Cities and youth culture have traditionally gone hand in hand. Urban environments have offered the spaces and the stimulus to launch a thousand era-defining ideas; to incubate fresh forms of creativity and game-changing innovations derived directly from the street.

But cities are changing and the secret spaces are receding. How does youth culture operate when gentrification abounds and the places where underground creativity previously thrived are increasingly legislated and commercialised?

In this edition of City Limits we explore the coping strategies, the hacks and the new dynamics that, in the face of adversity, are keeping youth culture alive and evolving. We look at what the role is for brands - both in developing opportunities for no-holds-barred fun and self-expression but also, and as importantly, in helping facilitate well-being, inclusion and life-shaping opportunities that last beyond the big night out.

Andy Crysell, group managing director, Crowd DNA

We asked young people in London and New York about the future of their city – turn to page seven for their predictions.

CITY EMOJIS
Guess the city...

Around the world in four icons - can you guess the city logo?

Answers:
Urban space, along with alternative media, has always played a pivotal role in the formation of youth culture. In the case of the former, it’s particularly about improvised space. Claiming and appropriating your own environment between the residential, the commercial and the municipal; finding and defining the spaces in which subcultures can first emerge.

There are endless stories of how urban landscapes have fostered youth-driven creativity - from the inclusion of garages in Seattle homes giving kids a place to escape the rain and make music (grunge), to London tower blocks offering prime transmission spots and fortress-like security for pirate radio (drum ‘n’ bass/grime).

Academic papers have explored the feelings of independence, belonging and ownership that come from these creative re-appropriations of the built environment. And brands, of course, have consistently sought to leverage the subcultural eruptions that follow.

Whether the future for youth culture in cities is as bright as its past, or if creativity will largely manifest online from now on, is up for debate. But, as bleak as things may look among today’s gentrified cityscapes, perhaps don’t bet too big against youth culture finding a way (and a space).

In the meantime - though we’re guilty of just scratching the surface - here’s some prime examples of how youth have made city spaces their own.

Los Angeles, Skating Pools

In the long, hot summer of 1976, a water ban was in effect and the previously shimmering pools of Los Angeles had transformed into dry concrete bowls. In one of the most celebrated improvisations of space in youth subculture, the city’s nascent skateboard scene broke into backyards and rode the perfectly curved surfaces (while keeping an eye out for the LAPD). Bowl riding was born, as was a new outsider status to skating, replacing its rather straight-laced beginnings with a stylistic blueprint that has gone global and endured for decades. The tale was told in all its glory in Stacy Peralta’s Sundance award-winning Dogtown And Z Boys documentary.

Soweto, Hardcore Freedom

Hardcore and punk might’ve been born thousands of miles away in London, New York and Los Angeles, but they offer a powerful contemporary platform through which South Africa’s youth can express both anger and solidarity. It’s in Soweto, in relative isolation from the bright lights and heavily branded streets of central Johannesburg, where this scene has burgeoned. Car repair yards, abandoned houses, even rooftops – with a deficit of proper venues to book, all kinds of spaces have been co-opted. These impromptu sessions have drawn together culturally diverse crowds in fast-changing Soweto, with disenchantment at the realities of post-apartheid life the common bond. The scene gained further prominence when Brooklyn’s Afropunk festival launched its first venture in Africa, with
breakthrough bands like TCIYF introducing the fresh face, and sound, of township culture to a wider audience.

**New York, Loft Life**

Whole books have been written about how the unclaimed spaces of downtown 1970s New York incubated myriad celebrated art and music scenes. Pivotal to this upsurge of localised creativity was the city’s loft spaces: former sweatshops that weren’t legal to live in but, nonetheless, served as residences-cum-studios-cum-venues for countless pioneers.

One such example is David Mancuso, the deified DJ who’s aptly titled club, The Loft (situated in the same space that he lived) became a home-from-home for a disenfranchised young, largely gay crowd, setting down a sonic precursor to so much that would follow in disco and house music. Though downtown Manhattan has changed dramatically, Mancuso’s place was opening to partying from 1970 right through to late 2016, just a month before his death.

