The city is not a static entity but an expression of past and current power struggles, whose ongoing conflicts are frequently carried out in public spaces. The symbolism of public space is continuously negotiated as diverse individuals and groups ascribe different meanings to particular places. Lily Kong and Lisa Law (2002: 1505) define cities as “excellent examples of medium and outcome of power relations”. In order to capture the domination of one group over others in giving meaning to urban objects, Kong and Law introduce the concept of ‘ideological hegemony’, drawing on Gramsci’s (1973) definition of hegemony. Gramsci regards hegemony as the means through which domination and rule are achieved. In contrast to coercion, which implies clearly recognizable constraints in everyday life, hegemonic controls communicate ideas and values that the majority are persuaded to adopt as their own. If hegemonic control is successfully implemented, the people will desire the social order endorsed by ruling elites. In other words, the ruling group presents ideas and values that are perceived as ‘natural’ or ‘common sense’ by the rest of society. Landscapes express the power to institutionalize and thus sediment a given order in space (Kong and Law 2002). In the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the one-party state used to be dominant in defining the urban landscape, with public spaces serving as stages for rituals of the state. However, with the transition from a planned to a market economy initiated by the Đổi Mới economic reforms in 1986, the state’s control over the urban landscape has been challenged by multiple actors. National and international companies have entered the local real estate market, changing the built environment, while citizens encroach on public space to conduct their daily routines of exercise, meeting friends and private economic activities.

In this chapter, I focus on the performative acts shaping public space, with special attention on a gender analysis of different hip hop dance styles performed by young women in three central public spaces of Hanoi. The chapter

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scrutinizes how these young women’s routinized practices unsettle state hegemonies inscribed in urban space. The concept of unsettling is relevant here in two ways. First, unsettling refers to modes of urban planning that gave way to one another over time in Hanoi, such as the indigenous city, colonial urbanism and socialist urban planning. These modes of planning determined the function and formal symbolism of public space. Second, the notion of unsettling pervades the materiality of those spaces studied, as young people’s struggles to appropriate space articulate hopes and desires that deviate from local and socialist norms.

While the young women interviewed did not self-identify their dance routines as conscious political acts, this chapter interprets the dancers’ spatial practices as expressing the ‘micro-conflictuality of everyday life’, arguing that the political is “transimmanent to the social” (Marchart 2018: 98). The spaces presented in the following were studied following the ‘go-along’ method over one year of fieldwork (2007–2008), and several short-time visits thereafter. Margarethe Kusenbach (2003: 463) defines the go-along as a method standing out from other ethnographic methods as it enables ethnographers “to observe their informants’ spatial practices in situ while accessing their experiences and interpretations at the same time”. In addition, I carried out interviews with both male and female dancers between 2015 and 2018, as well as archival research in the National Archive I (No. 2940; No. 005015).

**Urban Planning and Urban Routines**

In 1010, King Lý Thái Tông founded Hanoi as a sacred and political center in the Red River Delta. Until the arrival of the French in the 20th century, the city’s structure used to be defined by the tripolarity of the royal city, the commoners’ city and the agglomeration of agricultural villages. A rectangular and walled compound marked the symbolic center of the royal city. While the commoners’ city formed the hub of economic activity, the agricultural villages provided the royal city with food and herbal medicines. In this tripartite structure, those spaces aligning most closely with the Western concept of a ‘public’ space were the markets in the commoner’s city as well as sacred spaces, such as the temple and communal house (Kurfürst 2012; Nguyen 2002).

When Vietnam became a part of French Indochina in the 20th century, colonial urbanism significantly transformed the indigenous urban landscape, shifting the city’s centripetal focus away from the North-South toward an East-West axis. Moreover, the colonizers installed a French residential area south of the commoner’s city with Haussmann-style, tree-lined boulevards, including parks and squares, that did not exist before then (Kurfürst 2012; Logan 2000). In 1945, President Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam’s independence from France in Hanoi. Hanoi was the first capital of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and since 1976 of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Under the one-party rule of the Communist Party, the capital evolved as a socialist icon. Consequently, the primary function of public space in socialist Hanoi was to demonstrate and
symbolize the state’s power. Public spaces served above all for staging the masses. However, with private sector development and increasing urbanization since the 1990s, the state has become more tolerant of different uses of open spaces in the densely settled city. Citizens, in turn, appropriate former spaces of officialdom as they carry out everyday routines like walking, exercising, cooking, eating and drinking, nurturing children, as well as economic activities such as small trade (Drummond 2000; Kurfürst 2012; Thomas 2002). According to Michel De Certeau (1984), everyday practices are spatial practices that extend beyond the control of the state. As modes of resistance, they are able to evade discipline from the sphere within which it is exercised. Moreover, Peter G. Goheen (1998: 489) emphasizes the “unreadibility” of everyday practices by the state, highlighting their subversive, unsettling potential. Counted among these routinized urban practices are the diverse hip hop dance styles performed by young people. These dances not only contest the official symbolism of public spaces, but they also contest gender ideologies pertinent to young women’s conduct in public space.

