



# Street life: youth, culture and competing uses of public space

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1. Jacobs, Jane (1961), *The Life and Death of Great American Cities: The Failure of Town Planning*, Penguin, Harmondsworth.

**SUMMARY:** *This paper examines city streets and public space as a domain in which social values are asserted and contested. The definitions of spatial boundaries and of acceptable and non-acceptable uses and users are, at the same time, expressions of intolerance and difference within society. The paper focuses in particular on the ways in which suspicion, intolerance and moral censure limit the spatial world of young people in Australia, where various regulatory practices such as curfews are common. The author reflects on the failures of the two main strategies that have been used in Australia to control the presence of young people, and concludes with some thoughts about the construction of streets and public spaces as diverse and democratic places.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

*“Think of a city and what comes to mind? Its streets.”<sup>(1)</sup>*

STREETS, AS JANE JACOBS reminds us, have always held a particular fascination for those interested in the contested domain of cities. Streets are the terrain of social encounters and political protest, sites of domination and resistance, places of pleasure and anxiety.<sup>(2)</sup> Many community members are uncomfortable with difference, uncertainty, the “unconforming other” in the streets of the cities. Politicians and the media play a key role in exploiting our sensitivities in this regard, often demonizing events and people and encouraging containment and regulation of those at risk of hurting themselves or others. The “fear of crime” in the streets has made the city dweller nervous of those exhibiting behaviours seen as different from the mainstream. Because of the visibility of youth in the streets, they are constantly under barrage of these regulatory practices.<sup>(3)</sup> Excluded, positioned as intruders, young people’s use of streets as a space for expressing their own culture is misunderstood by many adults. To protect them from harm, curfews, detention and move-on laws are now becoming commonplace in high-income cities around the globe.<sup>(4)</sup>

In this paper, I argue that along with other marginal groups, including gay and lesbians, and indigenous people and refugees, youth have different cultural values, understandings and needs – differences that should be supported and valued as significant contributions to the social capital of cities and towns. The focus of attention here will be on the visible use of public space, particularly the street, as the site for constructing youth

culture. I start by exploring the contested nature of city streets, in the present and the past. I will then present the *problem* of youth in the street and reflect critically on two major strategies that have been used by city councils and space managers in Australia to contain youth street behaviours. I conclude the article with some new ways of thinking about youth and their role in the street life of cities.

My experience of research with youth is predominantly in Australia, and this essay has an Australian perspective. However, I believe many of the issues raised pertain to other high-income countries and, in some cases, to low-income countries where young people are already experiencing levels of marginalization and stigmatization in their city environments.

II. BOUNDARY RIDING

ALL BOUNDARIES, WHETHER national, global or simply street names on a road map are socially constructed. They are as much the products of society as are other social relations that mark the landscape. For this reason, boundaries matter. They construct our sense of identity in the places we inhabit and they organize our social space through geographies of power.

Geographies of power are less easy to determine than physical marks. Whilst a street map can tell us where we are in relation to other physical markers, it cannot tell us how the people who operate in it classify street space. Sibley, a geographer who writes extensively on exclusionary practices in public space, provides a helpful framework for thinking about boundaries, using the terms *open* and *closed* spaces as shown in Table 1.<sup>(5)</sup>

A *strongly* classified space, says Sibley, has *strongly* defined boundaries, its internal homogeneity and order are valued and there is a concern with boundary maintenance to keep out objects or people who don't fit into the shared classification (or culture) constructed by the dominant group (the insiders). The regularity of design and the high visibility of internal boundaries, which interrupt traditional patterns of social organization, make what is culturally different appear disruptive and deviant. Examples of strongly classified spaces include shopping malls, churches, schools, spaces where only those who belong and behave are welcome. Difference is not encouraged or tolerated. In contrast, *weakly* classified

2. Fyfe, N (1998), *Images of the Street: Planning, Identify and Control in Public Space*, Routledge, London.

3. White, R (1994), "Street life: police practices and youth behaviour" in White, R and Calder (editors), *The Police and Young People in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

4. Valentine, G (1996), "Children should be seen and not heard: the production and transgression of adults' public space", *Urban Geography* Vol 17, No 3, pages 205-220.

