

Title

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

Introduction

In Classical Theories of Urban Space, the Interaction Between Conceived Space, Perceived Space, and Lived Space Is Regarded as the Core of Spatial Production (Lefebvre, 1991). However, Under Contemporary Urbanisation Processes, the Balance Among These Dimensions Is Increasingly Disrupted. Urban Redevelopment Projects Such as Kings Cross (2008) in London Have Yielded Significant Economic Benefits, yet They Often Do So Through Top-Down Spatial Logics That Marginalise Original Residents—Such as Working-Class Communities and Artists. I Argue That in the Current Model of Urban Development, Capital Tends To Empower Land Rather Than Communities, Prompting the Fundamental Question: What Do Cities Truly Need—Vitality and Belonging, or Façades and Speculative Capital?

Against This Backdrop, Tactical Urbanism Emerged as a Response (Jacobs, 1961). Yet its Evolution Has Long Centred on Short-Term Spatial Interventions Led by Adult Citizens, With Sustained Neglect of Children and Youth as Spatial Agents (Lydon & Garcia, 2015; Hou, 2010). Meanwhile, Public Health Research Has Increasingly Emphasised the Importance of Spatial Justice for the Physical and Mental Wellbeing of Young People (WHO, 2020; UNICEF, 2018). In East London, the Adolescent Population Continues To Grow, While Access to Safe, Green, and Culturally Affirming Environments Remains Uneven (The Guardian, 2024). Urban Redevelopment Policies Often Prioritise Commercial Interests and Sanitised Urban Aesthetics at the Expense of Youth Spatial Agency (Greater London Authority, 2023; Tower Hamlets Borough Data, 2024). Nevertheless, Projects Such as Waterden Green in Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park (London Legacy Development Corporation, 2024) Suggest a Possible Shift—Towards Recognising Youth as Co-Creators of Urban Futures.

In Today's Cities, Spatial Privatisation, Behavioural Regulation, and Algorithmic Platforms Such as TikTok Have Profoundly Shaped Young People's Spatial Experiences. As a Result, Youth Increasingly Adopt Spontaneous, Tactical Behaviours To Reclaim Visibility and Autonomy in Public Space. This Tendency Raises Several Urgent Questions: Why Are Contemporary Urban Systems Pushing Adolescents Into Tactical Resistance? How Can Design Meaningfully Respond? And Do the Everyday Spatial Practices of Young People Hold the Capacity To Negotiate or Overcome Structural Constraints? (De Certeau, 1984)

Despite Growing Attention to Participatory Design, Youth-Centred Practices Remain Structurally Difficult To Implement and Sustain. Most Youth-Facing Social Design Projects Fail To Translate Co-Created Visions Into Structural Interventions. This Is Particularly Evident in the Case of Roller-Skating Youth—Often Framed as Disruptive or Marginal—Whose Spatial Claims Are Institutionally Overlooked (Heath & Holloway, 2023). At the Same Time, Digital Platforms Such as TikTok Are Rapidly Reshaping How Youth Navigate and Construct Spatial Identities (Henderson, 2024). I Contend That Platform-Based Practices Offer Unprecedented Access Points To Observe and Engage With Spatial Tensions That Are Otherwise Obscured in Daily Life.

This Research Begins by Critically Interrogating Whether Public Spaces in East London Genuinely Serve Their Youngest Residents—or Whether They Are Replicating Mechanisms of Exclusion. The Notion That “Designers Should Act as Responders Rather Than Responsibility Holders” (Thorpe & Gamman, 2011) Continues To Guide my Work, Urging the Inclusion of Lived Experience and Non-Designer Voices in the Design Process, Rather Than Imposing Predetermined Solutions.

While Socially Responsive Design Seeks To Dismantle the Binary Between ‘Designer’ and ‘User’ (Manzini, 2015), This Dichotomy Often Remains Intact in Practice—Especially When Engaging

With Non-Designers Such as Children and Adolescents. This Calls for Deeper Reflection: if Everyone Is a Designer, How Can Non-Designers Be Meaningfully Integrated Into Co-Creative Processes? What Support Structures Are Necessary for Their Contributions To Gain Transformative Potential? In This Project, I Attempt To Bridge Ontological Design (Escobar, 2018) and Binary Recognition To Formulate a More Empowering and Critically Reflective Pathway for Youth-Oriented Social Design.

Moreover, the Performative or Tokenistic Nature of Participation—as Critically Examined by Cooke & Kothari (2001)—Is Especially Problematic in Youth Contexts. In the Absence of Long-Term Institutional Frameworks, Young People’s Voices Are Often Symbolically Included but Structurally Excluded. What Is Needed Is a Participatory Model That Is Not Only Future-Oriented and Iterative (Mazé, 2019; Manzini, 2015) but Also Embedded in Resilient Spatial and Social Infrastructures.

