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Playing Out: The Importance of the City as a Playground for Skateboard and Parkour

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Out-of-School Hangouts

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The city, its streets, and its buildings make an ideal playground for skateboarders and freerunners. At the same time, the mostly teenage, mostly male participants in those activities are regarded by civic authorities as a problem. That attitude is part of a general antipathy to young people out on the streets, who are often assumed to be causing a nuisance. We present insights from working with skateboarders and freerunners in Newcastle upon Tyne and Tyneside, an urban conurbation in North East England, that reveal the significance that playing outdoors has for these young people. We also show how they value the city and the autonomy, friendships, and feel-good experience they enjoy there. Playing outdoors is a vital, positive part of their lives that cities should embrace.

Introduction

Playing outdoors in the city is increasingly difficult for young people. Heavy-handed laws, private security guards, and media-inspired moral panic all conspire to get youngsters off the streets where they are considered an unruly nuisance at best. At the same time, young people are now subject to the infinite allure of the Internet, which they access largely indoors and often alone and which is full of virtual friends they may never meet. These pressures only intensify a growing concern that contemporary children and teenagers are more isolated and sedentary than those of previous generations (Play England, n.d.). Karsten and Vliet (2006), for example, document that urban streets are increasingly inhospitable for outdoor play. And while children respond positively to attractive, well-equipped playgrounds, they also chafe at the restrictions of limited space (Veitch, Salmon, & Ball, 2007). The idyllic world where every child played outside all day long with their friends and came home just in time for supper is probably a nostalgic myth. Nonetheless, young people do still play outdoors, and for some—such as skateboarders and freerunners— being outside and exploring, reworking, and reinventing the city for their own purposes is at the core of their lives. For participants in those activities, the city can be one big playground. But while they are out playing there, such young people—mostly teenage boys tearing around in hoodies and T-shirts liberally decorated with skulls, zombies, or incomprehensible band logos—seem like the very worst kind of trouble to everyone else.

Skateboarding became firmly established in the UK in the 1970s, although its popularity varies as fashions change. Elements of skate culture, such as clothes and shoes, permeate widely into youth culture as a recognizable style. A majority of boys are likely to have tried skateboarding, and the skate scene's image as alternative, easy going, and cool (Borden, 2001) make it an attractive

teenage subculture. Note that that image may be more apparent than real: the skate scene supports a substantial corporate industry, and the core aspects of skate culture—physical prowess and risk taking—make it in many ways a traditional arena for young men, from which girls are excluded (Borden, 2001.

Freerunning and parkour arrived in North East England and in the UK in general more recently. Parkour developed in Paris in the late 1980s, combining a focus on discipline, skill, and gymnastic training to create a particular style of movement in urban space. Participants often have a background in gymnastics and similar sports. Parkour also has a distinct philosophical underpinning, emphasizing holistic well-being and noncompetitiveness. Freerunning is closely allied to parkour, perhaps best understood as a slightly more relaxed, individual expression of movement through the cityscape. To those not closely involved in parkour and freerunning, the two are probably indistinguishable, and we use the terms interchangeably here because the participants we met did so. There is no parkour equivalent of the ubiquitous skate culture. While young children may have seen some parkour on television, it is unlikely that they have had any active experience with it.

In-line skating and riding BMX bikes[1] and microscooters[2] are also popular street sports, but our commentary is based on the skateboarders and freerunners' worlds, which have been the focus of our research.

Since 2009, we have worked with skateboarders and freerunners in Newcastle upon Tyne and the surrounding conurbation of Tyneside, exploring the young people's cityscapes and helping them represent and show off their versions of the city. The project grew out of an interest in urban places and space and in how architecture can be reinvented and subverted. We rapidly learned that the spatial and physical imaginations of skaters were complemented by sociable, creative local cultures, rich in folklore and mutually supportive (Jenson, Swords, & Jeffries, 2012). From 2011 we also teamed up with North East Parkour (NEPK), the umbrella group for parkour and freerunning in North East England. NEPK reinforced our growing understanding of a positive, self-disciplined, inventive, sociable street-sports culture and of the value of informal play spaces both to the participants and, perhaps, to the city as a whole—especially to a city where the mainstream alternatives to street sports are shopping and drinking.

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[1] BMX bikes are fat-wheeled, low-slung, stunt bikes that originated in the early 1970s as home-customized bikes to ride in imitating dirt-track motocross racing. They are widely used for both acrobatic stunts and flatland balance tricks.
[2] Microscooters are light, compact, folding scooters with the same size wheels as in-line skates. They were invented in the 1990s as general childrens' scooters. However, after the initial craze subsided, they were increasingly used for street sports and stunts, primarily by elementary-school-age or younger teenage boys.

