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Hip-hop in Brussels: has breakdance left the ghetto?

Les lieux du hip-hop à Bruxelles : vers la fin du ghetto ?

Hiphop in Brussel: eindelijk uit het getto?

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Hip-hop in Brussels: has breakdance left the ghetto?

Translation: Jane Corrigan

This article deals with the socio-spatial situation of hip-hop. The study of the spatiality of breakdance battles and training illustrates the contemporary transformations which affect the practices related to this culture. With a growing maturity and the evolution of the social basis of these dancers, breakdance has left the ghetto, literally and figuratively. It takes place currently outside the most disadvantaged areas of the city, in the most mixed neighbourhoods at ethnic and socioeconomic level. Breakdance continues to face great difficulties entering the traditional cultural circuits. Daily artistic activities are in a delicate situation, as the organisation of training depends almost entirely on the initiative of the dancers themselves, who must often develop strategies to set up informal places for their activities. However, this type of appropriation of the public or semi-public space does not take place smoothly. The ignorance with respect to hip-hop culture and its relatively bad image, combined with the dancers' status as vulnerable users in the places they frequent, generate risks of eviction. Less appealing places which are deserted at certain hours – typically railway stations or underground stations – are used more and more.

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Introduction

1. Hip-hop – the cultural and artistic movement which emerged in New York at the beginning of the 1970s, including forms of expression such as graffiti, rap, DJ performances and of course breakdance – is a limited field of study which is beginning to develop in the academic world [Forman, 2002].
2. However, apart from a few recent works [Molinero, 2009; Pecqueux, 2007], the majority of contributions deal with the emergence of hip-hop culture (mainly rap) and how this culture has adapted outside its American birthplace [Bazin, 1995; Boucher, 1998; Lapassade & Rousselot, 1990; Mitchell *et al.*, 2001; Chang, 2006; Rose, 1994]. It is in this perspective that research devoted to hip-hop culture in Brussels has been carried out since 1997 [Lapiower, 1997].
3. Research in geography is in line with this approach. While the geography of music has developed in recent years [Guiu, 2006], most of the research devoted to the forms of expression of hip-hop culture has focused on their adaptation outside the United States [Rérat, 2006; Lafargue de Grangeneuve, 2006]. The study of the spatial structuring of breakdance in Brussels thus seems pertinent for three reasons.
4. Firstly, hip-hop culture has been one of the most influential music movements in recent decades, along with electronic music. Research has mainly been concentrated on rap and graffiti, which receive more media attention and are more visible in the public space [Chang, 2006; Ley & Cybriwski, 1974; Rérat, 2006]. Literature dealing specifically with breakdance or hip-hop dance in general is almost non-existent.
5. Secondly, apart from a few works dealing with hip-hop culture and its relationship to space through the study of lyrics by rappers [Guillard, 2012; Pecqueux, 2007; Vichérat, 2001], the understanding of the spatial dimension of these popular cultural practices is still rudimentary. Beyond the analysis of space based on the words of rappers, it is also necessary to analyse where this culture is currently expressed in concrete terms.
6. The last element – the need to update knowledge – speaks in favour of the study of the spatiality of breakdance. By concentrating on

the emergence of hip-hop culture in the United States and in the world, the works have tended to convey – despite themselves – a dated view of the phenomenon which is quite far from the current reality.

7. Since its emergence at the beginning of the 1970s in the Bronx ghetto in New York, hip-hop culture has undergone spectacular development, leading it to become a constituent part of globalised culture [Chang, 2006]. In forty years, it has gone from local to global, with new audiences and artists around the world [Forman, 2002; Shusterman, 1992; Rérat, 2006a; Mitchell *et al.*, 2001].
8. The commercial success and media coverage of rap are probably the most striking illustration of the new dimension of hip-hop culture. Today, in the United States and to a lesser extent in France, certain rappers are true stars, extending their sphere of activity outside music and generating large sums of money. The best examples of this success are the rappers Shawn Carter (alias Jay-Z) and Will Smith (alias The Fresh Prince): one has become one of the most influential businessmen in the world (appearing on the cover of *Forbes* magazine next to Warren Buffet), and the other has become a Hollywood film star after his success in the television series *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. In France, the career path of an artist such as Joey Starr – the former 'bad boy' of French rap from the group NTM who moved into cinema – is along the same lines.
9. However, hip-hop culture is still often associated with disadvantaged populations and the neighbourhoods they live in. In the United States, rap is strongly associated with the *inner city*, i.e. the city centre occupied by disadvantaged populations of African Americans [Rose, 1994; Guillard, 2012].
10. In France, the association between hip-hop culture and the suburbs is similar, and shows through in the media and in the literature [Boucher, 1998; Lapassade & Rousselot, 1990]. The most striking example of this association is the 1995 film *La Haine* by Mathieu Kassovitz.
11. What about today? Forty years after it appeared and became widespread, is the association between hip-hop culture (in this case, dance) and disadvantaged neighbourhoods still a reality? Has break-

dance freed itself from the rundown neighbourhoods where it was born? What has been the effect of the different transformations of the post-Fordist contemporary city [Kesteloot *et al.*, 2009]? Have the different urban dynamics, gentrification and urban sprawl (chosen or forced) had an effect on the spatiality of the places where breakdance activities are carried out?

12. Does the association between hip-hop culture and disadvantaged populations still have an impact on the way this culture is perceived? Or on the contrary, has it gained more legitimacy? In a society built by power relations, is hip-hop culture still in a weak position? Is it dominated by practices or stakeholders with greater cultural legitimacy? If culture is in the grip of mechanisms of domination, there are at least two spheres in which these mechanisms appear: the cultural world and the public space.

13. What about the integration of breakdance in the traditional cultural network? Are all cultural spaces open to this form of dance? Do they welcome it on a regular basis? Who are the participating stakeholders from the institutional network?

14. Finally, are breakdancers able to use the public space freely? Are certain uses considered to be illegitimate? While the illegality of a practice such as graffiti is well known, is a rejection of hip-hop dance beginning to develop? If so, how does it materialise and how does it influence the space where these activities are carried out? How do the dancers adapt to these difficulties?

