



# Leisure in Space: Adaptation and Challenge Among Youth and Youth Cultures

Introductory Text for Special Issue “Youth Cultures, Leisure and Space: Practices and Representations Between Public and Private Places”

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In an era where cities are increasingly seen as sources of both opportunity and exclusion, where space is ever more regulated, and where the digital realm is ever more intertwined with the physical and the social, young people are at the forefront of a continuous process of challenge and experimentation toward definitions, regulations and uses concerning space, and leisure is often at the core of this process.

More precisely, actors of this challenge and experimentation are often youth cultures, collectivities rooted in the sharing of distinctive practices and meanings, developing, on these bases, processes of identity building, identification, recognition, and socio-cultural positioning. Transcending traditional divisions between formal and informal, public and private, physical and digital, space, several youth cultures interact with parks, squares, shopping malls, bedrooms, and online platforms as potential contexts of leisure where space does not merely serve as a backdrop but becomes an integral component of practices, belongings, identities.

Reflection on youth leisure dates back to publications as early as the 1930s, but it still remains far from a consolidated field of research (the proof is that one can find, in the Scopus catalogue, more than 1,500 scientific articles whose titles explicitly refer to youth and leisure, but there is no structured introductory book that addresses this topic), and in this long path of investigation little attention has been paid to the spatial dimension (significantly, referring again to the Scopus catalogue, within the field of social sciences, 6,500 articles have a title referring to youth and space, but only one in a hundred of them also contains the word “leisure”).

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The earliest reflection on phenomena that somehow lie at the intersection of youth, space, and leisure can be traced back to the works of the Chicago School (Merico, 2023). Although youth was not their explicit focus, several of these studies did, in fact, touch on the subject, and laid the groundwork for future research. Scholars such as Robert Park, Ernest Burgess and Roderick McKenzie, Louis Wirth, and Nels Anderson, analysed how different social groups and sectors, including young people, distributed and adapted themselves within the urban environment in differentiated ways. Different segments of the youth population used different urban territories based on the constraints and opportunities these spaces offered, in connection with the resources and desires each segment possessed. Furthermore, since young people constituted a social sector particularly vulnerable to processes of social disorganisation, they often tended to develop “deviant” social networks and collective identities, especially in areas marked by poverty, migration, and marginality. These processes led to the emergence of “natural areas” characterised by high socio-cultural homogeneity, within which deviant traits were reinforced.

Studies on youth deviance thus revealed that sectors of young people tended to settle in marginal urban spaces, seeking to build support networks within a mainstream social environment which enacted processes of exclusion against them. Thrasher (1927) showed how portions of youth organised themselves into territorially-rooted gangs, for whom specific portions of urban space served as reference points, creating a sense of belonging and collective identities.

Subsequently, in the 1940s and 1950s, a new line of research about the relationship between youth and space emerged in the sociological field: reflecting the dominant functionalist sensitivities of the time, these studies were particularly interested in the processes of socialisation, integration, and social control, viewing young people primarily as subjects who needed to be guided and shaped into adults conforming to societal norms (Talcott Parsons, Robert Merton, William Foote Whyte). Urban space was thus mainly understood as a regulated and controlled environment where young people were socialised into dominant models, and integrated into the broader social system. The research focussed on institutional settings – such as schools, sports facilities, parks, and youth centres – which were seen as tools to promote the growth and socialisation of young people, to help them acquire the social, moral, and cognitive skills necessary to enter the adult world. These spaces were considered crucial both because they offered “good and useful” activities for young people and because they kept them away from “the streets” or other potentially “dangerous” spaces where they might come into contact with deviant behaviour. Unsupervised public spaces were rather viewed as ambiguous and risky, as young people could be exposed to negative influences that might lead them to develop deviant behaviour. One of the key concerns was so-called unsupervised leisure time: young people who spent too much time in public spaces without adult supervision were considered at risk. As a result, there was a strong emphasis on policies that encouraged youth participation in after-school programs, recreative centres, organised sports, and other structured activities.

It is not surprising, therefore, that as early as the 1950s, part of this research, in connection with subcultural and criminological studies, began to focus on young people in marginal or less regulated spaces, such as poor neighbourhoods or indus-

trial urban areas. The works of Cohen (1955), Cloward and Ohlin (1960), Matza and Sykes (1961), and Shaw and McKay (1969) – despite their distinct perspectives – underlined that the social disorganisation often present in disadvantaged urban areas weakened the connection with mainstream cultural models and favoured the development of deviant, and more specifically delinquent, youth cultures. Streets, squares, and marginalised neighbourhoods were thus identified as contexts where suspension of dominant norms and experimentation of deviant models occurred; more in general, these spaces allowed young people to construct personal and collective identities that differed from those ascribed to them, offering alternative criteria for recognition and status beyond those valued outside these areas. And many Western youth policies and services were developed according to this kind of thinking.

