

DRAFT VERSION

‘The Leisure of Grey Spaces, Urban Play and the Chromatic Turn’

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This special issue builds upon the discourse of blue and green spaces as conduits to our leisure. The value of these colour-coded spaces resonates with their associated natural qualities, refreshing water ways and lush verdant countryside. Discourse on blue and green spaces is focussed on health and wellbeing, and environmental consciousness. In this rhetoric the city and the built environment are often made peripheral. Implicitly, leisure in the built environment is also cast as oppositional to the salubrious and therapeutic framing of nature-based leisure. This collection of papers responds to this *other* aspect of leisure, the grey spaces, both material (urban) and symbolic (ambiguous, ideological), of sport, play, and recreation. These works pursue the notion that the city and the built environment need to be pulled into this conversation. This chromatic turn in leisure studies works with the extant tropes of blue and green spaces to explore and enliven our understanding of health and the environment in nuanced ways.

The concept of grey spaces is in itself a call to enmesh both the material and symbolic elements of leisure, and to attune our analysis to what this reveals. In embracing a conceptualisation of grey spaces (O’Connor et al. 2022, O’Connor 2024), these varied papers address an unfolding chromatic shift. Greyness is at once a signifier of the urban, but also a means to capture an array of intersections addressing subtle layered complexities. As a collection, these papers are innovative in enhancing a discussion on chromatic leisure. This can be seen in the way that colour is used symbolically to explain different phases in public private partnerships (Giamarino), to correspond with the feel of the city (Karas), or address the contradictions of a colourful subculture deemed dead (Noe). There is a distinct political edge to these collective themes encompassing capitalism, pollution, and colonialism. Rising populism, environmental degradation, and culture wars have been played out in a context of polar oppositions and black and white thinking. These discussions on grey spaces offer a correction to such binary thinking, ushering in a willingness to deal with complexity and compromise (Elmas & Açıkgöz).

Hybridity recurs as a motif across these papers and resonates with the liminality of the grey spaces paradigm. This dynamic is apparent in the tension and transformation of public-private space partnerships (Giamarino, Ying et al) in the mix of artificial waves (Byung & Choi), artificial turf and football cages (Crossley et al). The challenge of seeing polluted space as colonised and playful (Glenney & Du Bois), or both physically and emotionally dangerous while ludic (Elmas & Açıkgöz), speaks to these complexities. Hybridity itself, is at once celebrated as a term of fusion and mix, and reviled as pollution and miscegenation (Karla, Kaur, and Hutnyk 2005). Hybridity across these papers is also chromatic, fusing green with grey (Crossley et al), blue with grey (Byoung & Chois) and black amidst vibrant colour (Noe). In new urban surfing facilities such as *Wave Park* near Seoul, there is a convergence of issues that both open up surfing and democratise it to more people while also transforming its practice and culture. Byong and Choi see *Wave Park* as a hybrid space in

which new forms of surfing can unfold sometimes as regimented, controlled, and ordered. But they also recognise that such artificial leisure spaces present themselves as a social pollutant to the authenticity so important in lifestyle sports.

Such mix is apparent across the works in this Special Issue. As a collection they contribute to a critical and reflexive engagement with leisure in the face of the Anthropocene and posit possibilities of its pursuit amidst pollution (Evers 2019), catastrophe (Cherrington & Black 2022), and the crisis of capitalism (Critchley). These discussions offer hope beyond dystopian urban imaginaries (Fitzgerald 2024) and the fatalism of a resigned civilizational entropy (Stiegler 2018). These works are both a response to disaster leisure (Glenney and O'Connor 2022, Thorpe 2013) and an optimistic statement about the capacity for creative human play in constrained circumstances where pollution, risk, and austerity limit leisure in spatial, class, ethnic and gendered ways.