15. The analysis of breakdance and its establishment in the geographical and public space may therefore help answer the many questions regarding a popular cultural practice while taking an original approach to the transformations of the contemporary city.

1. Studying the spatiality of a cultural practice

16. Based on the idea that space is socially constructed and that it gives meaning to actions, the place where an experience unfolds has a deep influence on the sociological significance of the experience itself,

and on the way it is perceived by those who are actively involved. The objective of this article is therefore to highlight the spaces associated with breakdance in Brussels, i.e. the network of places in Brussels where people engage in this practice.

17. In the geographical literature devoted to the spatiality of a cultural practice throughout the city, the works of Boris Grésillon [Grésillon, 2002 & 2008] appear to be the foundation of a new approach to cultural geography [Guillard, 2012]. His approach consists in mapping the geography of a cultural reality, rather than a cultural geography. Such an epistemological choice limits the field of analysis, but it allows an identifiable object to be associated with the geography of culture [Grésillon, 2008].

18. With the settings for artistic creation at the centre of his analysis, this approach is not limited to official cultural venues (theatres, etc.) but also includes alternative or 'underground' places such as clubs, squats and urban wasteland. This therefore implies the acceptance of a definition of culture which is not elitist.

19. Artistic practice sometimes makes use of *anti-heritage* elements, or marginalised spaces with a bad reputation, which take on new functions [Grésillon, 2008]. Thus, by considering culture from the perspective of production and artistic performance which develops preferably in the city, this cultural approach allows an innovative relationship between city and culture to be envisaged, whereby culture structures the city in the same way that economic and social aspects do [Grésillon, 2008].

20. Such an approach appears to be well adapted to contemporary music trends and particularly to hip-hop, and therefore served as a theoretical framework for this article. Boris Grésillon was aware of the potential of this field of research, as he pointed out that '*with the absolute mobility which characterises these genres, the rules have been broken: the creative space has expanded, unlikely settings have been discovered, and spaces which are off limits are being used. Of all artistic genres, contemporary music trends question geography the most*' [Grésillon, 2002].

21. The analytical approach of this article is therefore based on the identification and localisation of the places used by breakdancers in

Brussels. A characterisation of these places is then carried out (central or suburban, sustainable or ephemeral, production or performance, spontaneous or organised use, etc.). This information will allow several typologies of these places to be established in order to understand the social, political and institutional mechanisms at work in the distribution observed [Grésillon, 2008].

22. In this regard, the lack of geographical literature dedicated to breakdance or hip-hop dance in the broad sense, and to its expression in Brussels in particular, has prompted us to use oral sources of information as the basis of the empirical analysis.

2. The concept of scene

23. Cultural practices and productions form a continuum in which it is difficult to identify the limit between the object under study and other human productions and practices. Rather than attempt to set an objective limit to our study – inevitably subjective – it seemed to be more effective to adhere to a series of methodological choices.

24. We have focused only on breakdance, which is the most representative and well-known discipline in hip-hop dance, as it includes familiar moves such as the 'headspin'. The spatiality of some other dance styles associated with hip-hop culture, such as new-style, house, popping and locking, has not been analysed in this article.

25. The concept of 'scene' is often used for a cultural practice which is still relatively non-institutionalised. The scene includes *'the places, the attitudes, the features and the means implemented by the artists, as well as the diversity of audiences and the multiplicity of the successive roles of each of the stakeholders: in such a system, the local artist is also, at different moments, an occasional or regular organiser of regional events and a spectator of events at different levels'* [Crozat, 2008]. Another definition considers the scene as *'a territorial group of scattered stakeholders in a position of centrality versus marginality, avant-garde versus classicism, and with different degrees of maturity, militancy and success'* [Mubi Brighenti, 2010; Girel, 2003].

26. We have chosen to use the definition proposed by Dominique Crozat, but with the term 'active breakdancers' used instead of 'artists'. While breakdancers may be considered as artists because they practise an artistic discipline, the term 'breakdancer' is nevertheless more flexible and less restrictive than the term 'artist'.

27. The regularity of the practice was a dominant element which must be underlined. In a practice which is still mainly informal such as breakdancing, the scene is a small world where everyone knows each other closely or remotely. In order to be identified as part of this world and to find one's place, one must inevitably be present at events on a regular basis, and also be present outside the framework of special events, in the places where breakdancing activities are carried out every day. In this sense, the breakdance scene in Brussels is made up of people who dance on a regular basis.

28. Being part of the scene and spending time with other people who are actively involved in it is, for such an underground practice, the best means of accessing a whole series of information such as technical advice, the agenda of coming events, the timetables and the places for training. Within the framework of a practice which still operates mainly through exchanges between peers despite the advent of the internet, it seems difficult to be active for a long period outside the scene. In time, those who are not actively involved seem destined either to abandon the practice or to join the ranks of those who do it actively. It is only among former active breakdancers that a more occasional practice may continue over time. This is typically the case of older dancers who devote time to other activities, in particular family activities.

29. The places listed are therefore the places used by active breakdancers (the term *bboys* is more common). Through their exchanges, the events they organise and the places they set up, these dancers constitute the breakdance scene in Brussels.

30. These places are not necessarily used frequently. For example, *Kaaitheater*, which hosts the *Battle of the Year* breakdance competition once a year, was listed as a place of practice on the Brussels breakdance scene because the artists who perform there are active dancers.

3. Inventory of places

31. As is the case for many other informal or non-institutionalised practices [Veille Marchiset, 2003; Dumont, 2006], there are no statistics concerning breakdance activities. An inventory of the places where these activities are carried out must therefore be created.

32. There are three main types of stakeholder within cultural movements: the creators and the performers, the intermediaries such as the directors of establishments or the politicians in charge of culture, and the public [Grésillon, 2008]. The performers were an inevitable choice in this case, as they are at the centre of the cooperation chain which constitutes the creative process. They are the ones who give life to the different disciplines. Semi-structured or unstructured interviews [Combesie, 2003] with active breakdancers from the Brussels scene were used as the main tool to build the inventory.

33. Several authors working on the subject of informal practices have adopted this method [Guillard, 2012 & Grésillon, 2008], some of whom even feel that the research on this type of practice was slow to develop because the places where these activities took place were only known by the dancers themselves [Jaurand, 2010].

