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# Building a DIY skatepark and doing politics hands-on

Mikko Kyrönviita and Antti Wallin

*In recent years, informal and unauthorised amateur urban design solutions have become an urban trend in the global North. These Do-It-Yourself (DIY) urbanism actions can be playful commentaries, critical interventions or functional improvements to urban spaces. In general, DIY urbanism tries to make urban everyday life better, but it is not always considered a political act. This paper presents an ethnographic case study of a DIY skatepark building in Tampere, Finland, and describes a group of skaters' political subjectivisation and how they learned hands-on to influence urban governance. After the city's failed skatepark plan, the skaters turned their discontent into a tactical spatial appropriation, a DIY skatepark, and later shifted their mode of politics to strategic claim-making. By doing so, the skaters became not only skilled skatepark builders, but also an organised association promoting skateboarding and influencing urban development and culture. This paper argues that DIY urbanism has transformative potential to act as a catalyst for bottom-up change in a contemporary city.*

## Introduction

Upward slope: how skateboarding transformed the 'Manchester of Finland' (King 2019)

**Keywords** DIY urbanism, political agency, skateboarding, bottom-up urbanism, informal urbanism

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Skaters use urban spaces in their own creative ways and thus challenge the functionality of the built environment; sometimes they can even have an impact on the city, as depicted in *The Guardian* (16 April 2019) headline above. In this paper, we present an in-depth case study of building an informal skatepark and describe how a group of skaters turned their dissatisfaction and frustration with the lack of institutional support into political action. Although skateboarding has gained a foothold in Tampere, Finland, it is still largely dependent on local skaters' proactivity and initiative. It is precisely these practices and the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) strand of skateboarding culture we emphasise in this paper. Furthermore, our study describes how the skaters leveraged their actions and established an organisation that 'within a decade made the city of Tampere a skateboarding capital of Finland', as the Finnish newspaper *Aamulehti* (9 June 2019) highlighted (Määttänen 2019).

In recent years, DIY enthusiasm has spread not only within the skateboarding culture, but through all kinds of citizens' alternative and unauthorised uses of urban space as amateur design solutions seem to be becoming an urban trend in the global North (Finn 2014; Talen 2015; Douglas 2018). The actions through which people are increasingly taking ownership of their environment in cities of advanced economies go under many labels. Tactical urbanism, guerrilla urbanism, temporary urbanism, pop-up urbanism, insurgent urbanism and DIY urbanism are all used to describe versatile actions ranging from playful commentaries to critical interventions and functional design solutions and modifications of official municipal infrastructure (Hou 2010; Finn 2014; Douglas 2018; Lundman 2018). Examples include the community and guerrilla gardens, self-made street furniture and various artistic and social projects occupying vacant buildings and public spaces that are taking place in many cities. Despite the diversity of activities and labels, these 'micro-spatial urban practices that are reshaping urban spaces' (Iveson 2013, 941) can be seen as a part of a wider movement of bottom-up urbanism (Arefi and Kickert 2019).

In this paper, we approach informal skatepark building through the concept of DIY urbanism and combine it with discussions on urban political agency. Our case study research describes how skaters built their Tikkutehdas (matchstick factory in English) DIY skatepark and during the process learned new skills and built competence to influence urban development. We ask why and how the skaters channelled their discontent with the city administration and policymakers into building their DIY skatepark and became politically active. This paper connects with the discussion of unconventional forms of political action in cities and the role of bottom-up urbanism in urban development (Boudreau, Boucher, and Liguori 2009; Crossan et al. 2016; Arefi and Kickert 2019; Beveridge and Koch 2019). Our study is also an empirical addition to the research on political agency in skateboarding (see Beal et al. 2017; VanHoose and Savini 2017; Borden 2019; Chiu and Giamarino 2019; Hollett and Vivoni 2021).

Specifically, our research contributes to the research agenda pointed out by Finn and Douglas (2019, 27) according to which there is: 'first, the need to better understand the impacts of DIY urbanism on the places and communities it aims to improve, and second, the need to explore the implications of DIY

urbanism for formal urban planning and design practice.’ To answer these calls, we apply Iveson’s (2007; see also de Certeau 1984) distinction between tactical and strategic spatial practices and offer a novel perspective of DIY urbanism as a way of doing politics hands-on. Our analysis shows how skaters shifted their mode of politics from tactical intervention of building a DIY skatepark to strategic public claim-making and thus managed to make permanent changes to the city. We argue that DIY urbanism can create a better functioning urban environment, but above all, it is political action in the form of *doing* and can generate possibilities for wider change in contemporary cities.

