"We belong here" Lessons from skateboarding

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Chapter 1

“We belong here”: Lessons from skateboarding

Sander Hölsgens

Growing up in The Netherlands in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I stumbled upon skateboarding everywhere. MTV broadcasted *Jackass* and Avril Lavigne’s *Sk8er Boi*, while *Tony Hawk’s Pro Skater* was a sleeper hit on Sony’s PlayStation. All major cities – including Maastricht, Eindhoven, and Rotterdam – had one or more skate shops where you could hang out after school. My friends and I each purchased VHS tapes of skate videos, which we then converted to digital files and exchanged on CDs and USB sticks. Bookshops sold copies of *Transworld Skateboarding*, *Thrasher* and *Sidewalk Magazine*, international publications that portrayed professional skateboarders as god-like figures. Gradually, city councils started to install “No Skateboarding” signs, attempting to restrict the use of streets for urban play. The sign in my hometown came with a sense of pride: we as skateboarders actually changed the city of Kerkrade. We were seen. And yet: as ubiquitous as skateboarding was, it gained little public credibility. If anything, this rise in popularity coincided with a public animosity towards skateboarders, including hostile architecture such as skate stoppers and related tactics to keep us off the streets.

What a difference a few years can make. In the fall of 2023, I travelled to London to visit the Design Museum. On display was a show called *SKATEBOARD*. By this point, I had conducted research on skate culture for over a decade. I had also witnessed skateboarders make their Olympic debut in Tokyo, while NETFLIX documentaries on skateboarding became a trope. Still, it felt unreal to enter a vast exhibition space tailored to something as offbeat as skateboarding. Suddenly, the particularity of my experience was something to reflect upon, to take seriously, to *preserve*. Upon entering the exhibition space, I noticed a museum label: "The exhibition recognises that the story of skateboarding is a recent one, made by skaters. There is no single version of events so memories may not always align" (Design Museum, 2023). I wondered whether this curated version of skate history would resonate with mine, or my friends', or any other skateboarders' for that matter. I walked up to a looped video essay, narrated by professional skateboarder, Olympiad, and architect Alexis Sablone. She chronicles a story all-too familiar to skateboarders across the globe: the skateboard started as a post-war toy for children (1950s), gained traction in the United States as an alternative to surfing (1960s-1970s), generated a street culture with its own aesthetics and anti-establishment politics (1980s-2000s), and culminated into a diverse, globalised phenomenon sensitive to sportification and Olympification (2010s-now).

My youth, my upbringing as a skateboarder, neatly fits the categorisation of the 1980s-2000s: my bodily presence in the city center was one of deviance, representing a “subculture” that challenged any kind of hierarchy and rank. But there was more to the exhibition than resemblances of my own youth. In the 1970s, for instance, plastic-based materialities – usually associated with children’s toys – were replaced by wooden, concave boards tailored to use cases of transportation and athletic excellence. During this transitional phase, designers experimented with the board’s look and feel, from eight-wheeled devices to triangular shapes and the use of carbon fiber. Speculating what (else) this wheeled activity could be, the 1970s are skateboarding’s most experimental phase, if not its coming of age. At this critical moment in time, technological and socio-material developments would coincide.

This quickly changed. As soon as skateboarding moved from emptied pools to hardpan streets in the 1980s, homogeneous design principles started to gain traction. Fixated on a symmetrical board, flexible aluminum trucks, and small-sized polyurethane wheels, skateboards became a uniform tool affording trick play in the built environment. Design-wise, not much has changed since: the boards achieved an optimum between ingenuity, maneuverability, and affordability. This is the look and feel of a board most current skateboarders fell in love with. Board graphics soon became the main differentiator, speaking to the appetite of late capitalism. From brand logos and photographs to satire and political commentary, graphics are now harnessed to communicate aesthetic and ideological preferences, becoming a tool for self-expression. This reverberates the commodification of leisure in the late twentieth century. Consider how, in nearly all video games on skate culture, new graphics are unlocked upon player progress: it's peak individualism. What's at stake is not necessarily the best-performing board, but rather a pictoriality that represents the skateboarder's (or player's) core values or affiliations.

