

Street Skateboarding and the Aesthetic Order of Public Spaces

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Street skateboarders are often excluded from public spaces with skating viewed as anti-social or uncivil. In this article, we argue that it can also be regarded as problematic as it interferes with the look and feel of cities as promoted by late-modern capitalism. The article contributes to an aesthetic criminology by arguing that street skateboarding is itself an aesthetic practice, but that this practice challenges the functionality and aesthetic order of the city. The article is supported by evidence from interviews with skateboarders in Manchester, UK. The context is the dual position of skateboarding, being regarded as both deviant and serious leisure (for instance, featuring for the first time in the Olympics in 2021). Rather than criminalizing and excluding skateboarders, it is argued that their aesthetic appreciation of public spaces could add value to city life, that they see and feel the city in ways that ought to add to our emotional and affective appreciation of what it means to live in a city.

Key Words: skateboarding, aesthetic criminology, exclusion, deviant leisure, Manchester

INTRODUCTION

Skateboarding has become a focal point for local authorities and agencies who consider skating in public spaces to be uncivil or anti-social (e.g. Woolley and Johns 2001). It can be regarded as problematic due to issues of loitering, the noise associated with skateboarding, trespass, damage to surfaces and the potential for conflict with others' use of public space (see e.g. Vivoni 2009). In this article, it is argued that it is also deemed to be problematic as it challenges the aesthetic ordering of public spaces, that it is often perceived to interfere with the look and feel of cities that are designed to cater for the 'consuming majority' (cf. Bannister et al. 2006) of late-modern capitalism. The focus for this article is street skateboarding as opposed to skating in purpose-built skateparks—the practice of using and adapting urban landscapes for skating, repurposing everyday city items such as stairs, benches and ledges, turning them into obstacles to be negotiated. It is argued that street skateboarding is an aesthetic practice—alongside being a leisure and subcultural practice—that challenges the functionality and aesthetic order of the city. Implications are discussed in terms of criminalization and exclusion from public space.

The article contributes to an aesthetic criminology (Millie 2016; 2017; 2019; Cooper et al. 2018; García Ruiz and South 2019), an approach to studying crime, justice and social harm that is concerned with our 'emotive and affective responses to sensory encounters' and 'the

regulation of tastes' (Millie 2017: 16). From the 2010s onwards, there has been what can be regarded as a visual turn within criminology with the growth of visual criminology that, according to Nicole Rafter (2014: 129) is, 'the study of ways in which all things visual interact with crime and criminal justice, inventing and shaping one another' (see also Brown and Carrabine 2017; McClanahan 2021). In recent years, there has also been growing appreciation that our sensory encounters with crime, justice and social harm are not restricted to the visual. According to McClanahan (2021), for instance, a proliferation of crime-related images may lead to ocularcentrism, privileging the visual over other sensory engagement. Thus, a development from visual criminology has been a suggested sensory criminology (McClanahan and South 2020)—what may be regarded as a further sensory turn for criminology. This is not a criticism of visual criminology which still has a great deal to offer but extends our appreciation to *all* the senses in constructions of crime, justice and social harm. This is reflected, for instance, in the publication of '*Sensory Penalties*', a collection edited by Kate Herrity et al. (2021) that explores—as the book's subtitle suggests—'the senses in spaces of punishment and social control'.

Aesthetic criminology similarly 'has interest in all the senses' (Millie 2019: 1270) and can be regarded as part of a sensory turn in criminology. It has clear overlaps with the proposed sensory criminology but focuses on how our senses relate to emotions, affect and taste. Aesthetic criminology draws on the philosophical study of aesthetics (Millie 2016), but also—and of most relevance to this article—writings in urban cultural geography that consider urban affect and emotion, particularly work on sensory urbanism (e.g. Rogerson and Rice 2009; Henshaw 2014). For instance, according to the human geographer Nigel Thrift (2004: 59), affective responses are:

... usually associated with words such as emotion and feeling, and a consequent repertoire of terms such as hatred, shame, envy, jealousy, fear, disgust, anger, embarrassment, sorrow, grief, anguish, pride, love, happiness, joy, hope, wonder.

