EMERALD POINTS

CREATIVE USES OF URBAN SPACE IN ITALY

Research on Graffiti Writing, Parkour and Skateboarding

CARLO GENOVA



CREATIVE USES OF URBAN SPACE IN ITALY

This page intentionally left blank

CREATIVE USES OF URBAN SPACE IN ITALY

Research on Graffiti Writing, Parkour and Skateboarding

BY

CARLO GENOVA

University of Turin, Italy

emerald PUBLISHING

United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India
Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing Limited, New Era House, 8 Oldlands Way, Bognor Regis,
West Sussex, England PO22 9NQ

First edition 2027

Copyright © 2027 Carlo Genova.
Published under exclusive licence by Emerald Publishing Limited.

Reprints and permissions service
Contact: www.copyright.com

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without either the prior written permission of the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying issued in the UK by The Copyright Licensing Agency and in the USA by The Copyright Clearance Center. Any opinions expressed in the chapters are those of the authors. Whilst Emerald makes every effort to ensure the quality and accuracy of its content, Emerald makes no representation implied or otherwise, as to the chapters' suitability and application and disclaims any warranties, express or implied, to their use.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83742-128-2 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-83742-127-5 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-83742-129-9 (Epub)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

CONTENTS

Introduction 1

1 Urban Space and Its Creative Uses 5
Introduction 5
1. The Contemporary City: Control and Contestation 6
1.1. Urban Space as a Socio-Material Construction 6
1.2. Public Space as a Normative Order 7
1.3. Devices of Control and the Management of Urban Behaviour 7
1.4. Design and Use 8
2. Creative Uses of Urban Space: Three Practices and Cultures 9
2.1. Creative Use and the 'Creative' City 9
2.2. Graffiti Writing, Parkour, Skateboarding: Transversal Lines 11
2.3. Graffiti Writing, Parkour, Skateboarding: Distinctive Traits 13
2.4. Young Practitioners 15
3. Development Trajectories 16
3.1. Emergence, Diffusion and Articulation of the Practices 16
3.2. Recent Developments 17
3.3. Italy 19
4. The Research 22
References 29

2 Trajectories, Motivations and Meanings 39
Introduction 39
1. Pathways into the Practice and Influencing Factors 40
1.1. Bodily and Expressive Background 40
1.2. Family, School and Friends 41
1.3. Media and Models 43

1.4. Courses 45
1.5. Independent Learning 47
2. Meanings and Perspectives of Practice 48
2.1. Defining the Practice 49
2.2. Rewards and Sources of Satisfaction 50
2.3. Progression and Improvement 51
2.4. Practice and Everyday Life 53
References 55

3 Using Urban Space 57
Introduction 57
1. Places 58
1.1. The Places of Practice 58
1.2. Suitable and Unsuitable Places 61
2. The Different Types of Places of Practice 65
2.1. City Centre: Visibility, Density and Negotiation 66
2.2. Periphery: Margin, Freedom and Latent Possibilities 68
2.3. Dedicated Places: Safety, Legitimacy and Standardisation 69
References 71

4 Observing Urban Space 73
Introduction 73
1. Finding and Choosing Places: Trained Gazes, Informal Maps and Urban Opportunities 74
2. The Gaze on Places and the City 77
2.1. Places 77
2.2. The City 79
2.3. The Development of the Gaze 81
2.4. The Diversity of the Gaze 83
3. Leaving Traces 85
References 87

5 Scenes, Identities and Lifestyles 89
Introduction 89
1. Networks of Practice 91
2. Building Networks 92

3. Frequency and Duration of Practice Encounters 93
4. Beyond the Practice: Friendships, Leisure and Frequentation 95
5. Portrait of Practitioners 96
5.1. Gender and Age 96
5.2. Educational and Work Trajectories 98
5.3. Style, Aesthetics and Consumption, Leisure Time 99
5.4. Identity and Distinction 101
5.5. Different Types of Practitioners 102
References 104

6 Public, Institutions, Market, Media 107
Introduction 107
1. Presence of the Public and Relations with Passers-by 108
2. Feeling Observed 110
3. Videos 111
4. Police 112
5. Normalisation 114
5.1. Dedicated Places 115
5.2. Public Institutions 116
5.3. Associations 118
5.4. Courses and Schools 119
5.5. Public Events and Commercialisation 120
6. Public Representations and Practitioners' Perceptions 122
6.1. Knowledge and Image in Public Opinion 123
6.2. Image in the Mass Media 124
References 125

Final Reflections 129
1. Creative Uses of Urban Space 129
2. Graffiti Writing, Parkour, Skateboarding 129
3. Three Profiles of Creative Use of Urban Space 132
4. The Research Context 134
5. Future Research Developments 136

About the Author 139

This page intentionally left blank

INTRODUCTION

At the core of this book are creative uses of urban space. As is well known, urban space, and public space in particular, is often reflexively designed, legally regulated and oriented in its use by frameworks of social expectations. However, a city can never be entirely reduced to the projects that have designed it, to the norms that regulate its use, or to its most widespread uses, because there always remains a gap, an opening, in which architectures can be interpreted and used in unexpected, creative ways.