As I walked towards the exit of the exhibition, I noticed the excitement of a couple of men about my age. They were running from one cubicle to the next, pointing out boards they used to have or recognised from skate videos. They, too, glared at the graphics and accessories at display – by American brands like Zero, Real, and Krooked. Then, a long pause. One of the men began to shake. He put his arm around his friend's shoulder and said: "Mate, this is us. Not the artists, not the designers, us… We belong here. We finally belong".

Perhaps, this is the point of the exhibition: to chronicle how skateboarding transformed its deviant urban play into an accepted medium. While city councils still resort to hostile architecture and policies to remove skateboarding from the streets, there's an increasing acknowledgment of its positive contributions. "We belong here" not only means a negative liberty, or an absence of hostile interference, but also a presence of skateboarders in the public sphere. In the 2020s, skateboarders are politicians, lawyers, social workers, planners, designers, psychologists, managers, and teachers – all working towards a fairer, safer, and more democratic use of public space. Put differently: "we belong" echoes with "our presence matters".

Skate studies: an origin story

Skateboarding's societal position is changing for the better. This shift is reflected in skate scholarship, too. What started off as an eccentric research subject has grown into a thriving area of inquiry. Globally, students are writing their thesis on topics adjacent to skate culture, while dozens of academics embrace research on urban play, lifestyle sports, and street art. Within the skate studies community, I've also heard multiple people say that "we finally belong". Gone are the awkward moments that talks on skateboarding at academic conferences are met with patronising comments. Disciplines like anthropology, performance studies, sociology, film and media studies, fine art, pedagogy and education, urban studies, and the psychology of sport now accept articles on skateboarding as valid contributions to research. Considered a societal phenomenon to reckon with, the bibliography in skate studies is growing on a weekly basis – offering radically new insights and pushing the field in unforeseen directions.

Skate studies took off in the mid-1990s with the publication of works by three researchers: Becky Beal, Iain Borden, and Ocean Howell. Although they fostered an entire generation of skate intelligentsia, their idiosyncratic relationship to skateboarding sparked a range of distinct insights. During his teens and twenties, Ocean Howell skated for H-Street, a San Diego-based skateboard brand, only to become a professional skateboarder for Tony Hawk's Birdhouse a few years later. These experiences punctuated his early academic work. This includes an inquiry into the urban developments and everyday experiences of Philadelphia's LOVE Park, an architectural marvel and prototypical skateable space. His writing works towards a poetics of security, tracing the effects of exclusionary urban policies and hostile architecture on skateboarding (Howell, 2005; 2008). Howell is especially well-known for his idea that skateboarders are used as "unwitting troops" for gentrification, by deterring "vandalism, drug use, prostitution, and homeless encampments" (Howell, 2008, p.485). Like artists, Howell claims, skateboarders are part of the neoliberal toolkit and tactics municipalities use for urban renewal.

By contrast, sports sociologist Becky Beal decided early on in her fieldwork that she would rather observe than skate:

> This is what happened when I first started interviewing skateboarders in 1989. It was mainly boys and they'd say: 'oh do you want to be a skater? Is that why you're interviewing us?' And I just decided right there: I'm not going to… I'm just going to be interested in you and I'm going to learn about your life, but I'm not trying to be a skater, I'm not trying to use you to become a skater. So that's where I just split. and that's why I never did it and now I'm old and I don't want to hurt myself (Pushing Boarders, 2018: online).

Beal's PhD thesis, completed in 1992, proved to be a starting point for long-term research into the gender dynamics and subcultural values in skateboarding, including how male skateboarders express non-hegemonic masculinity (Beal, 1992). Relatedly, Beal claims that skateboarders oppose competition, commerce, and hierarchy, such that the "internalization and personalization of the core values were central to being accepted as a legitimate member" (Beal and Weidman, 2003, p.340). Beal identified how societal value systems intersect with or counter skateboarding, suggesting that it operates as a subculture of sorts. This argument was advanced by researchers including Tyler Dupont (2014), Bethany Geckle and Sally Shaw (2022), and Chuang Li (2022), who developed site-specific studies into gatekeeping and authenticity.