We argue that such affect is relevant to both the practice of street skateboarding and attempts by those with power to exclude from public space. In line with literature on skateboarding culture (e.g. Borden 2001; 2016; Vivoni 2009; Snyder 2017; Chiu and Giamarino 2019), it is contended that skaters see the city differently and this seeing begets a unique aesthetic appreciation of public space. Skating is an aesthetic practice that re-shapes the city physically, emotionally and interpretively, especially for those 'in the know'; yet agents of social control have little understanding of skaters' appreciation of public space. The article is concerned with how aesthetic appreciation, notions of order and pleasure are experienced, projected and negotiated. We suggest that the tastes of those with power—often promoting the commercial interests of late-modern capitalism—can dictate the look and feel of the city resulting in exclusion for those who have a different aesthetic appreciation and therefore do not fit in, including skateboarders. Such exclusion is backed by legal, physical and social controls. According to Bourdieu (1979/1984), a hierarchy or tastes can be tracked from low-brow, through middle-brow to high-brow tastes—what the cultural criminologist Jeff Ferrell (1996) has regarded as an aesthetic of authority. In urban public spaces practices that do not fit with an 'aesthetic of authority' such as street skateboarding may be excluded. Woolley and Johns (2001) have proposed that skateboarding be considered as a positive contribution to city life. Rather than viewing it as a practice to be excluded, it is suggested here that skateboarders' aesthetic appreciation of public space could add value to city life.

METHODOLOGY

This article draws on research conducted in 2018 in the city of Manchester in the north of England, recognized as one of the UK's top destinations for street skateboarding (Woolley and

Johns 2001; Curran 2014). The research in Manchester involved semi-structured interviews with ten skateboarders aged between 20 and 40. The participants included one female and nine males. It is acknowledged that these are not representative of all skateboarders in the city; however, the sample was purposively recruited to include some of the key players in the Manchester scene, including five professional skateboarders. Snowball sampling was used with participants recruited via gatekeepers at two skate shops and a local skate park. Interviews varied from 45 minutes to 2 hours and took place in skate parks, shops or cafés, depending upon the wishes of the participant. All interviews were transcribed and analysed for key and emerging themes. Ethical approval was gained from the authors' institutional research ethics committee and all interviewees were anonymized.

BACKGROUND

The context for the discussion is the various legal, physical and social restrictions put in place to inhibit skating. In England and Wales from the late 1990s onwards, a plethora of legislation¹ has targeted anti-social behaviour (Millie 2009; Heap 2016). Alongside measures introduced through national legislation, local byelaw powers have also been used. These are:

...local laws made by a local council under an enabling power contained in a public general act or a local act requiring something to be done – or not done – in a specified area. They are accompanied by some sanction or penalty for their non-observance. (UK Government 2016)

Manchester City Council has a byelaw in situ that first gained approval in November 2001 and came into force 1 month later that bans skateboarding from specified areas within the city centre. The byelaw gives the local authority—and those who police these areas—the power to fine skateboarders and effectively criminalize them for taking part in a non-criminal activity. Despite a multitude of newer measures, such as Public Space Protection Orders (PSPOs) introduced with the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014,² the local authority continues to favour local byelaw powers as, once in place, they can remain in situ for as long as the authority who granted them wants. Also, byelaws do not require public consultation. PSPOs require public consultation and must be reviewed every 3 years. In addition to legal controls, attempts are made to exclude skateboarders through physical controls, for instance, through use of skate stoppers that make skateboarding more difficult by interrupting a smooth surface. Skateboarders can also be socially excluded from urban public spaces by a variety of social control agents such as security guards and police officers and influenced by public perception and negative media portrayals.

The city is traditionally a place of diversity, culture and economic prosperity. Yet, according to Sharon Zukin (1995), only certain forms of diversity are celebrated with exclusion and control essential to our understanding of how urban public spaces are managed. For Lefebvre (1991), there is a clash between a consumption of space that produces surplus value and that which produces only enjoyment and is therefore considered unproductive. In other words, there is a conflict between consumerist and other uses of public space. In this light skateboarders' consumption of space might be considered unproductive and unable to contribute to the value of how local authorities, commercial interests and city centre managers visualize the city, as skateboarders appear to use public spaces purely for pleasure rather than to contribute to capitalist

1 Notably the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003 and the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014.

2 Section 59 Public Space Protection Orders (PSPOs) are broad powers that allow local authorities to criminalize non-criminal nuisances or anti-social behaviours taking place within a specified area.

gain. In the right context, skateboarding can attract tourists and therefore consumer spending. For example, skateboarders have for several years attracted large crowds of tourists at the undercroft at the South Bank Centre in London (Millie 2009; Borden 2016). And more experienced skateboarders can be involved in commercial practices, a theme we return to. Yet skateboarders' day-to-day apparently unproductive use of public space may mean that skateboarding is interpreted as something to be excluded.

Skateboarding can be regarded as subcultural practice, although not necessarily in the classic sense of the Birmingham school (e.g. Hall and Jefferson 1976) that emphasized the importance of class—that subcultures are a working-class youth response to 'the material and situated experiences of their class' (Clarke et al. 1976: 47). Skaters are not all working class and they are not all youthful. That said, Hall and Jefferson's (and colleagues') emphasis on resistance through music, style and rituals may have relevance, although the extent that skating is resistance is something we consider further. According to Jack Katz (1988), transgression is inherently exciting and pleasurable, an observation taken forward by cultural criminology that emphasizes crime and deviance as edgework characterized by playfulness, risk-taking and resistance (Lyng 1990; Presdee 2000). Of course, not all transgressions are exciting, and some are quite mundane; yet play, risk and resistance can be features of many criminal or deviant activities and are clearly aspects of street skateboarding culture.