5. Sibley, D (1995), *Geographies of Exclusion*, Routledge, London.

Table 1: Characteristics of open and closed spaces		
Characteristic	Open spaces	Closed spaces
Definition of boundary	Weakly defined boundaries	Strongly defined boundaries
Value system	Multiple values supported	Dominant values normalized
Response to difference and diversity	Difference and diversity celebrated	Difference and diversity not tolerated
Role of policing	Policing of boundaries not necessary	Preoccupation with boundary maintenance, high levels of policing
Position of public	Public occupy the margin	Public occupy the centre
View of culture	Multicultural	Monocultural

SOURCE: adapted from Sibley, D (1995), *Geographies of Exclusion*, Routledge, London.

spaces have *weakly* defined or open boundaries, and are characterized by social mixing and diversity. They include such places as sporting venues, carnivals and festivals. Difference and diversity in culture, identity and activity in these open spaces is tolerated, understood and sometimes even celebrated. Policing of these open boundaries is not as necessary, as there is less concern with power or exclusion.

An understanding of how and why boundaries exist is a useful framework for studying the politics of street space. In the next section, I will position these discussions of space in terms of tolerance and difference.

### III. TOLERANCE AND DIFFERENCE IN PUBLIC SPACE

*"EVEN THE WORD we choose to describe a superior state of mind – tolerance – speaks to our arrogance if not our prejudice. Tolerance. Toleration. I will tolerate you. In a country made up of a population of some hundreds of ethnic groups and religions, tolerance actually may not be good enough. We must aim at acceptance, and hope for celebration. It's a utopian proposition – at a time when even tolerance, with all its implications of condescension and noblesse oblige, seems beyond us."*<sup>(6)</sup>

Phillip Adams reminds us that tolerance in the multicultural communities that most of us live in around the world is an important starting point for developing a civil society. Yet intolerance, exclusionary practices and moral censure have been the basis for much of our territory and boundary making in the development of cities. The walled communities and villages of the past served to keep citizens safe and intruders out. In the postmodern world, the wall has been replaced by new eyes – the CCTV (closed circuit television) surveillance cameras – and these communities are policed through strict by-laws and security guards.

History illustrates that the exclusion and intolerance of difference are not new phenomena in the spatial and social organization of cities. While lamenting the privatization of public space in the postmodern city, many observers have tended to romanticize its history, celebrating the past openness and accessibility of streets, and grieving its loss.<sup>(7)</sup> We may well ask if there was ever a time when street spaces were free and democratic, equal and available to all.

Historical accounts from Europe and the United States indicate that, at least since the nineteenth century, if not before, public space has been regarded as a lively and contested domain, the site of popular protest and political struggle.<sup>(8)</sup> Marshall Berman identifies the politicization of the streets as a key component of the "experience of modernity", as the public domain became subject to increasing regulation and control. Berman traces this process through Haussman's uncompromising "modernization" of the streets of Paris, Le Corbusier's vision of the streets as a "machine of traffic" and Robert Moses' formidable plans for metropolitan redevelopment in New York.<sup>(9)</sup> Various social groups – the elderly, the young, the poor, women and members of sexual or ethnic minorities – in different times and places, have been excluded from public space and subjected to political and moral censure.

In nineteenth century New York, for instance, women, along with their delinquent children, were subjected to arrest and institutionalization under the vagrancy and truancy laws when they ventured unchaperoned into public space.<sup>(10)</sup> In this volume of the journal, Hart documents the trend in New York in the same period to "contain" children in play-

6. Adams, P (editor) (1997), *The Retreat from Tolerance: A Snapshot of Australian Society*, ABC Books, NSW, page 25.

7. Sercombe, H (2000), *Opting for Inclusion*, Keynote Presentation at Local Government Association of Queensland. Annual Conference, MacKay, Queensland, July 13; also Watson, S and K Gibson (1995), *Postmodern Cities and Spaces*, Basil Blackwell, USA.

8. Harrington, C and G Crysler (editors) (1995), *Street Wars: Space, Power and the City*, Manchester University Press, Manchester; also Nead, L (1997), "Mapping the self: gender, space and modernity in mid-Victorian London", *Environment and Planning A*, 29, pages 659–672.