The spatiality of hip hop offers interesting insights into dynamics of the city as they are closely related to territory. Jenny Mbaye (2014: 402) defines hip hop in cities of the Global South as “political action redefining the spatial structure and the social order of the city”. In other words, hip hop seeks to reclaim urban terrain, making it work in favor of populations that have been marginalized or dispossessed by substantial urban transformations (Osumare 2001; Rose 1994). Along these lines, this chapter shows how young women, who are often associated with the margins of Vietnamese society, physically position themselves at the center of the city and at the heart of the dance style they practice.

**Gender and Urbanism in Vietnam**

The literature on gender in Vietnam typically locates Vietnamese women in a position inferior to men. Women’s subordinate position has been mainly explained by Confucian principles, such as the ‘Three Submissions’ \([\text{tam tướng}]\) and the ‘Four Virtues’ \([\text{tứ đức}]\), which define a woman’s role in society in relation to a male. According to the ‘Three Submissions’, for example, women must obey their father until they are married, followed by the husband during marriage, and then the son after the husband’s death. The ‘Four Virtues’, in turn, define the norms for ‘women’s labour’ \([\text{công}]\), ‘appearance’ \([\text{dung}]\), ‘speech’ \([\text{ngôn}]\) and ‘conduct’ \([\text{hành}]\). Women ought to be skilled at cooking and housekeeping (labor), physically attractive and pleasing to one’s husband (appearance), using a humble and submissive communicative repertoire and voice (speech), and, finally, embody female integrity by presenting obedience to seniors and the husband (conduct) (Khuat et al. 2009; Ngo 2004). Recent studies, however, examine transforming gender relations (Drummond and Rydstrom 2004; Earl 2014; Leshkowich 2008; Nguyen 2019), and suggest that the notion of the ideal Vietnamese woman must be understood as a socio-historical product of power structures at a particular point in time, serving the interests of those in power.
Unsettling Normative Ideas of Gender around the Block

(Hakkarainen 2018). Consequently, it is not surprising that the socialist state reinvokes the four virtues, insofar as they serve the aims of the state. In her analysis of fitness club culture, for example, Ann Marie Leshkowich (2008) shows how the idea of a ‘woman’s appearance’ [đụng] has been deployed in the state’s ‘happy family’ campaign, propagating the disciplined middle-class woman as caring mother and loving as well as attractive wife.

Like in many other cities around the world, however, women who used to be associated with the domestic sphere, and who were thus spatially confined to the private space of the house, increasingly move outwards as they pursue work or education in other places. Women have appropriated (semi-) public spaces, mostly for social and private economic activities, thereby negotiating and redefining the boundaries between private and public (Domosh 1998; Earl 2014; Kurfürst 2012; Nguyen 2019). For instance, women might open small food and drink stalls on sidewalks, engage in leisure activities like snacking on the streets, meeting friends for coffee and participating in outdoor aerobics classes, among other things. Liz Bondi (2005: 6) considers cities as “places where embodied meanings and experiences of gender are not necessarily reproduced according to dominant norms, but can be challenged, reworked and reshaped”. By dancing in public, young females unsettle normative ideas of women’s proper conduct in public space. Drawing on visual (hip hop apparel) and kinesthetic (dance) codes commonly associated with male adolescent bodies, they perform non-hegemonic femininities. In fact, the aesthetics of many hip hop dance styles, such as breaking or popping, are typically associated with male physicality and fitness. Performing in public late at night, while dressed in sneakers, baggy pants and extra-large t-shirts, female dancers create spaces of hope and desire that reshape (public) space, both in terms of its function and symbolism.