In recent years, a further development within criminology has been a focus on 'deviant leisure' (e.g. Clarke and Critcher 1985; Rojek 1999; Raymen and Smith 2019). In leisure studies for many years, a common-sense understanding of leisure was as free time, referring to the time left over after work and non-work obligations and how that time is spent (Stebbins 2017). Robert Stebbins' work (1996; 1997) is widely accepted as the beginning of deviant leisure studies with deviant leisure seen as an additional category alongside serious leisure and casual leisure (Spracklen 2017). Skateboarding can be viewed as serious leisure because it is an activity that requires significant personal effort, based on acquiring specific skills and possessing a unique ethos and social world. This is in contrast with casual leisure, which is immediate, relatively short-lived and requires no special training (Stebbins 1997). The 'seriousness' of the activity is reflected in the fact that, for the first time, skateboarding was successfully introduced as part of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics (delayed until summer 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic). Deviant leisure activities include those that subvert or reject norms, and academics have drawn on a wide range of practices—some legal, others not—as examples, including binge drinking (Crabbe 2006), urban exploration as recreational trespass (Kindynis 2019), 'deviant' sexual practices (Franklin-Reible 2010), and even serial killing (Williams 2020). Street skateboarding is an example of deviant leisure, one which is banned or, if tolerated, it is controlled; yet by including skateboarding as part of the Olympics and acquiring regulatory structures and governing bodies, it has a foot in both camps—being both deviant and serious.

Recent criticism of the deviant leisure perspective has come from deviant leisure theorists operating from an ultra-realist perspective (e.g. Raymen 2019a; 2019b; Raymen and Smith 2019). Ultra-realism is a sub-strain of English criminology that, according to Steve Hall (2018), focuses on ethnographic methods and the injustices of intersectionality. Neither ethnography nor intersectionality are unique to ultra-realism. For Hall, ultra-realists consider why '... some individuals and groups risk harm to others as they pursue their instrumental and expressive interests'. Like much of criminology ultra-realists claim to draw on a wide range of academic disciplines but are '[h]eavily indebted to Jacques Lacan, Slavoj Žižek, and Adrian Johnston's psychoanalytic theory' (Wood 2019: 95). Thomas Raymen (2019a) adopted an ultra-realist perspective on deviant leisure when discussing parkour. He drew on Veblen's (1899/2007) *Theory of the Leisure Class* that identified leisure as unequally distributed consisting of conspicuous and consumed leisure activities. For Raymen (2019a), parkour is not deviant; rather it

is hyper-conformist as he argues it also adheres to the values of consumer capitalism. In Raymen's study, parkour practitioners—sometimes known as free runners or traceurs—set up businesses and hosted advertisers on their social media accounts. He argued that this is a 'safe' transgression involving deviancy *and* capitalism. Gregory Snyder (2017) has noted how skateboarding can be both transgressive and entrepreneurial. He also highlighted how skating is physical, aesthetic and commercial: 'a highly refined athletic and aesthetic pursuit, from which a large number of people profit' (Snyder 2017: 9). That said, there may be advantages in being open to wider consumerist culture for skateboarding campaigns to gain access to city space (e.g. Chiu and Giamarino 2019).

In the current study in Manchester, those interviewed included skateboarders employed by skate shops, working as instructors or in some other way making a living from skating including as professional skateboarders sponsored by commercial interests. This is a product of our sampling methodology and most street skateboarders would not fall into this camp. However, the participants' experiences illustrate that overlaps between transgression and conformity, or between deviancy and serious leisure do exist.

By engaging with commercial practices it is possible therefore that those involved in street skateboarding are not 'doing resistance' as is often suggested by subcultural theory and cultural criminology (see e.g. Beal 1995; Borden 2001). According to Dimou and Ilan (2018: 15), the idea of subcultures is still useful 'to understand the political significance of youth leisure'. Those engaged in street skateboarding are not necessarily youthful, but their (subcultural) leisure may be political—as well as deviant and serious. As Ferrell (2019: 6) has suggested, if actors do not articulate reasons for their actions this 'does not necessarily disqualify an act from being resistant'. Millie (2019) makes a similar point regarding yarn bombing, that just because practitioners may not be politically motivated this does not mean their actions are not political, that '[c]hallenging people's aesthetic expectations and their understandings of the everyday use of urban space—even if this is with wool-covered trees—can be regarded as a political action' (Millie 2019: 1277). The same is true for skateboarders. Some may be hyper-conformist in pursuing commercial gain, and they may not see their actions as political, yet in challenging how we experience urban public space their form of leisure is political (as well as being deviant and serious leisure). And like yarn bombers, street skateboarders can similarly challenge our aesthetic expectations of the city.

