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# A TRIPARTITE CONCEPTUALISATION OF URBAN PUBLIC SPACE AS A SITE FOR PLAY: EVIDENCE FROM SOUTH BANK, LONDON<sup>1</sup>

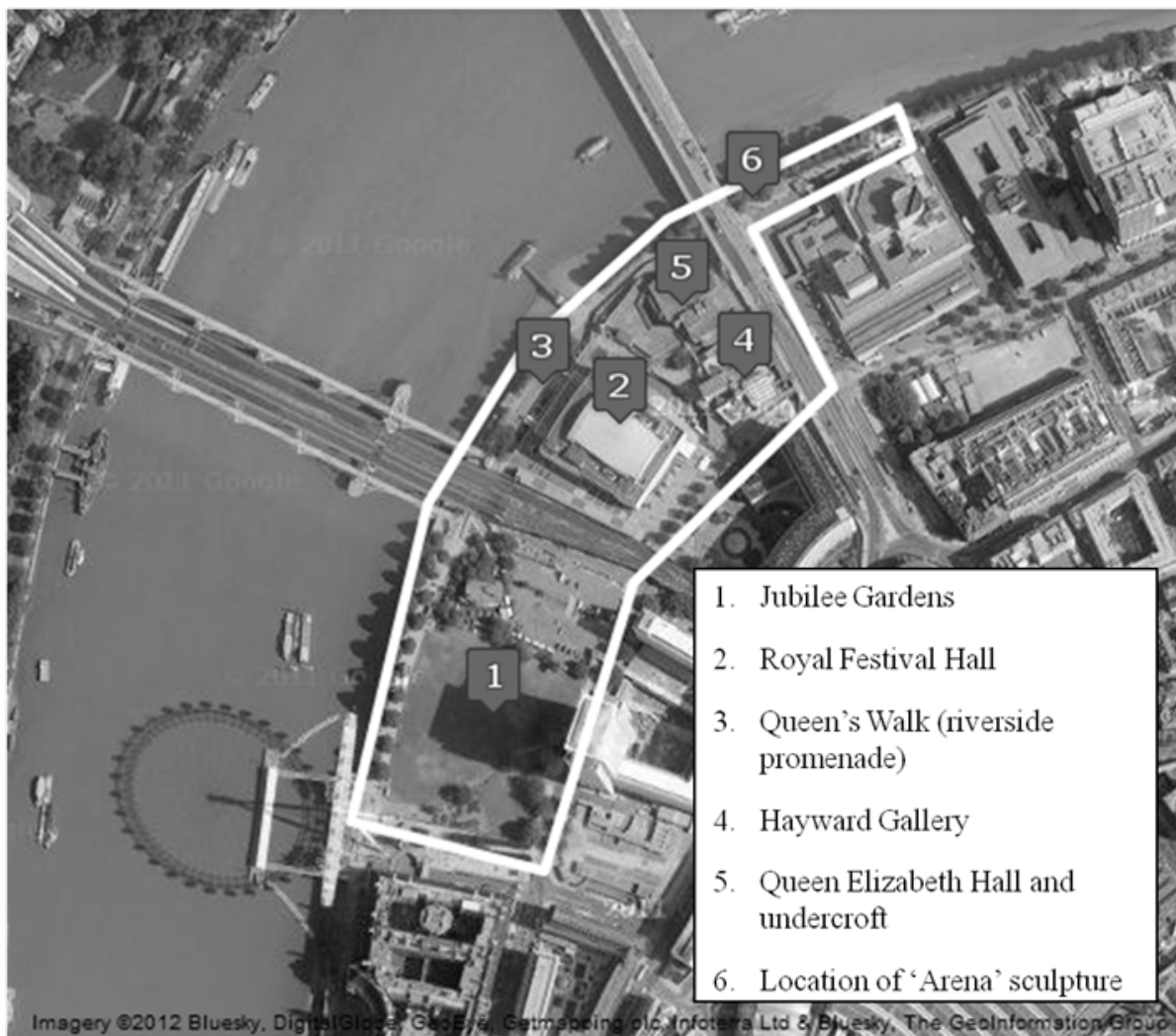
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*Abstract:* Public space is a feature of the urban built environment that has received increasing attention in recent years. Discussion has focussed on the theoretical decline of public space, as private and institutional forces take on increasing influence. At the same time, many such 'in-between spaces,' even privately-owned ones, are used and experienced as public on a daily basis. Few studies, however, have explored how spaces understood as public are used and practised as such. To address this gap in the literature this paper draws upon ethnographic data collected on the 'South Bank' in London (United Kingdom) to argue that 'play' is a recurrent trait of socio-spatial practices enacted in public space. Three interrelated typologies of playful practices in public space are discussed: child's play, plays on meaning and play as simulation.

## INTRODUCTION

Across the river from central London's 'West End' lies the 'South Bank', 'the largest concentration of cultural facilities anywhere in the world' (DCMS, 2002). At the heart of the South Bank lies the 'Southbank Centre', a riverside agglomeration of arts institutions and

open spaces that occupies a 170,000m<sup>2</sup> estate (the approximate bounds of which are demarcated in Fig. 1). This site comprises open spaces and buildings in about equal measure, and attracts 22 million people per year,<sup>2</sup> some visiting the site itself and others travelling through it to other nearby destinations such as London's 'West End'. The interconnected set of open spaces provided at the Southbank Centre are both paved areas of public space (in particular the Queen's walk, a wide riverside promenade, but also generous expanses of paved space between the local arts institutions and venues) and a significant area of green space (Jubilee Gardens, a 15,000m<sup>2</sup> park).



**Fig. 1.** Aerial photograph of London's South Bank. Given that the 'South Bank' area is not strictly defined, the approximate boundary of the field site used for this study is demarcated by the white line overlaid onto the aerial

photograph. (Source: adapted from Google Map Data, Imagery © 2012 Bluesky, DigitalGlobe, GeoEye, Getmapping plc, Infoterra Ltd and Bluesky, The GeoInformation Group).

This paper draws on qualitative data collected over a four-year period to explore the ways in which a set of open spaces in central London are ‘practised’ as public spaces on an everyday basis (esp. Jacobs and Merriman, 2011, on ‘practising architecture’). Rather than focus on a particular, more or less homogenous, set of users of public space, the author attempts to develop an ethnographic understanding the public spaces of the South Bank, with a focus on the uses of the paved open spaces fronting the Royal Festival Hall, Queen Elizabeth Hall and around the ‘Arena’ public sculpture [Fig. 1]. This is achieved through the analysis of direct observations of activities taking place on South Bank and ‘intercept interviews’ with visitors to the area. This paper can therefore be understood as an attempt to ‘spatio-analyse,’ to undertake an ‘analysis...of the (social) production of (social) space’ (Soja, 1996, pp. 34-35). It seeks to provide an ethnographic account of a public, and so inherently labile, social setting and in particular to understand some of the prominent qualities of everyday uses of the built environment taking place in urban public spaces.

