Power Plays in Public Space: Skateboard Parks as Battlegrounds, Gifts, and Expressions of Self

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Abstract: Numerous studies over the last thirty years have illustrated the importance of considering the issues and concerns of adolescents in any design undertaking, yet there is strong evidence to suggest that much of this research is not being applied by practitioners in any meaningful manner. Nowhere is this incongruence of research and practice more evident than in the design and management of skateboard parks, one of the most prominent—and misunderstood—forms of public space that responds to many of the needs of older children, teens, and young adults. Ideally, these parks can and often do offer a place that teens and others can claim as their own, use as they see fit, and manipulate or change to meet changing needs and desires. In truth, skateboard parks have become much more complex places where public and private agendas clash with the desires of teens who want a place to recreate, hang out, and have fun.

This paper highlights six case studies of skateparks in Oregon. Utilizing field observations and interviews/discussions with teens, park managers, administrators, and others involved in the creation, management, and use of these skateparks, this research not only validates past research findings regarding teens and public/private space, but also serves to illuminate the degree to which this past research is or isn’t incorporated into the design of this type of publicly accessible open space. Also apparent are various stereotypes about teens, skateboarders, and skateboarding, and how these stereotypes affect the ultimate configuration, acceptance, and use of these embattled landscapes.

Teenagers have been among the most underserved, even avoided, constituencies of public space users (Owens 1988, p. 17) since they were first identified as a group discrete from adults and children during the early- to mid-1900s (Cranz 1982, p. 117; Owens 1997). Since the 1970s, an increasing level of attention has been paid to understanding the social and spatial needs of teenagers, highlighting a number of issues and activities that could be supported in the creation of built environments. These include a preference for unprogrammed spaces (Lynch and Banerjee 1981, p. 175); a place to be with their friends and/or to get away from other people (Owens 1988); and the need to be in a place where they can "see without being seen"—a prospect refuge (Appleton 1975). Yet, even with the ever-growing body of research on teens and outdoor places, there is evidence to suggest that much of this information is underused, unused, or even misused by practitioners and policymakers in designing places for teens (Owens 1997). In most communities in the United States planned and designed places for teens are, in fact, very few in number (Owens 1998), leaving them to seek out and occupy spaces within the public realm that are often contested areas where the needs of teens conflict with the needs of other users such as pedestrians, business owners, families, or older people.

In an attempt to rectify this dearth of identifiable teen space, many cities across the country are turning to the idea of skateparks as a way in which to provide teens with a place to gather and recreate in a manner that is sanctioned, and in some cases controlled, by policy-makers, law enforcement officers, and others. These parks, however, are often misunderstood and misused by those in power, and by the professionals who design them. This paper explores these skateparks as more than just recreational or sports facilities,
evaluating them instead as community open spaces that could support a wide range of teenager's needs and uses in the outdoor environment. Through research into six skateparks in the state of Oregon, this paper identifies a range of issues at multiple scales that are critical to address in the creation of new skate facilities; it also highlights the need for a greater level of participation by teens themselves in the conceptualization, design, construction, and management/maintenance of the skateparks. Finally, this paper draws the distinction between skateparks that are merely athletic facilities (similar to tennis courts or football fields) and facilities that truly serve as community open spaces (Francis 1984, et al.) that serve the needs of a highly underserved population within all cities and towns.

Background

Forty years ago, in "The Abstract World of the Hotrodder," J.B. Jackson attempted to help others understand the changing ways in which people were recreating, and in a larger sense, the ways in which many (specifically Americans) were coming to understand and experience the landscape itself. Today, if you substituted "skateboarder" for "hotrodder," the issues highlighted and lessons imparted in Jackson's article would be just as salient. When Jackson authored "Hotrodder," 1950s-era adults were struggling to understand the rapidly changing nature of recreation, which was moving at that time toward an increasingly broad array of activities (many of which were labeled as anti-social, individualistic, or high-risk) that included river-rafting, hot rodding, mountain climbing, and skiing. What Jackson pointed out was that this change was directly related to several things, including the changing nature of the family, of technology, and of our relationship to nature—one that seemed to be increasingly distant, sanitized, and "abstract." Yet, in spite of this dissociation from nature, Jackson noted that even an average citizen could catch, a glimpse of a different kind of environment; brief, but enough to make him want to see more of it. From the idiosyncratically small window of a plane he manages to see the wondrous, free, non-human, abstract landscape of clouds and limitless sky; on a clear stretch of road, provided no state trooper is lurking, he can step on the throttle and know the thrill of speed produced by his own will... (Jackson 1957, p. 26)

