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Another Pavement, Another Beach: Skateboarding and the Performative Critique of Architecture

Derived from Iain Borden, *Skateboarding, Space and the City* (Berg, 2001).

> "Transform the world"— all well and good. It is being transformed. But into what? Here, at your feet, is one small but crucial element in that mutation.[1]
>
> Henri Lefebvre

Considering the unknownness of the city means not only thinking about ways of knowing it but also, as Steve Pile makes clear in chapter 15 of this volume, contemplating that the city will always in part remain unknown to us. One such zone of the unknown is not geographic or social, but temporal: the future. Given that we can barely begin to understand the present, and that our world is full of hesitancies and contradictions, how can we even begin to know how the urban will be constituted next year, next decade, or next millennium? While the answer is, of course, that we cannot know such things, we can still try to glimpse, pre-figure or even affect the way the future unknown city might operate. Such actions should then not project into the future a finite and definitive model, a kind of *a priori* decision taken on behalf of our future selves, but should be, following Lefebvre above, a direction, a tendency and, above all, at once theoretical and practical.[2] Furthermore, this combination of the theoretical and the practical does not necessarily mean a schism between the two, a juncture in which each term ultimately remains separate from the other. On the contrary, we must invoke a dialectic of the two such that "[l]anguage and the living word are components of a praxis," resisting the fetishisation of language in order to "go beyond the active word, to find, to discover — to create — what is yet to be said."[3]

This chapter explores a particular urban practice — that of skateboarding — for its implicit yet continuous tendency to critique

contemporary cities for their meanings and modes of operation, and to pre-figure what a future unknown city might be.

> Skating is a continual search for the unknown.[4]

The abstract space of capitalism harbours many contradictions, not the least being the simultaneous dissolution of old relations and generation of new relations; as such, abstract space is destined not to last forever, and already contains the birth of a new space within itself, Lefebvre's putative differential space in which socio-spatial differences are emphasised and celebrated.[5] Skateboarding, I propose, is a critical practice, challenging of both the form and political mechanics of urban life, and so in its own small way is part of this birth of differential space. Through an everyday practice – neither a conscious theorisation nor a codified political programme – skateboarding suggests that pleasure rather than work, use values rather than exchange values, activity rather than passivity are potential components of the future, as yet unknown city.[6]

Zero Degree Architecture

During the 1970s and early 1980s, skateboarders first undertook a series of spatial appropriations, rethinking the suburban drive as ocean surf, taking over schoolyards and drained swimming pools, and, in the purpose-built skateparks, producing a super-architectural space in which body, skateboard and terrain were brought together and recomposed in an extraordinary encounter. And skateboarders relived photographic and video images of themselves, making the body into a mediated entity and, conversely, the image into a lived representation. But from the early 1980s, the focus of skateboarding has shifted, becoming more urban in character, directly confrontational not only with architecture but also with the economic logic of capitalist abstract space. It is on this street-skating that I focus here.

Around 1984, Los Angeles skaters began the first radical extensions of skateboarding onto the most quotidian and conventional elements of the urban landscape. Using as their basic move the "ollie," the impact-adhesion-ascension procedure by which the skater unweights the front of the skateboard to make it pop up seemingly unaided into the air,[7] they rode up onto the walls, steps and street furniture of the Santa Monica strand and Venice Boardwalk.[8] In the words of Stacy Peralta, skateboard manufacturer and ex-professional skater,

> Skaters can exist on the essentials of what is out there. Anything is part of the run. For urban skaters the city is the hardware on their trip.[9]

"Public Domain" and "Ban This," the videos Peralta produced and directed in 1988-89, show skaters in the streets of Los Angeles and Santa Barbara, jumping over cars, riding on to the walls of buildings, over hydrants and planters, onto benches, flying over steps, and sliding down the free-standing handrails in front of a bank.

The first thing to note about this new kind of skateboarding is that it is no longer situated in the undulating, semi-suburban terrain of the Hollywood Hills and Santa Monica canyon, no longer among the moneyed detached villas and swimming pools, and has come downtown, to the inner city.