9. Berman, M (1988), *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, Penguin, Harmondsworth.

10. Stansell, C (1986), *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860*, Alfred Knopf, New York.

grounds, to protect them from bad influences on the streets. In late Victorian London, the streets were experienced simultaneously as a place of sexual danger and erotic delight, depending on one's social class.<sup>(11)</sup> The Vagrancy and Malicious Trespass Act of 1839 in metropolitan London declared illegal a range of activities in the streets, including football, flying a kite or any game considered to be an annoyance to inhabitants or passers-by.<sup>(12)</sup> Moral panics of the 1850s gave rise to the imprisonment of juveniles as a result of these offences. Wilson provides a lively account of the threat of the public woman in nineteenth-century Paris and the associated attempts to restrict women's movements:

*"The very presence of unattended – unowned – women constituted a threat both to male power and male frailty. Yet, although the male ruling class did all it could to restrict the movement of women in cities, it proved impossible to banish them from public spaces. Women continued to crowd into the city centres and the factory districts."*<sup>(13)</sup>

In Australia, a similar phenomenon was evident at the turn of the twentieth century, when various legislation, colloquially known as the Larrikin Acts, supported the incarceration of many working-class youth, and then again in the 1950s in response to youth out of control.<sup>(14)</sup>

So too now, in contemporary society, there is a new surge of "moral panic", structured by gender, class, age and racial fear,<sup>(15)</sup> with public space continuing to be contested domain, a place marked by paradox and tension. Nostalgia notwithstanding, history illustrates that public space is, and has been, the site where conflicts of morality and social values have often been launched.

It is no coincidence, then, that we see the gay and lesbian Mardi Gras, the "take back the night" events held by the women's movement, and 9/11 protests being staged in the streets. These street carnivals are strategic political moments, when minority groups are attempting through the spectacle to destabilize the hierarchy of spatial dominance. The carnival, as defined by Antoni Jach, is:

*"...that which can't be held, can't be repressed, can't be organized into neatness. The fear of politicians everywhere: the crowd in the street; the uncontrolled, uncontrollable display; the random, unpredictable event that punctuates the facade of normality, the facade of power."*<sup>(16)</sup>

The carnival allows inversion to occur – minority groups take up the central position in space and dominant society is relegated to spatial margins. These inversions, often fleeting, represent a challenge to established power and can often lead to highly visible regulatory practices. Examples such as the recent New Age, Gothic and Rave music festivals located in rural locations (particularly in the United Kingdom and Australia), and the street parades for causes such as the treatment of refugees and gay and lesbians have come under constant scrutiny and control by government bodies. Many attempts throughout history have been made to limit or ban festivals and parades that celebrate alternative cultures in both rural and urban landscapes.<sup>(17)</sup>

But streets as the means for expressing alternative cultures and contesting values aren't always seen in a negative light. Tim Edensor, researching the culture of Indian streets, identified the diversity of street users as contributing to energy and vibrancy.

*"...vans publicize the current movie attractions with samples of the soundtrack, and when there are elections or local political disputes, loudspeaker vans broadcast political slogans. Demonstrations by political parties, and religious processions, theatrically transform the street into a channel of embodied trans-*

11. Walkowitz, J (1992), *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*, Virago, London.

12. See reference 7, Sercombe (2000).

13. Wilson, E (1995), "The invisible flaneur" in Watson, S and K Gibson (editors), *Postmodern Cities and Spaces*, Basil Blackwell, USA, page 61.

14. See reference 7, Sercombe (2000).

15. Davis, M (1990), *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, Vintage, London.

16. Jach, A (1999), *The Layers of the City*, Hodder Headline, NSW, page 91.

17. See reference 5.

18. Edensor, T (1998), "The culture of the Indian street" in Fyfe, see reference 2, page 207.

*mission... As a site for entertainment, children make their own amusement, playing cricket and other games, whilst adults play cards, chess and karam. Moreover, travelling entertainers such as musicians, magicians and puppeteers set up stalls and attract crowds. But there are also more mundane social activities such as loitering with friends, sitting and observing, and meeting people that also form distinct points of congregation."*<sup>(18)</sup>

