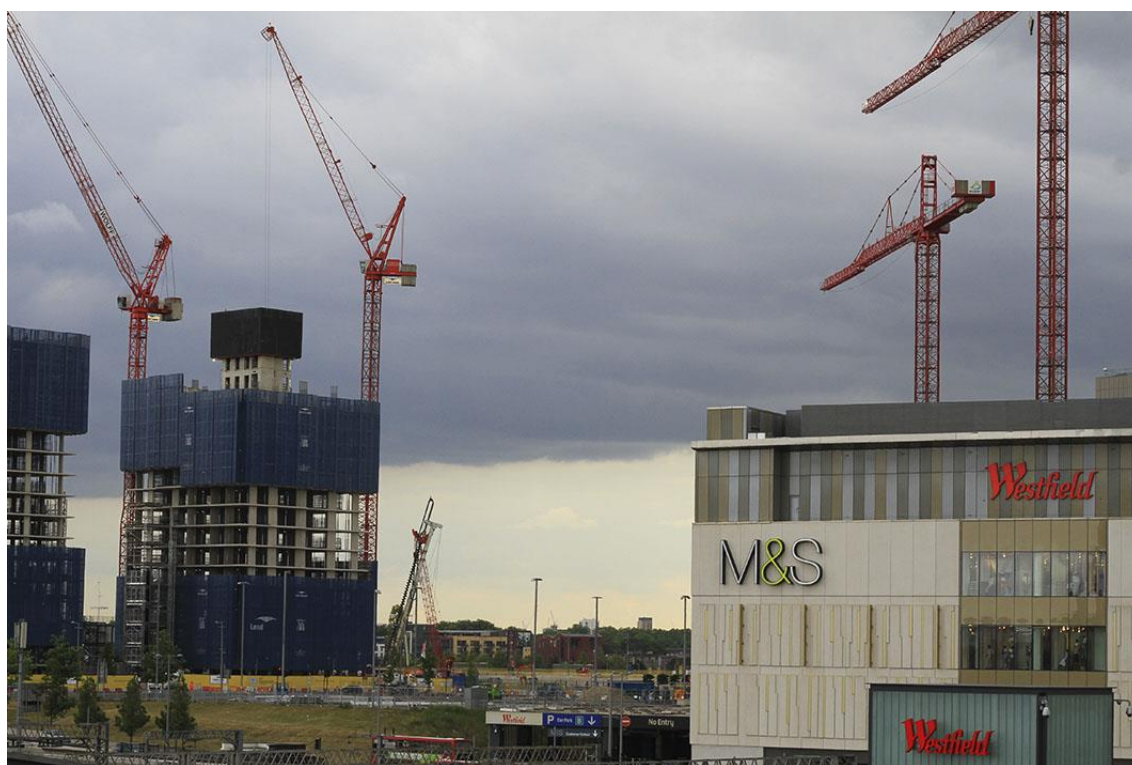
¹⁸ Glen E. Friedman, as quoted in Aaron Rose, *Dysfunctional* (London: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 1999), p. 197.

¹⁹ Lefebvre, as quoted in Simon Parker, *Urban Theory and the Urban Experience: Encountering the City* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), p. 20.

Stratford Centre: Historical and Social Context

Like in many other former industrial areas in England, Stratford's dwellers have seen their town, located at the heart of the London Borough of Newham, quickly changing beyond recognition during the last few years. Hosted in 2012, the Olympic Games have been an instigator for Stratford property-led regeneration. Historically one of the most deprived areas of the city, London's East End is attracting more and more foreign investors, new wealthy residents and tourists.

At the present time, visitors might not be enchanted with Stratford appearance of a huge site under construction, but they might be overwhelmed by the vision of one of the largest shopping centres in Europe: the *Westfield Stratford City*. Owned by Westfield Corporation, an Australian property-development company, this mega-shopping centre accommodates more than three hundred shops, extended over seventy-three hectares of former railway land. With over forty million annual visitors—according to its official website—it has converted Stratford into one of the most popular shopping and leisure destinations in the country.²⁰



Unfortunately, Stratford renewal and subsequent benefits have exclusively served the large business organisations to the detriment of the local inhabitants. The reconstruction of residential buildings into new luxurious apartments caused the displacement and eviction of many of its former tenants. According to people residing in Stratford for many years, this process of gentrification is deplorably leading to the erosion of the area's multiculturalism

²⁰ See <<https://uk.westfield.com/stratfordcity>> [accessed 27 October, 2016].

and strong sense of community. Indeed, neither Westfield Shopping Centre nor the Olympic Park seem to have any connection with the history and culture of the surrounding locality. Walking through what Marc Augé designates as ‘non-places’ might make one feel at once nowhere and anywhere else in the Western world.²¹ Another considerable impact is the shutting down of most youth infrastructures in the region. Since 2011, many youth clubs and meeting halls have faced closure because of the large Newham youth service budget cut, leaving the local young people with no other safe place to gather and practice their leisure activities than the old Stratford Centre.