Skateboarding today is the 1990s equivalent to Jackson's hot rodding. Seen as an anti-social, dangerous, destructive, and/or negative activity by many adults in our contemporary society (Figure 1), skateboarding itself has been banned in many cities or in districts within cities across the country, driving many teens who skateboard and teens who watch skateboarders either "underground" or away from the sport. In many instances (even in cities that have a skateboard park), a large portion of skateboarders would prefer to risk getting a ticket and losing their board in exchange for the chance to skate in an environment (i.e., the city) that offers challenge, variation, control, places to see out but not be seen—in short, an environment that responds to teenage concerns in public space, not just the needs directly associated with the sport of skateboarding. To complicate matters, the skaters themselves are often the subject of negative stereotyping by members of the general public who assume that a teen on a skateboard is a troublemaker, or even a criminal—a stereotype that is perpetuated by the ways in which skateboarders are treated by many local law enforcement officers who issue tickets and confiscate skateboards, just because the teenage skater (generally a white male, age 12–20) was cruising down the street on a skateboard (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Anti-skateboarding ordinances are a common tool used to control the activity in many urban and suburban areas today.

Figure 2. The ticketing of skateboarders sends a message to many teens that they are seen as an undesirable entity by those in power.
While much of this backlash against skateboarders can be tied to the wear and tear that the activity itself exerts on the urban environment (Figure 3), or to the stereotypes mentioned above, it seems appropriate to question whether or not it makes sense to ostracize an entire group of public space users who are participating in a sport that is: 1) one of the fastest growing sports in North America (Rankin 1997); 2) safer on an accident-per-participant basis than soccer and baseball (Rankin 1997); and 3) promoting physical fitness, self esteem, and a sense of belonging for an age group sorely lacking in these type of opportunities (Thomas 1997). Skateboarding is, in fact, a multifaceted activity that must be understood within its various contexts—as a sport (different than football or basketball), as a hobby, as transportation, or as lifestyle. With this understanding of the sport in mind, a society must ask itself if creating places that support both skateboarders and teens in general are goals that environmental design professionals wish to support.

**Methodology**

This study focuses on several questions pertaining to the programming, design, use, and maintenance of skateparks including:

- Are skateparks examples of successful places (in terms of use, attractiveness, etc.) for teens (from the viewpoint of the teens, city staff, and the general public)?
- Are there identifiable factors that are crucial to the success or failure of skateparks?
- How do the parks come to be? Was the genesis of the idea bottom-up, top-down, or middle-out (Jones 1999)? Who builds them? Funds them? Maintains them? Polices them? Controls them? How do answers to these questions impact the ultimate design, and its success or failure?
- What are the goals for these skateparks, and who sets the goals?
- Is past research into adolescents and public space incorporated into the design of modern skateparks?

To address these questions, the authors interviewed or talked with nearly 100 skaters (most of whom were 12–20 year-old white males) in the six communities whose skateparks were the focus of the case studies briefly described below. The authors also spoke with a number of park administrators and city officials in these same communities, several parents of skaters (particularly younger skaters), and several design professionals and others involved in the design and construction of the case study parks. On-site observations were made at each of the skateparks, with several of the parks being visited on multiple occasions over a period of two years. Print materials were also researched, including local newspaper coverage, as well as articles in academic journals, and articles in "trade magazines" such as 

| Case Study Synoptes |

Six skateboard facilities/skateparks in the state of Oregon were the subject of the on-site research in this study. These included: the Burnside Project in Portland; the Ponderosa Skatepark in Bend; the Amazon Skatepark in Eugene; the Kirtis Skatepark in Lincoln City; the Joe Dancer Skatepark in McMinnville; and the Marion Square Skatepark in Salem.

**The Burnside Project - Portland, Oregon (Population - 500,000).** Located under the Burnside Bridge in the northeast area of Portland (Figure 4), the Burnside Project is what many skaters across the country identify as one of, if not the, best skate facility in the United States. Entirely skater-designed and constructed, the project itself was an outgrowth of a more traditional process that began in 1988 with the passage of a $40,000 bond measure to fund a skate facility somewhere within the city. A committee of twelve citizens that included skaters, parents, business owners, and others was formed and charged with siting the new facility. Shortly thereafter, over fifty possible sites were identified, which the committee rapidly narrowed down to three. Of the three sites, none of the associated neighborhoods wanted the skatepark at all. Out of frustration, skaters on the committee walked out of the process, and shortly thereafter began work at

Figure 3. Efforts to curtail skateboarding, oftentimes resulting in unsightly, if not ridiculous, alterations to existing public spaces, also attest to the struggle for power in these same places. These half-round aluminum bars were fastened to the concrete wall, only to be chipped away first by skaters, and ultimately removed completely by the University of Oregon's Facilities Maintenance staff.

Figure 4. The Burnside Project, northeast Portland, Oregon.
the current site. At the time, the area was overwhelmed with drug dealing and prostitution, although there was also some disorganized skateboarding taking place on the site as well. Mark "Red" Scott, one of the skateboarders who left the committee, led the effort to transform the area under the bridge from a "lost space" (Trancik 1986) into the complex series of bowls and skateboard runs that it is today.

