

Article

Youth in Zurich’s Public Spaces: Hanging Out as an In/Exclusive Way of Taking Their Place in the City

Annamaria Colombo ^{1,*}, Claire Balleys ², Marc Tadorian ¹, and Marianna Colella ²

¹ School of Social Work Fribourg, University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland (HES-SO), Switzerland

² School of Social Sciences, University of Geneva, Switzerland

* Corresponding author (annamaria.colombo@hefr.ch)

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Abstract

Based on the preliminary results of an ongoing research project focused on the social and cultural practices of young people in physical and virtual public spaces across four urban areas in Switzerland, this article explores the everyday spatial behavior of youth who hang out in Zurich’s public spaces. It highlights how everyday activities provide these young people with a means of coming to terms with the inclusive and exclusive potential of the urban public spaces they appropriate and how, in turn, they adopt spatial practices that can prove more or less inclusive. Some of these practices may be provocative or even subversive; and whereas others are more discreet (sometimes involving unconscious behavior or passing unnoticed), we argue that they are no less political. The subtle ways in which young people progressively take their place in the city could best be described as “micropolitical.”

Keywords

adolescence; micropolitics; public spaces; socialization; urban cohabitation

Issue

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1. Introduction

Although political and scholarly attention to public space stretches back at least to Jane Jacobs’ work (Jacobs, 1961), its role not only as the setting for recent social movements (the Arab Spring, the yellow vests, climate action, Iran protests, etc.) but also as the focus of new security and control measures (CCTV cameras, facial recognition systems, etc.) seems to have sparked renewed interest in the concept (Qian, 2020). But beyond instances of social protest and political control, urban public spaces are also the site of everyday forms of urban cohabitation. The diverse uses of public space by different actors, whose level of familiarity with one another varies, can produce “everyday turmoil” (*troubles ordinaires*; see Bouillon et al., 2022), responses to which range from indifference to conflict and cooperation (Margier, 2017).

In particular, the ways that youth use urban public spaces can spark tension with adults or other groups of young people. Whereas children primarily socialize in private (especially in family environments) and institutional spaces (in schools), the transition to adolescence leads to an increased exploration of public spaces. Young people assert their right to public space by gathering with peers to listen to music, play sports, or paint graffiti. In this way, they gradually familiarize themselves with “the grammars of the public sphere” (Breviglieri, 2007), which shape processes of empowerment and adult identity construction.

Building on the work of Koch and Latham (2012), Qian has noted how, in most research on public space, “publicness is theorised as an ideal type, embodying aspiration for *inclusion* in the democratic urban commons, rather than a collective ambiance or habitus invoked

contingently through inhabitation, affective atmospheres and materialities” (Qian, 2020, p. 78). Drawing on the preliminary results of an ongoing research project focused on the social and cultural practices of young people in physical and virtual public spaces across four urban areas in Switzerland (Geneva, Zurich, Fribourg, and Mendrisiotto), this article addresses issues of inclusion and exclusion surrounding “ordinary” uses of urban public space by certain youth. Based on accounts shared by young people we met in Zurich, we agree with Qian’s argument that “inclusion and exclusion may be theorised as two logics of publicness that reside in mutually tensioned relationships, but can nonetheless coexist and even mutate into each other” (Qian, 2020, p. 79). Bearing in mind that “publicness” reflects an ongoing process rooted in everyday practices (De Backer et al., 2019; Göle, 2002; Low, 2000), this article looks at how such practices provide urban youth with a means of coming to terms with the inclusive and exclusive potential of the public spaces they appropriate. Some of the practices engaged in by young people can be conspicuous or even subversive; and whereas others are more discreet (sometimes involving unconscious behavior or passing unnoticed), we argue they are no less political. Rather, they correspond to what De Backer has described as the “micropolitical,” insofar as “they still are an expression of a political stance and a practice of protest” (De Backer, 2019, p. 310).

The article opens with a discussion of how the existing literature largely portrays public space as an unfavorable context for the socialization of youth. We argue that this dominant perspective not only obscures the fact that spending time with peers in public spaces can support identity construction and the transition to adulthood, but also promotes an essentialist understanding of urban public spaces as either “inclusive” or “exclusive” (Massey, 2005). In the second section, we use our research data to show how, far from being inherently inclusive or exclusive, the public spaces have a potential for either inclusion or exclusion that needs to be analyzed in terms of how youth interact with them and that fluctuates according to various factors shaping this relationship. The third section looks at how, rather than reflecting aimlessness and idleness, the practices of young people who hang out in public spaces actually constitute a form of micropolitics whereby youth assert a certain right to the city. The fourth section provides an opportunity to show how young people respond to the inclusive and exclusive potential of the public spaces they appropriate by developing urban cohabitation strategies that are themselves governed by logics of inclusion and exclusion. Finally, the article closes with a discussion of how even the most discreet practices, which often pass unnoticed, can prove politically significant.

