



# Buildering

*Buildering—a combination of the words “bouldering” and “building”—is the activity of climbing urban structures, often without safety equipment. A dangerous, mostly illegal activity, buildering first rose to prominence in the US along with the rise of the skyscraper at the beginning of the twentieth century, although an earlier form known as “roof climbing” first began in Cambridge, England, in the late 1800s. For many urban climbers, official disapproval is the bonus that separates buildering from other types of climbing.*

**Keywords:** buildings, roof, climbing, urban, structures, trespassing, illegal, danger, Spiderman

**B**uildering—a combination of the words “bouldering” and “building”—is the activity of climbing urban structures, many times without safety equipment. It is also known as “urban climbing.” In US cities, buildering first rose to prominence along with the rise of the skyscraper at the beginning of the twentieth century, when daredevil climbers scaled some of the world’s then-tallest towers.

## A Brief History of Roof Climbing

The early pioneers of buildering called themselves “roof climbers.” A strong link exists between the origin of buildering and the city of Cambridge, England. In 1899 Geoffrey Winthrop Young (1876–1958), an English writer and mountaineer, published *The Roof Climber’s Guide to Trinity*, in which he described routes for climbing onto the roofs of the buildings of Cambridge’s Trinity College.

In 1937, under the pseudonym “Whipplesnaith,” Howard Noel Symington published *The Night Climbers of Cambridge*, a follow-up to Young’s guide, which is still widely referenced.

The following passage explains both the attraction of buildering and the reason for the relative absence of literature on the subject.

It may lop off many a would-be climber who cannot risk being sent down, and keep many an adventurous spirit from the rooftops, drain-pipes and chimneys, but this official disapproval is the sap which gives roof-climbing its sweetness. Without it, it would tend to deteriorate into a set of gymnastic exercises. Modesty drives the roof climber to operate by night; the proctorial frown makes him an outlaw. And outlaws keep no histories. (Whipplesnaith 1937)

The book stresses important differences between roof climbing and mountaineering. Most roof climbers did not belong to a mountaineering club, and most of the regular mountaineers were not roof climbers, facts which the authors commented upon:

Until they have tried themselves on buildings, they assume roof-climbing to be as straightforward as a rope in a gymnasium, a travesty in all ways of the true sport. On the other hand, the greatest roof-climber we know has never climbed a mountain. The two sports are quite distinct, appealing to the same instincts without helping or interfering with each other. (Whipplesnaith 1937)

It is interesting, notwithstanding the differences between mountaineering (“the true sport”) and buildering (“a travesty”), that the ethos of both ways of climbing is similar and as old as the sport itself. *The Night Climbers of Cambridge* warned against leaving boot scratches and damaging stonework, “which is not consistent with the

*When I was 12, I forgot the keys to my parents' apartment. So I simply climbed up seven floors to get in.*

**Alain “Spiderman” Robert**

night climber’s ideal of leaving no trace where he has been. The use of the rope in climbing is a controversial matter. A rope is not necessary, but is an asset. It should be regarded as an additional safeguard” (Whipplesnaith 1937).

The community of modern builderers recognizes its predecessors of urban climbing. On the other hand, much has changed since roof climbing of the early twentieth century. Some of the important changes involve the international organization of the climbing community and the increase of competitiveness and the athleticism and abilities of elite builderers.

## Extreme Performances

The early roof climbers of Cambridge did not consider their night climbing activities a competitive sport. The following quote suggests that the “pioneer builderers” had quite moderate ambitions:

Mountaineers have always some bigger mountain they hope to climb, some steeper rock face they hope to assault. However, in Cambridge, with the exception of several dangerous or difficult buildings that few climbers attempt, there is no graded list of climbs, no classification of climbs according to their degree of severity . . . A moderate degree of fitness is advisable. A man who can pull on a horizontal bar until his chin is level with his hands should be able to manage the severest climbs. (Whipplesnaith 1937)

Builderers no longer perform in small groups or in anonymity. In fact, in January 2006 a group of climbers from Germany, Turkey, and the Netherlands met for the first world buildering championships in Cologne, Germany. Builderers can now communicate with each other online, and exchange accomplishments, pictures, movies, and

stories. Buildering nowadays involves the climbing of extremely high, difficult, and dangerous buildings for which “a moderate degree of fitness” will no longer suffice.

The French urban climber Alain Robert (b. 1962) more or less sets the standards for elite performance and defines the upper limits of buildering. Without using ropes or other safety devices, Robert has climbed more than seventy skyscrapers and monuments all over the world. The documentary *Alain Robert is Spider-man* has appeared at many festivals around the world. Robert writes on his website, “Spiderman is my nickname, but I have no supernatural powers. When I climb skyscrapers, there’s no special effect. No safety net!” (Robert 2009a).

Robert has had two severe accidents. He was in a coma for five days after a fall of 15 meters. After this fall doctors considered him sixty percent disabled. Asked what motivates his climbing, Robert said, “Calculated risk. Mastering my fear” (Robert 2009b). As the night climbers of Cambridge already knew: “The fear of heights is the easiest of all fears to cure, though one of the most troublesome while it exists” (Whipplesnaith 1937).

No doubt climbers such as Robert have outstanding capabilities, but should he be considered a true athlete? Is buildering a “true sport” or a “travesty”? After Robert has climbed a skyscraper, there is usually no prize, no ceremony. Some elite climbers do have sponsors and get paid for their climbing, but often they are arrested for trespassing.

Whether buildering is “a travesty” or a “true sport” is open to debate. One thing is certain, however: urban authorities continue to frown on the activity. For many urban climbers, however, official disapproval is the bonus that separates buildering from other climbing activities. This means that buildering will probably remain an underground activity instead of a sport.

Ivo van HILVOORDE  
*VU University Amsterdam*

*See also* BASE Jumping; Bouldering; Bullfighting; Bungee Jumping; Cave Diving; Caving; Climbing; Diving, Free; Extreme Media; Extreme Sports; Mountaineering; Risk-Taking Behavior