This ethnographic engagement with the South Bank generated a range of findings that have been written-up elsewhere (Jones, 2008). Principal among these were: the role of physical and semiotic boundaries in the regeneration of urban public space, the discretionary nature of the regulation of public space on South Bank, the ‘open’ qualities of public space on South Bank and the risks posed to these ‘open’ qualities by an increasingly prescriptive architectural and managerial realisation of public space on South Bank. In addition, through its attentiveness to how and why visitors to the South Bank use space there, the data analysed also indicated that ‘play’ may be a useful lens to explore how public space is practised. It is this dimension of the wider analysis that is explored in the present paper, which specifically attempts not only to illuminate the playful qualities of socio-spatial practices in public space,

but also to provide an aetiology of these practices that pays particular attention to the milieu in which they arise.

This is important because as physical public spaces are regenerated – this study coincided with the most active years of an extensive transformation of London’s South Bank (Southbank Centre, 2011) – it is likely that the qualities of those spaces and the ways that they are experienced will change as policies and plans aimed at the functional determination of space are implemented (cf. Low, 2000). Of particular importance in this paper, there is a risk that through strategies and plans designed to actively market, enliven and secure urban public spaces, the openness (of form and to interpretation of use) experienced in those spaces may diminish. The urban designer Kevin Lynch (1996) provides a useful account of this quality of ‘openness’ in his essay ‘The openness of open space.’ As Lynch (1996, 297) puts it, ‘[o]pen space is the negative, extensive, loose, uncommitted complement to the system of committed land uses that make up a city region’. Critically, Lynch stresses that ‘open space’ does not simply refer to the material characteristics of a given locale. Rather, he advocates a ‘behavioural definition’ that is couched ‘within practical bounds’ (namely that “we are talking about outdoor open space” [Lynch, 1996, p. 396]). That is, Lynch argues that while the physical parameters (and in particular the accessibility) of a given space are key to its openness, the degree to which a given space is open to interpretation of use and meaning is also critical. As he puts it himself, ‘[o]pen spaces in this sense are all those regions in the environment which are open to the freely chosen and spontaneous actions of people: [...] *a space is open if it allows people to act freely*’ (Lynch, 1996, p. 396 [emphasis added]).

In defining ‘openness’ in both material and experiential terms, Lynch prefigures the central premise of this paper that the ‘publicity’ of a given space stems from an uneasy dialectical relationship between its physical form *and* its social characteristics. As Iveson (2007, p. 3) describes, public space has been conceptualised both ‘topographically’ and

‘procedurally’, the former understanding public space as a physical portion of the city that could be delineated on a map, and the latter defining spaces as public at any given time they are used for collective action or debate (also Lofland, 1998; Tonnelat, 2010). While the different ways that public space has been conceptualised, and the attendant underlying tension between public/private, cannot be discussed at length here (for an interesting account of these issues see Iveson [2007, pp. 1-19]), it is worth stressing that in the present paper the author tries to avoid privileging either the ‘topographical’ or ‘procedural’ approach. Rather, a dialectical formulation is advocated, whereby material public space at one and the same time produces, and is produced as public by, social practices that are characteristically playful, and the extent to which practices are playful relates to how far spatial form and use is pre-determined.

#### *Public Space, Resistance and Play*

A number of recent accounts have focussed on the ordering of urban public space through the imposition of regulatory and managerial regimes that are seen to guarantee order and so nullify the very status of such space as public (Harvey, 1996; Atkinson, 2003; Ruppert, 2006; Herbert and Beckett, 2009; Minton, 2009; Blomley, 2010). This reported drive to order public space is set within a wider set of narratives that describe the widespread production of leisure landscapes in urban settings as city authorities seek to realise the political-economic potential of place (esp. Logan and Molotch, 1987) and to restructure city images in a bid for improved, ideally ‘global,’ city status (Zukin, 1995; Fyfe, 1998; Pinder, 2002; Smith, 2002; Degen, 2003; Stevens and Dovey, 2004; Mitchell and Beckett, 2008).

By the same token, accounts of social practices readily associated with public space, many of which have focussed on skateboarding (cf. Spinney, 2010, p. 2918), have conceptualised these practices as characteristically resistant in their transgression of codes of

behaviour and intended uses of architectural form (Beal, 1995; Borden, 2001; Flusty, 2000; Vivoni, 2009; Carr, 2010). Thus power and an essentialised notion of hegemony have become the dominant lens through which the restructuring of public space, and its everyday use, have come to be viewed. More recently, in his study of urban cycling which is also set on London's South Bank, Spinney (2010, p. 2915) has made a compelling argument that accounts of public space ought to take 'a more performative stance seeking to understand how power (and therefore what might be termed resistance) is continually becoming through fleeting encounters.' At South Bank, he argues, rather than being characteristically 'resistant,' 'the interactions between trials [cyclists], BMX riders, and other users performs [sic] the South Bank in ways which position these styles of riding as largely congruent with what the redevelopment [of the South Bank] is trying to achieve' (Spinney, 2010, p. 2915).

While rejecting the tendency to conceptualise these practices or 'performances' of urban public space as resistant, Spinney's (2010, p. 2915) argument does, however, continue to frame these social activities in terms of an overarching set of processes of spatial restructuring taking place in urban settings globally, namely the redevelopment of public space 'with an emphasis on imagery and spectacle in order to pursue economic goals.' Such processes have been described as resulting in 'disneyfied' public spaces elsewhere (Bridge and Watson, 2000, p. 374; Zukin, 1995, pp. 67-69), and rather than set social practices in public space in opposition to these political economic spatial transformations, Spinney argues that in some cases it might be more appropriate to conceptualise these practices as befitting them.

The present paper proceeds on the basis that there is something to be gained from breaking more fully from the 'seductions of resistance' (Rose, 2002) when it comes to discussing the everyday practice of public space. It moves away from an emphasis on 'framing performances as resistant or not' (Spinney, 2010, p. 2915) towards an understanding



of these embodied practices as ‘an alternative way of being that eludes the grasp of power’ (Radley, 1995, p. 9). As Thrift (1997, p. 149) puts it in his theoretical account of dance as embodied practice, ‘in part, to state that dance can be used to subvert power or to combat it is sorely to miss the point. Play eludes power, rather than confronts it.’ It is precisely around this observation that ‘playful’ embodied practice eludes rather than confronts power that this paper coalesces, drawing on interview data and observations to argue that playful aspects of social life in urban public spaces might usefully be conceptualised in terms of play *per se*, rather than as resistant to or accordant with dominant place-making tropes and their associated regulatory regimes (cf. Flusty, 2000).

To better understand the contribution that concepts of ‘play’ can make to the existing literature on urban public space and the social life that inhabits it the following analysis draws heavily on the work of Johan Huizinga, a Dutch cultural historian writing in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and specifically on his major theoretical work *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1970). Despite being credited as one of ‘the three truly great twentieth-century play theorists’ (Sutton-Smith, 2001, p. ix), Huizinga is a relatively under-explored writer in social and cultural geography. In his forward to *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga (1970, p. ix) stresses that it was not his ‘object to define the place of play among all other manifestations of culture, but rather to ascertain how far culture itself bears the character of play.’ It is precisely this objective that lies at the heart of this paper in its exploration of the extent to which social practices in urban public space bear the character of play. Importantly, as Anchor (1978, p. 63) points out, ‘[a]lthough Huizinga was not the first to discover the value of play in explaining human behavior, he was the first to attempt an exact definition of play and of the ways in which it infuses and manifests itself in culture.’ It is Huizinga’s attempt to outline the conceptual parameters of play that is of particular interest here and that underpins the tripartite conceptualisation of play set out by the author.