In contrast to the current regulation of public space we are experiencing in many nations, spurred on and legitimated by the horror of terrorists attacks around the world and based on fear, suspicion, tension and conflict between social groups, the Indian street, according to Edensor, is regulated not by sophisticated policing mechanisms but through contingent, contextual and local processes exercised by the street users. It is a place where communities come together to express and perform a variety of cultural activities – a space with open boundaries. Edensor also notes the gaze of tourists who observe and experience a disorder and cultural diversity so different from the streets they have become accustomed to in their own cities. Unlike the carnivalesque spaces of Indian streets, the highly regulated streets of many contemporary cities direct the street pedestrian so as to create an uninterrupted view of the shop windows and traffic. The loiterers, those "hanging out" on the street, are seen by shopkeepers to hinder and disrupt the flow of the shopper. One trader announced to me during street surveys in a suburban shopping precinct: "*...they [the young people] make the place look untidy.*"

Throughout high-income nations, there is an attempt to segregate space in terms of legitimate and illegitimate user groups, with the regulation of movement and flow of people and information having national security status in many communities. The forces to create clear boundaries and separate spaces have been initiated in order to diffuse conflict in public spaces, and have focused on regulating and maintaining shared value systems. They are based on a vision of appropriate use and appropriate users of public space. Sibley identifies these forces as the "purification of space", the need for clear, closed boundaries, internal homogeneity and order and the means for boundary maintenance, "*...in order to keep out objects or people who do not fit the classification.*"<sup>(19)</sup> For Sennett, the spatial purification of disorder and difference in urban renewal programmes has important psychological and behavioural consequences. He writes:

*"Disorderly, painful events in the city are worth encountering, because they force us to engage with 'otherness', to go beyond one's own defined boundaries of self, and are thus central to civilized and civilizing social life."*<sup>(20)</sup>

Without disorder and difference, he believes people cannot learn how to deal with conflict as a part of their everyday life. Maybe such incidents as "road rage" point to a community that has lost the capacity to deal with disorder.

The maintenance of boundaries in the purified spaces of Australian cities relies on a liberal assumption that there is one shared set of "public" values to which all members of the civil society subscribe, and which determines what is deviant and who is welcome. In the process, the "legitimate" users of space also lose their freedoms – they are also watched by the close circuit surveillance cameras, subjected to bag checks and move-on laws. For many this is the price of living in a risk society.<sup>(21)</sup>

19. See reference 5.

20. Sennett, R (1994), *Flesh and Stone*, Faber, London.

21. Beck, U (2000), *Risk Society and Beyond: Critical Issues for Social Theory*, Sage, London.

#### IV. DOMINANT VALUE SYSTEMS

HOW ARE DOMINANT value systems constructed and maintained?

How are individual groups identified to become the focus of moral censure? Often constructed through the rhetoric of political correctness, dominant value systems are based on what the public views to be threats to the moral and social order of our cities. But public opinion is a fickle animal. Phillip Adams states that:

*"...apart from the extremes at either end of the Bell Curve, public opinion is like a large blob of jelly that wobbles this way or that, depending on the direction of prevailing winds. If actively encouraged, the jelly will wobble to one side. If those views are countered, it will wobble to the other."*<sup>(22)</sup>

The jelly wobbles and someone or something is the flavour of the month. It might be gay men who have contracted HIV/AIDS and are infecting the community, parents who throw their refugee children overboard for public sympathy, or followers of hip-hop singer Eminem who join gangs and beat up old ladies in the street. The media and politicians appropriate public opinion and it becomes played out in the regulation of our streets to keep them sanitized from these infectious "others". But does this application of a shared value system allow for difference? Kurt Iverson asks:

*"What might a model of publicness that does not assume the existence of a single public with shared values look like?" "The first step..."*, he reasons, *"...is to redefine the public sphere not as a single universal sphere with a set of universal values, but as a sphere where there is more than one set of values or more than one 'public'."*<sup>(23)</sup>

His question is pertinent when we explore issues of public space and dominant value systems in relation to young people.

