1   The Accidental Youth Club: Skateboarding in NewcastleGateshead

2

3   **Abstract.**

4   Skateboarders re-invent and interrogate the physical structure of cityscapes as they use spaces,

5   buildings and objects for skating. However skaters are routinely regarded by the civic and

6   business interests who dominate city centre planning and regeneration as, at best, a nuisance and

7   at worst an unruly and dangerous blight. This paper reports findings from a research project

8   involving skaters which begins to unpick this stereotype. A participatory methodology combining

9   mapping, interviews and observation was used to identify spots used by skaters in Newcastle and

10   Gateshead (North East England). The key spots were characterized using Woolley & Johns'

11   (2001) criteria: trickability, accessibility, sociability and compatibility. Findings reveal two further

12   factors – temporal and relational dimensions – are crucial the journeys skaters embark on.

13   Sociability was the one constant factor defining favoured spots. The study revealed a sociable,

14   entrepreneurial, creative skate scene. Far from being a problem the skaters add to the social

15   capital of the cityscape. Our findings suggest rather than designing out skaters from the city the

16   civic authorities should work with skaters to sustain their scene as a positive benefit to city

17   regeneration.

18

19   **Skateboarding and the City**

20   Space unleashes desire (Lefebvre, 1991). Although this statement was not intended to represent

21   skateboarding, it is a useful way to consider what motivates skaters. Skateboarders can envisage

22   alternative uses of space and urban fabric which differ from the designed or desired purposes

23   (Jones & Graves, 2000). They reveal pathways and obstacles which offer other, more interesting

24   and challenging ways of traversing space, calculating the possibility of performing different tricks.

25   Flights of stairs become 'sets' to ollie over, ledges are there not to delimit the edge of usable

26   space but surfaces to grind along, handrails are not aids to stability but a challenge of balance

27   while sliding down them. The fabric of the city offers affordances to skateboarders it does not to

28   other users, their perception of city spaces enables actions outwith the norm (Gibson, 1986).

1

Skateboarders, then, have the ability to transform mundane architecture into pleasurable and

unique play zones (Vivoni, 2009) creating a mental map of the macro-scale city and the micro

scale structures (Rogers, 2001). These maps evolve and morph as new spots are discovered and

skaters are excluded from old haunts (Karsten & Pel, 2000). This ability to creatively rework

spaces has been described as 'skaters eye' where skateboarders analyse the cityscape for its

'skateability' rather than any aesthetic or historical value (Borden, 2001). In this paper we report a

project carried out in Newcastle and Gateshead, in North East England, intended to capture the

skaters' mental maps of their cityscape and the consequences of their interaction with the

physical city for their place in Tyneside. Firstly we examine the contested place of skateboarders

in cityscapes, Woolley and Johns' (2001) framework for exploring skaters' use of space and the

Newcastle-Gateshead context. We then outline a participatory and largely visual methodology

used to map the skater's cityscape and examine the use of key skate spots in terms of Woolley &

Johns' framework.

Skateboarding and the City

Borden's (2001) work is central to understanding a skater's relationship with urban architecture.

Drawing on Lefebvre's ideas, Borden critiques the way the discipline of architecture has tended

to conceptualise space as merely designed objects, overlooking the ways in which space and place

are produced beyond the physical and objective. Moving beyond a fetishistic relationship with

distinct, objective space, he suggests architects can gain and offer more through their work.

Borden also problematises more recent approaches in post-structuralist influenced architecture

that focus on destabilizing the meaning and symbolic value of the built environment. He praises

these developments for disrupting long held views of fixity and certainty, but claims reducing

interpretation to simply reading the architectural landscape depoliticizes the discipline, limiting its

value and voice on social issues. Borden's seminal work on skateboarding and the city, then, is

about understanding how different groups remake, or to use his term, 'creatively re-work'

architecture, and therefore the city. He adds an understanding of the way the city is used and experienced to architecture, transforming architecture from object to process.