2. Do Youth Belong in Urban Public Spaces?

This article relies on data collected as part of an ongoing research project that aims to provide a better under-

standing of how youth cultures develop through peer interactions in online and offline spaces, as well as how such cultures support the socialization process. Our research efforts are supported by a theoretical framework that draws on insights from the sociology of youth and socialization (Galland, 2011; Van de Velde, 2008), urban studies and the study of spatial practices (Authier, 2012; Lévy & Lussault, 2020; Parazelli, 2021), and the sociology of audiences and digital practices (Liebes & Katz, 1990; Livingstone, 2019). Based on a participatory model, the project has involved close collaboration with youth services agencies active in each of the four cities covered, as well as with the young people concerned. This has allowed us to maintain a dialogue between different forms of knowledge—academic, professional, practical—that we consider to be complementary. Following a multisite ethnographic approach (Debonneville, 2017; Marcus, 1995), we developed an innovative methodology for collecting data on the social and cultural practices of some 20 young people in each of the four urban areas covered by the project. Specifically, this methodology combines participant observation in public spaces, walking interviews (Kusenbach, 2003; Thibaud, 2022) led by youth between the ages of 14 and 25 in offline and later online spaces, as well as online ethnography and focus groups. As a result, we have been able to analyze youth cultures across the physical–virtual continuum to understand how these contexts interact and influence each other. Ten young residents of Zurich are among the 49 research participants who have already taken part in individual or group interviews.

Below, we explore issues of inclusion and exclusion that run through the experiences of the young people we met in Zurich. The analysis focuses on their use of geographical spaces, without addressing the digital component of the larger research project. All quotations from research participants (who are identified using pseudonyms) were recorded during walking interviews conducted in different areas of Zurich. Located in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, Zurich is the country’s largest city (with approximately 420,000 inhabitants, 30% of whom are foreigners) and serves as an important financial, political, tourist, artistic, and cultural hub. It is also home to a thriving alternative scene. Our fieldwork has focused on public spaces that are regularly and visibly appropriated by youth. The young people we have interviewed are among those who regularly gather in a variety of public spaces—parks, squares, streets, playgrounds, building entrances, underground parking lots, outdoor steps, etc.—where they develop social and cultural practices while interacting with peers. However, not all youth share such opportunities. As Oppenchain (2016) has shown, young people appropriate and move through public space in very different ways, mainly depending on their gender, age, social class, and place of residence. As a result, although our sample is somewhat diverse in terms of gender and age, it is much more homogenous concerning place of

residence and socioeconomic background. The youth we met came from the same two working-class neighborhoods (which, in the interest of anonymity, we refer to as neighborhoods A and B) where we conducted the bulk of our fieldwork. Situated in the northern reaches of Zurich, both these areas primarily consist of large housing blocks and towers, in contrast to residential neighborhoods closer to the city center and along the lakefront. Virtually all our research participants came from families of modest means and most of them were from migrant backgrounds. They described appropriating public spaces to socialize with peers in neighborhoods A and B and throughout central Zurich (e.g., in downtown parks, at the central train station, in the old town, and on the lakeside).

As Terzi and Tonnelat (2017) have pointed out, the concept of public space often lacks clarity. To reduce the ambiguity associated with the French term *espace public* (more often used to refer to the Habermasian notion of a public sphere), Paquot (2009, p. 3) has proposed using “public spaces” (plural) when discussing geographic locations, that is to say, “places accessible to the public, frequented by residents who may or may not live in the immediate vicinity.” We prefer Parazelli’s suggestion of using “public space” (singular) as a generic term to describe such places, and “public spaces” to refer to specific “physical locations accessible to the public” (Parazelli, 2021, p. 14).

Still, scholars disagree on exactly how to define public space. Whereas Jacobs (1961) emphasized the fundamental importance of diversity, others have identified accessibility (Carr et al., 1992), the simultaneous presence of individuals unfamiliar to one another (Sennett, 1970), or even visibility (De Backer, 2019) as key characteristics. Ultimately, these various criteria tend to prove both compatible and connected. Furthermore, Terzi and Tonnelat (2017, p. 525) have cautioned against treating them as intrinsic to public space in a way that tends to reify the latter’s publicness, which they propose conceiving of as “a potential or a becoming.” Likewise, Qian (2020, p. 79) has argued that “publicness is not an inherent quality of space, but an oeuvre born out of labours and agencies”; in this sense, it is “fluid, amorphous and contingent.”

