

Youth-Driven Tactics of Public Space Appropriation in Hanoi: The Case of Skateboarding and Parkour

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ABSTRACT

Starting in the 2000s, there has been a rise in youth-led appropriation of public spaces in Hanoi, Vietnam. Through case studies of skateboarders and *traceurs* (practitioners of parkour) in two of the city's formal public spaces, we explore and analyze the tactics deployed by these young urbanites to claim a part of the characteristically overcrowded and socio-politically restrictive public spaces of the Vietnamese capital. These case studies show that, by seeking to access public spaces for their new activities, skaters and traceurs have had to confront multiple sets of rules, imposed by not only the state, but also corporate actors and resident-driven surveillance. We find that skateboarders and traceurs deal with these forms of control largely through small-scale, non-ideological, and non-confrontational tactics. As a result, these youth practices have become normalized in Hanoi's public spaces. These findings broaden the discourses on everyday urbanism and social-political transformations in post-socialist urban contexts, and shed light on the ways in which contemporary youths engage with the city.

KEYWORDS: Youth, skateboarders, traceurs, everyday urbanism, spatial appropriation tactics public space, Hanoi, Vietnam, doi moi, street discipline, bo mon duong pho

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Introduction

The use and meaning of Hanoi's public spaces have undergone a profound change over the last three decades as Vietnam has experienced major socio-economic reforms (known as *doi moi*). Rapid urbanization and densification has favoured a new use of public space and allowed for the flourishing of spontaneous urban practices. This change in the role of Hanoi's public spaces has attracted the attention of scholars concerned with understanding the intertwining of urban change and political and social transformations in a post-socialist urban context. These concerns further echo a worldwide debate on understanding the emerging forms of everyday urbanism and social and political engagement driven by young people.

Our research was done through a case study of two groups of youths engaged in skateboarding and *parkour*¹ in two of Hanoi's formal public spaces (Lenin Square² and 34T Plaza). Beginning in the late 1990s and early 2000s, young urbanites began to experiment with new activities, colloquially referred to as "street disciplines" (*bo mon duong pho*), in some of the city's smaller public spaces such as our two study sites. The Vietnamese neologism "street discipline" refers to a wide array of lifestyle sports such as hip-hop dancing, skateboarding, parkour, inline skating, and single-speed cycling.

This study focuses on skateboarding and parkour because the youths who engage in these activities have met considerable hardship in seeking to establish these new urban practices in Hanoi. All street discipline practitioners are faced with the obstacles stemming from the characteristically overcrowded and socio-politically restrictive environment. Due to their heavy reliance on the material environment of the city (e.g., use of benches, lamp posts, outdoor stairs, etc.), skateboarders and traceurs are also perceived by other public space users, and by local authorities, as damaging to the urban environment. The fact that these two groups have had some success in claiming space for their activities opens up an insightful window onto the processes through which contemporary Vietnamese youths negotiate urban space.

Our qualitative analysis of the public space appropriation practices adopted by these youths combines a variety of data collected in two periods.

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¹ "Parkour" consists of moving efficiently and naturally through the built environment by jumping, climbing, and vaulting as gracefully as possible over obstacles. Parkour practitioners are commonly referred to as "traceurs."

² Not to be confused with Reunification Park (*Cong vien Thong nhat*), previously known as Lenin Park (*Cong vien Lenin*).

In an exploratory phase (May 2013 to November 2014), we first collected data on youth engagement with Hanoi's public space.³ This allowed us to identify eight key informants among Hanoi's skateboarding and parkour scene whom we selected because they belonged to different age segments (from 16 to 34 years old), engaged in skateboarding or parkour in different years, and played different roles in their group (including leadership roles). Between October 2014 and December 2015, these key informants were engaged in one or more open-ended interviews, and in additional focus-group discussions (in total four discussions were conducted with forty-three participants).

In-depth interviews provided detailed data on individual public space appropriation tactics, personal aspirations, and how this related to the informant's decision to engage in the practice of a specific street discipline. Focus-group discussions centred on the role of the collective in their space appropriation tactics and in the assertion of the informants' life-styles choices in the public spaces. This material also uses insights from observational data gathered at each site during the exploratory phase in which we visually mapped youths' daily routines and their tactics of non-verbal communication (gestures rather than words) to appropriate space. In addition, we use insights from six interviews conducted with policy makers and planners focused on the formal rules governing Hanoi's public space and ways in which they are enforced at Lenin Square and 34T Plaza.

This material provides further evidence of the diversification of the sources of authority exercised over Vietnam's urban public space.⁴ First, our case study begins by showing how formal public spaces in contemporary Hanoi are governed by a variety of management and policing arrangements. In inner-city public spaces, such as Lenin Square, youths are subjected to older forms of state surveillance. In the more recently built public spaces (mostly located on the urban periphery), youths are confronted with newer forms of authority exercised by corporate actors and residents. In this paper, we argue that public space appropriation involves more than a contestation of state rules as has been argued in existing literature on post-reform urban Vietnam.

³ During this first phase, we conducted semi-structured interviews with youths aged 18 to 25 years old (n = 60), led eleven focus groups with street-discipline practitioners, and compiled systematic observation data about youth activities (40 hours per site). Participants for the interviews were recruited either on site or through snowballing. All interviews were conducted in Hanoi. With the exception of two interviews conducted in English, all interviews and focus groups were conducted in Vietnamese, transcribed, and then translated into English.

⁴ Similar observations are made by Sandra Kürten, "The Transformation of Public Space in Hanoi," *Asien* 108 (July 2008); Sandra Kurfürst, *Redefining Public Space in Hanoi: Places, Practices and Meaning* (LIT Verlag Münster, 2012); Sarah Turner and Laura Schoenberger, "Street vendor livelihoods and everyday politics in Hanoi, Vietnam: the seeds of a diverse economy?" *Urban Studies* 49, no. 5 (2012): 1027–1044; Erik Harms, "Vietnam's Civilizing Process and the Retreat from the Street: A Turtle's Eye View from Ho Chi Minh City," *City & Society* 21, no. 2 (2009): 182–206.