> I realised that I would have to leave the hills and open countryside to progress in skating. Towards the urban jungle I headed [. . .] Bigger and more varied types of terrain were my driving force.[10]

And this is a process which has continued; today it is the downtown streets of not only New York, Washington, San Francisco and Philadelphia which are the most intense skate scenes, but those of London, Prague, Melbourne, Mexico City and other cities worldwide. The new skateboarding sites are not private houses or suburban roads, hidden from public view, but university campuses, urban

squares, public institutions and buildings, national theatres, commercial office plazas, as well as the more quotidian spaces of streets, sidewalks and car-parks; they range from specific sites such as, for example, the Annenberg Center for Performing Arts in Philadelphia, to any parking lot or bus bench in any city worldwide. All these are appropriations of places, not dissimilar to the 1970s appropriations of schoolyard banks and backyard pools, but here, like Paul Virilio's call for an inhabitation of the "critical spaces" of hospitals, theatres, universities, factories and so on, skaters undertake a "counter-habitation" of habitually uninhabited but nonetheless public spaces.[11] Skaters exploit the ambiguity of the ownership and function of public and semi-public space, displaying their actions to the public at large. But why is this, and what does it mean for the experience of urban architecture?

Cities offer more opportunities for those who live in their cores and concentrated heterogeneous social spaces than for those who live in the suburbs; the rich architectural and social fabric of the city offers skateboarders a plethora of building types, social relations, times and spaces, many of which do not necessarily require money to be accessed or at least visited. As a result, city dwellers are less compulsed than suburbanists and potentially more adaptive, even when without economic privilege.

> [E]ven when he is not wealthy the city dweller reaps the benefits of past glories and enjoys a considerable latitude of initiative, the make-believe existence of his environment is less fictitious and unsatisfactory than that of his suburban or new-town counterpart; it is enlivened by monuments, chance encounters and the various occupations and distractions forming part of his everyday experience; city make-believe favours the adaptation of time and space.[12]

But making a decision about which spaces and relations to enter into is not an easy one, and for any metropolitan dweller is ultimately conditioned by a whole range of not only locational and financial conditions, but also those of time, friendship, gender, race, age, culture and ideology. In particular, it is difficult to make such

decisions based on any sense of urban style, for while industrialisation and commercialisation pervades into every aspect of urban life, we have little language or style of experience beyond the formal "styles" of architectural physicality and the commodified "lifestyles" of fashion, food and such like. Analytically, this is in part due to a theoretical inheritance from Marx, who tended to reduce urbanisation to organisation and the demands of production, and so ignored the possibilities of adaptation to the city.[13] Socially, it means that we have no language of urban living, and instead we are surrounded by an emptiness filled by signs. Instead, skateboarding, as we shall see, offers a partial glimpse of a counter future to this condition, a creation of the city by those engaging directly with its everyday spaces.

> The productive potential expressed and realized in industrial production might have been diverted towards that most essential of productions, the City, urban society. In such a city, creation of creations, everyday life would become a creation of which each citizen and each community would be capable.[14]

As part of their own participation in the realisation of this "productive potential," skaters recognise that architecture has no innate or fixed meaning, and they are thus free to reinterpret it as they will.

> The corporate types see their structures as powerful and strong. I see them as something I can enjoy, something I can manipulate to my advantage.[15]

It is sometimes argued that the most effectively appropriated spaces are those occupied by symbols[16] (such as gardens, parks, religious buildings), appropriation offering the chance to invert social relations and meanings and so create a kind of heterotopic space.[17] To this end, skaters and other subversive or counter-cultural urbanists like graffiti artists certainly do occasionally work against highly symbolic monuments — for example, one of the favoured highly visible locations for Norwegian skaters is along the raised

walkways and outside the central doorway of the immense Rådhus (City Hall) in Oslo.[18] Similarly, Czech skaters utilise the space around the National Theatre in Prague,[19] London skater's have since the 1970s done the same around the high-cultural South Bank centre,[20] while Parisian skaters are often to be seen in and around the high architecture *folies* of Parc La Villette designed by Bernard Tschumi.[21]

But it is in the open, public space of streets and squares that counter-cultural and counter-spatial activities most readily take place, as these are the spaces as yet not dominated by the high ideologies and powers of the state – a point which Lefebvre notes in his little-read yet highly informative study of the events of Paris in 1968.

> It was in the streets that the demonstrations took place. It was in the streets that spontaneity expressed itself [. . .] The streets have become politicized – this fact points up the political void prevailing in the specialized areas. Social space has assumed new meaning. This entails new meaning. This entails new risks. Political practice transferred to the streets sidesteps the (economic and social) practice which emanates from identifiable places.[22]

Skateboarders implicitly realise the importance of the streets as a place to act; rather than ideologically frontal or monumental architecture, skateboarders usually prefer the lack of meaning and symbolism of more everyday spaces – the space of the street, the urban plaza, the mini-mall – just as graffiti artists tend to write on out-of-the-way (not always very visible) sites. In part this is to prevent social conflict, but it is also an attempt to write anew, not to change meaning but to insert a meaning where previously there was none.

