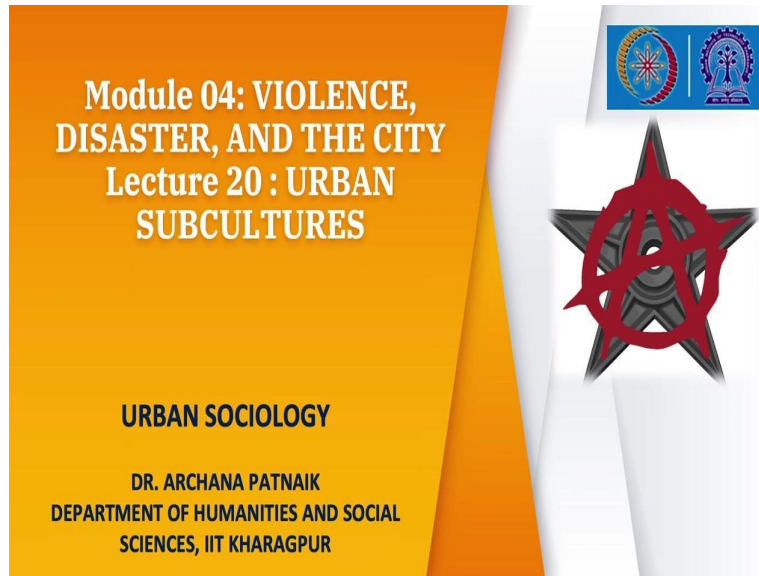**Urban Sociology**
Professor Archana Patnaik
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology Kharagapur
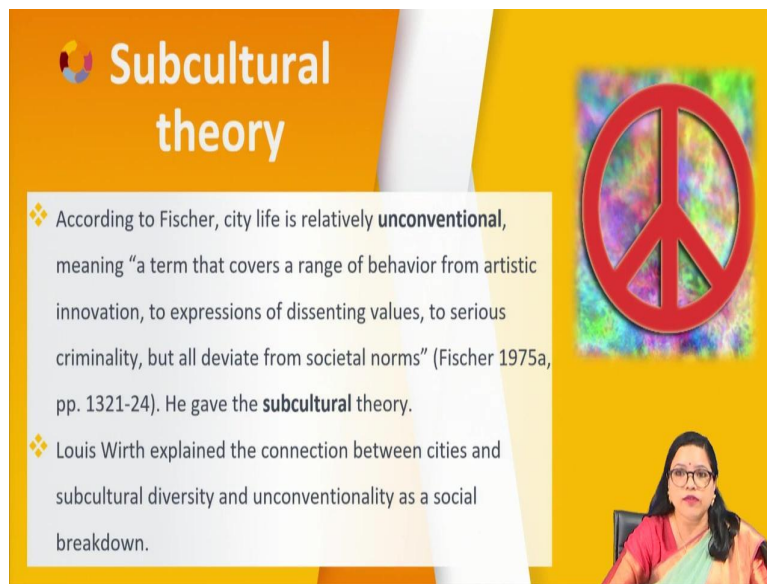**Lecture 20**
Urban Subcultures