Second, this paper will demonstrate how since the end of the 1990s, skateboarders and traceurs have dealt with these various sources of authority primarily through small-scale, non-ideological, and non-confrontational spatial appropriation tactics. These include: appealing to empathy, using gradual encroachment, raising the level of social acceptance of their activities by enlarging the number of practitioners of their street discipline and by encouraging a positive discourse about their new activities. These skateboarders and traceurs constantly reassess and adjust their use of formal public spaces to avoid conflicts with other users or local authorities. This discreet and slow mode of operation, we contend, has helped normalize new youth-led urban practices in Hanoi.

This paper is structured as follows: section 1 situates our case study in the literature on everyday urban practices and public space appropriation in the post-socialist context of urban Vietnam. Section 2 presents our two study sites: Lenin Square and 34T Plaza. By contrasting the sources of authority and rules governing each place, we highlight the variegated forms of public space control that characterize contemporary Hanoi. Section 3 introduces the groups of skateboarders and traceurs on which this study focuses. We examine the three main non-confrontational tactics they have employed in the last few years, to secure space for their new activities. We conclude in section 4 by situating our empirical findings among wider discussions on everyday urban politics. This urges us to rethink how youth act socially and politically and engage with a rapidly changing urban world.

1. Everyday Spatial Politics in Post-Socialist Hanoi

Rapid urbanization in Vietnam has meant a densification of population and the intensification of the use of public space. In the case of Hanoi, these rapid transformations have gone hand-in-hand with a noticeable rise in the spontaneous use of public space; i.e., activities initiated and led by ordinary citizens that challenged a long history of hegemonic state control over the city.⁵ In the early 2000s, scholars began to explore this use, looking first at the appropriation of sidewalks for private commercial and domestic activities, at street trading, and at crowding in open spaces around popular events.⁶

⁵ Nguyen Quoc Thong, "Histoire de Hanoi: la ville en ses quartiers" [History of Hanoi: the city in its neighbourhoods], in *Hanoi: Le cycle des métamorphoses: formes architecturales et urbaines* [Hanoi, cycle of metamorphosis: architectural and urban forms], eds. Pierre Clément and Nathalie Lancret (Paris: Les Cahier de l'IPRAUS), 17–30; Trinh Duy Luan, "Hanoi: Balancing Market and Ideology," in *Culture and the City in East Asia*, eds. Mike Douglass et al. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 167–184; William Logan, *Hanoi, Biography of a City* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000).

⁶ Lisa Drummond, "Street scenes: Practices of public and private space in urban Vietnam," *Urban Studies* 37, no.12 (2000): 2377–2391; Peter Higgs, "Footpath traders in a Hanoi neighbourhood," in *Consuming urban culture in contemporary Vietnam*, eds. Lisa Drummond and Mandy Thomas (London: Routledge, 2003), 75–88; Mandy Thomas, "Public-Spaces/Public Disgraces: Crowds and the State in

More recently, research has analyzed recreational practice in the open spaces surrounding national monuments and the staging of public protests in front of government buildings.⁷

The cornerstone of this research is a profound reworking of power relations within Vietnamese cities. Similar to the conclusion of studies conducted in Chinese cities,⁸ the research on the changing role of public spaces in post-reform urban Vietnam emphasizes a contestation of state rules. Scholars have analyzed disputes over land grabbing, public park redevelopment, and youth street protests. These studies have contributed to a better understanding of social and political change in Vietnam.⁹ Some scholars have even gone so far as to build on the seminal work of Jürgen Habermas, Hannah Arendt, and Richard Sennett, to argue that the ongoing state-society struggle over Hanoi's physical space might be the embryonic expression of a genuine public sphere in Vietnam.¹⁰

Such interpretation should however be taken with caution in the Vietnamese context. The vast majority of theoretical work on socio-political transformation and the forming of a public sphere in cities (of which Habermas, Arendt, and Sennett provide key examples), was generated in democratic societies where freedom of expression and oppositional politics are key drivers of change.¹¹ Vietnamese scholars have demonstrated the limitation of contentious politics for understanding changes in state-society relations in Vietnam, speaking instead of “dialogue” to describe how various elements of the state and civil society often negotiate and mediate.¹² In urban

Contemporary Vietnam,” *Sojourn* 16, no. 2 (2001): 306–330; Mandy Thomas, “Out of control: Emergent cultural landscape and political change in urban Vietnam,” *Urban Studies* 39, no. 9 (2002), 1611–1624.

⁷ David Koh, “The pavement as civic space: History and dynamics in the city of Hanoi,” in *Globalization, the city and civil society in Pacific Asia*, eds. Michael Douglass, Kong Chong Ho, and Giok Ling Ooi (London: Routledge 2008), 145–174; Turner and Schoenberger, “Street vendor livelihoods”; Sandra Kürten, “The Transformation,” 67–79; Andrew Wells-Dang, “Political Space in Vietnam: A View from the ‘Rice-Roots,’” *Pacific Review* 23, no. 1 (2010): 93–111.

⁸ For instance, Piper Gaubatz, “New Public Space in Urban China: Fewer Walls, More Malls in Beijing, Shanghai and Xining,” *China Perspective* no. 4 (2008): 72–83; Anthony M. Orum et al., “Public Man and Public Space in Shanghai Today,” *City & Community* 8, no. 4 (2009): 369–389.

⁹ Andrew Wells-Dang, “Political Space in Vietnam”; John Gillepsie, “Exploring the Limits of the Judicialization of Urban Land Disputes in Vietnam,” *Law & Society Review* 45, no. 2 (2011): 241–276; Nguyen Phuoc An, “State-society relations in contemporary Vietnam: An examination of the arena of youth,” *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 47, no. 3 (2006): 327–341; Stephanie Geertman and Julie-Anne Boudreau, “‘Life as Art’: Emerging youth networks in Hanoi and the Tree Hug Movement,” *City and Society* (forthcoming).