34. The breakdancers interviewed were often well established on the Brussels scene. Most of them had been doing it for a long time and had an objective view of their discipline and its evolution. They all agreed to answer non-anonymously.

35. Although it is difficult to be exhaustive with respect to the number of breakdancers interviewed, in particular because some of the information on the spatiality of breakdance in Brussels emerged during informal encounters, more than 15 dancers were contacted: among them, Rookie Roc, King Sacha, T-Rock, Fennane, Shed, Milan, Julien, Dark, Lawson, Oubaida, Yphun Chiem, Saïd Ouadrassi, Saho and Greglox.

36. While these interviews were the basis of the inventory of places where breakdance activities are carried out, other sources of information were also used. Regular monitoring of new media linked to the internet has allowed information to be gathered on a certain number of

events. The new information technologies constitute a formidable tool for unstructured practices such as those associated with hip-hop culture, allowing better networking and a better circulation of information among breakdancers [Jaurand, 2010]. Apart from Facebook, the online agenda of the non-profit making association *Lézarts Urbains* was regularly consulted. *Lézarts Urbains* is the institutional structure which is subsidised most and is the most active in the area of hip-hop in the French Community.

37. The combination of these sources has allowed a database to be compiled on the places used, the way in which they were established and/or abandoned, and the use made of them.

38. These data are clearly imperfect and incomplete, as is human memory. While the increase in the number of people interviewed allows us to aim for a collective memory of the Brussels scene, it would be impossible to claim that the inventory of places is exhaustive and objective, all the more since hip-hop culture has existed in Brussels for more than 30 years. However, for an unobtrusive territorialisation – even embryonic and ephemeral, and sometimes even illegal as in the case of breakdance – the memory of breakdancers is the only source of information available [Grésillon, 2002; Jaurand, 2010].

39. The places listed were classified according to the dominant practice, localised and mapped. While the mapping tool allows a better understanding of what comes into play in the relationship between a cultural practice and the public space, the places where breakdance activities are carried out do not have the visibility and the permanence of more institutional territorialities. The map therefore has the fault of immobilising what is fluid and ephemeral [Jaurand, 2010], but it allows a global understanding of the Brussels scene through its spatiality.

40. In the end, these different approaches allowed an identification of the representative places where breakdance activities were carried out in Brussels in the first decade of the 21st century.

Types of activity	number of places	%
Battles and Training	40	53,3
Creations	24	32.0
Dance courses	11	14.7
Breakdance total	75	100.0

Table 1. Summary of places where breakdance activities are carried out according to the type of activity. Source: author's inventory.

4. Breakdance practices

41. The Brussels breakdance scene may be associated with several practices: transmission, training, competition and live performance.

42. Training constitutes the basis of the practice. This sphere includes the places where dancers go on a daily basis to practise their movements and develop new ones. Training is intimately linked to the sphere of competition, as the majority of dancers train in order to do well in the different competitions, which are commonly referred to as 'battles'.

43. Battles are the classic form of breakdance performance, whereby a dancer gains the recognition of his or her peers. As they represent the very core of breakdancing, these two spheres were studied simultaneously and as one.

44. The sphere which includes training and battles is the most significant (53.3% of the places listed). It constitutes the daily life of dancers and an essential step before possibly going on to create dance performances. Not all dancers will end up working on original creations – some of them will remain in the sphere of battles and training. Finally, it is rare for dancers to devote themselves entirely to the creation of per-

formances, as their path generally goes back and forth, allowing them to rework their skills and come up with new movements and ideas.

45. The sphere of live performance, i.e. hip-hop dance creations, has therefore not been dealt with in this article as – unlike battles which are mainly intended for the dancers – hip-hop dance performances are aimed at another audience, which is typically a dance audience in the broad sense. This sphere therefore makes use of very different places and does not obey the same socio-spatial logic.

46. However, there is not an out-and-out separation between the sphere of battles and training and the sphere of live performances. Different interfaces exist in Brussels, in particular the dance festival organised by the non-profit making association *Lézarts Urbains* and street performances.

47. Once a year, the non-profit making association *Lézarts Urbains* organises a dance festival which is difficult to categorise. During this festival, groups present performances of original creations as well as short sets directly derived from battles. This is an important community event as, for many, it is often the only encounter with the world of live performance. Due to this position as an interface between battles and live performances, the places where the dance festival organised par *Lézarts Urbains* is held were considered.

48. Likewise, the street performances by certain groups during the summer are also intermediate objects. While they are clearly not battles or training, the spontaneous organisation of these shows, their short duration and their relatively improvised nature bring them closer to the category of training places than to that of theatres. The street corners where such performances take place were thus also considered during this study.

49. Finally, the sphere of learning and transmission, i.e. breakdance courses, was not studied in this article. These courses do not meet the criterion of the regularity of activities as underlined above. Instead, they fulfil the potential function of doorway to the scene and a more active involvement. In a discipline such as breakdance, learning still takes place mainly while practising it, through trial and error and exchanges with peers.

5. The places where breakdance activities are carried out: typologies

50. Several typologies allow a differentiation between places with very different uses.

51. The first typology focused on differentiating between the places of artistic production and those of performance. Traditionally, places of production are places of work and everyday places, whereas performance spaces are used more rarely in order to present the result of this work to an audience, either large or small, initiated or uninitiated. It was sometimes difficult to make this distinction, in particular with respect to the public space used spontaneously.

52. The second typology was aimed at differentiating between places according to their frequency of use. Non-institutionalised practices and the resulting territorialisation have neither the visibility nor the permanence of the more classic forms, i.e. those of institutional stakeholders [Jaurand, 2010]. We also differentiated between the active places and abandoned places at the time of the surveys. When places had been abandoned, the mechanisms leading to this abandon were investigated.

53. The active places were classified as ephemeral, seasonal or permanent according to their frequency of use. The ephemeral places are places used just once, usually for an event. Such places were rarely reused, and when they were, it was not on a regular basis. When a place used for an event was reused regularly, it was considered as a permanent place. Seasonal places are places used regularly from year to year but not throughout the year. Typically, these places are outdoors or are highly exposed to the elements. The permanent places were places used regularly by dancers when the surveys were carried out. But as we shall see, even places used for nearly 20 years have sometimes had to be abandoned overnight.