The city began its relationship with the new skate facility by essentially ignoring the activity going on at Burnside, allowing the skaters to collect debris from throughout the neighborhood (which the local business community loved) to use as fill in constructing the base for the bowls. As the scope of the project grew, the three or four core skaters seen by most as the founders drew upon friends who had expertise in building and setting forms, in concrete finishing, and in welding (for the coping). Those without any specific skills were used as laborers, or as gatherers of material. Over time, the skaters built relationships with Ross Island Sand and Gravel Company who provided the skatepark with free loads of concrete for the bowls, and with local businesses who saw in the skatepark a way to turn the area around, utilizing the twenty-four hour "eyes on the street" notion that the project offered. One of these business owners, Joanne Ferarro, worked with the skaters to start and facilitate a foundation-type account that is funded through donations by supporters of the project, or by companies such as Nike and others who wish to use the facility for filming or photo shoots. The fund is used to support the skatepark's needs in terms of materials for repairs, changes, and general maintenance.

The park itself is a series of large and small bowls of varying sizes and shapes (Figure 5), with different types of coping and transitions between bowls. The largest wall is a vertical twenty-five foot high wall that comes up nearly to the underside of the bridge. The project's location under the bridge allows participants and non-participant observers alike to "hang out" and see but not be seen, while also supporting twenty-four hour, 365 days-a-year use in Oregon (not an insignificant issue given the wet Oregon winters). Large flat areas and small niches on the top of the bowls and around the outside of the park offer many options for sitting, hanging out, resting, and watching. In one area, in fact, the skaters had at one time placed a found couch for seating on top of the rim of one of the bowls, to facilitate a more comfortable viewing arrangement.

Most of the skaters see Burnside as something that is their responsibility to preserve and protect, and the level of maintenance and the general respect that the users have for both the project and the neighborhood is apparent at first glance. Graffiti is virtually non-existent within the bowls (it hampers traction), and there is a set of agreed upon rules of conduct posted by the city that the participants largely adhere to. Maintenance is the responsibility of the skaters; and if there are changes to the project that are deemed necessary by the majority of skaters (with the final approval of Mark Scott), these too, are the responsibility of the skaters to carry out. While this doesn't happen frequently, skaters do have control over the state of the park's design, and can and do re-design, jack hammer out the old, and form up and replace it with a new bowl, or transition, or element. Of all the information uncovered in compiling the case studies, this was perhaps the single biggest surprise, and also the single best indicator of why Burnside is more than just a skateboard facility.

In truth, it is a community open space for teens (and pre-teens and parents in some instances) that fosters among the skaters a true sense of responsibility, ownership, and control over the project, which ripples out to visiting skaters who come from as far away as Norway to skate Burnside.
The Ponderosa Skatepark - Bend, Oregon (Population - 25,000). The Ponderosa Skatepark, located approximately one mile from downtown Bend in an unused area of Ponderosa Park behind several portable toilets, opened in 1997 (Figure 6). Like the majority of skateparks in this study, siting the facility involved a fairly intensive and lengthy process that ultimately identified seven possible sites for the "skate track," as landscape architect and skatepark designer Ken Wormhoudt labeled it.4 Of the seven sites, nearly all of the neighborhoods stated outright that they did not want the facility in their immediate area. Ultimately, the site that was selected was the one that was farthest from residential development, and was chosen based upon several criteria, including an assessment of Ponderosa Park’s unused areas, the distance from existing residential areas, and the relative closeness of the site to an elementary school. Also important in the final site selection was the advice of Wormhoudt, who recommended the site largely based upon what he identified as expense-related reasons (Wormhoudt 1996). It is interesting to note that the skaters themselves were not in any way consulted regarding the siting of the facility.

The design of the park was ultimately the work of Wormhoudt’s firm, the Ken Wormhoudt Architecture Firm, based in Santa Cruz, California, and widely known for their work in the design of skatepark facilities across the country (Thompson 1998). In describing their typical process to city officials in Bend, Wormhoudt stated:

After the requirements have been defined and a budget set, I would meet with the skateboarders and have them work with modeling clay to form and shape their ideas for what they would like to see included in the skateboard track. With their clay examples and ideas, and along with my ideas, I would build a scale model of the track. This model would be presented to you, Park and Recreation Staff and the skateboarders for review and approval. (Wormhoudt 1996)

Figure 6. The Ponderosa Skatepark, Bend, Oregon.

The final design in this instance is a combination of bowls and street features that has little to offer non-skating participants (Figure 7). In terms of the design process itself, Bend officials and Wormhoudt’s firm all felt that the clay modeling done by the skateboarders was an effective method for involving the skaters in the process; the skaters, however, viewed it as “a joke,” or as academic, knowing that the design would be what “the guy wanted it to be anyway.” Whether or not the park succeeds in doing what all parties hoped it would do is also a matter of opinion. City officials and the design team all feel that the park is a success, offering skateboarders an excellent facility to test out their moves. Skaters, on the other hand, feel that the park is a “disappointment” at best, with “no flow” among the elements and poor detailing that makes using the park even more frustrating. This was summed up in an exchange between skaters at the park in this way:

The concrete is all wrong and what about this edge over here? Where’s the coping? And this coping over in the bowls, who did it?? And why is it sticking out so much? How are you supposed to ride this? Where’s the flow? I’ll tell you, there is none!