Street skateboarding can also be regarded as a form of urban interventionism (Iveson 2013; Young 2014; Millie 2017; 2019), an expressive activity 'performed amidst the normality of everyday urban existence' (Millie 2017: 4). Examples of urban interventions include street art/graffiti, flash mobbing, guerrilla gardening, parkour, yarn bombing and urban exploration. Urban interventions are frequently on the boundaries of normative acceptability and/or legality, and 'not only challenge the visual but also broader aesthetic experiences of the city' (Millie 2019: 1270). As noted, an important consideration for aesthetic criminology is our emotional or affective engagement, which in an urban context may be in terms of the look and feel of the city - or what Alison Young (2019) has called its affective atmosphere. In the current context, street skateboarders may contravene the functionality and the feel of the city that is being promoted by commercial interests and be regarded as out of place (cf. Cresswell 1996).

Skateboarders promote alternative functional and aesthetic appreciation of the city. Functionally, they may view a space that has never been skated and imagine ways that it could be tackled without necessarily ever skating it. Aesthetic appreciation may involve imaginary as well as actual visual and tactile engagement with the varied surfaces of the city, including those that were never meant to be appreciated in this way, such as including various obstacles, steps and rails. Often it is the banal everyday spaces of the city that are appreciated, providing an alternative consumption of public spaces that challenges the status quo. Skaters search the urban

landscape for sites that are 'skateable' and then make multiple functional and aesthetic decisions regarding what tricks are possible. Decisions concern how the city is experienced, projected and negotiated and include what to wear, where to skate, what tricks to perform and, in some cases, regarding how to document the sight and sound of what is achieved through photography and film, and then to share virtually with others in the skating subculture and beyond (with the viewer online extending aesthetic engagement further). An important consideration is how a trick fits with the history of a 'skate spot', and whether the trick has 'already-been-done' (ABD) or 'never-been-done' (NBD) in that context. In this way, the emotional and affective meaning of a skate spot changes, even for those who have not yet skated there but observe the trick online (cf. [de Certeau 1984](#)). There is attachment to specific skate spots and the creation of new urban topographies of the skaters' negotiations of public space, composed of affective nodes, paths and edges (cf. [Brantingham and Brantingham 1993](#))³ that dissect the city. Drawing on [Deleuze and Guattari \(1987\)](#), some skateboarding scholars refer to rhizomes to describe how street skaters '[r]ather than moving from point A to point B ... continue to look for potential spots or sessions that can arise at any point within a trajectory' ([Fine 2013: 7](#)).

Sharon [Zukin \(1995\)](#) has argued that the way a city looks and feels reflects the decisions made by those in power who decide who and what should be visible at specific times and places. As noted, an important consideration is the tastes of those with power ([Millie 2017](#)); however, the aesthetic order of the city, the way that those with power believe it is supposed to look, feel and act is not a straightforward matter as what is aesthetically preferable for one person or group is not necessarily for another. Some may find aesthetic satisfaction in having everything in its place. As the philosopher Roger [Scruton \(2009: 80\)](#) has considered, beauty may be found in neat rows of vegetables, that 'satisfy our need for visual order'. Transferred to an urban context, such predictability may appeal to city planners and commercial interests who benefit from an ordered city. Yet others will take aesthetic and affective satisfaction from public spaces that are more disordered, preferring unpredictability, 'a certain anarchy' ([Sennett 1970: 108](#); see [Millie 2016](#)). A breach of an approved aesthetic can lead to criminalization for those who challenge the (consumerist) aesthetic order, thus creating categories of us and them ([Millie 2008; 2017](#)). If you are not there to spend, or your presence is perceived to detract those who may spend—such as can be the case with street skateboarders—you are a threat and your presence questioned.

As suggested, skateboarders may also be involved with commercial interests, and skateboarding can be an attraction for tourists. But this is unusual, and the day-to-day management of city centre spaces prioritizes those who are there to spend (or other functions that bring money to the city, such as commuting). Those who challenge this and create a different look and feel for public spaces may be excluded, or as [Beckett and Herbert \(2009\)](#) have argued in relation to street homeless people, the result can be banishment. Yet, as Alison [Young \(2014\)](#) has suggested, whilst the appearance of cities is initially shaped by urban planners, architects and builders, the cityscape is also transformed by the efforts of unauthorized individuals (such as skateboarders).