**Performative Acts (Re)Shaping Public Spaces**

The performative acts of hip hop dancing take place in symbolic official spaces, such as Lý Thái Tông Square, the Lenin Monument or the Soviet Vietnamese Friendship Palace. What these three places share in common is their central location in the city as well as their morphology, consisting of a wide, flat and smooth surface suitable for street dance. Symbolically, they are all icons of state power, naturalizing the current political order. Their history is rooted in colonial urbanism, but their function and symbolism altered with socialist urban planning that replaced the colonial planning regime. What is more, male statues oversee both Lý Thái Tông Square and the Lenin Monument. The statues represent historical figures the party-state draws on in order to legitimize the current order.

**Lý Thái Tông Square**

Lý Thái Tông Square is located at Hanoi’s historical center on the banks of Hoàn Kiếm Lake. Built by the French in the 19th century, the square was one of
the first Western public spaces introduced to a society formerly comprising exclusive spaces, access to which was granted on the basis of social rank and gender (Drummond 2000). On 4 July 1890, a statue of the recently deceased Résident Général Paul Bert was installed in a wide-open space bordering the lake, giving the space the name Paul Bert Square. The physical structure of Paul Bert Square linked the main institutions of colonial power, including the town hall, the treasury, the post office, as well as the Résidence Supérieure (Bourrin 1941; Service Géographique de l’Indochine 1902). After the country gained independence from France, the square was named Ghandi Park to honor what were good relations with India at that time. However, following a public debate about the square’s name among Hanoians and intellectuals, the municipality changed the name and erected a statue of King Lý Thái Tông, founder of Hanoi, at the site where the 19th-century statue of Paul Bert had once stood. Since then, the square has evolved as a public space, as it is used for state celebrations and diverse other urban activities, such as dancing, skateboarding, inline skating, football and economic activities (Kurfürst 2019). B-boys and b-girls would come to the square from all over the city to practice in front of the statue, starting from 8 p.m. until approximately 11 p.m., while carrying portable music players with them. Breaking is usually exercised in a cypher, a circle in which the dancers enter, taking turns so that everyone can participate. Yet, at Lý Thái Tông Square, the dancers adapt their spatial practices to the place’s rectangular outline, forming a horizontal line in front of the statue. Most of the b-boys and b-girls face the statue while practicing, whereas those taking a break sit opposite them with their backs toward the statue. The adaption of this body arrangement can be explained by taking a closer look at the place’s infrastructure. After dark, two large spotlights are directed toward the statue. Facing the statue, and with the lights to their back, the dancers are not blinded by the spotlights, but are rather able to see their own shadows on the ground (see Figures 3.1 and 3.2).

Apart from the material infrastructure of the place, another reason for the dancers’ orientation toward the statue might be that Lý Thái Tông is a symbol shared by both the party-state and the public. As the first king of the centralized Vietnamese state following 1000 years of Chinese domination, Lý Thái Tông represents the idea of the country’s unity and sovereignty, desired both by the party-state and the Vietnamese public. Such overlap in meaning can be recognized in the way that other spatial practitioners engage with the statue. While the youth are dancing, others approach the statue to pray and make offerings to the king. This occurred the first time I met a young woman named Mai at the statue. At that time, Mai regularly met with a group of female dancers to practice. When I met her again ten years later, she had become a professional dancer and was renowned in the Vietnamese hip hop community for her mastery of diverse dance styles, such as breaking, hip hop and house dance. The b-boys in front of the statue were well aware of her status as a famous b-girl, as Mai is frequently invited to perform in shows abroad as well as to serve as a judge at local and international hip hop battles. What is more, Mai is Vietnam’s first b-girl
trained by b-boy LionT, who is considered a legend and founder of breaking in Vietnam. Mai considers herself a ‘b-boy-girl’ (personal interview, 8 October 2018). For her class and performances, she usually dresses in baggy pants, XL t-shirts and sneakers. Like many others, she started practicing at the Soviet Vietnamese Friendship Palace.

**Soviet Vietnamese Friendship Palace**

The Soviet Vietnamese Friendship Palace is located at Trần Hưng Đạo Street 91, close to the central train station in Hanoi. The palace is situated on the former site of the colonial exhibition and market center [Nha Đấu Xảo], which subsequently became the Maurice Long museum of Indochina. The edifice was completely destroyed at the end of World War II. Construction of the Palace started in 1978, the same year the Socialist Republic of Vietnam signed the Treaty of Friendship.
and Cooperation with the Soviet Union in order to guarantee bilateral economic cooperation. The edifice is located close to the office of the Central Party Committee of Hanoi and was a gift from the Central Council of the Soviet Trade Unions to Vietnam. The architecture of the palace followed the model of the Moscow Palace of Labour in the Modern Constructivist style, offering lecture halls, theaters and meeting rooms (Logan 2000). Large official celebrations occur here, such as on the occasion of the National Independence Day (2 September).