22. See reference 6, page 35.

23. Iverson, K (1998), *Public Cultures and Public Space*, paper presented to PALM/RAPI Forum, Canberra, September 4.

## V. YOUTH CULTURE AND SPATIAL EXCLUSION

THE VISIBILITY OF youth and their competing use of street space positions them in the front line of conflict over its use. There is a mounting danger, as privatization of public space increases, that young people will be excluded from places the "public" now inhabits.<sup>(24)</sup> The perception of youth as a potential threat places them in an ambiguous zone in relation to space. Many become undesirables and a source of anxiety; others are seen as needing protection. Gill Valentine says:

*"Public space therefore is not produced as an open space, a space where teenagers are freely able to participate in street life or define their own ways of interacting and using space, but is a highly regulated – or closed – space where young people are expected to show deference to adults and adults' definitions of appropriate behaviour, levels of voices, and so on – to use the traditional saying: 'Children should be seen and not heard'."*<sup>(25)</sup>

Clearly, social organization and order is a powerful tool for disrupting and disarming discourses supporting definitions of multiple roles in communities. Being welcome in the public sphere has particular expectations, and those who enter must be willing to conform. Hanging around in groups on street corners talking, playing or simply observing others is viewed as inappropriate in the structured ordered streets of our cities. Yet the street, according to Rob White:

*"...represents for many young people a place to express themselves without close parental or 'adult' control, at little or no cost in commercial or financial terms. It is also a sphere or domain where things happen, where there are people to see and where one can be seen by others. In short, for many young people the street is an important site for social activity. And the intrusion of 'authority' into*

24. France, A and P Wiles (1998), "Dangerous futures: social exclusion and youth work in late modernity" in Finer, C and M Nellis (editors), *Crime and Social Exclusion*, Blackwell, Oxford.

25. See reference 4, page 214.

26. See reference 3, page 109.

*one's social affairs can and does create resentment and resistance, especially if this is done in a heavy handed fashion."*<sup>(26)</sup>

For many young people, the street is the stage for performance, where they construct their social identity in relation to their peers and other members of society. Many of the identities young people adopt within the public domain are contradictory and oppositional to the dominant culture (messy, dirty, loud, smoking, sexual); others have an easy fit (clean, neat, polite, in school uniform). Visible expressions of youth culture could be seen as the means of winning space from the dominant culture, to construct the self within the selfless sea of city streets; they are also an attempt to express and resolve symbolically the contradictions that they experience between cultural and ideological forces: between dominant ideologies, parent ideologies and the ideologies that arise from their own experiences of daily life.

Moralists often condemn young people for their risky, self-indulgent and anti-social behaviour, and identify potential perpetrators by stereotyping youth, using their dress as the main indicator.

*"Most gang members dress in the same manner..."* states an unidentified author of a youth and community newspaper; *"...the uniform of some local gangs is easy to recognize. It includes white T-shirts, thin belts, baggy or saggy trousers, and a black or blue knit cap. Gang members also like particular brands of shoes, pants or shirts."*

These types of accounts and descriptions construct our view of young people and often tell us more about the fears and anxieties of adults than about youth.

Unfortunately, these stereotypes have a more sinister outcome than just adult angst. Fanned by the media, and responding to a moral panic about an escalating "youth crime wave", a number of regulatory, surveillance and exclusionary régimes have been introduced to provide police (and other community members, such as security guards, etc.) with powers to physically remove young people from public spaces. These programmes include move-on laws, curfews and police detainment. Young people in Australia give verbal accounts of being targeted and harassed on the streets by police. Police say "stopping and questioning" people is part of their job, although it seldom happens to adults. The following account was taken from a weekend newspaper in Sydney Australia:

*"'Terry' an 18-year-old from Chatswood High School has been pulled aside on four separate occasions by police over the past month. Hanging around outside the local Coles supermarket, he was asked to turn out his pockets; playing pool in the youth centre he was taken off to be put in a break-and-enter identification line-up; walking through the train station on his way home he was searched by police and asked about heroin dealing. He was still in his school uniform."*

But more radical and enduring than the daily "stopping and questioning" has been the introduction of youth curfews. The most substantial and public example in Australia was Operation Sweep, a curfew and detainment programme endorsed and supported by the government of Western Australia in 1994.<sup>(27)</sup> A section of the Child Welfare Act 1947 (Section 138b) allowed police to detain children determined to be at risk. During Operation Sweep, police picked up over 200 young people (many of them on the streets waiting for lifts from parents) and took them back to the police station where they phoned parents to organize their collection. Many of these (now irate) parents were driving through the streets looking for their lost children and were not home to take the call. The operation raised questions of young people's civil rights and was, after many public

27. See reference 7, Sercombe (2000).

debates, subsequently abandoned.

