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The Role of Joe Rockhead's Climbing Gym in Community Building

Introduction

 Joe Rockhead's Indoor Rock Climbing, located on Fraser Avenue in Toronto's Liberty Village, takes an inconspicuous approach to exterior design (Figure 1). Their small sign sitting on the sidewalk tells of prices and hours, operating only to let you know you have arrived rather than as an advertisement. Most businesses in this neighbourhood operate the same way – rather than foot traffic, alternative means such as word of mouth attracts customers. In being the first rock climbing gym in the city, it is central to the community and is consistently full of a diverse group of people. We are interested in this unique case – curious as to how an almost un-advertised location for hobbyists could be so popular. Our research seeks to understand what separates Joe's from other gyms in the city by asking the question, how does the built form of Joe Rockhead's climbing gym help to facilitate community formation? Guided by literature on community formation, this paper will analyse our exploration of the climbing gym through participant observations, visual analysis, soundscape analysis, and interviewing to understand how Joe Rockhead's pulls climbers into the gym space.

Literature Review

 The introduction of Dan Blazer's 2005 book, *The Age of Melancholy: "Major Depression" and its social origins* is important to our research because it provides a background to the importance of community. He states that isolation is a leading factor of the increase of depression and for people to develop a sense of community in the modern age, they must actively seek it out and situate themselves within an alternative form of community through common interests or hobbies. Leisure activities, like rock climbing, offer socializing outlets that can provide the means to develop the personal and community identity lost in the modern age.

 The need for community is elaborated in *What Community Supplies* by Robert J Sampson. In his review of research on community, he defines it as "a collection of both people and institutions occupying a spatially defined area that is conditioned by a set of ecological, cultural, and political forces" (Sampson, 2008, pp. 165). He ascribes that community supplies individuals with grounds to realize common values, and access to social capital. Putnam's social capital theory defines this as "features of social organization, such as trust, norms, networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions" (Putnam, 1994). Social Cohesion is academically defined as the extent of connectedness and solidarity among groups in society (Sabbe,

p. 263). Sabbe reference's Putnam's social capital theory to connect the ways in which community sports can promote social cohesion and enhance social capital. While being more niche and reliant on setting, Joe's gym facilitates the key five dimensions referenced by Sabbe include belonging, participation, acceptance and legitimacy, worth, and social justice and equity. These dimensions are fulfilled by the gym as it offers an alternative community for young people, especially to mitigate loneliness.

Tanna Naylor discusses the uniqueness of the climbing community in her article, "Community in Rock Climbing: An analysis of subculture representation", proving why a young person would wish to get involved with this sport instead of other activities. The benefit of the community to an individual is like how Blazer (2005) regards the value of a local community – the value provided by knowing people well and having face-to-face interactions builds deeper ties and fosters a stronger sense of community. Community is highly valued within rock climbing, to a point, Naylor says, that the comradery of the practice is "an emphasised endorsement" (Naylor, 2023).

Methodology

In finalizing our research, we recognized how three research methods specifically led us to answering our research question – these were participant observation, alternative cartography, and interviews. Our participant observations occurred on a busy Friday night. We each stood in a different part of the gym, writing notes and rock climbing. We spoke to several patrons, and Sunnie's prior knowledge of the gym community helped to inform the overall observation notes. Through this first visit, we learned that the gym resets its climbing walls on a regular basis, ensuring that there are new problems to try, and encouraging patrons to interact and converse with each other, keeping the gym refreshed. In our visual analysis, we brought a camera and photographed the space and the different climbing walls. Our soundscape, captured at the same time as our participant observation notes, is recorded from a central section of the gym. The audio separates into various layers of audio, with a multitude of background noise, and recording a specific group of people climbing and providing feedback to one another. These research methods helped to set a stage for the rest of the project, contrasting the bright inside and the uncomfortable outside of the gym, the interesting inside layout of the space, and the social atmosphere of the gym.

Our alternative cartography method (Figure 3) combined what we had learned about mapping and participatory action research to discover the unique role an individual plays within community. For this method we created an alternative map inspired by the work of Lo Prestia (2018) who promotes the idea of cartographic experimentation and the role of aesthetics in cartography. We formulated a heat map of the climbing wall which considers the number of times each hold is touched to

understand if individual climbers take different routes to navigate the wall. We accompanied this with a form of participatory action research where we asked three climbers to annotate their thoughts on the different routes, hoping to reflect conversations that we heard in our observations. We believed that participatory action research would be useful because it provides a rich description, highlights inconsistencies, and recognizes our positionality in the research overall (May and Patillo-McCoy, 2000).

Our interview process consisted of two different interviews, one with a worker at the gym and another with a patron that accesses both Joe Rockheads, as well as another climbing gym affiliated with Joes. In this interview, following our initial protocol, we asked both individuals why and how long they had climbed for, how closely connected they feel to this gym, and how they would define community. Our interviews and questions were inspired by our alternative cartography research. Specifically, discussions with patrons about their individual experiences and the strategies used to achieve climbing goals made us question how climbers access the gym which was crucial to answer our research question.

Reflection on Methods

Although our methods were far from perfect, they helped create a comprehensive image of our site. Our positionality played a role in the limitations of our research, especially with the choice of our interviewees. Harriette shares a very homogenous positionality with Sunnie as a 20-year-old female rock climber. In contrast, Pascal's position as a photographer and worker at the gym yielded a fresh voice, as we did not share much in common with the climber. It is hard to say however, that we captured a representative share of Joes' patrons, as we were unable to include perspectives of someone who had left the gym or who was unable to continue accessing the gym, which would have enabled us to better answer questions on how community loses members, or better comment on the barriers of entry. There was also shortcoming related to the mapping portion of our research, we had only included a couple of annotations from a single group sitting by the wall, when our heat map had captured the activity of three or four separate groups of people attempting the routes.