However, by introducing new spatial practices to the site, the young dancers redefined the palace’s intended iconic meaning and function. Dancers practiced alone or in groups alongside the palace’s outer walls. The colonnades along the palace’s outer walls offer a dry open space to practice during the monsoon season, while offering shade from the sun during the dry season. The flood lights on the corner of the building, and the lamps in the colonnade ceiling, offer enough light in a city where the sun regularly sets around 6 p.m., ideal for evening dances. This materiality, including the embodied practices of the dancers and their perceptual memories, creates a particular sense of place (Degen and Rose 2012).

Hoàng Phương, a female hip hop dancer, explained that she liked to dance there because the place had a good ‘spirit’ (personal interview, 10 October 2018). The palace reminded her of the first dancers who practiced in this very space, creating a place for hip hop in Vietnam (see Figure 3.3).

Mai and Hoàng Phương both started dancing at the cung [‘palace’], or cung xã [‘Soviet palace’] as they colloquially refer to the palace. The palace is the site where they first came into contact with hip hop dance as they saw the first generation of male hip hop dancers exercise outside. Phương Silver Monkey, who is said to be the first hip hop dancer in Hanoi, used to practice outside the palace. Training in public, he made his actions “visibly-rational-and-reportable-for-all-practical-purposes”, and thus accountable to others (Garfinkel 1967: vii). Phương
Silver Monkey introduced a new bodily practice to the city, thereby unsettling existing repertoires of bodily movements within public space. Furthermore, he made his bodily practices reproducible to others and enabled them to engage in a mimetic process. Watching him perform, Hoàng Phương and her friends finally asked him to become their teacher. Together with other young men and women, she became a member of his crew. Having learned from him, Hoàng Phương today owns her own dance studio and is the leader of an all-female hip hop crew.

The friendship palace used to be a popular space for young people to mingle in the evening. As more dancers of different styles joined, it became very crowded and some groups did not clean the place after practice, leading the state to prohibit access to the space for dancing (personal interview, 10 October 2018). In the colonnades, a sign reads that all ‘activities of freedom’ [hành động tự do] are prohibited. The sign implies that all self-organized, rather than formally sanctioned, activities are banned from this space. The assemblage of young dancing

**FIGURE 3.3** Colonnade at the Soviet Vietnamese Friendship Palace.

bodies in front of the socialist icon is apparently considered a threat to the urban order. Nonetheless, hip hop’s past and present remain inscribed in the space through graffiti. Along the right outer wall, tags from different writers present quotes from hip hop vernacular, such as ‘CYPHER’, ‘CREW’ and ‘HIPHOP DONT STOP’. ‘CYPHER’ refers to the spatial practice of convening in a circle, and taking turns dancing, or rapping, whereas the crew is a form of social organization among hip hop practitioners. By contrast, ‘HIPHOP DONT STOP’ is a typical line heard in rap lyrics, as well as the name of a CD compilation of hip hop classics published in 1997. Consequently, while ephemeral embodied practices have been banned from the palace, the tags invoke dancers’ perceptual memories (see Figure 3.4).

**Lenin Monument**

The Lenin Monument is located at Điện Biên Phủ Street opposite the UNESCO heritage site at the royal citadel. The overall outline of the public space is triangular. The area comprises a wide-open space made from stone that houses a statue of Lenin as well as a wooden pavilion in the park behind the monument. Originally built in the colonial period as a memorial for those who had fought for France, the party-state chose to replace the memorial with a statue of Lenin, following the lead of many other socialist countries at that time (Logan 2000). In 1985, the Lenin Monument was erected in the park, consisting of a 5.2-meter-high effigy of the father of the Soviet Union that stood on a 2.7-meter-high stone pedestal (see Figure 3.5).