Exclusionary and regulatory practices introduced in a variety of sectors in Australian society have not gone unnoticed. The United Nations audit of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in Australia in 1997 stated that:

*"Young people being refused access to commercial premises on the basis that they are likely to behave irresponsibly and be disruptive, [and] police in various localities establishing curfews which require all children to be home after a specific time are examples of discriminatory practices and an infringement of children's civil rights."* (Commonwealth of Australia 1997)

In more recent times, Australia's treatment of indigenous peoples and refugees has come under similar international scrutiny.

Similar to the Australian experience, Barry Percy-Smith writes on young people's experiences of the streets in the English city of Northampton:

*"Young people in both Semilong and Hunsburg related how their use of open spaces is often thwarted by controls laid out by adults or by competition with other place users... Conflicts appear to arise as a result of the ambiguous status of neighbourhood space and contested assumptions about young people's right to use these spaces. These are often semi-public or transitional spaces, sandwiched between public and private realms: for example, open grassed areas and neighbourhood streets around community buildings or route ways through local authority housing."*<sup>(28)</sup>

A contrasting view is found in the research conducted with young people in the port neighbourhood of Boca-Barracas, in Argentina, where young people experienced streets as sites for cultural production.

*"Although children in Boca-Barracas criticized the general level of litter, untidiness and lack of repair and maintenance of plazas, streets and sidewalks in the area, they still used these spaces, as there was nowhere else to go. Although these spaces might have seemed undesirable to an outsider, they harboured community life in the form of small neighbourhood industries, cafés, stores and the ubiquitous 'kioscos' where a child might purchase something sweet for a few 'centavos' (cents)."*<sup>(29)</sup>

Unlike in Australia and the United Kingdom, the street space in this Argentinean neighbourhood was a place for exploring relationships with peers and other members of the community, an open space where young people shared and expressed cultural connections and differences.

To alleviate the tension between young people and the public concerning public space, during the past ten years a number of strategies have been utilized in Australian communities. These strategies are: youth-specific space and negotiating youth space. I will summarize these strategies before providing some ideas for rethinking approaches to young people and street space.

## VI. YOUTH-SPECIFIC SPACE

I LIKE TO call this the "not seen and not heard" strategy. The community removes "the problem" by creating a space for young people where they can conduct their own activities without interfering with legitimate users of public space. On the surface, it seems like a win-win situation: young people are allocated rooms in the basement of shopping malls or skate ramps on the outskirts of town, thereby eradicating the possibility for interaction and potential conflict.

28. Percy-Smith, B (2002), "Contested worlds: constraints and opportunities in city and suburban environments in an English Midlands city" in Chawla, L (editor), *Growing up in an Urbanising World*, UNESCO and Earthscan, London, page 68.

29. Cosco, N and R Moore (2002), "Our neighbourhood is like that!" in Chawla, see reference 28, page 41.



An example is the development of a skate ramp as youth facility in the city of Frankston. Built in a car park on the edge of the central activities district, and under a two-way road ramp, it was to be a temporary site while negotiations took place regarding a permanent site. The car park was large (around 20 acres) and used mostly during peak shopping periods. After five years as a “temporary site”, it has become clear that there is no intention to relocate the skate ramp even though young people, local youth workers and our own research point to its inappropriateness. The main concerns are the lack of natural surveillance, lighting, toilets, drink fountains, shade and first aid facility, and the unsafe location across an empty car park. A local youth council member, Scott, wrote in a report to the council: *“A lot of the boys mentioned ‘outsiders’ when we were talking to them and expressed concern towards the installation of toilets due to it attracting druggies.”* The lack of “natural” surveillance led to feelings of uneasiness for many young people, especially girls. *“I don’t like going to the skate park anymore. I went there once with my friends and all these old guys from Dandenong turned up and started to push the young guys around. We left because we were scared.”* (Cassie aged 15, participant Growing Up In Frankston project, 1999)

In this instance, the youth-specific space was used only by the very keenest skaters. Very few girls went to the site and many younger boys would only use the ramp when they could be sure that police or other security people were on hand. It was not a place for youth to hang out together.