Speaking of creative use of urban space does not, however, mean evoking an idea of freedom without constraints. Every action developed within it in fact engages with the configuration of architectural elements, but also with social and legal rules, as well as with the physical presence of other users. Creativity therefore emerges from the actors' capacity to grasp whether, and how, a place allows a certain use, a certain action, given the framework of resources and limits that it offers.

In this sense, a creative use of urban space is also based on a transformation of the gaze directed towards it: what, in the eyes of an ordinary citizen, possesses predefined meanings and functions – that is, indications of use – is instead observed and interpreted in creative uses through different frames, from the perspective of possibility. A creative gaze therefore accompanies creative use; and if, on the one hand, the representation of individual places changes, as they acquire new meaning and new relevance, on the other hand, the representation of the urban territory as a whole also changes, as it is progressively composed through the network of places used and the routes that connect them.

These processes, moreover, often do not take place in strictly individual ways, but instead develop within social networks in which these creative uses and gazes are shared. Within these networks, more articulated frameworks of practices, sensibilities and models of reference also emerge, producing bonds and collective identities, with consequent processes of identification, distinction and recognition. Broader cultures thus accompany the practices at the centre of these creative uses.

A creative use of urban space is a different, alternative use, in relation to those predisposed by design, legally legitimated and socially most widespread. As a consequence, it may be considered – by public institutions, mass media and public opinion – as transgressive or deviant. At the same time, precisely because it is not aligned with convention, it may also be identified by these same actors as a potential source of innovation. The relationship between the individuals involved in these creative practices and the social context in which they operate therefore often proves complex.

With regard to these practices, public institutions act according to logics of opposition, aimed at preventing the spread of the practices; of containment, aimed at ensuring that they remain within defined spatial boundaries; and of normalisation, aimed at bringing them back within known, and therefore controllable, social, cultural and legal forms. Market actors, for their part, become interested in these practices once their diffusion is sufficient to create a potential pool of consumers; at that point, the logic is to select what, within them and their cultures of reference, can be translated into commercial value, excluding the rest, and to place it on the market. The mass media, instead, operate along two parallel lines: on the one hand, there is the critical narrative of the spontaneous forms of these practices, not infrequently described as morally or socially dangerous, both for those involved and for society; on the other hand, there is the valorising narrative, focused on their normalised forms, which describes them as positive factors of social, cultural and economic innovation. Public opinion, finally, knowing these practices mostly indirectly, develops representations and evaluations in which the polyphony of these approaches and discourses resonates, often revealing prejudices and contradictions.

The individuals involved in practices of creative use of urban space thus find themselves moving within complex socio-cultural contexts, in which strongly differentiated representations and forms of intervention circulate around them, and towards which they themselves therefore develop ambivalent attitudes.

The book investigates these dynamics through a comparative study conducted in Italy, based on qualitative interviews with young people involved in graffiti writing, parkour and skateboarding. The available research literature on these three phenomena is now extensive, but so far it has focused on each of them in isolation. The comparative approach is considered useful because it makes it possible to distinguish the specific traits of each from those that more generally characterise creative uses of urban space, observing how the practices and cultures that define them take different forms according to the type of action involved, its spatial requirements, the traces it leaves, the response

of public institutions, the market, the mass media and public opinion, and the attitudes that practitioners develop towards them.

On all these levels, the Italian context in which the research was carried out offers a particularly interesting field of observation. The encounter between practices that largely originated elsewhere and the specific reality of Italian cities generates distinctive dynamics. Their strong historical stratification and the presence of urban centres of high monumental and aesthetic value make public space particularly delicate. At the same time, processes of industrial abandonment and the presence of urban margins awaiting new uses have long offered these practices possible contexts of action that are freer and less regulated, but which today are increasingly often incorporated into regeneration projects in which the practices themselves are also involved. Moreover, these practices emerged in connection with broader youth cultures, in contexts such as the United Kingdom, France and the United States, where youth cultures have historically been, and remain, important social forms. In Italy, their diffusion and relevance have been, and remain, decidedly more limited, and tend to be connected to processes of importation. This makes the territorial context even more interesting for the aims of the research.

The book is organised into seven chapters.