This shopping centre, built by Ravenscroft Properties Limited and opened in 1974, is one of the last remaining symbols of the pre-Olympics Stratford. Accommodating affordable shops as well as the traditional East End market (selling a variety of fruits and vegetables), Stratford Centre primarily attracts the local community. According to the information provided on the Stratford Shopping website, while the sixty-two shops are privately owned by Catalyst European Property Fund LP, the passage in-between is a 24-hour public thoroughfare used by approximately 460,000 pedestrians a week.

It is this 24-hour open access that first brought a handful of skateboarders to this place during the 90s. For many years, the trespassers have defied and resisted the local authorities trying to chase them. The shopkeepers have been constantly complaining about the material damages provoked, and some pedestrians about feeling intimidated by these young people. Being routinely removed did not, however, stop the subversive occupants. Quite the reverse: determined and convinced of their right to have a place to practice their legal and harmless activities, they started coming more often, and their presence attracted not only more skateboarders, but also rollerbladers and dancers.

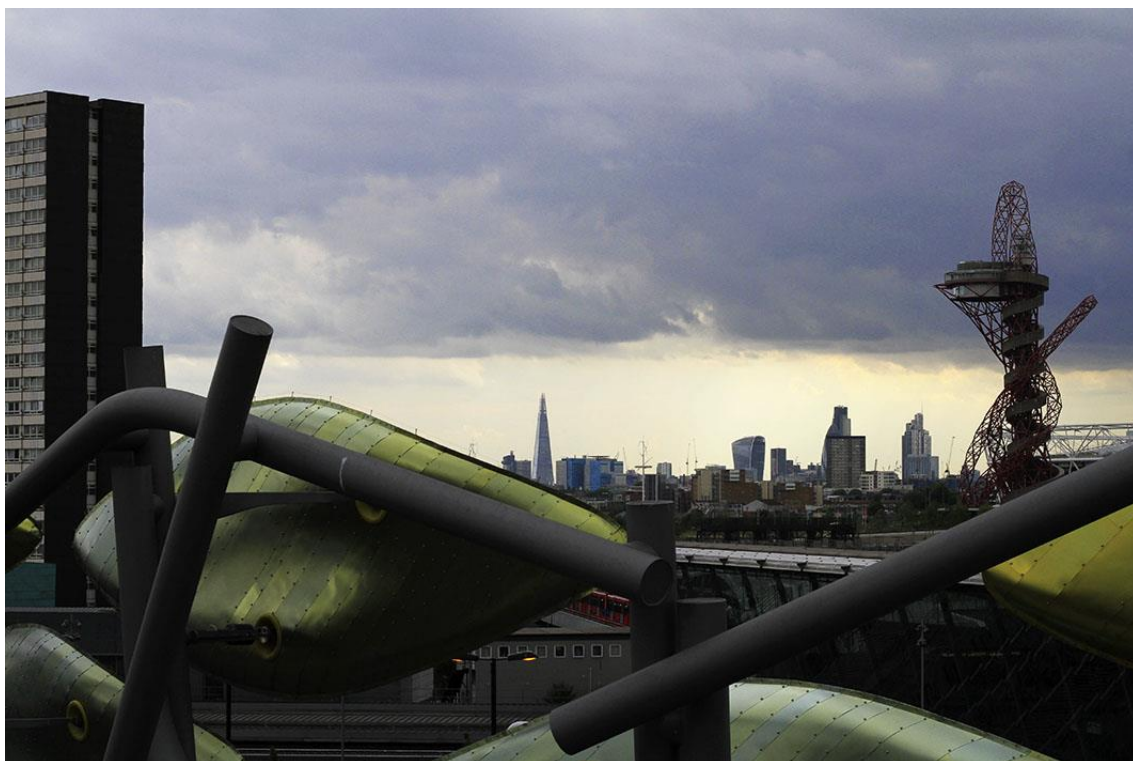
Through this snowball effect, the social movement kept growing and gained the sympathy of the local population, and even progressively the informal approbation of the local council. Feeling powerless, faced with this increasing number of night invaders, the authorities gradually eased the tension and accepted to negotiate the youth groups’ access to the centre. The atmosphere became more peaceful and, for the moment, the performers are permitted to use the site after the shops close. But until when?

Due to its unofficial nature, the permission of using this space as a skate area, a rink and a dancefloor might be revoked at any time. Furthermore, since Westfield’s opening in 2011, the old Stratford Centre has been threatened with transformation or even complete destruction. If the place has survived until today, it has nevertheless been hidden from the public view behind a colourful art installation designed by Studio Egret West: a 250 metre-long titanium shoal. According to David Wess, one of the responsible architects, this astute visual diversion was intended to conceal the grey building, thereby giving more visibility and importance to the colossal shopping centre opposite the street.