The place is frequented by practitioners of different street disciplines, such as skateboarders and traceurs (Geertman et al. 2016), and has become a collective practice space for diverse hip hop dance styles, such as waacking. Initially, waacking evolved in Latino or Black private social spaces, such as gay underground discos in Los Angeles in the 1970s. Waacking connects the muscular tensing of different body parts with brief flowing transitional movements that might be considered

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**FIGURE 3.4** Hip hop graffiti along the outer walls of the Soviet Vietnamese Friendship Palace.

feminine. Notwithstanding its queer history, waacking according to dance scholars has the potential to perform non-dominant femininities (Bragin 2014; DeFrantz 2016). Twenty-seven-years old, Nguyệt, joined her first waacking class at the Lenin Monument in 2013. At that time, C2Low, the first waacking dancer in Hanoi, taught waacking to friends, and was looking for crew members. Today, Nguyệt is the only waacking teacher in Hanoi apart from C2Low. She teaches her own class, consisting of six girls, twice a week. They meet at the studio on one evening, and at Lenin Monument on the other evening, as she wants her
students to engage with the sensory experience of public space. For her class, she explicitly chose ‘Le-nin’, as they call it, because she wants to maintain the place as a “traditional space of hip hop”, where everyone is welcome to join (Nguyệt, personal interview, 10 October 2018) (see Figure 3.6).

One rainy evening in October 2018, Nguyệt taught four of her students in front of the pavilion, where they put their belongings, food and drinks. English-language disco music was playing from Nguyệt’s mobile phone that was hooked into a portable amplifier. The four students formed a line facing the pavilion with their backs toward the main street. Nguyệt alternately stood in front of the group with her back toward them to demonstrate a particular move before retaking her position within the formation, indicating her self-understanding as a teacher. While she shared skills and knowledge with her students, she still considered herself part of the group (Nguyệt, personal interview 10 October 2018). Referencing Princess Lockeroo, an American female waacker, Nguyệt explains that waacking is about expressing emotions: “Waackers [are] the people who guide everyone into the feelings of the music […] We express the feelings of the song” (ibid.). The performance of emotions in public spaces challenged ideas of appropriate (female) conduct in public.

Unsettling Normative Ideas of Gender

The three female dancers introduced in this chapter, Mai, Nguyệt and Hoàng Phương, all started out dancing in symbolic public spaces, learning from male teachers, who themselves were the first to practice their particular style in Vietnam. Today, the three women are professional and publicly admired dancers, all teaching their own classes, both indoors in the studio and outdoors in the public spaces where they once started out dancing themselves. They creatively
and playfully appropriate important public spaces, and move right to the center of the city. Through their performative acts of dancing, they unsettle meanings of the place’s official symbolism, creating spaces of hope and desire. In other words, they contest the ideological hegemony of the urban landscape, making room for a multiplicity of meanings. Although the young dancers do not self-identify their dance as political, they nonetheless express the contingencies and conflictualities of everyday life. In his call to reconceptualize antagonism in research practice, Oliver Marchart (2018: 99) proposes an ontology of the political, “initiating a change in perception that reaches down to the micropolitical level of the social”. He asks us to pay attention to “the secret conflictuality of daily life – the minor and barely visible tectonic shifts of social sediments” (ibid.: 101). Such minor tectonic shifts consist of the daily performances in front of statues and monuments, the bodily sensations of dancing and the resulting redefinition of the meanings of public space in Hanoi. Dancing as a performative and affective act is intimately linked to struggles that occur in everyday life among the sexes, classes, and citizens and the state. These struggles manifest themselves in a number of bodily affects. The linking and reinforcement of these singular bodily affects into a collective body has a strong transformative power.

Empowerment through voice, music, body and place are essential features of hip hop. The bodily practices of breaking, waacking and hip hop dancing render the individual and collective bodies of young women in the city visible. Under the unsettled conditions of rapid socioeconomic change and an ever-changing urban landscape, female hip hop dancers appropriate symbolic public spaces as “sources of pleasure and power” (Rose 1994: 22). They indulge in hip hop’s spatial practices as a means of self-expression and personal freedom as well as to create new forms of sociality. By making their practices visible and accountable to others, they are able to identify peers, who share their passion for dancing in common. With their public demonstration of feelings and emotions (e.g. in waacking), they challenge longstanding ideas about a woman’s appropriate conduct in public space. With their bodily contortions, baggy pants and sneakers (e.g. in b-girling and hip hop dance), young females perform non-hegemonic femininities, as well. Assembling and moving together with other young women and men, under the gaze of male statues and the state, they unsettle normative ideas of gender.

Note
1 The proper translation of the Vietnamese name vườn Lý Thái Tổ would be Lý Thái Tổ Garden, but the term ‘square’ is chosen to emphasize the rectangular morphology of the architectonic object.

References