¹⁰ For instance, Kürten, “The Transformation,” 67–79; Thomas, “Out of control,” 1611–1624. These studies acknowledge that Vietnam's urban civil society is still limited in size and scope and that its public sphere of action is far from immune from state control and censure.

¹¹ Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (Boulder: Paradigm Books, 2006).

¹² Benedict Kerkvliet, “An Approach for Analysing State-Society Relations in Vietnam,” *Sojourn* 16, no. 2 (2001): 238–278, 245; David Koh, *Wards of Hanoi* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006); Irene Nørlund, “Civil Society in Vietnam: Social Organisations and Approaches to New Concepts,” *Asien* 105, no. 10 (2007): 68–90.

contexts, scholars have adopted this notion of dialogue to make sense of successful, everyday practices of negotiation between street vendors and local authorities.¹³

Beyond negotiation with the state, other studies focus on the use of sidewalks for private or domestic activities.¹⁴ The presence of many people engaged in leisure activities in urban open spaces is significant in that it offers a means for ordinary citizens to assert their identities and interests.¹⁵ The very visible presence of these everyday activities is testimony to “the erosion of the hegemonic authoring of Hanoi’s public spaces by the state and the rising of a city which more closely incorporates its citizens’ yearning to participate in the creation and transformation of its landscape and meaning.”¹⁶ Our analysis of skateboarding and parkour in Hanoi expands on these studies by shedding light on how non-ideological everyday practices performed by youths also contribute to socio-political change in the city.

Benedict Kerkvliet has demonstrated how in pre-reform rural Vietnam, villagers’ non-ideological local everyday activities prompted the de-collectivization process that later evolved into changes in national policy.¹⁷ Agrarian policies, Kerkvliet argued, were transformed not as a result of massive collective actions and organized movements but instead through the shared, everyday non-ideological actions of largely unorganized farming populations. This independent political action through everyday activities by peasants is also central to the work of James C. Scott, who speaks of them as “weapons of the weak.” By this he means to emphasize the subtle but powerful forms of everyday (mainly oral) resistance among peasants in Southeast Asia. These concepts are useful; however, they remain focused on rural rather than urban contexts.

In the Middle East, Asef Bayat demonstrates how the ordinary life choices of various urban subaltern groups, such as street vendors, squatters, and youths, have triggered gradual political and social change. Bayat speaks of “low politics,” referring to “localized struggles for concrete concerns.” He conceptualizes the networks engaging in these forms of low politics as “non-movements,” that is, collections of individuals that operate without pivotal

¹³ David Koh, “The pavement as civic space,” 145–174; Turner and Schoenberger, “Street vendor livelihoods,” 1027–1044; Noelani Eidsa, Sarah Turner, and Natalie Oswin, “Contesting Street Spaces in a Socialist City: Itinerant Vending-Scapes and the Everyday Politics of Mobility in Hanoi, Vietnam,” *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 106, no. 2 (2016): 340–349.

¹⁴ Lisa Drummond, “Street scenes: Practices of public and private space in urban Vietnam,” *Urban Studies* 37, no. 12 (2000): 2377–2391; Peter Higgs, “Footpath traders in a Hanoi neighbourhood,” in *Consuming urban culture in contemporary Vietnam*, eds. Lisa Drummond and Mandy Thomas (London: Routledge, 2003), 75–88.

¹⁵ Thomas, “Out of control.”

¹⁶ Thomas, “Out of control,” 1612.

¹⁷ Benedict Kerkvliet, *The Power of Everyday Politics: How Vietnamese Peasants Transformed National Policy* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2005).

leadership, ideology, or formal structure to influence governance.¹⁸ He further contrasts these concepts with more conventional oppositional politics as follows:

... unlike the abstract and distant notions of “revolution” or “reform,” [these localized struggles] are both meaningful and manageable [for the dispossessed]—meaningful in that they can make sense of the purpose and have an idea of the consequences of those actions, and manageable in that they, rather than some remote leaders, set the agenda, project the aims, and control the outcome.¹⁹

Through examples such as underground music concerts, private parties, and laxity in the way young women wear the veil, Bayat underscores how what he calls “politics of fun”²⁰ leads to a “quiet encroachment on the ordinary.”²¹ He demonstrates how in Tehran, for example, youngsters appropriate public space by using religious rituals as occasions to dress their best, stroll through the streets, and have fun. Although these are non-ideological everyday activities they gradually challenge state control.

Asef Bayat’s concept of “low politics” can be understood as a practice of everyday life or as what Michel de Certeau calls “tactics.” Tactics are actions performed in a constant state of reassessment and correction, based on direct observations of the actual environment.²² In contrast with de Certeau’s notion of “strategies,” tactics do not presume control and self-reference. Low politics and non-movements can be seen as examples of everyday urbanism. Defined as “social products, created out of the demands of everyday use and the social struggles of urban inhabitants,”²³ everyday urbanism is a tactical form of low politics.

The concepts of everyday urbanism and low politics offer relevant analytical lenses through which we can better understand the urban practices of youth because, unlike James C. Scott and Benedict Kerkvliet’s suggestions, they are grounded in urban change. Moreover, they focus on surreptitiously offensive actions rather than just everyday forms of resistance as a means for everyday survival. Low politics and everyday urbanism emphasize the notion of a “quiet encroachment” and the “the art of presence” as factors of socio-political changes rather than focusing on oral resistance.²⁴ Finally, the fact that Asef

¹⁸ Bayat, *Life as Politics*, 14–26.

¹⁹ Bayat, *Life as Politics*, 184.

²⁰ Bayat, *Life as Politics*, 137–158; Asef Bayat, “Islamism and the Politics of Fun,” *Public Culture* 19, no. 3 (2011): 433–459.

²¹ Bayat, *Life as Politics*, 43–65.

²² Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Rendall (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1984), xix, 35.

²³ Margaret Crawford, “Introduction,” in *Everyday Urbanism*, eds. John Chase, Margaret Crawford, and John Kaliski (New York: Monacelli, 1999): 8–19.

²⁴ Bayat, *Life as Politics*, 1–26.

Bayat's concept of low politics was formulated in non-democratic Middle-Eastern cities makes it more relevant for understanding socio-spatial and socio-political changes in urban Vietnam (also a non-democratic context).