²¹ See Marc Augé, *Non-Lieux: Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1992).



As the future of Stratford Centre is uncertain, this project has been motivated by a certain impulse to pay homage and record an image of these subversively transgressive cultures, before they might be deprived of their playground.



Methodology: participant observation, informal interviews and photography

I discovered Stratford Centre immediately after moving to London in September 2014. Residing in Stratford High Street, a short walking distance away, I started doing my shopping in this shopping centre. I remember that the first night I cut through the centre to go home, I was totally amazed by this breathtaking spectacle: street dancers, rollerbladers and skateboarders all around, sliding and moving their bodies to the beat of the music coming out of a loudspeaker. The enjoyment and happiness visible in the performers' faces immediately made me feel desirous of being part of the movement. It motivated me to work on an ethnographic exploration of those alternative cultures and their role within the surrounding environment, using my camera to give them wider visibility, recognition and significance.

Only equipped with a pen and a field book, I spent numerous evenings sitting in a bench or sometimes on the floor, enjoying the show and witnessing the performers' behaviours and interactions. I went to the centre on different days of the week and at different hours of the night with the hope to find some rules, to understand the forces and social dynamics sustaining this youth collective movement.

The little degree of knowledge I had at this point rose up the questions which would orientate my urban ethnographic research: Why did these heterogeneous groups choose to occupy this shopping centre rather than using formal structures, like skateparks or dancing halls, specifically designed for those physical activities? And what were the consequences of their reappropriation of a 'quasi-public' space for the locality and its population?

In order to obtain an answer, I started interacting with some performers and different users of the space—among which pedestrians, shopkeepers, security guards, police officers, a centre cleaner and the mother of a young skater. The open-ended discussions most often centred on the reasons, purposes and regularity of the interviewee's presence in the shopping centre, their personal experiences of this particular place, and their relationships with other users. Opting for an unstructured form of interview allowed me more flexibility to restructure and adapt the questions in the course of the dialogue, thus guaranteeing more freedom for the interviewees' spontaneous and personal accounts. I decided not to record the informal interviews but opted for a field note technique. For ethical principles, the participants have been fully informed about the intentions of my project and the aims of their involvement. And they have been asked for their consent to use both their names and images.

With my presence becoming regular, I started to be identified, recognised and greeted by some young people. This accepting atmosphere encouraged me to take my camera out and progressively start moving around the space to get closer to the actions and capture the intensity of the moment. On several occasions, skaters suggested that I try skating myself. Inspired by Nikki S. Lee's performative project on a group of skateboarders that she sought to mime, and remembering the Chicago School emphasis on the necessity for fieldworkers of 'engaging in the same activities as participants', I decided to buy my own pair of quad skates

and experience roller skating at this place.²² This participant observation helped me to create sustained relationships with the young performers and to gain better insights into their worlds.

However, as warned by Mitchell Duneier: 'In the end, any sociologist who simply believes that time spent in the field qualifies him as 'one of the boys' is not only sadly mistaken but in grave trouble'.²³ This limit has also been valid for my case: I knew that even by skating and playing with these young people, I would always maintain my foreign position of researcher and would not become "one of them"; and I accepted it.

The descriptive account that will follow is the result of this multi-method case study approach. It takes the form of a photo-essay and attempts both to convey something of the sensory rich atmosphere of Stratford Centre and to analyse the culture of its nightly occupants.

Description and analysis of the project



²² Richard E. Ocejo, *Ethnography and the City. Readings on Doing Urban Fieldwork* (New York, NY, and London: Routledge, 2013), p. 79. See also Nikki S. Lee, 'The Skateboarders Project #7', *MoCP: Museum of Contemporary Photography*.

<<http://www.mocp.org/detail.php?t=objects&type=browse&f=maker&s=Lee%2C+Nikki+S.&record=1>> [accessed 15 November, 2016].

²³ Mitchell Duneier, *Sidewalk* (New York: Farrar and Giroux, 2001), p. 326.

As night falls, the shopkeepers put up the shutters and the pedestrians, coming out from the transport stations, hurry across Stratford Centre's hallway to go home. Instantly, a troupe of young dancers, skateboarders and roller skaters overrun the shopping centre's heart, offering an unexpected but still astonishing spectacle.

The presence of those youth alternative cultures in the shopping centre might, at first, appear discrepant for the observant passer-by. And it might make them wonder about the reasons of their occupancy of a space not originally intended for those kinds of recreational and energetic activities.

