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### Skateboarding and the City

I shall begin with an urban nightmare masquerading as retail dream. Bluewater, the mega-mall shopping complex outside of London, is a vast experiment in consumerism – a £375 million, 240 acre, self-contained world replete not only with 1.5 million sq ft of lettable space spread over 325 fashion shops and other retail outlets, not only with 6 individualised mall strips on two levels, not only with ample parking for all, but also 3 full-blown leisure villages offering multi-screen cinema, outdoor plazas, food courts, night-time bars, public art works and a rock-climbing wall.

This is the utopia of late capitalism, a place where all that is troublesome in the city is erased, where there are no homeless people, wailing sirens or speeding couriers. But where there is always, with absolute 100 per cent certainty, a place to sit down, a drink to be quaffed, a toilet to be found and a new product to be purchased.

This is what Bluewater's managers call retailment (a neologism born from retail + entertainment), "a whole experience" to "integrate retail and leisure in a new way, and enhance both the guest' experience and the retailers' performance." This is contented consumerism where the visitor is always relaxed enough to open their wallet (hence enhancing "retail performance") and always happy enough to be a citizen through shopping (hence the term "guest" rather than shopper or consumer).

This is also high quality architecture, for Bluewater proudly displays an artful blend of wide concourses, marbled surfaces, historical styles, large sculptures, variegated colours and playful light. Barrel vaulted roofs are interspersed with splendid arched windows, centred oculi and light deflectors, floors proffer depictions of the River Thames, cornices are decorated with

representational friezes and poetic inscriptions, and the three corner-hubs contain thematised installations relating to the moon, tides and other such up-lifting conceptual armature. This is what master architects Eric Kuhne's Associates call "architectural diversity."

Given this degree of architectural effort, it is hard to fault Bluewater – it is undoubtedly one of the best shopping malls of its kind. If in need of a new shirt or pair of shoes, this would be a fine place to go. Or, indeed, if one was just in need of something to do on a Saturday afternoon, this would be equally a good place to visit.

Or would it? For while Bluewater is of very good quality, it is still very good quality false consciousness – an ideological palace which pretends to be a city (it has everything, supposedly, a city could offer), but in fact has none of the qualities which cities really offer. It is an internalised, predictable, controlled, safe and sterile arena. It is a place which suggests that we are only citizens in so far as we shop or consume. It is a place which suggests that we know what we want, and we know where to find it. Bluewater is a place where there are no surprises. It is a place which suggests that we are happy to be provided for, to be serviced, and to give up our individual powers and rights to the private concerns of the retail mall and its managers. To give one example of this passivity and asymmetry of power as with many shopping malls, the mall may continually film and photograph us, but we cannot do the same in return

Furthermore, Bluewater is far from unique – and indeed is merely one extreme version of one of the most powerful visions that is currently being promoted for the future of the city: i.e. the idea that the city is, above all, else a place to shop. We now have airports which are shopping malls. BAA, who are the owners of Gatwick and other British airports, now make more money from retail than they do from landing fees. Economically speaking Heathrow and Gatwick are now shopping malls with runways attached. We have railway stations which are shopping malls. This is the concourse at Liverpool St Station, selling socks, knickers, CDs, sandwiches and Rover cars We have museums which are shops. This is Tate Modern, selling art as postcards. In all of these examples we are being carefully

trained and educated into the idea that the city is a place for commodity exchange and consumerism, a place for passive bodies, a place for consuming bodies, docile bodies and, often, unthinking bodies.

How then to offer a different view of the city? Where to find practices and spaces which are less docile, less passive, more creative in their engagement with cities? For myself, one of the key inspirations has been the work of Henri Lefebvre, the French marxist philosopher. Lefebvre, I think it is fair to say, had two big ideas. Firstly, space. Space for Lefebvre is a social and not scientific or natural phenomenon. Space he argues in his book *The Production of Space*, is not an a priori entity but is produced by, and productive of, social being. In short, we make space and space makes us. Secondly, everyday life. Apart from the concept of social space, Lefebvre's other great contribution to thinking about cities is in recognising the importance of everyday experiences for urban dwellers. On the one hand, in Lefebvre's thinking, everyday life emerges as the site of increasing domination on the part of capitalism – the space and time of routines, boredom, repetition, lack of imagination.

But the everyday for Lefebvre is also, crucially, the field of resistance, imagination, profound desires and feelings, all that is truly lived in peoples lives. In the final analysis the everyday is not, therefore, the banal, trivial effect of politics and capitalism – although it may often feel that way for us – but the place where politics are ultimately created and resolved. What becomes important then is not just grand monuments, high culture, great historical events, but the things people do every day of their lives, their waking thoughts, their hidden desires, their repeated practices and behaviours – the things we all actively undertake every day of our lives.