Via these qualitative research methods, they did still have strengths. Field notes allowed us to develop a research question, photography and audio analysis enabled us to tangibly reference the environment in Joe's throughout our research, our map visualized the ways in which individuals participate and interact in the gym and interviewing an employee and member of Joe's contextualized many of the comments of our map. Sunnie approached this research project as an existing member of the rock-climbing gym and community, allowing us to access resources from the gym that we otherwise wouldn't have, such as a timely arrangement for an interview, access to

the paywalled space, and social capital for much of our participatory research. Connor and Eric on the other hand were outsiders to the gym, making us more observant of details that might not be given a second thought by people who are often there.

Results/Data

The bustle and chatter of the space echoed through both our participant observations as well as our visual analysis. Despite the cold outside, a particular detail of our research, the atmosphere inside the gym shockingly contrasts the industrial outside of the rest of the neighbourhood. The vibrance of the gym is also evident through our soundscape, filled with laughter and teasing and conversation related to the climbs. Patrons are audible heard grouped together in varying pockets via the layers of conversation scattered in the audio. Sharp burst of encouragement is audible and unique spatial separation that reflects in our visual analysis is also clear. The spart of a climb can be heard on-queue as a blanket of silence overcomes the primary voices, signalling the beginning of a climb, and ends when the climber assumedly leaves the wall and bursts of chatter fill the space again. Figure 2 depicts a "stage – like" atmosphere, where people that are cheering in the audio are clearly separated from the climber, and the "stage" is outlined by the wall, and the presumed climber.

The alternative cartography portion of the project yielded few results to directly answer our research question but was useful in highlighting themes of our research and guiding the format of our interview. Our map highlighted the importance of the individual within a community by demonstrating their unique approaches to navigating the climbing wall. Examples of this include the stylistic differences in annotations, highlighted by one person's playful discussion of the climbing hold looking like "Babybell Cheese" and another's using specific climbing phrasing like, "sloper" and "heel hook". Despite this, the heat map portion of our map displays that the way people tackle the route is similar.

Despite obvious differences, the two climbers accessed the gym in very similar ways. Similar levels of connection were noted as the patron described the gym as "important to maintain [her] relationships, as well as physical needs", the worker mentioned the gym being a "safe space that people with like interests can just come together [in]". The role of the physical space was integral to their descriptions of Joe's. The patron commented on her preference for the layout of this gym, the worker mentions that he could "take [his] headphones off at any point to socialize". In this gym, individuals can choose to socialize or not with ease. A particular point that was mentioned was their comments about barriers of entry such as the membership fee, the isolated location of the gym, and the intimidating nature of the sport. The interviewees discussed why these barriers to entry, the price, location and nature of the sport, can be a feature of the community rather than inhibitors. These features

filter and discourage people who are not as enthusiastic about the sport, creating an environment where everyone that spends time at the gym are enthusiastic and build solidarity together, promoting the social cohesion of the space (Sabbe, 2018).

Analysis

Our exploration of the climbing gym through various research methodologies creates a foundation for our analogy of the climbing wall as a stage, highlighting it as a space for climbers to perform on and for people witing to be an audience of. The sounds and the annotations made by climbers are directly impacted by the interior created in this gym. The stage fosters community formation by directing the attention of bystanders to the selected group of individuals who are climbing at any given time. The result of this is increased interactions and consistent recognition of people you have seen climbing before.

Community in Joes is established through the shared interest in the sport, and the climbing wall, as well as the "stage" supplies individuals with the social capital, connection climbers and facilitating relationships among them. This space also helps to enhance social cohesion, as the climbs and mutual interest in the same route creates relationships between climbers that would not form elsewhere. The five dimensions referenced by Sabbe (2014), are all highlighted by Joe Rockheads, as climbers find a sense of belonging participate in their sport, become accepted and integrated in their community through action on the "stage", and subsequently proving their worth. The equity aspect is achieved in the diversity of the community that we observed.

We also noticed that the barriers to entry discovered while conducting research filter-in the most enthusiastic new climbers. The paywall and limited accessibility of the space are physical and social trials that determine who continues to enter the space. Only rock climbers with the enthusiasm and vested interest consistently make the difficult and lengthy commute to the location and pay the membership fee to able to use the location long-term. We interpret this as beneficial to the formation of community, because if the space was wholly public, the quality of relationships and depth of the communal bond would be less concentrated. These barriers to entry manage to preserve this diversity with respect to racial, ethnic, gender identity and sexual orientation, allowing the community in Joe Rockheads to be as diverse as Toronto itself, only misrepresented by economic background in favour of those able to handle the membership expenditures needed to remain a member.

Conclusion

Our qualitative research helps us to conclude that the built form of Joe Rockhead's does foster community. This project began exploring how an individual

becomes situated in the gym, we came to understand how the space of the climbing gym contributes to the community. The strength of the gym community is built through interest and the shared adversity that individuals experience when being within the gym. Although it is a community of outgoing people who love to discuss the weekly changed routes and welcome newcomers, to be a part of this community requires high commitment to overcome the barriers that stop people from entering; comradery and overlapping interests are major themes that make the space so integrated.

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