‘Play’ is by no means an absent dimension in theoretical accounts of urban form and urban life, and to this end the work of other notable theorists on the ludic qualities of city life and the spaces it occupies (in particular Richard Sennett [1977, 1994], Michel de Certeau [1984] and Roland Barthes [1997]) will be referenced, as well as work by more recent commentators who draw on these earlier thinkers in their own analyses of the potential for urban space to be ‘made’ (Tonkiss, 2005, pp. 131-147), ‘played’ (Stevens, 2003; 2007) or ‘sensed’ (Degen, 2008). Stevens (2007) in particular makes the connection between *public space* in cities and play, echoing a link made previously by Lyn Lofland (1998) in her six point ‘inventory of utility’ for the public realm. In this ‘respites and refreshments’ category Lofland (1998, p. 233) argues for the preservation of (non-Disneyfied) public realm on the grounds that it constitutes a ‘playground’ for both children *and* adults in which ‘respites and refreshments attractive to both groups abound’. The contribution that the present paper makes to this set of literature on the ludic qualities of cities, and public space in cities more specifically, is a close empirical account of how the social life of urban public space bears the character of play. In so doing, the paper attempts to address an observed need in research on public space to get closer to the ‘daily social interactions’ and ‘quotidian public life’ of urban public spaces (Degen, 2008, p. 10) and builds on a growing body of work that foregrounds the social rather than the spatial qualities of ‘publicity’ in cities (esp. Watson, 2006; Iveson, 2007).

## METHODS

The findings in this paper are drawn from two distinct ‘corpora’ of primary qualitative data (Bauer and Arts, 2000) collected as a means to approximate an ethnographic understanding of London’s South Bank as a set of interconnected urban public spaces. The data collected comprises: direct observations of people’s uses of the South Bank made, over a four-year period, in the various ‘microsettings’ (Duneier, 1999, p. 344) that make-up the area

and recorded via ‘continuous on-the-spot note taking’ (Lofland and Lofland, 1995, p. 89) and ‘intercept interviews’ (N=46) conducted with passers-by on London’s South who were selected in a purposive way to participate in the study and who were approached ‘cold.’

This ‘bricolage of ethnographic methods’ (Aitken, 2001, p. 499) was employed with a view to understanding how people used and valued public space, and topic guides for the intercept interviews were therefore developed in such a way as to generate stories about participants use of, attitudes towards and interactions on the South Bank. Fieldnotes and transcripts were thematically coded and analysed qualitatively according to techniques drawn from the grounded theory tradition (Strauss and Corbin 1998). In particular, principles of the constant comparative method (Strauss, 1987) were used, with an emphasis on combined analysis of codes generated through the analysis of different data sets (observational fieldnotes and interview transcripts).

As far as possible, in the course of data collection the researcher sought to allow the ‘[b]ehaviour and interaction [of those observed to] continue as they would without the presence of a researcher, uninterrupted by intrusion’ (Adler and Adler, 1998, p. 80). However, fears that exceptions to this rule this would disturb the ‘natural’ order of activity being observed, and that the ‘true’ identity of the researcher would be revealed by such moments (or even that it would be the cause of them), were unfounded. Rather, such potentially disruptive moments were in themselves key ethnographic encounters (rather than disjunctures in the collection of ‘valid’ observational data). Importantly, the public qualities of the study setting with which this paper is concerned mitigated the extent to which the researcher’s presence affected the research as the criteria for valid presence were inherently broad.

## SOUTH BANK AS A SITE FOR PLAY

*[G]eographic and planning perspectives on public space that bemoan its 'end' in the contemporary city, as it seemingly is replaced by more structured 'single-minded' space, are too simple for understanding how spaces are appreciated and used, and how people form identities within them (Mitchell, 1996, p. 130).*

In this paper the author is interested in how public space is *actually* practised and consequently 'made'; in addressing Low's (2000, p. 38) lament that public space has been the subject of "few ethnographic studies, and even fewer environment-behaviour studies that emphasised socio-cultural processes and social relations." Mitchell's (1996, p. 130) concern not to 'discount the experience of so many users of these [public] spaces'. Specifically, the author considers the socio-spatial practices variously characterised by *play* that were evident during fieldwork. In this paper, 'playful' moments do not refer simply to childish and adolescent practices at South Bank, but rather to ludic moments in their totality, and in fact one of Huizinga's own concerns was with 'how and why adults play' (Stevens, 2007, p. 28). A tendency to reduce playful activities to the realm of 'minors' (a tendency dating back in Western European societies to the mid-eighteenth century [Sennett, 1977, pp. 92-94]), and to make 'distinctions made between childhood and adult forms of play' (Sennett, 1977, p. 92), is rejected in the present paper (cf. Valentine, 1996; Sutton-Smith, 2001; Holloway and Valentine, 2000, pp. 1-26; Aitken, 2001). Moreover, whilst play is understood as 'an action accomplishing itself outside and above the necessities and seriousness of everyday life' (Huizinga, 1970, p. 26), at the same time the author follows Huizinga in stressing that 'all play, both of children and grown-ups, can be performed in the most perfect seriousness' (Huizinga, 1970, p. 18). This approach follows more recent analyses that have attempted to critically analyse play as 'an adult construction full of questionable assumptions about enjoyable activities free of stress for the children concerned' (Thomson and Philo, 2004, p. 111; also Holloway and Valentine, 2000).

Following this critical perspective on play, the paper proceeds first by considering overtly playful socio-spatial practices on South Bank among children, before turning to similar practices among adults in the same physical space. This approach is taken to reinforce the arguments made in the analyses described above that distinctions between children's 'playful' activities and adults' preoccupations are socially-constructed. Drawing primarily on the work of Huizinga (1970), the paper goes on to engage with play in public space in three ways. The first of these is to consider those moments of *playfulness* where the 'fun-element' (Huizinga, 1970, p. 3) is explicit in the experience of a given social practice. This section concerns material practices; it focuses on corporeal playfulness, or play as enacted physically. One practice readily associated with London's South Bank, skateboarding, can be taken as an example (e.g. Beal, 1995; Pégard, 1998; Flusty, 2000; Borden, 2001; Woolley and Johns, 2001; Vivoni, 2009; Carr, 2010), although it must be acknowledged that this too can be practised in the utmost seriousness, so appearing less overtly playful. Critically, the author intends to move beyond skateboarding at South Bank as *the* ludic indicator. While skateboarding is readily identifiable as a playful engagement with public space – and is almost archetypal in this respect, with architects portraying skaters in their project plans, city tourist boards using images of them in their marketing materials<sup>3</sup> and the Southbank Centre employing them as part of the Mayor's 'Inside Out' festivities along the embankment (GLA, 2006) – the author contends that with closer observation playful moves can be observed amongst users as more widely conceived.