Adopting the definitions proposed by Terzi and Tonnelat (2017) and by Qian (2020), we contend that it is precisely the fluid and indeterminate nature of spaces located outside the domestic sphere that certain youth find attractive. This perspective reflects a relativistic and relational understanding of space (Lévy & Lussault, 2020; Löw, 2016), insofar as we emphasize how “spatialized realities organize space through relationships that may involve social actors; they define it by activating such relationships, by setting them in motion” (Lévy & Lussault, 2020, p. 355). Beyond the mere presence of young people in public spaces, we focus on how youth appropriate them, find them meaningful, and ascribe meaning to them.

Yet, both the academic literature and social representations portray public spaces—especially urban ones—as inappropriate locations for young people to spend their time. This is especially true of places with a lasting and visible youth presence (Bellot & Sylvestre, 2015; Rothé, 2018). As for the safe movement of young people within urban space, this is seen as requiring a significant degree of parental supervision (Rivière, 2017). More specifically, two approaches dominate European and North American scholarship on the use of public spaces by youth. The first characterizes young people’s activities in such locations as “risky,” “pathological,” or even “deviant” behavior (Anderson, 1999; Desage et al., 2015), often by applying epidemiological or criminological lens (for a critical review of such studies see Colombo, 2010). Perceived as inherently dangerous and primarily associated with the consumption of goods, services, and experiences (Margier, 2017; Merrifield, 2013; Perraton & Bonenfant, 2009), urban public spaces are not considered conducive to the socialization of adolescents, who find themselves increasingly confined to private space (Poretti, 2016). In turn, the presence of young people in the streets is perceived as a danger, if not a threat to public order (Desage et al., 2015). Characterized as “disrespectful,” the practices developed by youth in public spaces are a source of tension with both neighborhood residents and the authorities (Cahill, 2000; Gray & Manning, 2022; Libois & Wicht, 2004; White, 1993). For example, young people may find novel uses for street furniture—such as skateboarding (Glauser, 2016) or graffiti (Brighenti, 2010; Tadorian, 2013, 2021)—sometimes causing damage in the process. Activities like these can trigger various responses, including removal, dispersal, and even punishment (Litscher et al., 2012; Low, 2000; Mitchell, 1996; Parazelli, 2021).

The second approach adopted by scholars interested in the use of public spaces by youth treats the presence of young people in city streets as a “default” situation, which may result from a lack of housing, a process of desocialization, or an irrational wanderlust (Zeneidi, 2010). References to wandering or even just hanging out express normative injunctions regarding the mobility and spatiality of young people, especially those in precarious circumstances (Pattegay, 2001; Trainoir, 2019; Zeneidi, 2010).

To begin with, such approaches promote a view of public spaces as risky or dangerous, thereby obscuring the positive role they can play in the socialization of youth. Indeed, as numerous researchers have shown, they can serve as “transitional spaces” conducive to adult identity construction (Parazelli, 2002), provide a catalyst for action (Tadorian, 2013, 2021), offer resources to those living on the street (Low, 2000; Zeneidi, 2010), or even form the basis for negotiating the conditions under which different groups share the city (Cahill, 2000; De Backer, 2019; Gray & Manning, 2022). Furthermore, dominant representations of public spaces tend to treat them as inherently inclusive or exclusive. In fact, the

experiences described by the young people we met in Zurich suggest that urban public spaces tend to exist in an indeterminate state, sometimes even wavering between inclusion and exclusion.

3. “We Just Want to Chill Out!”

Our research participants described regularly gathering with their friends either at meaningful locations in their neighborhood (e.g., a soccer field, a playground, a building entrance) or, in the case of older youth, in the city center. These places meet the criteria for what Lévy and Lussault (2020, p. 334) have called “shared spaces” (*espaces communs*), that is to say locations whose “layout allows them to be jointly used by social actors who have exited the domestic sphere.” Most of the time, the aim was to “chill out,” as the young people themselves put it. In other words, they wanted to spend time together talking or listening to music, and sometimes playing sports or painting graffiti. In the evening especially, activities might include consuming cannabis or alcohol. Consider the comments made by Ashan, a 14-year-old resident of neighborhood B with roots in Sri Lanka. A public school student with a love for manga, video games, cycling, and basketball, he described how he and five or six of his school friends (mostly boys) would get together mainly to have fun and fight boredom:

Young people like us are full of energy! We’re growing up....Puberty, you know? That means we need a lot of different activities, not always the same thing. Otherwise, it gets boring. My goal when going out? I just want to have fun. It can’t be boring.