The Newcastle Context

Newcastle upon Tyne (Newcastle) is the historic capital city of North East England. Within the UK, Newcastle has a powerful, distinctive identity, and its residents are known for their boisterous, friendly culture, which retains many of the traits of the working class that once served the coal mines, shipyards, and allied industries in the area. The mines and ships have gone, and the main contemporary economic drivers are shopping, nightlife, and the public sector. In the early 1990s the city suffered from riots and depopulation and reached its nadir, but it has since undergone a startling regeneration and become a mecca for culture and partying. This process has been dominated by corporate and civic institutions whose main focus is commercial, providing a host of opportunities for people to spend money but creating homogenous cityscapes that lack any authentic civic culture. For example, Daskalaki, Stara, and Imam (2008) provide a detailed case study contrasting parkour's energy to the blandness of corporate civic culture.

Youngsters often do not have much money, so instead of shopping, they hang around Newcastle, often in noisy, shifting groups, sometimes getting in the way of the customers whom stores wish to attract. That situation has generated negative newspaper coverage, focused on a square in the center of the city, where young people traditionally meet up on Saturdays. Participants in street sports are perceived to be an even worse problem. In Newcastle, as in many cities in the UK and throughout the world, skateboarders and freerunners are routinely told to move along by police and private security guards, and street sports are prohibited outside of designated areas by bylaws; in Newcastle violations carry a heavy fixed fine of £500. ($ 790 US) The building of a skate park on the periphery of Newcastle's city center was as much a way to get skaters out of that area as it was an effort to accommodate them.

The reasons usually given for such regulations are a mixture of fear of the possibility of injury to passersby and damage to buildings and concern that injuries to the urban games participants themselves might result in litigation. In Newcastle, this negative attitude toward those who engage in street sports may also be linked to the city's role as the regional corporate retail epicenter. Teenaphobia is another contributing factor (Taylor & Khan, 2011). Rogers and Coaffee (2005) provide a detailed exploration of the management of youngsters in Newcastle's city center, including a discussion of the exclusionary policy aimed at skateboarders.

However, attitudes to skaters are not uniformly negative. East of Newcastle, in adjacent North Tyneside, the local council has constructed five skate parks in accessible locations; that program was championed by staff from the council's health and community team who saw outdoor play as a great asset to youngsters. In addition, south across the River Tyne from Newcastle, Gateshead Council has spent £11,000 ($ 17,400 US) developing an outdoor skate plaza, Five Bridges, because the presence of the skaters was credited with making the space feel safer for other passersby (Jenson et al., 2012). These positive attitudes to skaters appear to be largely contingent on local events and the attitudes of individual employees.

Newcastle and Tyneside have a thriving skateboard culture, covered by bloggers and in web videos.[3] A distinct Tyneside scene has been sustained since the opening of the Native Skates store in 2003, with a strong emphasis on the street rather than the skate park as the main playground. Big local events, such as professional touring contests, can attract more than 200 skaters from the area. Parkour became established in Tyneside in the early 2000s by a handful of participants who were inspired by television programs (such as *Run London,* which first aired in 2005) or ads featuring rooftop chases and stunts. In addition, for several years "Juice," a local youth festival, organized some parkour sessions. NEPK coalesced in 2007 and now meets regularly on Saturdays in Newcastle, attracting up to 50 participants from across North East England, and also organizes days of parkour activities in other cities. Young people join the Tyneside scene primarily by actively searching the Web for NEPK and then going to local training sessions organized by core NEPK members or by participating in NEPK events elsewhere.

Exploring the Importance of Informal Street Sports: Our Methodology

The commentary presented here is based on several sources of data: (a) informal interviews with skaters and freerunners, conducted at street skate spots or during NEPK Saturdays, (b) participatory observation of skaters and freerunners' activities and of their behavior toward each other and the public, (c) over 200 psychogeographic maps[4] created by skaters, portraying their days outdoors, and (4) skaters and freerunners' photographs and videos.[5] The great majority of the participants were boys and men in their teens and early 20s. Girls were conspicuously absent: we encountered at least 300 male skaters but only three female skaters and only one girl among a core group of 50 freerunners. North East England is much more homogeneously white than much of the UK, and the participants were predominantly white as well. However, the few participants of color we observed seemed entirely at home.