A first-generation British skateboarder, Iain Borden primarily skates bowls, not street – which is the main topical focus of this volume. Still, his main arguments revolve around street skating and found urban space. As an architectural historian influenced by Henri Lefebvre, Borden (2019) is specifically interested in how skateboarders represent, perceive, and produce found architectural space. Most critically, Borden argues how skateboarders "analyse architecture not for historical, symbolic or authorial content but for how surfaces present themselves as skateable surfaces". Put differently, skateboarders develop a unique skill set for navigating the city: they reconfigure the common meanings of urban space through play. By rendering space as *skateable*, skateboarders also offer an embodied critique of the functionalist design principles of the modern city. Even though street furniture like ledges, benches, bollards, and litter bins have specific use-cases, skateboarders imagine what else these objects could be (and mean). This, to Borden, is a way for skateboarders to push back against the increasing neoliberalisation of modern cities. Borden's argument is recently taken up by researchers including Luke Cianciotto (2020, p.680), who suggests that skateboarders produce *common* space – or a spatial typology that is "constantly in the process of becoming, brought into being through social practices". Relatedly, Åsa Bäckström and Anne-Lend Sand (2019, p.122) argue that skateboarders "imagine and make new material encounters" through their bodily practice.

Finally, and crucially, Borden's work offers the first and most thorough historical analysis of the sociocultural, geographic and architectural developments of skate culture. Borden's more recent writings, including an updated re-issue of his 2001 seminal text, explore how skateboarding has moved beyond being a predominantly Northern American (and Western European) phenomenon, with social skate organisations and communities on the rise. This reverberates with the narrative presented at the SKATEBOARD exhibition described above: from deviant to socially conscious and societally accepted.

The three Es: the environmental, ethical, and emic turns

Inspired by the first wave of skate researchers, current scholarship orbits around three intersecting turns: the environmental, the ethical, and the emic. The first – the environmental turn – took off at Pushing Boarders, a conference tracing the social impact of skateboarding. During a workshop, scholars, industry leaders, and critics got together to discuss where skateboarding stands in terms of sustainability. As much as the skate industry is slowly moving towards ethically produced attire and boards made with renewables, another concern was raised: skateboarding depends on the polluting spaces of the built environment, including city centers, harbours, brownfields, and industrial areas. The hardpan surface of the city – and tarmac in specific – fumes with toxins and chemicals, not to mention the close proximity of cars, landfills, and factories. Put differently: skateboarding relies on the modern city, or precisely the kind of poisonous environment known to cause thousands of deaths per year. One of the scholars attending the workshop was Clifton Evers, who had just coined the concept of "polluted leisure" to understand how surfers learn to live alongside marine pollution. This conceptualisation proved relevant to urban practices as well, resulting in a co-authored piece about skateboarding and the Anthropocene (O'Connor et al., 2023). Framed as "grey spaces", these authors identified how socio-material detritus punctuates the everyday practice of skateboarding.

This environmental take on skateboarding implicitly builds upon Actor-Network Theory and related social theories interested in constantly shifting networks of complex relationships between people, other lifeforms, things, and environs. What's more, this foundational paper kickstarted an entire strand of 'chromatic' research, from an interest in brownfields (Glenney, 2023), grey sites of skate tourism (Buchetti and O'Connor, 2024), green skateable spaces (McDuie-Ra, 2023), greyness and masculinity (Chan, 2023), the joy of using polluted skate spaces (Hölsgens and Glenney, 2025), and the convergence of social and material pollution (Hölsgens, 2024). In this collected volume, Noah Romero and Douglas Miles advance this genealogy by researching the relationship skaters of the Apache Notion have with land. Indigo Willing, Sanné Mestrom, Lian Loke, and Nadia Odlum point to more sustainable ways of building skate spaces. While pollution is not the topical focus of this volume, the environmental turn has influenced many of its contributors in exploring the relationship between skaters and their surroundings.

