History

Skateboarding and the City: A Complete History

Ian Borden

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Why should planners care about skateboarding? In this engrossing history, University College London Professor Iain Borden argues that increasingly ubiquitous urban skateboarders are more than disorderly, antiestablishment miscreants but instead routinely engage with "matters of public space, historic and architectural preservation, healthy and sustainable living, and entrepreneurialism" (p. 3). *Skateboarding and the City: A Complete History* shows how much planners can learn from how skaters interpret, reimagine, and ultimately shape our cities.

Skateboarding is a global phenomenon with more than 50 million participants, a remarkable number given that the first production skateboards only appeared in Southern California in the 1950s. When the surf was down, middle-class teenagers took to suburbia's wide, curvilinear streets and mimicked the sweeping back-and-forth style they used on the water. At the time, many streets were relatively absent of cars because roads and infrastructure were built before adjacent homes. Tiring of this monochromatic terrain, skaters claimed backyard swimming pools as their new terrain after discovering that many homeowners had drained them because of drought and cost concerns.

Urban youth later joined the fray and turned downtown streets, cultural centers, and corporate plazas into their playgrounds. Soon forced out of these more visible spaces, urban skaters appropriated the city's most marginal locations—the "spaces leftover after planning"—creating famed skate spots like Portland's (OR) Burnside Park and London's (UK) Southbank Undercroft, both built by skaters in abandoned spaces under bridges and buildings, and Philadelphia's (PA) LOVE Park, where skateboarders colonized a windswept Modernist plaza.

This do-it-yourself ethos, Borden argues, represents a powerful critique of the dominant meaning and function of the actually existing city. "Two hundred years of American technology has unwittingly created a massive cement playground of unlimited potential," one critic asserts, "but it was [only] the minds of 11-year-olds that could see that potential" (p. 194). As such, Borden argues that street skateboarders are civic activists and "urban anarchists" who use "streets, sidewalks, and sewers in a thousand ways the original architects could never even dream of" (p. 194). To skaters, handrails are less for safety and more for accommodating a 50–50 grind; benches are not just places to sit but are obstacles to be cleared with a 180 kickflip.

In this way, skateboarders exploit prime urban spaces for their use-value over their exchange value, "emphasizing meaning and pleasure over ownership and profit" (p. 225). Because this interpretation challenges dominant conceptions of urban spaces as potential capital investment sites, these non-consuming skateboarders are viewed as unwelcome trespassers "without any discernable ambition" (p. 231). Some even believe skateboarders are a gateway group inviting further disorder: "If you let the skaters in," one detractor argues, "you are just opening the neighborhood up to pushers, pimps, pedophiles, and prostitutes" (p. 165).

On the contrary, Borden shows that skateboarding has major tourism and revitalization benefits, attracting non-skateboarders to previously underused spaces, extending the hours of public space in central business districts, and contributing to the overall vitality, conviviality, and security of the public realm. After skateboarders were forcibly removed from Philadelphia's iconic LOVE Park, Richard Florida lamented, "To take the park away is to tell them they are not valid. Big mistake" (p. 265). By animating public space, skaters render it more attractive to investors, in the process becoming "shock troops of gentrification, part of a creative class that produces marketable street culture" (p. 265). It seems that skateboarders can't get a fair shake: They're blamed for deterring investment and for helping attract too much of it.

Beyond economics, and the considerable physical health benefits that skateboarding can generate, Borden cites research showing that skateboarding in groups "helps build adolescents' autonomy, social skills, self-confidence, friendships, and peer-group status" and "provides opportunity structures for enhancing skater's social, psychological, and physical well-being" (pp. 165, 168). In an era of helicopter parenting, skateparks and skate spots can help youth build autonomous social cultures free from their parents' gaze. In sum, "Skateboarding suggests that pleasure rather than work, using space rather than paying for it, activity rather than passivity, performing rather than watching, and creativity rather than destruction, are all potential components of our cities" (p. 194).

Professor Borden is a renowned theorist and longtime skateboarder himself, authoring dozens of articles on urban and architectural space as well as the

groundbreaking *Skateboarding, Space, and the City* (Borden, 2001). This current book is geared primarily to skateboarders and aficionados, although its references to David Harvey, Henri Lefebvre, and Chantal Mouffe will please design theorists and planning academics alike.

Two minor gripes: First, perhaps because the title promises a "complete history," the text can get bogged down with overlong lists of dates, parks, skaters, and release dates. Second, Borden never seems to resolve a key critique of skateboarding culture: Although the skateboarding community has diversified in terms of age, ethnicity, race, and sex, it remains predominantly a White male–dominated activity.

Skateboarding and the City: A Complete History is just that: a comprehensive, approachable, and passionately written volume packed with dozens of full-color images and more than 100 QR codes linked to YouTube videos made especially for this book. It is a critical addition to our urban canon.

REFERENCES

Borden, I. (2001). *Skateboarding, space, and the city*. Oxford University Press.

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