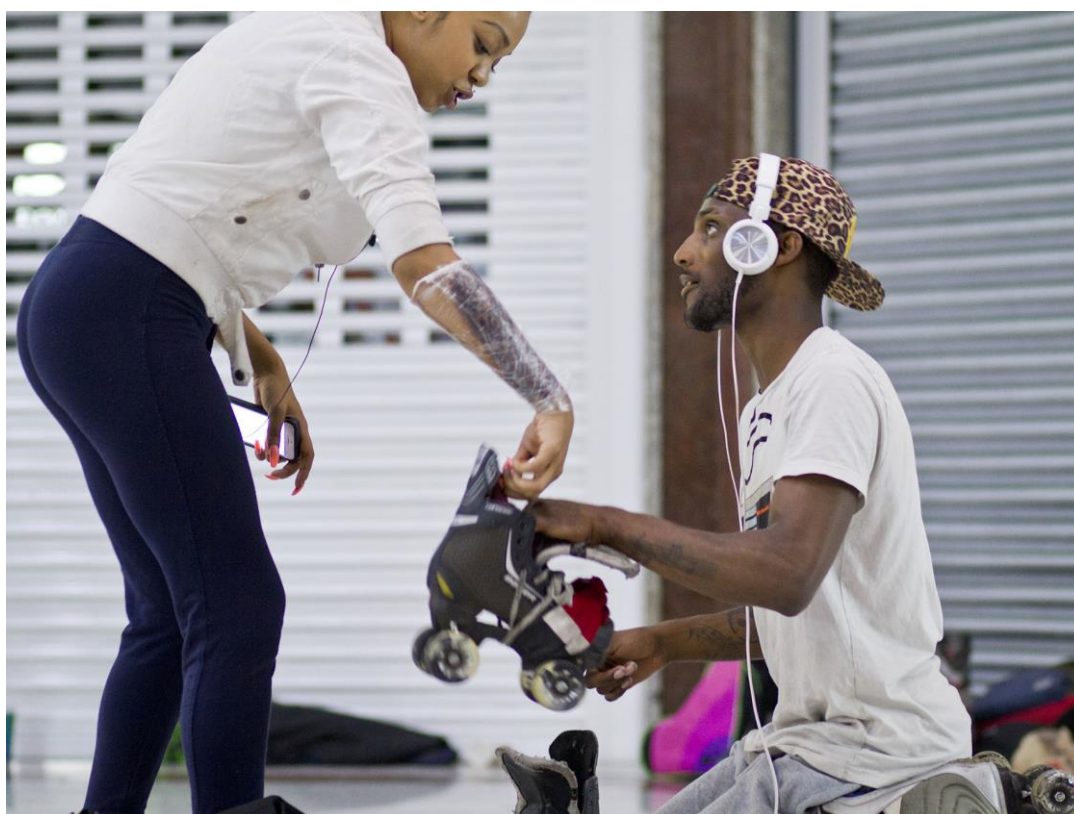
Most of the skaters and dancers, aged between 16 and 28 years old, legitimate their presence by the absence of alternatives: they started coming here because they had no better place to go. Complaints about the cruel lack of safe and free infrastructures for young people to congregate, play and express themselves have been consistent throughout the interviews.

Zampa, who has been practicing breakdance for many years, lamented the shutting of all London suitable "dance squares"—among which the internationally known one in The Trocadero—and their replacement by commercial centres and hotels. As the narrative of a mother of a 10-year-old rollerblader revealed, the same process is affecting skaters' lives. She said that accompanying her son so far from their home was very inconvenient, but that it was, unfortunately, the only place where he could have fun doing what he really enjoyed.

During the 80s, most of the roller rinks and skateparks in the UK started closing. Since then, very few have been constructed, as highlighted by a Stratford Centre security guard. The interviewee confessed being a skater himself in his teens: "I grew up in London and we had proper places to meet and skateboard. But they are all closed nowadays".

Through a conversation with a police officer, I learnt that the area has a high rate of crime. Keeping the young people off the streets, where alcohol, drugs and violence are prevalent, might therefore be one of the motivations pushing the local council to allow them to use Stratford Centre, a space kept under surveillance. Conflictingly, the commercial centre landlord would regularly complain about the situation and try to definitively banish the young people. But where would they go if that happened?

The very few surviving skateparks are frequently overcrowded or "territorialised" explained Charles, Jack and Alex, who are all skateboarders in their early twenties. What they meant is that those places, often dominated by the local skateboarders, are not really inclusive. Furthermore, they condemned the individualistic character of those proper-built structures in which skating is exclusively about advancing skills, and social interactions are limited. My participant observation as a newcomer roller skater allows me to affirm that the opposite distinguishes Stratford Centre, where everyone is easily integrated and supported by the older users. Tom, also a novice rollerblader, told me how, the first time he tried to skate in the commercial centre, people that he did not know taught him how to stand on his rollerblades. His account reveals a certain absence of competition that opens the way to a sense of solidarity, often demonstrated by shouting encouragements, clapping hands when a nice move is performed or helping each other.