What the “not seen and not heard” strategy fails to address is the attractiveness of shared community space for young people, who do not want to be excluded or be invisible in the everyday life of their cities. The vibrancy of community public space provides young people with a variety of important elements, including an opportunity to observe and engage in the development of the social and cultural capital of their communities, to learn skills of social negotiation and conflict resolution, to try out new social identities and for there to be the safety and security necessary to do all these things. It has become obvious from the research that skate ramps and other youth-specific spaces on the margins of city centres are less than appealing places for young people (especially young women).<sup>(30)</sup>

The main issues identified by young people allocated spaces on the fringes of towns include lack of transport, issues of safety and security, and feelings of exclusion. Many conflicts arise over the ownership and the competing interests of groups of young people in these generic “youth” sites. Who owns the space? Who makes up the rules?

In summary, youth-specific spaces tend not to provide the positive physical and social qualities that young people are looking for in public space, that is, social integration, safety and freedom of movement.<sup>(31)</sup> The use of youth-specific spaces reinforces the position of youth as a problematic group, and justifies the need for them to be dealt with separately from other members of society.

## VII. NEGOTIATING YOUTH SPACE

A STEP FORWARD, but with a number of limitations, is the “negotiating youth space” strategy. White, Murray and Robins wrote in the introduction to their guide for *Negotiating Youth-specific Public Space* that:

30. Malone, K (2000), “Dangerous youth: youth geographies in a climate of fear” in Mcleod, J and K Malone (editors), *Researching Youth*, ACYS, Tasmania, pages 135–148; also see reference 28.

31. Chawla, L (editor) (2002), *Growing up in an Urbanising World*, UNESCO and Earthscan, London.

*"The need for such a guide at this point in time is due to the widespread interest in and hands-on activities for many people across the country on public space issues. A new role for youth and community workers in negotiating with local councils, property developers, shopping centre managers and state governments on public space is now emerging."*<sup>(32)</sup>

This participatory approach adopted in a variety of forms around the world focuses on the importance of creating fora where youth and the public engage in discussions and negotiations over the planning, development and management of public space. Examples of this have included the development of shopping-centre and street-trader protocols and contracts, youth councils and advisory committees, and shopping centre managers employing youth advocates.<sup>(33)</sup> Although more inclusive in its intent than a youth-specific space strategy, it still implies an underlying commitment to a universal view of mainstream values and positions youth as the "other" who must substantiate a claim for inclusion in public space. The success of these projects is dependent on the capacity for ongoing resources and time to be allocated to negotiations between young people and the place managers. A number of the issues need to be addressed when developing these programmes. For example, the type and level of participation afforded to those young people engaged in the negotiation process need to be considered carefully in light of the time frames, expectations and capacity of young people to contribute, the commitment by individuals in the council and the diversity of young people who are supposedly being represented.

Keeping youth interested in projects is also a significant issue – being young is not a permanent state of life. Also, changing trends, needs and patterns of behaviour mean that street life is mobile and constantly being reinvented in light of the production of street culture. White provides a cautionary note regarding the constraints of time and resources:

*"...it needs to be reinforced that creating positive public spaces for young people is a process. As such, it must be recognized that there is no single, or simple, solution to the issues covered in this publication. The process is ongoing, and requires long-term commitment of resources, staff and facilities."*<sup>(34)</sup>

There are examples where youth-negotiated spaces have been successful in at least creating the opportunity for youth issues to be acknowledged and valued.<sup>(35)</sup> But as an overall strategy, it still doesn't address the fundamental question of why public space can't implicitly accommodate alternative values and cultures, developed by social groups such as those of young people, in a natural and evolving manner.<sup>(36)</sup>

## VIII. STREET LIFE IN THE MAKING

TO MOVE FORWARD with an understanding of what a vibrant and exciting street life that includes young people might look like, we must have a grasp of how difference is constructed through various representations and practices that seek to name, legitimate and sometimes exclude young people. The vision of a future is the ideal of the unoppressive city, the open space with inviting streets. This would be a place where differences between people would be accepted – it would be an open place not enclosed against the world inside, a city without walls.<sup>(37)</sup> The unoppressive city is thus defined as being open to "unassimilated otherness".

