Skateparks: Trace and Culture

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Abstract

Skateparks are undeniably youth-orientated spaces where contoured bowls, smooth concrete, steep ramps and angled ledges carry the embodied expectation that the sole purpose of the space is for skateboarding. Upon close inspection though, visible signs and *traces* reveal other activities occurring – meeting up, hanging out, hooking up, dropping out, graffiti-ing and worshiping, to name a few.

This article presents a variety of visual traces that have been captured from over 60 skateparks, spanning six countries, where the resulting material demonstrates the complex relationships that occur both with and within these youth spaces. From the inane to the deeply personal, recurring traces demonstrate the important role that the skatepark plays in youth culture.

Introduction

Skateboarding is unique in the way it operates as both a sporting discipline – complete with world championships – and as a deeply rooted cultural entity that provides an archetypal facade by which skateboarding and skateboarders are identified. The term 'skater boy/girl' concocts visions of sneaker-wearing, casually dressed kids whose style has changed little through the rise and fall and rise (and fall and rise) of skateboarding over the last 60 years. Craig Stecyk's photographs of the first 'rock star skateboarders' of the 1970s faithfully capture the lifestyle aspects of skateboarding and the burgeoning skate culture that has acted as a blueprint for all that has come after (See Fig 1). Rather than focus entirely on the physical act of skateboarding, Stecyk often turned his lens towards the skaters themselves, documenting the unique personalities, fashion and identities that were alive at the time. On a more contemporary level Ed Templeton's numerous high profile exhibitions and publications depict a focus on skate culture that proves furthermore that the non-skating aspects of a skateboarder's life are culturally

rich, compelling, worth documenting and celebrating (See Figure 2).

Figure 1. "*Jim Muir with Don Hoffman's Badlands Licence Plate*" by C.R.Stecyk III. Dogtown Chronicles, 2014, http://juicemagazine.com/home/dogtown-chronicles-jim-red-dog-muir/.

Figure 2. "*Crust Punk Kid*," by Ed Templeton. Photographs to Encrust Your Brain With, 2012, http://toymachine.com/ed/2012/06/.

On a practical level skateboarding offers a variety of positive physical and social needs within a youth-orientated age group, and beyond (Bradley (2010; Hetzler et al 2011). On a physical level skateboarding provides participant access to a pursuit that develops coordination, endurance and balance. On a social level it is said to harbour great potential for developing social and entrepreneurial skills (Jenson et al. 387) as well as identity (Shannon 2008). Tomlinson et al (2005) have suggested that skateboarding represents an avenue:

> … for sporting participation and social engagement for men and women, young and old, who have been alienated by traditional school-based and institutional sport practices (2005, p.8).

And yet, despite the documented benefits of skateboarding, skaters continue to suffer an image problem. They are often viewed as 'problems' or 'nuisances' (Woolley, 2001, p. 215) because skateboarding is sometimes practised in public spaces, which has led to a perceived risk to public safety as well as property damage. Negative public attitudes such as these marginalise skateboarders from the broader community, thereby cementing preconceptions of skateboarders as being 'risky', 'devious' and 'unsavoury' (Taylor et. al, 2010, p 499).

Despite the critics, skateboarding is deeply rooted in mainstream culture (Borden 2015) and has even been incorporated into some school sporting curriculums both in Australia

(NSW Department of Education, 1999) and abroad (Borden, 2015). In support of the positive aspects of skateboarding, Jensen et al (2012) argue that:

> … rather than legislate or design out skaters, civic leaders would benefit from allowing skate scenes to colonize and re-invent parts of the city as a wholly natural part of a city's fabric (2012, p. 387).

In his recent *Guardian* article, Borden (2015) cites pro-skating initiatives that are opening up the urban landscape to skateboarding where skate-friendly features are designed into the civic architecture. It is heartening to see that some councils are slowly transforming attitudes from that of intolerance to actively welcoming skateboarding, which adds 'artistic, cultural, educational and commercial value to our urban lives' (Borden, 2015).

Constructed space

In Borden's (2001) seminal text, *Skateboarding, space and the city: Architecture and the body*, skateboarding is described as being practised in both 'found space, and constructed space' (p. 57). To understand these terminologies better, one must be acquainted with the two definitive skateboarding styles that skaters align themselves to – street skating, and 'vert' skating (a shortening of 'vertical').