Borden (2001) suggested that the alternative uses of space by skateboarders challenges the normative uses within capitalist society by implicitly critiquing space and architecture as a commodity. Skateboarding has been identified as a specific example of a wider clash between the domination of public space in the city by corporate and business commercial interests versus free, non-consumptive use, such as youth hanging about (Borden, 1998; Nemeth, 2006; Howell, 2008; Vivoni, 2009; and in Newcastle specifically Rogers, 2001). In the capitalist system, abstract space is created in which behaviour is prescribed and dictated. Such action is political and can lead to conflict with other users or 'owners' of space. Through the reproduction of this space as a play zone, skateboarders offer no monetary compensation for the time which they spend at a location. Borden (2001) describes this as a conflict between architecture's 'exchange value' - its potential to add value to commercial activities by creating a space conducive to efficient consumption - and its 'use value' – the potential offered, in this example, for skating. City centre spaces are most frequently managed for those who offer exchange, thus excluding skaters. Skateboarders are seen in the same light as other 'undesirables' potentially devaluing the exchange value of space: the homeless, prostitutes, drug dealers, young people hanging out (Valentine, 1996; Borden, 1998; Carr, 2010). To protect the exchange value of particular spaces often undergo a process of privatization that defines its acceptable use, and legitimises the exclusion of particular groups (Fyfe & Bannister, 1998). The privatization of space is frequently backed up by legal instruments which enforce the regulation of normative views (e.g. Rogers & Coaffee, 2005; Nemeth, 2006; Howell, 2008). This process can be more subtle, however, resulting from an informal, but no less powerful, social construction of public space as 'adult space' (Valentine, 1996), or where actions of groups such as skateboarders are labeled as unnatural and against the common sense use of space (Cresswell, 1996; Nolan, 2003). These processes have seen exponential growth of private and quasi-public spaces in the last two decades (Mitchell, 2003).

1   In the case of skateboarders, their behaviour is justified as unacceptable for a number of reasons.

2   These include a perceived risk to the public, fears of litigation if skaters injure themselves, and

3   damage to property (e.g. Old Eldon Square, Newcastle upon Tyne, Rogers & Coaffee, 2005;

4   Woolley, Hazelwood and Simkins, 2011). These reasons might appear logical as the appropriation

5   of space by skaters often involves modifications such as applying wax to surfaces to aid the

6   transition of boards over them, and damage to surfaces does occur, albeit usually only minor

7   scuffs and scratches. Vivoni (2009), however, argues this is an unintended outcome for

8   skateboarders who actively seek to maintain the parts of the built environment they value. The

9   degrading of the surfaces they use is detrimental to both skaters and other users of street

10   furniture (see also Woolley & Johns, 2001). For some, wax and scuff marks are signs of abuse,

11   but for skateboarders they are symbols of desire. Skaters will look for these signs of other skaters

12   in their exploration of a city. The threat of injury litigation from skaters appears minimal

13   (Nemeth, 2006).

14

15   Where conflict over the appropriation of space does occur, skateboarders are moved on or

16   designed out of using a place. 'Skate proofing' is an example of the latter that involves the

17   inclusion of physical barriers on street furniture and other architecture that disrupts the ability of

18   skateboarders to use them. Often this requires only minor additions of metal ridges on benches,

19   studs on the edges of ledges or grooves that interrupt the transition of wheels over a surface or

20   temporary obstacles e.g. gravel (Woolley, Hazelwood and Simkins, 2011).