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A warm welcome to all, today we will be discussing the last section that is the urban subcultures. And in this lecture, we will cover the portions that are different perspectives of urban subculture theory, Fischer's proposition of sub cultural theory, case of Redfern, Waterloo, Australia to understand how city and subcultures interact with each other, then we will discuss about the case of graffiti and subculture. And we will also discuss about a case of skateboarding in Los Angeles.
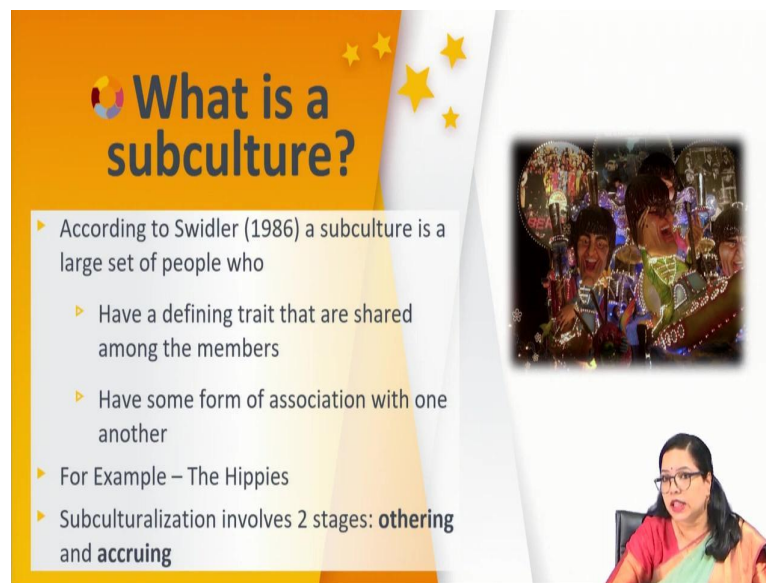
The Subcultural theory as was given by (Fischer 1975a, 1982, 1984) contends, that city life is relatively unconventional – and by unconventional Claude S. Fischer meant "a term that covers a range of behavior from artistic innovation, to expressions of dissenting values, to serious criminality, but all deviate from societal norms" (Fischer 1975a, pp. 1321-24).

Whereas, Louis Wirth explained the connection between cities and subcultural diversity and unconventionality as a social breakdown. Where he finds that city life makes individuals alienate from others and develop individualization which was criticized by Fischer. According to Fischer in subcultural theory, cities do stimulate unconventionality, but not by bringing in normlessness or alienation.

According to him the "Population concentration generates a variety of subcultures, or "a set of interconnected social networks . . . and the ... norms and habits common [to it] ...; it is loosely synonymous with 'social world" (Fischer 1984, p. 297). Thus, congregation of people to maintain the subculture is important here which is not possible if people alienate.
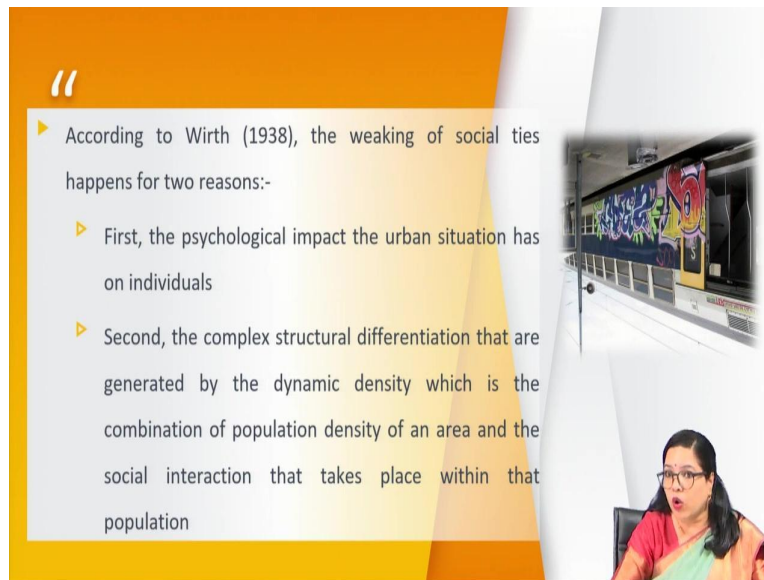
According to Swidler (1986) a subculture is a large set of people who:

- Have a defining trait that are shared among the members

- Have some form of association with one another

They become members of institutions which are associated with their defining trait. They share a set of cultural tools and adhere to certain distinct set of values that are common to all the members. For Example – The Hippies.

Scholarly works of Durkheim (1933), Simmel (1905), and Park (1916), and Wirth (1938) laid the foundation of sociological approach to urban life and community. Wirth was the one who took the understanding forward. According to him, with large and heterogenous population residing mostly in the cities lead to weaking of interpersonal ties among the members.