**London, Squat Glamour**

London creativity in the 1970s and 1980s owed much to squat and dole culture. The scope to claim benefit – relatively unchecked by any demands to actually get a job – gave emergent artists plenty of time to develop their ideas. And vast swathes of London real estate were empty, with families and the wealthy leaving the city, and space thus left for, incredibly, around 30,000 mainly young squatters to occupy. Proceedings reached a glamorous peak around the Warren Street area – where, in the huge but battered Edwardian residences, an assortment of musicians, style journalists and fashion designers clustered together and set about creating the aspirational and globally influential new romantic scene. They might not have had running water, but they had ideas and eyeliner. Fancy a five storey place of your own in that part of town? Yours for circa £20,000pm today.

**Tokyo, Street Fame**

Sometimes the co-opting is less about swimming pools or lofts, and more about whole districts. Think Harajuku in Tokyo, where - for five decades - Japanese teens have paraded an ever-evolving dress code of handmade fashion. In some respects, the nucleus of this riot of colour was simply the pedestrianisation of the main drag. But in another sense, it was all about Japanese youth finding its voice – reputedly starting with the awesomely titled Bamboo Shoot Tribe, a gang of disco dancing working class kids in outrageous outfits, who couldn’t get into nightclubs.

Teen-oriented street style magazines flourished in the area - including Heart Candy, which recruited 18- to 20-year-old girls as editorial staff and featured fashion imagery predominantly of self-styled people. Though inevitably now much more commercialised than it was, Harajuku’s role in defining the modern-day codes of street style photography has been significant.

**Beijing, Backstreet Battles**

At other times, it’s not about claiming space, but holding on to it. Beijing’s Hutongs, the disorderly maze of lanes that have captured the true sense of street life for centuries and, more recently, provided a haven for young creatives, have been under threat through a ‘bricking’ process, which has seen the authorities, in the name of ‘economic hollowing’, trying to limit access to the buildings. The youth fight back has been notable and varied. One protest took the form of a live streamed performance art series. Another project, meanwhile, saw a youth art collective documenting daily changes in the hutongs via scooter and GoPro. Then there’s the 19-year-old who’s started a group on WeChat, China’s primary social messaging app, called Hutong Art Team, calling for creative submissions that chart the changes underway in the hutongs. The resistance is innovative and the struggle continues.
Youth culture has always been tribal - but whereas once the clusters were monolithic and mainly music-oriented, now they draw from increasingly diverse sources of inspiration, are less clearly defined by fashion codes and are just that bit more fluid. Here’s a few youth tribes to keep an eye out for, no matter where you are in the world…

**HOLISTIC HEALTH HUNTERS**
Binge on mindfulness apps and obsess about not being obsessed with ‘stuff’; anxious perfectionists who crave clean-eating and always have time for a headspace moment.

**INTERN→HUSTLER→CEO**
From bedroom De-Pop legends to zine editors, these career grafters and master multi-taskers are constantly working on their next big project(s) to redefine themselves and the world around them.

**GAME CHANGERS**
Forget the park, the weekends are for gathering your mates and heading to a march. These opinionated activists on the front line fighting for a meat, plastic, discrimination-free planet. Purpose is at the core of everything they do and buy.

**PODCAST JUNKIES**
Conspiracy theory experts convinced that everything has an alternative story, they reject the establishment and want to share their thoughts and voice with like-minded people.

**EXPERIENCE HOARDERS**
Materialism is dead. They live for the moment (as long as it looks good on Instagram later) and the memories, seeking unique experiences over objects or possessions.

**THE ‘INFLUENCER’**
The fashion/beauty/lifestyle/anything blogger that lives and “works” on social media, always dreaming about that little blue tick. They’re seeking wider, global significance beyond their immediate gang, but all the while making sure they’re #accessible and #authentic.
THE ONLINE CITY AND ME:
The role of the city is now being challenged by all things online, with digital space taking on the significance that physical ones did in helping young people explore self identity. We log on and click deeper...

Densely populated and socially diverse, cities have always offered the freedom and inspiration to explore self identity. Especially during those crucial teenage years, experimenting with who we are – and who we hang out with, listen to, or make out with – is all part of growing up. Urban melting pots have presented a perfect mix: proximity to exciting influences, and the anonymity to explore them.

But digital spaces are increasingly taking on the significance that physical ones once did. Young people are no longer defined mostly by geographical location, but now also by hashtags and social media presence as well.