Entrance charges and strict injunctions, as for instance wearing a helmet or indoor footwear, are other limits that have been evoked by the participants when discussing the possibility of using formal skateparks or dancing halls. If the members of youth countercultures dispraise these normative regulations, it is because they go against their activity's essence, which is the free and autonomous use of the public realm. Protests about the rigid opening hours of other places have also been recurrent. One evening, I was surprised to see a group of salsa dancers rehearsing for a competition within the shopping centre. One of the members told me that they were coming to Stratford Centre because her university's dance studio closed at 8pm, leaving them with nowhere else to train. For people working or studying during the day, the possibilities to practice these non-traditional forms of sport remain highly restricted.

Admittedly, the Olympic Park offers, against payment, new infrastructures for plenty of diverse indoors sports. While it might be true that the city recognises and tries to respond to its inhabitants' needs for leisure and physical activities, sports evolving on the streets like skateboarding or breakdancing are, nonetheless, denied any value and keep being marginalised.

Stratford Centre, their own playground

In an attempt to resist and find an alternative to their condition of exclusion and marginalisation, Stratford Centre’s skateboarders, roller skaters and street dancers have been ignoring the prohibition signs displayed at the entrances of the building and have long resisted the authority’s efforts to expel them. After a long period of fight, they finally “won” the right to access Stratford Centre and reinvented it as their own play area.



For Franck and Stevens, possibilities of alternative experiments usually arise from lack of choice.²⁴ When modern private-public spaces are designed and managed by and for the others, disobedience, trespass, and transgression become inevitable if these youth subversive groups want to gain the recognition of their culture and subsequent legitimate right to participate in the city.

Every evening after 8pm, when the centre’s elementary function of commerce is momentarily suspended, Stratford Centre’s ‘place hackers’ exploit the underused large space of the site to play.²⁵ Through non-conformist bodily movements, the young invaders reappropriate Stratford

²⁴ See Karen Franck and Quentin Stevens, *Loose Space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life* (London: Routledge, 2006).

²⁵ Bradley L. Garrett, *Place Hacking: Explore Everything* (2012) <<http://www.placehacking.co.uk>> [accessed 16 October 2016].

Centre for a completely different purpose than the intended and normative one of consumption. They interact with the space and its material elements in innovative and creative ways: they slide on the smooth floor which is normally walked on; they reimagine benches, where people sit during the day, as obstacles to jump over; they take advantage of the mirroring effect of shop windows.