STREET SKATEBOARDING IN MANCHESTER

Writing in *Kingpin* magazine, skateboarder [Gez Curran \(2014\)](#) claimed that Manchester was ahead of the game when it came to skateboarding. Despite the byelaw that bans skateboarding from parts of the city centre, Manchester's large and lively scene sees skaters from all over the

3 The notion of nodes, paths and edges was originally suggested by [Brantingham and Brantingham \(1993\)](#) in relation to how the physical environment can influence criminal decision making.

country travel to the city to practice their tricks, meet other skaters and explore the city in a way that only skateboarders do. For instance, according to one of the interviewees, Nick, 'Manchester has got the second biggest skateboard scene in the country besides London'. According to Seb:

Well, it's kind of got everything you need, it's got bank spots, ledge spots, it's got stairs it's like a nice mixture of architecture that you can actually skate and er the good thing with Manchester is that it almost resembles New York but on a smaller scale.

A day skateboarding on the city's streets often involves rooting around to find suitable surfaces and textures for skating. Officially approved skate parks are available but these tend to be out of the way and, as [Curran \(2014\)](#) suggests, the searching for surfaces to skate is part of the pleasure for skateboarders. According to [Curran \(2014\)](#), the mixture of new urban zones and plazas, along with the remnants of Manchester's industrial past (which are evident throughout the city) make the city an exciting skateboarding terrain. [Curran \(2014\)](#) suggests that skateboarders who frequent Manchester need to 'search and destroy' to be able to skate. According to [Ocean Howell \(2005\)](#), 'skate and destroy' and 'skate and create' were popular slogans used by skateboarders from the late 1980s. For Howell, the slogans suggest that, while skateboarders consider what they do to be an art form, they also acknowledge that skateboarding on street furniture can be destructive. Those interviewed acknowledged the damage done, e.g., leaving marks on stairs or chips on walls and ledges, as well as leaving wax residue behind. However, the skateboarders justified any damage as wear and tear and believed other city users caused an equal amount of damage. For instance, according to Lucas:

... at the most putting a few small scratches like on a ledge, like I don't see it as that bad, you know, if you look at Piccadilly Gardens [in Manchester] where people don't skate and all those benches around there are more trashed than skate spots and that's not from skating that's just from you know general wear and tear. So, it's just a bit extra wear on it. But ... it brings an area to life.

According to AJ, complaints about damage centre on issues of aesthetics:

It's the aesthetics that is what people are really worried about, that's not going to change a whole lot, there's just a bit of what we called metallic and a bit of wax, so as far as that goes for me I don't think that it is a massive thing, corporations say 'oh we've got to replace that' but like you have to replace them anyway.

Skate spots have special emotional and affective meaning for skateboarders depending on their skatability and history. [Tuan \(1977\)](#), [Cresswell \(2004\)](#) and others have differentiated between 'space' and 'place', where a space becomes a place once it gains emotional meaning and attachment. According to [Tuan \(1977: 3\)](#), 'Place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other'. For the skateboarders interviewed a skate spot has specific meaning as place and is developed when a found or made space contains the right elements. According to AJ, '...there's not one single thing that makes a skate spot, it is like a massive conundrum of lots of different types of elements'. According to Lucas: 'I suppose a lot of different things really, I suppose it's when like there's smooth ground that makes a good spot like if it's got really good like ledges and stairs'. There are functional considerations, but also aesthetic concerns with a skate spot requiring the right look and feel, and one of the most popular skate spots in Manchester is an area known as 'Urbis' located outside the National Football Museum. Urbis was the name given to a Museum of the City opened in

June 2002. However, due to low visitor numbers, Urbis closed in 2010, then reopened in 2012 as a football museum. Despite this change, for the skateboarders interviewed the name 'Urbis' has stuck. Woolley and Johns (2001) suggest that there are four elements involved in turning an ordinary space into a skate spot. These are trickability, accessibility, sociability and compatibility. Urbis remains popular because it is thought to have the right combination of all four elements. For instance, according to Nick: '...the Urbis since I've started skating in Manchester that's always been the place to go'. Similarly, for Joe, '[Urbis] it's like the main meet up point, you can get the bus into town and there is always someone there that you know'. According to Jess, 'Urbis is good' cause it's this big centre and it's not like you are in anyone's way too much, it's like big and out of the way, it's a bit of a gem of a find'.

Skateboarding at Urbis is restricted because of the byelaw that covers the area; yet, its popularity as a skate spot is un-wavering. Signage can be seen throughout the area stating that the byelaw prohibits skateboarding—and other similar activities listed as 'skating, cycling or riding on wheels' (see Figure 1, which also shows active skateboarding occurring at the Urbis skate spot).