Street skating in its purest sense is practised in *found space*, where the skater explores and appropriates the pre-existing urban landscape – streets, schools, shopping plazas, drainage ditches, and many more. In *found space* the skater is utilising the built environment for activities that it was not otherwise designed for (Jenson 371).

Vert skaters, on the other hand, skate on transitioned ramps in purpose built skateparks , or *constructed space*. These skateparks mimic the ocean wave, and hark back to skateboarding's roots as an activity practised by surfers when the ocean was flat. Seeing as such *vert* features are uncommon in the found environment, the *vert* skater relies on purpose-built skateparks for their preferred terrain (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Singapore's East Coast Park offers the skater features that are not usually found in the natural urban environment.

While I have defined skateboarders as belonging to either a street or *vert* identity, crossovers exist between the two groups. Within most skatepark environments, specific space is dedicated to street skating and vert skating. The street skater will skate on features that mimic the street or urban environments (see Figure 4). These 'contrived spaces' (Wallis, 2015) offer the park skater many of the features that the street skater seeks out in the natural urban environment – hand rails, ledges, gaps and stairs.

Figure 4. The stepped ledges of Waterloo park in Surry Hills replicate the features found in the natural urban environment.

Building on Borden's definitions of found and constructed space my research has established a third definition – the *re-constructed space.* This term refers to a skatepark that has undergone a transformation at the hands of users as a way of affirming ownership. Re-constructers of space embed social and cultural knowledge and meanings linked to place and history, which go on to form part of a sub cultural language of place. Such narratives may not be immediately evident to a casual observer.

For example, graffiti at a skatepark is often viewed on a macro level where graffiti is either present or absent. But on micro levels – when we read, analyse and understand the graffiti – we discover relationships that occur between the user and the space. Visual traces that I have documented include material phenomena such as graffiti, littering, embellishments, stickers and vandalism. Indeed, as I have come to see it, any re-construction which has altered the original skatepark, both structurally and non structurally, can be valued for the insights they give to the cultural and social practices of the skaters who use the space, and the broader culture to which they belong.

Developing the research context

During the developmental stages of my Doctorate of Creative Arts, my research plan focused on photographing a series of skateparks and documenting the ways in which skateparks are used. My objective was to consider the elements of skatepark culture and to explore the environmental and social factors that affected skaters' usage and experiences of the skatepark. After travelling to more than 60 skateparks across Australia (England, France, Spain and Singapore), I amassed a vast collection of images that demonstrated that all skateparks were similar in their intended function, but each was vastly different in design, material construction, location, patronage and condition.

Drawing on 20 years of photographic experience and the visual literacy that comes with

working in the creative industries, I began to analyse the photographs, searching for meaning in the commonality and differences between the skateparks I had visited. Initial observations included the geographical location of the skatepark and their propensity to locate them in sporting precincts; the material construction and design of the skateparks; and user-added features such as graffiti. This reflective process soon became a process of discovery as I worked my way through my archived folders, starting from the top – Alice Springs, Barcelona, Batemans Bay, Bathurst, Bellingen, Blackheath … 'click' open an image, 'click' close an image. 'Click' concrete ramp, 'click' graffiti, 'click' beer cans wedged in fence, 'click' bags strewn around step, 'click' *Miss you bro R.I.P Pau/*.
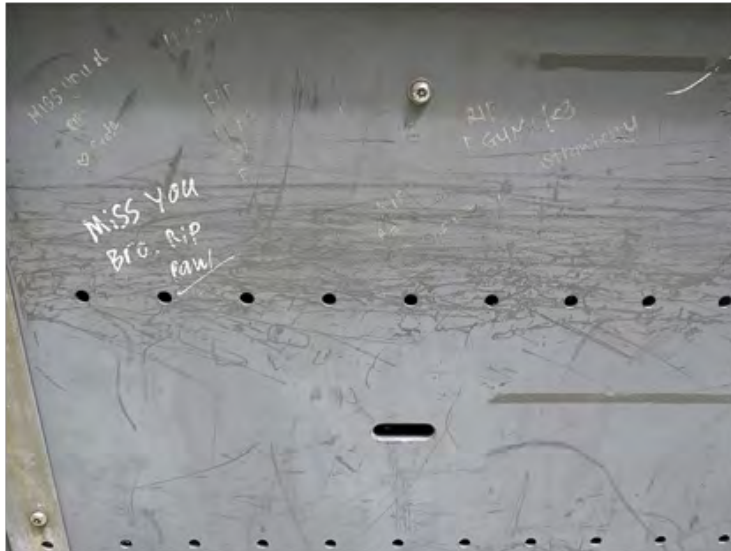

Figure 5. Epitaphs found at Bishan Road Skatepark, Singapore.

