

Book Review of *Youthsites: Histories of Creativity, Care, and Learning in the City*

Phebe Chew*

In *Youthsites: Histories of Creativity, Care, and Learning in the City*, Poyntz, Sefton-Green, and Frey map a key sector of society that has evaded bureaucratic formalization: non-formal community arts youth organizations. The authors term these spaces “YouthSites”—youth-serving organizations that operate at the junction of community arts, education, and urban youth provision. Such spaces, the authors stipulate, are more readily defined by what they are *not*: “They are like schools but not schools, they espouse creative production but have no credentials, they are homes for many young people and yet they are transitory” (Poyntz et al., 2023, p.4).

The authors argue that YouthSites have become essential civic infrastructure for urban youth towards cultivating spaces of provision, care, creativity, and learning for youth failed by increasingly inhospitable urban landscapes and neoliberal systems and institutions. The authors map the nexus of societal domains that comprise the YouthSites sector: “their common existence on the boundaries between subculture, industry, and government provision for youth through the arts, education, training, and the creative industries” (Poyntz et al., 2023, p. 29). Through an international historical and multiple case study of YouthSites in London, Vancouver, and Toronto across a 30-year period of study, the authors provide a thorough, critical analysis of the rise, functions, and evolution of YouthSites within civil society in the Global North. Throughout the sections, the authors situate specific organizational cases within the historical phenomena they describe, allowing the reader to concretize the ways these large-scale, long-term forces shaped various aspects of the YouthSite sectors in three cities. It is through understanding context that individual experiences are resignified within societal patterns across the axis of space and time—contributing to a fuller understanding of how policy and context influence the sector, and subsequently, the lived experiences and outcomes for the youth who pass through it.

The book is organized in three parts which define, operationalize, and instantiate the Youthsites sector as shaped through historical and political events. The introductory section consists of Chapter 1, “A History of Changing Places for Learning, Creativity, and Care in the City,” which introduces the concept of YouthSites and the authors’ impetus for studying them with an internationally comparative, historical approach. It provides an overview of the book’s primary arguments, as well as a roadmap for the structure of the book. The next part, “Section 1: Defining and Describing YouthSites,” addresses the methodological processes concerning selecting contexts and YouthSites of study, data, and analytic procedures, behind mapping the sector. Chapter 2, “The Challenges of Researching the Non-Formal Learning

* University of California, Irvine

Sector,” describes the various considerations and challenges of studying non-formal sectors across a 30-year period of study. Chapter 3, “A Tale of Three Cities,” provides historical context around the rise of YouthSites in Toronto, Vancouver, and London, to demonstrate how this sector across each of these cities in the Global North have been shaped by social and political forces. Chapter 4, “Young People’s Experiences of YouthSites,” then zooms into the YouthSites themselves to describe the affective lived experiences and outcomes gleaned through interviews with former YouthSite participants across cities.

With these definitions and contexts in place, the final part, “Section 2: The Achievement, Impact, and Effect of YouthSites,” articulates the ways YouthSites contribute to learning, creativity, and care within urban spaces. Chapter 5, “Making a Claim for Authentic Learning amid Changing Education Ecosystems,” focuses on how YouthSites offered and centered alternate pedagogical approaches, providing effective educational environments for youth otherwise failed by formal learning experiences. Chapter 6, “Aesthetics and Creativity in Youth and Community Arts,” focuses on the ways that aesthetics within YouthSites provide mediate various pathways to expression, relationality, and social change. Chapter 7, “Making Spaces for Youth: Community Arts and the City,” focuses on the role YouthSites play in providing space and place of refuge for youth in cities amidst displacement and gentrification. Chapter 8, “Leaders and Modes of Leadership,” characterizes orientations of leadership and feminine structures of care quintessential to the sector, and maps evolutions of leadership orientations as shaped by fungible sociopolitical dynamics and inequalities. Chapter 9, “The Paradox of Enterprise: Governance, Markets, and Social Good,” traces the ways funding models have influenced YouthSite organizational and program structures through time. Finally, Chapter 10, “Conclusion: What Future for YouthSites?” summarizes each previous chapter, providing a bird’s eye view of the ways history and context has resulted in various accomplishments and challenges of the sector, as well as the questions that lie ahead as YouthSites inevitably continue to evolve.

Though undeniably a scholarly text, the authors’ firsthand experience working in various YouthSites positions them to access dimensions of YouthSites beyond the theoretical, resulting in the nuanced and comprehensive mapping of a sector shaped by specific socio-historical contexts, grounded in an awareness of organizational realities and practical dynamics that arise in such spaces. Take for example, discussions around functional dimensions of YouthSite organizations such as funding, leadership styles, and structures, and complex real-time tensions between “amplification of youth voice or a fetishization of youth arts” (Poyntz et al., 2023, p. 111). As such, *Youthsites* serves as a foundational text that defines and contextualizes the non-formal youth arts sector. Furthermore, because *Youthsites* spans historical and policy-based analysis across educational, welfare, and creative industries, it presents as an intellectual resource for many possible audiences connected to the non-formal youth arts sector: for scholars across disciplines looking to situate and build on otherwise scattered scholarship; for researchers and policymakers who aim to surface historical systematic challenges towards policy that sidesteps previous failings; as well as for practitioners—whether looking to develop quality practice and organizational structures, or to bolster rationale for material support from stakeholders.

By providing a historical and political context aside the lived experiences of former youth participants and leadership of YouthSites, Poyntz, Sefton-Green, and Frey make a compelling case for the ways YouthSites function as an essential societal sector in urban life, and how they came to be that way. Through their mapping of the YouthSites sector, the authors bring

definition to a sector that is otherwise challengingly heterogeneous—towards building a historical bedrock of articulative, dignifying, and useful scholarship for scholars, policy-makers, and practitioners alike who have a stake in the multifaceted and consequential spaces YouthSites provide for urban youth.

References

Poyntz, S. R., Sefton-Green, J., & Frey, H. F. (2023). *Youthsites: Histories of Creativity, Care, and Learning in the City*. Oxford University Press.