54. A third typology attempted to differentiate between places according to the way in which they were established, i.e. how the dancers set up their activities there. We therefore tried to understand the operational methods which led to the creation of a place for these activities.

Three types of establishment dominate this process. The first consists in the spontaneous appropriation of a public or private place. In concrete terms, a place starts to be used by a group of people who give it the characteristics favourable to their activities. If these qualities persist (no eviction, hidden vice, etc.), the place may continue to be used, and by word of mouth, more people will come to use it. The place thus appropriated may belong to the public or semi-public sphere (street corners, railway stations, public transport stations, etc.) or to the private sphere (building entrances, etc.). The latter may be referred to as sought after appropriation, such as in cases where breakdancers approach an institution in order to be able to carry out their activities in a specific place or to organise an event. This may involve renting (sports centres, recording studios, rehearsal space) or a loan (room in a cultural centre). This appropriation differs from the first due to the fact that it requires an intermediary in order to legitimise their presence. Finally, the third type is that of institutional appropriation. It may be direct or indirect. Direct institutional appropriation takes place when an institution (theatre, cultural centre, STIB, municipalities, etc.) organises an event or provides rehearsal or training space. Indirect institutional appropriation takes place when an institution (youth centres, non-profit making associations, etc.) submits a request to another institution in order to obtain the use of a place for production or performance purposes.

55. It is clear that these typologies are ideal types, which, in reality, may be combined. Thus, as we shall see in the example of Brussels, the spontaneous appropriation of a place may lead to a loan request (sought after appropriation) or to a use organised by the institution (institutional appropriation). Likewise, the lending of a place following an individual request may later be institutionalised. Finally, while it was sometimes necessary to carry out additional mapping, in particular related to the importance of places in the eyes of breakdancers, the analysis of the spatiality of breakdance in Brussels is based on the information from the typologies of places where these activities take place.

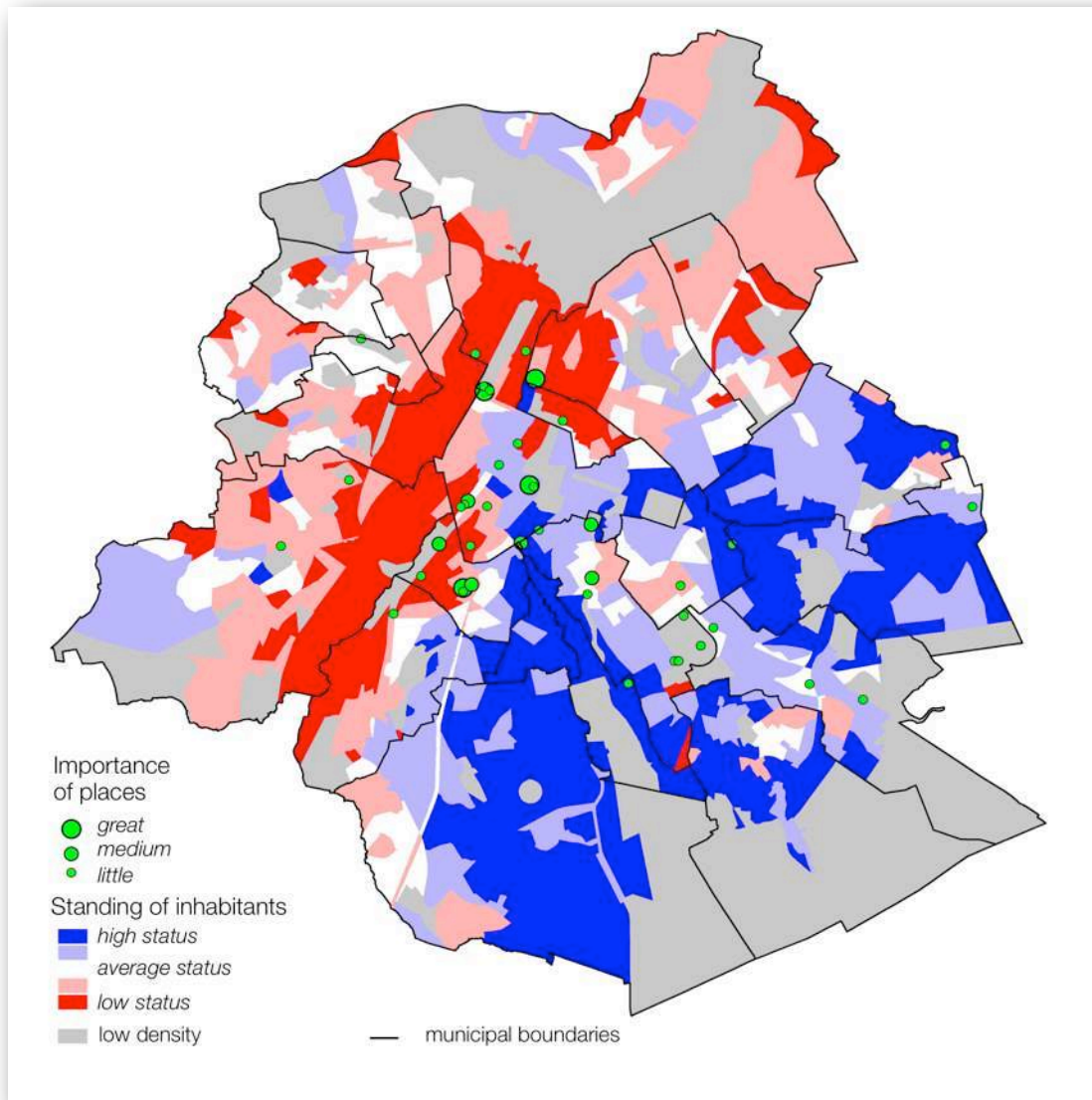


Figure 1. The significance of places for battles and training according to active breakdancers and socio-economic status of the Brussels population. Source: author's survey, 2000-2010, typology ULB, 2008.

6. Battles and training: distribution in the city

56. Breakdance is still a very central activity: the majority of the places used are located in the city centre and the eastern area of the inner ring of Brussels (figure 1).