How then might these kinds of ideas be explored in specific parts of urban life? What might they tell us about cities and urban dwellers today?

For myself, this has taken the form of a study of skateboarding – and while this may at first seem like an unlikely topic, the historical study of this urban practice shows how useful it can be for delineating what one might call a Lefebvrian history of architecture and the city. In particular, skateboarding is an activity which is profoundly bodily and spatial, which is culturally critical, and which above all is performed in direct relation to architecture and urban space. It therefore shows how there might be great potentials in cities and architecture that are as yet largely undreamt of by architects, planners and urban managers.

### **Found Space**

Let me sketch out some of these possibilities as thrown up by the history of skateboarding. While the skateboard itself is a relatively basic piece of technology, as we see here, its deployment within the space of the city yields some significant social, spatial and conceptual effects.

Primarily, the engagement with the found terrains of LA and southern California showed that even at its outset in the 1960s and 1970s skateboarding dissolved the physicality of the modern city into an imaginative re-enactment of an other space, the skateboarder's micro-experience of the found terrain causing a new space-production to occur.

At a macro scale, the Los Angeles and its environs was surveyed for specific kinds of spaces – primarily banks, ditches, pools and pipes – in order to locate and appropriate such spaces for as long a time as possible, thus colonising them as localised territories of competition and rivalry. By implication, the city too was redefined from a place of suburban homogeneity and comfort to that of confrontation and conflict.

### **Skateparks**

Yet skateboarders ultimately had little control over such processes, their temporal tactics falling foul of the legalised forms of property ownership. Partly in response to some of these legal problems, and partly because of the massive increase in popularity of skateboarding, skateboarders from the mid 1970s onward enjoyed the benefits of their own legalised spaces. A rapid construction of skateparks took place, with over 190 constructed in the US and about half that figure in the UK, beside numerous other examples worldwide.

Such skateparks initially copied surf wave forms and pipes, and then backyard pools, before quickly creating new terrains which while based on pools were designed primarily with skateboarders' movements in mind. During the 1980s, wooden-based ramp and half-pipe constructions came to the fore, either as stand-alone elements, both small or large, or as the basis for new skateparks, many of which were indoor facilities.

The spatial nature of these skateparks is not best understood, however, through conventional architectural notions of production such as design, construction, authorship, intention and evolution, but through the skateboarder's engagement with these terrains. In skateparks and on ramps, skaters developed an ever more complex series of technical moves, each with a precise consideration of time, space and speed. Space here is a production outward from the skater's body, created in relation to genetic properties of its symmetries and orientation.

However, this is not the only space production involved. The skateboard itself is another focus, at once external to and absorbed within the dynamism of the skater's move, a mediation and tool necessary to the skater's relation to the terrain underfoot.

Equally importantly, architecture is questioned by the skater for its ability to project space in relation to the move. Verticals, curves, symmetries, projections, transitions and so forth are brought to life, no longer static objects or formal qualities but now propulsive elements, the skater becoming like the metal ball propelled between the accelerative cushions, roundels and flippers of a pinball machine. All takes this place in the course of an event, the movement of the skater; as a result all three projectors of space – body, tool, architecture – are erased and reproduced.

This is what I term "super-architectural space," space that lies beyond the space of subject, tool or terrain, and which is compositionally quite distinct from the ordered hierarchies of architecture-as-object, architecture-as-drawing or architecture-as-idea; it is a rhythmical procedure, continually repeated yet forever new, like the waves of the sea, the playing of music or declamation of poetry.

### Subculture

Skateboarding is not, of course, a purely bodily activity, devoid of social meaning and significance. In particular, skateboarding promotes an oppositional subculture, by which skaters constitute a complete way of life for themselves. Skaters are predominantly young men in their teens and early twenties, with broadly accommodating dispositions toward skaters of different classes and ethnicity.

Gender relations are, however, more problematic, with female skaters usually discouraged by the forces of convention, including within skateboarding those of sexist objectification. Similarly, homophobic attitudes have also been increasingly evident in the 1990s – one way in which skaters try to fabricate a homosocial masculinity between each other.

In terms of relations with the external world, skateboard subculture uses a range of differing graphics, words and ideologies to create a generalised rejection of this external world, particularly aspects of paid work and the family.

### Urban Performance and Critique

Ultimately, however, skateboarding takes its meanings not from its equipment or surfaces but from its actions. In particular this can be seen with the emergence of streetstyle skating in the 1980s and 1990s.

