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When the Horizontal Goes Vertical or How Skateboarding Redefines the Urban Environment

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Abstract

What do you do when one of the essential elements of your livelihood is being taken away from you? You adapt. This is exactly the fate that is facing today's skateboarders in major metropolises all over the world. The invention and implementation of Hostile Architecture has jeopardized the future of skateboarding, but this is not the first time the skateboarding community has faced extinction and due to the sports growing popularity in recent years and the new influx of creative, innovative, and brave skateboarders, the sports future seems safe in the hands of adaptation. After all, the skateboarding community's most unifying trait is its adaptability.

Washington Square Park is filled with noise. People bustle about, snippets of conversation can be heard, street performers try to catch the attention of pedestrians, dogs bark at the dog park. From time to time loud, aggressive sounds can be heard around the fountain and always be traced back by the stage area across from the statue on the East side of the park. The sound of wood hitting concrete, a brief moment of silence, the sound of impact, like a stick breaking, and the sound of small clunky wheels rolling on hard cement. This is the way by which skateboarders glide along the flat surfaces of New York City, navigating the urban architecture and man-made obstacles found in the urban environment. Skateboarding in New York City is far more than a culture, it's a way of life. The urban environment and speed of the Big Apple provide a perfect landscape for street skating—an activity which exists both as a method of transportation and a method of recreation.

Because of its diversity of use and general adaptability, street skating can be done anywhere in any country at any time; but, in the city specifically, the need for quick, maneuverable, stylish, gliding transportation makes the avid presence of the skateboard a notable part of New York life. Watching skateboarders perform maneuvers and navigate the city, or doing it yourself in my case, you come to realize that in the city, skateboarders glide along the concrete and metal in a unique way: challenging the horizontal existence through various vertical moves. Unlike pedestrians and rollerbladers, skateboarders possess the power to manipulate the confining aspects of their city into a tool using their skateboard.

This practice of skateboarding began in the late 1950's when surfers in Southern California began attaching rollerblade wheels to 2x4s (Owen) and took their boards not to the waves but to the streets. The design of the board evolved and with it evolved the interests of the activity's participants. Competitions began to sprout up around California pitting young, up-and-coming skaters (such as Steve Caballero, Tony Hawk, Rodney Mullen, Christian Hosoi, and Tommy Guerrero) against one another in epic battles of innovation and boundary-pushing skateboarding. Again and again, these athletes would use competition as the setting to push the boundaries of what was possible in the sport, making the limitations into tools for competitive and cultural advancement, riding not the waves of the ocean but the concrete of the streets.

One innovator in particular developed influence beyond the physical skateboard becoming not only a coach but one of the only historians of skateboarding, a sport with a famously unrecorded history. Stacy Peralta began as a member of the Zephyr Team, the original skateboarding team, and after the group blew apart, Stacy found himself wanting to recreate the magic of a team "and I wanted it to last." Said Stacy, "I wanted it to last, I did not want it to end" (Peralta). This desire birthed the Bones Brigade, a team stacked with the most important skateboarders in history. After the Bones Brigade's multi-decade lifespan came to an end, Stacy changed his role in skateboarding again, becoming a documentary filmmaker and skateboarding's historian, by accident.

His documentaries, to me, are a symbol of the struggle skateboarding has withstood and a testament to the beautiful things that can come out of the sport. His documentaries *Dogtown and Z-Boys* and *Bones Brigade: An Autobiography* portray the darkest corners of skating history, addiction, violence, competitive pressure, and depression; but, he portrays these people, who are often written off as the “scum of the earth skaters” (Peralta) devoting their lives to something that “really doesn’t matter” (Peralta) as athletes struggling for survival in society. These people are portrayed as innovators in a field that is being demolished from the outside.

Chief amongst these innovators was Rodney Mullen, a member of the Bones Brigade, the man responsible for inventing the vast majority of the street skating vernacular, and the skateboarder responsible for inventing some of the most essential tricks in the sport. This was birthed out of his sheer ability to see past the conventions of the sport that confined other riders and invent. According to his longtime coach, Stacy Peralta, “Most people get on a skateboard, they stand on the deck, and they remain on the deck. Rodney looked at the board and went ‘I can ride every side of this, I can ride the nose standing up, I can ride the tail standing up, I can ride it upside down, I can ride on the edge’” (Peralta) (*see fig. 1*). Or, to put it simply, he was ready to explore what a horizontal board could do even though that was not what it was supposed to do: travel vertically. Rodney Mullen became one of the most influential skaters of all time by choosing to define what was possible for his skateboard and himself to accomplish.



Fig. 1. Rodney Mullen at Kenter Canyon School, Los Angeles, 1982. Photo credit: Glen E. Friedman.

Today, competitions are still abundant. With a quick google search of the terms "Skateboarding events in NYC," I found myself on NYSkateboarding.com. This is a website dedicated to skateboarding news, resources, parks, and events in the Manhattan and Brooklyn areas. On the events calendar, I found that in November of 2018 alone, there were two competitions of SKATE held.

A game of SKATE is quite different from an independent, non-competitive skate session. SKATE, much like PIG or HORSE in basketball, the game involves a series of increasingly

difficult tricks between a group of skaters. The skaters each get two chances to stick the landing. If they fail they get the first letter from the word “skate.” Once a person obtains all five letters they are out of the competition.