57. The municipalities used most are Brussels-City, Saint-Gilles and Ixelles. These activities are not very common in the west of the Region. This traditional opposition between the east and the west of Brussels is evident in this case, yet these activities are usually associated with disadvantaged populations in the collective imagination. The majority of the working-class neighbourhoods are absent in this distribution. Old Molenbeek, Cureghem and the lower parts of Saint-Josse and Schaerbeek are not home to the training and battles of the people on the Brussels breakdance scene. The only notable exception is the North Station.

58. The privileged neighbourhoods are rarely used either, such as the suburbs in the southeast of the Brussels urban area, or more central areas such as the surroundings of *Quartier Léopold* or the section including *Avenue Louise* and *Place du Châtelain* in the south of the urban area.

59. Hip-hop activities therefore take place mainly in intermediate neighbourhoods such as Ixelles, Saint-Gilles and the city centre, to a lesser extent. In the southeast, an intermediate area from *Place Flagey* to the university campuses and then on to Auderghem, also includes a concentration of places where breakdance activities take place.

60. One of the reasons for the preferential use of these neighbourhoods seems to be the fact that, being areas where lower, middle and upper classes mix, they provide the greatest and most diversified potential visibility. These areas are home to a large number of venues (cultural centres, theatres, cultural associations, etc.), associations and events (festivals, all-night events, artist itineraries, etc.) which are likely to be open to an 'alternative' culture such as hip-hop.

61. These central and diverse neighbourhoods combine institutional cultural structures and a network of alternative or avant-garde venues. They seem to offer more possibilities for expression and are therefore more appealing.

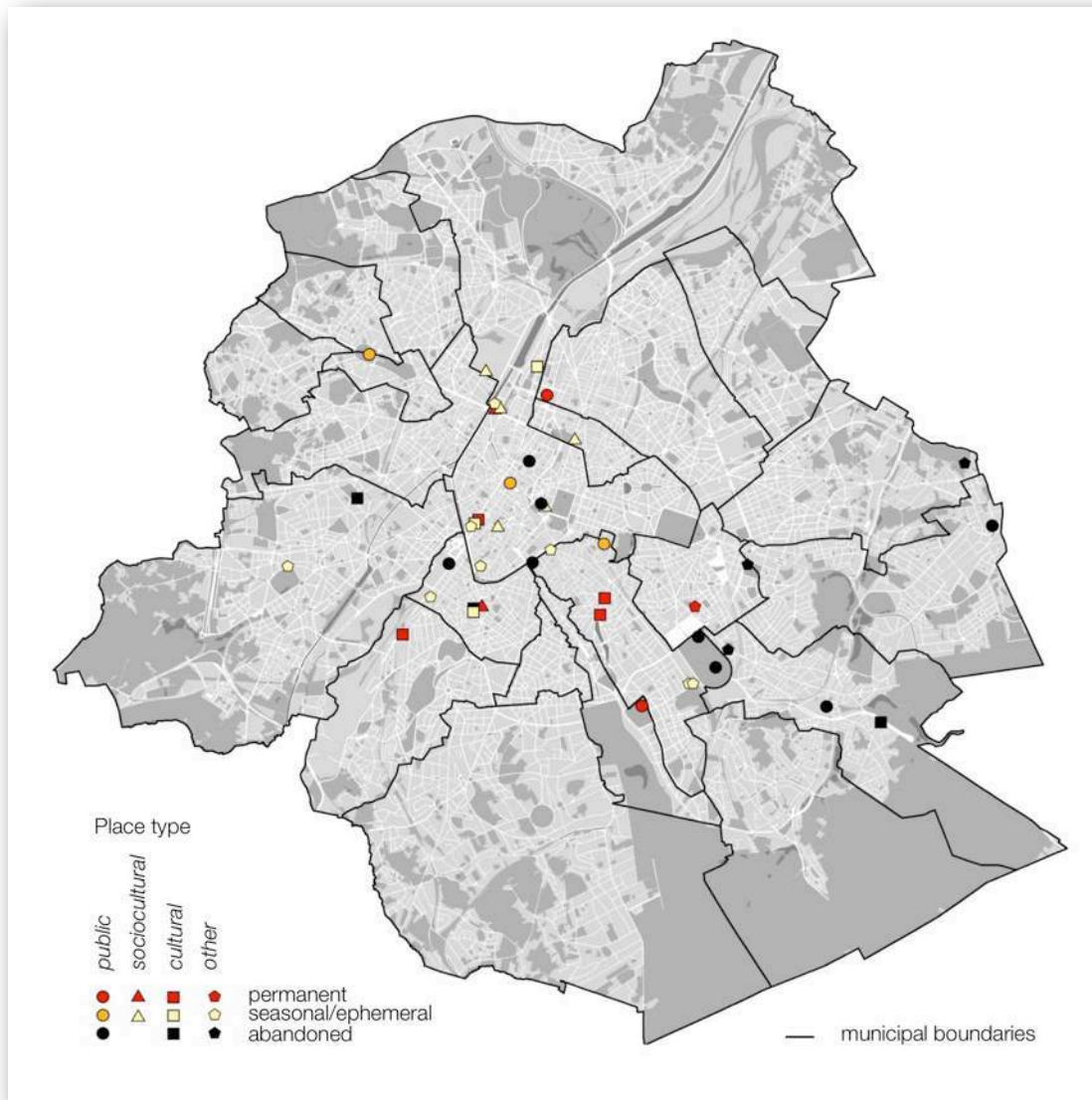


Figure 2. Types and levels of occupation of places used for breakdance battles and training in Brussels.
Source: author's survey. Source: author's survey, 2000-2010.

62. But the forty or so places listed include places used in different periods and with varying frequency. Of the places used just once – usually for a battle – the places used only during the summer, and the places abandoned for various reasons, the number of places truly available to breakdancers at the time of the surveys was much lower (9 out of 42 places). Of the performance spaces used year after year for an event but not on a daily basis, the number of spaces for these activities is even slightly lower (6 out of 42 places).