A number of scholars have already analyzed youth practices in urban Vietnam. Their studies have explored the way young people search for tourists around national monuments and museums to practice their English and the organizing of protests in public spaces without permission from the authorities.²⁵ Only a handful of scholars, however, have focused on youth perspectives. The few studies that have explored this area tend to emphasize tension and the generational gap.²⁶ Christina Schwenkel writes:

The older Vietnamese generation was raised in relative poverty, and went through episodes of war and communist state control. The new generation is coming of age in a more liberal socialist environment and a technological and communication revolution exposing them to international consumer products and lifestyles that remained largely unknown to their elders.²⁷

These scholars note how in this context, youths are largely perceived as a threat to the social order, including a risk to subverting deeply held cultural values. This is not unique to Vietnam. Scholars, however, observe a current global generation that significantly contributes to “softer” forms of social and political change, characterized by features such as “freedom, customization, scrutiny, integrity, collaboration, entertainment, and innovation.”²⁸ This generation is also argued to be “more horizontal, interactive, participatory, open, collaborative, and mutually influential.”²⁹ The role of this generation in social and political urban change, however, remains largely understudied. In the following sections we will explore the perspectives of the young skateboarders and traceurs, by looking at their everyday spatial practices in the variegated landscape of control in Hanoi.

²⁵ Christina Schwenkel, “Youth Culture and Fading Memories of War in Hanoi, Vietnam,” in *Everyday Life in Southeast Asia*, eds. Kathleen M. Adams and Kathleen Gillogly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 127–136; Nguyen Phuong An, “State-Society Relations”; Geertman and Boudreau, “Life as Art.”

²⁶ David Marr and Stanley Rosen, “Chinese and Vietnamese Youth in the 1990s,” *China Journal* no. 40 (1998): 145–172; Nguyen Phuong An, “State-Society Relations”; Karen Valentin, “Politicized Leisure in the Wake of Đổi mới: A Study of Youth in Hanoi,” in *Youth and the city in the global south*, ed. Karen Tranberg Hansen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 74–97; Christina Schwenkel, “Youth Culture.”

²⁷ Schwenkel, “Youth Culture,” 127.

²⁸ June Edmunds and Brian S. Turner, “Global generations: Social change in the twentieth century,” *British Journal of Sociology* 56, no. 4 (2005): 559–577; Don Tapscott, *Growing up digital: How the net generation is changing our world* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009); Linda Herrera, “Youth and Citizenship in the Digital Age: A View from Egypt,” *Harvard Educational Review* 82, no. 3 (2012): 333–352; Tracey Skelton, “Taking Young People as Political Actors Seriously: Opening the borders of political geography,” *Political Geography* 42, no. 2 (2010): 145–151; United Nations Population Fund, *State of world population 2014; the power of 1.8 billion adolescents, youth and the transformation of the future* (2014), accessed 8 June 2016, https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/EN-SWOP14-Report_FINAL-web.pdf.

²⁹ Edmunds and Turner, “Global generations.”

2. A Variegated Landscape of Control

Claiming a part of Hanoi's public space for the practice of new urban activities is a multifaceted challenge for youths. On its most general level, the Vietnamese capital offers young Hanoians—like the rest of the city's population—very limited public space. In fact, this situation has only deteriorated since the beginning of the *doi moi* reforms. Between 2000 and 2010, the city's total park area declined from an already limited 2.09m² per capita to just 1.48m².³⁰

In such circumstances, skateboarders and traceurs are inevitably bound to compete with other users for space. Beyond these constraints, the youths on which this study focuses also face forms of control specific to the two places where they seek to engage in skateboarding and parkour (Lenin Square and 34T Plaza). They also have to deal with broader societal norms about appropriate youth behaviour, which tends to limit their range of possible activities in the city. This section draws a portrait of these localized and diffuse socio-spatial and socio-political constraints and of the ways in which they affect youths' attempts to appropriate public space in post-socialist Hanoi.

Localized Socio-Spatial Constraints

Lenin Square and 34T Plaza (figure 1) share a number of characteristics that make them particularly attractive to youths and that help explain the intensification of their use. Both public spaces are adjacent to main streets and are easily accessible. Moreover, and in contrast to many of the larger formal public spaces in Hanoi, they are unfenced and do not charge an entry fee.³¹ Most importantly, however, both places feature a rather large, flat, and non-programmed surface suitable for the practice of street disciplines. Beyond these similarities, the ability of youths to access and use the spaces is shaped by the different sources of authority that regulate codes of behaviour in each public space.

Lenin Square is located in the city's political heart and its history is closely tied to the communist state's attempt to impose its power on the Vietnamese capital city.³² Originally established by the French colonial administration after the communist North won the war, this public space was symbolically appropriated by Hanoi's authorities in 1976 when they installed a statue of the Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin, and created a large paved area in front of the monument to act as a politically symbolic space for this figure.

³⁰ Julie-Anne Boudreau et al., "Youth-friendly public spaces in Hanoi" (Montreal: Institut national de la recherche scientifique, 2015), 51.

³¹ Most of Hanoi's large city parks are fenced off and charge a small entry fee to users.

³² William Logan, "Hanoi townscape: symbolic imagery in Vietnam's capital," in *Cultural Identity and urban change in Southeast Asia*, eds. Marc Askew and William Logan (Victoria: Deakin University Press, 1994), 44–69.

Figure 1
Location of Lenin Square [1] and 34T Plaza [2]



Source: authors

According to Hanoi's urban administrative management system, Lenin Square falls into the category of cultural park (*cong vien van hoa*). These parks generally have a symbolic meaning and represent communist state authority. There are several cultural parks in Hanoi—the best known is probably Ba Dinh Square in front of the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum. Since cultural parks are meant to serve as political tools of the state and preserve their reverential character, city authorities proscribe (at least in principle) recreational activities within them. A senior municipal planner interviewed for this paper explained that “In Vietnam, we divide parks into different types and then we decide which ones youths can use. [In the case of cultural parks], youths can come to enjoy these places, but they cannot enter them to play sports. These places are not meant for [recreational] activities.”³³

In theory, the local police—charged with the regulation of Lenin Square—should stop users from entering this public space to engage in sports or exercise. Previous research³⁴ and our observational data, however, indicated that a variety of recreational activities are tolerated at Lenin Square and,

³³ Senior municipal planner, interview by authors, Hanoi, 9 October 2013.