21

22   An alternative more progressive tactic to deal with 'problem skaters' is to create places

23   specifically designed for them to use. The idea is that conflict will be resolved simply by

24   displacing skateboarding out of public space to skateparks. Civic authorities and developers may

25   collaborate with skateboarders and other stakeholders in the design of parks. Problems arise,

26   however, between the nature of skateboarders as explorers and the programmed space within

27   skateparks. The history and culture of skateboarding is heavily rooted in the streets and skaters

28   are therefore not easily removed (Rogers, 2006). Atencio *et al.* (2009) suggested that

1   skateboarders are solely concerned with finding unique and challenging places to skate. It is

2   unsurprising then that skateboarders often reject the use of a skatepark where contrived,

3   unvarying space can seem limiting (Thompson, 1998). Nemeth (2006) noted the skaters'

4   resentment of parks, the skateboarders are well aware that the space which they receive is often a

5   token gesture, and are unwilling to exchange their use of a whole city for this space. Whilst

6   skateboarders are often seen to be cooperative during the processes of designing a skatepark (e.g.

7   Rogers, 2006) after its implementation they lose interest and resort back to the streets.

8

9   Whilst skateboarders are routinely perceived as part of a general problem of youth in the city

10   their potential as an asset has also been identified. They can create a cool, youthful buzz which

11   many cities crave as part of regeneration. Many skaters show an entrepreneurial interest in

12   creative industries in particular video and photography, used within skating partly to demonstrate,

13   capture and advertise prowess recording performance (Dumas & Laforest, 2009); skaters are part

14   of a much sort-after creative class (Howell, 2008). Skaters have also been identified as a means of

15   gentrification (Howell, 2005), their presence diluting the impact of other groups deemed

16   undesirable in public spaces, perhaps even driving out other groups, providing an informal

17   policing (Woolley & Johns, 2001; Nemeth, 2006; Howell, 2005, 2008; Vivoni, 2009). Separately

18   from their role as 'the shock troops of gentrification' (Howell, 2005, p40), many studies note the

19   positive benefits of skateboarding, emphasizing a sociable, entrepreneurial, DIY culture (Howell,

20   2005, 2008; Nemeth, 2006; Vivoni, 2009; Karsten & Pel, 2000) with "an ethic of care for the built

21   environment" (Vivoni, 2009, p146). Conversely many studies recognize the overwhelming white,

22   male domination of skate scenes (Borden, 2000; Karsten & Pel, 2000; Atencio *et al.* 2009) which

23   can create a sexist, homophobic, primarily white culture (Beal, 1995, 1999; Borden 2001; Porter,

24   2003) which in many ways privileges traditional male status gained via risk taking and physical

25   prowess (Kelly *et al.*, 2008).

26

27   Where skateboarders successfully appropriate spaces of the city for skateboarding it becomes a

28   skateboard domain (Karsten & Pel, 2000). These places may be used for just minutes or hours

1 throughout a day, week or month. The frequency of the appropriation often accords with

2 skateboarders' recognition as to whether the location is good or bad. Spaces which are

3 appropriated regularly become initiated into the skateboard community. This is often marked by

4 a special place name e.g. 'Harry Bastard banks' - an endearing name given to a skateboard

5 location in Newcastle. If the location becomes popular it becomes known as spot and is

6 repeatedly appropriated and written into skateboard folklore (Karsten & Pel, 2000; Borden,

7 2001).

8

9 In their study of skateboarding in three UK cities Woolley & Johns (2001) developed a

10 conceptual framework to understand why particular places are appropriated over others. They

11 propose four key elements:

12

13 *Accessibility* – Basically the location of a spot, its centrality, relation to transportation links and

14 other spots especially as part of a circuit during a day out. Facilities such as shops can be

15 important. A spot may not be particularly conducive to actual skating, but is appropriated as a

16 meeting point.

17

18 *Trickability* – This refers to the quality and quantity of potential tricks that can be performed. This

19 increases with smooth surfaces, structures and the potential to transition between them. The

20 variety and mix of obstacles influences the range and difficulty of tricks. Trickability is influenced

21 by both the physical nature of a space and a skater's ability. Some spots may seem too mundane

22 for experienced skateboarders, and, vice versa, a spot might be too challenging for others. Spots

23 which can serve both the novice and expert are highly prized. The numbers of skaters a spot can

24 hold without compromising the skating is also important.