The first chapter develops the theoretical, historical and methodological framework of the research. It opens by discussing the relationship between urban space, materiality, norms, uses and representations; it then introduces skateboarding, parkour and graffiti writing, reconstructing the trajectories of international development of the three practices, their rootedness in the Italian context, and the more recent processes of institutionalisation, commercialisation and regulation; finally, it presents the research design.

The second chapter investigates trajectories of access to the practices – analysing the role of peers, family, school, media, informal mentors and courses – and then examines the reasons for involvement, forms of learning and criteria of improvement.

The third chapter is dedicated to the places of practice. By examining the relationship between habitual spots and exploration, the criteria through which a place is defined as suitable or unsuitable, and differences in practice in central, peripheral and dedicated places, it shows how, in the choice of places, material qualities, accessibility, risk, visibility and co-presence with other users combine differently in the three cases, producing different conditions of freedom, control and creativity.

The fourth chapter explores how places are searched for, recognised and progressively inserted into geographies of practice. It reconstructs the processes through which a trained gaze develops, the role of direct exploration, word

of mouth and digital tools, and shows how practice transforms the perception of individual places and of the city as a whole. It also addresses the formation of memories, affective bonds and informal maps, as well as the question of the traces that practice leaves in urban space.

The fifth chapter focuses on the collective dimension of the practices, reconstructing the formation of local networks, the forms taken by shared practice and sociability, and analysing belongings, internal differences, lifestyles and criteria of recognition.

The sixth chapter shifts attention to the relationship with the outside. It therefore examines interactions with passers-by and the public, the role of videos and digital visibility, relations with law enforcement agencies and public institutions, as well as practitioners' reactions to processes of institutionalisation, commercialisation and mass-media representation. It shows how the three practices are continually located at the centre of tensions between curiosity and stigmatisation, support and containment, autonomy and normalisation.

The final chapter draws together these results, on the one hand offering a comparison of the three practices considered in the research and of their cultures, and on the other presenting a typology of ideal profiles of creative use of urban space that emerged from a transversal analysis of the three practices, while also reflecting on the relationship between the research findings and the territorial context of reference.

Overall, the aim of the book is therefore to offer a reflection on creative uses of urban space, considering the meanings that underpin them, the relationship with the city and its places that characterises them, the cultures that traverse them, and the relations they develop with the surrounding social context and its different actors.

1

URBAN SPACE AND ITS CREATIVE USES

INTRODUCTION

Graffiti writing, parkour and skateboarding are practices rooted in a creative use of urban space. They take shape through a direct engagement with the built environment, with its material characteristics, with the legal rules that define obligations and prohibitions, and with the social expectations that guide its use. A writer, a traceur or a skater does not observe the city only as a set of already established functions, but also as a field of possibilities; and where the ordinary gaze of the citizen relates to an urban element mainly according to the purposes for which it was designed, their distinctive gaze also sees a set of alternative opportunities. Urban space, indeed, is never entirely defined by the project that produced it, by the norms that regulate it, or by the uses that are most habitual within it. It is certainly organised through material forms and prescriptions, but it remains open to alternative interpretations and appropriations; and it is in this gap between what a place is designed for and what users see in it that its creative use is located.

Speaking of creativity, however, does not mean evoking an indeterminate freedom. Each of the three practices considered here has a specific set of needs and sensibilities, and creativity therefore emerges from the encounter between competences and material conditions: it is necessary to know how to see whether a place allows a certain kind of action, how its configuration supports or limits a gesture and whether its location makes the presence of the practitioner possible or risky. Urban space offers constraints and resources, but these become meaningful and actualised only for those who have learnt to recognise and exploit them.

In this sense, the three practices analysed in the book do not merely imply a different way of using the city, but also a different way of looking at it. Apparently ordinary places become legible in relation to the practice; not because

they change materially, but because the criteria through which they are interpreted change. The city is thus progressively recomposed into a distinctive geography, which does not replace the official one, but is superimposed upon it, producing a practice-based representation of the urban territory.

These processes, however, are not only individual. Graffiti writing, parkour and skateboarding are shared practices and cultures; ways of looking at the city and technical competences, codes and language, forms of recognition and belonging, develop through interaction and acquire value within specific social networks. At the same time, these practices mainly develop in parts of urban space that are not specifically intended for them. This brings practitioners into interaction with those who control these spaces and with other users, who may perceive the practices as expressions of urban vitality, but also as transgression, disorder or risk, and may therefore welcome them as cultural expressions or reject them as improper uses of space.

1. THE CONTEMPORARY CITY: CONTROL AND CONTESTATION

1.1. Urban Space as a Socio-Material Construction

Urban space cannot be understood as a simple container within which social practices unfold autonomously. Streets, squares, buildings, infrastructure and urban furniture participate in the construction of urban life because they do not merely host actions and relations, but help to make them possible, orient them and differentiate them. The city should therefore be understood as a socio-material construction, in which physical elements are always intertwined with social and cultural ones, in a relation of mutual constitution (Latham, 2016).