## The politics of DIY urbanism

Urban DIY interventions are not a recent phenomenon within the skateboarding culture. DIY skatepark building dates back to the late 1970s at least, and perhaps the most famous DIY skatepark, Burnside in Portland, Oregon, was started in 1990 (Borden 2019). DIY skatepark building is essentially about illegally appropriating, constructing and modifying urban spaces for the needs of the skaters (Peters 2018). The very idea behind skaters’ functional, voluntary and self-financed transformations is in line with the recent academic discussion on DIY urbanism.

The concept of DIY urbanism in academic urban studies is understood to cover unauthorised yet intentionally functional alterations of urban streets, parks, public spaces, or built structures by individuals or small groups of amateurs (Douglas 2018; Finn and Douglas 2019). Although professional and scholarly knowledge of urban planning sometimes plays a role in DIY urbanism (Douglas 2016), in general it is considered a bottom-up and anti-professional approach outside of, and contrary to, bureaucratic and investment-heavy urban planning (Deslandes 2013; Talen 2015). DIY urbanism’s philosophical foundations lie in opposing reactions to rational planning and large-scale urban renewal policies as well as in calls arguing for more democratic city-making processes (Finn and Douglas 2019; Hou 2019). Although DIY urbanism seems a current trend, it has roots in a long trajectory of civic initiative and citizens’ creativity in shaping urban spaces (Talen 2015). Modern DIY urbanism also connects to the self-help ethos of hippie counterculture and experimental urban interventions and explorations that do not just comment on, but aim to change, socio-spatial relations, blurring the lines between art, architecture, political activism and social commentary (Finn and Douglas 2019).

Despite connections with counterculture, forms of DIY urbanism have become part of the contemporary urban development agenda. DIY urbanism’s creative aesthetics and ‘coolness factor’, as Fabian and Samson (2016, 167) put it, fit well with creative city policies and are seen as ‘location specific assets’ in interurban rivalries (Mayer 2013, 11). In neoliberal settings and under austerity politics, city governments and urban developers have harnessed sub—and countercultural practices in urban regeneration to create economic value (Mayer 2013; Tonkiss 2013). Berglund’s (2019) study of Detroit shows precisely how similar measures when used by developers and corporate actors are celebrated

as clever and innovative, whereas those informal practices created by long-time residents out of sheer necessity are not.

Where urban planners and designers have started adopting bottom-up approaches, Mould (2014) argues that the conflictual quality of spatial interventions is erased, and subversive DIY tactics are depoliticised. DIY urbanists seldom regard themselves as radicals or activists but rather as creative, pragmatic urban problem-solvers without organised political efforts (Douglas 2014; Finn and Douglas 2019). We agree with Douglas (2014, 2018) that DIY urbanism often lacks straightforward political communication and impact, although the actions are often entangled with politics and formal policy processes in various and ambiguous ways. However, our paper builds on the understanding that the political quality of DIY urbanism lies in the actual *doing* in relation to the everyday urban environment (Crossan et al. 2016, 945). DIY urbanism is about tactical spatial practices contesting and re-appropriating processes of urbanisation (Iveson 2007; Beveridge and Koch 2019).

It is in the realm of the urban everyday life that DIY urbanists have become motivated to improve an element of the city, and this, we interpret, is a political act. Through these tactical spatial practices, the role of the city dweller moves away from a mere spectator towards an active political actor producing their own environment (Crossan et al. 2016). The political in DIY urbanism is then not about performing a political identity, but instead about changing the everyday life in the city and creating new spaces for action (Lefebvre 1991; Beveridge and Koch 2019). In similar lines, Iveson (2013) sees DIY urbanism as contesting the 'proper' urban practices by signalling a different kind of city within the city.

We argue that tactical appropriations of DIY urbanism lay the basis for other forms of politics and can foster productive engagement with urban authorities. In accordance with Iveson (2007; see also de Certeau 1984), we see that DIY urbanists can deploy two distinct but related forms of political action that are not mutually exclusive: tactical and strategic. Strategic practices, generated by DIY urbanism, aim to shape public opinion via the politics of claim-making. This may take time, but it is especially important for DIY urbanists to make their tactical interventions 'a matter of public interest and debate in procedural sense' to make more effecting and lasting results in the city (Iveson 2013, 946). Yet, we want to highlight Marchart's (2011, 972) notion of 'minimal politics' to argue that the political in DIY urbanism is not necessarily about a big collective with effective strategy, intense conflict and good organisation, but these conditions can also be witnessed in the smallest acts and the modest achievements.