This approach to the study of youth and youth cultures remained predominant until the mid-1960s, when the emergence of new social movements and new subcultural phenomena, in which young people again played a central role, led to the development of new interpretative models. In particular, the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham became highly influential. Scholars such as Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, Phil Cohen, Paul Willis, and Dick Hebdige focussed primarily on spectacular youth subcultures emerging within the working class (mainly among young men), and interpreted them as forms of symbolic resistance to class inequalities and dominant cultural models: through their distinct styles, these subcultures expressed a rejection of the mainstream, revealed the vulnerability of dominant cultural norms, and constructed elective collective identities.

In these analyses the issue of space was not explicitly thematised, although the studies on girls' cultures by Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber paid some attention to private spaces of everyday life. Significantly, neither in the selection of essays composing the most famous book of the CCCS, "Resistance Through Rituals", nor in the 2000 pages of the CCCS Selected Working Papers (Gray et al., 2007), did any of the contributions explicitly focus on this topic. However, by gathering the fragmented insights present in these works, one can observe that space is a factor in play: youth cultures often transformed portions of urban spaces into sites of cultural, identity, and political expression, through a process of material and symbolic "re-territorialisation". Urban public space, in particular, became a place of visibility and recognition where spectacular practices were displayed and where the group distinguished itself from others. Hebdige (1979) showed that punks used urban space to make their rebellious aesthetic visible, while Willis (1977) highlighted that working-class boys – and Griffin (1986) how working class girls – constructed forms of resistance within both their school spaces and their neighbourhoods: inside schools, they subverted institutional control through acts of transgression and defiance, while outside, they appropriated marginal urban spaces such as pubs, sports fields, and streets to reaffirm their class identity. Girls in Griffin's study also encounter sexism and racism in education, in addition to class struggle, not being able to reach their goals of a good future (a decent job, a good man, and friends).

Similarly, groups like mods, teddy boys, and skinheads, symbolically marked their "territories" within urban space by electing specific locations – bars, dance halls, streets or squares – as their sites of gathering, belonging, and shared identities. This process of space appropriation, particularly of urban public space, often came into

conflict with institutions and law enforcement, who viewed these symbolic occupations of urban space as threats to social order. As a result, tensions between subcultural youth and the police frequently revolved around the control and use of streets, squares, and parks. In a brief mention, not further developed, Clarke et al. (1976, p. 53) refer to a “territoriality” that characterises, at least some, youth cultures.

But the issue of the relationship with space, particularly urban public space, in the perspective of CCCS emerges, albeit implicitly, as more complex. On the one hand, the organisation of this space and the rules that govern it, reflect the social inequalities and power dynamics that are at the root of the emergence of youth subcultures: the organisation of space reflects and reinforces social inequalities; urban areas and places are more or less accessible depending on social position and status; youth subcultures tend then to emerge in deprived or marginalised urban areas, where the young people, mainly young men, involved are exposed to economic, social, and cultural exclusion. On the other hand, these subcultures resist cultural models, and this often leads them to challenge the rules governing public space, claiming their right to space, and asserting their presence in those streets, squares, and areas from which processes of segregation and marginalisation tend to exclude them.

As already mentioned, the reflections within the CCCS on the theme of space did not, however, focus solely on its public dimension. Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber (1976) highlighted that urban public space, often considered in research as a site of gathering and resistance for young males involved in subcultures, was less accessible for girls due to social restrictions. Moreover, even when girls were present in public space, they were more exposed to processes of control and judgement. As a consequence, domestic and private space often became the primary site of sociality and creativity where they could explore their identities and relationships with fewer limitations. The so-called “bedroom culture” refers thus to the practice of young girls using their bedrooms to share experiences, musical tastes, magazines, clothes, and ideas with friends: this private space becomes a site for identity formation and socialisation, running somewhat parallel to the male-dominated public space, allowing girls to develop cultural affiliations, albeit in ways less visible than those of dominant male subcultures. By questioning the assumption of public space as the only space of youth culture and leisure, the article by Angela McRobbie and Jenny Carber addressed an important bias of youth studies, which had been gender blind by focusing only on young men, and more specifically on those young men who spend their leisure time in public urban space. After this article, the girlhood studies started to rise also by other authors, focussing of the spaces and cultural habits of the girls, as well as those young people, whose life and leisure did not take place in public urban arenas. This theme of gender and space remains vivid in Levi Herz’s article in this special issue.