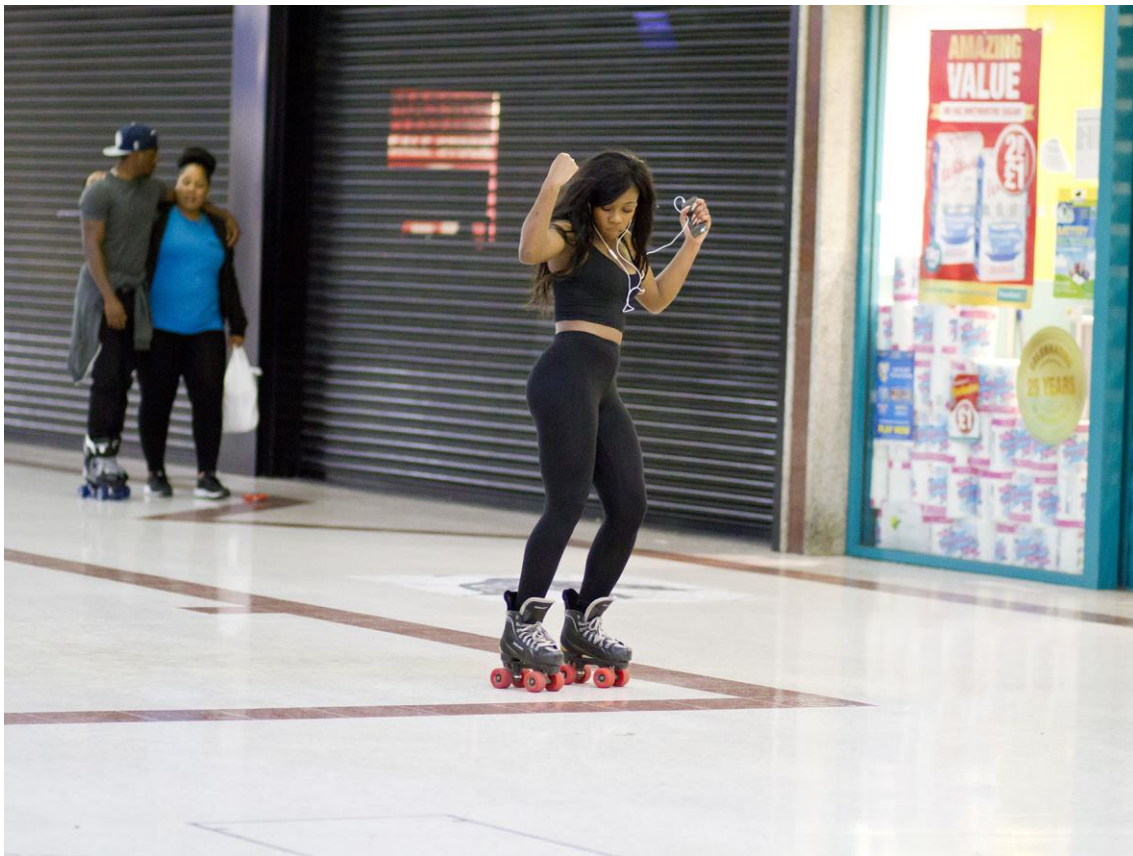


Their insistent reclamation of the right, not only to enter this place but also to enjoy and engage with it in their own terms, leads to the creation of a 'counter-space': a new liminal space of play, free expression and social meeting.²⁶ For some young people, Stratford Centre has become their "own home". The reiterative use of this term by the interviewees unveils the teenagers and young adults' real attachment to this place, and their need for a sense of belonging and being accommodated in the city.

Certainly, the performers' inhabitation of a space usually quickly passed through by commercial users disrupts its order and opposes itself to the predetermined and limited uses of the capitalist city. On the other hand, most of the performers do not claim to enact any explicit socio-political critique of the city. When decriminalising their activities and presence, they

²⁶ Lefebvre, *La Production de l'espace*, p. 440.

rather enumerate personal aims and desires, as for instance having fun, congregating with friends, positively and publicly self-representing, and relieving stress.



As stated by a dancer during an interview: “This is a place to relax, to forget about my everyday problems and express myself after fourteen hours of work. I come to enjoy two hours of freedom before going to sleep”. These notions of freedom and ‘time-out from everyday routine’ have been a constant in the discourse of many other respondents.²⁷

On his activity of urban exploration through illegal trespass of buildings, Bradley Garrett asserts: ‘Multiplying possibilities, and creating opportunities that are not offered, is always a political act’.²⁸ Stratford dancers, rollerbladers and skateboarders might not be aware of the political nature of their “out of place” activities, but their transgressive adoption of the retail space remains, nevertheless, a subtle performative critique of the city, its architecture, and its ‘normative landscape’; a reclamation of public space from private interests; and a fight for an alternative urban life, more diverse, playful and meaningful for its dwellers.²⁹

²⁷ Franck and Stevens, p. 15.

²⁸ Garrett, *Explore Everything: Place hacking the city* (London: Verso Books, 2013), p. 174.

²⁹ Tim Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology and Transgression* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 9.

Stratford Centre, a Mecca for skaters and dancers

Whether the performers seek insurrection or merely enjoyment, one might interrogate the reasons for choosing this particular place. In Ewen Spencer's short documentary on roller skating, a young skater describes Stratford Centre as a 'Mecca' for roller skaters, skateboarders and dancers.³⁰ The video presents young people commuting from all over London. This geographic diversity is further confirmed through the sample of participants for this project, composed of performers coming from Deptford, London Bridge, Romford, Wembley Park, and many others parts of the city.

Most of the participants remembered that they started coming to Stratford Centre after a friend's recommendation. The centre's reputation grew through word of mouth and virtual social networks, notably videos of the performances posted online. Nowadays, "every respectable London skater knows about this spot", assured me a skateboarding lover. So why is this informal playground so popular and valuable among these youth countercultures?