Informed by these different interpretations of 'the political', we understand DIY urbanism as political action that goes beyond protest and pays attention to practice (see also Iveson 2013; Beveridge and Koch 2019). We argue that in DIY urbanism political subjectivisation and politicised urban practices are entangled. Looking carefully at how a specific DIY intervention is executed enables us to see the everyday experiences of unequal investment and practical and political responses these experiences may have (Tonkiss 2013; Douglas 2018; Beveridge and Koch 2019). In addition, it sheds light on the personal and collective learning processes and material changes that such action and self-organisation foster and produce in the urban fabric.

## The case of Tikkutehdas DIY

In this paper, we empirically showcase how skaters staged their disagreement, politicised skateboarding and extended further their ambitions and actions. We apply an ethnographic case study methodology to identify the different phases the skaters went through building the Tikkutehdas DIY skatepark in Tampere. With a population of 244,640 (Statistics Finland 2022) Tampere is the third biggest city in Finland. Since the late 1980s, local skaters have engaged with the city to develop outdoor and indoor skateparks. The city has provided skateparks for years, but they ceased to meet skaters' requirements in the early 2000s. The skaters appealed to the city authorities for a new skatepark, but without success. In 2009, a group of skaters frustrated with the city's empty promises decided to build an unauthorised DIY skatepark. This turned out to be a significant turning point for the local skateboarding scene.

Our primary research material consists of 10 interviews (conducted in 2017–19) with the skaters who we have identified as main actors in the process. These skaters were the key persons active in starting the project, building the skatepark and organising financing and other resources. The same skaters later founded an association called *The Ramp Dogs* (Pirkanmaan Kaarikoirat ry in Finnish) to promote skateboarding culture. At the time of constructing Tikkutehdas DIY, the skaters were in their twenties. Some of them had summer or part-time jobs, others were studying or unemployed, and all had free time on their hands. One skater interviewed was a woman (Marja-Liisa in this paper) and the other nine were men, reflecting the overall gender balance in Tikkutehdas DIY where most builders and skaters were men.

The semi-structured interviews lasted from one to two and a half hours. With each interviewee, the topics discussed varied according to their personal experiences and role in the project. Our questions aimed at understanding the course of events in detail and capturing the participants' personal experiences related to Tikkutehdas DIY and to *The Ramp Dogs*. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and all names of the interviewees have been changed to protect their identity. During the years, we closely followed how their DIY project evolved and undertook numerous informal discussions to verify our interpretations. The first author has documented the progress of Tikkutehdas DIY and *The Ramp Dogs* by taking photographs, collecting flyers, posters, and news articles, which serve as secondary material to draw a definite picture of the case itself. We compare and contrast them with the interviews to further illuminate the process to the reader.

Both authors are long-time skaters and know all the interviewees, which gave us access to the skate community. We have skated with them but have not been involved in building the skatepark. We acknowledge our positioning as white male skaters and researchers doing research about predominantly white and male-privileged skateboarding culture and DIY urbanism (Heim LaFrombois 2017a; Douglas 2018; Kusz 2018). Paradoxically, our background provides us with a nuanced understanding about skateboarding culture, which in turn enables in-depth discussions with the skaters, but also possibly brought to bear a gendered perspective on the politics of DIY urbanism and skateboarding.

**Table 1:** Key turning points of the development of the Tikkutehdas DIY skatepark and The Ramp Dogs skateboarding association.

January 2008	Outline of the Tampere skatepark plan
Summer 2008	First quarter pipe built inside the matchstick factory
2009–2010	Skaters found the concrete platform of a demolished warehouse; cleaning and first modest builds
Summer 2011	More builds and first fundraising party at the end of the summer
February 2012	Serla 'Good Deed' competition win and €5000 prize money
March 2012	The Ramp Dogs founded and registered as an official association
Summer 2012	Main building period, big party at the end of the summer
November 2012	The petition to revive the Tampere skatepark plan was started
Year 2013	Skaters started to actively contact politicians and city officials
Summer 2013	Additional builds, Tikkutehdas DIY finished in its final form, party at the end of the summer
August 2014	Tikkutehdas DIY 5-year party
Autumn 2014	The building of Iso-Vilunen skatepark begins
Year 2015	Iso-Vilunen skatepark opened and first Manserama contest organised
May 2017	The Ramp Dogs opened an indoor skatepark in Hiedanranta, Tampere
May 2018	Tikkutehdas DIY was demolished
August 2021	The opening of a skateboarding themed high school programme in Tampere

In our analysis, we first identified the key turning points essential to the development of Tikkutehdas DIY and The Ramp Dogs (see [Table 1](#)). We then categorised the interview material in more detail and identified the critical barriers the skaters faced and how they surpassed them. In doing so, we sought to explain what kind of resources the skaters had when building the Tikkutehdas DIY skatepark and what capacities they developed during the process. This enabled us to understand how the skaters politicised skateboarding, expanded their goals and became politically active through their involvement with the city's administration and policymakers. Thus, our analysis reveals how the skaters' role as political actors shifted during the process.

