

Urban Guerrillas : Skateboarding and the City

"Skaters by their very nature are urban guerrillas: they make everyday use of the useless artifacts of the technological burden, and employ the handiwork of government/corporate structure in a thousand ways that the original architects could never dream of." - Craig Stecyck, 1976



The skateboarder in the metropolis is an urban warrior of a different kind. The perception of the city that comes from this user group is loaded with a specificity of seeking, combined with creativity, athleticism, and a rebellious counter culture. Public space in the city takes on new identities when viewed through the mind of a skater. The search for new 'spots' is endless and the ability to adapt to any environment is unrelenting. For the skater the entire city is a usable terrain. Design elements intended for sitting, landscape, changes in elevation or public safety become obstacles of opportunity for grinding, sliding and clearing that can be combined and with any array of tricks limited only by the technical skill, confidence, and will of the skater.

The stair, for example, is a very necessary and basic element of architecture. In urban design, it is historically used to represent a sense of monumental grandeur, it functionally connects areas of different elevation bringing people from one place to another, and in design it offers a scale and flexibility to the designer that can adapt to any situation. The pedestrian uses the stair for access or seating and within a public plaza can offer a place of hesitation to observe the interchange of the community. But the skateboarder sees the stair in a whole new light as a challenge to experience, an opportunity to practice, and a place to express creativity. A simple set of stairs with a good landing and runway can tempt skaters to push the boundaries of their own existence and inspire a creative act that transcends typical movements of the body through space. Add a rail, a curb or a ledge and the potential for the application and combination of tricks becomes limitless increasing the possibility of new perceptions through space. Every element in every corner of the city offers a potential arena for the sport multiplied thousands of times throughout an urban fabric.

The movement of skateboarding changes the parallax of the city. The ability to roll at speed alters the viewpoint continuously. The skater is not bound by the separation of car and pedestrian, but can roll seamlessly between street and sidewalk. The fluid and dynamic motion of skateboarding propels the body through space. The loud rumble of urethane wheels, and the distinct 'clack' of the ollie announces the presence of a skateboard from a distance and turns the heads of unsuspecting pedestrians. This audible presence also influences the perception of the skater causing a reaction of indifference to the surrounding social context. In this sense, the skateboarder like the architect, exists outside the constructs of society and is free to experiment and explore. But unlike the architect, the skater exists free to reinterpret the function and use of spatial sequences for their own expression and enjoyment.

Skateboarding is an individual activity expressed as an extension of self. It is a creative act that is as specific and unique as each skater's persona and style. As an art form, it can be elegant, smooth, effortless and beautiful... yet at the same time it can be aggressive, intense, bold, and in your face. As a sport, the physical body is pushed to a level of coordination and conditioning as real as the concrete, stone and asphalt surfaces that break and bruise the body which fails to roll away after attempting a maneuver. The adrenaline of each attempt and the reward of rolling away pushes each skater to pursue the act, focus the mind and succeed. Unlike organized sport, there is no winner or loser in skateboarding, it is the process that counts, not the result. Skating is an individual sport and its style is an act of self expression, but it is fueled through the social interaction and competition driven camaraderie that a group dynamic provides. Skaters roll in packs, pushing each other through performance and praise to break new boundaries and experience the urban criteria through a new interface of exchange. This social construct becomes a representation of a new type of family unit, providing support and validation for a user group that is often seen as problematic through the eyes of a corporate, capitalist society.

The skateboarding culture emerged during the mid 1970s in southern California as an extension of a surf culture, but quickly took on a lifestyle of it's own. It represented an energy and urban radicalism that has classified skateboarding as an alternative to the mainstream. Within the context of the city, the skateboarder can still be regarded as a public nuisance by property owners, patrons and pedestrians being ushered away by security guards and harassed by the law. The pursuit of skateboarding and its attitude directed against the grain leaves a clear mark on the architecture of the city. The tracks of skate spots can be seen on waxed curbs, walls, ledges and rails left to be revisited at another time. Seen by some as vandals, skaters leave behind hints of the alternative uses provided by urban spaces that enrich the fabric of the urban jungle. Conditioned to appear at moments when there is the least resistance, skateboarders are urban guerrillas seeking an environment in which to practice their medium.

One of the many things that architecture and urbanism can learn from this integral user group is the flexibility and adaptability of using sequences of prescribed space. Another is the understanding of alternate perceptions through experimentation. These ideas can be utilized to create changes that may introduce completely new trajectories of architectural thinking.

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