We advertised our project on local skate and parkour blogs, having rapidly established links with core members of the Newcastle and Tyneside scene through Native Skates. We also made connections with NEPK through Solar Learning, a Newcastle-based youth learning and enterprise

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[3] Digital Deekies (www.digitaldeekies.com/) and Four Sight (www.4-sightskateboardzine.com/) are long-standing Tyneside skate blogs. NEPK's Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/#!/groups/104344919656775/) has links to many of their videos.

[4] Psychogeography is the study of how the physical environment affects emotions and behavior. It emphasizes the personal, subjective, divergent, and often playful reactions to and knowledge of place. One of the powerful things that has resulted from this approach is the creation of highly individual maps revealing diverse and idiosyncratic versions of a given place. The majority of the skaters' psychogeographic maps can be seen at http://www.flickr.com/photos/31185521@No2/sets/72157623237346084/ .

[5] A selection of photographs of skateboarding and freerunning taken during our work and concentrating on the participants' use of space and on the social context are on Flickr: http://www.flickr.com/photos/31185521@No2/sets/72157623876832634/ (skateboarding) and http://www.flickr.com/photos/31185521@No2/sets/72157629072812189/ (freerunning).

company. We set up our own Facebook and Flickr photography groups to spread the word about the work, receive feedback, and share images as our record of the local scene built up. Everyone we approached was given handouts with information about the project, contact addresses, and invitations to send us images and videos for exhibitions we arranged as a thank-you to the participants and as a more general commitment to participatory research. Everyone who took part in the project was asked if we could use their first name or tag, and all willingly agreed, often delighted to see their words and outlook represented. We have quoted all their comments verbatim. Many of the psychogeographic maps were made as the skaters hung out in Native Skates; others were drawn at skate spots. The skaters we approached were very happy to participate in our project, especially after a few weeks when word about it had spread.

As part of the project, we gave skaters felt-tip pen and big sheets of paper and asked them to doodle psychogeographic maps. This approach worked well across all ages and in different locations and was every bit as effective as interviews. It was a relaxing and entertaining way for the participants to provide information about the Newcastle skate scene. Friends featured in many of the maps. The example below (Figure 1), shows a day out that includes a bit of skating, getting food (at Greggs), popping into Native Skates, and meeting up with a friend ("Biscuit").
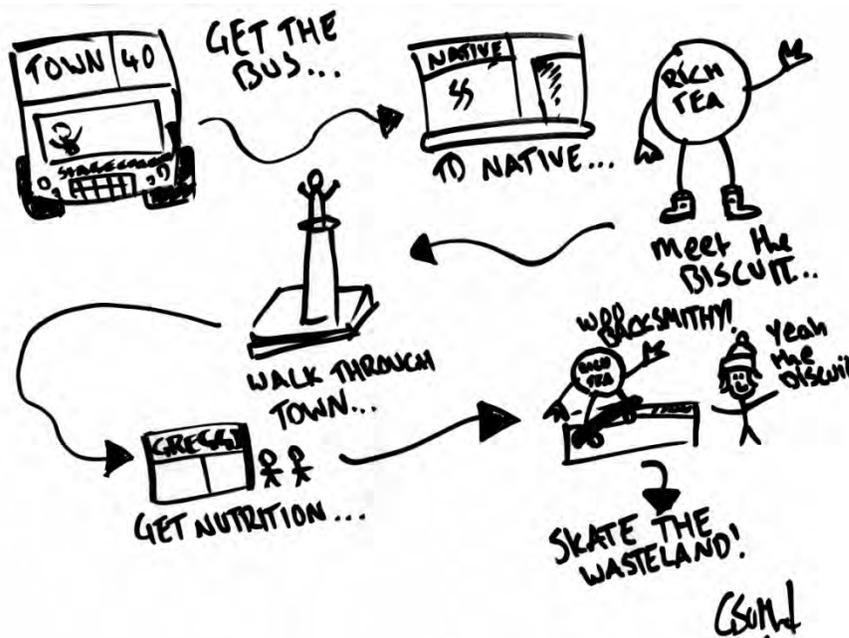

Figure 1. An example of a skateboarder's psychogeographic map. Note the mix of content which includes favorite sites, e.g., the Wasteland, food, e.g., Greggs bakers and friends ("Biscuit" is a friend's nickname).

The projects were disseminated to a wider public audience showing the skaters and freerunners videos, images, maps, and other artifacts at public galleries. PlaySpace, held in 2010 at Dance City in Newcastle, was a one-day show of photography and maps, which about 150 people attended.