While writing this, Tikkutehdas DIY has already become history. It served the skateboarding community until May 2018 when it was demolished to clear the way for housing construction. By this point, skaters had already extended their territory to several other places in the city and other forms of practice.

## Constructing a counter space

In January 2008, the city of Tampere published an outline of the skatepark plan for an extensive network of 13 new skateparks by the year 2015 (Tampere 2008). This was a collaborative process with workshops and a working group in which local skaters were included. However, to the skaters' disappointment, the plan

was never implemented. This increased their distrust of the city, demonstrating as it did the decision-makers' unsupportive attitude towards skateboarding. But the policy failure and the lack of institutional support also became a driving force for creativity (see Hajer 2003), and the disappointment drove particular skaters to pursue other means of achieving their goals, as Kepa (22 March 2018) explained:

We were never optimistic about it (the skatepark plan). There was nothing, and we thought that there never will be, and we decided to start building by ourselves.

Concurrently with the doomed skatepark planning process in Tampere, a rising DIY enthusiasm spread within the skateboarding culture. An important promoter of DIY culture has been the Swedish skater and filmmaker Pontus Alv, who documented the Malmö skateboarding scene. His film *The Strongest of the Strange* (2005) shows how to realise 'a vision of your own paradise', while his following film *In Search of the Miraculous* (2010) presents detailed instructions on how to modify everyday urban surroundings for skateboarding. DIY culture and Alv's videos impacted the skaters in Tampere 'really hard' and showed 'that you can do it yourself using concrete' (Eki, 16 March 2017). Alv's videos and personal travel experiences from Sibbarp, Malmö and other European DIY projects, such as Black Cross Bowl in Basel, Switzerland, and Pumpa DIY in Postojna, Slovenia, 'lowered the threshold and showed that this concrete thing works well on a small scale [...], and then, probably in the autumn 2009, we decided that we need to build something similar in the matchstick factory' (Kepa, 22 March 2018).

Since the early 1990s, the deserted matchstick factory and the surrounding old industrial area had become an urban fallow, a place for alternative urban cultures, such as graffiti, techno raves and punk gigs. Other unofficial users of the empty buildings included squatters and the homeless. In 2008, the derelict area also lured a group of skaters who built a small quarter pipe made of concrete inside the matchstick factory. The word spread and more skaters started to explore the industrial area. Skaters realised the possibilities of the area and started to clean the rubbish-filled concrete floor of a demolished warehouse next to the matchstick factory. The first skateable structures there were built by a group of three young skaters using any kind of scrap material such as forklift pallets found at the location. As Make (15 March 2017) told us, these modest constructions served as 'a catalyst that you can do this here, and it has already been done, so why not continue from there'. It was the informal nature of the place that encouraged skaters to appropriate more space:

All sorts of things took place there. So, it was a propitious place for that (DIY skatepark) as well. [...] We started it without asking any permission. We didn't think about it that much since there were so many things going on anyway and people were coming and going, doing their own thing. (Riku, 8 March 2017)

After two summers of pottering around without any interference, the skaters became familiar with the complex tenure of the place. The city of Tampere owned the area and had started a planning process, which had been delayed due to the



appeals to the Administrative Court. This setback in urban development opened a crack which enabled the skaters to take over the place (see Tonkiss 2013). In addition, the abandoned matchstick factory, along with the foundations of the demolished warehouse, had been rented to a local entrepreneur. In the summer of 2010, ‘the landlord’s henchman’, as Jokke (8 March 2017) called him, accidentally found out about the informal skatepark when he visited the site just as one of the skaters had started unloading 1000 kg of cement bags from the truck. The landlord was alerted and immediately came to see what was happening. As Jokke described (8 March 2017), ‘there was a real threat of violence, and the situation almost escalated into a fistfight’. Luckily, the skaters managed to cool it down and explain what they were doing. As a result, the landlord understood that the skaters were not vandalising the premises, but could instead be helpful in the area. They made a verbal agreement with the skaters, who agreed to keep an eye on the place and occasionally help with cleaning. They also exchanged phone numbers, so the landlord had a contact to the place appropriated by the underground cultures. The overlapping proprietary rights and rental agreements within the area worked in the underground users’ favour. As the legal liability was the entrepreneur’s, the city authorities had no direct responsibility and thus did not interfere in what happened in the area. The skaters could thus use the place for their own purposes without a fear of being kicked out.