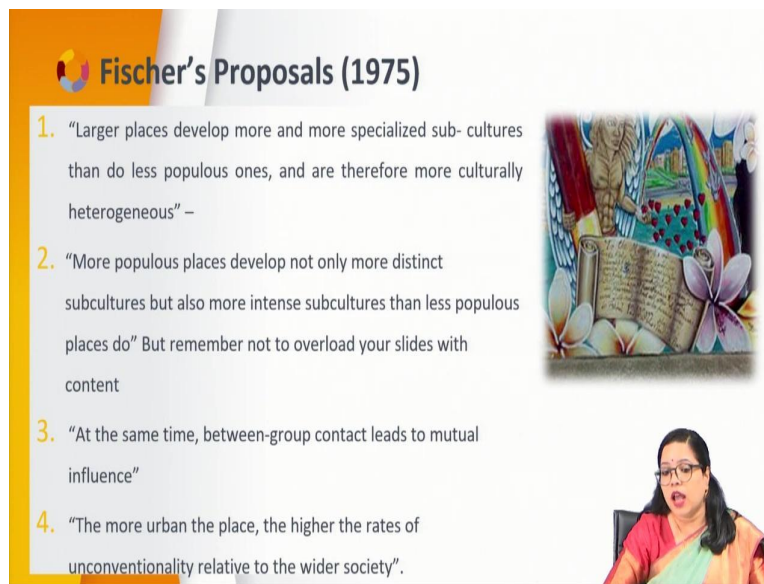According to him, the weaking of social ties happens for two reasons:-

- First, the psychological impact the urban situation has on individuals

- Second, the complex structural differentiation that are generated by the dynamic density which is the combination of population density of an area and the social interaction that takes place within that population

According to him, these further lead to deviant or non-conformist behaviour among the individuals. However, there were scholars like Gans (1962a), Lewis (1952), Young and Willmott (1957), and others who found this understanding of the cities as problematic. For these scholars who are also known to be having a nonecological position claim that there are few differences between rural and urban population and density of the city or the ecological factors do not play any important role in individual's social life.

For Fischer (1975: 1321) "urban residents do differ significantly from residents of nonurban places, and they differ to a degree insufficiently accounted for by the individual traits each group brings to its locale. They are more likely than rural residents to behave in ways that diverge from the central and/or traditional norms of their common society".

According to Fischer (1975: 1323) "subculture is a set of modal beliefs, values, norms, and customs associated with a relatively distinct social subsystem (a set of interpersonal networks and institutions) existing within a larger social system and culture". Thus, to him, urbanism is correlated with unconventionality, as it stimulates the development of subcultures. He also gave certain propositions for the same like: Proposition 1 – "Larger places develop more and more specialized sub- cultures than do less populous ones, and are therefore more culturally heterogeneous" –

According to him because of migration people come from various parts to the city and when they reside in the city, they also practice their culture which is again diverse in nature. Thus, subcultures is then organized around ethnicity, occupation, etc. Proposition 2 – "More populous places develop not only more distinct subcultures but also more intense subcultures than less populous places do" –

According to him as the population is more in cities they have larger subcultures which helps in developing specialized social networks and people then are very well knitted in the group to resist the outside forces and reinforce their own group boundaries. Making their subcultures more intense.

According to him, larger groups influence the smaller ones and the smaller ones also influence the larger ones. For example, when hippie culture spreads to middle class then the smaller group affects the larger group. He also proposes that sometimes subcultural fusion also takes place within the cities.

Proposition 4 – "The more urban the place, the higher the rates of unconventionality relative to the wider society". As to him the larger the place, the intense the subculture and this leads to greater intergroup contact and diffusion of cultural elements of subculture to other areas. Thus, he finds that "large city is integrated neither by virtue of its citizens' sharing a common "social world" nor by the formal instruments of an anomic "mass society" (p.1337). (Refer Slide Time: 8:27)

Let us analyse certain cases to understand how city and subcultures interact with each other. George Morgan (2012) in his article "Urban Renewal and the Creative Underclass: Aboriginal Youth Subcultures in Sydney's Redfern-Waterloo" explains how civic booster strategies fail to recognize the complex and ambiguous character of public spaces and their importance as sites of resistant/underground/avant-garde/youth subcultures. And the city is integrated by exchange, negotiation and conflict among various subcultures.