The key difference between this game and skating non-competitively is the stakes. When skating competitively, to fall or to mess up a trick is to lose the competition. When skating casually, falling is simply a low-risk mistake (aside from physical injury). Furthermore, skate competitions take place in sanctioned areas. Outside of the boundaries of competition, it seems that far more is against the average street skater. In fact, today it seems that not only are security guards and police officers becoming issues for the street skating community, but architecture has also begun to fight back against skaters who would use it to their advantage.

In the recent decade, a style of urban architecture known as “hostile architecture” emerged, as James Petty identifies in his article about the city of London (Petty 67-81). The movement started as a method to deter the homeless from sleeping in and around buildings and residences. “Metal spikes” and “metal studs” (Petty 67) are the most common ingredients of this style of design. The metal stud, especially, can be seen almost anywhere, on ledges and benches across the city. This is to prevent grinding—a trick wherein a skateboarder slides the deck or the trucks along a flat, elevated surface or edge. The challenge of street skating has become evolving beyond the anti-skateboarding architecture (Németh). Today, in internet skate videos, one can find footage of groups of skateboarders attempting to perform maneuvers and avoid security in corporate areas; but, sometimes written rules and boundaries are not enough to stop skateboarders.

When I arrived at NYU, I took my skateboard out to explore the surrounding neighborhood and skate in the park. Before I could enter Washington Square Park, I noticed a sign secured to the fencing near the entryway. It read: “Skateboarding is not permitted in the park.” New York parks have a complicated relationship with the proponents of skateboarding and with residents in general. “Space becomes power through exclusion” (Farquhar 49), says Stephanie Farquhar in her essay about the exclusivity of Gramercy Park’s rules and regulations. In Gramercy, only those who live surrounding immediately the park and have purchased a key to the gates surrounding it, can enter and enjoy the beautiful scenery and walking paths within; everyone else is not welcome. For skateboarders, the vast majority of parks, walkways, and courtyards are off limits; however, when faced with the implementation of exclusive symbols (Hostile Architecture, security guards, signs, etc.), skateboarders take on the challenge of extinction with aggressive creativity and sometimes just skate in an off-limits spot anyways. It is these limitations that have forced skateboarders to think beyond what a skateboard merely “can” do; it has pushed them to try the impossible.

These exclusions do not apply to pedestrians, however. Pedestrians are welcome most anywhere. It would seem at first that pedestrians have it better than skateboarders, but the two activities are radically different. Much like skateboarding, walking in New York requires a great deal of training, physical and personal awareness, immense focus. There is very little room for error. And traffic laws should be followed: pedestrians

cannot walk in the bike lane or in the street; they are confined to the sidewalk. Pedestrians move at a slower pace; it requires less effort to propel oneself at about an eighth of the speed of a skateboarder. Skateboarders and pedestrians sometimes come to an impasse on the sidewalk; however, should a pedestrian and a skateboarder come to a collision, the skateboarder will be far less injured than the pedestrian. Skateboarders wear protective gear and skateboarders are more used to falling than the average pedestrian. Compared to walking, skateboarding is adventurous, risky, and fun.

Rollerbladers have far more in common with skateboarders, yet lack the societal stigma and exclusion that skateboarders often incur. Rollerblades, like a skateboard, are the prop which transforms an average citizen into a participant in the activity in question. According to rollerblader and writer Blagovesta Momchedjikova, “roller-blades stay with you even after you leave the street. Roller-blades take you outside, but also come inside with you. They can carry you places but you too, can carry them: on your shoulder” (Momchedjikova section 9). The same is true for the skateboard, which too is attached to its owner, even if not in use. Yet, its very presence, even if when carried around, signifies danger, wildness, and the breaking of rules. The rollerblade and the skateboard both exist in the strange in-between space, unwelcome on the sidewalk and endangered in the New York City street; however, I have never heard a rollerblader called a “punk” for using the street or a “hooligan” for gliding down a sidewalk. Skateboarders, unlike rollerbladers, exist in a pre-determinately stigmatized culture. They are labeled as dangerous and senseless despite the fact that rollerblading and skateboarding come with the same kinds of physical dangers—the threat of injury. This label excludes skateboarders from spaces where rollerbladers are welcomed and tolerated. Sometimes signage prevents rollerbladers from entering or using an area, but so much of the city and its residents are open to the presence of rollerbladers, that the spaces where they are unwelcome seem tiny in comparison to the spaces skaters are barred from.

As I spent my time in Washington Square Park skating, I would strike up a conversation with one or two of the guys who skate on the East side of the park and around the fountain. I asked about the potential illegality of skating in specific areas and in the park in particular. Although it is plain that skating is not permitted in Washington Square Park, I’ve ever seen any police officers enforcing that clearly written rule by any means. Neither had anyone I talked to. “Naw man,” said Jay, a regular to the park. “Nobody comes in here checking on us.” To me, this meant the park had transitioned into an area where we, the skateboarders, had defied the limitations of the space and begun to determine what the space has the potential for. Pedestrians, street performers, and the like all avoid the area where the skateboarders are practicing. The area is clearly defined as ours.

Seeing that for the first time, I dropped my board to the ground while at a jog, and hopped on. I slid my back foot to the tail of the board and slammed it down making the sound as loud as a gunshot against the concrete hexagons. I scraped my front foot forward and took flight for a brief moment before leveling the board and let myself fall back to Earth, sticking the landing. Again, like so many times before, I decided what my board would do and where it would take me. I thought as I often do when I skate of Rodney Mullen performing the first flat-land ollie and pictured myself discovering the

ability to fly for the first time. Gliding along the ground, gliding through the air, defying gravity, the rules of Washington Square Park, and the rigidity of my skateboard, I took part in skateboarding in New York City.

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About the author

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