Accordingly, This Research Aims To Develop a Participatory Design Toolkit That Clearly Redefines the Designer’s Role as a Facilitator and Enabler of Community Knowledge and Agency (Kimbell & Julier, 2019), While Remaining Critically Alert to the Risk of Bureaucratic Co-Optation Within Institutional Frameworks (Berry & Iles, 2010). The Key Challenge Is To Translate Decentralised Design Principles Into Real-World Projects—Particularly Those Involving Marginalised Youth, Such as Roller-Skating Adolescents in East London, Who Operate Within Contested and Overregulated Public Space. Practice Is Positioned as Essential to Understanding Youth Perspectives, Enabling Closer Engagement With Lived Experience and Repositioning the Designer Away From Centralised Authority. I Believe That Envisioning Future Urban Spaces Must Begin With Critical Reflection on the Inequalities of the Present.

Together, These Complex Urban Dynamics Reveal a Series of Urgent Research Gaps:

1. Generational Rupture in Tactical Urbanism: While Tactical Urbanism Is Well-Studied Among Adult Citizen Groups, There Is a Striking Lack of Research on How Children and Adolescents Engage Tactically With Spatial Exclusion (Jacobs, 1961; Lydon & Garcia, 2015).
2. The Structural Challenge of Youth-Led Implementation: Co-Creative Design Processes Involving Youth Often Lack Mechanisms for Translating Expressions Into Structural Interventions—Especially Among “Disruptive” Groups Such as Roller-Skating Adolescents (Heath & Holloway, 2023; Henderson, 2024).
3. Persistent Tensions Between Designers and Non-Designers: Although the Decentralisation of Design Is a Widely Accepted Theory (Manzini, 2015), in Practice Designers Often Retain Control. There Remains a Lack of Frameworks and Tools for Enabling Empowerment Without Reinstating Hierarchy.
4. Ontological Design for Youth Remains Underexplored: Escobar (2018) Emphasises Design’s Capacity To Shape Being and Relationships, but How This Applies to Children and Adolescents in Social Design Contexts Remains Largely Unexplored.
5. Lack of Frameworks Addressing the Tension Between Platformed Youth Practices and Urban Governance: Platforms Like TikTok Foster Decentralised, Algorithm-Driven Spatial Practices Among Youth. How These Practices Intersect With or Resist Traditional Governance Models Lacks Theoretical Grounding.
6. Risks of Symbolic Participation in Youth Design: Participatory Practices Involving Children and Adolescents Are Often Reduced to “Performative Co-Creation” Rather Than Structural Inclusion. There Is a Lack of Mechanisms To Detect and Prevent This Form of Dangerous Formalism (Cooke & Kothari, 2001).

Research Question

How can participatory design frameworks integrating tactical youth practices and digital spatial expressions (TikTok) empower East London roller-skating adolescents to co-create inclusive urban spaces amidst spatial exclusion?

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.

Methodology

Citywalk Observations:

Systematic walking observations will be conducted to document and map how adolescents use and experience public spaces. These mappings will be visualised through abstract yet contextually grounded cartographies, capturing temporal-spatial relationships and urban infrastructures. This method aims to reveal everyday spatial tensions and overlooked contradictions often omitted in top-down planning paradigms. Comparative case studies will be analysed alongside this fieldwork, such as the temporary skateparks in Jakarta—spontaneously organised by youth in response to public demand—and the DIY skate scene in Accra, Ghana, which exemplifies grassroots strategies to counter spatial exclusion. In contrast, such international initiatives often benefit from underutilised land and limited commercial pressure. East London’s roller-skating scene, by comparison, is shaped by TikTok-driven trends, resulting in large, fast-forming, and loosely organised collectives—a mode of spatial practice distinctly different from the skill-based, subculturally cohesive skateboard scene at London’s Southbank.

Integrated Onsite-Online Youth Interviews:

This method combines semi-structured interviews with digital ethnography on TikTok (Ofcom, 2024) to investigate how roller-skating functions as a mode of transport, a tool for self-expression, and a marker of social identity among youth. The aim is to interlink their embodied experiences in physical spaces with their algorithmically shaped behaviours in digital environments.

Participatory Co-Design Workshops:

Participatory workshops will be held using drawing, mapping, and storytelling to help youth articulate their spatial needs, prototype design interventions, and identify overlooked urban sites. Referencing practices by Matt+Fiona (2021), Build Up Foundation (2022), and Make:Good (2023), these workshops aim to empower adolescents as active spatial agents and iteratively refine the participatory toolkit through real-time feedback and situated experimentation.

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:

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- Links to digital resources (e.g., prototype toolkits, feedback videos)

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