

Title

Mapping the Unspoken: Youth, Power, and the Fragmented City

Abstract

This project explores how experimental mapping and riso printing can reveal the fragmented characteristics of urban public spaces in London. Starting from Granary Square at Kings Cross, my practice utilizes city-walking, illustration, and print-based publishing (maps, calendars, zines) to document and critically reflect on spatial atmospheres. As I move eastward through London, stark contrasts emerge: on one hand, well-designed, privately managed public spaces; on the other, neglected parks lacking child-friendly design. Concurrently, I observe the tactical spatial behaviors employed by roller-skating youth in East London as a form of resistance against exclusion. These findings provoke urgent questions: Who truly owns urban space? And can we imagine a new democratic urban future through mapping?

Context

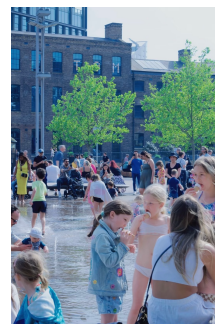
Historically, urban space has been theorized as three interrelated forms: “conceived space, perceived space, and lived space (Lefebvre, 1991)”. Granary Square at Kings Cross, redeveloped in 2008, epitomizes a capital-driven, ‘new logic’ conceived space. Serving high land values, it is perceived as an ‘urban oasis’(Figure 1 & 2 & 3), where the plaza fountains function metaphorically as beaches for children. Yet, how is this idealized vision constructed? Who is permitted entry, and who is excluded? Granary Square exemplifies a privatized public space whose redevelopment empowers land value rather than the community itself, turning London's major transit hub into a stage for capital.



(Figure 1. Author's Own Photograph.Granary Square, London.2024)



(Figure 2. Author's Own Photograph.Granary Square, London.2024)



(Figure 3. Author's Own Photograph.Granary Square, London.2024)

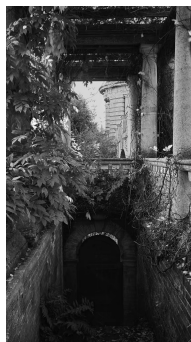
My visual narratives through illustration and riso printing do not reflect authentic community voices but instead reveal a fictional narrative constructed by capitalist and authoritative logics (Mitchell, 2003). This realization prompts a critical inquiry: Does redevelopment inherently generate spatial and community inequality? I advocate for design practices that are sustainable, iterative, and future-oriented (Mazé, 2019; Manzini, 2015), with designers acting as responsive and empowering

facilitators (Thorpe & Gamman, 2011; Kimbell & Julier, 2019), sharing their capabilities as platforms similar to how Uber and Airbnb share surplus resources.

Observation has become central to my understanding of community and spatial relationships. Through illustrated and riso-printed map experiments, I employ a slower, embodied approach to documenting community culture and replicating spatial experiences. Granary Square serves as a turning point in this perspective shift. During city-walks, the recurring image of the 'wall' emerged—whether physical, social, or symbolic—as a boundary of exclusion (Mahama, 2024). Ibrahim Mahama's artwork 'Purple Hibiscus (Figure 4)', which wrapped Barbican walls with fabric, challenged the rigidity and power symbolism of concrete. Similarly, I interpret walls as both abstract and concrete representations of social structures, akin to maps (Wood, 1992).



(Figure 4. Ibrahim Mahama's *Purple Hibiscus* installation at the Barbican Centre, London. Image source: Barbican Centre (2024).)



(Figure 5. Author's own photograph. The Hill Garden, London. 2024)

In mapping urban walls (Figure 5), I recognized a top-down, vertical, inflexible social structure. To counter this, I propose the metaphor of 'ivy'—flexible, organic, and bottom-up structures symbolizing a vision of participatory democracy (Mouffe, 2005; Rancière, 2004; Mansbridge, 1999).

To further explore tensions between ‘private’ and ‘public’ spaces, I analyzed two spatial cases: the Hakka Tulou (Figure 6) in Fujian, China—a communal housing structure blending private and collective life—and Casa Batlló (Figure 7) in Barcelona, transitioning from private residence to public cultural site. These cases deepen my understanding of ‘publicness’ as fluid and socially



(Figure 6. Fujian Yongding Hakka Tulou. Image source: Pixabay (2020).)



(Figure 7. Façade of Casa Batlló, originally a private residence, now a public cultural site. Image source: Casa Batlló (n.d.).)

contingent.

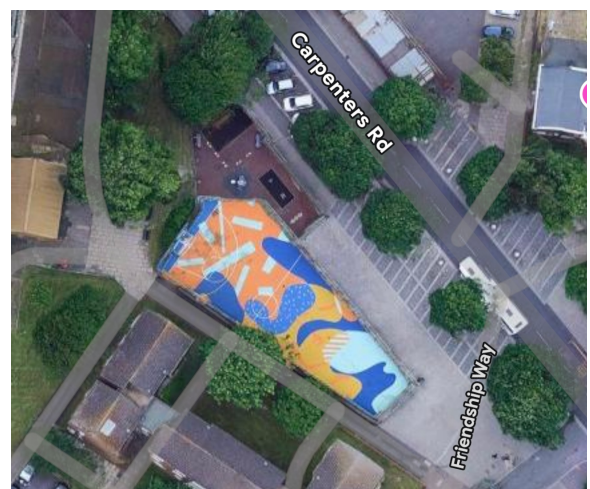
During my city walks, two starkly contrasting children's spaces emerged:

- The Spark(Figure 8), an ongoing public space project in Stratford, East London;
- An anonymous children's park(Figure 9), merely 300 meters from The Spark, yet entirely unsuitable in scale for children.