The Manchester byelaw states that:

3. (1) No person shall on any footway or carriageway skate, slide or ride on rollers, skateboards, wheels, mechanical contrivances or other equipment in such a manner as to cause danger or nuisance or give reasonable grounds for annoyance to other persons lawfully using the footway or carriageway.
3. (2) No person shall skate, slide or ride on rollers, skateboards, wheels, mechanical contrivances or other equipment in a designated area. (Manchester City Council (no date) - Byelaws for Good Rule and Government Regarding Skateboarding etc. 2001).⁴

According to the byelaw anyone caught breaking it can be 'liable on summary conviction for a fine not exceeding level 2 on the standard scale'. At the time of writing the maximum for a level 2 fine was £500 (and Manchester had set its penalty at the highest possible denomination as demonstrated by the sign in Figure 1).

In earlier research on skateboarding within Manchester, Woolley and Johns (2001) suggested that the byelaw was vigorously enforced. Twenty years later, the situation does not appear to have changed, as Joe, one of the participants in this study noted: 'This battle with the council has been going on since I was young'. When asked how they felt about being banned from skateboarding in the city centre all the participants felt that the ban was excessive. They felt



(Photos by Sharon Dickinson)

Fig. 1 'No skateboarding' sign, along with skateboarding at the Urbis skate spot, Manchester, UK.

4 Made under section 235 of the Local Government Act 1972.

unfairly excluded for doing something that they see as their lifestyle. According to AJ, ‘... that’s like completely unfair, that’s actual separation, that’s me and them, we are not people anymore.’ Jess similarly noted, ‘Saying that you are committing an offence when you are skateboarding in town is like saying that you can’t jog into town or you can’t like hold a football or something’. Similarly, according to Sam: ‘I don’t think that it’s fair that anyone would punish anyone for something creative.’

Despite the presence of the byelaw skateboarders seemed to pay little notice and continued to use this well-respected skate spot. According to those interviewed the enforcement of legal sanctions was not always successful; as Ste explained: ‘It’s always like a game of cat and mouse and we’re the mouse and we always get away’. According to Josh, ‘Erm I’m not that fussed about it’ cause we are still just going to skate, we are going to do it anyway’. According to Lucas, ‘No matter how hard they legislate against us unless they like start fully throwing people in prison and they aren’t going to stop it’. It is possible that some of those interviewed displayed bravado in stating that the legal controls did not affect them; yet during the research, it was evident that a great deal of skateboarding still took place within restricted areas, including at the Urbis skate spot.

As noted, an alternative to legal controls might be the installation of physical controls on skateboarding. The use of urban design and architecture to target specific populations is not unique to skateboarding. For instance, street homeless people have been targeted for decades with the installation or retro-fitting of ‘bum-proof’ benches (e.g. Davis 1990), or ‘anti-homeless spikes’ outside retail and office premises to deter rough sleeping—a form of ‘hostile architecture’ (Petty 2016) or ‘defensive architecture’ (Mould 2015). Howell (2005) has argued that skateboarding is a thorn in the side of landscape planners, architects and building owners. Jenson et al. (2012) suggest that when there is a conflict over the appropriation of space by skateboarders they are designed out of that space by skate-proofing it. Iain Borden (2001) suggests that physical controls include design changes to existing urban spaces by using non-skateable materials such as gravel or sand, or the use of anti-skate devices manufactured as integral to street furniture or added to existing landscape elements such as benches and stairs. Woolley et al. (2011: 483) claim that physical controls have been an important part of Manchester City Council’s city centre management strategy both in terms of designing and regenerating the city centre. Until recently the Urbis skate spot remained free of anti-skate devices; however, in March 2020, the local authority demonstrated its continued view of skateboarding as anti-social and installed anti-skate devices to ledges at Urbis (see Figure 2), although by the end of the year, they were removed again.

The skateboarders in this study thought that anti-skate devices negatively affected the area’s aesthetic; As Joe noted, ‘Yeah yeah it like totally ruins how the architecture is supposed to look, stoppers make it look bad’. Similarly, according to AJ, ‘Well to be quite honest skate stoppers are quite ugly anyway’. According to Seb:

They covered the whole thing with these big metal bar things and it used to look really nice and then when they did that they completely butchered the whole design of the area.

For these skateboarders, the aesthetic of the area was impacted. The skate stoppers were also perceived to impact the area’s functionality, but for some, this was just an extra challenge; as Ste put it, ‘Oh like the blind bumps and that erm there’s always like ways around it you can always figure out other ways to kind of skate it’. According to AJ:

The thing with skateboarding is like there’s not any specific rules to it about how you ride it or how you use it, so they can try and skate stop a ledge but they’ll probably, while doing that, make it skateable in another way.



(Photo by Sharon Dickinson)

Fig. 2 Skatetoppers installed at Urbis, Manchester, UK.

With new challenges, the functional and aesthetic appreciation of the skate spot evolves. As noted, this appreciation is by those who have skated there, and those who have only seen images and film replayed online.