The second approach to play is inextricably linked to the first and concerns an interpretive understanding of play. In practical terms, this approach turns to the variety of ways that users of public space interpret given objects in ways other than prescribed; it explores *plays on meaning* practised by individuals in public space. On South Bank, the functionality of objects is played with by a whole variety of users on a daily basis, from the

use of an out of the way space as one in which to exercise to that of a bench as a sun lounger [Fig. 2].



**Fig. 2.** Visitors ‘twist’ the ‘ideological content’ of street furniture in public space, practising an out of the way corner of the South Bank as a gym, or a bench on the site as a sun lounger. (Source: author’s collection).

In contrast to these first two approaches, the third one adopted takes Huizinga’s (1970, p. 1) argument that play also has a ‘non-materialistic quality’ as central. This understanding of play emphasises its imaginative qualities, qualities that are key for Huizinga (1970, p. 4) in his attempt ‘to understand play as a cultural factor in life’. In particular, the section focuses on the ways that users of public space can be seen to manipulate certain images (or, more precisely, *projections* of themselves) to create an *illusion* (Huizinga, 1970, p. 11): ‘a pregnant word which means literally ‘in-play’ (from *illusio*, *illudere* or *inludere*)’ (11). In this vein, when Thrift (1997, p. 145) asks, ‘what, then is play?’, he states that ‘[c]lassically, play is described as ‘as-ifness’: it is ‘not-for-real but is enacted as if it were’. In open public space, it is contended, where access is, at least theoretically, relatively unrestricted and only regulated according to behaviour rather than essential characteristics of the individual, so constraints on one’s imaginative capacity – the ability to imagine, and project, oneself as ‘other’, ‘*as-if*’ – are loosened. This ‘looseness’ of public space (esp. Franck and Stevens, 2007) such as that experienced by interviewees on South Bank is perhaps most apparent when it is contrasted with the regulation of behaviour in, and even

physical access to, increasingly privatised, sanitised and disneyfied city spaces (Sorkin, 1992; Goss, 1993; Mitchell, 2003; Stevens and Dovey, 2004; Zukin, 2009; Minton, 2009).

*'Child's Play'<sup>4</sup> at South Bank: Overtly Playful Practices in Public Space*

For Huizinga (1970, p. 10) it is the case that '[a]ll play moves and has its being within a **playground** marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course' [emphasis added]. At South Bank, two principal sites that are (although by no means continuously) 'in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain' (Huizinga, 1970, p. 10) can be identified. The first of these 'spots' is the Queen Elizabeth Hall undercroft [Fig. 3]. This concrete, ground-level void beneath the Queen Elizabeth Hall (a concert hall and performing arts venue [see Fig. 1]) opens out onto the riverside walkway and was designed to accommodate service and delivery functions for the Southbank Centre arts venues. However, it was underused for these purposes and was subsequently appropriated by skateboarders (from the 1970s onwards) due to the abundance of desirable architectural features (smooth surfaces, banks, steps and ledges) found there, as well as its city centre location. In the early 2000s an attempt was made by those in charge of the open spaces of the Southbank Centre to formally delimit the territory available to skateboarders and BMXers by demarcating the section of undercroft available to them with a yellow line [Fig. 3]. However, observations for the present study revealed that in practice the spatial limits of the area they use are positively ambiguous, although a shared sense (between riders of various sorts and passers-by alike) seems to have developed as to where the South Bank 'skate spot' *is* 'as a matter of course'.



**Fig. 3.** The Queen Elizabeth Hall undercroft with a yellow line [indicated by arrow] painted onto the paving by Southbank Centre estates staff to demarcate the skateboarders' (and others') realm. The loose basis of this line as boundary is evidenced in the photograph, with two skateboarders transgressing its bounds. (Source: author's collection).

The second 'playground' is the 'Arena' public sculpture (created by the artist John Maine in the mid-1980s) which takes the form of a broken, or incomplete, ring of stone [Fig. 4] about 10 metres across and situated in the middle of the riverside walkway to the northeast of the Queen Elizabeth Hall [see Fig. 1]. The Arena is more clearly 'hedged round' than the undercroft [Fig. 4], but again this completeness is neither unambiguous in a visual sense – the form of the sculpture is such that it appears to disappear into and reappear from the paved walkway on which it is positioned – nor in terms of how the sculpture is 'practised' from day to day. Moreover, the sculpture is by no means signalled as playground, but rather is 'interpreted' openly as such through practice. While skateboarding was one of the playful activities identified taking place here, the most recurrent one is more readily associated with 'playgrounds', namely 'child's play'. Thus, each time the Arena sculpture was subject to long periods of observation, its use by children (mainly of primary school age or below) as an *ad hoc* playground was evident [Fig. 4].





**Fig. 4.** The *Arena* sculpture. (Source: author's collection).

The banked sides of the sculpture are used as surfaces to scramble up, onto and over, or to perch upon, while the flat area shielded by these sides is used as a rink to run, bike or skate around, often while chasing or being pursued by companions. Here the physicality of the space 'produced' by the sculpture is key, as the sides create a permeable yet protected space – the term 'arena' cannot be bettered – that can be practised in 'playful' ways. Critically, this reading of the *Arena* sculpture as playground seems to be held not only by younger passers-by but also by their guardians. Thus observations were often made of parents encouraging their dependents' gambits or using the outdoor Royal National Theatre tables nearby as an informal waiting area while their children played at the adjacent sculpture.

Alongside the suitability of the material form of the *Arena* sculpture to 'play', observations and accounts of how activity on South Bank is regulated must also be considered. That is, the observations and intercept interviews conducted, and not in the least the daily presence of skaters for more than 30 years on the South Bank, indicate that the area is considered to be one in which young people are accommodated. For example, when an intercept interviewee was asked if he had come to the South Bank for a particular reason that day he responded as follows:

*Not particularly, it's just a very good place to bring children...a place they can 'run riot' in....I mean it's, one of the places that you're not thrown out of if you take children to.*

This use of the undercroft by guardian-accompanied children surfaced a number of times during fieldwork observations, and not least in an intercept interview with a middle-aged woman who was at the South Bank *solely* because her sons had ‘come to skate’ there. Thus, as fieldwork proceeded it became clear that the South Bank was an area well-utilised and highly-valued by parents and guardians with young children because of the physical and metaphorical space it provided for exuberant activities.

*More than ‘Child’s Play’: Ludic Practices on the South Bank*

A young girl...runs, laughing and shouting ‘daddy, you’re it’ (as in the playground game ‘it’) – the dad (of the family of four) at first seems disinclined to play, acting serious and ignoring his daughter’s provocations, but then surprises her by joining in suddenly to which she screams in delight. [Observational fieldnote extract].