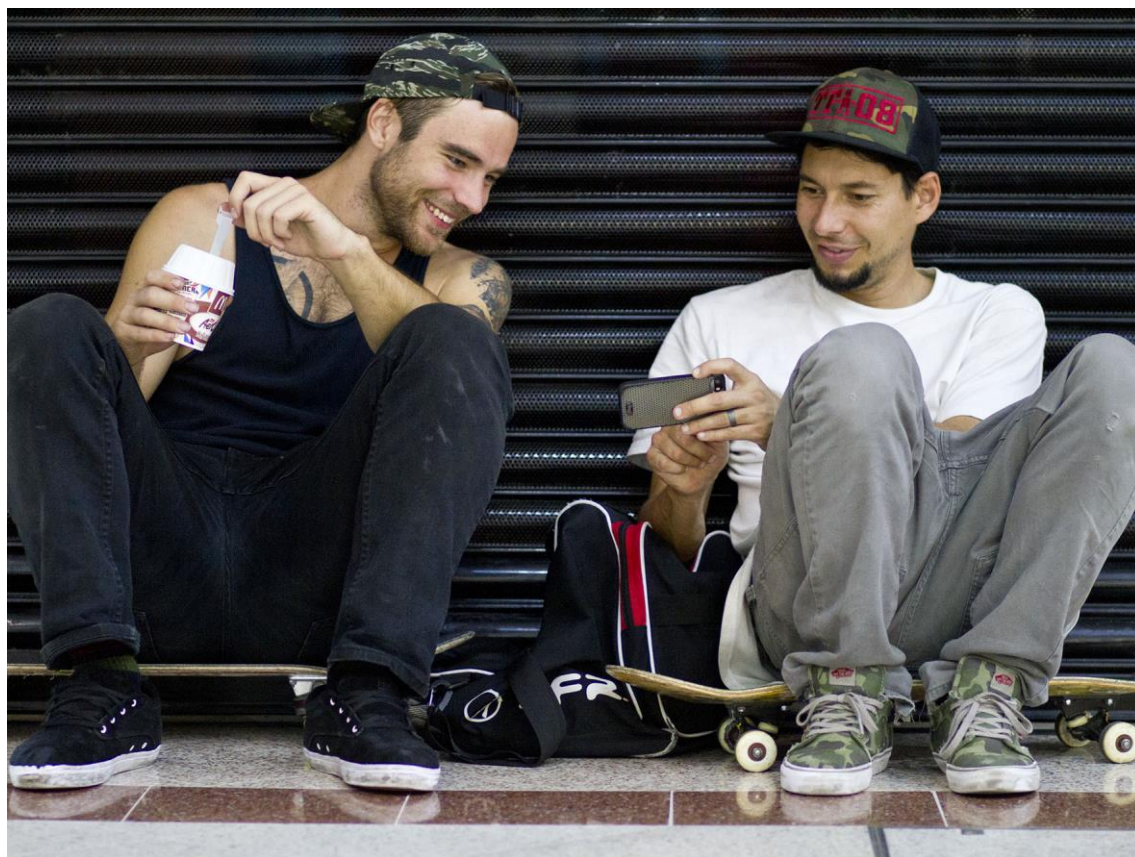
The attractive criterion that all respondents evoked in their apologia of Stratford Centre was the atmosphere, which was more friendly and welcoming than in all the other places they used to perform. "We are like a big family," said Cruze, a 21-year-old rollerblader.

³⁰ Ewen Spencer, 'Jam & Cheese', online video, 2015.

<<http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/24350/1/london-s-underground-rollerskaters>> [accessed 16 October 2016].

Other participants highlighted the community-building aspect of the location, referring to it as a “meeting place” or a “place to create real friendships”. Jack, a regular skateboarder, confessed that he would never have met his girlfriend or his best friend had he not started coming to this place one year previously.

During my fieldwork, I remarked that these infringers spend a lot of time sitting together and chatting, eating, or simply watching other peoples’ performances. All interviewees without exception mentioned the opportunity to gather and have fun with friends as being of as much importance as the practice of the activities itself.



The sociability of the space is one of the four criteria (the three others being accessibility, compatibility and ‘trickability’) attracting skateboarders, identified by Woolley and Johns in their study of urban skating.³¹ Skateboarding, dancing and rollerblading are not solitary sports, as one might believe, but instead collective practices. Indeed, people engaging in such activities cooperatively learn from each other, they exchange and reappropriate moves and they play with each other. “If you train alone, it is harder to improve”, explained a breakdancer.

³¹ See Helen Woolley and Ralph Johns, ‘Skateboarding: The city as a playground’, *Journal of Urban Design*, 6 (2001), 211-230.



The questions of accessibility and compatibility are also determinant in the youth countercultures' choice of a place to colonise. Refusing to be placed on the edge of the city, they look for an enjoyable everyday space where they can be seen and heard. 'Visibility accommodates participation and acceptance', claimed Guggenheim and Söderström.³² Both a retail space and a thoroughfare, the centre brings many pedestrians and consumers inside, hence constituting a public audience for the performers.

The last element on which a space is judged 'skateable' is its architectural and material qualities. Stratford Centre's weatherisation, protection from the traffic, illumination and long corridors all contribute to enhance the 'trickability' of the space. The smooth floor of the centre seems to be its most appreciated physical quality. It allows velocity and softens falls, avoiding serious injuries. On the contrary, having to zigzag between the pedestrians augments the risk taking, but also adds more fun and creativity to the activity.

³² Michael Guggenheim and Ola Söderström, *Re-shaping Cities: How Global Mobility transforms Architecture and Urban Form* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), p. 97.

Stratford Centre, a place like no other

The discussion above has showed some of the distinctive features that attract so many young people and how they contribute to make Stratford Centre such a unique multi-use place. This essay now takes an interest in how the youth presence is perceived by the local population.

Among the non-performers interviewed, a small minority complained about this youth movement. Globally, the public appears to respond positively and support the presence of the young skateboarders, roller skaters and dancers in Stratford Centre. Through my long-term observation of the place, I realised that a lot of people would stop their current activity to watch the free show, momentarily escaping the practicalities of their routine.