Illustration 10.01
"Harry, ollie over roundabout, Between Towns Road, Oxford, (1995)."

What then are these other kinds of spaces, those without explicit meaning or symbolism? Most obviously, they are the left-over spaces of modernist town planning, or the spaces of decision-making (typically the urban plaza) which symbolise not through overt iconography but predominantly through their expansivity of space. Lefebvre characterises these, after Roland Barthes, as a kind of spatial degree zero: zero points of language (everyday speech), objects (functional objects), spaces (traffic circulation, deserted spaces in the heart of the city), needs (predicted, satisfied in advance) and time (programmed, organised according to a pre-existent space).

> Zero point is a transparency interrupting communication and relationships just at the moment when everything seems communicable because everything seems both rational and real; and then there is nothing to communicate![23]

Architecturally, the city is reduced to the status and form of an instrument, passed over by a capitalist and state rationality which prefers to operate at national or international scales.

> The statutes of urban "zones" and "areas" are reduced to a juxtaposition of spaces, of functions, of elements on the

> ground. Sectors and functions are tightly subordinated to centres of decision-making. Homogeneity overwhelms the differences originating from nature (the site), from peasant surroundings (territory and the soil), from history. The city, or what remains of it, is built or is rearranged, in the likeness of a sum or combination of elements.[24]

The new town and the reconstructed old city alike are reduced to the legibility of signs, their spaces optimised for the function of decision-making.

For the experiencer of such architecture, there is a similarly reductive effect. In Barthes' concept of "zero point" elaborated in Le degré zéro de l'écriture (1953),[25] the neutralisation and disappearance of symbols is justified by the writer claiming to state simply and coldly what is, as if just a witness.[26] In terms of architecture, the lack of discernible qualitative differences, and the corresponding surfeit of instructions and signals, is rendered as a feeling of monotony and lack of diversity, the urban having lost the characteristics of the creative oeuvre and of appropriation.

> There is a poverty of daily life as nothing has replaced the symbols, the appropriations, the styles, the monuments, the times and rhythms, the different and qualified spaces of the traditional city. Urban society, because of the dissolution of this city submitted to pressures which it cannot withstand, tends on the one hand to blend with the planned land use of the territory into the "urban fabric" determined by the constraints of traffic, and on the other hand, into dwelling units such as those of the detached house and the housing estates.[27]

The metropolitan dweller and architect alike become simply witnesses to the functioning of the city, in which exchanges of decisions and commodities dominate over social relations and uses. The experience of urban space is reduced to that of the modern museum, where constraints on the bodies of visitors create a kind of "organised walking" in which route, speed, gestures, speaking and sound are all controlled.[28]

This does not mean, however, that passivity and ennui are the only possible responses to such reductive architecture. Resistance to zero degree architecture takes place outside of the buildings themselves, in the streets, countering the everyday, routinised phenomena of privatised urban space and the commodification and pacification of urban experience by enacting a different space and time for the city.

> Formerly abstract and incomplete, the dissociations now become complete. Projected onto the terrain, it is here that they can transcend themselves – in the streets. It is here that student meets worker, and reason reduced to a function again recovers speech.[29]

Skateboarders target the spaces and times of the urban degree zero, re-inscribing themselves onto functional everyday spaces and objects.

> [Skateboarding] is a challenge to our everyday concepts of the functions of buildings, and to the closed world we create for ourselves out of this massively unlimited city.[30]

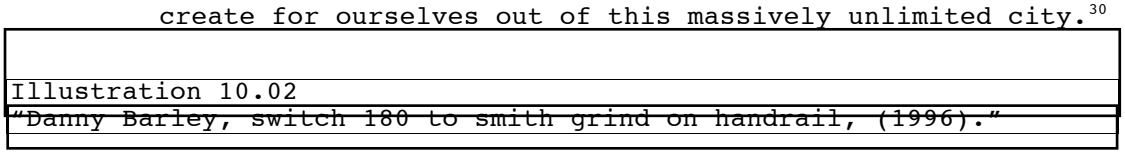
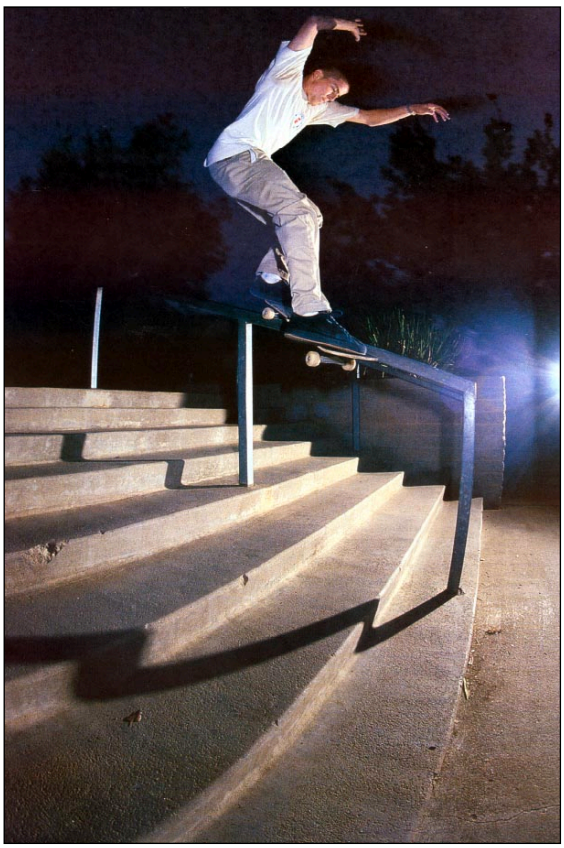