Several times a week, after school or in the evening, Ashan and his friends would drop by the local community center to “chill out” by playing soccer, ping-pong, or video games. Often, they moved on to another location, usually to play basketball. When it got cold, the community center sometimes provided access to an indoor sports facility. But in good weather, they preferred to play in a courtyard between two neighborhood buildings that boasts a basketball hoop (without a net) and some trees. Although less well equipped than the indoor facility, this location appealed to Ashan and his friends because it was not associated with the community center and because the trees provided shade and a degree of privacy. Breviglieri (2007) has noted how adolescents prioritize the appropriation of what he calls “interstitial spaces” (*espaces intercalaires*), where they can gradually stake their claim to public space. Situated on the margins between the domestic and public spheres, such locations make it possible for youth to “oscillate” between childhood spaces and those characterized by publicness. Interstitial spaces that provide privacy or are hidden away prove all the more alluring. This helps explain why Ashan and his friends preferred playing at the relatively secluded outdoor basketball court, despite lamenting

the poor state of its equipment. Located in the heart of the neighborhood, close to their homes and their elementary school, this location allowed them to interact with peers in relative privacy while also maintaining contact with familiar settings from childhood.

Ashan also noted that many young people from his neighborhood, especially older ones, preferred to hang out at Zurich’s downtown central station. However, he had no interest in spending time there. To begin with, assuming he succeeded in getting permission from his parents to leave the neighborhood, he would need to keep them informed of his movements. In any case, this particular destination lacked appeal because it mainly offered opportunities for consumption that were poorly aligned with Ashan’s interests and out of his financial reach: “I never go there [central station]. There’s no point. All you can do is buy things. But you can’t do much of anything else.”

Bea, a 17-year-old enrolled in a workstudy program whom we met in neighborhood A, also described meeting up with friends (especially other girls) close to home. The daughter of a Swiss father and a Colombian mother, she belonged to a supporter’s group for one of Zurich’s two main soccer teams. In addition to watching soccer matches, she enjoyed painting graffiti, listening to Latin music, and playing basketball:

[When we meet up in the neighborhood], we just like to have fun, or play ping-pong. We often play a version where we switch places. We try to keep moving, even if we’re smoking or whatever, drinking beer, we still try to keep moving. Yeah, just having fun, talking about what we’ve been up to. But sometimes we’ll do nothing at all and everyone just looks at their phone. But I can’t because I only have internet access at home. So, I can’t surf the web, I can only listen to music or play games.

Bea also talked about how, as she had gotten older, she had increasingly been meeting up with friends (girls and boys) in a park downtown, where they sit around listening to music, drinking beer, and talking: “We normally sit down over here, because this little park isn’t very big. There’s other people over there. We pick up some booze and then we sit around in the park.” In this way, Bea revealed how, over time, she had come to explore a growing range of spaces, branching out from neighborhood locations to ones in other parts of the city. She and her friends valued these places not only for the privacy they offered (the little park) but also for the wider diversity of people present. Although the activities she described were similar to those she had previously enjoyed with girls from the neighborhood, increased mobility had led her to reshape and broaden her circle of friends, which now included youth from other parts of the city. For instance, she explained how, by choosing centrally located meeting places, they ensured that no one would have to travel especially far. However,

she also emphasized how the potential for spontaneity and discovery drew her to locations outside her own neighborhood. Indeed, her words conveyed a longing for the harmony, freedom, and spontaneity she associated with downtown locations, in contrast to the more stifling atmosphere she associated with places closer to home. She gave the example of another downtown park—one with a lot of trees, which she called “the forest”—that she sometimes visited with her friends. According to her, the harmony of the place, which can give the impression of being in the middle of nature instead of the middle of a city, made people friendlier and more open than in neighborhood A:

For example, the day before yesterday, we suddenly decided to go into the forest so we could sit down and enjoy the view. It was all on the spur of the moment. We didn’t plan it in advance. We just went into the forest, we ran into some people, some of them were older, we said hi to them. I find it really nice when people greet each other, it’s another sign of the harmony in the forest. You know, people just say “hello!” and you say “hello!” back. Anyway, they’re much friendlier or whatever, I find, in comparison to here [neighborhood A], where if you say “hello,” no one answers. You just keep on walking. It’s annoying...

Like Bea, other young people we interviewed described gradually abandoning locations closer to home (which appeal to younger individuals, like Ashan) for ones farther afield (often downtown). Meanwhile, as reflected in the experiences of both Ashan and Bea, the movements of young people within public space (as well as their online activities) are monitored and restricted to varying degrees by parents. The level of parental control tends to vary by age and gender, with younger children (like Ashan) and girls (like Bea) enjoying less freedom. Rivière (2017) has described how parents generally allow young people to explore public space in stages, based on a gradually expanding boundary. First, children are left alone at home. Later, they can wander the neighborhood or walk to school without adult supervision. And when they reach a certain age, youth can begin visiting locations farther from home.