³⁴ See Thomas, “Public-Spaces,” 306–330; Thomas, “Out of control,” 1611–1624.

more generally, in Hanoi's cultural parks. The senior municipal planner quoted above indicated that local authorities are compelled to bend the rules on the use of cultural parks because youths "don't have enough space [elsewhere in the city] to engage in recreational activities." However, as other built environment professionals interviewed for this project remarked, this remains an informal arrangement, which, they all insisted, is only temporary.

In other words, recreational activities are tolerated in cultural parks including Lenin Square, due to the city's very limited availability of public spaces for youth activities (and entertainment activities by other users). Nonetheless, there are limits to what the authorities will tolerate in cultural parks, as we will see in the discussion below. Despite the relative tolerance of recreational activities in cultural parks, such activities remain under stricter control in these parks than in other types of public spaces. Youth activities in these places can be forbidden at any time, and are likely to be restricted during political events, dignitary visits, or simply when the authorities consider (even if only momentarily) that they are inappropriate.

Completed in 2006, 34T Plaza, whose name comes from the 34-storey tower facing it, is located in an area now known as Trung Hoa-Nhan Chinh. This is a new, mixed-use development on the near periphery of Hanoi (about five kilometres from the historic core), built and managed by a former state-owned enterprise called Vinaconex. Well connected to the inner city, this area has come to epitomize Hanoi's new suburban centres, which are large redevelopments characterized by new building types (high-rise towers, big box stores, malls, etc.), tertiary economic activities (e.g., banking, retail, catering) and a predominantly middle-class population.³⁵

According to Hanoi's regulatory framework, 34T Plaza falls into the category of multi-use space (*khong gian da nang*). This category includes neighbourhood-level public spaces, such as schoolyards, and playing fields. As the expression suggests, multi-use spaces are meant for a variety of activities, and the restrictions on use are less severe than those for cultural parks. In line with this institutional definition, the local residents of Trung Hoa-Nhan Chinh perceive 34T Plaza as a collective space primarily built to serve their recreational needs, while understanding that it remains accessible to other users living outside the neighbourhood.

Vinasinco, a private company and subsidiary of Vinaconex, manages 34T Plaza.³⁶ As such, Vinasinco hires security guards who patrol 34T Plaza and

³⁵ Julie-Anne Boudreau and Danielle Labbé, "Les nouvelles zones urbaines à Hanoi: ruptures et continuités avec la ville" [New urban areas of Hanoi: continuity or fragmentation in a city environment?], *Cahiers de géographie du Québec* 55, no. 154 (2011): 131–149; Stephanie Geertman, *The Self-Organizing City in Vietnam; Processes of Change and Transformation in Housing in Hanoi* (Eindhoven: Bouwstenen Publicatieburo, 2007), 285–289.

³⁶ Vinasinco went bankrupt in 2014. Vinaconex took over afterwards.

ensure its order and security. This form of private urban management is relatively new to Hanoi and is closely associated with a corporate-led model of suburban development adopted by the city authorities in the late 1990s.³⁷

The street discipline practitioners interviewed for this project are well aware of the distinction between the private management system of Trung Hoa-Nhan Chinh and the more conventional public management found in inner-city parks such as Lenin Square. When we asked a young traceur to describe how 34T Plaza is regulated, he remarked: “here, we deal with security [guards], not with the police.”³⁸ As other youths practicing parkour at the plaza explained to us, the implication of this private management system is a tight surveillance by Vinasinco’s security guards, in close cooperation with residents of Trung Hoa-Nhan Chinh, who consider that 34T Plaza is meant, primarily, to serve their recreational needs. As such, they regularly ask the guards to forbid activities which they find too noisy or dangerous for the elderly and for children, activities which they perceive to be damaging to the urban setting, and activities they deem inappropriate.³⁹

Localized Socio-Political Constraints

Aside from the socio-spatial controls specific to Lenin Square and 34T Plaza, youths who seek to engage in street disciplines in Hanoi face broader forms of socio-political resistance. Hanoi youths developed their street disciplines by taking inspiration from popular lifestyle sports.⁴⁰ As observed in other contexts,⁴¹ these practices offer youths alternatives to the more conventional recreational activities controlled by the state and its institutions, such as state schools or state-backed mass organizations (e.g., the Youth Union and Ho Chi Minh Young Pioneers). In contrast to the formal clubs set up by these institutions, the street disciplines, as with lifestyle sports elsewhere,⁴² are organized from the bottom up by the youths themselves. These youth-driven activities allow them to explore self-directed ways of being and offer identities that differ from the values and models predefined for them by the state and by their families.

Many youths in Hanoi told us that practicing a street discipline is a lifestyle choice. Skateboarders and traceurs demonstrated this in their explanations about how they approach life as an art (*nghe thuat*). This is understood to be a non-competitive, self-motivated, and self-directed existence that may or

³⁷ Geertman, *The Self-Organizing City*, 285–289; Boudreau and Labbé, “Les nouvelles zones,” 135.

³⁸ Traceur #1, interview, 34T Plaza, 25 September 2014.

³⁹ Security guard, interview by authors, 34T Plaza Hanoi, 11 June 2014.

⁴⁰ See for instance Iain Borden, *Skateboarding, space and the city: Architecture and the body* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2001); Belinda Wheaton, *Understanding lifestyle sports: consumption, identity, and difference* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁴¹ See for instance Borden, *Skateboarding, space and the city*; Wheaton, *Understanding lifestyle sports*.