Illustration 10.02
"Danny Barley, switch 180 to smith grind on handrail, (1996)."



For example, a handrail is a highly functional object, for which both the time and nature of use is fully programmed. If there is a meaning at all in a handrail, then it is directly related to function: that of safety. The surprise of the skateboarder's re-use of the handrail — ollie-ing up onto the rail, and sliding down its length sideways, weighted perilously on the skateboard deck as it at once balances and moves along the fulcrum line of the metal bar — is that it targets something to do with safety, to do with everyday security, and turns it into an object of risk, where previously it was precisely risk that was being erased. The whole logic of the handrail is turned on its head. More usually, however, such an object has no apparent history or wider cultural or social meaning outside of the use for which it is intentionally designed and provided. In place or on top of this absence of meaning, skateboarding inscribes a new one; where previously there was only the most banal of uses, skateboarders create not just a change of use but an ex novo act. The "meaning" of the skateboard move then in part takes its power and vitality from the fact that it comes out-

of-the-blue, an unexpected and sudden eruption of meaning where society had previously been content to say nothing. Skateboarding is a critique of the emptiness of meaning.

> Empty of cars, car-parks have only form and no function.[31]

Rhythm and Urban Senses

If the meaning of the architecture of the new town and reconstructed post-war city is at zero point, what then does skateboarding address? What is the ground on which it acts? The answer less lies in the realm of culture of meaning, and more in that of physical and sensory rhythms.

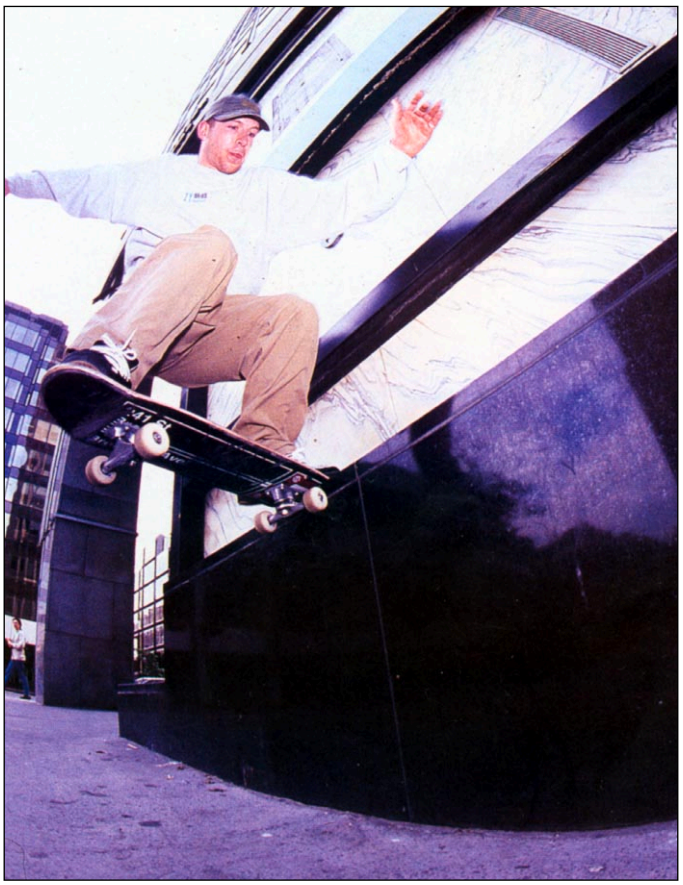
While cities are made from social relations as conceived and constructed by thought, they are not, and cannot be, purely ideational. The "urban is not a soul, a spirit, a philosophical entity,"[32]so the city is the immediate reality, the practico-material of the urban; it is the architectural fact with which the urban cannot dispense. And of course this "architectural fact" necessarily takes on a certain form, which in turn poses certain constraints and conditions, but also specific opportunities in time and space. Lefebvre notes that, for example, the remarkable architecture of stairs in Mediterranean cities, which link spaces and times, and so provide the rhythm for space and time of walking in the city.[33]