The discussion now moves beyond a straightforward designation of the Queen Elizabeth Hall undercroft and the Arena as ‘playground’ as in its most common usage, as a set-aside site for the activities of children. The inappropriateness of such an association – and of attempts to analytically reduce play to children’s activities more broadly – is clear if one goes to observe the skateboarders in the Queen Elizabeth Hall undercroft. This is particularly so during school hours, when, not surprisingly, those present tend not to be children, but individuals beyond their teenage years (by 10 years or more in some instances). Moreover, this finding should not be deemed anomalous, and reducible to the idiosyncrasies of skateboard ‘culture’. Rather, beyond the (at least intra-group) legitimisation of playfulness afforded by being on a board with wheels, elsewhere on South Bank moments of play can be observed in the practices of other users no longer in their formative years. An observation made on a summer afternoon illustrates this point. On this day, the Arena is being treated as a playground in the typical fashion by children and parents. Among these users are a boy

whizzing around on a bike with stabilizers and his mother. Of particular note here was not the child's apparent immersion in the sculpture as 'playground', but rather the less formal playful practices in which his mother engaged while he raced around:

This...child is with his mother who chats on a mobile while he bikes around. As she talks, she notices his other form of transport (one of the newish/revival two-wheeled metallic scooters) has been left unattended. She goes over to it and stands with it, and, perhaps distracted/less publicly-conscious for being on the phone/in a private conversation, she proceeds to have a go at skating on the scooter herself, apparently unaware that she is in the middle of the busy, stage-like *Arena* statue. She then ends her phone call, but continues scooting, and calls her son over to leave/move on.

Here, then, it could be argued that in accompanying her child to the South Bank to play, the woman in question had a legitimising 'tool' (not unlike the skateboarders' boards) for her playful practice. Such a legitimising function of children can also be read in another observation made when when a father scrambled over the *Arena* sculpture to encourage his son [Fig. 5].



**Fig. 5.** An early middle-aged man scrambles over a section of the *Arena* sculpture while his son looks on. (Source: author's collection).

However, such readings explain only part of the picture. That is, while the availability of some sort of 'crutch' may well increase the likelihood of an adult 'playing' in public, it is by

no means conditional for it (cf. Sheehan, 2006). Thus, observations were also made of users not accompanied by children very deliberately using the Arena in a playful way, from walking over (rather than around) its concrete sections as a part of a promenade stroll, to running up the side of the sculpture as they pass it by:

A couple [late 20s/30s] walk past [the Arena] and the woman runs up one of the banked sides laughing, to the apparent slight embarrassment/chagrin of her partner.

A particular take on Huizinga's direct association between play and freedom can help to interpret these observations. That is, alongside his assertion that play 'is' freedom, the fieldwork described here indicated that play can be seen to occur at certain moments of freedom; to be *expressive of* freedom. In public space, this argument has a triple significance. First of all, the relatively afunctional and 'open' nature of public space partially forecloses any normative prescriptions of use. Unlike the school playground, public space is not set aside for play, *but likewise such activity is not unexpected*. A certain degree of 'freedom' exists, then, to develop (and *practise*) one's own understanding of how public space 'should' be used (and so made). Notably, this 'freedom' seemed to be age-dependent on occasion, as the following fieldnote recorded after observing some early teenage boys jumping around the *Arena* suggests:

I [notice...] the more permanent, less mobile apparently, yellow-jacketed [security] guard speak to two older teenage boys leaping on the statue, as if cautioning them – there seem, therefore, to be differential rules for young and old 'kids'/people; norms of who can or should, and cannot or should not, play being put into practice. ...As he cautions these [young adults], a white, male, less than 6 year old child on a bike with stabilizers whizzes past the guard unnoticed, almost as if to reiterate this point.

Despite such moments, however, data collected for this study for the most part suggest that in public space the ‘pleasure principle in urban space’ is rendered less ‘vulnerable to the spatial sway of the reality principle, the dominant rationality of productivity, utility and order in the city’ (Tonkiss, 2005, p. 136). Moreover, this is a dialectical relationship, in that the enactment of activities of your own choosing in public space itself contributes to the degree to which that space is perceived as public.

Secondly, public space is used by many to spend leisure time. Thus, if ‘waiting for a bus is generally only ‘play’ when you’re not really waiting for a bus’ (Tonkiss, 2005, p. 147), then it could be argued that in public space ‘play-potential’ is increased because leisure is privileged, and purposefulness sidelined. Thirdly, and related to these spatial and temporal arguments, the anonymity experienced in urban settlements (esp. Simmel, 1998), and perhaps most readily in the central public spaces of large cities, arguably reduces the paralysing effects of self-consciousness, or, from another perspective, sets one’s consciousness free. As Tonkiss (2005, p. 139) puts it, a sense prevails that out in public ‘nobody is really looking’ (bar the ethnographer!), and that even if one is seen, the significance of being ‘caught in the act’ is much diminished because the majority of people co-present tend to be unknown others.

So far, the findings recounted mostly corroborate Huizinga’s assertion that all play takes place in a playground. This contextual circumscription of play will now be contested, however, and the role of individuals in *making space playful* through social practice emphasised. This is not to refute Huizinga’s claims outright, but rather to contest the finite bounds to play that he infers (cf. Thomson and Philo’s [2004] critical analysis of children’s ‘play’ spaces). Away from the ‘playgrounds’ already described, then, passers-by engaged in playful activities of various sorts were also observed. Not unexpectedly children were often

engaged in such activities, most recurrently using the benches at various locations on the South Bank as platforms to leap onto, off and across, as observed in the following fieldnote:

A large family group (three generations – grandparents, parents and young children) pass by along the promenade, east to west. The children start playing with the benches, jumping on and off them, the young girl wanting to be lifted between the benches by her grandmother, the boy preferring to leap between them. But it is not only the children who use the benches in a playful way – the elderly male also uses the holes in the top of the benches as a stand for his umbrella, poking it through to rest on the ground with the handle poking out above the surface of the bench.

At other times, and again notably on the terrace fronting the Royal Festival Hall, these same benches would be used as hurdles or stepping-stones by some more energetic passers-by [Fig. 6], and occasionally by friends racing each other.



**Fig. 6.** A visitor plays with the meaning of a row of benches on the South Bank, using them as stepping-stones. (Source: author's collection).

Observations were also made of children and adults alike engaged in less dramatic playful acts; a young child weaving through a set of bollards as if a slalom, a man walking along a wall beside a friend to test his ability to balance or a rollerblader seen on the riverside promenade:

A lone male, 20s, rollerblades past me (east to west), turning to rollerblade backwards as he passes where I sit, before turning back and gliding between the passers-by and fixed objects further on. His movements resemble a sort of dance.

Through these socio-spatial practices it can be observed that the provision of public space that is ‘open’ in the Lynchian sense does not guarantee play, or the absence of it elsewhere, but rather it facilitates playful readings of space.

### *Plays on Meaning: The Functionality of Objects in Public Space*

The second mode of playful practices under consideration bears a strong resemblance to the first, but is distinctive in terms of the way that these practices are enacted. The play discussed in the preceding section was overtly ‘playful’, or pure play. The spatial practices discussed in the present section, however, are less obviously moments of mere ‘fun’. An apparently commonsensical distinction between ‘mirthful’ and ‘serious’ actions in public space may be misleading in some instances, and rather than analyse them as playful or not, it may be most beneficial to consider them *both* ‘in the concept of play’.

