Drifting in the Trees: Creating Playgrounds with Recreational Urban Tree Climbing

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how recreational urban tree climbing[1] is a playful activity that creates new ways of experiencing the city by transforming a liminal space, the canopy, into a play place. Tree climbing is the act of climbing trees in public urban areas for recreational purposes. Cooke, a London-based climber, suggests it can be done alone or accompanied, and with or without equipment. (Cooke, 2016) Colloquial information shows it is practiced in US and Northern European cities, but it remains largely undocumented[2]. Curiosity towards this sport-like activity led me to the hypothesis that climbers transform our perception of canopies into micro-spaces of play and this research is motivated by the possibility that the canopy could function as a sort of nature-based playground.

When you look at the place of play in the city, research shows a leisure activity must be practiced at its designated place by design, rules and norms that is, typically in parks and playgrounds. (Ackermann & al., 2016) Due to a high number of concrete-based spaces and a cultural preference for indoor activities, cities around the world[3] observe a deficit of human-nature interactions. (Soga & Gaston, 2016; Louv, 2005) In response, policymakers design greenspaces to ease access to nature, (Factor & al. 2015) whereas communities develop projects like street gardening to appropriate local public areas. (Baudry, 2014)

In this paper, I demonstrate how the canopy is liminal and how tree climbing is a liminoid experience. Then, I investigate how the use of liminal spaces create playgrounds beyond those implemented by design. Thereby, I reveal how the activity and the playful behaviour of climbers blur the place of play in the city. Research on recreational skateboarding is drawn upon. I conclude by arguing that tree climbing is a form of Situationists' *dérive*– tree climbing is an act of *drifting in the trees* that changes climbers' experiences.

From Liminal to Actual Space

A liminal space is defined as a place where one goes to transit for a limited time, and where there is a "presence or absence of opportunities for social subversion". (Taheri & al. 2016, 2) Turner (1974) demonstrates that in liminoid experiences, like in play, arise new social models. He writes: "in liminality people "play" with the elements of the familiar and defamiliarize" (60) Modern theorists agree that transgressive play practices change built environments and social structures: skateboarding expands

our perceptions of staircases and locative games transform streets into game world; (Rauscher, 2016; Lobna & al. 2020; Flanagan, 2009, 199) Consequentially, people's *present realities* (practico-material facts) and *social realities* (constructed relations) shift. (Ackermann & al. 2016)

The canopy is a liminal space, or has a liminal quality to it because it exists in *present* but not in *social* reality. A tree is an architectural fact placed in the city by design but not its canopy: the presence of the tree is acknowledged by the passerby because it is an object next to us. The canopy is less likely acknowledged because it sits above us. Much like the public-right-of-ways "usually go unnoticed by passersby because they are considered unusable" (Baudry, 2014, 12), canopies are spaces we are not supposed to use, but they become usable through climbers' interactions. By climbing, walking, or sitting in the canopy, climbers subvert its function without changing its physicality. Much like the function of the skateboarder's staircase transforms from utilitarian to recreational, so does the climber's tree. Through use, the canopy becomes a place where climbing (alongside other activities) can take place. This is reminiscent of street gardening which uses the public-right-of-way to create an "actual space in which social interactions can occur." (12) Subsequently, tree climbing is a liminoid experience because it is a voluntary activity and a place climbers go to for a limited duration. Cooke recounts that he idles in a tree and watches "the world go by". (Google Talks, 2016). This reveals that a climber's goal might not be to reach the top of the tree, but to take part in other parallel activities. Lastly, tree climbing shares the liminoid quality of defamiliarizing the familiar, as one can infer from Cooke's testimony: up in the canopy, climbers get an unfamiliar god-like view that enables them "to see familiar places in new ways." (Google Talks, 2016)

The argument is reinforced when drawing similarities between Situationists' drifters (Debord, 1956) and climbers' playful behaviours. Both let themselves be drawn by the terrain. Whereas drifters' terrains are streets, climbers walk playfully on the branches to absorb details of the trees, of themselves, and of others. Drawing on the distinction between play and playfulness by Sicart (2014), I explore how climbers "playficate" the canopy by interacting with it much like a kid would with a playground's module. While exploring the terrain, drifters become aware of the socio-emotional landscapes of their city. Comparatively, the tension between what is nature, urban design, and social constructions unveils in the canopy.

Conclusion

This paper succeeds in situating tree climbing within existing discussions on the influence of transgressive play practices[4] on public spaces. It discussed how tree climbing changes the way we perceive designated urban play spaces by transforming the liminal canopies into actual places one can go to play, relax, or socialize. It examined how the interaction of the climber with the canopy compares to the skateboarder's interaction with urban structures and exposed similar behaviours between drifters and climbers. Core questions remain unanswered: how can tree climbing inform urban planners? Can trees function as *actual* nature-based playgrounds?

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[1] I use the term "tree climbing" when referring to *recreational* and *urban* tree climbing.

[2] Information can be found about the existence of communities or clubs in different cities including London, Copenhagen, and Atlanta. This paper was limited by the lack of scholastic research.

[3] Including US and UK. Data and case studies from the US.

[4] There is a curiosity about the influence of free-roaming in video games on digital spaces, but this is not the focus of this paper.