Their proximity starkly highlights severe inequalities in urban space distribution and child-friendliness.



(Figure 8. Author's own photograph. The Spark, Stratford, London. 2025.)



(Figure 9. Google Maps. Annotated screenshot by author, May 2025. Source: Google, 2025.)

A more specific spatial conflict arises between roller-skating youth and commercial spaces such as Westfield(Figure 10 & 11 & 12). Their mobility is frequently rejected, yet they actively assert their presence through TikTok videos(Figure 13 & 14 & 15) documenting resistance in prohibited commercial areas and activities in nearby parking lots (Henderson, 2024; Heath & Holloway, 2023). Urban redevelopment strategies that prioritize sanitized aesthetics and commercial interests (Greater London Authority, 2023; Tower Hamlets, 2024) increasingly restrict youth spaces, whereas initiatives like Waterden Green illustrate a critical shift toward positioning youth as co-creators of inclusive urban futures.

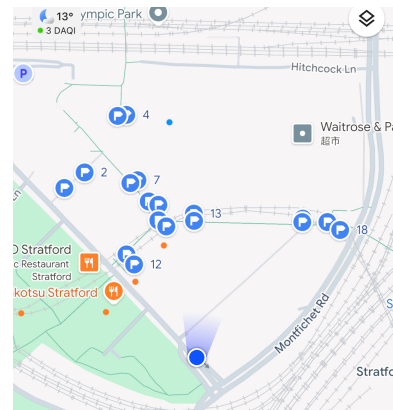
Critically, tactical urbanism (Jacobs, 1961), historically adult-centric, now infiltrates children and youth spaces. Youth physical and digital expressions create unofficial, tactical pathways within urban environments.



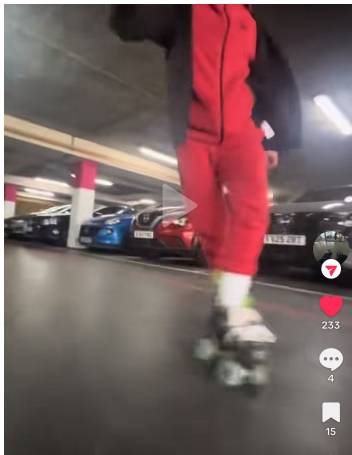
(Figure 10. Author's own photograph.Stratford Westfield, Stratford, London. 2025.)



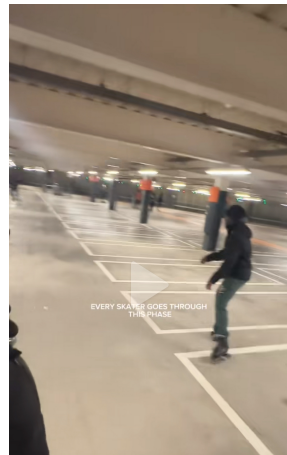
(Figure 11. Author's own photograph.Stratford Westfield, Stratford, London. 2025)



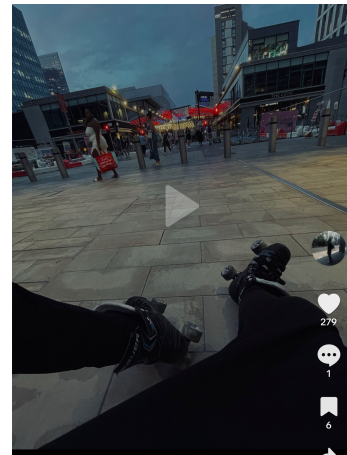
(Figure 12. Google Maps. Annotated screenshot by author, May 2025. Source: Google, 2025.)



(Figure 13. TikTok interface screenshot (content blurred), showing youth skater's spatial use in Stratford. Source: Author, 2025.)



(Figure 14. TikTok interface screenshot (content blurred), showing youth skater's spatial use in Stratford. Source: Author, 2025.)



(Figure 15. TikTok interface screenshot (content blurred), showing youth skater's spatial use in Stratford. Source: Author, 2025.)

Projected Contribution

This project does not aim to solve or intervene in spatial injustice directly, but rather to observe and reveal it—through a design methodology centered on visual documentation, map-making, and publishing. It seeks to make visible the often-overlooked spatial experiences of youth, and to open up new ways of seeing and questioning public space. It reconceives maps from mere technical diagrams to emotional, critical, and participatory narrative tools, capturing tensions and gaps between spatial experiences and social structures.

Through riso printing and illustrations, I developed visual maps and publications that highlight:

- Imperfections and experimental qualities of riso printing to showcase contrasts between idealized and neglected urban spaces;
- Youth tactical movements and bodily engagements within public spaces;
- Visual metaphors of "walls" and "vines" as contrasting models of spatial governance.
- These outputs include:
- Illustrated narrative imagery;
- Riso-printed maps and experimental publications.

This research emphasizes designers' roles as continuous documenters and amplifiers of marginalized spatial experiences rather than solution creators. Maps here become "detooled"—not standardized instruments of measurement, nor mere archival tools, but rather interventionist, participatory languages of social design.

By placing observation and publishing at the core, this research pursues a gentle yet sharp urban critique, deeply attentive to the aesthetic and political dimensions of urban space, grounded in the interplay of visual narratives, poetic resistance, and spontaneous youth-led spatial claims. It encourages ongoing reflection: For whom are our public spaces created? Who is allowed to leave their marks, and how? Can mapping itself foster a new democratic practice?

Ultimately, this project is more than an observation of urban spatial structures; it experimentally redefines the role of the designer—moving from top-down shaping mechanisms to platforms empowering community negotiation and marginalized voices.

word account: 940

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