He takes the case of Redfern-Waterloo and, in particular, the Aboriginal youth of the area. Redfern-Waterloo Authority an Australian Government of New South Wales authority was established in 2004 with the responsibility for the Urban Renewal of the Built Environment along with Human Services, Employment and Enterprise in Redfern-Waterloo area. It planned to renew the Redfern-Waterloo area which was inhabited by the Aboriginals

The objectives as the Act states were:

(a) to encourage the development of Redfern–Waterloo into an active, vibrant and sustainable community,

(b) to promote, support and respect the Aboriginal community in Redfern–Waterloo having regard to the importance of the area to the Aboriginal people,

(c) to promote the orderly development of Redfern–Waterloo taking into consideration principles of social, economic, ecological and other sustainable development,

(d) to enable the establishment of public areas in Redfern–Waterloo, and

(e) to promote greater social cohesion and community safety in Redfern–Waterloo.

Thus, the Redfern-Waterloo planners were compelled to acknowledge the significance of the Aboriginal people residing in that area.

Morgan argues that the Aboriginal presence particularly of youth was subcultural. Redfern-Waterloo (RW) that Morgan studied was an area of poor housing accommodating largely the Irish Catholic working class and, at various times ethnic minority groups like the Lebanese. In the post–World War II period the area was the hub and center of the New South Wales urban Aboriginal community. It served as a place where stories were exchanged of common experiences of racism at the hands of authorities. Such exchanges became the foundation for the emergence of a Pan-Aboriginal politics and culture.

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Important community and cultural organizations like the Aboriginal Legal Service, Aboriginal Medical Service, and the (defunct) Black Theatre all originated in Redfern-Waterloo.

Redfern-Waterloo also became the space in the late sixties where The Black Power movement emerged in Australia. Since Aboriginals has problems of accessing affordable and adequate housing in Redfern-Waterloo thus, migration to the city made it overcrowded and slowly the area gained the reputation of being a rough area. According to Morgan, public drunkenness, violence and prostitution, provoked considerable moral alarm and contributed to the public perception of Aboriginal residents as "fringe-dwellers" corrupted by modern society.

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In 1974, there were plans to redevelop the area around Eveleigh Street, Redfern for private housing dedicated to Aboriginal. But the plan was not fulfilled and led to rise in the Crime levels and heightened tensions between locals and authorities. According to Morgan, The area came to be known as a center of drug dealing with high levels of addiction among young people.

This was graphically and sensationally documented in media reports during the late twentieth century which revived popular fears about the "black ghetto," social decay, and disorder. Here we find how unconventionality was seen as social breakdown. However, according to Morgan, the The Sydney 2030 plan—the City of Sydney Council's vision for the next 20

years—acknowledges the dangers of clumsy development, recognizing that what is attractive about localities is their organic and multi-layered nature.
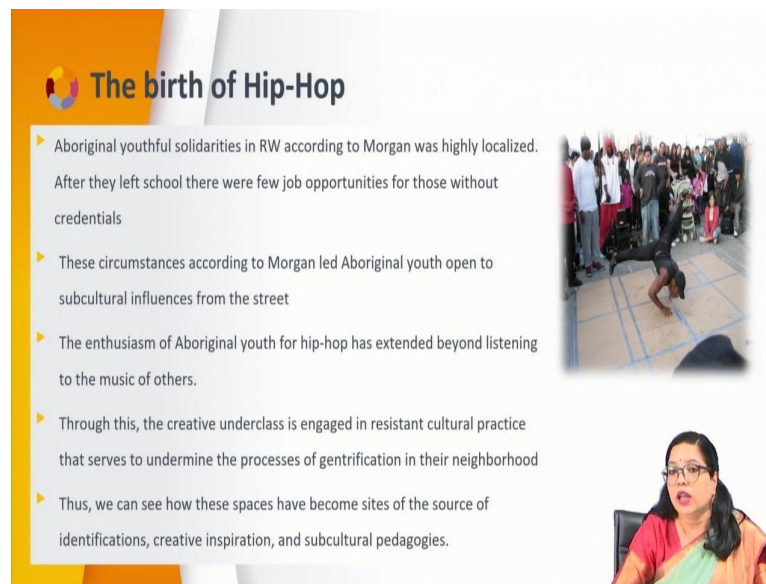
Some scholars like Davis (1990), Sennett (1970), and Gleeson (2006) have spoken about the shrinking of the possibilities of social mixing in a modernist city. For example, Davis in 1990 described how in Los Angeles the fortification of the spaces of consumption, work, culture, and family took place excluding the underclass and the evacuating them from the public space.