The matchstick factory area offered a counter space for underground users, free of authorities, social conventions and fixed functions, that provided possibilities for new uses (see Franck and Stevens 2007). As Make (15 March 2017) said, it was a perfect ‘Mad Max’ type of playground to try out new building methods and collective endeavours. Tikkutehdas DIY started to grow little by little, from a very small unauthorised skate spot to a vibrant underground scene. It took hours of manual labour from a rather small core group of skaters, but the more they cleaned the place and built something to skate on, the more skaters and random people came to help, and after a while ‘it was no longer just the four or five of us, but suddenly there were a lot of people in our group’ (Riku, 8 March 2017) (see Figure 1). The opportunity to improve the spot and skateboarding in general and to be of help motivated people to join the project.

The place, surrounded by trees and hidden from the unnecessary public gaze, gave birth to ‘a strange collective’ (Eki, 16 March 2017). All the underground users worked side by side, and even crust punks occasionally came to help with



**Figure 1:** Tikkutehdas DIY building in 2011. Photo: Niklas Pedersen (used with permission).

heavy manual labour. The crust punks had set up a bar and organised parties and punk gigs inside the nearby gunpowder warehouse. Ruben, one of the crust punks who lived there in his old bus, sometimes had a barbecue with the skaters and baked pizza in his self-made pizza oven. He had also wired illegal electric cables to the place from the nearby railway tracks. The graffiti writers also hung out at the DIY skatepark and sometimes helped, if not too stoned. The rather large area was not of immediate interest to any authorities, which gave free space for all underground users to do their own thing, without any conflicting interests.

The skaters built a personal relationship with Tikkutehdas DIY. 'There was a community-feeling that the rest of the city but also skateboarding was lacking' (Reiska, 8 March 2017). It was a place for fun and games, but also a place loaded with ideological views against 'commercialism and superficiality', as Arska (20 February 2019) put it. In Tikkutehdas DIY, it was possible to get out of the city, escape authority and do things in an alternative way compared to packaged urban lifestyles (Beveridge and Koch 2019). Through tactical appropriation skaters constructed their counter space filled with alternative solidarity (Iveson 2007; Crossan et al. 2016; Borden 2019). It was an idea that became material by building it together with friends, a city within the city (Iveson 2013), or as Arska (20 February 2019) described, 'it was like the Hundred Acre Wood, a retreat where you felt like you're not in the city at all'.

## Learning by doing together

Nearly all the skaters we interviewed emphasised their previous experience of building wooden ramps and other skateable structures, but concrete as a building material was new to them. They had watched instructions on the Internet, but 'the experience everybody had was really weak' (Kalevi, 19 March 2019). They bought concrete and some tools and began to build. There was neither a plan nor criteria; it was mere tinkering in the beginning. The skaters borrowed a concrete mixer and a trailer from relatives, and the place itself offered various scrap materials for use in the construction. They gathered old tiles, gravel, wood and even a refrigerator from the surrounding area to be 'thrown inside the moulds and covered with concrete' (Make, 15 March 2017), which was mixed with water carried from the nearby lake. The quality of the first constructions was very poor, and they went to rack and ruin. That did not discourage them, since the whole thing was about 'just learning and having fun with friends' (Jokke, 8 March 2017).

In true DIY fashion, the building was self-financed, and the work progressed only when someone had money: if they had managed to collect enough bottle deposits, or a couple-of-euro whip-rounds from other skaters. One of the main ways to collect money was the fund-raising parties at the end of the summer when the skaters also held raffles and sold self-printed Tikkutehdas DIY t-shirts and boards. The parties with live music, DJs and posters were, along with the building work itself, a way to build social cohesion, identity and aesthetics directly associated with Tikkutehdas DIY (see Peters 2018). They were socially important and a way to express a do-it-yourself mentality and do 'cooler things

than anyone else' (Eki, 16 March 2017). A reward after the summer's hard work, above all, they became an important way to organise, raise awareness of the skatepark, bring more people together and create a sense of community.

At the end of 2011, the Finnish toilet paper brand Serla organised a *Good Deed* competition in order to support non-profit projects benefiting communities. A skaters' friend saw the advertisement by chance 'while sitting on the toilet' (Jokke, 8 March 2017) and entered Tikkutehdas DIY in the competition. The competition was based on internet voting, and the first prize was €5000. Tikkutehdas DIY won the competition by a rather large margin, because the skaters actively shared information about the project and the competition in their networks and 'really benefited a lot from social media and the Finland-wide skate community' (Riku, 8 March 2017) to activate broader public support (VanHoose and Savini 2017).