What then if we applied the same "rhythmanalysis"[34] to modern cities, to the architecture of the zero degree city. What kind of rhythm and experience do they pre-suppose? This is exactly the condition for urban skateboarders, being both presented with, and exploitative of, the physical space-times of modernist urban space. Firstly, it is the spaces of the modern metropolis that skateboarders address: the spaces of the square and the street, the campus and semi-public buildings. Beyond these spaces being functional spaces, each corresponding to a particular activity or ideological purpose, they are also conceived primarily as objects in space, as dispositions of three-dimensional form (each modulated according to its own programmatic and aesthetic concerns) in a

universal, abstract space. Space here then is at once homogeneous, and – subjected to the various technical forces and resources available – more or less capable of being fragmented into any sub-division, plot or architectural component that might be wished of it.

> What then is the principal contradiction to be found? Between the capacity to conceive of and treat space on a global (or worldwide) scale on the one hand, and its fragmentation by a multiplicity of procedures or processes, all fragmentary themselves, on the other.[35]

Illustration 10.03
"Arron Bleasdale, (1996)."



Skateboarders treat space exactly as conceived and presented in this form of architectural urbanism. Firstly, space becomes a uniform entity, a constant layer through the city that can be utilised, in this case, as a surface on which to skate. All elements of the city are thus reduced to the homogeneous level of skateable terrain, for "[a]nything is part of the run."[36]

> Buildings are building blocks for the open minded.[37]

Second, skaters follow the homogeneity-fragmentation contradiction of abstract space by oscillating from this macro conception of space to the micro one of the architectural element; they move from the open canvas of the urban realm to the close focus of a specific wall, bench, fire hydrant, kerb or rail.

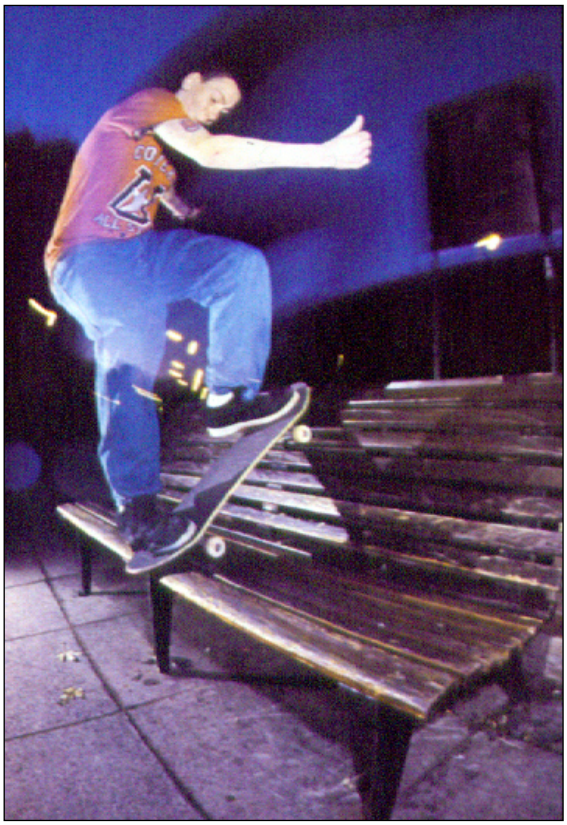
> Bumps, curbs and gaps. The street is really universal.[38]
>
> From a perfect bank, to a smooth marble step, to a lamp post: movement around lines and shadows. An unusual arrangement of street furniture can be inspiration for radness.[39]

The spatial rhythm adopted is then that of a passage or journey from one element to another, the run across the city spaces interspersed with moments and momentary settlings on specific sites. This is not an activity which could take place in a medieval, renaissance, or early industrial city. It requires the smooth surfaces and running spaces of the paved, concrete city ("the polished marble planes of [Mies] van der Rohe's plazas are Mecca to Chicago's skateboarders"[40]), and, above all, it requires the object-space-object-space rhythm born from a fragmentation of objects within a homogeneous space. For the skateboarder, the "primary relationships are not with his fellow man, but with the earth beneath his feet, concrete and all."[41]