From this perspective, the configuration of urban space is not only a technical matter, but also a social, cultural, economic and political one (Tonkiss, 2014). It affects the forms of action that develop within it, because it can facilitate some of them while making others less likely. Urban design itself, in defining this configuration, can therefore establish possibilities and constraints, inviting certain uses and discouraging others.

These effects, however, should not be understood deterministically: urban forms do not automatically produce actions, but develop fields of possibility within which actors recognise resources and limits, adapting or challenging the functions envisaged. Places may therefore also open up to unexpected possibilities, emerging from the encounter between design, rules, materiality, interpretations and everyday practices (Lanng & De Block, 2022; Shah & Kesan, 2007; Stevens et al., 2024).

1.2. Public Space as a Normative Order

The dynamics described in the previous section become particularly significant with reference to public space, where institutional design is often explicitly oriented towards encouraging or inhibiting certain forms of use on the basis of broader cultural models (Mehta, 2007). It is precisely in this domain that the design of a place not only outlines interventions in material structures, but also, upstream, defines which actions and which uses are to be encouraged or discouraged (Carmona, 2021). More generally, urban forms incorporate implicit models of social order: they suggest where and how to move or linger, and which uses of places appear appropriate, according to their coherence with a certain expected image of the city.

At the same time, it is necessary to consider that the institutional design and regulation of public space is accompanied by its definition at the social level. As a result, both institutional norms and processes of habituation, social models and rules develop around its legitimate use, together with processes of informal sanctioning directed at possible transgressions.

Certain behaviour in a given place may therefore be considered problematic, or out of place, either because it violates a legal norm or because it appears dissonant with the social expectations associated with the use of that place (Cresswell, 1992). In this sense, transgression makes visible a form of regulation that usually remains implicit.

The main difference is that, when legal rules are involved, processes of surveillance-sanctioning or the development of 'hostile architecture' may also come into play. These are aimed at eliminating either certain forms of use, or even certain actors themselves, from a portion of space, through dynamics of material obstruction and deterrence that help to define who may be in a given place and under what conditions (Beckett & Herbert, 2008).

1.3. Devices of Control and the Management of Urban Behaviour

If urban order is produced not only by design and by the material impact of places on the actions they host, but also by a plurality of regulatory devices that define which behaviours are acceptable and operate to prevent those that are excluded, then legal norms, surveillance tools and social expectations together contribute to outlining a field of possibilities and boundaries.

Public administrations, at both national and local levels, are the actors that simultaneously produce formal rules and are responsible for enforcing them, with the aim of limiting or expelling unwanted conduct (Barker, 2017).

This regulation is also translated into material devices. So-called hostile architecture and defensive design operate through instruments such as segmented benches, spikes, barriers, fences, gates and deterrents, which make specific forms of presence physically uncomfortable or impossible. These devices do not merely organise places in relation to the uses made of them, encouraging some and preventing others; they also contribute to producing social boundaries, discouraging within them the very presence of subjects considered undesirable (Denman, 2025).

To these are added the tools and actors of surveillance, such as cameras, private security services and the police, which operate as both direct and symbolic deterrents, with control that is sometimes visible and sometimes invisible, depending on whether the objective is more preventive or more punitive (Muller et al., 2016).

Finally, these interventions are accompanied by the construction of public discourses aimed at legitimising these different forms of intervention through the categories of safety and decorum: ordinances, surveillance activities and technological devices of control are thus presented as being aimed at protecting the 'quality' of places, preventing 'decay', safeguarding the 'image' of the city, and guaranteeing 'ordered coexistence'. Practices and presences that are not envisaged by institutional rules or by socially predominant models are therefore often interpreted first and foremost as problems of urban order and deviance (Gayet-Viaud, 2017; Mattiucci & Schwarz, 2025; Moroni & Chiodelli, 2014); and establishing which behaviours are indecorous, unsafe or out of place means delimiting who may use public places, in what way and under what conditions (De Backer, 2016).

1.4. Design and Use

If one of the main features of urban space is the dense co-presence of architectural structures, subjects who move through it and act within it, and social and legal norms that establish, in its different portions, which activities are compulsory, permitted or prohibited (Franck & Huang, 2023), it is precisely this latter dimension – the definition of possible uses – that has acquired increasing weight. Urban space is today ever more pervasively regulated, both socially and legally, through designated uses, prescriptions and prohibitions. At the same time, it is also subjected to increasingly widespread forms of control and surveillance, which make it faster to identify actions perceived as transgressive and to sanction them (Berking et al., 2006; Body-Gendrot & Martiniello, 2016; Coleman, 2004, 2005; Peršak & Di Ronco, 2021).