These critiques sound harsh at first, but it quickly becomes clear in talking with skateboarders that they are more in tune with both site scale issues and detail-oriented issues than most landscape architects are or could ever be, unless they themselves were or are skateboarders. Still, many
of the skaters said that even with all the drawbacks, it was at least good to have a place to skate where they weren’t being hassled all the time; Bend, like most cities in this study, had banned skateboarding. Even the location was not something the skaters were overly upset about, since they were grateful just to have any place at all.

The Bend skatepark is a very good example of a facility where attention to detail, and to “flow” was lost, and where the potential for the park to do more than just support a singular activity (skateboarding) was never considered. It also illustrates what might be best described as “pastiche participation,” or participation among future users (i.e., skateboarders) that looks good but in actuality fails to significantly affect the final design. This is not to say that using clay models to get some base ideas is a bad thing; it does, however, seem to indicate a need for the skaters themselves to go deeper into detail, possibly even to get involved in construction, so that the skaters will feel that their expertise is truly being tapped and that their concerns are being addressed.

The Amazon Skatepark - Eugene, Oregon (Population - 125,000). Started in 1989, the Amazon Skatepark was the result of a several months-long process wherein a Skateboard Task Team studied the feasibility of a skatepark in Eugene and identified eleven outdoor and four indoor sitting possibilities within the city. With these sites in mind, the Task Team then conducted a design competition within the local schools, using the “carrot” of having the winning design built on whichever Task Team-identified site was closest to the winner’s school as motivation to increase the number of submissions. Only five designs were submitted, from which they selected a conceptual winner. Parks planning staff enhanced the winning design, later modifying it, and then built a clay model for the final approval of those skateboard activists still involved in the process.

The final sitting for the skatepark was in Amazon Park, located in the southeastern part of the city in close proximity to several major bike and transit routes (Figure 8). According to John Etter of the Eugene Parks Department, “there was no public input sought at the neighborhood level regarding this site (Amazon Park), or of the Skateboard Report with respect to the sites listed. Staff felt it had discretion to locate the facility where it is since there were no immediate neighbors” (Etter 1995). At a site scale within the park, the facility is located out in the open, in an area of the park adjacent to a large transformer (Figure 9) and under power lines (another example of “lost space” within a larger identifiable open space). The openness of the site was seen as a positive element by park staff, who stated that,

[visibility from the street to passers-by (and police) is an important criterion in this site selection. It’s good to be able to see what’s going on, both in terms of errant behavior, and in terms of letting people see that kids are enjoying themselves in a safe place. (Etter 1995)]

The constructed skatepark consists of a single bowl that is far too small and is poorly designed and detailed for the amount of use it receives (Figure 10). It is not uncommon for forty to sixty skaters to share the bowl on a sunny day, and that sheer number overwhelms its capacity. The design of the bowl itself was largely liability-driven, since park staff determined that the slope of the sides of the bowl should not exceed a gradient that “any average senior citizen” could climb out of if they were to fall in (in effect, not to exceed 2:1). There is nothing else to the design of the skatepark itself; and while it does get an enormous amount of use, skaters were uniformly disappointed with the facility. According to skaters, the park’s only positive attribute seems to be its close proximity to transit (ease of access); aside from that, the park’s limited size and overuse (and competition for use from inline skaters, and “trick bikers”); the lack of seating, facilities, drinking fountains, and privacy all contribute to an overwhelmingly negative attitude among skaters towards the only facility of its kind in the city.
Kirtis Skatepark - Lincoln City, Oregon (Population - 6,500 winter; 20,000 summer). Located on the Oregon coast not far off of the city's "main strip" (which is U.S. Highway 101), the Kirtis Skatepark is the result of a hurried process undertaken by the city and their parks department to replace a set of skater-built ramps and elements that were destroyed when Roger Ploger became the new head of Parks and Recreation (Figure 11). Under fire from the city council for unilaterally tearing down the ad hoc skatepark, Ploger was given a mandate to build a replacement in a very short amount of time. According to Ploger,

There was no site analysis and there were no community or neighborhood meetings. I was under a lot of pressure from the city council to get it built and from that they gave me free reign, I guess... (So I said,) let's put it here, behind the Kirtis Ball Fields... We dug it out and let the kids do the rest. (Ploger 19)