PlayToon, held in 2012 at The Holy Biscuit in Newcastle, included a weeklong exhibition of photography, videos, artifacts, and texts as well as a day of live events; over 1,000 people came through the gallery that day (Messer & Jeffries, 2012). Although many of the participants had taken arts courses, apparently this was the first time that any of them had access to such spaces or events.

Valuing Place: "Countless Summer Days Here"

Skateboarders and freerunners have their own versions of their city. They are not indifferent to it or thoughtless about it; they value particular spaces, and local lore about good spots is spread by word of mouth. What these young people value in a space is partly its precise mix of buildings, open areas, and street furniture as well as how that arrangement allows them to perform; partly the likelihood that they won't be harassed by authorities or the public there; and partly its sociability. The opportunity to just hang out with friends is very important. A lot of time is spent not skating or freerunning but instead sitting together, chatting, eating, taking videos and photographs, and swapping stories. Left to their own devices, skaters and freerunners tend to do a circuit of the city, lingering at favorite spots, and moving quickly through conspicuously public spaces often not making any effort to skate or jump. Far from being out to cause trouble, they tend to be cautious, not wanting to draw attention to themselves.

The result of this unofficial use of the city is that each street-sports group has its own mental map of it and its own urban lore. For the freerunners, the map includes spots such as "Discovery," "Solicitors," "Library," "Quayside," and "Flats," while the skaters' spaces include "5-Bridges," "Pig and Whistle," "Queens Banks," "Gap to Ledge," and "Leap of Faith." Other local residents could probably guess where a few of these places are, but the location of most of them would be a mystery. Many of the sites also have skate or freerunning lore attached to them. For example, the Newcastle law courts are one of the much-used skate sites; the design of the exterior entrance terrace and steps there represents an ideal challenge. However, the skaters were well aware that it was one of the most unlikely venues to tolerate kids hanging around, and therefore they skated the site when it was closed. A sympathetic security guard once told them what these times were and said that they wouldn't get into any trouble skating then. The skaters also have a great eye for detail. For example, Max commented:

How long Law Courts been around? Years. If you look at the floor all you see is a couple of scratches, what happened the day before, a few little dents, there's so much different stuff, the 8s, the 3s, just like the ledge to mess about, the rail, pretty epic, that's just like a god's rail it's got a bit of everything. (Max)

Skaters have invested time, energy, and money improving some of the sites. The prime spot in Newcastle was the "Wasteland," the old floor of a demolished factory. It was not an area frequented by the general public, but it was only a ten-minute stroll from the city center. For at least 15 years prior to 2012 when developers moved in, it was used by skaters and other youngsters as a place to hang out and to hold self-organized skateboard or BMX events. Over the years, skaters repeatedly built blocks and ramps there. The picture below (Figure 2) was taken on a typical day at the site; most of the skaters and BMXers were just hanging out chatting. The concrete floor is clean of debris because the skaters kept it clear. Given the chance, skaters, BMXers, freerunners, and other street-sports participants will not only create their own version of a city—they will also build and nurture space.

Figure 2. The Wasteland site in 2010, used by skaters, BMX and micro scooters. Note that most of the present are sitting chatting and watching rather than skating; the social side of the playing out is paramount. (photo credit: Michael Jeffries)

How much these spaces are valued often only becomes clear when they are lost. Just before the Wasteland was dug up, BMXers painted a message there: "Farewell our fairweather friend" (Figure 3). The "countless summer days" quote which heads this section also refers to the Wasteland. Given that the participants are primarily teenage boys—not a group known for its public displays of sentiment—these reactions reveal the powerful meaning that the skaters, freerunners, and others attach to their informal cityscape playground and their deep engagement with those spaces.

Figure 3. The Wasteland in 2012 days before being demolished by developers. The "Farewell our fair-weather friend" message was painted by local BMXers as a final salute to the site.(photo credit: Michael Jeffries)

There is creativity to this use of space. Local skate parks are often regarded as boring, or perhaps okay as one part of a circuit of sites, but not as somewhere to stay all day. Freerunners don't use formal skate parks at all. All these street-sports groups are therefore on the lookout for the potential in city spaces. Bryan noted,

"You can just find something no one wants, no use and you can turn it into something that you can do something really good which makes you feel good about yourself because of how you land the trick."