Alongside legal and physical controls, there is also a range of social control agents that attempt to limit street skateboarding (see e.g. [Borden 2001](#); [Howell 2005](#); [Snyder 2017](#)). In Manchester, these include various combinations of police, private security guards and local authority-employed street wardens that issue warnings and attempt to enforce the byelaw. According to the research participants, private security guards were often the most vigorous, a point previously made by [Kara-Jane Lombard \(2016\)](#). Yet in the current study, security guards were not thought to have what the skateboarders considered to be ‘real power’. According to [Alison Young \(2014\)](#), public and private spaces are intertwined and boundaries are not always apparent, meaning the remit of private security is not always clear. In this study, private security guards were also not always easy to predict, with some trying to develop a positive relationship with skaters, whilst others were more antagonistic. For example, according to Sam, ‘the nicest ones are the ones that say, “lads I finish at six o clock, come back then”. This guy he gets the respect then we love that guy ‘cause he’s been honest and open to us’. However, Sam also highlighted that ‘... there’s been fights with security’ cause that’s the kind of animosity they create’. Similarly, for Nick ‘... just like talking to you like you’re almost like a piece of shit’. Tony recounted fights with security guards and that, ‘Sometimes they snatch your board off you and, yeah, there’s been fights’ cause security will literally grab your board out of your hands, that’s like taking a kid’s favourite toy off them’. Security guards are charged with controlling the specific spaces that they are responsible for; yet, participants were able to provide examples when security guards had gone beyond the limits of their duty. For example, according to Seb:

I got chased across the city for half an hour by the university security, er, they were trying to run me over in the car and running after me down streets. It literally went on for half an hour till I got to my friend’s shop and I ran in the back and I hid. I was er pretty freaked out.

Although skateboarders were also moved on by the police the participants claimed that the main problem was private security; as Josh noted, ‘Erm to be fair the police are just like pretty sound, we’re the least of their worries’. That said, Nick noted that:

...you just get some police coming over and totally threatening you just like being aggressive and it’s just not really needed ‘cause, like, we are all reasonable, we don’t kick off in my eyes, skating isn’t anything incriminating.

According to AJ, local authority Street Wardens, ‘they kind of intimidate you, I’ve heard in the past of them taking the names of younger kids who are not as confident’. Similarly, for Lucas, ‘I’ve had some of the kids that come here say oh you know they got gripped by one of the wardens and they kind of intimidate them’. However, the skateboarders in this research did not hold the Street Wardens in the same regard as they did the police or security guards and claimed to either just skate away or refuse to co-operate.

More informal agents of social control, such as other city users, can also influence skateboarders’ use and appreciation of public space. Those interviewed believed they were well received by the general public with some stopping and taking an interest in what they were doing. They emphasized the importance of mutual respect—that it is important that the skateboarders themselves consider other users of public space. For instance, according to Lucas, ‘Erm, it depends I’ve never had too much problems really. Sometimes you have the odd drunk person that wants to give you trouble but mostly I try to get on with everybody’. Ste explained how skateboarders had a mixed reception from the public:

Some people like it and some people don’t. I mean it’s like with anything, you’re not going to please everyone. Some people kind of stop and watch, prime example is like when we are skating Urbis and we will be trying to do something as people are like walking past. If one of you fall over you will get an old gent walking past and they will be like ‘oh, never mind lad better luck next time’ but then you will get like a 30-year-old lad saying ‘what are you doing riding that, go get a job’.

When asked if he thought there had been a change in public perception towards skateboarding Josh explained:

Yeah, like heavily, it didn’t used to be cool at all, it used to be like if you skated you were like the outsider you had no friends apart from the friends that skated, but now you’re cool if you skate and it attracts like a load of attention.

DISCUSSION

Rogers and Coaffee (2005) claim that there is an institutionalized mistrust of marginalized groups such as skateboarders, which has led to the development of urban policies that exclude them from the city centre. At the time of writing, Manchester City Council continued to exclude on-street skateboarding; however, this study has demonstrated skateboarders’ sustained resistance to attempts to exclude them from public space. This is not a new observation and is something that several studies of skateboarding highlight (e.g. Borden 2001; Howell 2005; Snyder 2017). What this article offers is recognition that such controls may be influenced by aesthetic expectations as laid down by commercial interests; and this is in the context that skateboarding itself can be viewed as an aesthetic experience.