Empirically, this section explores the ways that users of public space can be seen to play with the meaning of the conventional use of a physical object (or set of objects) at South Bank. While such practices can be, and in many cases are, conducted ‘in the most perfect seriousness’ (Huizinga, 1970, p. 18), this is not to say that they are therefore ‘playless’. Rather, they can constitute expressions of the *joie d’espace* identifiable in the work of Roland Barthes (1997) as a key quality of urban experience.

Throughout the observations conducted, various architectural objects around the South Bank – and primarily various pieces of ‘street furniture’ – were recurrently the subject of *plays on meaning* or ‘misinterpretations’ (de Certeau, 1984, p. 39). Such moments would

range from a pair of middle-aged men using the base of the riverside promenade as a table for a game of chess to ‘free runners’ scrambling up a concrete parapet. Such playful interpretation of given elements of the urban realm is at the heart of ‘free running’. In this practice (also known as ‘parkour’), walls, ledges and other ‘street furniture’ are literally reconfigured as ‘obstacles found in one’s path to perform jumps and acrobatics’ (Schofield, 2002). Significantly, the South Bank seems to offer a particularly suitable arena for this practice. Free runners featured in my observations on a number of occasions, including the following fieldnote:

Two ‘parkour’ practitioners (male and female, 20s) start jumping between low pillars and a square, stone piece of sculpture (~1.5m high) to my right and adjacent to the Queen Elizabeth Hall stairs... They are practising, like urban gymnasts.

It was the suitability of the South Bank to parkour that was of particular interest when three separate groups of free-runners were observed during one set of week-day lunchtime observations. Having approached one of these groups to ask them about their activity, they reported, unexpectedly, that the textured concrete surfaces found at the South Bank [e.g. Fig. 7] were a key attraction because they improved practitioners’ ability to grip onto structures; that, as with skateboarders, the quality of surfaces impinges upon free runners’ ability to perform certain moves (cf. Saville, 2008). At the same time, however, the quality of the *space itself* was also key, not only in terms of the configuration of objects/obstacles, but also the *openness* of the space – as one of the respondents put it, the space had an almost ‘rustic’ feel. Again, and as with the Queen Elizabeth Hall undercroft, this openness was not simply material, but also regulatory:

I’m told that they [the free runners I approached] have only been kicked-off the temporary stairs down between the Queen Elizabeth Hall terrace and promenade (an area subject to both Headline and Queen Elizabeth Hall [security guard] surveillance)



which they could understand. Apart from that there were no problems with security and they felt unhindered in their activity.

That same day observations of two more groups of free runners are recorded, one of which is a group of three mid-teenage boys who are filming each other jump onto, and run along, a low wall on the terrace next to the Hayward Gallery. As with skateboarders, then, these free runners play with meanings, reimagining a wall, conventionally a barrier to movement, as a prime site for their recreation.

It is worth stressing the importance of not conflating persons and activities with regard to ‘play’ at South Bank. That is, it is not just ‘free runners’ who play with urban form in this way, but rather their engagement with the site is a more formalised extension of activities that can readily be observed in public space. Moreover, the emergence and coverage of parkour<sup>5</sup> arguably influences how ‘regular’ users engage with built form [Fig. 7].



**Fig. 7.** A couple of friends size up a wall (that they later try to scramble up) beneath the Queen Elizabeth Hall terrace. (Source: author’s collection).

Besides these ‘unconventional’, intensely physical and direct, uses of space, however, other more mainstream socio-spatial practices arguably have a playful basis. These include cyclists (e.g. Spinney, 2010) and rollerbladers meandering through the South Bank site, as well as numerous joggers – so much so that on weekday lunchtimes Queen’s Walk (the riverside promenade) could be mistaken for a running track.

Repeatedly in the observations made for this study, the subjects of these plays on meaning were the numerous benches of various kinds placed around the Southbank Centre site, including the plain, concrete benches [Fig. 8] characteristic of the area.



**Fig. 8.** A row of concrete benches lined up along the riverside wall of the Queen Elizabeth Hall. (Source: author’s collection).

Of the numerous misuses of these benches observed (misuses that stand in stark contrast to the undifferentiated form of the benches themselves), some were overtly playful (as discussed earlier), while others were less transgressive of the benches’ ‘ordinary functions’. For example, in Fig. 9 below, the woman at the edge of the image sits right up on the bench, using the Queen Elizabeth Hall wall as a backrest [see also the woman pictured in Fig. 9].



**Fig. 9.** A visitor rejects the pre-determined functionality of this bench and uses the wall of the Queen Elizabeth Hall as a backrest instead. (Source: author's collection).

During a period of observations conducted around this same section of terrace, benches were used as a backrest (while the user sat on the ground) and even as an impromptu classroom for a one-to-one French lesson. On numerous other occasions 'grown adults' were observed using them as sun-loungers [e.g. Fig. 2] or as a raised platform to stand on. At the same time, on numerous instances in the fieldnotes amassed for this study, non-seating elements (sculptures, banisters and steps among others) were observed being used *as* benches [Fig. 10].



**Fig. 10.** Elements of the built environment around South Bank being used as seats by passers-by. (Source: author's collection).

Clearly, all of these (mis)uses can be ascribed a utilitarian motive, and this is perhaps most tellingly the case when homeless individuals use the available benches as beds. At such

moments, any ‘fun-element’ of the ‘play’ observed is clearly absent, and the serious implications of such uses must not be ignored.

However, the author contends that the understanding provided by such utilitarian explanations for unconventional use of street furniture (cf. Whyte, 1988) is only partial. The reading of a bench as backrest, sun bed or desk is not simply an expression of its maximal utility – the ‘highest and best use’ as Whyte (1988, p. 124) puts it in his account of observed behaviour in public spaces in New York – but also expresses the capacity fostered in public space simply to *play* with an object’s prescribed meaning and use. For Michael and Still (1992, p. 881), ‘[d]isciplinary power *tells* us that a chair is for sitting on, but ecological perception permits us to see that it affords standing upon, throwing, lying over, scratching against, and so on’ (cited in Degen, 2008, p. 64 [emphasis in original]). I would further this by arguing that public space ought to provide conditions in which the will of disciplinary power is susceptible to plays on meaning, and that in turn the playful practices so enabled create the conditions in which space is experienced as public. It is expressive of the openness experienced and practised at South Bank to play with the functionality of objects.