Using the Eugene Skatepark as their primary reference, the design of the skatepark is only a slightly more complex, bowl-type park than its Eugene predecessor (Figure 12). Not surprisingly, the success of the facility as a skatepark is limited, from the view of the skaters. In talking with them, the skaters noted that the quality of the concrete work throughout the bowl was not very good in many places, and its runs became monotonous after only a few visits to the park; yet, most of them were just grateful to have a place to skate unhindered by law enforcement, as well as to have a place to go where they could "hang out" with their friends. This component, due largely to the park's location on a bluff above the ball fields and being nearly enclosed by a ring of vegetation, made this skatepark more successful as a place to hang out than it was as an actual skatepark, in the view of the skaters themselves. Even though there were no toilet facilities, no places to sit, and no drinking fountains, just the fact that teens in this relatively small community had a place to call their own seemed to make this skatepark more multidimensional as a community open space than all of the other case study parks except Burnside. Another facet of this skatepark is the degree to which it has been altered by the skaters themselves, although they have not gone so far as to jackhammer out and re-do portions of the bowl as the skaters at Burnside have done. Small additions, in the form of built ramps and other elements, can be seen around the edges of the bowl, increasing the sense of power and control that the skaters feel over their skatepark.

From the city's point of view, the park is very successful, due to the low initial construction costs ($13,000), the low maintenance needs of the skatepark, and the continuing positive relationship that the city has with the skaters themselves. This skatepark, as hurried and uninspired as it might be in its design, manifests the city's understanding that this constituency needs a place to go and recreate. When the skaters' previous ad hoc facility was destroyed, it was the city that was quick to replace it with what they perceived to be a better, more permanent facility for the teens in their community to use. While far from perfect on many levels—particularly from a skateboarding standpoint—the Kirtis Skatepark offered some very interesting insights into the design of multifaceted open spaces for teens that supports both their social and physical needs and desires.

Figure 10. The Amazon Skatepark, Eugene, Oregon.

Figure 11. Kirtis Skatepark, Lincoln City, Oregon.
Jocke Dancer Skatepark - McMinnville, Oregon (Population - 25,000). Started in 1991, the Joe Dancer Skatepark followed closely on the heels of a city council decision to ban skateboarding from Third Street (the main commercial strip in downtown McMinnville), and subsequently throughout most of the downtown area. Located in an eighty-acre park on the outskirts of town (Figure 13), this skatepark and the history of its development again shed light on the difficulties inherent in siting a facility such as this. According to Jay Pearson of the city’s Park and Recreation department,

I think it took us months if not years to find a place; the neighborhood that we had originally hoped for just didn’t go for it at all... We went through several neighborhood meetings and they all didn’t want it near them and on top of that, they all didn’t want it in the park that was just down the street, either. They just didn’t want it 100%. (Pearson 19)

Ultimately, it was the skaters who suggested Joe Dancer Park, even though it was so remote from the core of the city. Their feeling was that at least no one would hassle them, a common thread among many of the case studies conducted for this project. The skaters were also highly involved in the design of the skatepark itself. Once the idea of a

desired street course, one that mimicked the elements in the neighborhoods where they were currently skating. Pearson took the skaters’ ideas and model to Hal Beighley, an architect located in Beaverton, Oregon, and had him put together the final drawings, although, according to Pearson, Beighley was actually brought in to do more of the drainage design than he was to do design development. The skaters’ wishes are strongly evident in the final design of the skatepark (except for the lack of a water fountain, lights for night use, and a cover over the facility), which attests to the positive relationship that existed and still exists between the skaters and the city. As for the elements not incorporated into the final design, a water fountain is being added in the very near future; lights are “out of the question,” according to Pearson, as is covering the skatepark. The end result is a street-type course (Figure 14) that responds to the local experience of the skaters in McMinnville. It is used by local skateboarders of all ages, although the dominant age group seems to be slightly older teens, due at least in part to the remote location of the

Figure 12. Kirtis Skatepark, Lincoln City, Oregon.
park, making it necessary for younger skaters to be accompanied by their parents to the skatepark.

The skaters’ critique of the skatepark was generally supportive, lamenting the lack of additional elements, as opposed to criticizing what was there. The skaters were highly involved in the design, and were also involved in the actual construction, as well as in the ongoing maintenance and policing of the site (at one point, the skaters actually had to stand in front of the city council and vow to take care of it). One of the elements lacking in the design are places to sit, a need that Jay Pearson didn’t seem to understand. The skaters have also recently requested a larger lawn area adjacent to the skatepark, which seems to indicate a desire for more non-skating activities in the vicinity of the park. Again, Pearson wasn’t entirely sure what to make of this request, although in granting it he illustrates that the positive relationship and mutual respect that existed between the skaters and the city still exists today.