⁴² Wheaton, *Understanding lifestyle sports*.

may not fit into the expected patterns of individuation. A 23-year-old male traceur interviewed at 34T Plaza summarized this view as follows: “like contemporary ‘art’, [parkour] is not competitive, each artist has his own style [...] This kind of art doesn’t force you to achieve anything, it doesn’t force you to take this or that direction; it’s free.”⁴³ Along these same lines, the words “freedom” (*tu do*) and “ease” (*thoai mai*) regularly came up during interviews when we asked youths to explain the benefits they get from practicing a street discipline.

These views echo the existing literature, showing that urban and suburban youths engaged in lifestyle sports participate in the creation of urban countercultures. The creative and playful means on which these youths rely to claim public space in cities—skaters by riding and jumping with their boards, traceurs by running, climbing, and jumping—also serve to assert lifestyle choices. Both lifestyle sports have been explained as challenging the common perceptions of appropriate use of public space.⁴⁴ Beyond other specific differences between the ideals of the two activities, the desire to take up skateboarding and parkour provides the Hanoian youths with an immediate feeling of transgression. Engaging in these activities has motivated them to develop spatial appropriation tactics to cope with the localized socio-spatial and socio-political constraints which are further detailed in the following section.

3. Carving Out a Practice Space at Lenin Square and 34T Plaza

Skaters were first seen in Hanoi (at Lenin Square to be more specific) in 2000, a period during which a small group of boys started to bring skateboards to the capital from Europe and the US.⁴⁵ Parkour made its debut in Hanoi around the year 2005.⁴⁶ Over the last decade, a rapid increase in the number of youths engaged in skating and parkour has been observed across the city.⁴⁷

⁴³ Traceur #2, interview by authors, 34T Plaza Hanoi, 16 November 2013. Additionally, one of the authors who has lived in the city for over a decade has observed this increase personally.

⁴⁴ See for instance Daniel Wojcik, “Skateboarding,” in *American Countercultures: An Encyclopedia of Nonconformists, Alternative Lifestyles, and Radical Ideas in U.S. History*, ed. Gina Misiroglu (New York: Routledge, 2015), 661; Lieven Aemeel and Sirpa Tani, “Parkour: creating loose spaces?” in *Geografiska Annaler, Series B Human Geography*, vol. 94, no. 1 (2012), 17–30; Oli Mould, “Parkour, Activism, and Young People,” in *Geographies of Children and Young People. Space, Place and Environment*, eds. Karen Nairn, Peter Kraftl, and Tracey Skelton (New York: Springer, 2016, book forthcoming).

⁴⁵ Skateboarder #1, interview by authors, 7 February 2016. This informant started with the first imports of skateboards in Vietnam from Thailand (from 2003), he also informed us that since 2005 more companies started importing, largely cheaper ones produced in China. To date there is no production of boards in Vietnam.

⁴⁶ Traceur #1, 25 September 2014.

⁴⁷ Focus group discussion with traceurs, by authors, 34T Plaza Hanoi, 17 November 2013; focus group discussion with skateboarders, by authors, Lenin Square, 20 June 2014. Additional, personal observation of one of the authors living in the city for over a decade.

Figure 2
Skateboarder at Lenin Square



Source: authors (2015)

They have become part of the daily usage of public space in the city.⁴⁸ This growth in the number of skateboarders and traceurs in the city (as well as other young people participating in street disciplines) has been accompanied by the establishment of organized practice groups, events (competitions and demonstrations), virtual groups on social network platforms (notably Facebook), and specialized shops. These various networks, events, and activities feed into the three main spatial appropriation tactics employed by these youths: (a) appealing to empathy, leading to gradual (informal) encroachment; (b) formulating positive arguments to gain social recognition and increase their collective presence in the city; and (c) silent reassessment and constant adaptation to avoid conflict.

⁴⁸ It should be noted that, similar to other citizens using public space for daily exercise, groups of skateboarders and traceurs usually arrive at their practice site around 4pm. But in contrast to other users (including other youths), they often stay until late at night. Furthermore, and in an attempt to avoid the crowds, they start much earlier than other users during weekends and holidays, usually around noon.

Figure 3
Traceur at 34T Plaza



Source: authors (2015)

a) Appealing to empathy, leading to gradual (informal) encroachment

When attempting to use these spaces, both youth groups were asked to move by the local authorities. As discussed earlier, the official regulatory framework governing multi-use spaces should—in theory—has allowed traceurs to do parkour at 34T Plaza. In practice, however, as large numbers of residents began to settle into the new suburban neighbourhood, tensions emerged with the authorities. By 2006, the new residents started to informally ask the Vinasinco corporation, in charge of the management of the estate, to put up signs forbidding running and climbing on walls and urban furniture at the plaza (i.e., traceurs' main activities). Vinasinco security guards did enforce these rules but only partially. Convinced of their legitimate right to use the space, traceurs persisted in claiming it as theirs as well, a view captured by a member of this group as, “we just come here shamelessly.”⁴⁹ In this context,

⁴⁹ Traceur #2, interview, 16 November 2013.

the traceurs' preferred tactic of spatial appropriation allowed them to avoid contact with the residents by practicing during working hours when most residents were away. At the same time, the group appealed to the security guards' empathy. Interacting with them on a daily basis, they developed trusting relationships. At times, the security guards would tear down the signs forbidding traceurs' use of the space (posted at the request of residents) and would allow their presence on the plaza.⁵⁰

At Lenin Square, the situation was different. There, skateboarding and other leisure and sports activities were—and are still—prohibited by formal regulations. This is clearly illustrated on an official billboard at the square, listing the prohibited activities (soccer, skateboarding, vending, etc.). Nonetheless, the district police, just like the 34T Plaza guards, applied the formal regulations with considerable flexibility.

Similar to the situation at 34T Plaza, skaters have managed to build a trusting relationship with local policemen at Lenin Square. In the early 2000s, the district leadership changed just as skateboarders became increasingly visible in front and at the base of the statue of Lenin. This led to an immediate ban on the activity and the arrest of many skaters.⁵¹ The skaters, however, returned.⁵² Furthermore, they became attached to the square, which became an integral part of their identity. This is evidenced by the name taken by the first group of skaters in Hanoi: the Lenin Team. These skaters recall that over a period of approximately five years (2000–2005) they ran away when policemen showed up at the square. Yet, when they got arrested by the authorities, they did not argue or fight. They would just silently follow policemen to the district's station where they would call their parents and ask them for help in order to get their confiscated boards back.⁵³ The next day they would return to the square as usual.