25

26 *Sociability* - This refers to the social characteristics of a spot beyond time on the board. Activities

27 such as chatting, eating, skateboard maintenance and watching others skate are noted as key in a

1   spot with a high sociability, all of these relying on space to sit or stand away from the action. This

2   might also include room for non-skating friends.

3

4   *Compatibility* – Given the potential for conflict with other groups the ability to skate without

5   interference from others is important. In a formal sense this includes prohibition and being

6   moved on by police, private security or similar officialdom, as well as the number of pedestrians.

7   Informally, the design of a space might increase its use by non-skaters increasing its compatibility

8   for them, and in turn lowering it for skateboarders. In addition there can be specific conflicts

9   either with other spot users, e.g. BMXers and roller-bladers, but also rough drinkers, antagonistic

10   youth groups and fear of crime. Skaters can develop a local lore recognizing which spots tend to

11   risk official sanction and how this might vary between days and times.

12

13   **The Newcastle-Gateshead context**.

14   Woolley & Johns' (2001) framework is adopted here to analyse the geographies of skateboarding

15   in Newcastle upon Tyne and Gateshead in North East England, the two routinely linked in

16   regional place promotion as one entity NewcastleGateshead. The research was prompted by

17   personal experience of skateboarding in Newcastle, especially the value skaters placed on many

18   of the modernist buildings dating from the infamous "Brasilia of the North" 1960s

19   redevelopment of Newcastle (Jeffries, 2002). The importance of modernist architecture such as

20   blocks, plazas but also out of the way spots such as fly-overs has been highlighted as important

21   by a series of scholars (Karsten & Pel, 2000; Borden, 2001; Howell, 2008) and provided the

22   backgrounds to images fronting the earliest skate and architecture commentaries, (e.g. Borden,

23   2000; Johns, 2001). There are conflicting accounts of how Newcastle City Council dealt with the

24   'skateboarding issue'. Newcastle city centre and the NewcastleGateshead Quayside have

25   undergone dramatic redevelopment over the past 20 years. Millions of pounds have been spent

26   transforming the urban fabric of the city, notably the renaissance of Grainger Town, a £160

27   million renovation of Newcastle's Georgian core (Faulkner *et al.*, 2006). This regeneration of the

28   city centre was dominated by the classic corporate – council business agenda, in which young

1   people in general, and skaters specifically, were seen, at best, as a nuisance (Rogers & Coaffee,

2   2005; Rogers, 2006). As part of this process a space for the city's skaters was identified as a

3   priority. The result was the construction of a skatepark in Exhibition Park on the northern edge

4   of the city centre. The provision of the skatepark involved consultation between the council and

5   young people and was heralded as an example of best practice by the local authority but also

6   revealed problems (Rogers, 2006). Although many young people were involved in the lengthy

7   consultation process, key decisions about the design and location of the park were either

8   compromises or ultimately made by the council. The site was from the start "out of the way",

9   (Rogers & Coaffee, 2005). Six years on from the skatepark's opening it has not lived up to

10   expectations, and many skaters resent it being held up as a landmark of successful collaboration.

11   Nonetheless, skaters have been removed from the city centre. The question remains, then, where

12   have they gone and what makes their preferred sites special?

13

14   **Methodology: "…skateboarding is 'hard to put onto paper' " (Borden, 2001, p223)**

15

16   Borden (2001) characterized skateboarders' vision of a cityscape as more a process of editing,

17   enacting and living the architecture, a psychogeography of time and space which is hard to depict

18   on conventional maps. Our research methodology was designed to capture skaters' experiences

19   rather than literal mapping. We combined three strategies: asking skaters to map their days out,

20   interviews and informal conversation, and participant observation at skate spots.