A concern a number of these papers raise is the grey space which youth leisure occupies. Young people as repositories for hope and optimism feel the varied crises in their leisure acutely and a number of these papers address this dynamic head on. Firstly, Crossley, Campenhout, and Billingham (2025) show how football has been demonised and criminalised in informal settings in the UK. As school and public playing fields across the country have been reduced, and sold off, young people have been left with ever shrinking space in which to play the national sport. The rise of football cages provides a key example of the contradictions by which youth leisure in Britain is understood in contradictory ways, both a problem and a solution. Informal football in the UK is thus a provocative example of material and symbolic grey space. Crossley et al. open up a timely chromatic debate where urban green spaces are cast grey as many are made artificial. The recent example (Barkham 2025) of 52 hectares of a London park being transformed to artificial all-weather football pitches for a women's soccer academy emphasises the ambiguity at play here. In this case, an informal leisure space is made formal, public space is made corporate, green space is made grey, and yet important legitimate space is made for women's sport too long been kept marginal. In such a scenario. informal green spaces for play are a continued casualty, and grey spaces of play are too often commercialised or criminalised.

The urgency for people, especially youth, to have access to spaces that are safe and promote inclusion becomes clearer when viewed through a human rights framework. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2024) involves a pledge in Goal 11 to "make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable". Target 11.7 urges that by 2030, cities will also "provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities" (United Nations, 2024). This international strategy however overlooks the specific potential of 'grey spaces' as sites that add value and can contribute to improving the lives of children and others. The presence of youth, and especially racialised minority youth in urban space is an issue of contestation and human rights where technologies of deterrence are employed to further limit access to space (van den Berg and Chevalier 2018). A critically needed invitation to think more carefully about exactly what kinds of 'public spaces' exist beyond 'green ones' can be found in Stenning's (2025) contribution in this issue that includes a case study of the UK which has insights transferable to other cities with high-density living. She begins her paper by emphasising how children's play has historically been restricted to notions of what constitutes 'proper places' for outdoor play. She proposes that applying a 'grey spaces lens' assists with understanding debates by play planners, advocates, researchers

and practitioners in relation to existing “ideas of children and play and to the ambiguities and relationalities in children’s ludic geographies”.

Importantly, Stenning points to the centrality of grey spaces and research highlighting that children in the West will spend more time in built environments than green ones. However grey spaces are revealed to be marked by a strong resistance by planners and the public towards play, based on notions that children are nuisances, elevate risks to safety and property. Her study identifies the value children bring, how they ‘turn up the colour’ of urban landscapes through their play and paraphernalia (and even things such as colourful chalk on grey streets). Their presence also attracts more community engagement and connections.

These two UK focussed papers are enhanced by research focussed on other locales and settings offering a global contextualisation of youth leisure in a chromatic frame. Elmas and Açıkgöz (2025) adapt Evers’ polluted leisure (2019, 2023) to develop ‘dystopian leisure’ as a framework for a postqualitative analysis of the safety concerns of Roma children’s leisure in Turkey. Safety of the children is compromised by drug trafficking in their neighbourhood and broken appliances and glass polluting public spaces. Dystopian leisure maps resilience strategies through which children normalise the physical danger that their polluted environment poses in their everyday life while struggling with managing the emotional stress induced through the misbehaviour of adults. Greyness manifests here in various intersectional layers, from the materiality of the ghettoised neighbourhoods that the Roma community are forced into, to children’s continuous search for hidden grey spaces suitable for play and concealed from the eyes of violent adults. Their rich analysis also gives important focus to differences in gendered experience between Roma boys and girls where expectations and dangers differ dramatically. Contrasting with Stenning’s work, Roma girls are encouraged to play near to home and close to grandmothers who monitor their behaviour, yet they covet the freedom of grey spaces beyond such surveilled confines despite their potential hazards.

The frame of youth is expanded in a focus on informal DIY leisure practices in Russia. Karas (2025) explores the context of the crisis of capitalism in the Capitalocene by investigating greyness as a facet of urban rooftop exploration in St Petersburg. While ‘roofing’, practitioners gain access to the roofs of buildings through trespassing, that is, accessing backyards, stairs and freeclimbing walls. Karas traces roofing as young peoples’ strategy for breaking out of the city’s perceived overarching greyness to enjoy its lights and white nights during the summer period of midnight twilight from a legally inaccessible, but financially unconstrained perspective. This novel approach recasts discussion on the challenge of access to leisure in an increasingly pecuniary ordering of public space. Roofing thus actively challenges the greyness of everyday life by injecting colours into the perception of the cityscape and thus functioning as a quotidian subversion of authoritarianism in Putin’s Russia.