In 2023, sociologist Indigo Willing and journalist Anthony Pappalardo observed that a growing number of skaters are change-makers. Aiming to transform society for the better, skaters increasingly turn to social and humanitarian issues of gender inequity, racism, mental health, consent culture, unsafe cities, and climate change. As much as skateboarding has historically developed into an unorganised, individualist, and male-dominated practice, the tide is turning. Women-led organisations are pushing for equal pay among professional skaters (Wheaton and Thorpe, 2018; Abulhawa, 2020); conferences and festivals tackle problems in skate culture from within (Hölsgens, 2021); industry leaders raise awareness on suicidality (Pushing Boarders, 2019); skateparks organise skate sessions for women, non-binary, and queer skaters (Bäckström and Nairn, 2018; Dekker, 2023); and design and construction companies use more durable and ethically produced materials for the production of skateable space (Kuipers, 2022). Willing and Pappalardo (2023) identify this trend as an "ethical turn" in skateboarding – an indication that it is no longer just a youth culture tailored to play. Skateboarding is developing into a self-conscious, reflexive, and multifaceted network of communities, some of which align themselves with or parallel broader social movements. This ethical turn includes both a critique of skate culture itself and a resistance to harmful societal issues. Increasingly, this includes intersectional and decolonial approaches (Sueyoshi 2015; Atencio, Romero, 2020). Many of the chapters in this book reflect this ethical turn in understanding skateboarding as a learning tool.

Finally, and relatedly, research on skateboarding includes a growing group of skate practitioners, who use their insider's positionality to validate their knowledge claims. Social scientists denote this as an *emic* perspective. This approach generates detailed (auto-)ethnographic accounts of skate culture, including communities in Japan (Marlovits, 2024), Palestine (Abulhawa, 2017), China (Li, 2022), Sweden (Book and Eden, 2021), South Korea (Hölsgens, 2019), Dubai (McDuie-Ra, 2021), Jamaica (Critchley, 2022), Indonesia (Artosa, 2022), Afghanistan (Friedel, 2015), and many more. It also engenders insights into how socio-political dynamics play out in the microcosm of skateboarding, including motherhood (Sayers, 2023), racial politics (Williams, 20211), queerness (Geckle and Shaw, 2022), and media representation (Willing et al., 2020). The wide majority of these studies speak to the researcher's involvement in skateboarding. Conceptualised as a "rolling ethnography" (McDuie-Ra, 2023), researchers regularly use their own sensory practice to gain access to a community and offer a more trustworthy alternative to the unfamiliar observer. Such an immersive approach and embedded positionality enables a research typology that foregrounds the experiential, affective, and emotive, rather than locating knowledge primarily in discursive exchanges and quantitative analysis.

However, uplifting sensory data does not necessarily mean a researcher has to be a practitioner themselves. Åsa Bäckström (2014), one of this volume's contributors, has written extensively on the sensory and kinaesthetic experience in skateboarding, without actively partaking in the practice during her research projects. Similarly, Greg Snyder (2017) traces the socio-emotive dimensions of being a professional skater from an etic, or outsider's, perspective. Analysing a practice one is not part of can help identify routines, tendencies, and structures that may otherwise be taken for granted. This volume features skateboarders and non-skateboarders alike, advancing the notion that a focus on merely insider's or outsider's perspectives alone is insufficient for understanding the depth and scope of a practice.

If anything, all these studies show the multiplicity of skateboarding today. As much as the *SKATEBOARD* exhibition at the Design Museum boosts a hegemonic history, the factual origins of skateboarding remain nebulous. The most dominant story – the one presented at the exhibition – takes place in Southern California, in the early 1950s (Borden, 2019). There, young kids modified scooters in such a way that they eventually ended up with a wooden plank, four wheels, and two axle trucks, without any kind of handlebar. However, a similar story exists about the coasts of postwar Japan. Here, kids were also making new wheeled tools, as much as surfers transformed surfing to a form of urban play (Glauser, 2016). These academic uncertainties play out on different levels, too. Is skateboarding truly salubrious, bettering practitioners' mental and physical health? Is it really as progressive as some of its community leaders want us to believe? And is it actually unique and incomparable, *sui generis*, as some researchers have suggested over the past few years (Glenney and Mull, 2018)? These are exactly the kinds of questions that the contributors of this edited volume grapple with – through the lens of education and pedagogy. The outcome is not a general story about skate culture, but rather a collection of situated studies that broaden and deepen our insights into the kinds of forms and effects skateboarding may have in specific contexts. As such, this volume proposes that there is no such thing as a *skate world*, but rather a diversity of interconnected *skate worlds*.