The skaters recall that by 2006, they had become “a part of the square” simply by making a daily appearance over the years.⁵⁴ They eventually developed a trusting relationship with the vendors working at the square (whom the skaters perceived as informal managers) and other core (street-discipline) users. Eventually, a trust relationship was established with the local policemen in charge of the square.⁵⁵ This process was accompanied by the development of an informal, yet effective, set of rules. As the informants

⁵⁰ Focus group discussion with traceurs, by authors, 34T Plaza Hanoi, 17 November 2013; observation sessions by authors.

⁵¹ Skateboarder #1, interview by authors, Lenin Square, 24 November 2013.

⁵² Skateboarder #2, interview by authors, Lenin Square, 23 December 2015.

⁵³ Skateboarder #1, interview by authors, Lenin Square, 24 November 2013.

⁵⁴ Skateboarder #3, interview by authors, Lenin Square, 13 June 2014; skateboarder #1, interview, 24 November 2013; skateboarder #2, interview, 20 June 2014.

⁵⁵ Skateboarder #3, interview by authors, Lenin Square, 13 June 2014; Skateboarder #1, interview, 24 November 2013; Skateboarder #2, interview, 20 June 2014.

put it, “as long as we follow police orders and move away during politically sensitive times and on national holidays, we have the trust here.”⁵⁶

These tactical encroachments by skateboarders and traceurs illustrate that the implementation of regulations by authorities are conducted in a flexible, informal manner. This is reminiscent of recent research on livelihood and informality in Hanoi, as well as earlier studies of everyday politics in Vietnam.⁵⁷ We found that the youths’ tactics of spatial appropriation depend, for the large part, on personal relationships and on appealing to the authorities’ and other users’ empathy. Uncertainty remains, however. This clearly comes across in a remark by one of the leaders of the skaters’ group that we interviewed at Lenin Square. “It all depends on the district guy [government]. When he’s happy, he allows us [to skate], but when he’s not, he stops it. So it’s not taken for granted that we will continue to [skate] here like this.”⁵⁸ The traceurs at 34T Plaza perceive a different degree of uncertainty, as they believe they are losing their trusting relationship with security guards, and also indirectly with residents.⁵⁹

b) Formulating positive arguments to gain social recognition and raise collective presence

Skateboarders and traceurs actively advocate for their activities by trying to shed a positive light on them. A pioneering skateboarder, who previously skated at Lenin Square in the early 2000s, recalled how he and his friends used to invite other kids who were curious about the new activity to spontaneously (and free of charge) join practice sessions at Lenin Square.⁶⁰ In interviews, many young skaters told us that they either joined this activity after having watched skaters perform at the square, or through social networks (Facebook). Traceurs similarly sought to recruit youths at 34T Plaza.

During and after recruitment, skateboarders and traceurs used positive arguments to convince their parents and the parents of new members of the team to let them engage in these new activities. For instance, they argued that team members often study together for exams, they help each other find jobs, and stay away from drugs.⁶¹ Furthermore, members of skating and parkour teams told us they tended to keep an eye on each other—a caring approach supported by their collective organization (regular practices, group funds, etc.). These collective structures are used for logistical reasons and serve as support systems for members who are not as well off. For example, skateboarders will collect money to buy boards for members who cannot

⁵⁶ Skateboarder #3, interview, 13 June 2014.

⁵⁷ Koh, “The pavement”; Turner and Schoenberger, “Street vendor”; Kerkvliet, “The Power.”

⁵⁸ Skateboarder #1, interview, 24 November 2013.

⁵⁹ Traceur #3, interview, 17 November 2013; focus group traceurs, 17 November 2013.

⁶⁰ Skateboarder #1, interview, 24 November 2013.

⁶¹ Focus group traceurs, 17 November 2013; focus group skateboarders, 20 June 2014.

afford them and members will often give them their old boards.⁶²

Both groups further seek to boost the popularity of their activities among the general public by proactively organizing events. For the skaters, this includes a large-scale annual skating day (held since 2006) supported by skate shops. They also organize two or three monthly skating competitions at Lenin Square. The traceurs organized a monthly event called Parkour People's Day in 2012, held at 34T Plaza during eight successive months before being halted by Vinasinco. These events were, first and foremost, opportunities for youths to connect with other youths (recruited via social networks, they would gather from different cities in Vietnam) to show off their skills to each other. The organizers also explicitly used these events to gain public support.⁶³ As the leader of the traceur group in charge of organizing the parkour day put it: "I just wish that people would come to understand that [parkour] is a sport that helps us stay healthy."⁶⁴

c) Silent reassessment and constant adaptation to avoid conflict

Both skateboarders and traceurs have adopted a variety of spatial tactics to avoid conflict. Although they prefer to practice at peak hours to engage with others, to be seen and to receive recognition from other practitioners, many of them choose to come at times when Lenin Square and 34T Plaza are least crowded. This is, in large part, to avoid conflicts with other users. For example, the traceurs informed us that they only use their preferred practice space (the stairs in front of the entrance of the 34T building) during work hours, when most residents are absent. Observational data similarly showed that when the plaza gets crowded, they quietly retreat to the less intensely used edges of the plaza. Furthermore, when the traceurs were asked to leave by the security guards, they silently retreated from the area to the unused edges of the plaza, though only temporarily. As the parkour group leader explained: "they [security guards] talk, we politely listen, then after a while when they leave, we come back and continue to practice."⁶⁵

Although skateboarders do not need to avoid residents who claim Lenin Square as theirs (as is the case with Trung Hoa-Nhan Chinh's attitude towards 34T Plaza), they do quietly retreat at peak hours of public space use (late afternoons and early evenings). They do this as a tactic to avoid inevitable conflicts with others (users and authorities) stemming from overcrowding at the square.⁶⁶ Some of the skateboarders (older ones in particular) go as far as to come during the hot summer afternoons (from noon till 4pm), or

⁶² Focus group skateboarders, 20 June 2014.