21

22   In the first phase of the research skaters were asked to draw maps of their Tyneside skate world.

23   Mental mapping is an established methodology with a series of advances. To begin with mental

24   mapping helps break down the power relationship between researcher and participant, something

25   particularly useful when working with young people. Young & Barrett (2001) successfully

26   mobilized such an approach when working with street children, similarly, Hörschelmann &

27   Schäfer (2005) adopted this method to explore the spatial practices of young Germans. It proved

28   to be an engaging way to glean information and a much talked about approach amongst skaters

1   who often knew what we wanted from them before we had asked them, via the skate-grapevine.

2   The mapping was undertaken from December 2009 to April 2010 with Native Skate shop in

3   Newcastle the main venue. Additional mapping was completed at popular skate spots. By June

4   2010 we had 180 maps, including a few created by up to three people. Figure 1 shows two

5   examples of maps.

6

7   *(Figure 1 positioned here. Caption on separate sheet at end)*
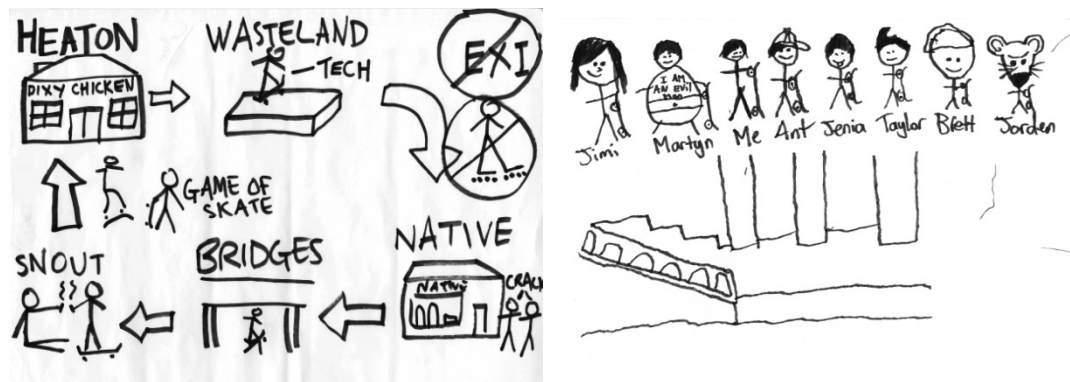
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9

10   Many participants spent a long time creating maps, in one case over 45 minutes, and several

11   sophisticated cartoons and doodles emerged, perhaps reflecting an empathy between the visual

12   method and the visual creativity witnessed in the skate scene, via film, photography and graphics,

13   (see Borden, 2001). Participants appeared to enjoy the map-making, reliving adventures, triumphs

14   and injuries.

15

16   It had always been our intention to give something back to the skaters and the maps provided a

17   useful opportunity to do this. At the end of the fieldwork phase of the research (June 2010) an

18   exhibition was held to feed back our early findings, show a large composite 'mappi mundi' made

19   from the skaters' maps (see Jenson *et al.*, 2010), and the original maps. This was hosted by Dance

20   City as part of the 2010 North East Festival of Architecture and included a core groups of skaters

21   acknowledged for their video and photography of the local scene.

22

1   In combination with the mapping we undertook participant observation totalling 100 hours.

2   Twelve semi structured interviews were carried out during these observations and additional

3   quotes were collected during many of the mapping and observational sessions. Observations

4   were predominantly at two spots, Five Bridges and the Wasteland, which may bias the relative

5   importance of these spots in skaters' maps and comments but skaters were familiar with a wide

6   range of spots, often navigating a circuit of different sites throughout the cityscape in the course

7   of one day out.

8

9

10 **Characterising NewcastleGateshead's core skate spots.**

11

12 Sixty-three skate spots were identified from maps and interviews, although there is probably

13 some duplication due to synonyms. A handful of spots dominated maps and interviews:

14 Exhibition skate park, the Wasteland, the Law Courts and the Haymarket (all in Newcastle) plus

15 Five Bridges in Gateshead.. This section applies Woolley & Johns' (2001) framework to the main

16 skate spots in Newcastle and Gateshead to characterize each and identify commonalities. Our

17 findings are summarized in Table 1.