The city in this case provided a place not only where they could find better-paid jobs, but also where they could enjoy themselves. According to Morgan, these men were free from the constraints which were imposed on them by the authorities, and indeed their own elders, back in their home lands. He found that these men took their lead from the Black Power movement in the United States and adopted the dress, appearance and forms of speech from Afro-Americans who led the civil rights movement. They claimed that they learned about their culture in the streets of Redfern and streets provided them with alternate education.

Aboriginal youthful solidarities in RW according to Morgan was highly localized. As many children grew up in households without fathers and with single mothers who found it difficult to monitor the activities of their children at all times. Majority of them also did not complete high school and many were skipping school from an early age. After they left school there were few job opportunities for those without credentials, and these circumstances according to Morgan led Aboriginal youth open to subcultural influences from the street.

According to Morgan, the enthusiasm of Aboriginal youth for hip-hop has extended beyond listening to the music of others. Redfern has become a place where the community-access recording studio in the Redfern Community Centre is used and for outdoor performances. Aboriginal rappers like MC Wire, Brothablack, Street Warriors, and South West Syndicate have developed fan bases here. Redfern is the base for Gadigal Radio, an Aboriginal radio station, and Redfern Records, both of which support the indigenous music scene. Thus, we can see how these spaces have become sites of the source of identifications, creative inspiration, and subcultural pedagogies.
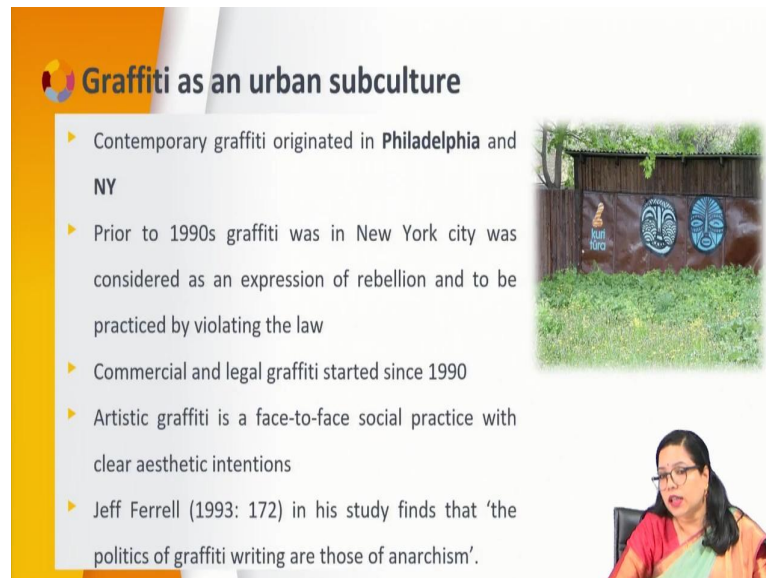
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Now let us discuss another case of urban subculture that is graffiti. The presence of Graffiti has increased over the years in different cities across the world. According to many scholars contemporary graffiti originated in a phenomenon that took place in the USA toward the end of the 60s/beginning of the 70s of the twentieth century, in cities like Philadelphia and New York. Prior to 1990s graffiti was in New York city was considered as an expression of rebellion and to be practiced by violating the law. Like by stealing the spray paint or by trespassing the train yards to paint. And 'commercial' and 'legal graffiti' did not exist prior to 1990. Jeff Ferrell (1993: 172) in his study finds that 'the politics of graffiti writing are those of anarchism'.