In order to receive the prize money, the skaters needed to form a legal entity. Before this, they had not had any intentions to organise officially. As Kepa (22 March 2018) put it, 'we had to set up an association—none of us was interested in that bureaucracy, but then it was a must'. The Ramp Dogs registered as a non-profit association in March 2012. In the beginning, the association did not affect the skaters' way of doing things. It remained more in the background, although they needed to take care of the official requirements such as the constituent meeting, rules and appointment of the board of directors. They collectively learned 'how to run an official association, organise events and the work of volunteers' (Marja-Liisa, 23 April 2018). However, it was not the association as such but the money that enabled the skaters to build more and 'take the whole thing to a completely different level' (Riku, 8 March 2017). With the money, the building process became more goal-oriented, although the target was still to have a good party at the end of the summer.

The Ramp Dogs association worked as a strategic tool to obtain other resources. It was easier to approach sponsors as an official non-profitable association rather than just a group of random skaters. They also broadened the scope of the association by framing the skatepark project as generally supporting youth and sports and exercise activities. This way the attitude towards the project became very positive, and they managed to receive free materials from concrete companies. They also received help from the media when a local newspaper wrote an article about the Good Deed competition prize and the forthcoming building process. The CEO of a local construction company saw the article and decided to send one of his workers with an excavator to help in digging the place for the pool. In addition to the prize money, the skaters succeeded in gathering other resources worth thousands of euros with their ability to communicate the value of the project to the wider public. The positive feedback also motivated the skaters, since the project 'concretised at societal level that we are doing something valuable here—showing an example' (Eki, 16 March 2017).

When Spring 2012 came, the skaters started to collectively plan the park. They had a lot of personal experience about good and bad skatepark designs, but were not familiar with the right building techniques. When the first big pour came, 'it was an absurd amount of concrete compared to the skills we had', as Kalevi described (19 March 2018). The work progressed through collective



**Figure 2:** The hard work was celebrated in August 2012. Photo: Mikko Kyrönviita.

decision-making and deliberative approach, but the skaters were learning the hard way how to ‘read the concrete’ (Kalevi, 19 March 2018). Material knowledge increased by doing, as did the understanding of technical requirements, such as reinforcement and tools. The building of Tikkutehdas DIY required constant problem-solving, and the skaters learned inevitably through trial and error. Tikkutehdas DIY became a place for crafting knowledge and learning hands-on in the urban environment (Hemphill and Leskowitz 2012; Crossan et al. 2016). The building remained meaningful, since everybody played a role and could use his or her strengths. They ‘wanted the best possible outcome’ and ‘accepted it, that it was our common effort. Maybe not the best quality, but ours’ (Eki, 16 March 2017). Despite the occasional disagreements, working with like-minded and committed people was also rewarding even to the extent that the finished skatepark was almost like ‘a by-product of having fun with others’ (Araska, 20 February 2019) (see [Figure 2](#)).

### Broadening the political scope

Through experimenting and sharing knowledge, the skaters learned skills that have later benefited many of them either as professional skatepark builders or in working life in general. However, the more important consequence was that they saw ‘that it is possible to influence society by doing, not only through a top-down system’ (Kalevi, 19 March 2018). The skaters reached their objective and changed the conditions of skateboarding in its immediacy, but also developed collective practices and social relations enabling them to become

politically active citizens also towards institutions (Crossan et al. 2016). At the end of the summer 2012, building Tikkutehdas DIY had been nearly finished but the organised skaters did not want to stop there. Instead, they shifted their orientation beyond Tikkutehdas DIY and politicised skateboarding in the wider urban context by public claim-making (Iveson 2007; Beveridge and Koch 2019). Riku (8 March 2017) explained:

Of course, we had to move on somehow. [...] Why stop there? Now we have the association and the will to do it. [...] Now we shall see what else we can do.

In November 2012, The Ramp Dogs again raised the question of the Tampere skatepark plan and started a petition to revive it and include new skateparks in the city's budgeting. They started the petition in collaboration with three other grassroots associations, and the need for new skateparks was also framed to serve other users, such as BMX riders, rollerbladers and scooters. This way the skaters broadened their network and bridged social capital (VanHoose and Savini 2017). This strengthened the impact of the petition, which obtained 1194 signatures. The skaters actively sent the petition to the city officials and politicians. In addition, they consciously brought up the need to develop skateparks in local and national media. This way they publicly staged their discontent about the skatepark plan and politicised skateboarding (Iveson 2013).