⁶³ Focus group traceurs, 17 November 2013; focus group skateboarders, 20 June 2014.

⁶⁴ Traceur #3, interview, 17 November 2013.

⁶⁵ Traceur #2, interview, 16 November 2013.

⁶⁶ Skateboarder #3, interview, 13 June 2014.

dark nights (from 10 pm to 2 am), when the square is nearly empty.⁶⁷ From observation, we learned that the skateboarders (especially younger ones) who do come to the square during peak hours, carefully avoid conflict with others. The core skaters of the square come daily at the same time without explicit agreement. Similarly with the other street disciplines, they clearly understand which space belongs to them, and which space belongs to other groups. When we asked a young skateboarder we met during an observation session why he and his friends moved when other users came, he summed it up simply: “we always move for them.”⁶⁸ Conflict avoidance and tacit agreements greatly contribute to the normalizing presence of these youths in the public spaces of the city.

4. Youth-Driven Everyday Spatial Practices as New Forms of Socio-Political Engagement in Post-Socialist Cities

Skateboarders and traceurs in Hanoi, as in other contexts, perceive life as art. They articulate this view through their urban practices as a creative, spatial act that can trigger socio-political change.⁶⁹ They develop non-confrontational tactics to secure space and, simultaneously, to express their interests and identities. These tactics cannot be analyzed as survival practices. In fact, their activities are closer to what Asef Bayat called “the politics of fun,” referring to leisure practices that are essentially driven by transgressive urban youth practices. We have argued here that these practices can be read as subversive socio-political acts. These practices of everyday urbanism “should inevitably lead to social change, not via abstract political ideologies, imposed from outside, but instead through specific concerns that arise from the lived experience of different individuals and groups in the city.”⁷⁰

The street disciplines in Hanoi form what Bayat would call a youthful non-movement. This is understood to mean a non-ideological network of everyday practices that contributes to socio-political transgression. This network encroaches on public spaces and transforms their meaning. Yet, unlike Bayat’s studies on Middle Eastern streets, Hanoi’s youth non-movement resonates with the more traditional Vietnamese collective structures. Most street disciplines are collectives with names, rules, leaders, and shared funds. Yet they strongly assert themselves as a set of independent “teams” that function in a much more free-flowing and flexible way than what is commonly understood with an organized movement. What we observe in Hanoi is a constellation, in which there is a feedback loop between

⁶⁷ Skateboarder #4, interview by authors, Lenin Square, 20 June 2014; focus group skateboarders, 20 June 2014.

⁶⁸ Skateboarder #5, interview, Lenin Square, 24 November 2013.

⁶⁹ Borden, *Skateboarding, space and the city*.

⁷⁰ Crawford, “Introduction,” in *Everyday Urbanism*, 13.

independent individuals who spontaneously organize themselves with like-minded youths in supportive collectives. These collectives' role in actively promoting alternative lifestyles, using positive arguments, and seeking empathy sets the non-movement as it emerges in urban Vietnam apart from the form of passive resistance characteristic of the youth non-movements documented by Bayat in Middle Eastern contexts.

These youths developed silent tactics of socio-political transgression that appeal to affective flows (such as empathy or tacit understandings of who belongs where in the square) rather than engagement through rational argument. Christina Schwenkel similarly notes how residents employ the language of sentiment (*tinhs cam*) as an affective tool against the state logic of bureaucratic rationality.⁷¹ "Reason and sentiment in carrying out the law (*ly va tinh trong view chap hanh phap luat*)" is widely practiced in Vietnam.⁷² It is often used to explain tolerance for the many informal activities that characterize the urban landscape of Hanoi.⁷³

However, skaters, and especially traceurs, still face hostility. Our study highlights that depending on the regulatory regime of each individual public space, affective tactics are more or less effective. When powerful private individuals or corporate actors claim the space as theirs, as seen in the case of 34T Plaza, youths face more obstacles. Similar processes were observed in other Vietnamese cities.⁷⁴ In contrast, when facing the state, as in the case of police regulation at Lenin Square, affective tactics seem to be more impactful, perhaps because they build on a longer tradition in terms of the way citizens interact with the state in Vietnam. The study of these variegated landscapes of control in a post-socialist city is important to understanding how market socialism affects everyday state-society relations.

This paper has sought to illustrate how non-confrontational tactics enable skaters and traceurs to become a normal part of the everyday urban landscape. Through these everyday urban tactics, Vietnamese youths are contributing to a significant change in the meaning and use of public space. Although such spatial appropriation tactics are not limited to youths, this paper illustrates the essential role of this group in socio-political transformation through everyday urbanism. This paper also demonstrates how these youths are part of a global youth generation with distinctly local

⁷¹ Christina Schwenkel, "Reclaiming rights to the socialist city: bureaucratic artefacts and the affective appeal of petitions," *South East Asia Research* 23, no. 2 (2015): 205–225.

⁷² John Gillespie, "Rethinking the Role of Judicial Independence in Socialist Transforming East Asia," *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 56 (2007), 855.

⁷³ David Koh, *The Wards of Hanoi*; Turner and Schoenberger, "Street vendor livelihoods," 333; Kim, "Sidewalk City."

⁷⁴ A similar phenomenon was observed by Harms in Saigon and Schwenkel in Vinh City. See Harms, "Vietnam's Civilizing Process" and Christina Schwenkel, "Civilizing the City: Socialist Ruins and Urban Renewal in Central Vietnam," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 20, no. 2 (2012): 437–470.

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Vietnamese features.⁷⁵ In an increasingly urban world, this incursion into the worlds of skateboarders and traceurs shows us there is much to be learned from their non-confrontational and non-ideological socio-political spatial practices.

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⁷⁵ UNFPA, *The power of 1.8 billion adolescents*; Tracey Skelton, “Taking Young People Seriously”; Linda Herrera, “Youth and Citizenship.”