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The new skate city: how skateboarders are joining the urban mainstream

Skating bans and defensive architecture are increasingly giving way to a realisation of the positive role skateboarding can play in education, entrepreneurship and community cohesion

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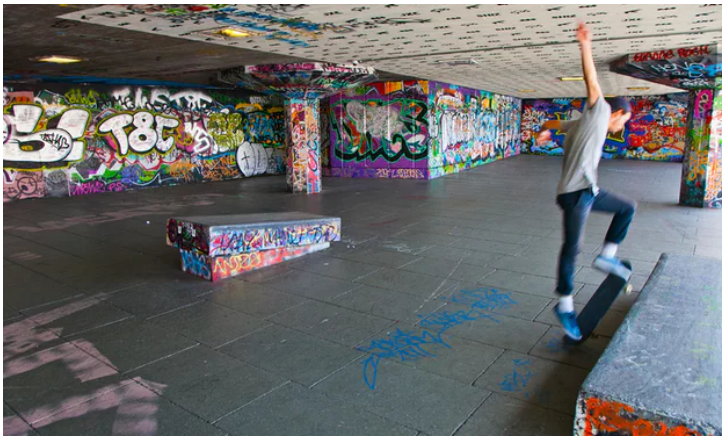
Since its origins in the late 1950s, skateboarding has typically been perceived as thrusting a rebellious two fingers in the face of controlling authorities, parents and schools. By 1965 numerous US cities already had skateboarding bans, while 50 years later “skate stopper” devices (ranging from metal prongs on ledges to roughened pavement surfaces) have mushroomed across city squares worldwide, spoiling skateboard fun with universal determination.

Typical is the “Scoop” amphitheatre beside London’s City Hall, a pseudo-public space managed by the More London office development and which deploys a metallic army of

joy-killing knobs. In this version of the skate city, skateboarding is expelled from urban centres and confined to the invisible hinterlands of suburbia and industrial estates.

Except this is not the whole story. Skateboarders are fighting back. What's more, many of the general public, charities and councils, along with a few enlightened developers, architects and companies, are starting to agree. One healthy sign of this emerging shift came in 2014, when an immense public campaign saved the historic undercroft skateboarding spot at London's Southbank Centre from being turned into retail units. Today, as well as its section 106 agreement guaranteeing the continuance of skateboarding in the undercroft, the Southbank Centre is keen to pursue further skateboarding and other urban arts activities under its Hungerford Bridge site. Skateboarding is now an established part of this major international arts venue.



The undercroft skating area at London's Southbank Centre, saved from redevelopment. Photograph: Alamy

Buoyed by this success, other skaters have been fighting off ill-conceived plans for skateboarding bans everywhere from Norwich to Columbia City, Indiana. They are also more aware of the legal opportunities available. Brixton-based Friends of Stockwell Skatepark have followed the Southbank Centre undercroft in gaining "asset of community value" status for their 27-year-old facility, and are looking to expand the skatepark still further. Rom skatepark in Essex acquired Grade II listing from English Heritage last year, while the Bro Bowl in Tampa Bay, Florida, has gained similar historic preservation status – and is heading for laser-scanning and reconstruction under a park redevelopment programme.

Skateboarding's burgeoning "DIY" movement is also playing a part, where skaters add home-made ledges, bowls and transitions to existing urban spaces and so fabricate new skate opportunities. Often these are transgressive acts, but many others – like the famous Burnside project in Portland, Oregon and Levi jeans-funded Holy Stoked skatepark in Bangalore – involve the active collaboration and approval of local authorities.

The Burnside project began in 1990 when local skaters like Mark Hubbard, Mark 'Red' Scott and Bret Taylor first added a few ad hoc concrete transitions to a piece of wasteland beneath a road bridge. Through a combination of skater manpower, free concrete from a friendly contractor and lots of local politicking, Burnside quickly mushroomed into a full-blown skatepark with full city approval, and has become internationally renowned as one of the most challenging skateparks in the world. "Every skater knows what Burnside is," says Hubbard. "Every skater would like to visit it at least once. That's what makes it legendary." Burnside has even been credited with regeneration powers, replacing the site's former drug-addicts and prostitutes with a much more amenable bunch of regulars.

Burnside Skate Park in Portland. Photograph: Steve Dipaola/Invision/AP

It's not just skaters, then, who are cultivating a new kind of skate city. A skate infrastructure building boom is under way, with just about every UK council – having realised that skateboarding is healthy and accessible – now boasting at least one new skatepark in the heart of the local community.