The skaters who started the process three years earlier had built hands-on confidence and determination (Crossan et al. 2016). They had become a group with the internal capacity to pursue change in formal policy processes related to development of skateboarding (VanHoose and Savini 2017). They decided purposefully to seek contact with the city organisation 'in every possible way' (Eki, 16 March 2017). It took a great deal of effort since they did not know any officials or politicians, but at this point, engaging with institutions 'didn't feel like a big thing anymore but a natural progression, since the whole "Tikkutehdas thing" had taught us how to work with such organisations' (Riku, 8 March 2017). This marked a shift in the political character of their actions and orientation as the skaters started to participate in the public meetings and planning workshops organised by the city, although they were hardly relevant to skateboarding, and kept repeatedly bringing up the issue of the skatepark plan.

Eventually, the hard work paid off and they found the right city officials 'who are good to collaborate with' (Eki, 16 March 2017). The skaters managed to organise a meeting with the deputy mayor and started to receive official invitations to the city's meetings. With their persevering promotion of skateboarding, they succeeded in moving on from a spatial intervention and managed to create a public debate where they were able to define the agenda of how skateparks should be built. This meant that city officials had to take them into account and recognise them not only as a party but also as experts having know-how of the skatepark design and building (Iveson 2013). At the end of 2013, the city of Tampere organised a workshop and invited The Ramp Dogs and other skaters to design a new skatepark called Iso-Vilunen. The Ramp Dogs entered into a continuous dialogue with the skatepark designer and influenced the park design with their expertise acquired in Tikkutehdas DIY. The new



**Figure 3:** The political pressure from below pushed the city to build a proper skatepark, where the Danish skater Jonas Bünger is doing a frontside air in Manserama contest 2019. Photo: Aleksi Martikainen (used with permission).

Iso-Vilunen skatepark (see [Figure 3](#)) with its versatile bowl section and a street course, was built by the end of 2014 and officially opened in Spring 2015. From the beginning of Tikkutehdas DIY, it took approximately five years to arrive at this point. Reiska (8 March 2017) reflected on the process:

I think that there wouldn't be the Iso-Vilunen skatepark without our political activity. We brought it up and challenged the skatepark plan, which was unrealistic. I'm sure it's thanks to The Ramp Dogs that the skatepark was built.

In May 2018, Tikkutehdas DIY was demolished, but The Ramp Dogs was already an established organisation. In addition to acquiring expertise in building concrete skateparks, the skaters had learned how to mobilise action, apply for funding and organise big events, such as the Finnish championships and the annual Manserama contest with professional skaters from all over the world (see [Figure 3](#)). The international network they have created has also brought them political competence. They had formed a partnership with the neighbouring municipality, Ylöjärvi, and received funding of an additional €20,000 from the Ministry of Education to build a new skatepark. However, the opposition of the nearby residents hampered the project, and no other place was found in Ylöjärvi. The Ramp Dogs were able to transfer the funding to another project in the old factory area of Hiedanranta, where they started a currently on-going collaboration with the city of Tampere. The Ramp Dogs learned how to adapt their work not only to different urban spaces, but also how to connect it with various processes in urban development.

Skaters' tactical appropriation of derelict urban space included forms of strategic political action. Whereas Tikkutehdas DIY was originally the skaters' own project, today, The Ramp Dogs have succeeded in broadening their activities and publics. They are an association with several employees running an indoor skatepark and skate schools, organising events and offering courses for photography and filmmaking that all attract people from different, often marginal, backgrounds and age groups. The Ramp Dogs have created partnerships with national public employment and business services, local enterprises, and above all, with the city of Tampere, which has established Finland's first skateboarding themed high-school study programme (see Kallio et al. 2021). The Ramp Dogs have managed to take advantage of the 'coolness factor' of their creative practices and positive benefits of skateboarding with wider public and institutional urban authorities (Fabian and Samson 2016, 167; see also Beal et al. 2017; VanHoose and Savini 2017; Chiu and Giamarino 2019). Although their collaboration with institutions requires formalities and conventional norms absent from Tikkutehdas DIY, The Ramp Dogs continue to open up possibilities for various urban underground groups such as punks, graffiti writers and ravers. None of this would have been possible without the skaters' discontent that was directed into *doing*—political action.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have described how a group of skaters became politically active and learned *hands-on* how to influence urban governance. After the failed skatepark plan, the skaters turned their discontent into a tactical spatial appropriation, a DIY skatepark, and later shifted their mode of politics to strategic claim-making (Iveson 2007).