Skate pedagogies

These new directions in skate scholarship display a shared interest in learning and teaching practices. Ethically, skateboarders co-develop emancipatory sensibilities to become a better person. Environmentally, skateboarders must learn to live with pollution. As a global community, skateboarders cultivate a common frame of reference for urban play. This volume, *Skate/Worlds*, seeks to advance this intersection of skateboarding and learning. Can skateboarding be a school subject and contribute to people's personal development? Is it therapeutic? Why do skaters learn to move sideways? What do you learn from falling and failing (Tae, 2011)? And how can skateboarding help parents with raising newborns? The volume chronicles how we can learn to skate and learn from skateboarding, zooming in on topics including gestalt therapy, high school education, open-source learning communities, DIY peer support, care work, motherhood, anticolonial pedagogy, and grassroots advocacy. These topics speak to the ethical and environmental concerns at the heart of today's societies.

One of the aims of *Skate/Worlds* is to break down decades-old assumptions on skate pedagogy. Most persistently is the idea that skateboarding advances an antirank, informal, and horizontal pedagogical approach: a beginner does not learn to skate by taking lessons from a coach or instructor, but simply *by doing*. This includes carefully observing peers (but never asking for help); watching skate videos on repeat (but never instructional videos); performing a Sisyphean form of trial-and-error (but never quitting). Attending a skate class, let alone wearing a helmet or joining an association, goes against the grain of this normative ethic of self-schooling (O'Connor, 2016). Taken to the extreme, some skateboarders – generally labelled as "core" – may take pride in the unending frustration of learning tricks by themselves. Akin to martyrs or meritocrats, such practitioners honour the code of being an autodidact, preferring the idea of hurting themselves over asking for a little help. Despite these "core" sensibilities, skateboarding has a convoluted historical relationship with formalised education and institutional sports. There have always been skateboarders who mentor their peers, enjoy school, wear protective gear, and watch instructional videos. Learning to skate and taking lessons from skateboarding have socio-historically oscillated between informal and formal education, between the self-actualisation of individuals and the emancipatory forces of the collective.

Learning processes are always situated, meaning that skateboarding can be more DIY in some places and more regulated and institutionalised in others. *Skate/Worlds* acknowledges this spectrum by zooming in on specific contexts, showing how skateboarders across the globe learn about, from, through, or in spite of skateboarding. This approach is further substantiated by recent publications on skate pedagogy, most notably Robert Petrone's *Dropping In: What Skateboarders Can Teach Us about Learning, Schooling, and Youth Development* (2023). Petrone considers skateboarding a possibility model for developing more equitable education for all youth, in part because it is such a fluid and ever-changing practice. The fact that *Skate/Worlds* and *Dropping In* were produced along similar timelines is not a coincidence: there has been an increase in scholarship on adjacent topics. This includes insights into youth skateboarding programmes (Sorsdahl et. al, 2024), play therapy among skateboarders (Norman, 2024), spiritual development (Shoemaker and Bernal, 2024), and the educational practices of healing and care (Clark and Sayers, 2023). Besides presenting new and original research, one of the aspirations of *Skate/Worlds* is to draw attention to recent scholarship on skate pedagogy.

Co-editor Adelina Ong and I brought together writers, educators, researchers, and social workers who use skateboarding as a learning tool. We invited these authors to share their perspectives on skateboarding and education: where does it flourish, why does it falter, how can it improve? We hope that this encourages readers to explore the liberating potential of moving sideways on their streets, as well as to find or create learning communities that speak to their emancipatory aspirations. We do not argue that skateboarding plus education is an equation with a singular outcome. Rather, we provide case studies that amplify the meanings and interpretations of learning practices across specific geographic, social, and historical contexts. The reader will also notice that several authors share a commitment to critical and engaged pedagogy. This is especially noticeable in the cross-textual references to Paulo Freire. By attending to the socio-economic, cultural, and political realities of those involved in learning and teaching, Freire (2003) considers it possible to develop emancipatory and liberating educational practices. Learning to skate goes beyond the immediacy of skill acquisition: it is not just about the tricks. Many of the chapters in this volume attest to the need for a pedagogical liberation and an emphasis on practitioners' wellbeing. What aligns these chapters is an intersectional approach to research. The authors discuss how skateboarding (still) is gendered and racialised, at times bordering on classist and ableist ideologies, and encapsulated in colonial trajectories. The work of Dani Abulhawa (2017; 2020) and Neftalie Williams (2021) is instrumental for multiple authors to develop such a situated critique.