As youth culture continues to be uploaded online, digital platforms and apps now offer an alternative route to working out who you are or who you want to be. Sifting for like-minded people, exploring different expressions and embracing the tricky world of dating are still played out in real life, but now also, increasingly, in online ‘cities’ too.

So as our hyperconnected lives expose young people to influences beyond their locality, how are digital platforms and brands getting involved? And how are they placing themselves well within online youth experiences? We take a look at identity formation in the online city.

Snapchat, Lens Studio
With the all-empowering tagline ‘The World Is Your Canvas’, Snapchat’s Lens Studio has made its AR platform even more interactive by allowing users to create their own Snap lens. Offering a blank canvas, as opposed to a prescribed set of features, users are invited to test out multiple identities by creating their own AR experiences to share with 70 million people worldwide. This development pushes the app’s ability beyond simply allowing users to try on an identity and into the realm of creating whole new ones.

#LGBTQProm2K18
Refreshing open discussions around gender fluidity and sexuality have made space for teenagers to explore and express themselves – both online and IRL. Digital platforms have played a key role in raising visibility of non-binary individuals and have created safe spaces for them to express themselves in all their multifaceted glory. The trend of ‘Queer Prom’ photos on Instagram, for example, pushes past rigid stereotypes by places images of diversity within a traditional rights of passage for young people.
Finding like-minded people, forming subcultures

Instagram Flop Accounts
In this era of fake news, young people are ever more sceptical of traditional media sources. Increasingly, they’re debating the issues of the day via Instagram flop accounts. Managed collectively by teens, they cover everything from gun control and abortion, to viral memes and their favourite YouTubers. All subjects posted are deemed a ‘flop’ (a fail) because the admins consider them to be morally wrong or simply unacceptable. Their appeal? Instagram provides a space, away from grown-ups, where the young are free to share and form their own opinions, putting the world to rights. And, whatever their followers’ beliefs, flop accounts connect them to each other – bursting filter bubbles and offering alternative perspectives.

Meme Culture
Similar to above, as online culture becomes increasingly fleeting and identity becomes ever more fragmented, many subcultural threads are represented through shared jokes and attitudes expressed via humour-drenched memes. These esoteric ‘in-jokes’ bring together tribes of online users through mutual understanding. Finding like-minded others who share similar views, attitudes or – in most cases – senses of humour, is now as simple as liking a post.

Aimed at people aged 17 and up, Taffy is providing teenagers with an online dating experience designed to be just that bit less superficial. To combat the throwaway dating culture of apps such as Tinder and Bumble, all Taffy profiles start with a blurred picture, encouraging potential partners to get to know each other before making snap judgements based on looks.

Taffy

Relationships are not only forged online, but played out there as well. Young people are acutely aware of the way they and their current partners are perceived. For them, image is everything – but so is the caption. Seventeen magazine even recently posted an article titled ‘30 Best Couple Instagram Captions For That Cute Photo of You and Your Bae’, demonstrating the importance of curated online storytelling for the younger generation.

Curated Cuteness

The app created by actress/youth mentor Maisie Williams is designed to be a booster platform for young people hoping to forge their paths in the creative industries. Directing the talent of younger generations to use the internet to promote their work, the app encourages users to build connected creative communities and, in turn, establish new industry norms that suit digital nomads around the world.

Daisie

Hey! VINA
Online networking platform Hey! Vina was created for self-identifying women aged 16 and up. The all-female app offers a space to connect with like-minded women whether that be in a professional or platonic-friendship capacity. It’s identity is based heavily around nurturing real life connections, using pictures of its users attending events together and nurturing relationships in physical settings, giving the app a more tangible and human feel.

Hey! VINA
Ryan - 17, Holloway, London

“London will just be full of more flats in the future, and even less open space where I can hang out with my mates.”
FAST FORWARD

We asked young people in London and New York: ‘What’s the future of your city?’

Migle - 17, Kensal Rise, London
“There will be more high-rise flats and more pollution. There are just so many people coming to London. Lots more cars, more buildings, fewer trees, definitely more health issues.”

Veanne - 18 - Hell’s Kitchen, NYC
“The future will bring more buildings and more people. New York will stay the same, but those things will give it more character. It’s a trade off: less space, but more character.”