The skaters were able to find an ideal hideout, a 'loose space' out of sight that offered autonomy and materials to build their counter space, which drew in more like-minded people (Franck and Stevens 2007, 8). As VanHoose and Savini (2017) have pointed out, to succeed, urban activism needs to have a common identity, internal cohesion and capacity to mobilise support for lobbying specific goals. The skaters constructed a Ramp Dog identity with graphic designs, parties and skateboarding style. The internal cohesion was built by pouring concrete. The skaters' tactical DIY intervention gained acceptance beyond the local underground culture. They learned strategic ways of organising action: they won the Good Deed competition, established an association, started a petition and built coalitions, and thus became a more credible actor to work with the city organisation. Unlike in some DIY urbanism actions (Douglas 2016), the skaters in Tampere did not have much technical knowledge or understanding of official planning when they started. But step by step, they gained knowledge and know-how to promote skateboarding and align their actions to urban development.

Beveridge and Koch (2019) note that politicisation happens within the realm of the everyday. Thus, DIY urbanism is political action changing the everyday life in the city. The point Beveridge and Koch (2019) make is valuable: urban everyday life always produces countering forces, which hold political potentials. Before political mobilisation occurs, the antagonistic relation has already been

manifested; it is already there. DIY urbanism is about countering some parts of the contemporary city or urban everyday life, whether the activists view themselves as political or not. In this way, changing the city by *doing* DIY urbanism is political (Crossan et al. 2016).

As Hajer (2003) points out, it is often a public policy initiative that provokes people to reflect on their values and to voice their concerns or wishes and become politically active. Our interpretation is that the skaters politicised skateboarding, and the moment of politicisation happened when they produced an antagonistic position towards the city and started to build their own unauthorised skatepark. Disappointments with the empty promises for better skateparks were the trigger that ignited the skaters from remaining on 'stand by' to becoming politically active (Hajer 2003, 88; Iveson 2013).

This political agency in the form of DIY urbanism led the city organisation to change its urban development practices in some ways. However, as researchers have documented, not all informal uses of urban spaces, such as homeless squatting, are welcomed by the authorities (Deslandes 2013; Spataro 2016). Also, DIY urbanism can be controversial. As Douglas (2018, 2019) emphasises, self-entitled individuals or groups bypass democratic processes and can neglect other users while implementing their visions that lack official legitimacy and accountability. Participation in DIY urbanism has also been criticised for inequality and actions are seen to reinforce masculinist privileging of urban spaces (Heim LaFrombois 2017b; Douglas 2019). Similarly, DIY skateparks and skateparks in general can be exclusive and heteronormative 'dude spaces' (Carr 2017). Despite the open atmosphere, to some extent this applies to Tikkutehdas DIY, which also gathered other kinds of typically male-dominant urban underground cultures, such as graffiti writers and punks. Increasingly, however, the local skate scene has become more diverse and inclusive to all age groups and genders, reflecting broader shifts within skateboarding culture (Willing and Shearer 2016; O'Connor 2018; Geckle and Shaw 2022).

Whereas the skaters first ignored the official urban planning processes in their tactical spatial appropriation to create an unauthorised DIY skatepark, later they wanted to engage with institutions to promote skateboarding. The skaters started to include public claim-making strategies in their political repertoire, which required communication and inclusion of wider city publics. The distinction between these two modes of politics is not a question of either-or (Iveson 2007). The Ramp Dogs have been able to keep their original DIY attitude, while successfully learning ways to influence institutional processes, which led to more lasting results. Now, the city authorities have acknowledged The Ramp Dogs as a significant actor and partnered with them in the fields of urban development, culture, sports, youth work and education.

By staging the disagreement, DIY urbanism contests institutional city-making and 'the very order of the city' (Iveson 2013, 955). The pressure from below pushes the authorities to acknowledge the countering forces, which is 'a gauge of "real" democracy' (Lefebvre 1991, 420). DIY urbanism allows the urban everyday life to change from below (Beveridge and Koch 2019; Finn and Douglas 2019) and skateboarding communities' grassroots activism can have such an impact (Chiu and Giamarino 2019). This was exactly what happened in the case of Tikkutehdas DIY and The Ramp Dogs. By *doing* an unauthorised DIY



skatepark the skaters challenged dominant practices and, as Crossan et al. (2016, 944) point out, it 'is no small thing'. Our research shows that DIY urbanism is political action, holding a transformative potential to act as a catalyst for bottom-up change in a contemporary city.

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**Mikko Kyrönviita** is a doctoral researcher in the Faculty of Management and Business at Tampere University, Finland. Email: mikko.kyronviita@tuni.fi

**Antti Wallin** is a post-doctoral research fellow in the Faculty of Social Sciences at Tampere University, Finland. Email: antti.wallin@tuni.fi