This was made evident to the author while observing activity on the Royal Festival Hall terrace one lunch-time. On this particular day, in the middle of a cold winter snap, the terrace was, unsurprisingly, rather underused, though one family did stop at the bench adjacent to the author’s to have lunch. Having finished their lunch, the two children in this group proceeded to climb onto the concrete benches, balancing on them and jumping between them. In addition, and in fact before the children did so, the father of the group climbed onto one of the benches to stand and face the rest of the family as they ate. Following Whyte’s (1988) interpretation, this action could clearly be taken as a move to offer an improved vantage point over the surrounding area and beyond (a ‘tactic’ witnessed on other occasions). However, it was apparent here that this did not provide a complete explanation. First of all,

at this precise time and location there was no notable visual advantage to standing on the bench (the setting was enclosed on all sides [either by the blank walls of the Queen Elizabeth Hall and Royal Festival Hall, or by the blue hoardings of the ongoing works]). Secondly, the almost instinctive, non-purposeful manner in which the father stepped onto the bench, and his actions thereafter (continuing to eat his sandwich in a carefree way), suggested an almost complete lack of purpose beyond stepping onto the bench as if to test it, and nothing else. It is to the significance of play in everyday (urban) life that my attention now turns.

### *Untethered Identities: Playacting and Public Space*

Just as the ‘uncommitted’ functionality of public space arguably loosens the ways in which its morphological form can be interpreted, the anonymity it affords arguably allows users to step outside of themselves vis-à-vis their identities. That is, in public space, where official identity, or even demographic markers, are not (theoretically) requirements for presence (and belonging), heightened ‘powers of imagination’ are fostered (Sennett, 1977, p. 41). Here, Huizinga’s (1970, pp. 13-14) discussion of the imaginative qualities of play and experimenting with identity is important. Thus, discussing imaginative performances during childhood, he argues:

*The child is quite literally ‘beside himself’ with delight, transported beyond himself to such an extent that he almost believes he actually is such and such a thing, without, however, wholly losing consciousness of ‘ordinary reality’. His representation is not so much a sham-reality as a realisation in appearance: ‘imagination’ in the original sense of the word (Huizinga, 1970, p. 14).*

Transposing this argument to public space the author argues that a number of instances of ‘imagination’ realised in this way take place<sup>6</sup>, although given the inherent difficulties with

validating evidence that people are simulating something they are not, this aspect of the theoretical argument of this paper is the most contentious.

In one instance, as the author observed a family group passing the Arena sculpture a young boy from the group ran up the sculpture, with his mother close at hand helping him up and being there to catch him if he fell. Of significance here is not simply the misuse of the sculpture, but the way that the boy reflected on his apparently instinctive actions, telling his mother: 'I'm really sorry, mummy, but I've got to practise some mountain climbing to warm myself up' [quoted from fieldnotes]. Here, then, it is clear that the child approaches the Arena 'full of imagination' (Huizinga, 1970, p. 13); it is not simply a handily-sized set of concrete blocks to climb on, but is reimagined as a mountain, and at the same time *he reimagines himself* as a mountain climber. In this example, the enabling capacity to play out (or not) certain roles in public space seems apparent.

When it comes to the imaginative practices of older users of public space, their articulation was less clear. Nevertheless, it still manifested itself in some of the field observations made. Notable among these was an observation made in the vicinity of the Queen Elizabeth Hall terrace when a young man, and apparently a well known skater there from his later interactions with others, turned up at the undercroft. As I write in my fieldnotes:

I...notice a white, shaven-headed youth with an inconspicuous/plain rucksack roll past and stop to sit at the corner section of riverside block often inhabited by skaters. The [young man] (ca. 20 years of age) [ – in a plain white t-shirt, straight-legged tight jeans and white, run-of-the mill trainers – ] doesn't really look like a skater.

Significantly, though, on sitting down he removes his shoes and puts on another pair that he retrieves from his rucksack. This pair [is] far more unusual, being white Vans

(a skate shoe brand)...with bright red decoration, and a more punky look. [...W]hile I had previously [observed...] middle-class skaters playacting as gangsters [in baggy, hip-hop style clothes], in this scenario it could be argued that the opposite is true. The skater/man seemed to make an effort *not to look like a skater* (though having a skateboard clearly tests this) until he got to South Bank; [apparently so as] to ‘fit in’ to more acceptable styles (pure white trainers) outside the context of South Bank.

This young man arguably adjusted, or reimagined, his identity between different contexts, from an apparent emphasis on anonymity away from South Bank, to one of being ‘a skater’ at South Bank. It is worth stressing here that skateboarders usually wear their ‘skate shoes’ in both skateboarding and non-skateboarding contexts, and that the shoes this individual arrived in (plain white trainers) had no obvious functional advantage for other contexts over the skate shoes he changed into. The only perceptible difference for the author was that one pair of shoes gave the impression of this individual as subscribing to a style associated with skateboarding while the other did not.

Some homeless users of the South Bank would play with their identity in a similar way. By simply taking off a beanie hat, concealing a wad of *Big Issue* magazines<sup>7</sup>, or sitting inconspicuously in the Royal Festival Hall foyer during a free music event, in part these users ‘play’ with their ‘marginal’ identities in a way that is particular to urban spaces that are practised as public and where access is unconditional; the openness of public space enables users to *perform belonging* in a positive sense, to ‘enjoy the illusion of his or her own ‘equal social worth’ as Forty (2001, p. 209) puts it of the experience of being in the Royal Festival Hall foyer.

Such work on the self might also clearly be a response to perceived socio-spatial norms as to comport and conduct, however. Much research concerning public space is

concerned with the filtering out of ‘undesirables’ associated with the increasing commercialisation and surveillance of public space (e.g. Davis, 1992; Harvey, 1996; Mitchell, 2003; Ruppert, 2006; Zukin, 2009). To a degree many such exclusions are based upon (assumptions about) the characteristics of particular users of public space. Thus ‘winos’ might be filtered out because they are holding a can of beer, or ‘odd people’ because of their appearance. This is particularly true in public spaces such as malls, where the onus is on consumption, and the provision of a ‘comfortable’ atmosphere in which to consume (Goss, 1993). Thus exclusions are arguably often made on the basis of the *identity* of particular users of a space; on the basis of an ‘image repertoire’ (after Barthes, in Sennett [1994, p. 365]) – ‘images which fall into simple and general categories, drawing on social stereotypes’ (Sennett, 1994, p. 365). Elsewhere, Sennett (1977, p. 238) refers to this process of taking ‘a detail...for an entire character state’ as ‘decoding’. Thus, ‘acceptable’ users are normalised, and users outside of these norms are deemed undesirable.

Moreover, how norms are constructed is often associated with the functions of a given space, for example with groups of adolescents often ejected from malls for ‘hanging around’ (Valentine, 1996, p. 213) which is both deemed intimidating towards others present, and also non-compliant with consumptive practices. Critically, while the ongoing transformation of public space on South Bank suggests that the area is being recreated as another disneyfied waterfront space for spectacle and consumption in the pursuance of economic ends (Spinney, 2010, p. 2915; also Marshall, 2001), the present findings suggest that the relative afunctionality of public space on South Bank at the time the data was collected – at a time when the area had only just recently been described as being characterised by ‘huge dusty areas untouched for decades’ (Sudjic, 2001 in Spinney, 2010, p. 2916) – is valued because it forecloses processes of normalisation that are inextricably linked to the functional rationalisation of space. Though Foucault (1995, p. 304) states that ‘[t]he judges of normality



are everywhere', in public spaces that are not yet subject to globalised strategies to 'place-market' their presence is at least less manifest than elsewhere in the city.