The photograph is from Bishan Road Skatepark in Singapore. It is a sideview of a grey steel ramp with five small pieces of graffiti written in what appears to be white correction fluid. The most legible message reads 'Miss you bro. RIP Pau/' (see Figure 5). The remaining four messages all refer to the same Rest In Peace testimonial.

These small pieces of graffiti spark a memory … I don't close the image, but click through to a new folder. Paris, The Globe. Another epitaph, 'RIP GINA'.

And one more – this time, as far from Paris as you can possibly get – Coober Pedy, South Australia, 'The Legend'.

Here was an occurrence of a recurring trace that transcended continents but shared the same canvas—the concrete surface of the skatepark. It led me to wonder: what was this place that is so often vilified by the general public, and sometimes referred to as a breeding ground for male centric macho-ism and the anti-social behaviour that comes with it and yet acts as a place to recognise and remember a fellow skater who has died?

The chance discovery of the epitaphs triggered a framework for seeking out other visible traces that illuminated the different uses of the skating space; uses that it was not otherwise designed for. With newly found purpose, I began to trawl my image bank for other recurring visual traces, only to see my research travelling in an unexpected and very exciting dimension of spatial knowledge, based on intervention and traces of human action.

Figure 6. Traces shed light on the culture of a place.

Building trace typologies

At a skatepark every visual trace, large or small, visible or invisible, intentional or otherwise sheds light on the culture that resides in and utilises that particular space. The smallest piece of graffiti is a trace of the cultural life that exists within the context of the localised skatepark. Likewise, the very skatepark itself is a trace, and represents the broader skateboarding culture (see Figure 6). Anderson states that:

> Traces are most commonly considered as material in nature (material traces may include 'things' such as buildings, signs, statues, graffiti, i.e. discernable marks on physical surroundings), but they can also be non-material (non-material traces might include, for example, activities, events, performances or emotions) (Anderson, 2010, p. 5).

Investigating the notion of re-constructed space, I have utilised non-intrusive observation and photographic practices to document the instances of found visual traces. The resulting visual typology of repeating signs, symbols, affiliations and declarations reveals a cultural vocabulary that is shared from skatepark to skatepark, country to country.

The process that I work through when I document a space follows a set routine of non-intrusive observation and photographic documentation. An initial walk through the skatepark allows me to get a sense and feel for the space, and to familiarise myself with the main user groups – both skaters and observers. As a standard practice I inform the users of my intentions and material focus and the fact that I am not photographing any human subjects.

Once I begin photographing my focus turns to instances of signs and symbols that have been repeated across two or more sites. In general terms these signs and symbols could be placed into four categories: graffiti, embellishments, stickers, litter and structural vandalism. Each main category can be further unpacked. For example, common repeating graffiti themes include drug references, RIP testimonials, territorial statements, political statements, personal attacks, brand affiliations, love testimonials, obscene and commissioned. Structural vandalism tends to be focused on either skateable features of the park such as damaging the ramp, or non-skateable features such as rubbish bins and signage.

With respect to the large variety of visual traces that I have documented I have focused this article on three recurring themes – epitaphs, stickers and embellishments. Each has been identified for the depth of narrative that is embedded into the trace, reinforcing the cultural importance of the space.

Photographic approach

As a photographer, I am in a position to influence how the viewer perceives the subject matter through the way that composition and light are manipulated. Using photography for this research, however, requires an objective approach. I am less concerned with the aesthetic qualities of a particular visual trace and more concerned with documenting its very existence. Adopting the photographic style of the New Topographic Movement has provided me with a conceptual and technical framework. Pioneered by Berndt and Hiller Becher in 1960s post-industrial Germany, members of the New Topographic Movement tirelessly documented the disappearance of particular instances of industrial architecture in northern Europe. The structures that were photographed shared similarities in design, such as water towers, coke ovens and silos. These were presented in formal grids, referred to as typologies, which celebrated the unintentional beauty that occurred within these relics. Relying on common photographic techniques of lighting, composition and depth of field, the focus was on the ordinariness of subject matter.