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Illegality of graffiti

- According to Nancy Macdonald (2001: 126), the illegality of graffiti constitutes 'the subculture's backbone'.
- Graffiti has been associated with masculinity.
- Graffiti writers derive pleasure by breaking the boundaries set by the institutes
- **Artification, Institutionalization, Commodification and co-potation** are the processes redefined graffiti's limits and reassessed its aesthetic and cultural value

Similarly, according to Nancy Macdonald (2001: 126), the illegality of graffiti constitutes 'the subculture's backbone'. Graffiti has been associated with masculinity. As stated by Macdonald "This subculture must be acknowledged for what it is ... a site for 'male' youth – an illegal confine where danger, opposition and the exclusion of women is used to nourish, amplify and salvage notions of masculinity". (2001: 149)

According to Macdonald (2001: 176) graffiti writers derive pleasure for it breaking the boundaries set by the institutes and any attempts to move away from this tradition of illegality will be similar to "taming the subculture". Ronald Kramer (2010) studied graffiti writers to understand the culture in a better way. His interviews with graffiti writers from '5 Pointz' which was a warehouse building located in Queens where people were given permission to paint graffiti on the exterior surfaces of the building. However, now this has stopped   since   2013.
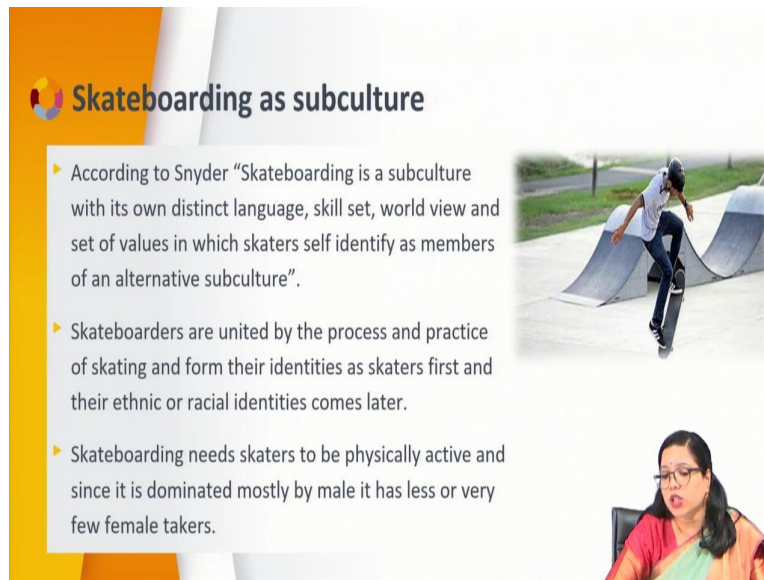
The vast majority of legal graffiti in New York City is found on the exterior sidewalls of small businesses, large factory walls in the outer boroughs, school yard walls, and sometimes on vans and trucks. The graffiti writers in this case seek permission from the property owners to produce legal graffiti murals in form of a written consent. The graffiti writers also paint for free.

In contrast to stealing the aerosol cans now the legal graffiti painters buy their specially produced cans from different companies like 'Spanish Montana', 'German Montana', 'Belton', 'Monster', 'Sabotaz', and a handful of others. Kramer found that the writers see themselves and their art as contributing to communities in ways that are beneficial and it would appear that portions of the general public are appreciative of the work that they do. Here we find a different kind of interaction that takes place between the subculture and the city.

Let us examine another case of skateboarding where Gregory J Snyder establishes how these subculture careers have a positive impact on individual skaters and to understand some of the effects that subcultures have on the cities in which they are most prominent. As Fischer (1975) claims modern complex cities exhibit a wide range of subcultural diversity.

According to Snyder "Skateboarding is a subculture with its own distinct language, skill set, world view and set of values in which skaters self-identify as members of an alternative subculture". According to him, skateboarders are united by the process and practice of skating and form their identities as skaters first and their ethnic or racial identities comes later. Skateboarding needs skaters to be physically active and since it is dominated mostly by male it has less or very few female takers.