Public spaces can also integrate skateboarding alongside other pursuits, from cycling and parkour to walking and running. The $4.5m Paine's Park in Philadelphia offers 2.5 acres of landscaping and walkways, plus skater-friendly banks, ledges and blocks. Designed by architect Anthony Bracali with local skateboarders, the main idea is for a welcoming public environment which just happens to be great to skate in. At Rabalder Park in Roskilde, Denmark, a rainwater drainage system has been inventively re-purposed by architect Søren Nordal Enevoldsen for skateboarding and other activities.

Other stealth-skateboarding venues are also popping up, with renegade skater-architects apparently smuggling skateboard-friendly features into their designs. For Snøhetta's Opera House in Oslo, architects consulted skateboarders regarding surface textures and materials, leading to parts of the building and its immediate surroundings being kitted out with skateable marble ledges, kerbs, bench-like blocks and railings. At Foreign Office Architects' Auditoria Park in Barcelona, innumerable walls, banks and ramps tempt skaters with curving transitions and long runs.

An architects' vision of Rabalderparken, Denmark. Composite: SNE architects

Of course, skateboarding is big business too. London's new House of Vans skatepark is both a rolling advertisement for the $2bn shoe company and a free-to-enter skatepark and cultural venue in a prominent central location. City authorities are also realising skateboarding's financial potential, with Louisville, Ohio, Shanghai and George Town, Cayman Islands establishing multimillion pound skateparks to promote tourism.

Haderslev in Denmark, for example, has just opened its elaborate £3.6m StreetDome skatepark. Replete with grass-domed arena and provision for skateboarding, kayaking, music, parkour and climbing, here "urban sport, street culture and youthful souls all meet together".

As this all suggests, skateboarding is now reaching deep into mainstream culture and education. The US Skate Pass system provides equipment and training to school teachers, adding skateboarding to the sports children can pursue now and into later life. Likewise, the "Create a Skate" initiative – founded by skateboard manufacturer Paul Schmitt – lets kids fabricate and decorate skateboard decks, and so acquire design and technology skills.

Still other ventures have even more ambitious social agendas. Community-oriented projects like EthiopiaSkate and Megabiskate in Addis Ababa, Ride It in Detroit, Skateistan in Afghanistan, Cambodia and South Africa, SkatePAL in Palestine, 7Hills in Jordan, Bedouins in Tunisia and the All Nations Skate Project in America all deploy skateboarding to build social capital and counter deep-rooted issues with alcohol, drug abuse, unemployment, violence, gender prejudices and access to education. Skateboarding here is part of an answer to complex social conditions in the city.

Children participating in the Skateistan project skateboard in Kabul. Photograph: Skateistan

Oliver Percovich, the Australian skateboarder who founded Skateistan in Kabul and is now its executive director, explains how the children who make up 70% of the population of Afghanistan often have only roadsides in which to play, with girls in particular not being allowed to ride bicycles or climb trees. But they are allowed to skateboard – hence Skateistan's efforts to teach boys and girls alike to skateboard alongside an educational arts-based curriculum ranging from world cultures, human rights and environmental studies to nutrition, hygiene and storytelling. "When it comes down to it, kids just want to be kids", explains Percovich. "Skateboarding provides that because it's fun and challenging. It lets them forget their problems for a moment. Once kids are hooked on skateboarding, so much more is possible, especially in the classroom. Skateboarding itself teaches important life skills, like creativity and problem solving."

Whereas many cities around the world have continued to push skateboarding out from squares, shopping streets and other public areas, they have also had to accept that skateboarding is here to stay. Propelled by the rise of street-based skateboarding since the early 1990s, by the popularity of spectacular events like the X-Games and by pro-skater Tony Hawk's PlayStation video game, skateboarding has entered the cultural mainstream to become a global phenomenon with tens of millions of active practitioners. It is also a multibillion dollar business, with skate shoe company Vans alone turning over $2bn in

2014. On top of this has come the realisation that skateboarding can be actually a good thing. Apart from the obvious benefits of young skaters doing something that is relatively healthy, affordable and accessible, skateboarding is increasingly being recognised as encouraging a whole series of qualities from creativity and entrepreneurship to resilience, confidence and independence. Countries all over the world are appreciating this, hence the global boom in skatepark construction and other skate-related community initiatives.

Through all these ventures, skateboarding is no longer something to be proscribed or repelled. Instead, in the new city skateboarding is increasingly central to debates about the value of public spaces, while simultaneously adding artistic, cultural, educational and commercial value to our urban lives. It is even helping to address some of our most difficult social challenges, and providing hugely disadvantaged children and youths with new hopes, skills and futures. Far from the narrow-minded view of skateboarding as purely countercultural and somehow separate to society, in the new skate city, skateboarding is being celebrated as something diverse, positive and very welcome.

Iain Borden is professor of architecture and urban culture at University College London. His book Skateboarding, Space and the City is published by Bloomsbury. A new edition will appear in 2017.

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