Marion Square Skatepark – Salem, Oregon (Population - 100,000). Opened in 1994, the Marion Square Skatepark sits very near the center of downtown Salem, adjacent to the city’s Riverfront Park, and in the most historic park of Salem (Figure 15). Designed by local skating activist Buzzy Morales and landscape architects Chuck and Carol Magnum, the skatepark is actually two skateparks—one “old school” bowl-type park and the other a “new school” street-type park—sited in Marion Square Park. This was not the preferred site for the facility, and (like Burnside) was a place that was heavily impacted by illicit uses including drug dealing and prostitution. The original site for the skatepark was under the Center Street Bridge (like Burnside), but that site was rejected by the surrounding neighborhood. Some people (mostly adults, younger pre-teen skaters, and their parents, and/or non-skaters) also felt that the site was too invisible, stating their belief that since skateboarding had been banned in the downtown area, the skaters would want a visible presence in the community. As a result, Marion Square Park then became the focus of the effort, which was also seen by city officials as a way to alter the current character of the park in a positive manner. From the outset, in fact, law enforcement officials were involved with and were very supportive of the idea of a skatepark in Marion Square Park; citing a letter from a Portland police officer that attested to the impact that the Burnside skatepark had on the local crime rate in the vicinity of the skatepark, Salem police were very optimistic that a new skatepark could have a similar impact in their city as well.

Surrounded on all four sides by very busy streets and divided into quarters by large pathways, the formally-designed Marion Square Park is host to not only the skatepark, but also to a kiosk/band shell, a jungle gym, and two basketball courts. The skatepark is hugely successful in terms of sheer use, with skateboarders attempting to share the space with in-line skaters and BMX bikers alike, although the chaotic nature of mixing these uses makes the experience frustrating, even dangerous at times, according to the skaters who frequent the skatepark. Skaters were very involved in the grassroots effort to get the park established, but were not significantly involved in the design and construction of the park itself. In fact, much of the construction for the skatepark was facilitated through the Oregon National Guard, who did most of the construction and
concrete work. The design itself offers a wide range of opportunities for skating, sitting, and hanging out (Figure 16), and is supported by facilities such as drinking fountains, bathrooms, and ease of access (all of which existed prior to the skatepark’s construction). The overall design is generally critiqued positively by skaters, although some did comment on the need for more space, and/or for a different facility for in-line skaters and BMX bikes.

Conclusions

From these six case studies, numerous issues have been identified that affect the ultimate success or failure of skateparks as athletic facilities. When understood as community open spaces, a much larger set of issues rises to the surface when considering the creation of new skateparks. To discuss these issues, this paper will outline design issues at the site scale; design issues at the neighborhood scale; issues pertaining to power and control; issues pertaining to cultural context and pastiche participation; and issues pertaining to the use of research and precedent in the design of skateparks.

Design Issues at the Site Scale.

Most of the skateparks studied seemed to possess homogeneous details contained within a homogeneous design that had little, if anything, to do with the local context. Most of the skateparks were sited and designed with little or no site analysis, leading to the creation of what appears to be the skateboarding equivalent of 1960s “plopculture.” There were also few examples of skateparks with additional facilities such as bathrooms, drinking fountains, and seating that would support the use of the skatepark by a wider array of participants and observers, and that encourage longer visits (i.e., support for “hanging out”).

Of the skateparks studied, only two of these allow change and adaptation to be made at any significant level. The two that utilize what Nicholson labeled as “loose parts”—Burnside and Kirtis—also seem to support a wider range of abilities and ages through the flexibility to change the park, if even slightly, so that an appropriate level of challenge and support can be achieved in the runs that the skatepark offers. This becomes critical when the nature of skaters today is understood—the range of ages (6-36 years) and abilities is enormous, which ultimately puts significant pressure on a single facility to support a wide range of activity and skill levels. By allowing change, temporary or permanent, to occur, these two skateparks not only support a wider range of users, they also engender an increased sense of ownership and control, as evidenced by the comments of the skaters interviewed.

Perhaps the most significant site scale issue pertaining to the activity of skating itself was the importance the skaters placed on simple details such as transitions, flow, and elements such as coping as being critical to the success of the skatepark. Where the skaters were most involved in both the design and in the construction, the attention to detail and the satisfaction with the outcome seem to be higher, again as evidenced by the comments we heard from the skaters.

Figure 16. The newer, “street course” side of the Marion Square Skatepark, Salem, Oregon. Not shown is an older, bowl-type skatepark immediately to the right of where this image was taken.

Design Issues at the Neighborhood Scale.

Of the issues pertinent at the neighborhood scale, clearly the most significant is the issue of siting the skateparks themselves. In every instance, the skatepark’s siting was controversial at best, with the large majority of neighborhoods not wanting it in, or even near, their vicinity. This stems in part from the noise that is generated from these facilities (complaints to the city of Eugene about noise from the skatepark came from as far away as 300 feet shortly after it was completed), but is also seemingly rooted in the negative stereotypes that many people have regarding the activity and its constituency. This seems to suggest that process issues are critical in developing the idea of a skatepark, and that an educational component needs to be built into any process that allows the general public to see both skateboarding and the skateboarders in a positive light.