Moving a focus to East Asia and beyond youth, two papers provide a discussion on the tension between blue and grey spaces in lifestyle sports. Firstly, Jinsu Byun and Kyu Ha Choi (2025) explore how typically outdoor sports can make their way to indoor or artificial settings. Zooming in on wave parks in South Korea, they trace how surfers make sense of the artificiality of sports facilities. Mimicking the blue spaces of oceans, the greyness of sports halls punctuate and subvert the socio-somatic norms of surfing. Not only does one of the few lifestyle sports without an entry fee become ticketable, the turn to wave parks also makes the experience more sports-like. This provides a provocative recasting of the notion of ‘pay to play’ at various levels. Byun and Choi describe how surfers in these constructed environs

primarily focus on techniques and skills, and less so on surfing as a way of life and coexistence with blue spaces. Still, some participants in the study crave for ‘natural waves’ and are torn between the accessibility and reliability of artificial waves in contrast to authentic blue space and surf culture. This finding resonates with how Korean skateboarders oscillate between purpose-built and found spaces (Hölsgens, 2019; 2021), using the former to practice tricks and the latter to build community, and also broader discussion on artificial waves (Roberts and Ponting 2018). Byun and Choi push this argument by linking the grey hues of the indoor leisure spaces to identity formation and community building.

Shifting focus to BMX in Wuhan, China, Ding, Zhou and Cheng (2025) explore how an annual informal jump event into East Lake has become commodified. This article fuses a popular lifestyle sport that has little academic attention with a case study of resistance against commercial real estate development and the preservation of informal leisure. The ‘Everybody’s East Lake’ event comes to be a topic at once relevant to blue space in its origins, grey space in its commercial transformation, and polluted leisure in environmental ethics. In resisting the privatisation of the event and the BMX community have enacted both an inclusive egalitarian project and operationalised the Chinese principles of harmony.

Moving beyond lifestyle sports but remaining in East Asia, Villani, Yin, and Siu (2025) turn their focus to the urban Zumba dancing of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong. Conspicuously occupying the streets of the central district of the city, the dancers utilise the grand grey spaces of the business district for their own leisure. Migrant workers become a key topic for discussion as their work and status in Hong Kong is marginal and precarious, they have little free time, low wages, and seldom their own space. Most live in the residence of their employers, sometimes sleeping in a living room or bathroom. Occupying the streets on their Sunday break becomes both leisure and resistance in a contrasting spatial politics to the ways lifestyle sports engage with grey space.

A collection of papers focus on skateboarding, building on and extending the context from which the grey spaces concept emerged. Firstly, Andrea Buchetti (2025) scrutinises the borderlands of skate goods and spots. Based on fieldwork in Tijuana, Mexico, he identifies ‘border grey spaces’, where the leftover scraps of clothes, skateboards, and tools made for the United States are reappropriated by Tijuana skaters. This results in a grey infrastructure for the circulation of material goods: although the Mexican city is a vital node in its production cycle, dominant skate lore suggests that California is the home to all things skateboarding. Buchetti conducted interviews with 62 participants to grasp how these dynamics play out in the lives of skaters. How do they make a claim to authenticity? What kinds of skate goods and skateable spaces are used, and why? And what does it mean to reside in such close proximity to San Diego – where some of the most influential skate brands are located? Buchetti takes the chromatic turn in lifestyle sports and leisure studies to articulate how greyness has economic, legal, symbolic, and infrastructural dimensions. Key to his argument is the notion of secrecy: as much as Tijuana is at the heart of the contemporary skate industry, its status is veiled, mystified, and indeed greyified.

Casting light on an overlooked facet of skateboarding, the colourful subculture of freestyle adds to the chromatic debate. Noe (2025) highlights the intersectional dimensions of greyness in the understudied field of freestyle skateboarding in which practitioners perform competitive choreographed trick routines on a flat space without obstacles that are accompanied by music. Framing freestyle as a subculture that operates in a marginalised dark space outside of the dominant scope of street skateboarding, Noe adapts the framework of

greyness by means of a dark materiality that freestyle skateboarders must decode in urban surfaces to successfully perform their tricks. This process results in the collision of freestylers' practice with material challenges such as unevenness and prescribed use of flat public surfaces designed for other sports such as Basketball and the social stereotyping of freestyle as dead or androgynous.