> … consistent choice of angles and viewing distances, which de-emphasise subjective shot decisions and permit easy comparisons between different photographs and photographic groupings (Biro 2012, p. 354).

The repetition of subject matter, combined with the strict photographic disciplines to which Becher and Becher were committed, frames this extensive body of work as conceptual art (Biro, 2012), with vast collections of typologies found in galleries and museums around the world today. The typologies are valued both as a historical database of industrial architecture, as well as a collection of fine art (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. "Water Towers" by Bernd and Hilla Becher. Group of Six Typologies, 1972–2009, http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/becher-water-towers-p81238. © Estate of Bernd Becher and Hilla Becher.

Lewis Baltz has further influenced my conceptual approach due to his commitment to document the mundanity of discarded human waste and wastelands. Baltz's photographs capture the urban encroachment on the American Midwest, and the 'violent processes of place-making' (Stentiford, 2014, p. 347) that occur when humans reside within this hostile landscape.

Figure 8. "Fluorescent Tube," by Lewis Baltz. Nevada portfolio, 1977, https://www.sfmoma.org /artwork/80.471. © Estate of Lewis Baltz.

Baltz's images depict human traces found in the hinterland between human settlement and the harsh desert – long discarded television sets that have slowly morphed into the landscape; a shattered fluorescent tube indiscernibly melded into the desert ground

(see Figure 8); abandoned sun bleached industrial estates that sit in a state of stasis; and the angles of an air conditioner duct tracking a path down an otherwise bare, hot wall. Like the Bechers, Baltz's focus on documenting inanimate objects that are devoid of emotional overtones, yet rich in human narrative, has provided me with a conceptual and technical framework on which to underpin my photographic approach. Where Baltz's work focuses on found human traces within the naturally occurring desert landscape, my work focuses on traces of humanity within the constructed landscape of the skatepark.

Where Becher and Baltz inform my objective compositional and technical approach, Craig Stecyk and Ed Templeton's photographs of skateboarders have led me to empathise with and appreciate the human condition that acts as a driver for and resides within the inanimate *trace*. Stecyk and Templeton are both deeply entrenched within the skateboarding community and for them documenting skate culture was, and is, as easy as photographing the everyday life that occurs around them. Their raw and intensely personal images reveal not only the act of skateboarding, but the sinews of intense life that are intrinsically entwined within and throughout skateboarding culture. The young people depicted in Stecyk and Templeton's photographs are skate culture personified, balancing social conformity (or the lack thereof) with the intense creative expression that skateboarding provides. While skate culture on a global level is so well documented by these photographers, a gap exists in linking this rich and unique culture to the skateparks where skaters congregate. Found traces of cultural activity at Skateparks provide this link, and by documenting and presenting them to a broader audience I want to highlight the significance of the space and the nuances of the culture that are not evident in traditional approaches.

Epitaph

Graffiti and skateparks share a symbiotic relationship of sorts where smooth expanses of concrete offer graffiti artists the canvas on which to ply their craft. The breadth of graffiti styles and subject matter that occur at skateparks cover a broad spectrum – from council endorsed commissioned masterpieces to scrawled personal attacks. For the uninitiated, the presence of graffiti is an oft-cited negative attribute of skatepark environments. The '2008 Skatepark Report' cites that non-skatepark users find graffiti to be one of the most unattractive aspects of a skatepark (Bradley, 2010, p. 50). The same report, however, cites graffiti as being one of the most attractive aspects of skateparks amongst both non-users and users (p. 47). Loved or loathed, it is unusual to find a skatepark that does not have any evidence of graffiti. In my field visits I am yet to find one that doesn't. In Singapore graffiti is a criminal offence and can attract caning and a jail term (Shen, 2015). Still, the skateparks I have visited in Singapore all display signs of graffiti activity, which demonstrates an affiliation to a broader global skateboarding culture, despite the risks involved.