Overall, this analytical approach to youth cultures developed by the CCCS remained predominant at least until the 1980s. However, at the end of this decade, researchers increasingly encountered phenomena that could be considered subcultures, but were less and less comprehensible using the CCCS framework, which centred on the idea of symbolic resistance rooted in class inequalities. These changes in the framework of youth research followed changes in sociological field, where interest in questions of social class declined, the postmodern framework with questions

of change and fluidity took over, agency and reflexive self were highlighted within structures (Lash 1990; Giddens, 1984; Giddens, 1991). This marked efforts in developing new interpretative models, and although no unified framework emerged, one of the most commonly shared ideas has been that youth cultures arise from the interaction of individuals who share a set of sensitivities (representations, tastes, interests) and practices around which progressive processes of identity construction take place.

In this perspective, youth cultures, or subcultures, were no longer seen as being in opposition to dominant culture, but rather as minority forms emerging within it (in varying, deviant, or resistant ways depending on the case); and the existence of a dominant culture, or even only of a unified mainstream culture, is debated, as some scholars argued that contemporary society is characterised by a variety of different cultures and lifestyles, each with different degrees of diffusion and power. The idea was then that youth cultures construct distinctive styles through the re-signification of raw materials from the cultural industry without necessarily involving dialectical dynamics of resistance. The subcultures were seen as more connected to individual sensitivities, and less to social class and structural traits (Miles, 2000; Muggleton, 2005). Later, however, the extreme versions of this approach – in which youth cultures emerged as individual choices – have been criticised for paying too little attention to social contexts, social structures, inequalities and allocations of resources (Blackman, 2005).

But referring to the topic of the special issue, the core point is that several youth cultures focussed on by this research were “street cultures” (Ross, 2021), that is to say that their practices involved alternative uses of portions of urban space, particularly public space, which contrast with the predominant, planned, institutionally defined and legally legitimised ones (Ferrero Camoletto, & Genova, 2019). Since the 1990s several works have explicitly begun to reflect upon the spatial dimension of youth cultures (Skelton & Valentine, 1998; Bennett, 2000; Malone, 2002; Chatterton, & Hollands, 2003), focussing in particular on urban contexts, and several new dimensions and perspectives in the investigation of young people and spatiality have been introduced (Abbott-Chapman, Robertson 2015; Pryor, & Outley, 2014; Tolonen, 2017; Molnár, 2014; Ravn et al., 2017; Juvonen, Romakkaniemi 2019).

At present, research on alternative and creative uses of urban space highlights thus that several youth cultures reinterpret the city environment to meet both pragmatic and expressive needs. Graffiti and street art transform city walls into canvases for figurative expression, turning them into spaces for visual communication where art breaks through imposed boundaries and reshapes the urban landscape (see also the article by Vasileva & Fransberg in this issue). Physical practices such as skateboarding and parkour reshape public space through physical movement: stairs, benches, and pavements are repurposed and re-signified as opportunities for bodily and playful creativity. Illegal raves use abandoned or marginal spaces that, temporarily devoid of function, are reinvented as settings for collective music and dance events. Political squatting involves the occupation of abandoned buildings, transforming them into places of social gathering, cultural production, and engagement. And many other examples could be cited, such as street dance, urban knitting, street performances, guerrilla gardening, street soccer, poster art, street bouldering.

Despite their evident heterogeneity, transversal to these phenomena are interpretations and uses of urban space that are alternative to the socially predominant and legally sanctioned ones. Urban space, in the contemporary Western context, is not only densely built but also densely planned, regulated, and surveilled: increasingly, for each portion of space there are thus legal and social rules defining what can, must, or must not, be done there; there are subjects and tools that monitor compliance with these rules; and there are institutional mechanisms to punish any breach of them, as well as young people trying to avoid them (Body-Gendrot, 2000; Berking et al., 2006; Peršak & Di Ronco, 2021; Franck & Huang, 2023; see also Bessant et al. in this issue). Against this backdrop, however, individuals and groups remain who transgress these rules – whether of a social or legal nature – and use portions of urban space in alternative ways. In some cases, this transgression stems from a basic need for space that legitimate opportunities do not allow them to fulfil; in other cases, it explicitly serves as a critique of current social and legal models governing urban space.