The volume's second chapter, by Rhianon Bader, chronicles the emergence of social skateboarding. Based on research by the Goodpush Alliance, Bader traces how social skate and educational initiatives exchange knowledge and best practices through open-source learning communities. The chapter gives an overview of the various ways in which skate collectives – especially those operating outside the global north – build and share teaching strategies, as much as it addresses pressing critiques on skate philanthropy and the broader formalisation of skateboarding. John Dahlquist turns the latter point into a detailed case study: what is it like to have skateboarding as a school subject? As a teacher and vice principal at Bryggeriets gymnasium in Malmö, Dahlquist reflects with former students on the joy and challenges of a skate-infused high school. The chapter's empirical insights show how skateboarding can help students with other subjects, while the formalised setting of a school can simultaneously feed and limit students' interest in skateboarding. *Skate/Worlds* fourth chapter, by Esther Sayers, reflects on her research at Bryggeriets gymnasium by asking: what if a skate pedagogy has the aim of learning-for-life, rather than for a profession or constrained skill set? Precisely by developing social, symbolic, and embodied ways of knowing, skateboarders can build meaningful connections and shape empowering communities. Advancing the notion of a public pedagogy, Sayers argues that skateboarding can be an emancipatory tool for acquiring agency and a community-wide sense of belonging.

Arianna Gil and Jessica Forsyth explore how socially engaged skate crews in New York City deal with structural oppression. Grounded in research by the Harold Hunter Foundation, Gil and Forsyth point out how skate crews have the capacity to challenge the urban politics of wealth and welfare distribution, making visible the city's socio-economic and racialised segregation. Here, DIY acquires a political meaning. Indigo Willing, Sanné Mestrom, Lian Loke, and Nadia Odlum also delve into peer and community support among skateboarders. Attending to women and non-traditional skateboarders in Australia, these authors highlight sociological, design-based, and artistic projects that reconsider what skate spaces can be. Initiated by the authors themselves, these projects push for gender equity and social inclusion in urban play. Åsa Bäckström connects such urban play to movement literacy by asking a crucial chapter: how does teaching and learning in skateboarding happen? Taking Oyvind Standal's phenomenological insights into physical education as a starting point, Bäckström positions embodied skill-acquisition as a crucial variable in community-building. What's more, the learning process of skateboarding speaks to issues of social inclusion, hegemonic norms, and categories of difference.

The volume's eight chapter, by Sophie Friedel, scrutinises movement literacy in a therapeutic setting. Based on Friedel's own gestalt therapy, this chapter points to the divergent ways in which skateboarding can be generative in terms of mental health, personal development, and lifelong learning. In the two case studies presented, Friedel identifies how skateboarding can be interwoven into professional therapeutic practices. For Adelina Ong, moving sideways is equally transformative. Reflecting on motherhood in Singapore, Ong argues that skateboarding with a baby in a stroller can challenge both gendered expectations of parenting and the carefully monitored choreographies of urban space. Here, the skateboard and the stroller become pedagogical tools for raising a newborn *and* unlearning normative approaches to motherhood. Finally, Noah Romero and Douglas Miles build upon this discourse of resistance by drawing upon the anti-colonial skate pedagogy of Apache Skateboards. A Native-founded skate company, Apache Skateboards is a model for informal and non-scholastic learning through which to advance Indigenous struggles and reject colonial mandates. Romero and Miles demonstrate how skateboarding as a modality for learning can push for collective liberation. This, co-editor Adelina Ong and I believe, brings together all chapters: how can we build new, and expand on, existing pedagogies that speak to the needs of a multiplicity of skate worlds?

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