The age at which young people are allowed to begin exploring public spaces is often higher for daughters, who are subject to stricter rules (Clair, 2008; Oppenchain, 2016; Rivière, 2017). Bea explained: “My mother doesn’t like it much when I hang out in town.” Other female research participants were more likely than their male counterparts to report restrictions on their ability to travel within the city and a need to keep parents apprised of their movements outside the family home. This was especially true for girls from families of more modest means, whose parents had grown up in a country other than Switzerland, or who lived in single-parent households. Bea, who lived with her Colombian mother and her stepfather, explained how she had to keep

her mother informed of her whereabouts at all times, providing constant reassurance in the form of texts or calls from her smartphone. Ashan, whose parents came from Sri Lanka, also faced more restrictions than most of his peers. However, this was due to his age, not his gender. Based on his study of adolescents in urban France, Oppenchain (2016) has observed that although parents consistently place constraints on youth mobility, the nature and extent of such restrictions vary according to a family’s conception of public space and the dangers it could pose for young people. Socioeconomically disadvantaged, single-parent, and ethno-racial minority families tend to see public space as more of a threat, especially for daughters.

The experiences described by Bea and Ashan show how the appropriation of public spaces provides youth with an opportunity to gradually take their place in the public sphere, while continuing to draw strength from their peer group. This aligns with Parazelli’s (2002) notion of “transitional spaces,” insofar as public spaces promote the construction of an adult identity on the margins of traditional institutions of socialization, within a “imaginary in familialist terms” of horizontal socialization among peers (Colombo, 2021). In these spaces, young people play basketball or ping-pong, talk among themselves, listen to music, or simply “do nothing at all,” as Bea explained. And yet, her descriptions suggest that something significant was going on even when she and her friends were “doing nothing at all.” All on their smartphones, those with internet access were checking their social media feeds while those without it were listening to music or playing games. In other words, they were doing what they did by themselves at home, but they were doing it together in a different kind of space. This gave them the opportunity to collectively comment on what they were doing, to determine which activities or behaviors were considered acceptable, to express and compare opinions, to gain a stronger sense of belonging by openly sharing the same interests, to set themselves apart by remarking on the behavior of other youth they interacted with online or in person. In short, they were learning the codes governing what behaviors are socially acceptable outside the familiar spaces of the domestic sphere and school, while relying on the (dis)approving gaze of their peers for guidance.

At the same time, youth perceptions of the inclusive or exclusive potential of public spaces depend less on the intrinsic characteristics of such locations than on factors like age, gender, and family socialization. This was reflected in the experiences described by all the young people we met, including Ashan and Bea.

Perceptions can also vary based on young people’s relationships with other users of public space. For example, Bea explained that the greater freedom she felt downtown was partly a reflection of just how much her use of public space was subject to control within her own neighborhood.

4. Hanging Out as Micropolitics

Bea told us how one day, while she and her friends were playing cards at a park in an adjacent neighborhood, a woman came up and told them that they were not allowed to be there:

Once, I was sitting on a ping-pong table with some friends. We were just quietly playing uno, listening to some music. And then an older lady came along and told us we weren't allowed to be there....She started saying things to us, calling us names and stuff, for no reason... and we weren't behaving badly. We even tried to be polite to her....I think it's a shame....There aren't any signs that say "private" or "keep out!"

Bea's friend Berna, a 16-year-old Swiss citizen completing an apprenticeship in the education sector, participated in the same walking interview. She had also grown up in neighborhood A and supported the same soccer team as most of the young people she knew. Berna explained how she and her friends liked to sit on the steps of a local supermarket. However, they were often rudely told to move along by people who just happen to be passing by:

There's a supermarket [in our neighborhood] with a place where we can sit around back, on a small set of stairs....While we're there, they [adults] often tell us: "Hey, get out of there!" Sometimes, they insult us and tell us we're not allowed to be there and kick us out....But it's not written anywhere that we're not allowed to be there!

Both Bea and Berna expressed resentment at this kind of treatment, emphasizing how they had "done nothing wrong" by just "hanging out" in a spot where, by all indications, they were allowed to sit down. Still, their accounts suggest that it was not so much their presence or their activities that disturbed the adults who confronted them, but the ways in which they had appropriated public space. Specifically, both girls described using street furniture or other urban amenities for purposes they were not designed for, such as by sitting down on a ping-pong table or stairs. And by "sitting around" (as they put it) in an area designed as an entryway or pathway, or for a very specific activity, the young people involved had violated the "socio-spatial dictates" governing the use of such locations (Parazelli, 2021, p. 17). Hence the strong reactions of passersby, who felt the need to remind them of the official functions and appropriate uses of the spaces in question. Such interactions also reflect the fact that cities are often designed "exclusively for the dominant category of citizens, namely economically productive adults" (Tonucci, 2019, p. 57). Indeed, as multiple authors have pointed out, functionalist approaches to architecture and urban planning tend to produce public spaces designed to facilitate the uninterrupted move-

ment of residents toward private and protected spaces (Garnier, 2010; Low, 2000; Margier, 2017; Mitchell, 1996; Perraton & Bonenfant, 2009). As a result, the static use of public space, especially by groups, can be perceived as disruptive or even threatening by other inhabitants of the city (Bellot & Sylvestre, 2015; De Backer, 2019; Young, 1999).

