

Research Proposal

Title

Claiming Urban Spaces: A Participatory Toolkit for Empowering Excluded Youth in East London

Enquiry

‘How can a participatory design toolkit empower children and adolescents to engage with, co-create, and reimagine public environments in East London, particularly in areas such as Stratford, Poplar, Hackney, and Bethnal Green?’

Aims

1. To design, prototype, and evaluate an inclusive and adaptive participatory design toolkit that empowers children and youth to become active co-creators of their community spaces.

Keywords: Youth mobility; Movement pathways; Activity zones; Inclusive design; Shared urban space; Youth agency; Co-creation; Dynamic urban futures; Spatial equity; Inclusive participatory design; Youth empowerment; Community co-creation; Toolkit prototyping; Participatory methods.

Objectives

- To establish a participatory youth network of roller skaters in East London and to conduct a critical literature review of historical and contemporary practices relating to young people’s engagement with public spaces and mobility. The review will also examine the intersections, boundaries, and current developments within service design, social design, and participatory design approaches focused on youth contexts.
- Investigate how children and teenagers navigate spatial restrictions, negotiate visibility, and assert presence in East London public spaces by building a participatory network (Kimbell & Julier, 2019) combining TikTok engagement and annotated mapping (Willats, 2010; Fujimori, 2016), culminating in co-designed, site-responsive ‘green’ spaces that embed speculative dramaturgical structures (Machon, 2013) into imagined futures of youth mobility—spaces shaped by and for the roller-skating practices of East London’s youth.
- To test the participatory toolkit with youth groups in specific East London neighbourhoods (Stratford, Poplar, Hackney, Bethnal Green) through a combination of online and offline engagements, utilizing diverse media materials. The toolkit will be tested during a series of co-design workshops with young participants, with iterative adjustments made based on feedback and observed interactions to refine its accessibility, relevance, and effectiveness.
- To disseminate process logs documenting the participatory toolkit development to relevant local authorities, urban planners, and community organizations in East London; to continue tracking youth perspectives and evolving spatial needs through ongoing engagement; and

to ground this approach in bottom-up democratic systems informed by new democratic theories (Mouffe C., 2005; Rancière J., 2004; Mansbridge J., 1999).

- To synthesise and document the entire participatory process, finalise a prototype of the participatory design toolkit, and critically explore the intersections between social design, participatory design, service design, and spatial observation. The project will culminate in the writing of a doctoral thesis that expands the theoretical and practical boundaries of these intersecting fields.

This research creates a bottom-up participatory design toolkit that repositions designers as enablers, empowering youth to act as the primary decision-makers and responders in shaping their public spaces.

Historical Context

Urban space is produced through three interrelated forms: conceived space, perceived space, and lived space (Lefebvre, 1991). Within these socially produced environments, how can children and young people articulate their urban imaginaries amidst spaces increasingly shaped by systemic power relations (Jacobs, 1961)? Furthermore, how might their everyday spatial practices tactically resist or negotiate these structural constraints (de Certeau, 1984)?

Contemporary Context

Public health research increasingly acknowledges the role of spatial justice in child and adolescent health (WHO, 2020; UNICEF, 2018). In East London, a growing youth population faces unequal access to safe, green, and culturally affirming environments (The Guardian, 2024). Redevelopment strategies often prioritize commercial interests and sanitized urban images, frequently at the expense of youth spatial agency (Greater London Authority, 2023; Tower Hamlets Borough Data, 2024). Nevertheless, initiatives such as Waterden Green in Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park (London Legacy Development Corporation, 2024) demonstrate the urgent potential to reposition teenagers not as peripheral or managed users, but as central co-creators of inclusive urban futures.

This research is driven by the necessity to critically investigate whether public spaces in East London genuinely serve their youngest inhabitants—or perpetuate their exclusion. Following Thorpe and Gamman's (2011) argument that designers should act as responders rather than responsibility holders, this project seeks to facilitate, translate, and amplify youth voices rather than impose prescriptive solutions.

In response to these spatial and social challenges, the proposed research will develop a participatory toolkit designed to decentralize the role of the designer and to foster continuous, iterative, and future-oriented youth engagement (Mazé, 2019; Manzini, 2015). At the same time, it remains alert to the risks of bureaucratic co-optation inherent in participatory processes (Berry and Iles, 2010). Building on Kimbell and Julier's (2019) two-stage social design practice, the toolkit will

extend these principles into concrete, youth-centred applications, enabling children and adolescents to actively shape their spatial environments (Henderson, 2024). Furthermore, the project recognises the growing influence of digital media platforms such as TikTok in mediating youth spatial behaviours and identities (Heath and Holloway, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

This research integrates both Critical Theory and Projective Theory.

Through Critical Theory, it draws on Lefebvre (1991), Jacobs (1961), and de Certeau (1984) to critique how urban spatial production marginalizes young people, highlighting the structural exclusions embedded in redevelopment processes.

Through Projective Theory, it builds on Kimbell and Julier's (2019) two-stage social design practice and Mazé's (2019) future-oriented design to guide the development of a participatory toolkit. Practice is positioned as essential to understanding youth perspectives, enabling closer engagement with lived experiences and repositioning the designer as a facilitator rather than a central authority. I believe that imagining future spaces must be grounded in critical reflection on present inequalities.

Methodology

1. **Citywalk:** Systematic walking observations to document how young people use and experience public spaces. Through recording and mapping, this method captures everyday spatial tensions often overlooked in top-down planning.
2. **Integrated Onsite-Online Youth Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews with youth roller-skaters combined with digital ethnography on TikTok (Ofcom, 2024), to explore how skating functions as transport, self-expression, and social identity, linking physical and digital spatial practices.
3. **Participatory Workshops:** Co-design workshops where young participants use drawing, mapping, and storytelling to express needs, prototype spatial interventions, and identify overlooked urban sites. Workshops aim to empower youth as active agents and to iteratively refine the participatory toolkit.

Prediction of the Form of the Final Presentation of the Thesis

The final thesis will include:

- A written text with critical analysis, theoretical reflection, and methodological discussion.
- Visual materials such as:
 - Annotated maps

- Workshop documentation
 - Youth-generated design outputs
 - Photographs from participatory activities
- Selected excerpts from:
 - Social media analysis (e.g., TikTok content)
 - Citywalk observation records
- Evidence of practice:
 - Visual portfolios showing the toolkit's development
 - Diagrams illustrating the participatory processes
 - Process narratives of toolkit testing and iteration
- Supplementary materials:
 - Links to digital resources (e.g., prototype toolkits, feedback videos)

words account: 996

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