As highlighted, skateboarding can become something of a tourist attraction, but this is not the normal day-to-day experience of skateboarders. And whilst some skateboarders may make a living from the practice, for the majority, there is little money to be made. Instead, the appeal may be pleasure, physical and mental challenge and being part of a community. It may also be affective in seeing, feeling and experiencing the city differently. Skateboarders engage with the city through an aesthetic appreciation of urban space, through visual and tactile understandings of surfaces and of the spaces inbetween. For instance, the affective and emotive appeal of street skateboarding in Manchester was highlighted by Joe, who compared it to a dance:

...it's more of an expression of myself which makes it a lifestyle, it's like a dance, each intricate move is me trying to express who I am as [a] person, to tell people my story in a way that I can communicate.

Chivers Nochim (2010) has suggested that skateboarders can experience emotional, spiritual and mental pleasures by taking part in skating—that it is a part of who they are that embodies every aspect of their lifestyle. One of the interviewees, Lewis suggested, 'I don't know who I would be without skateboarding, or it's kinda like shaped who I am today, everything that I am into and what I have done'. It is an aesthetic engagement with the board, a surface, an environment and a lifestyle—and often relived online through images and video. It is thus of interest to visual and aesthetic criminology (and similarly to a sensory criminology). But it is not to everyone's taste, and here there is a conflict with those with power over the use of public spaces, who promote an alternative aesthetic of consumption through various legal, physical and social controls.

According to Oli Mould (2015), physical controls, or defensive architecture such as the use of skate stoppers is expensive to implement and enforce; yet such an approach continues to be adopted by Manchester City Council. This study has shown how skateboarders can see such measures as negatively impacting the aesthetic of an area; yet, others are resistant to physical controls by viewing skate stoppers as a new challenge that requires further imagination to be skated.

The interviews with skateboarders revealed how skate spots—such as at Urbis—persist, even when legal, physical and social controls are put in place. Skateboarders' resistance to these controls may not be overtly political but, as noted, this does not mean their actions are not political (Dimou and Ilan 2018; Ferrell 2019; Millie 2019). Beal (1995) depicts skateboarding as a cultural site of social resistance that challenges normative values. Such resistance is evident in skateboarders continuing to skate in places outlined by Manchester's byelaw. Skateboarders feel that they have a 'right to the city' (Lefebvre 1991) as much as anyone else, and many feel the ban is excessive and unfair affecting their lifestyle by restricting what would otherwise be a legal activity. Further resistance against legal controls is evident in some skateboarders campaigning to save beloved skate spots, such as through the activities of 'Skate Manchester':⁵

CONCLUSION

As noted, street skateboarding can be regarded as a form of leisure that is both deviant and serious—as reflected by inclusion in the Olympic Games. The tension between subcultural deviancy and wider cultural acceptance is not likely to be resolved any time soon. It is a

5 See <https://skatemanchester.co.uk/> (accessed 28 September 2021).

tension experienced by other urban interventionists; as witnessed in graffiti and street-art culture with some gaining celebrity status—with almost everything done by Banksy, for instance, seemingly receiving positive media coverage—whilst others' work regarded as a negative aesthetic contribution, at times leading to imprisonment (see e.g. [Millie 2008](#)). In Manchester, the local authority's hostile view of skateboarding as deviant and anti-social is at odds with the skateboarders' view of their practice as legitimate use of public space. There seems very little prospect of change in this position. Manchester's byelaw has been in place since 2001 and, at the time of writing, was not likely to be withdrawn. One skateboarder within this study suggested that, rather than spending money on excluding skateboarders, the local authority could use that same money to include and integrate them into the city:

I always think about the money that they spend, like trying to stop something from happening, they could put that money into changing the designs of stuff so maybe if you build the ledges set with metal in them or you just make things so that it's not going to get damaged as much so that it can still be skated for like 100 years. (Seb)

Such a position may seem unlikely, but more integrative policies have been adopted elsewhere and move us some way towards resolving tensions between deviant subculture and wider acceptance. For example, Malmö in Sweden embraces its skateboarding culture with the local authority having its own skateboarding co-ordinator. According to Chris [Lawton \(2017\)](#), Malmö's approach demonstrates that skateboarding can be utilized as a tool for creating and maintaining active and engaging public spaces. Furthermore, [Lawton \(2017\)](#) argues that cities that integrate skateboarding encourage a sense of shared ownership of the city and its public spaces. [Lawton \(2017\)](#) suggests that a critical factor in skateboarding being integrated into city life is that skateboarders realize they must be good partners to the city.

In order to achieve similar inclusion elsewhere—such as in Manchester—skateboarders need to demonstrate the value they can bring to the city as a positive contribution to city life ([Woolley and Johns 2001](#)). The status quo is the criminalization and exclusion of street skateboarding, a practice that challenges the functionality and aesthetic order of the city. But rather than viewing skating as a practice to be excluded, skateboarders' aesthetic appreciation of public space could add value to city life. Like other urban interventions—such as parkour or yarn bombing—street skateboarders see and feel the city in different ways and this ought to add to our emotional and affective appreciation of what it means to live in a city.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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