Jasper - 17 - Bedford-Stuyvesant, NYC
“Technology will keep changing and adding to New York. It’ll affect every part of the city - perhaps not the arts, though.”

Kathy - 23, Haggerston, London
“I’m hoping there will be more cycle lanes! In The Netherlands, bikes are completely separated from cars, so hopefully we can do that in London.”
Maddie - 19 - Chelsea, NYC

“I came to New York because it’s a safe space for a lot of people. I’d like to think this city becomes even more accepting of people; it seems to be heading that way.”

Nicole - 22 - New Jersey (commutes in), NYC

“New York is getting more expensive, which makes it harder for young people to live here while working an entry-level job. I don’t see this changing in the future at all.”

Nalia - 16, Tottenham, London

“There’s a lot of danger in London, but I feel that the future will be brighter. People might start to look at things they’ve done wrong in the past and create a better, safer future for everyone.”

Ridwan - 17, Ealing, London

“I hope that there’ll be better facilities to encourage people to get outdoors and do sports. Not enough young people are active around London at the moment.”

Reuben - 16 - Fort Greene, NYC

“New York is getting more expensive and minorities are being pushed out for rich, white people. I saw Brooklyn experience that already, so maybe in the future the same will happen for other boroughs, like Queens.”
Joanna - 19 -
Upper East Side, NYC

“You can always rely on New York – no matter what’s happening or changing around it, the city stays strong.”
Young people today are passionate, pressured and pushing boundaries – in both cities and beyond. Here, we take lessons from the brands tapping into three of the biggest urban youth trends...

The young people in our global cities are establishing trends that will define their generation, as well as influence the shape of their future urban environments. They are vocal activists, loudly protesting the issues that matter with certainty, via hashtags and marches. At the same time, they embody an openness and fluidity through a street-style that challenges stereotypes and defies preconceptions.

Armed with good intentions, and an endless stream of information in the palm of their hand, they are also a cohort driven to achieve and succeed. But with ambitious expectations comes pressure, and constant exposure to a world in turmoil leads to a need for escape. Our younger neighbours therefore seek newness, hype, exclusivity and recognition of their strengths (not expectations) as a release from the pressures of daily life.

Here, we explore three of these major city-led youth trends and what we can learn from the brands tapping into them to stay relevant. Above all, purpose collaboration and creativity are key.

**YOUTH ACTIVISM**

**ANGRY YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN**

#MeToo, the polarisation of politics across the globe and only 12 years to fix climate change: this is a time of extremes. Banded together through social networks, young people are actively taking their protest offline and the cities are their stomping ground. In the US, for example, 19 year old Emma Gonzalez has roused the crowds at gun-control rallies in Washington DC; in Thailand, 14 year old Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal fights for free speech in Bangkok; while in London, 18 year old Amika George has led multiple marches against period poverty.

It’s no surprise, then, that young urbanites look for brands that are authentic in their support of the political and eco-ethical issues that they support – both in their comms and in the way they produce their products. A 2018 study by GreenMatch found that Gen Z will spend more money on something if they are aware that it’s sustainably produced.

**Back The Vote**

After a tumultuous first two years of Trump, and yet more gun violence in schools, young people in the US were more politically galvanised than ever. During the recent midterm elections, Tinder jumped on this sense of action by helping them make dates with their local city polling station through its Swipe The Vote campaign. Likewise, the ever-present urban ride apps Uber and Lyft partnered with the non-profit organisation When We All Vote to help transport young voters without a means of getting to the polling booths.
Make Style Sustainable

In 2018, several youth-orientated high street favourites in cities around the globe, including H&M, Zara and adidas, committed to increasing sustainable output by 2020 as part of the Global Fashion Agenda. The pledge involves increasing sustainable design, use of recycled textiles, implementing garment collection and repurposing surplus materials. Similarly, in January 2019, it was announced that Los Angeles would be host to the first Vegan Fashion Week early this year. Significantly, the event costs between $20-$60 to attend, making it accessible for young consumers, as well as highlighting the expectations around who the target audience for sustainable fashion is.