63. These different remarks concern many places in the city centre, *Palais des Beaux-arts*, *Recyclart*, *Tour & Taxis*, *Palais du Midi*, *Bruxelles-les-Bains*, the Puma shop, *Centre Pôle Nord*, the deconsecrated church of Gesù, etc. Thus, while the city centre is an area where several battles have taken place, daily breakdance activities have not been seen there since *Galerie Ravenstein* was abandoned at the beginning of the 2000s. It is only in summer, when certain dancers give street performances near the Stock Exchange, that breakdance activities may be seen regularly in the historical centre. However, such activities are becoming increasingly rare as they now require a permit, whose eligibility criteria are becoming stricter each year.

64. Among the processes which reduce the number of places available to dancers, the abandoning of certain places deserves some attention. As the places abandoned are mainly located in the public space and are used spontaneously by breakdancers, their study is symptomatic of the importance given to breakdance in the public sphere. It seems that dancers cannot use the public space or the space accessible to the public freely. The ignorance with respect to hip-hop culture and its relatively bad image in the collective imagination, its association with the disadvantaged working classes often with an immigrant background, and sometimes with a form of delinquency, lead to the eviction of dancers from public spaces where they are considered to be unwelcome. This type of eviction was seen in several places in Brussels, in particular *Galerie Stockel*, the Auderghem *Carrefour*, *Galerie Louise*, the South Station and *Galerie Ravenstein*. There are usually two different operational methods for these expulsions, which may be combined if necessary: the forceful method and the gentle method.

Figure 3. A 'gentle' method of evicting breakdancers: placing power sockets under lock and key at Luxembourg Station. Source: photo by author, 2012.



65. The forceful method consists in involving the police or the security service, in order to evacuate the area and dissuade the dancers from returning. In this case, the argument put forth – if there is one – is often about safety: the risk that a dancer could get hurt and then hold the place responsible must be avoided. In the literature, this safety argument is used in connection with other informal practices. Gilles Vieille Marchiset points out that with respect to street sports, the safety argument is often a way for the state to reaffirm its authority and its prerogatives in certain areas [Vieille Marchiset, 2003].

66. The gentle method consists in changing the characteristics of a place in order to make it less suited to breakdance activities. One of the simplest and most effective means consists in removing the power sockets or placing them under lock and key. Thus, with no electricity for their sound systems, the dancers will either leave the place or bring battery-powered equipment. While this type of intervention is rarely completely effective, it complicates the appropriation of the place and reduces its importance.

67. Apart from expulsion, the abandoning of a place may be in keeping with an internal logic. This often occurs when a place loses its appeal for various reasons: let us mention in particular having to pay to use a place which used to be available free of charge (*Collège Saint-Michel*), the decrease in the number of dancers who use a place (the Mounier sports centre in Kraainem), the obtaining of a place which is more easily accessible to all dancers or is better equipped (*Galerie Place des Martyrs*, the Auderghem youth centre), etc.

68. These elements are not anecdotal, but instead are powerful driving forces in structuring the spatiality of breakdance activities. Due to the considerable number of hours devoted each week to these activities, even a nominal fee may represent a significant amount of money for these dancers, who are often young. For the social aspect as well as the emulation it creates, breakdance is a group phenomenon whose social dimension is very important. Thus, any element which could reduce the number of dancers using a place may lead to its being abandoned, as it prevents the emulation sought by the dancers.

69. The abandoning process is always the same. The dancers wish to carry out their activities in the best possible conditions in order to improve their skills. When external or internal elements hinder this process, the dancers search for a new place with better conditions. If there is any resistance (e.g. the dancers may return to a place after being evicted), it usually does not last long because it conflicts with the initial objective of being able to carry out their activities.

70. The majority of breakdance battles and all training activities have occurred outside the traditional cultural network, with training depending almost exclusively on the spontaneous or sought after appropriation of places by dancers. Within the institutional framework, only a few sociocultural structures such as *De Pianofabriek*, a local cultural centre in Saint-Gilles, and the youth centres in Forest, Ixelles, Neder-over-Hembeek and the Northern Quarter, have provided support to breakdancers by opening training spaces and/or by organising small events from time to time.

71. However, these structures have limited means: at the time of the surveys, there were only two permanent training spaces: a room in