Responding to the possibilities of everyday architecture, the new street skateboarding appropriates any element in the urban landscape, seeking to use the meaningless, zero degree modernism of the new town and city centre as places to assert new meanings and actions. Skateboarders create new edits of the city, rethinking architecture as a set of discrete features and elements, and recomposing it through new speeds, spaces and times during their run through the city.

This then is a very different kind of spatial and temporal experience to that produced by other forms of action in the city. Once again, as with the super-architectural space of the skatepark, the body is recomposed in the process, thus resisting the intense scopic determinations of modernist space through a reassertion of touch, hearing, adrenalin, rhythms, balance, movement and highly detailed focus.

This also involves a different compositional process to that of architecture as conventionally considered. Here, the composition is not that of writing, drawing or indeed any form of codified theorisation, but the performative act of skateboarding itself. The edit and mapping of architecture and the city on the part of the skater produces few visual codifications, but is instead a situated and “spoken” record, continually relived in time as well as space.

Unlike, however, the super-architectural space of 1970s skateparks, this is an action which takes place in public, in the semi-official, semi-private zone of city streets, & hence has an entirely different social character. Reconsidering some of the subcultural attitudes touched on earlier, but now within the urban context, discloses that skateboarding’s marks, scratches and other material manifestations are only the traces of much deeper critique of contemporary urban life.

For example, embedded in the actions of skateboarders are reconceptualisations of: architecture as reproducible micro-spaces rather than grand projects; production not as the production of things but of play, desires and actions; the purpose of space as use rather than exchange; richness as social wealth rather than ownership; place as composed of time and speed as well as a quantity of space; and the city as interrogator rather than determinant of the self.

### Spatial Censorship

Finally, there are, of course, social responses to this kind of skateboarding. Despite its lack of real criminal activity, skateboarding has become increasingly repressed and legislated against, not by national or federal laws but by a series of local reactions aimed at suppressing that which is different (and misunderstood).

Conversely, such laws add to the anarchic character of skateboarding, part of its continual dependence on, as well as struggle against, the modern city.

### Conclusion

What then to make of this study of skateboarding? Where does it leave our understanding of cities and architecture in general?

In the most general terms, we can begin to delineate an understanding of cities which does not focus solely on things, effects, production, authorship or exchange. The particular study of skateboarding shows how cities also involve various machines and tools, everyday spaces, imaginative experiences, city mapping, body moves, compositional processes, social relations, images both visual and lived, social identities and rejections, graphic designs and surfaces, textual discourses, urban terrains, implicit or performative critiques, institutional responses and subcultural re-responses.

Cities, then, do not always have to be the place of consumption and genteel civilisation, whether in the shopping mall at Bluewater, or the art gallery, or quiet urban square. Cities can also be composed from all the disparate activities that people do in cities. That is, they are cities of shouting, loud music, sex, running, demonstrations, subterranean subterfuges. They are the cities of intensity, of bloody-minded determination, and getting out-of-hand; they are the cities of cab ranks, boot sales, railway arches and street markets; they are the cities of monkish seclusion, crystal-clear intellectualism, and quiet contemplation; they are the cities of strange oppositions and ephemeral art interventions.

What skateboarding, and all the myriad urban practices of the city whereby people get on and do something, what all these practices tell us is that far from the homogeneity of the shopping mall, we need to need to celebrate three things: different peoples, different spaces and different ways of knowing the city.

That is, we need to celebrate the people of different backgrounds, races, ages, classes, sexuality, gender and general interests, all of whom have different ideas of public space, and who subsequently use and make their own places to foster their own identities as individuals and citizens.



We need, therefore, different kinds of spaces. Beyond the mall and the piazza, cities need hidden spaces and brutally exposed spaces, rough spaces and smooth spaces, loud spaces and silent spaces, exciting spaces and calm spaces. Cities need spaces in which people remember, think, experience, contest, struggle, appropriate, get scared, fall in love, make things, lose things and generally become themselves.

Finally, we need different ways of knowing the city. We need spaces in which we encounter otherness and sameness, where we are at once confirmed and challenged. Otherwise we too are erased from view, removed from the retail mall and the urban square, censured from ourselves, denied the right to the city. We need a city which we do know but which we do not know, which we understand but which we do not understand, which is familiar to us yet also strange to us. We therefore need familiar yet strange practices like skateboarding, all of us, whether we skateboard or not.

*Ian Borden at the international conference »Building the City Anew« on June 21 in Hamburg.*