The absence of decoding as a means to regulate access at South Bank was perhaps most clear in an intercept interview carried out with a passer-by. The interviewee in question, a middle-aged man sitting on a bench on the Royal Festival Hall terrace, enjoying the sun and drinking beer at 12.25pm on a Saturday, could from his appearance, and slurred accent, be 'decoded' as a 'wino'. However, the very fact that he was present at South Bank, and able to participate in an interview, hints that regulatory processes of sanitisation associated with many spaces 'provided for the public' are not enforced at South Bank in the immutable ways that some more abstract accounts of public space would suggest is the case (e.g. Ruppert, 2006; Harvey, 1996; Atkinson and Flint, 2003; Minton, 2009; Zukin, 2009). In terms of the 'play-acting' identified at South Bank, then, the very responses of the 'wino' interviewed themselves expressed the 'as-ifness' quality of play that has been elaborated. Critically, because the interviewee had the same right of access to South Bank as everyone else present, and shared 'equal regard' with them (after Cooper, 1998, p. 465), his identity was not forewarned by his appearance. Thus, the responses he gave were not mediated by the fact that he might appear to be drinking at an inappropriate hour, or to be untidily dressed, as could be expected. Instead, during a post-interview conversation the interviewee in question reported the surprising lack of 'street people' (beggars, hawkers and so on) at South Bank – a group with which he might have been associated himself in other more functionally-determined spatial 'fragments' of the city (Sennett, 1994, p. 367) and based on first appearances. It seemed to me that because his presence is tolerated at South Bank – as he put it, 'this is *the* place for me in London, actually, do you know what I mean?' [emphasis in speech] – the responses he gave were *not* those of a marginalized 'other'.

Based on this analysis the author argues that the non-discriminatory atmosphere embodied in urban public spaces characterised by openness constitutes a context in which ‘the imagination of what is real, and therefore believable, *is not tied to a verification of what is routinely felt by the self*’ (Sennett, 1977, p. 41 [emphasis added]). The tolerance found in such public spaces to some extent dampens a focus on the self *because access is unconditional*. Those present can take on a public ‘role’ (as a mode of ‘play-acting’ [Sennett, 1977, p. 29]) and are able to shed the burden of ‘oneself;...this burden of personality’ (Sennett, 1977, p. 265). The ‘performativity’ witnessed in these instances can be understood not only as reactive, then – as pandering to norms – but also as an active attempt to imagine non-routine forms of belongingness in the city. Here, a group of youths who repeatedly mugged skateboarders but later became skateboarders themselves, as reported in an interview with a longstanding ‘local’ skateboarder, can be taken as a case in point. As such, public space could be argued to constitute a last refuge from the increasingly pervasive ‘intimate society’ identified by Sennett (1977); to constitute a context in which a ‘public role’ can be assumed, whether this role is performed or not.

#### CONCLUSION: (MIS)READING THE CITY, PLAY AND PUBLIC SPACE

Lofland (1998, p. 233) notes that in contrast to the elaboration of socially beneficial roles for the private and parochial realms (e.g. the socialisation of children and the provision of kin-based support networks respectively), a malignant sense exists that ‘everyone *doesn’t know* about the value of the public realm’ [emphasis in original]. The author’s intention in this paper has been to explore this overlooked value through recourse to the ‘play-concept’ (Huizinga, 1970, p. 18) with respect to ethnographic data collected on London’s South Bank.

In part the analysis provided can be seen to corroborate Lofland’s (1998, p. 233) reading of the public realm as ‘playground’. Such a conclusion would seem to neatly fit

Huizinga's (1970, p. 10) assertion that all play requires such a 'hallowed spot' where it 'proceeds within its own proper boundaries on time and space' (Huizinga, 1970, p. 13). However, there is a need to refrain from making an apparently straightforward designation of public space at South Bank as 'playground'. Rather than identify any playful quality as intrinsic to the precise bounds of the open spaces of the South Bank, the author would also like to emphasise the importance of being attentive to the playful qualities of *social practices*. Such an emphasis reverberates with Barthes urban semiotics in its acknowledgement that '[t]he ways in which the city signify are not tied to any single meaning, nor *do meanings reside securely in space*' (Tonkiss, 2005, p. 136 [emphasis added]).

This perspective stems partly from a practicality; namely that the precise bounds of the South Bank, let alone the 'public realm', are unclear – the South Bank 'does not have much of an overall identity'.<sup>8</sup> Notably, this ambiguity of form and function is one 'problem' that the ongoing 'transformation' of the Southbank Centre attempts to address. In doing so, however, the evidence presented here suggests that the 'open' qualities of space experienced on South Bank may be undermined. In turn, users' propensity to playfully practise South Bank *as public space* may be limited. This argument is a particular articulation of Lefebvre's (1991) notion of the dialectical *production* of space. That is, space should not be seen as public simply for certain qualities residing there, but rather in this paper the author has attempted to show that space is also *produced*, through spatial practices that are characteristically playful, as public. In this vein, to assign public space as playground is anathema to its value as a space that is intuitively functionless. Rather, it is this very afunctionality of 'open' public space that makes room for multiple, often perceptibly 'playful', readings by users. Within this, users can voluntarily enact public space as a site for play.

In conclusion, play, in its various forms, can be seen as one of ‘the resourceful ways people engage with their city’ (Tonkiss, 2005, p. 137). This engagement is not only active, however, but also *productive* (Lefebvre, 1991). Materially and functionally ambiguous public spaces – or the ‘empty patches’ between more functional fragments of the urban environment as Sennett (1994, p. 367) refers to them – not only provide the conditions for playful practices, but are also produced by them. This raises an important paradox that requires further analytical attention. Namely that the more designated ‘public realm’ is produced through approaches to design deemed increasingly ‘expert’ (Jacobs and Merriman, 2011, p. 215), the more constraints may be placed upon the everyday use-based production of space as public.

## NOTES

<sup>2</sup> See <http://ticketing.southbankcentre.co.uk/about-us> [retrieved on 21<sup>st</sup> September 2012].

<sup>3</sup> E.g. posters displayed in London Underground stations as part of the recent ‘Now or Never’ tourism promotion campaign for Vienna (WienTourismus, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> After Huizinga (1970, p. 10).

<sup>5</sup> E.g. the film ‘*Jump London*’ (Christie, 2003) which was screened on United Kingdom terrestrial television station Channel 4 had the free runners I spoke to in the present discussion animated and certainly put South Bank ‘on the map’ vis-à-vis free running.

<sup>6</sup> See also Stevens’s (2003, p. 241) discussion of ‘simulative play’ in public space.

<sup>7</sup> The *Big Issue* is a magazine produced by a charitable foundation and sold by homeless people as a means to give them an opportunity to earn a legitimate income, the on-street selling of which would readily identify the vendor as homeless.

<sup>8</sup> As stated by the South Bank Centre’s Artistic Director Jude Kelly in her interview with Emma Brockes’s (Brockes, 2006).

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