In Taylor et al's (2010) graffiti categorisation typology, nine distinct graffiti themes are recognised. They include: declaration, hate, identity, legal, memorial, obscene, quirky, romantic and threatening (p. 146). While each of these categories can be identified within the skatepark environments I have researched, it was the discovery of epitaphs – a memorial for a deceased person (Taylor et al, 2010, p. 146) – that was the turning point in my field research. It marked the point where I diverged from analysing the physical features and locations of individual skateparks to actively seeking out recurring traces and cataloguing them. I had seen an RIP dedication in the past – in fact there is a dedication to someone who has passed away at my local skatepark. But what I was not

aware of was the broader global practice and the variety of ways in which these epitaphs have been marked into the landscape. Some are as insubstantial as a marker scrawl on the back of a ramp, whereas others consist of elaborate graffiti that covers a substantial area of the skatepark. At my local skatepark one of the bowls features an extension section that represents a tombstone complete with an RIP mosaic in tiles across the top edge (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. A mosaic RIP memorial at Katoomba skatepark.

More noticeable in the epitaphs than in any of the other recurring traces that I have so far recorded are the nuances that have been applied to the styling, which shed light on cultural differences from site to site. For example, the epitaph trace that was documented in Coober Pedy in the South Australian desert (see Figure 10) suggest indigenous connections through the colour of the paint used and the incorporation of hand stencils which reflect Australian indigenous rock paintings. In Singapore the epitaph is handwritten and includes text type motifs that reflect SMS icons (see Figure 11). For example, a heart has been handwritten to sit on its side by incorporating the characters <3. In another, colon and open bracket character are combined to make a sad face. On a cultural level Coober Pedy is as far removed from Singapore as it is by miles, which is illustrated clearly by the visual style that has been applied to what is essentially the same message. Yet each place shares the same intent, which is to honour the memory of a friend who had a deep connection with the skatepark.

Figure 10. An epitaph found at Coober Pedy in South Australia features Aboriginal motifs.
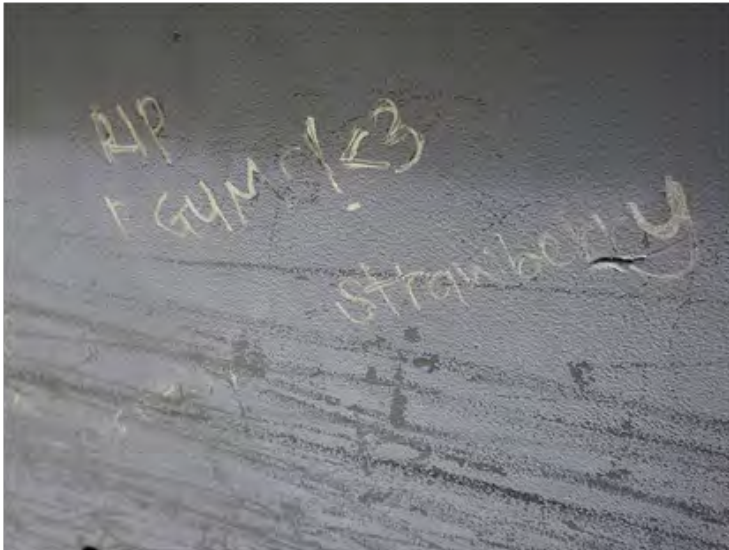
Figure 11. An epitaph found at Bishan Road, Singapore includes text type motifs that reflect SMS icons.

Due to the perceived physical risks that revolve around skateboarding the casual observer might question whether a skatepark epitaph marks the spot where a skater has suffered a fatal injury, similar to the way a roadside memorials marks the spot where a fatal vehicle accident has occurred. It is possible though, due to the public nature of information, to trace some epitaphs back to the event that caused the untimely death, and these rarely (if ever) relate to skateboarding or the site where the epitaph is placed. The skatepark epitaph therefore should be compared to a plaque at a beautiful lookout or a bench seat in a park that has been marked as a special place for the deceased. The graffiti is not a piece of vandalism but a heartfelt dedication to a lost friend, spoken with appropriate cultural voice. As Anderson writes:

> Youth cultures do not necessarily care about how their traces are seen by the mainstream. They are more concerned about how they are seen and read by their own culture (Anderson, 2010, p. 151).

What I find most heartbreaking about these traces is that they refer to real people, most of whom were active in the local skateboarding community and who have probably passed away at a young age. The fact that the skatepark has been chosen as the location for the epitaph demonstrates the importance of this place within the immediate community.