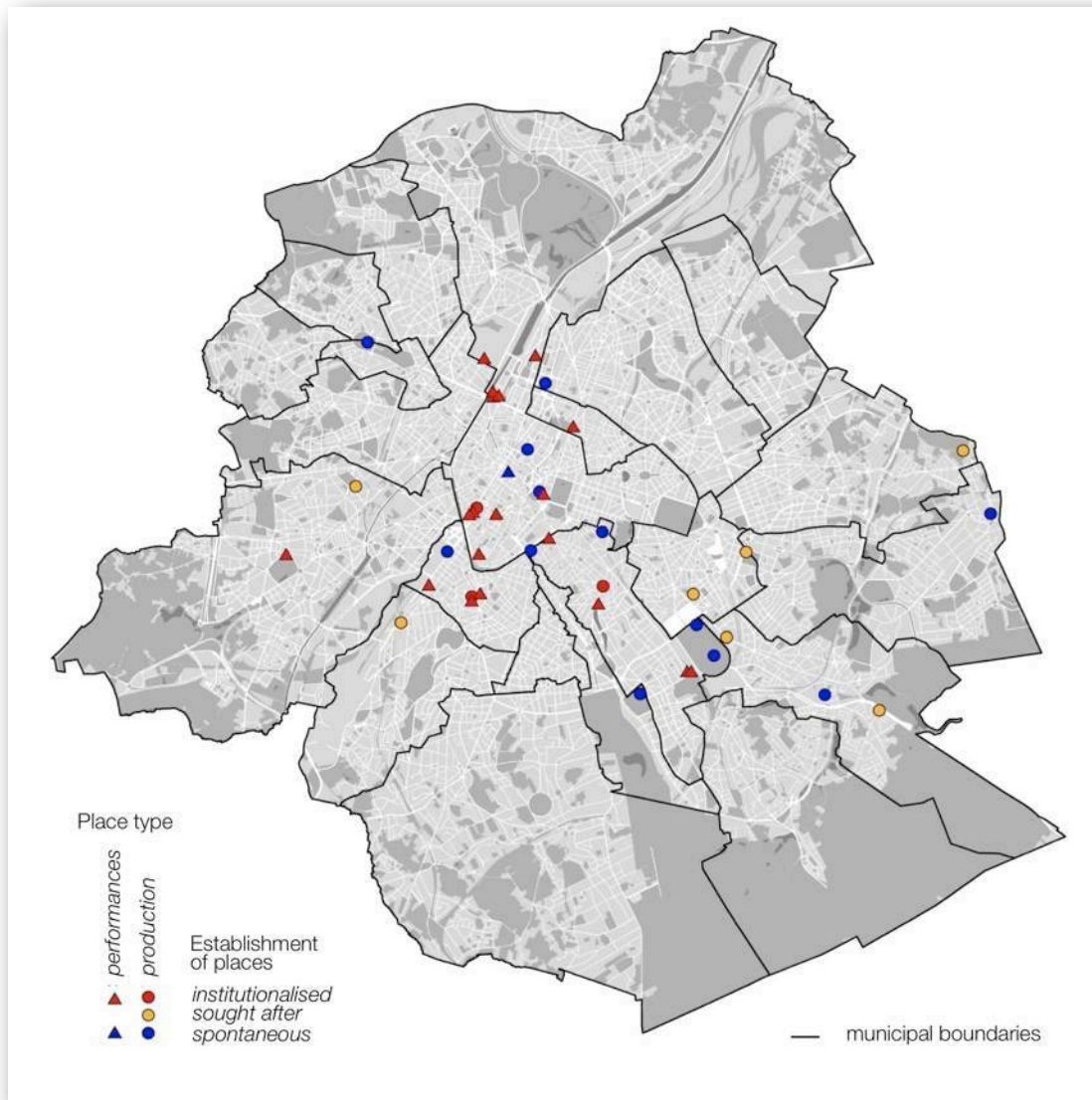


Figure 4. Establishment of places used for breakdance battles and training in Brussels. Source: author's survey, 2000-2010.

Palais du Midi and a room in Rue Malibran in Ixelles, both accessible once a week.

7. Performance spaces

72. While breakdancers are subject to eviction when they carry out their activities in the public space, they are not better off in the world of cultural institutions.

73. The cultural network in Brussels is not very open to activities associated with breakdance. During the period under study, only seven events were held in cultural institutions in Brussels. And in order to reach this total, two places were included, which had been the venues for the dance festival held by the non-profit making association *Lézarts Urbains*, at the interface between battles and creations.

74. At the time of the surveys, there were only two cultural places in Brussels which opened their doors each year to the traditional forms of expression associated with breakdance: *Kaaitheater* in the framework of the *Battle of the Year*, a world breakdance event which has existed for more than 20 years and whose qualifying rounds for Benelux are held in Brussels, and Jacques Franck cultural centre in Saint-Gilles, which was used only in the framework of the dance festival organised by the non-profit making association *Lézarts Urbains*.

75. In this case, the events persist rather than the spaces themselves. Thus, between the end of the surveys and the publication of this article, these two events changed location: from *Kaaitheater* to KVS for the *Battle of the Year*, and from Jacques Franck cultural centre to *Kaaitheater* and then to *Palais des Beaux-Arts/BOZAR* for the festival organised by *Lézarts Urbains*.

76. Another breakdance battle has recently emerged in the breakdance landscape in Brussels and in Belgium. It is called *Redbull Cypher Belgium*, the Belgian qualifying rounds for another world breakdance event, the *Redbull BC One*. At the time of the surveys, after the first two editions which were a success – one in Antwerp and the other at *Palais des Beaux-Arts* in Brussels – *Redbull* withdrew its support for the or-

ganisation of a third edition, only to return the following year to *Palais des Beaux-Arts*. Since then, the battle has been organised each year and has been held in different cultural venues in several Belgian cities (Antwerp, Brussels, Ghent and Leuven in 2014).

77. Elements from after the end of the period covered by the data have been mentioned because they are good illustrations of the openness of institutional cultural venues towards breakdance. While this openness is still subject to conditions (only events which benefit from considerable financial means and substantial support are welcome in most cases), the fact remains that these events are always hosted by the same venues, and they move from one to the other year after year.



Figure 5. Galerie Ravenstein, the former training space used by dancers in Brussels, now bears the sign 'no entry'. Source: photo by author, 2012.

8. The memory of venues

78. As with the events held in the traditional cultural network, multiple appropriations are seen in less prestigious places. Apart from weekly training organised by the Neder-over-Hembeek youth centre, *Palais du Midi* had already hosted two editions of a battle organised by the Ixelles youth centre and another battle organised directly by a dancer.

79. Likewise, the cultural centre *De Pianofabriek* had put an end to the breakdance training which had taken place there for many years. Since the end of the surveys, this training has resumed and the centre has continued to host small battles from time to time.

80. Through these multiple appropriations and the intensive use of certain places, a sort of 'memory of venues' is developing in cultural practices. Faced with eviction policies in the public space and the low level of openness of the traditional cultural network, the venues which have welcomed these activities in the past are highly valued by the dancers, and are frequently called upon again.

81. In the literature, such phenomena of resilience have raised the questions of other researchers who have noted that '*these social places are loaded with meaning and performances which result from a history and a tradition shaped by cultural experience and "the memory of those who share the space."* The content of "collective memory" is however not a sum of "individual memories", but rather a collective imagination with a given territory acting as a framework or support' [Guérin-Pace & Filippova, 2008].

82. In this sense, the mapping of abandoned places is interesting because these places are more likely to be used in future than any other place, as they are part of the collective memory of breakdancers. In a sense, they form a sort of *sleeping space*.

9. A station for the banished

83. In geographical terms, the North Station constitutes an 'anomaly' when we consider the general distribution of places where breakdance activities are carried out in Brussels. But its history summarises the processes at work.

84. At the beginning of the 2000s, several training areas coexisted: the North Station, Luxembourg Station, the South Station (since the construction of the Thalys terminal) and most importantly, *Galerie Ravenstein*. In 2002, the extension of *Palais des Beaux-Arts* forced the dancers in *Galerie Ravenstein* to leave: this was the case of an official art form chasing away another less institutionalised one.