Also at the neighborhood scale, there was a desire among skaters to have the facilities fairly easy to access, with transit access often mentioned as an important component in siting future skateparks. There was also a desire among many skaters to be near—but not in the middle of—
areas of activity, but that in saying this, they also expressed the idea of wanting to be in an area where they could see but not be seen. The best examples of this can be seen in Lincoln City and at Burnside, where the skateparks offer shelter from view while not being too far from the activity of the city.

**Issues Pertaining to Power and Control.** In *A Theory of Good City Form*, Kevin Lynch puts forward a comprehensive discussion of power and control as it pertains to public space, in which he identifies several "spatial rights" (Lynch 1981, p. 205) that inhabitants might or might not possess within the urban environment. These rights include the right of presence (the right to be in a place), the right of use and action (to behave freely in a place without fully appropriating the place), the right of appropriation (the ability to use a place and its resources to the exclusion of others), the right of modification (the ability to change the place as one sees fit), and finally, the right of disposition (the ability to do with it as one chooses, which includes the ability to transfer control to another). Lynch goes on to state:

We think of all these as being aspects of one thing, which is true ownership. But these rights are separable, and not inevitable. In some cultures, land belongs to whoever is using it at the time. This means only the rights of presence, use, and appropriation, and these rights are extinguished when active use is abandoned. Other controls, in the sense of rights to transfer, modify, or exclude, rest with the tribe or with the gods. Control may be explicit and codified, or implicit, informal, and even illegitimate, as when an adolescent gang controls its turf. It may be effective or ineffective; continuous, temporary, or recurrent. (Lynch 1981, p. 207)

In terms of power, control, and skateboard parks, it becomes clear that the parks themselves are often times gifted of a sort, as well as being "battlegrounds" between users and between groups (homeowners versus skateboarders, for example). In some cases skateparks are places where skaters can and do express themselves through motion, action, level of care, and in the way they alter or preserve the skatepark itself. In all of the case studies, the activity of skateboarding was being regulated/legislated out of the realm of appropriate public space use and into the world either a singular athletic activity, or as a public nuisance needing to be addressed. For many cities, skateparks seemed to be a way in which they could control the activity without totally driving it "underground" as an illicit activity.

Skateparks were seen as a way to fence in the activity, giving boundaries to a sport in a manner that unfortunately results in a facility-based mentality that supports the sport without supporting the needs of the users as people. In short, the skatepark became a compromise to get the skaters off the streets, and gave the skaters a place to skate where they "wouldn't be hassled." Because the compromise was more often than not at the behest of the city, (the exception being Burnside, although even this was "city-sanctioned" in the end), the ultimate power over the skatepark is held by the city, and the skaters know this. Most feel fortunate to have any place at all to skate, and so the threat—which is often articulated directly to the skaters verbally and in writing—to take away the skatepark if things don't go well is taken seriously. Many of the skaters resent this type of control over the facility, but assent to it because they have no viable alternative, in most cases.

**Cultural Contexts and Pastiche Participation.** In addition to the need to recognize physical context in the design of new skateparks, there is also a need to recognize the cultural context of a given city or community so that the facility can be designed to reflect the inherent differences that exist between skaters in one town as compared to another. Part of this difference has to do with the physical environment that the skaters grew up in, which is also the environment that most of them learned to skate in and on. And while many skaters read the trade magazines religiously and covet the experiences and places they see, their interpretations in terms of the physical design of a new skatepark cannot help but be informed by the characteristics of the place they live in.

What this in turn suggests is that a localized study of skating and of teens in general should be a part of any process that is leading toward the creation of a new skatepark. Currently, many designers lack understanding about the skaters themselves, both as human beings and as skaters; designers also tend to overlook the wide range of abilities among skaters, and they fail to understand the various age-related needs of different skateboarders. For eight to thirteen year-old skaters, important issues include: easy and safe access; security (an overwhelming concern of parents); an appropriate level of challenge and support in the design of the skateable surface; and facilities such as bathrooms and drinking fountains. Teenagers, as skaters, have a similar need for an appropriate level of challenge and support, although typically this will include more challenge and less support than the younger group requires. Teens have additional needs which include: hang out space; prospect refuge; independence and control; and, like the previous group, they also need bathrooms and drinking fountains if they are to make active use of the site over long periods of time.

One way of gaining insight into the variation in skateparks from community to community would be to use participation in the design process that is more than "pastiche," the skaters, their friends, and the "skater experts" who are frequently brought into a process are oftentimes misused.
in the design process, leaving the skaters in particular feeling more like “window dressing” than like actual participants. This should not be construed to mean that experts from the outside should never be brought in. What it is intended to suggest is that their involvement and input must be tempered (in some cases heavily) by the input the designer receives from local participants and skaters. An overreliance on outside experts does have an effect in several areas, perhaps the most important of which is how the skatepark facility is defined. In many cases, the result has been an increased “mono-dimensional” quality to the park thereby missing the opportunity to incorporate non-skater uses, as well as non-skating activities. If the design of skateparks that function in the role of community open space is a goal, then substantive participation must be incorporated into the process (Hester 1984).