Rhythmanalysis does not only refer to space, however, and also involves the rhythm of time. The temporal rhythms — the various routines, cyclical patterns, speeds, durations, precisions, repetitions — of the city, as well as its spaces, offer a frame for

skateboarders. Here it is the essentially fragmentary temporal use of urban space that skateboarders respond to, exploiting the streets, urban plazas and street furniture that others rarely use in any constant manner for long periods. For the zero point architecture of the new town and decision-making centre, the skater interweaves their own composition of time into that of regular temporal patterns, such as waging a fast assault on a handrail outside a bank, adding a speeding skateboard to the slower pattern of those walking on the sidewalk ("skating past all the business-suit lames that slog gloomily down the sidewalk, barely lifting their feet, like they're kicking shit with every step),"[42] or staying longer in an urban plaza as others hurry through. (I see this last kind of temporal tactic most evenings outside Euston Station in London, where a few skaters often spend an hour or so riding over its planters, benches and low walls, while commuters rush through to their transport connections). For the more contested terrains of postmodernity — such as the shopping mall or privatised public space — a different temporal tactic has to be used. In particular, skaters exploit the highly bounded temporality of, for example, a privatised office district by stepping outside of its normal patterns of use. In places in London like Canary Wharf or Broadgate — both versions of privatised urban space, with very precise patterns of usage — skaters use the hours of the weekend or evening to conduct their own activities, separate from the conventional times of the office workers. This appropriation of the unused time of a particular urban element is also applied to smaller, less spectacular parts of the urban street; the bus bench out of rush hour, or the department store car park outside of shopping hours, can also be the focus of skateboarders who take advantage of the few minutes or hours in which it otherwise lies dormant.

Illustration 10.04
“Frank Stephens, blunt on bench, (1995).”



Micro experience is also part of rhythmanalysis – the relation of the self to the physical minutiae of the city that are not always obvious to, or considered by, the dominant visualisation of the city upon which we most commonly depend.

> These are my streets. I know every crack of every sidewalk there is down here.[43]

For skaters this involves hearing; when travelling at speed the skater, like a cyclist, responds to the more obvious sounds of the city, such as a car accelerating up from behind or a police siren, and to the noises of a car door, people talking and footsteps. In particular, the sound of the skateboard over the ground yields much information about the conditions of the surface, such as its speed, grip and predictability. More importantly micro rhythmanalysis

involves a sense of touch, generated either from direct contact with the terrain – hand on building, foot on wall – or from the smoothness and textual rhythms of the surface underneath, passed up through the wheels, trucks and deck up into the skater's feet and body. Here such things as the smoothness of pure tarmac or concrete, the roughness of metalled road, or the intermittent counter rhythm of paving slab cracks all combine to create a textual pattern bound into the skateboarder's experience of urban space. The compositional sound rhythms – the monotonal constancy of the subtle roar of tarmac, the silence-click-silence-click of paving slabs, combined with the intermittent pure silences when the skateboard leaves the ground through an ollie, and the sudden cracks as it once again hits terrain and elements – are a feature of this urban space.

The skateboard run, with its patterned moves, junctures, noises and silences is then at once an exploitation and denial of zero degree architecture, exploiting its surfaces and smoothness, while using its roughness and objectival qualities to create a new appropriative rhythm quite distinct from the routinised, passive experiences which it usually enforces; street skateboarding is "a total focus of mind, body and environment to a level way beyond that of the dead consumers interested at best in money, beer and 'the lads.'"[44] The "new school" skateboard – with its light deck, small wheels, and equal front-back orientation specifically designed for street skating[45] – is a tool in hand for this rhythm, a tool that is also absorbed into the new rhythmic production of super-architectural space.

As this last point suggests, it is not only the city that is re-engaged with in the intersection of skateboard, body and architecture. The construction of the body too is changed. In terms that recall Georg Simmel's identification in the modern metropolis of a fundamental reorientation of the physiology and psychological of its inhabitants, an "intensification of nervous stimulation which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner

stimuli,"[46] or what David Frisby calls "neurasthenia,"[47] Lefebvre notes that:

> The physiological functions of the "modern" man's nervous and cerebral systems seem to have fallen victim to an excessively demanding regime, to a kind of hypertension and exhaustion. He has not yet "adapted" to the conditions of his life, to the speed of its sequences and rhythms, to the (momentarily) excessive abstraction of the frequently erroneous concepts he has so recently acquired. His nerves and senses have not yet been adequately trained by the urban and technical life he leads.[48]