But it is important to recognize that in the cases described by Berna and Bea, the alternative use of public space did not reflect ignorance of social norms. Rather, the young people involved appear to have been challenging the narrow and seemingly exclusive uses imposed by adults. Not that such challenges always lead to open confrontation. In fact, youth normally seek to avoid conflict, especially with adults. For instance, Berna described how, despite being irritated by how adults reacted to her and her friends, she normally walked away without saying anything, out of a sense of both pragmatism (staying out of trouble) and decency (respecting what others think is right):

I never talk back to older people who tell me to "get out of here!" or things like that. Sure, I get a little annoyed. But at the end of the day, it doesn't bother me. I just tell myself: "They're old. They're just doing what they think is right." I don't do anything to pointlessly provoke them. It wouldn't do any good. Instead, I just leave.

This reflects the fact that Berna and the other young people we met did not object to the mere existence of rules governing the use of public space or even the fact that the uses favored by adults did not align with those favored by youth. Rather, they disagreed with how certain rules were used to exclude them specifically. Accordingly, in locations with a greater potential for inclusion, youth tend not to challenge such rules and sometimes even seek to uphold them. Consider how Bea and Berna describe their experiences in a third downtown park, which they regularly visited with their friends. They noted how the park in question was also popular with younger teens as well as highly marginalized adults, whom the girls described as drug users. Although each group tended to keep to its own section of the park, clashes sometimes occurred. The authorities had recently installed CCTV cameras in response to a higher incidence of littering and fights. During the walking interview, Bea and Berna tended to discursively and physically distance themselves from other users of the park, especially the young teens, whom they blamed for causing problems. They emphasized the need to show respect for the public spaces they visited, out of a desire to not only ensure that the area would be safe and clean when they returned but also to head off any complications associated with increased police surveillance. Like the habit of greeting passersby described by Bea in an earlier quotation, they characterized an understanding of the rules governing the use of the park and a willingness to respect

them as a sign of maturity. Accordingly, by demonstrating that they knew how to behave in a less familiar public space (i.e., one located outside their neighborhood), where they interacted with a wider variety of groups, they were able to assert adult status and distinguish themselves from younger park users.

Clearly, when they appropriate certain public spaces for their own use, youth are inclined to do more than passively adopt the prevailing social codes of behavior. In many cases, they actively negotiate such codes by variously comparing them, defying them, adopting them, and even upholding them. These findings underscore the need to look beyond the appearance of aimlessness or disregard for rules of behavior when studying how young people occupy public space, to recognize manifestations of what De Backer (2019) calls “the micropolitics of the hanging out spot.” As De Backer et al. (2019) argue, the concept of micropolitics is close to Scott’s concept of infrapolitics, “which refers to a kind of politics that avoids direct confrontation but opens up to a ‘subterranean world of political conflict’” (Scott, 2012, p. 244). By focusing on the microgeographies of everyday life (Low, 2000), it aims to “recognize the political beyond the antagonistic moment and beyond visibility” (De Backer et al., 2019, p. 244).

Like the young people De Backer met in Brussels, our research participants described efforts to use or redesign such spaces in ways more suited to their needs. Such efforts reflect an attempt to defend “their right to be in public—the right of presence, use, action and modification (Lynch, 1981)—and the framework of rules of their own device” (De Backer, 2019, p. 315).

Nor are the “micropolitics of the hanging out spot” solely a matter of pushing back against sociospatial dictates imposed by adults. The act of appropriating public spaces also allows youth to develop their own forms of control, whose degree of inclusion also varies.

5. In/Exclusion: Strategies for Controlling Public Spaces

Cyrill, a 20-year-old Zurich Oberland resident with roots in Switzerland and Romania, was enrolled as a food industry apprentice at the time we interviewed him. He spent a lot of time downtown and in neighborhood A, where his girlfriend lived, hanging out with her and their friends. He explained how his group was always ready and willing to defend the spaces where they gathered against incursions by other young people they perceived as a threat. Although this meant that they sometimes got into fights, they were committed to not bothering families, especially those with children. On one occasion, Cyrill went so far as to intervene to protect a father and child, leading them away from the scene of a fight he deemed potentially dangerous:

We leave [families] alone. We don’t care about them. When there are children, families, we leave them alone. We don’t bother them, we leave them alone.

One time, I did piss off a father. It was one in the morning when he came by. There was a big police operation because of a fight. He went back and forth three times with his stroller: “To hell with that kid! He has no business being here!”