These young people's use of informal play space represents a significant, positive part of their lives. They invest time, resources, and energy into the city; in other, more conventionally acceptable contexts, we would be quick to praise such behavior. Their activities also build self-respect and self-confidence, evident in Bryan's comment above, as well as in Aaron's:

Parkour... you don't need anything with you, you don't need an object. if you're doing flipping, if you're [doing] the jumps, if you're doing the movement it makes you feel better. I free run to relax and chill out. I've got lots of stuff to sort out but when I'm free running, I don't think about all my work and stuff, I just think about this.

Bryan and Aaron's statements also reveal a euphoric, carefree reaction to their immediate experience, echoing findings by Seifert and Hedderson (2011), who emphasized this very upbeat psychological benefit of playing outdoors.

Not Being Valued: "Before We Skated, When We Quit, We Got into Loads of Trouble"

Risk taking and breaking the law have been considered part of what some youth groups, such as graffiti artists, find appealing about their activities. The skaters and freerunners we met were well aware that, as a result, they were also perceived negatively, and they resented it. More surprisingly, in several cases they credited their involvement in street sports with keeping them out of trouble. Spinney (2010) worked with BMX bikers in London. He noted that their activities were not intended as a challenge to authority and that their run-ins with officials were instead a hazard of wanting to ride the cityscape. Tales of such confrontations with security guards and others are commonplace:

People have a go at you if you're just riding down the streets, but that's what they were built for, to ride on. They think they were built just to ride in skate parks, but skate parks were made loads after the first boards. (Willy)

A horde of security guards came and kicked us out. Suspicious. What were we doing, suspicious of what? What were we going to do wrong, what are they suspicious of? (Max)

However, most security guards tend to be polite—even a little apologetic—and explain that they have to tell the skaters or freerunners to move along because of bosses' orders. On all the occasions that we witnessed such situations, the young people acquiesced quickly and without directing any antagonism at the guards:

We went down the Quayside and we met the nicest security guard you could ever meet, he had a proper conversation with we, he said he wouldn't mind us skating here but we gotta move you on because my supervisor wants me to. (Long Board Man)

The value of getting out and playing in the city—and in particular the role of such play in keeping young people out of trouble—is explicit in several interviews:

 What was most important to me was that my BMX had got nicked and I'd been walking the streets at the age of 14 thinking is this what it's all about. This is shit. So boring. Then this one time I was on the roof of the cinema where my auntie worked. I went to check out the city from the roof. And my attention was sidetracked because there was this guy pushing down the street but the roar that was coming from his wheels…turned round…looked down, followed him all the way down. Then in a week I'm sat on my own down at the river and a couple of skateboarders [were] across the road, and one of them came over and that was it. I was hooked. I told my auntie about what I'd seen and she got me it [a skateboard]. Magic. (Jimmy)

Before we skated, when we quit, we got into loads of trouble, we had nothing to do for fun. Went into the industrial estate, smashing windows. Packed it in, started skating again. (Bryan)

Got told off for doing stupid things, doing dares, then we started skating and we don't do all that rubbish anymore. (Bryan)

I didn't really have any interests before skateboarding. Mainly just being a little bit of a terror out on the streets. Nothing else to do just running around, doing nothing, causing grief to people. What did I see? I seen a competition on telly one night and I said I need to get into that, more fun than what I'm doing. I could see where I was going. (Sean)

Being able to get out in the city with friends was core to the lives of many of the participants. Having to stay inside because of injuries or rainy weather was the cause of great resentment and grief. "I haven't left the house in ages, haven't had anything to do, it's been horrible, I just want [to go] out to do something," Max complained when he had been hurt. When we started the project, we assumed that the physical use of space would be the key to these young people's worlds. Being indoors just does not work, as the following example from a freerunner graphically demonstrates:

Me mum doesn't want me going on school nights, especially because she'll be oh no you need to stay in and do this and this, it gets really annoying. I want one night a week, one night, is it too much to ask to do what I love and practice with other people? If I can't go out I admit I will try one or two tricks just around the house. My mum isn't really impressed about that. There's the door, there's the couch, I thought, right, I'll move the dining table that way and try a huge dive. My mum comes down and said "what was that big bang?" I looked around; "nothing." (James F.)

Injured skaters and freerunners routinely turned up at popular spots, even when they couldn't physically participate in the activity, so that they could hang out with friends. However, we soon realized that the power of friendship was at the heart of the skate and freerunning scenes.

Valuing Friends: "Top Marras[6]...Top Lads"

In interviews, photographs, video, blogs, and doodled Psychogeographic maps, friendship comes through as a key element of the skate and freerunning scenes.