For skateboarders, like all metropolitan dwellers, modern urban conditions produce new kinds of socio-spatial conditions, impacting at a psychological and formal as well as social levels. In Lefebvre's consideration of events, unlike Simmel's, the new kind of person this creates is not yet fully evolved, not fully adapted. In particular, the modern individual cannot abstract out the concept from the thing, for these are mixed together in their perception, creating a confused unity in which relations, order and hierarchy are lost. This is a state of "deliberate semi-neurosis," partly play-acting, and "often little more than an ambivalent infantilism."[49]

We might speculate then that this "ambivalent infantilism" is exactly the condition of skateboarders, faced with the intense conditions of the modern city. And in terms of epistemology, or more precisely in the context of the absence of codified socio-political awareness on the part of many skaters, this would be largely correct. But the very same condition also contains the seeds of resistance, critique and creative production. As Lefebvre notes, the fact that the modern individual is not yet "fully adapted" suggests that a process of evolution is underway and elsewhere Lefebvre is more explicit about this, seeing it as involving a transformation and development of our senses. It is then in lived experience, rather than abstract theoretical knowledge, that the skateboarder's adaptation can initially be seen.

> The activity which gives the external world and its "phenomena" shape is not a "mental" activity, theoretical and formal, but a practical, concrete one. Practical tools, not simple concepts, are the means by which social man has shaped his perceptible world. As regards the processes of knowledge by means of which we understand this "world" [. . .] they are our senses. But our senses have been transformed by action [. . .] Thus it is that our senses, organs, vital needs, instincts, feelings have been permeated with consciousness, with human reason, since they too have been shaped by social life.[50]

Such concerns directly raise the question of spatiality, as Fredric Jameson does in his identification of the alarming disjunction of body and built environment in the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles, where postmodern hyperspace "has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surrounding perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world."[51]

The skateboarder's highly developed integrated sense of balance, speed, hearing, sight, touch and responsivity is then a product of the modern metropolis, a newly evolved sensory and cognitive mapping; the aim is not only to receive the city but to return it to itself, to change through movement and physical energy the nature of the <u>experience</u> of the urban realm.

> A feel of rhythm and an aroma of sweat overcome my senses on this Wednesday evening as the popping sound of wooden tails and the connection of metal trucks to metal coping takes place.[52]

> One step ahead of the pedestrian or static eye, the architects and the artists, the people who look at shapes and patterns around themselves and see beauty in these things people have created from pattern and relationships of shapes to shapes and people to shapes. To us these things are more. These things have purpose because we have movement as well as vision.[53]

In this, skateboarding is part of the untheorised element of praxis, that which focuses on the development of a sensuous enjoyment of the object (rehabilitating the world of senses as practical-sensuous, through the immediate sensing of art, cities, buildings, objects of

common use, landscapes and relationships) and on the recognition of particular needs (here the need for activity, muscular extension, direct engagement with objects).[54]

> It's better than drugs. You won't believe the adrenalin. The feeling of accomplishment is insane.[55]

The skateboarder's senses are then historically produced, both as products of the historical constraints of the city, and as agents of engagement with the present and future opportunities of the city. These senses are not then a basic need, the satisfaction of which brings simply "momentary relief to constant struggle,"[56] but an historically-produced capacity to enjoy and reproduce the city. They are a sensory and spatialised version of the Althusserian concept of ideology as the imaginary representation of the subject's relationship to their real conditions of existence.[57]

It would be wrong then to see skateboarding as a nostalgic return to the physicality of enjoyment; rather it is a new physicality of enjoyment latent in the possibilities of modern architecture. Whereas, for example, the oldest towns of England are, due to their medievalist architecture and urban fabric, "crap to skate,"[58] the modern architecture of the new town offers surface (concrete not cobbles), expansivity (squares not alleys), urban elements (fragments in space, not modulations of space), and above all, the appropriativity of public space, semi-public space and certain private spaces. To give one precise example of skateboarding's engagement with this architectural possibility, the small wheels of new school skateboards are an attempt to exploit the smoothness of terrains while increasing the height of the ollie move, and as such are born from the level horizontality of the pavement and, simultaneously, aimed at a denial of that horizontality. The city offers at once precise hard-faced objects, a precise delineation of where particular functions take place and, simultaneously, an ambiguity of meaning, circulation patterns, control and ownership.

It is this modern city that skateboarding is at once born from and works against.