Currently, we do not have such openness to difference in our social relations. The politics of an open street lies in the institutional and ideo-

32. White, R, G Murray and N Robins (1996), *Negotiating Youth-specific Public Space: A Guide for Youth and Community Workers, Town Planners and Local Councils*, Australian Youth Foundation, NSW.

33. Crane, P (2000), "Young people and public space: developing inclusive policy and practice", *Scottish Youth Issues Journal* Vol 1, No 1, pages 105–124.

34. White, R (1998), *Public Space for Young People: A Guide to Creative Projects and Positive Strategies*, Australian Youth Foundation, NSW, page 146.

35. See reference 33.

36. See reference 23.

37. Young, I (1990), *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

38. Giroux, H (1993), *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education*, Routledge, New York.

logical means for recognizing and affirming different groups and their needs in spatial terms. This could happen in three ways: first, by giving political representation to group interests; second, by celebrating the distinctive cultures and characteristics of different groups; and finally, by re-imagining the role of streets as sites of collective culture, and culture production and reproduction. Like the streets of India or Argentina, the street as the socially constructed boundary between public and private could be reinvigorated as the space within our city landscape where we celebrate difference, the spectacle, the performance and the carnival. The street could be remade as the space where the "other" is offered the opportunity to express cultural and social identity.

In terms of re-mapping the street as a site for youth to reproduce their own culture, there are two major considerations:<sup>(38)</sup>

- The liberal idea of multiculturalism that links difference within the terrain of false equality must be replaced by a *radical* view of cultural difference that recognizes the contested character of youth identity and youth culture within our community.
- Central values of democracy and children's (human) rights must provide the principles by which differences are supported and celebrated inside rather than outside mainstream politics.

To support youth in taking back the streets as an important space for the construction of their identity, the task of youth advocates is to move beyond the role of negotiator/bridge-builder between society and youth. Rather, they must recognize the highly politicized terrain of the public sphere, and open up debates and conversations focusing on the source of societal intolerance of all forms of "difference". Instead of asking: "*How can we alleviate space use conflict between adults and young people?*", they should be asking: "*Whose needs and values are privileged in the architecture of our city streets?*"

The concern should be with creating a language of democratic possibilities that rejects the enactment of cultural difference structured within notions of hierarchy and spatial dominance. The urban street needs to be reinstated as the symbolic space for the production and transmission of local identity. Lost from our civic consciousness, the function of the street, now deemed to be little more than a thoroughfare to the "analogous city" – a city with its system of malls, bypasses, subways and superstores – needs to be questioned in terms of what has been lost from the streets in the name of commodification.

Rethinking the role of streets and public spaces as sites of collective culture would enable concepts of democracy and difference to be reconstructed so that diverse identities and cultures could intersect as sites of creative cultural production; places where multiple perspectives can accommodate and support young people as valid and valued producers of social capital.

Tolerance in building a community of difference is an important stepping-off point for some, but it is more than putting up with difference. To create a public space where the opportunity exists for the growth of an authentic culture of inclusivity, there is a need to revisit streets before they were sanitized and commercialized and relearn how to create living spaces as opposed to what Sennett has referred to as "dead public spaces" and Mitchell as "pseudo public spaces".<sup>(39)</sup>

I finish this paper not with an answer to the question of how to reconstruct a culturally rich and diverse street life, but with a challenge to children's environment researchers to explore and learn more about the

39. See reference 20; also Mitchell, D (1995), "The end of public space? People's park, definition of public and democracy", *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* Vol 85, No 1, pages 108–133.

potential for viewing, in new ways, young people and their relationship with the community through their interactions in the street. Around the globe, there are still places, streets where conflict and contestation build a community rather than disconnect it, where patterns of expression and performance are seen as exciting and vibrant, where the passage through space is disrupted and distracted by a diverse community, including children and youth who are playfully exploring their sense of belonging, place and self-identity through the rituals and “dailyness” of street life.