The lot I skate with will skate with pretty much anybody, thirty, forty people and there's also young kids if they're off school and they're skating and we're skating and [they] come along with us. Why not? It's like good manners. You should treat people like you expect to be treated. You look after your own, same as anybody would. (Sean)

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[6] "Marra" is North East England slang for an especially close friend.

Free running by myself is not that good, it's just horrible, I like doing it with my friends. Top marras, enjoy it too much. Gets you out of the house. Top lads. (Jamie)

There's so many people we skate with, we know... all of us, all of us, it's always good crack.[7] (Max)

Sociability turned out to be the one consistent factor among skaters' favorite spots. For many youngsters, whatever their particular interests, the psychological and physical space to hang out with a friend is important; a key difference for skaters is that they adopt not just one but many locations around the city.

In the more than three years we spent working primarily with skaters and freerunners, we never witnessed any aggression or violence within the groups. However, we are aware of friction between participants of different street sports, notably between some skaters and BMX bikers. In addition, the recent advent of microscooters, usually ridden by conspicuously younger children, draws criticism from young people involved in all the other wheeled sports. These tensions can be a problem at skate parks, partly because there are too many people trying to use the space at the same time but also perhaps because of the differences between participants in the various groups. Skateboarding has been characterized as an activity for more affluent youngsters (Karsten & Pel, 2000), while there is a perception that some BMX bikers come from less wealthy families, although that has not been properly explored.

When passersby did stop and watch the street action, they were often both surprised and impressed by what they saw: the level of skill, positivity, and friendliness. The following field notes were jotted down in January 2012, as NEPK started showing their circus skills at a favorite site, "Solicitors," which is the front yard of a legal firm in the center of the city:

> lots of people slow and watch, small kids join in, out come juggling balls and batons, they are on top of each other, on/in space, affectionate, friendly, hugs and handshakes. A posse of skaters pass by, stop to watch and say hi.

The freerunners were adding to the cityscape. Far from causing trouble, they were a source of interest and they inspired respect.

Valuing the Informal Playground: "My Perfect Day"

It is easy to see the street-sports gangs hurtling past or scrambling over buildings and think the worst of them. For example, Figure 4 shows NEPK all over the front of Solicitors, which is private property. In Figure 5, boys are doing some aerial gymnastics on the scaffolding on a building—the sort of behavior likely to attract criticism and perhaps attention from the police. But look closely at Figure 5 and notice the *Chronicle* headline on the bottom part of the doorway on the right-hand

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[7] "Crack" is North East England slang for fun.

Figure 4. North East Parkour, Saturday morning at "Solicitors", 2012. This favourite spot is the front of a local law firm, but the offices are not open on Saturday. The site is on a main road so the free runners are conspicuous (photo credit: Michael Jeffries)

side of the photo, "CITY BOOZE DEATHS SHOCK REVEALED." It points to a dark side of the economy of youth party culture. Like many British cities, Newcastle suffers from binge drinking, alcohol abuse, and attendant violence. In contrast, NEPK members are conspicuously healthy. As far as we know, none of them smoke. They bring wholesome food to their events. Many of the participants are trained gymnasts, and several are developing businesses as personal trainers or parkour instructors. Parkour has been characterised as a positive mix of martial arts discipline and "playful, childlike curiosity" (Ameel & Tani, 2012), and its outdoor group sessions are a powerful form of collaborative learning (O'Grady, 2012). It is hard to imagine a group more different from the stereotype of unhealthy, sedentary, antisocial youth. All that parkour participants need is the city to play in.

Conclusion

Skateboarders and freerunners place great value on the city, their sports, and above all, their friends. Days spent outdoors participating in these activities and the cultures that have grown up around them are at the core of these young people's lives. The informal playground of the city beckons them when school is out. Far from banning and demeaning the youngsters' use of the city, the civic authorities might do well to appreciate what a positive use of space skaters and

freerunners create. In any case, despite others' disapproval, it is clear that Jamie and the many others like him are not likely to stop any time soon:

My doctor advised me not to train anymore... but the idea of it... no free running... it makes me happy... it's like telling a fish to stop swimming. It's silly, it's a silly idea. (Jamie)

Figure 5. NEPK using scaffolding for gymnastics in the city centre on a Saturday, 2012. This may look like a nuisance but their active, sociaable days out are in stark contrast to the city's major problems shown by the local newspaper headline on the poster in the shop door "City booze deaths shock revealed". (photo credit: Michael Jeffries)

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