Stickers

Stickers are less visible than graffiti but are still prevalent at most skateparks. These are indiscriminately pasted around the park and usually demonstrate an affiliation with skate brands. These stickers represent urban decay on a micro level and are often worn away beyond any point of recognition as they suffer the wear and tear of a certain 'line' (the name of the path that the skater will travel along through a course of obstacles) (see Figure 12). When this is the case, the sticker is worn away and is barely discernable from the surrounding surface. Such is the habit of laying down stickers that I have found evidence of price tags, barcodes and even bandaids stuck where people sit.

Figure 12. A sticker placed on an obstacle suffers the wear and tear of the 'line' on which it has been placed.

One of the more creative uses of stickers that I have documented was in Singapore, where the local graffiti artist used envelope labels as a base on which to tag, but without defacing the surface itself. Not only have they not 'really' broken a graffiti law, but in pre-tagging sticky labels in a safe environment the graffiti artist has effectively reduced the amount of time spent on location. This, in turn, reduces their chances of getting caught, which seems a prudent approach given Singapore's harsh anti-graffiti laws (see Figure 13).

Figure 13. Tagging on label stickers in Singapore.

Finally, in some of the larger, loftier skateparks I discovered clusters of stickers that were used to indicate the high point of the skateboarder's trajectory up the larger ramps (see Figure 14). In practice the skater will progressively ride higher and higher up a ramp, and with sticker in hand, back peeled off, they'll wait for the dead point where they are no longer going up or down, before pasting it as far up the wall as they can reach. This is even more impressive on ramps or 'cradles' with an 'over-vert' section, which is where the transition begins to curve over the skater's head like the roof of a cathedral. In order to get a sticker into the over-vert the skater needs to roll into what is

fast becoming the ceiling, then pivot and free fall back onto the vertical face and lower angled transition. Similar to historical flood indicators, these high point stickers remain as a marker of the bravest, gravity-defying warrior.

Figure 14. The stickers on this ramp indicate the high point of a skater.

Embellishments

As mentioned previously, *constructed space* describes sites and spaces that are developed with the sole purpose of the skater (and other wheeled enthusiast) in mind. In Australia with over 1350 skateparks listed on the Australian Skatepark register (skateboard.com.au), it is clear that skateboarding is well provided for on a local government level. There is, however, no governing body that oversees the planning and development of new skateparks (Kellet & Russell, 2009) and it is left to local councils to manage the planning and development of new facilities. As there is no 'standard' skatepark design (unlike a tennis court or football field etc.), a wide variety of skatepark designs exist (Kellet & Russell, 2009), as well as a broad range in quality.

Despite the huge number of skatepark developments, the skating literature suggests that skaters still prefer to 'invent' their use of the 'natural' environment – for example, streets, plazas and malls (Németh, 2006; Woolley & Johns, 2001; Jenson et al, 2012). Skaters believe that purpose-built skateparks are yet another way to be controlled by powers who do not understand or appreciate skate culture (Bradley, 2010; Jenson et al, 2012). Providing skateboarders with a skatepark effectively – and ideally for some naysayers – moves skateboarding and skateboarders 'out of sight' (Németh, 2006), thereby ensuring even greater tracts of the urban landscape are off-limits for skating (Woolley et al, 2011). As Thompson notes, 'they build one (skatepark) just as an excuse' (2003, p. 37).

As a means of stimulating a sense of connectedness and ownership, youth engagement often occurs during the design phase of a new skatepark with Bradstreet (2009, p. 62) noting that 'public process' is the single most important phase in developing a new site. Jenson et al (2012) argues however, that skaters often see this as a token gesture while Taylor and Khan (2011) add that youth feel their opinions are not as well considered as those of more vocal adults who may oppose particular aspects of the development. While adult acknowledgement of youth needs and desires can foster a sense of community connectedness, the needs of youth who are often in an advocatory position do not necessarily represent the needs of their less advantaged and less vocal

constituents (Whitlock, 2007).