In this instance, Cyrill went beyond a passive respect for families by going out of his way to explain the need to steer clear of a fight. Such examples illustrate how the young people we met did not merely challenge or accept ways of using public space that had been imposed by adults. In some situations, they felt confident enough to impose their own rules, even when this meant preventing others from using the spaces in question. When they targeted young children and other groups perceived as vulnerable, such exclusive strategies were justified in terms of protection, as in the example given by Cyrill. But when they involved confronting other groups of young people, they reflected a desire for dominance. It was primarily male research participants who described implementing strategies of domination. These boys felt justified in behaving aggressively toward other youth who encroached on what they considered to be “their turf,” sometimes going so far as to fight off interlopers. But dominance could also be expressed through actions that appear more trivial. For example, Cyrill explained how he and his friends would play loud music to discourage others from remaining in a busy park where they often hung out. Others described fights and standoffs, as well as cases where certain young people were banned for a particular neighborhood. This happened to Diego, a 15-year-old light industry apprentice with roots in Switzerland and Ecuador who had grown up in a working-class Zurich neighborhood. He described being unable to visit neighborhood B because of a conflict with some local youth:

Over there, that’s [neighborhood B]. I used to go there all the time....There’s always tension....I’ve been in fights with three or four guys from over there. Things are a little too heated over there for me [right now]....It happens quite a bit in Zurich: One person bars another from visiting a particular place....In theory, I’m not allowed to enter [that neighborhood]....But if I’m with my buddy who’s from there, they can’t touch me.

But as De Backer has explained, exclusive strategies can paradoxically contribute to inclusion: “To be truly social, young people need to be *asocial*: establishing a territory goes hand in hand with the erection of boundaries and the exclusion of others” (De Backer, 2019, p. 315). In this way, excluding others provides youth with a means of strengthening ties within their own peer group and claiming their own place in the public sphere.

Meanwhile, by establishing the boundaries of what they consider to be “their turf,” young people also recognize the territories claimed by other groups.

The experiences described by Faust do a good job of illustrating these dynamics. The son of Portuguese immigrants, this 16-year-old who was completing a mechanical and metalworking apprenticeship had spent his childhood in neighborhood B. Although he had once been involved in drug trafficking, he claimed this was no longer the case. He had a passion for motorcycles and spent a lot of his free time playing soccer or exploring his neighborhood and downtown Zurich, either on foot or in older friends' cars. Like his friends, he was a fervent and unmistakable supporter of one of Zurich's two main soccer teams. While talking about the area around the team's stadium, where he regularly met up with other fans, Faust explained how he had "always been there to defend our territory and show that it belongs to us," even when that meant using his fists. However, he adopted a completely different tone while leading us down what he called "the long way," an especially long street in his neighborhood where he regularly hung out with his friends at night:

[Here, we often come across other groups of young people] and things can get tense. In general, everyone keeps their distance and tries to stay out of each other's way. Well, sometimes we get into fights...but we're not the ones starting trouble by showing up at a spot someone else is already using. We do our own thing....There's no point in provoking others.

When young people seek to assert their right to use certain spaces in their own way—occasionally imposing their own codes of behavior or excluding other groups—micropolitical strategies tend to be implemented in relatively peaceful ways. In fact, our research participants generally expressed a desire to avoid conflict whenever possible. This was especially true in situations where they found themselves on unfamiliar ground or in the presence of young people they did not know well. Bea put it this way: "When, like, there are too many people in the same place and we don't know them very well, that's when we prefer to move on instead of staying. Instead of, you know, picking a fight and annoying them." Situations like these show how, instead of excluding others, young people sometimes practice a form of "self-exclusion" by simply leaving the disputed area. They may even prefer invisibility when they find themselves in public spaces.

6. Invisibility as Protection

De Backer (2019) has described how young people who hang out in Brussels rely on different "regimes of visibility" to regulate their interactions with other users of public space. Likewise, the situations described by the young people we met in Zurich provide examples of subversion, control, and sometimes even domination. And when their presence in public space produced overwhelming feelings of unease or insecurity, our research participants tended to opt for discretion, if not invisibil-

ity. Still, these moments of uncertainty were not necessarily tied to specific locations. Instead, they tended to be shaped by factors like the style of dress and ethnoracial origin of the young people involved, and above all by their gender. In addition to being more likely than their female counterparts to describe situations where they had exercised control over a public space, male interviewees were also more likely to talk about encounters with police. For example, during a walking interview, Diego led us to a part of Zurich that is home to a skatepark and a "hall of fame" (a place where graffiti artists are allowed to paint murals). The location held special significance for him since he and his friends often spent time there skateboarding, listening to music, and looking at the surrounding graffiti. He explained that, although the area was mainly used by skateboarders during the day, a more diverse range of young people arrived at night, when a more festive atmosphere took hold and those present often behaved badly. He had frequently been stopped and searched by the police, not necessarily for being involved in a fight, but simply for being with a group of young people. As a result of such experiences, Diego remained constantly on guard against the authorities, even when he felt he had done nothing wrong. He explained how, when he saw the police coming, he always ran away and alerted his friends so they could avoid any potential trouble:

When we see the police going by, we make a run for it right away. And once we're safe, we start warning our buddies....They warn our other friends...and that's how everyone in the neighborhood stays safe, I'd say. When the police are in the neighborhood, we stay on top of what's going on. That way, nothing bad can happen.