On different occasions, I witnessed conversations where passers-by would compliment performers for their prowess. I was, too, astonished by most youngsters' talents, which actually turned out to be a challenge for my photographic project. Indeed, the low and non-uniform lighting of the centre has been a real technical obstacle for my attempt to capture clear pictures of the skaters and dancers' incredible speed of movements. It forced me to opt for the use of a digital camera and put in more effort to improve my ability to control high-speed photography.



For the young kids impressed by Stratford dancers' choreographies, a free *krump* workshop—a form of freestyle dance, which is characterised by convulsive and energetic arm movements—is offered in the centre two Wednesdays per month. Professional dance instructor Warren, aka Wild G, organises these free sessions to give young people who cannot afford paying for dance classes the chance to express themselves.

The numerous comments from Internet users on the online petition to support and save the Stratford performers confirm this general approval. Many *netizens* point out the dual positive impacts of these activities, both on the performers themselves and on the city, qualifying the place as a 'hub of creativity'; a 'healthy and creative community cohesion'; or a 'fun and healthy way for youths to spend their time'.³³

This notion of healthiness has also been highly alluded to during the interviews conducted. Dancing and skating are peaceful and harmless activities, allowing people to spend their energy and physically express their emotions or frustrations without endangering their life or anybody else's. Over a period of eight months of participant observation, I never witnessed any violent altercation between the young trespassers or with other users of the space. A police officer patrolling around the place described most of the skaters and dancers as "pleasant people".

Another positive impact of the young people's night presence in the centre is the security that it brings, both inside and outside the centre. Stratford's inhabitants admit feeling safer when having to cross the centre late at night, due to the presence of many people.

Together, the dancers, skateboarders and rollerbladers produce a public place that promotes diversity, inclusion and acceptance: a place that unifies people. When questions of class and age are usually important issues in 'private-public' spaces, and especially in shopping centres, in this one, after 8pm, the logic is reversed. Boys and girls, young and less young, experts and neophytes, from different cultures, with different backgrounds: all are having fun together. All the differences among the performers are left at the entrance of this shared space to give way to the common desire to funnily and freely 'travel through space'.³⁴

To sum up, Stratford 'place-hackers' create value for the society: they offer free public entertainment and security. The imaginative and heterogeneous (mis-)uses brought altogether produce a vibrant and tolerant place, full of diversity, spontaneity and joyfulness; an authentic public space where transgression emerges as being not solely a negative act. In the age of global cities with so-called public spaces disconnected from the local environment and increasingly alike, Stratford roller skaters, dancers and skateboarders create a revitalised and distinguished place, a place like no other.

³³ 'Support the Stratford Skaters. Allow Roller Skating in the Stratford Centre.'
<<https://www.change.org/p/london-borough-of-newham-and-the-met-police-support-the-stratford-skaters-allow-roller-skating-in-the-stratford-centre>> [accessed 16 October 2016].

³⁴ Aaron Rose, *Dysfunctional* (London: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 1999), p. 14.

Conclusion

This visual and ethnographic exploration of the reappropriation of Stratford Centre by skateboarders, roller skaters and street dancers has endeavoured to capture and convey moments of happiness, equitable participation and friendly collaboration—all elements contributing to the great social cohesion characterising Stratford Centre as a night playground. It has attempted to deconstruct the usual misconceptions and stereotypes attached to these youth countercultures. Furthermore, it has denounced the lack of governmental concern and investment in the provision of truly public spaces for young people's needs of social meeting, play and civic participation.

This project did not aim to suggest that there is one better and worthy way to experience urbanity, but rather to underline the fact that urban dwellers are not often offered the choice to decide how to read and engage with everyday urban spaces. Nevertheless, the example of these young performers' successful conversion of an exclusive commercial space into a more pluralist and public space might be seen as a message of hope for change and encourage similar collective actions to create new meanings and new possibilities that are not offered. Playful and creative activities might contribute to reimagine an alternative city, more democratic, less alienated, where amusement and conviviality supplant boredom and individuality.

The young people's resistance against their marginalisation and exclusion of pseudopublic spaces reminds us that urban public spaces should not keep tightening up on how they are used but, on the contrary, be fluid, open to everybody and responsive to users' different, spontaneous, and ever changing needs, choices and 'heart's desires'.³⁵ Their transgressive physical activities show us that body language can be used to protest, redraw limits and challenge social and cultural conventions.

I conclude this essay by appealing for other methods of urban planning and management, more empirical, participative and adaptive, in order to recreate a city of greater diversity, social justice and equality. Finally, it leads to a rethinking and reopening of debates about who the city is for and whom it belongs to.

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³⁵ Robert E. Park, *On Social Control and Collective Behavior* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 3.

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