 Most revealing perhaps is Whitlock's (2007) findings that youth who are most in need are also the least likely to participate in community-initiated activities such as focus groups and forums. But what is not resolved during the brief community consultation window is made up for in the ensuing months and years where the skaters are left to their own devices to determine how the unstructured space will be used. It is not unusual to find a discarded shopping trolley, old sofa or shipping crate lying around at a skatepark as skateboarders add physical features and embellishments, actively stamping ownership and authority over the site (see Figure 15). Indeed, one could argue that all user added features – be it graffiti, rubbish, vandalism or embellishments – exist so the user can claim full ownership over their place.

Figure 15. A stack of baker's trays and milk crates add to the challenge of this quarter pipe 'fly-out'.

While such detritus can make the skatepark look like an illegal dumping ground, mostly these items have been brought in to add to the park. Such additions, or some might say improvements, might be as substantial and permanent as an added concrete ramp where the original developers did not consider placing one during the original construction, as is the case at Newcastle Beach skatepark in NSW (see Figure 16). Or it may be as insubstantial as a witch's hat (see Figure 17), or a cinder block that acts as an obstacle to ollie over (the skateboard jump which is the basis for most skateboarding

tricks).

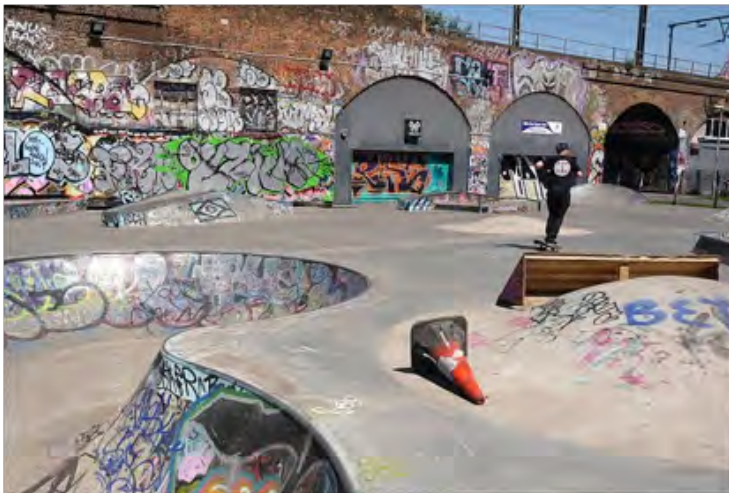Figure 16. User added concrete ramps at Newcastle Beach skatepark.

Figure 17. User added embellishments were documented at Mile End Skatepark in London.

Singapore developers have taken a more substantial approach to the embellished landscape by providing the skater with modular, hard plastic sections that can be pushed together to form long ledges or pulled apart to create gap obstacles. Of the three skateparks I visited in Singapore, two had these features, which were actively being moved and skated on by the skateboarders at the time of my visit (see Figure 18). One may deduce that by providing moveable features the developers have acknowledged the skaters' desire to control the landscape. Yet, critically, given Singapore's focus on clean urban environments, developers have also been strategic about how to offer skaters the best opportunity to manipulate the environment while minimalising the visual clutter associated with such approaches.

Figure 18. Skaters in Singapore maneuver modular features at Somerset Skatepark.

While documented embellishments focus mainly on the addition of props into the environment, I have documented cases where features have been removed from the environment as a means of improving the user potential of the skatepark, thereby opening up new lines of flow that would otherwise have been un-rideable. At Blackheath skatepark in the Blue Mountains NSW, a guard rail has been removed from the back of a ramp which allows BMX riders to launch over the flat platform at the top of the ramp and down the grassy bank behind. Over time such activities will kill the grass and erode the bank, outcomes that developers were undoubtedly attempting to avoid in the first place. Developers attempt to control this 'push beyond the fringes' by identifying the features that might lend themselves to facilitating an external push, ultimately making it impossible or (perhaps worse) possible, yet highly dangerous for the user to utilise this protected terrain. Control measures include placing bollards, railings and boulder fields adjacent to ramps to deter the user from encroaching on the hinterland between the skatepark and the shared civic landscape.

Documented embellishments indicate a skater's desire to control and reinvent the ways the skatepark environment is utilised. Due to the unmovable nature of most skatepark builds, however, such embellishments and unauthorised modifications can have an adverse effect, be it on an aesthetic or more structural level. To make allowances for this, consideration should be given to how spatial reinventions can occur without causing lasting damage to the facilities.