> Two hundred years of American technology has unwittingly created a massive cement playground of immense potential. But it was the minds of 11 year olds that could see that potential.[59]

Performative Critique

Many questions are raised by all this, not least as to how skateboarding, by virtue of using architecture without participating in its productive or exchange functions, might pose a reassertion of use values over exchange values and so, implicitly, mount a critique of labour and consumption in capitalism. How does this relate to the subcultural values of skateboarding, through which its practitioners construct a kind of romanticist[60] generalised opposition to society and so create a social world in which self-identifying values and appearances are formed in distinction to conventional codes of behaviour?[61] What of skateboarders' attitudes and constructions of race, age, class, gender, sexuality and, above all, masculinity? What of the global dispersion of skateboarding, and its spatially generalised activity through millions of skateboarders in just about every major and minor city throughout the world. Conversely, what of the extremely localised physical marks and striations created by skateboarding on the urban realm — the aggressive grinds of truck against concrete, board against wood, and their destructive assault on of the micro-boundaries of architecture? What of appropriations of time and not just space, and what of skateboarders' attitudes to history, politics and the material constructions of the urban? What of spontaneity? What of the city as <u>oeuvre</u>, as the production of human beings and the richly significant play of collective creation,[62] and of the city as the place of love, desire, turmoil and uncertainty? And what of spatial, temporal and social censorship on the part of safety experts, urban legislators and managers, who have tried to invoke laws of trespass, criminal damage and curfew to control skateboarding?

These questions must remain unanswered here, but suffice to say that skateboarding is antagonistic towards the urban environment ("a skateboard is the one thing you can use as a weapon in the street that you don't get patted down for"[63]). But beyond simple accusations that skaters cause physical damage to persons and to property, in redefining space for themselves skateboarders threaten accepted definitions of space, confronting the social, spatial and temporal logic of capitalist space; skateboarders take over space conceptually as well as physically and so strike at the very heart of what everyone else understands by the city.

> Around 37th, there is a quiet garden spot where students can relax in the shade of some flowering trees and enjoy a restful moment. Be sure to do some grinds on the edge of the steps down to this place, or just drop right down them (there are only two). Do a slide or something before you go. They're in a city. Don't let them forget it.[64]

Skateboarders are part of a long process in the history of cities, a fight by the unempowered and disenfranchised for a distinctive social space of their own. They bring time, space and social being together through a confrontation of the body and board with the architectural surface, and, as a result, they redefine the city and its architecture, their own social identity and bodies, the production/reproduction nexus of architecture, the emphasis on production, exchange and consumption, and the lived nature of representations. This is the most overt political space produced by skateboarders, a pleasure ground carved out of the city as a kind of continuous reaffirmation of one of the central maxims of the 1968 Paris revolts, that <u>au dessous les paves, la plage</u> — beneath the pavement, lies the beach.[65]

Illustration 10.05
“Skateboarder at the South Bank, London, (1996).”

Above all, it is in the continual performance of skateboarding – which rather than reading or writing the city, speaks the city through utterance as bodily engagement – that its meaning and actions are manifested. This performance cannot be seen or understood through pure abstraction; like rhythms, skateboarding requires a multiplicity of senses, thoughts and activities to be enacted, represented and comprehended.

> Rhythms. Rhythms. They reveal and hide, being much more varied than in music or the so-called civil code of successions, relatively simple texts in relation to the city. Rhythms: music of the City, a picture which listens to itself, image in the present of a discontinuous sum.[66]

Rhythms then disclose things, not through explanation or codified interpretation, but through lived experience. For Lefebvre, locating and understanding rhythms is to find a truly social time-space that is at once a practice, conception and experience. Above all, because the experiencer relates the fundamental conditions of their own temporality to that of the world outside, they create an engagement between subject and object that is ultimately a lived form of dialectical thought.

> Here is found that old philosophical question (the subject and the object and their relationships) posed in non-speculative terms, close to practice. The observer at the window knows that he takes as first reference his time, but that the first impression displaces itself and includes the most diverse rhythms, as long as they remain to scale. The passage from the subject to the object requires neither a leap over an abyss, nor the crossing of the desert.[67]

Skateboarding is then a kind of unconscious dialectical thought, an engagement with the spatial and temporal rhythms of the city, wherein skateboarders use themselves as reference to rethink the city through the practice of skateboarding. Skateboarding is not the ignorance of "unthinking and unknowingness," but rather an activity in which a certain newness is born from knowledge, representation and lived experience enacted together. It is also an activity which refutes architecture as domination of the self.

> Skateboarding is my only identity for better or worse.[68]

Rather than allowing architecture and the city to dictate what they are, and to demand who urban dwellers are, the skateboarder poses the unanswerable questions of "what are you?" and "who am I?" Ultimately, these are not questions for the past or present, but for the future constructedness of the as yet unknown city. All this occurs not as metatheory or political programme, but through bodily action performed on everyday streets, spaces and times — far from

being the diminution of its importance, this is the very source of skateboarding's historical relevance and being.

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