Traversing the peripheries of skate culture to the core of the culture and industry, the grey spaces of California become our next focus. Chris Giamarino (2025) interrogates the 'pollution of publicness' in his article on grey spaces of polluted leisure through three phases of development at West Los Angeles Courthouse. The 'street spot' is culturally significant to skateboarders (Snyder, 2017, Willing and Pappalardo, 2023), from being a popular place to 'session' and even attracting skate tourists due to its skateability and being featured in numerous professional skateboarders' clips. Giamarino draws inspiration from Mike Davis' (1990) excavation of public space privatization 30 years ago and David Harvey's (2003) concept of 'accumulation by dispossession' to explore how grey spaces such as street skating spots are framed as desolate and polluted to warrant private development. The pollution of publicness, as argued by Giamarino, must be seen as a process of privatisation.

Through his skater's eye, Giamarino observes and discusses three stages of chromatic shifts that symbolise the changes in accessibility of the Courthouse for skaters. These are Monochrome (public); Shades (public-private) and Compound (private). In doing so, he draws attention to how the strategies skateboarders' adopt to access grey leisure spaces are often contested, ambivalent and themselves also 'grey' rather than clear cut. In particular, efforts for public space sometimes involve co-opting the tenets of neoliberalism rather than the subcultural resistance traditionally associated with skaters. He reveals how "the construction of The Courthouse has produced contradictions between private redevelopment desires and struggles by skateboarders to preserve publicness". Giamarino lives in LA, knows the spot well and has advocated for its preservation amidst council plans for its development. In his view, spatial justice requires a more vigorous refusal of processes that *pollute publicness* rather than making compromises and being co-opted. While specifically a case study of the West Los Angeles Courthouse, his paper's call to action can be transferred to other grey spaces that are urban sites for leisure and the sometimes grey politics and relationships skateboarders have to navigate with forces of privatisation.

Street skating has long been conceptualised as a provocative presence in mainstream society and yet studies grounded in an anti-colonial or de-colonial framework go under-recognised and are still emerging (Geckle, 2025, Romero and Miles, 2025, Kamper and Williams, 2025, Willing and Pappalardo, 2023). In Brian Glenney and Peter Dubois's (2025) article in this special issue, the authors propose that "skateboarding, like surfing, exists in a settler ambiguity, a colonial grey space." Their article positions Indigenous and Native approaches to skateboarding at the forefront and adopts an oppositional approach to counter a white-washed history of skateboarding. Skateboarders, they argue, can be a decolonising force, as seen in Indigenous-led efforts by Colonialism Skateboards and Apache Skateboarders, and Native women skateboarders such as Di'orr Greenwood, from the Dine Navajo Nation, and Rosie Archie who represents Nation Skate Youth. Glenney and Dubois also introduce Indigenous concepts such as "the commons, horizontal mentoring, and soft pedagogies" and make a distinction between 'Ready-Made' and 'DIY' skateparks.

De-colonialising grey spaces includes complicating the idea of 'Ready-Made' skateparks as sites for free leisure. Instead, the authors liken such sites to colonial reservations in terms of

restricting what happens and where, and how it is surveilled. In contrast ‘DIY’ skateparks are proposed as radical and anti-colonial and with parallels to Indigenous concepts ‘land title’, rather than individualist ownership. They then present two case studies, Lead Skatepark to critique the former, and Wounded Knee Four Directions/Toby Eaglebull Memorial Skatepark (Eaglebull for short) to better understand the latter. Both are located next to toxic mines with harmful legacies to the Lakota People. Other sites are also discussed, with a shared dilemma: if pollution is colonialism, how can people decolonise spaces that are already polluted? While not settling for easy answers, the authors emphasise Indigenous concepts that must be prioritised to navigate what they state are a “colonialist/decolonialist ‘grey space’ of dense socio-material meaning” attached to skateparks.

This mixture of scholarship exploring grey spaces in skateboarding and beyond adds to an already robust body of scholarship on blue and green space. As a collection they extend the notion of chromatic leisure that works with the complexity and nuance of a range of hues. We propose that these framings of chromatic leisure provide important reflection on urban leisure, indoor-outdoor play, built and artificial space. Just as they engage with the material they also explore potent ideas of ideology, pollution, capitalism, death, dystopia, and colonialism. The geographic diversity of these articles captures the versatility of chromatic leisure. The fact that they address a range of different contexts through a shared conceptual language makes this a diverse but cogent collection of work.

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