'Spot' traces

So far this paper has focused on visible traces that exist within the boundaries of the formal skatepark, but it is worth mentioning skateboarding specific traces that exist outside of designated skate spots. I referred to these spaces earlier as *found spaces*, but tapping into a skater's word-bank these would be more commonly referred to as *skate spots* or more simply *spots*.

As an active skateboarder I am constantly tuned into the urban environment and am on the lookout for engaging and challenging skate features. Once located, be it a flight of stairs, a handrail or ledge, close inspection sometimes reveals visible traces of skateboarding activity that have been etched into the surface of the landscape. Documented traces include ledges that have been rubbed with candle wax so as to

decrease the friction and increase the slide; paint that has transferred from the skateboard onto the surface; scarred paint on metal rails; and chipped and broken tiles, concrete, and stone ledges (see Figure 19).

Figure 19. Waxed step at the Carrington Hotel in Katoomba reveals skateboarding activity.

Where I see such traces as being an interesting relic of skating activity, civil authorities more often regard them as signs of vandalism, and it is this very damage that results in many councils installing physical barriers commonly known as skate stoppers or skate haters by the skateboarding community (Woolley et al., 2011). These are designed and produced in a multitude of shapes and sizes, to be used wherever there is a perceived need to limit skateboarding from the immediate environment (see Figure 20). These physical barriers deter most skaters from engaging with these spaces, but for some more skilled – and less law abiding – skaters, they merely present an added challenge of skating lines that avoid the stoppers.

Figure 20. Skate stoppers are used to deter skateboarders from utilising urban features.

Photographic evidence documents the removal of skate stoppers by physical means, possibly (and most probably) by skaters, which usually involves a hefty hammer or battery-powered angle grinder. Such forced removal results in physical damage that

exceeds any caused by skaters utilising a *spot*. Consideration should be made, therefore, as to the type of trace we want to exist at a *spot* – the trace of active use by skateboarding; the trace of physical deterrents, albeit beautiful, applied for the sole purpose of pushing skaters away; or the trace of the forced removal of skate stoppers, and the physical and cultural damage that comes with it.

At Singapore's East Coast Park I came across the strange occurrence of skate stoppers used within the boundaries of the skatepark. The stoppers had been fixed to concrete ledges that were evidently being preserved for sitting only. The stoppers had been largely removed by force, which caused so much damage to the ledge that it was rendered un-skateable (see Figure 21). One must question the motives of the developer to determine this particular stretch of concrete to be out of bounds. In a skatepark that offered hundreds of linear metres of ledges why place skate stoppers on this section? One must also question the action of the activists who removed the skate stoppers. With so much skateable terrain on offer why go to the trouble of removing this small section, effectively ruining the surface in the process? I would argue that this was a political action, a way of showing 'the man' what skaters thought of particular control measures enforced upon and within the skateboarders' place.

Figure 21. The forced removal of skate stoppers, have rendered the ledge un-skateable.

Conclusion

The visual traces that I have documented at skateparks add a new dimension to previous research around skatepark design and development. Extending Borden's (2001) concepts of found space and constructed space, my research offers a new category of spatial definition – the re-constructed space. This space contains compelling and sometimes heartbreaking cultural narratives, which mark this space as crucially important to its users. The RIP testimonial defines the space as a shrine, stickering as a site for competition and risk-taking, and embellishments as space to practise entrepreneurship. My research reveals ways to read these signs and appreciate the information found in them. The recurrence of these traces from site to site, country to country, proves that this is not an isolated phenomenon but that skater communities on a global level speak with a visual voice that represents creativity, nurture and defiance. This, in turn, fosters a sense of place and assists in creating a culturally rich space that skaters can call their own.

Based on these findings, planning models would benefit from researching the culture that is shaped through youth interactions at these spaces, and exploring strategies that cater to the cultural needs of the skateboarder. Rather than seeing skateparks solely as functional sporting venues, they should instead be developed and nurtured as vital cultural zones that contribute positively to the physical, social and cultural wellbeing of the young people who use these spaces.

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About the author

Dan Johnston is an Associate Lecturer in Design at Western Sydney University. His professional experience includes working as a graphic designer, photographer and art director while his work spans various media including print, web and television. His research explores how youth-oriented public spaces are utilised, with a particular focus on the social and cultural knowledge and values generated at skatepark environments.