85. From then on, the dancers fell back on other existing places, in particular the South Station. At the time, the high speed train connections at the South Station were not what they are today, and the dancers were able to use the spaces for a certain time. However, with the growing success and the increase in traffic at the Thalys terminal, the

South Station has become an international gateway. The dancers therefore became unwelcome there.

86. In this case, the forceful method was used for the eviction (police raids) as well as the gentle method (advertising displays were set up where the dancers carried out their activities). Once again, the dancers were forced to move – this time to Luxembourg Station.

87. In this location as well, the dancers were forced to leave due to the renovation of the station and the installation of paving stones and new buildings connected to the European institutions. Luxembourg Station is however still used occasionally, especially during the summer. Furthermore, since the end of the renovation works, dancers who do other forms of 'standing' hip-hop dance have taken over the space without encountering too many problems.

88. Several possible explanations exist. On the one hand, these dancers do not have the same sociological profile as breakdancers. There are many more girls and the ethnic minorities represented are sub-Saharan rather than North African. On the other hand, as these dancers tend to remain standing, it is difficult to use the safety argument to evict them. Nevertheless, certain measures such as placing power sockets under lock and key were taken, but to no avail. The forceful method was therefore used and the police evicted these dancers from Luxembourg Station as well.

89. Once again forced to stay away from a training space, the breakdancers therefore returned to the North Station, which had been somewhat abandoned. Since then, they have not faced any evictions.

90. Here, the relationship between eviction and urban renovation dynamics is evident. When an area undergoes a renovation process, dancers are perceived as being unwelcome, as a defacement and a symbol of insecurity. The dancers are then forced to leave during the first months. But when they begin to use a place located in an area which has fallen into disrepair and is not about to be 'upgraded', they are not evicted because they do not represent a disturbance.

91. While the topography must come into play at the North Station (presence of a very big hall), it is evident that its low status – linked to



Figure 6. The area used by the dancers in the huge and often deserted hall leading to the North Station. Source: photo by author, 2012.

its proximity to the main prostitution area in Brussels and the presence of a large number of homeless people – is the major element allowing us to understand why breakdance activities are tolerated there.

92. In the same way as skateboarding in Los Angeles [Gloor, 2005], the use of spaces in rundown neighbourhoods – in this case the North Station – follows an indirect logic in Brussels. It is only after being forced to leave other places located in other parts of the urban area that the dancers have fallen back on this space.

93. Although this place is not the most pleasant or the best equipped (no power sockets, very hard floor which is very cold in winter, etc.), and is not even the most accessible, at the time of the surveys it was the only place where the breakdancers could go every day and be sure that they could carry out their activities without encountering any major difficulties.

Conclusion

94. The study of the spatiality of breakdance battles and training in Brussels illustrates the contemporary transformations which affect all of the practices related to hip-hop culture. Fluctuating between a growing maturity and the evolution of the social basis of the dancers, breakdance has left the ghetto, literally and figuratively. It takes place currently outside the most disadvantaged areas of the city, in the most mixed neighbourhoods at ethnic and socioeconomic level.

95. Thanks to the internet and through the organisation of qualifying rounds for international events (such as the *Battle of the Year* and *Red-bull BC One*, as well as the *World Bboy Classic*, the *UK Bboy Championship* and *Only Bboying*), little by little the Brussels scene has opened itself to the world. This internationalisation is one of the most striking illustrations of the growing maturity of the discipline. Even so, leaving the ghetto was not easy for breakdance in Brussels.

96. Breakdance performances – in this case battles – appear to have great difficulty entering the traditional cultural circuits. They often seem to suffer the pernicious effects of the current 'event creation' policies. A

battle held within an infrastructure which is part of traditional cultural network still remains a small event, as proven by the large number of ephemeral performance spaces. Apart from a few structures which demonstrate a special openness such as the Jacques Franck cultural centre or *Kaaitheater*, the doors of the vast majority of cultural places in the Brussels-Capital Region are still closed to hip-hop dance.

97. In this sense, from within the cultural network or through the wide selection of alternative venues which were called upon, in particular sociocultural infrastructures or sports centres, the Brussels breakdance scene appears to be evolving in a microcosm. It is always the same places which open their doors for the same events. While the openness towards such events within the traditional cultural network is a positive sign in itself, its unrepeated and ephemeral dimension has a pernicious effect: it gives the impression that hip-hop dance is integrated, yet outside these few specific events, breakdance is almost totally absent from the programmes of cultural venues in the city.

98. The lack of lasting integration of hip-hop dance in the cultural network and the resulting logic of 'event creation' is not, however, a phenomenon which is specific to Brussels [Lafargue De Grangeneuve, 2003].

99. Beyond diffusion, the daily activities associated with breakdance as the basis of creation are in an even more delicate situation, as the organisation of training depends almost entirely on the initiative of the dancers themselves, who must often develop strategies to set up places where breakdance activities may be carried out on a daily basis. The traditional cultural network is practically absent when it comes to performances, as well as artistic production and practice outside the framework of special events.

100. This absence appears to be paradoxical as it is a prerequisite for all types of performance. It is often only later that dancers may benefit from institutional support for artistic production, in particular for the staging of a creation.

101. With the lack of openness of the cultural sector, the dancers in Brussels have developed two main compensatory strategies. The first consists in bringing practices into the private domestic sphere when

they do not find their place in the public sphere. Thus, with the growing diffusion of hip-hop culture within more privileged social classes, in particular in the suburbs, new practices are developing at home.

102. But the main strategy consists in making spontaneous use of the public space. However, this type of appropriation does not take place smoothly. While the main quality of the public or semi-public space is its accessibility and that it is a place where intruders are accepted [Lafargue de Grangeneuve, Kauffman & Shapiro, 2008], the ignorance with respect to hip-hop culture and its relatively bad image, combined with the dancers' status as vulnerable users in the different places where they carry out their activities, generate risks of eviction. Places located in less appealing parts of the urban area which are deserted at certain hours – typically railway stations or underground stations – are used more and more by breakdancers.

103. Faced with these difficulties, only a small network of sociocultural structures such as certain youth centres provide support to artists with times for them to carry out their activities somewhere other than at home or in the public space.

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