The Use of Research and the Misuse of Precedents. None of the skatepark designers or public officials interviewed indicated that they used, or were even aware of, the body of research that exists on adolescents, children, community space, and public space; the only research that was used seemed to be material-based research (on concrete, or coping materials, etc.), or precedent studies of other skateparks. While the lack of research is highly problematic, the misuse of precedents is possibly even more detrimental to the current trend in skatepark design. Designers and administrators conceptually want to make a Burnside-type park in their city; unfortunately, they misunderstand what is it they are seeing when they look at Burnside or other similarly successful skateparks. What the designers seem to see, based upon the case studies in this project, is the area “inside the bowl.” What they do not see is the proximity to transit, the prospect refuge, the facilities (drinking fountains, bathrooms, etc.), the “loose parts,” the community connections, or the cover and lighting. Rather, the designers see a collection of obstacles on the “track,” not the potential for community spaces that support a range of physical activities, such as hanging out; they miss the sense of control over the environment that the skaters have, and the feelings of self-worth and esteem that are engendered through that control.

In the end, they want to design a Burnside, but they fail. Designers must look at precedents, such as Burnside, with a discerning, critical eye that looks both inside and outside “the bowl” (Figure 17). Successful skateparks encourage teens—skaters and non-skaters—to come together, have fun, talk, hang out, goof around, and be teens. They allow them to go to the bathroom, get something to drink, and have interaction with the community on their own terms. They allow teens to be meaningfully involved participants with a significant say in the design, maintenance, management, and possible alteration of the park. Successful skateparks are also as variable (or even changeable?) as the streets from which these skaters are being chased.

Summary
In The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces, William Whyte examines urban space in New York and identifies several critical components that seem necessary for public space to thrive. In his study, he both begins and ends on a street in Brooklyn, noting that the active street scene with children playing in the water from a fire hydrant, people hanging out working on cars in the street, chatting with neighbors on the front steps, etc. could have told them everything they needed to know about successful public space, had they known what it was they were seeing in the first place. Looking at Burnside, had we understood from the outset what it was we were seeing, we could have identified the makings of a successful skatepark. In looking at other skateparks, it was the absence of one or more of these variables that ultimately highlighted the subtleties of creating a successful skatepark that both supports the athletic activity inherent in the sport of skateboarding, while simultaneously functioning as a community open space for the larger—and largely underserved—community of teens living in cities, suburbs, and towns today.
Notes

1. The roots of this study are in an undergraduate design studio titled “Community Open Space: Beyond the Merely Vernacular,” taught by one of the authors and attended by the other. This studio examined vacant land in Portland, Oregon’s northeast Albina neighborhood and developed ideas/proposals to respond to the unmet needs in terms of recreation, economic development, community health, and more. The author and participant became interested in the needs of teenagers in the area, and subsequently began to investigate skateboarding and skateparks as one possibility. Both the studio participant and instructor (the co-authors) quickly realized that what many call the best skateboard facility in the country (and one of the best in the world)—the Burnside Project—was located fairly close to this area. This led us eventually into this study. In thinking about skateparks in terms of community open space, however, we came to realize, based upon discussions, interviews, observations, and research, that we were expanding beyond the scope of what many affiliated with the design and implementation of other designed parks around Oregon considered relevant in the development of these facilities.

2. Not all donations are in the form of cash; donations often consist of material goods, such as a concrete mixer, or other tools/materials that support the park’s ongoing evolution and maintenance. Decisions on how the funds actually get used are based, in large measure, upon a common understanding of need among the regular skaters that, in the end, the founders, particularly Mark Scott, deem appropriate.

3. While the potential cost of not following the rules could be the removal of the park, Park and Recreation officials that we spoke with uniformly agreed that there was virtually no chance that it would be removed.

4. This seems to suggest he considers these facilities more a sport venue—similar to a tennis court or soccer field—as compared to what it might be when “park” is maintained in the label.

5. The location of the skatepark was of most concern to the parents of younger skaters, since it was so far removed from most of the rest of Bend, and the only way to get to the park mandated using a very busy stretch of road. Parents were also disappointed in the lack of places to sit and watch.

6. This may be a bit misleading; according to the skaters, they participated in the construction only a little.

7. Some skaters had been using the skatepark at night by shining car lights onto the facility, but were asked to stop by Pearson. According to Pearson, the skaters complied immediately and with no problem.

8. The park is unbelievably clean and free of graffiti.

9. It is interesting to consider that cities like Salem see skateboarders as a constituency capable of taking on illegal activity like drug dealing and prostitution. For the most part, the skaters are younger teens, ages 12–18, and seem unlikely candidates for a situation that law enforcement officers would consider difficult, even dangerous, to handle.

10. This letter, written by Officer Jim Hardy, is now almost larger than life; copies of it can be found in many of the proposals for new skatepark construction across the country.

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