Interestingly, since the early 1990s a lively debate emerged in relation to the study of youth cultures regarding the usefulness of maintaining the concept of subculture as an analytical tool, or the necessity of adopting different instruments; and one of the alternatives which has been proposed is that of “scenes”, where the spatial dimension is placed in the forefront. The concept of scene refers to networks of individuals who, based on shared interests, engage in interactions and activities in specific locations, which thus become nodes of the network (Straw, 1991; Stahl, 2004). More specifically, a scene is constituted by the recurring gathering of individuals in particular places, the pathways that connect these places, the shared activities of these individuals, and the networks of relationships that are formed on this basis. A scene is then composed of “hard infrastructures”, the locations, and “soft infrastructures”, the social networks, rooted in shared sensitivities and practices. And since interaction in a scene can develop on different spatial scales, and can be either physical or digital, we can speak of local, trans-local, and global scenes (Bennett & Peterson, 2004): the local scene is connected to a specific territory; the trans-local scene consists of multiple interconnected local scenes, with individuals periodically moving between them, often linked to events; and the global scene, primarily digital and virtual, involves individuals spread across different territories interacting remotely via communication tools.

The topic of digital scenes is particularly challenging for an approach interested in the relationship between youth cultures and space (Hoskins, Genova, Crowe 2023). During recent decades, in fact, two main processes have shaped the spatialisation of leisure among youth cultures: the first has been the progressive shift from public to private space – whether intended as individual (personal rooms in parents’ homes) or collective (shopping malls or clubs); but the second has been precisely the growing role of digital places. If physical places are a core factor in forming the possibilities and realities of young people’s ways of living and thinking (and, in this sense, both public, semi-public and private spaces are experienced as grounds, background and constitutive elements for their social lives and their leisure activities); digital places are a further, increasingly relevant, context that often crosses the boundaries of these different realms, where, on the one hand, “offline” identities, activities, and social

networks can find further development and expansion, and, on the other hand, different identities, activities, and social networks can be developed (see also Colombo et al., and Kauppinen et al. in this issue).

Looking then overall at these different stages of reflection on youth cultures and space, it is easy to see that the topic of leisure has gained increasing relevance through time, but it has been rarely explicitly debated. This special issue of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Leisure*, with its five articles, aims precisely at contributing to filling this gap.

The article by Judith Bessant, Patrick O’Keeffe and Rob Watts focusses on the 2020–21 pandemic period in Melbourne, when the population, including young people, were subjected to one of the longest lockdowns in the world, and faced significant restrictions, including curfews and limitations on their movement in public spaces. In this situation, some young people built dirt bike jumps in urban parklands, challenging control over these spaces and resisting traditional representations of public space imposed by adults. Urban parks, unlike conventional public spaces, thus became essential for maintaining social connections and engaging in physical activities, and offered young people a sense of freedom and escape from the constraints of the pandemic. Despite local authorities’ public endorsement of youth participation, the article reveals how officials dismissed these activities as antisocial or illegal, reflecting the broader regulation, control, and marginalisation of youth in public spaces. Drawing on local case studies on the basis of photographs, field notes of interactions with police and local government, and analysis of websites, the article suggests that these young peoples’ actions were a form of political expression, as they contested their exclusion from public life and challenged adult and institutional regulations regarding this life.

Eila Kauppinen, Sirpa Tani, Sofia Laine, Tommi Hoikkala reflect upon the movements of young people in Finland through urban space, considering what types of physical places were popular hangout spots, and what role digital applications played in youth gathering practices in Covid time. The research was based on ethnographic observation, interviews and “reflection documents” from key informants. The article shows that the understanding of urban spaces by young people is influenced, at least, by public transport; stories about interesting places; other young people’s digital or verbal indications; the opportunities offered by digital applications; mass media; shared mental images of the areas; by the constraints and opportunities deriving from weather and rules of the places, such as opening hours; by the familiarity of the place and the experience of the area’s safety or insecurity; and by the restrictions and control set by parents and guardians. Young people thus navigate from one location to another using a “social compass” which shows them their friends’ movements, as well as adults’ movements, in the city in real-time, and thus makes it possible to change routes smoothly when needed. Friends can in this sense be thought of as checkpoints that are constantly changing their locations, so that movement from one place to another takes place through physical, social and digital negotiation.