However, there are some women skaters as Elissa Steamer and Marisa Del Santos are considered to be good in this area. Skaters come from a wide range of class like the suburban upper middle class, to working class, to urban poor even. According to Snyder, skateboarding attracts skaters to certain cities like Los Angeles, San Diego and San Francisco to participate in the skateboard industry and to skate the most famous spots.

According to Snyder, subcultures that exist in a particular city matter as young people who think of moving to a city generally chose the one that has the subculture that they can identify with.

Thus, immigrants migrate to Los Angeles or San Diego with their skateboard and all of the requisite knowledge the subculture requires. Additionally, Snyder finds that subcultures like skateboarding create self-sustaining enclaves that attract more and more people to a city to capitalize on the opportunities that the subculture creates.

For example, the subculture nurtures career opportunities and helps some individuals achieve economic self-sufficiency. Like engaging in professional skateboarding, becoming filmers of skateboarding, photographers, video editors, writers, journalists, shoe designers, clothing designers, graphic artists, team managers, and company owners, etc.
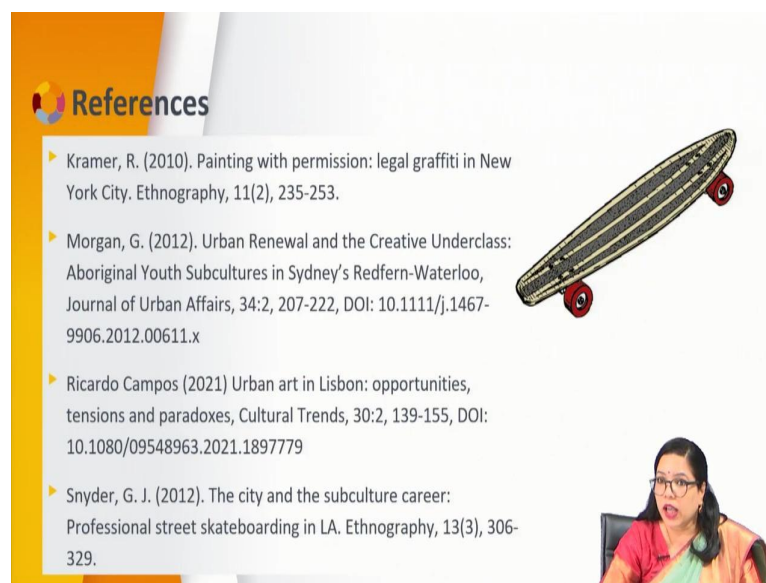
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According to Snyder, the creative use of space by the sketers for their own purposes is not purely a critique of urban space; professional street skateboarders perform original tricks on subcultural landmarks for the purpose of progressing the discipline of skateboarding and getting paid. His study has shown that the skateboarders participate in the subculture for fun, but many also hope that they may make a living out of what they are doing for or what they love to do.

According to him, taking skateboarding as a profession or associating market to it was seen by some scholars as not abiding by the subculture. However, Snyder believes that if the skateboarder practices skateboarding keeping intact his/her creativity then this dictates the skateboarding subculture. According to him, the existence of skateboarding subculture careers is itself a reflection of the Do It Yourself ethos that came out of the punk movement. Skaters find places to skate, document it and put the edited content in magazines, on DVDs

and on the web, which they sell to other skateboarders. Thus, according to him, this subcultural activity constitutes so much more than simply riding a skateboard, illegally, on a city street.

According to him, Skateboarding subculture sustains itself and progresses through the documentation of skateboard tricks disseminated through subculture media like magazines and videos. And through this use of space the skateboarders lead to the creation of opportunities for young people giving a new meaning and use to the urban space.

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This today we have discussed how subcultures interact with the city. I hope you have gained new perspectives from enrolling on this course that is urban sociology, and enjoyed every bit of learning with us. I wish you have a great carrier ahead and thank you for listening.