DISRUPTIVE ENTREPRENEURIALISM
THE SIDE HUSTLE IS REAL

They say you grow up faster living in a city, but Gen Z are purposefully accelerating their adulthood in urban centres. We’re witnessing a disruptive form of entrepreneurialism, where young people’s proactive side hustling turns passion into professional results. Combined with the ease of social media self-promotion, cities offer the ability to collaborate with peers and brands, and house a wealth of creativity and culture on Gen Z’s doorstep. But exposure to city chaos, the cost of urban living and the competition to stand out builds pressure. Add to that a pile of global crises, and young people have got a lot on their plate. Brands can acknowledge the struggles that young people face, but also collaborate with them to celebrate their unique skills.

Celebrate Ambition

Cities around the world are attempting to inspire their young and show them that they are in the right place to achieve their goals and dreams. In Singapore, the government itself released an advert in spring 2018 that celebrated 26 year old Douglas Ng - a fishball entrepreneur and champion of traditional hawker culture in urban environments. The end of the film also revealed that both the soundtrack and calligraphic imagery featured were created by two other young Singaporeans, overtly celebrating youthful ambition in the process.

Tap Into Talent

In August last summer, Sunny D launched its high energy Drink To Your Own Beat campaign.

The TV spots featured Gen Z creatives from all over the world showcasing and showing off their talents against the backdrop of Miami street scenes (including DJing, bike surfing and, er, human noodling). Behind the scenes interviews and social media activation brought together this international collective of ‘boldly original’ Gen Z trailblazers – a term that’s now become the brand’s strapline.

FLUID EXPRESSION
THE LABEL DEBATE

Today, street-savvy brands must appeal to a young generation that eschews categorisation and gender stereotypes, and embraces inclusivity and diversity. More and more urban brands are adopting the approach of unisex streetwear, launching new sub-brands specifically targeting this fluid yet fashion conscious group. And while young people don’t want to be defined or boxed in, they’re game for a challenge to get hold of the latest trainer or drop from the right label. Brands must engage and excite - this demographic is lured by hype and is ready to stand in line outside stores in cities worldwide, from San Francisco to Seoul.

Design For All

Launched by ASOS late last year, Collusion is a gender-fluid, streetwear-inspired brand, designed in collaboration with a range of young influencers. The kickoff campaign featured 100 young Brits who have turned, or would be turning 18, in 2018, photographed against the familiar urban landscape of their home cities. With so many startup challenger brands forgoing labels and categories, it’s significant to see such a mainstream retailer entering the fray.

Create A Quest To Purchase

In October 2018, Footlocker invited users to take part in an AR scavenger hunt around the streets of Los Angeles for the chance to be one of the first to buy a pair of the new Nike LeBron 16 King Court Purple. Mimicking the appeal of Pokemon Go, the app hooked in young, mobile first consumers keen to express their insider knowledge and exclusive street-style.
Two strangers from two generations sit together in silence for a game of chess. Crowd DNA in Belgium

No Public Displays Of Affection. Young love has its barriers. Crowd DNA in Singapore

Kids get high as rollerblading takes on new forms for these thrill seekers in Fitzroy. Crowd DNA in Melbourne

Young fans rush the Kylie Jenner Cosmetics pop up waiting to snap a photo of the celebrity’s entrance. Crowd DNA in San Francisco

Settling into a moment of group meditation away from the hustle of the city. Crowd DNA in Sydney

A local restaurant’s selfie wall reiterates that it’s never just about the food. Crowd DNA in Guangzhou

Lights, phones, action – a live experience is played out through screens in the crowd. Crowd DNA in Switzerland

City as a playground. A young skater makes the most of street blocks to practice tricks. Crowd DNA in Jakarta

Creativity is power as young women fight for equal pay and opportunities at a protest in central Glasgow. Crowd DNA in Glasgow

Fans line up for the latest drop outside SoHo’s Supreme store, proving real-life retail isn’t quite dead yet. Crowd DNA in New York City

Speaking up at Reprezent’s youth-led radio station, paving the way for the next generation of radio hosts. Crowd DNA in London

CROWD SNAPSHOTs
Where we’ve been and what we’ve seen in cities around the world.
Thanks for reading.

Crowd DNA is a cultural insights and strategy consultancy with offices in London, Amsterdam, New York & Singapore.

Formed in 2008, operating in 55+ markets, we bring together trends specialists, researchers, strategists, writers, designers and film-makers, creating culturally charged commercial advantage for the world’s most exciting brands.