Annamaria Colombo, Claire Balleys, Marc Tadorian, and Marianna Colella focus on the social and cultural practices of young people in public and digital spaces. The research focusses on the social and cultural practices of young people in Switzerland, combining participant observation, interviews, online ethnographies and focus

groups. The article examines the “regimes of self-presentation” in both online and offline environments, exploring the dynamics of privacy and power that influence these regimes. The authors introduce the concept of “digital street credibility” in order to highlight that, at present, youth activities are directed toward two distinct audiences – one that is physically present in urban public spaces, and another that is media-based, composed of viewers who access live or recorded content via smartphones and social media platforms – and this situation has compelled young people to adopt new social norms for managing self-presentation. The article reflects thus upon the topic of visibility, where privacy and power dynamics intersect, and on the fine line between actions that boost social standing and those that may be perceived as “embarrassing” or “cringe-worthy”. As a result, it underlines that, both in physical spaces and online, what is deemed an acceptable form of visibility is closely tied to the concept of digital street credibility, suggesting the need to rethink how young people perceive privacy, especially in relation to their social and leisure activities across both urban and digital domains.

Rachel Levi Herz’s article focusses on the Israeli context, and captures the leisure spaces through gendered analysis. The contribution investigates the phenomenon of “attacking”, a heterosexual practice performed in public spaces of nightclubs by adolescents and young adults, according to clearly defined social rules, for the purpose of initiating casual sexual interaction. The author uses a feminist approach, and traces young women’s intensified vulnerability as an affective pattern to reveal the affective relations that emerge in attacking spaces. These affective relations emphasise the gender role division in leisure spaces of adolescents and young adults. On the basis of interviews and participant observation, the article shows how young women’s vulnerability in attacking spaces emerges in relation to: strict social judgment of their sexual and social behaviour; gender role division that preserves young women in responsive subjective positions; constant touching as a result of young men’s attempts to attack. Moreover, even if an individual does not want to actively participate in attacking, these spaces are constructed according to the social expectations and the perception of the practice as normative; and this makes attacking an important case study for analysing young women’s vulnerability which gives rise to different affective relations in leisure spaces of adolescents and young adults.

Nadezhda Vasileva and Malin Fransberg explore visual subcultures in Helsinki and in St. Petersburg. The article considers how visibility – as “a practice of ‘seeing and being seen’ that implies the certain disclosure of identity in front of others” – is performed and managed in urban public places by two intersecting subcultural communities in two different socio-political environments: sticker artists in St. Petersburg and graffiti writers in Helsinki. Data have been collected through observation and interviews. Both subcultures are related to the global culture of graffiti and street art, yet they emphasise different dimensions in their urban creativity: sticker art is an activity that entails creating and putting up small stickers; graffiti writers draw and paint on walls. Medium and technique shape the spatial logic of each of these two youth cultures, and their positioning in the city space and in relation to the other, to be recognised as an actor, but also trying to maintain a dimension of secrecy. In the authors’ interpretation, both subcultures, when managing visibility in relation to



control and recognition, use a distinct subcultural ‘gaze’ in their movements through urban space.

Considering the content of these five articles as a whole, and placing it in dialogue with the broader research literature on the intersection between youth cultures, leisure, and space, it appears then increasingly challenging to adopt a single interpretive framework among those developed over time. Depending on the context, the relationship between these three elements may reflect dynamics conceptualised in traditions of subcultural research, such as adaptation, deviance, resistance, or distinction, as well as more hybrid forms. Similarly, the relationship of youth cultures with space – particularly with urban public space, which is most frequently the focus of analysis – often emerges as shaped by both structural constraints on young people’s choice of leisure spaces and a collectively shared set of distinctive tastes and sensibilities. In addition, institutions are increasingly able to contain and control young people’s use of space through technological innovations, but these same innovations simultaneously provide youth with new tools to evade or challenge such control. On the whole, space thus emerges concurrently as a container, a tool, and a contested ground: young people involved in a specific youth culture, through individually or collectively customised uses of space, also develop new visions and narratives not only of the space itself but of their own place within it, engaging in a dialogue—either accommodating or challenging—with their peers, with other youth cultures, and with the adult world. By expanding the range of phenomena and territorial contexts considered, future research will have the opportunity to face the challenge of exploring whether, across different phenomena, it is possible to develop a transversal structured interpretive model for the current interconnection between youth cultures, leisure, and space.

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