As for our female research participants, they described feeling especially unsafe when they encountered strange men in unfamiliar locations or while out on their own. This is how Bea set the scene:

In the street or at a park, there are certain men....They always feel the need to say something when a good-looking woman goes by. For a woman, it's a bit unpleasant. I'm not saying we're not used to it, but we need to protect ourselves as women, we need to stand up straight and say "fuck them" and go on our way instead of letting them get a rise out of us.

To avoid being bothered by male strangers, the girls we interviewed described paying heightened attention to how they moved, what they wore, and where they went. They also employed self-defence strategies like traveling in groups or with men, carrying pepper spray in their bags, or simply pretending to talk on the phone.

These examples show that young people are very conscious of being subject to gender-specific rules of behavior when in public space. The preliminary results

of our research project also highlight other factors that intersect with gender, including styles of dress as well as visible associations with a working-class neighborhood or a particular ethno-racial group. Ongoing and planned research will allow for more in-depth analysis of the connections between these different factors and how they jointly shape the inclusive or exclusive potential of the relationships young people maintain with public spaces. Nevertheless, this article has shown that, far from seeing themselves solely as victims of police surveillance or misogynistic behavior, young people actively rely on strategies of (in)visibility that are perfectly integrated into their everyday experiences. Although often less visible or dramatic than strategies of protest, domination, or spatial control, strategies of invisibility have no less micropolitical significance, given how they facilitate young people's efforts to appropriate public spaces and stake out a place in the public sphere.

7. Conclusion

Our findings show how, even though cities are rarely planned with an eye to facilitating the use and appropriation of public spaces by youth, and contrary to prevailing representations in the literature, young people's presence in such locations does not automatically reflect idleness or subversive activity. Rather, young people have a structured perception of public space and they actively negotiate the terms of cohabitation with other users. For instance, our research participants described appropriating public spaces that held significance for them. At times, they actively defended what they considered to be "their territory." In other situations, they opted for invisibility. Above all, they sought out spaces where they could meet up with friends while enjoying a degree of privacy. By diversifying their activities and progressively expanding the extent of their movements, they appropriated urban public spaces in ways that allowed them to gradually familiarize themselves with the "grammars of the public sphere" (Breviglieri, 2007). In turn, this learning process facilitated the development of an adult identity.

Although sometimes subversive or confrontational, their spatial practices generally tended toward the mundane, the peaceable, and sometimes even the invisible. As demonstrated above, this does nothing to take away from the (micro)political significance of these practices. Indeed, the young people we interviewed were well aware that some of their activities could disturb other users of public space and run counter to normative expectations regarding the intended purpose of specific locations and the behavior of those present. That is not to say they were ignorant of the rules for urban cohabitation or prone to disregarding them. In fact, they generally followed such rules, although they also actively participated in negotiating them. Ultimately, the strategies that our research participants employed for sharing public spaces varied according to the groups they interacted

with, their relationship to the locations concerned, and their interest in returning.

Taking the political dimension of young people's everyday spatial practices into account makes it possible to look beyond an idealized and binary vision of public spaces (e.g., a working-class neighborhood or a city center) as inherently inclusive or exclusive. This more complex perspective allows for an understanding of publicness rooted in processes of both inclusion and exclusion that together provide youth with opportunities to gradually assert their presence in the public sphere and take their place in the city.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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About the Authors



Annamaria Colombo (PhD in urban studies) is a full professor UAS at HES-SO, University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland in Fribourg, School of Social Work. Favoring merging of knowledge and participatory methodologies, her work focuses on urban and juvenile marginalities and is interested in the meaning that practices considered marginal or “at risk” have in the eyes of the concerned actors. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3878-4069>



Claire Balleys (PhD in communication and media sociology) is an associate professor at the School of Social Sciences from the University of Geneva, Switzerland, and head of Medialab, Institute of Media and Cultural Studies. She was formerly an assistant professor at the School of Social Work, University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland, a postdoctoral fellow at the LabCMO of UQAM (Montreal), at the Institut National de la Recherche Scientifique in Quebec City and at Télécom Paristech (Paris).



Marc Tadorian (PhD in humanities and social sciences) is a postdoctoral fellow at HES-SO, University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland in Fribourg, School of Social Work. He has been conducting research for several years in the field of spatialities and contemporary urban youth subcultures, using ethnographic, multi-sited, transnational and participatory approaches.



Marianna Colella is a Phd candidate at Medialab, Institute of Media and Cultural Studies, School of Social Sciences, University of Geneva, Switzerland.