18

19 *(Table 1 postioned here. Table and caption on separate sheet at end).*

20

21 *Exhibition Skate Park - Exhibition Park, Newcastle. "Just got bored with it"*

22

23 Exhibition Park – or 'Exi' to skaters - completed in the spring of 2004, was intended to give

24 skaters a space away from the commercial centre of Newcastle (see above, and Rogers, 2006).

25 Whilst portrayed as a bonus for local skaters the park allowed the exclusion of skateboarders

26 within the city centre through anti-skate measures, as they now had a 'place' of their own. In the

27 choice of location, skateboarders were designed out of the city and pushed to the peripheries.

1   Nevertheless, Exhibition Park featured in 21% of maps but was disparaged in almost all

2   conversations and many maps (e.g. Figure 1a).

3

4   Trickability is good, in particular the design of the main bowl; "we like the bowl but not the other

5   bit, hard for people who aren't too good" (Josh). The Park presents a range of obstacles such as

6   ledges, banks and rails which are better than those found at Five Bridges and Heaton Wasteland,

7   although several skaters said these elements were cramped and, once mastered, boring

8

9   Accessibility appears good, within 10 minutes walking distance of Haymarket and Jesmond

10   Metro Stations. However the Park is isolated in relation to other spots, particularly since anti-

11   skate measures have been put in place on Newcastle University's neighbouring campus, and a

12   new by-law excluding skateboarders from Haymarket monument (backed with the threat of a

13   £500 fine, see below). Exi is off the circuit of other spots which reduces the number of

14   skateboarders who are willing to travel out of their way there and back. Accessibility is not simply

15   distance. The skate bowl is part of a larger park which was largely cut off from the surrounding

16   city by motorway construction in the 1960s, making much of the area only accessible by

17   underpasses and obscured by embankments.

18

19   Sociability is poor. Those skaters who used Exhibition Park suggested it was "hard to buzz off

20   each other" (Skater3) at Exhibition Park because it was full of separate, unconnected obstacles

21   that more often than not segregated the group of skateboarders. Fences around the sides squeeze

22   onlookers against the skaters and the only seats are at one end from which the bowl cannot be

23   seen.

24

25   As the skate park is a designated facility for skateboarding it is strange that there are issues with

26   the compatibility of the location, although McCulloch *et al.,* (2006) recognize that skate parks can

27   act as a focus for other youth groups to congregate. A major problem which was identified with

28   the skate park was it being "full of kids on bikes", "it's rubbish, too many people, too many kids"

1 (Calum) who, respondents felt, did not understand the etiquette of taking turns so as not to

2 interrupt somebody's flow. Skateboarders became frustrated and spent less time actually

3 skateboarding within the skate park and more time waiting in line for a turn. Skate parks also

4 become a focus for other youth groups as somewhere to hang out, which may put skaters off

5 (McCulloch *et al.*, 2006, Weller, 2006).

6

7 Worse still security was a major concern. During the consultation process this was highlighted as

8 particularly important (Rogers, 2006). Respondents believed this issue had not been dealt with,

9 describing the Park as having a bad reputation; "it's radgie, had a knife pulled on me twice"[1]

10 (Conor's mate) , "got my phone nicked" (Liam), "don't go after 8[pm]" (Michael). This unease is

11 compounded by a nearby underpass and woods that skaters felt offered cover for potential

12 threats. During observation undertaken at Exhibition Park it was clear skaters were uneasy, at

13 times on look out for 'chavs' they perceived as dangerous[2]. Haywood and Yar (2006) provide an

14 overview of the rise of this problematic term which is certainly recognized as a distinct youth

15 culture in Newcastle distinct from and antagonistic to skaters (McCulloch *et al.*, 2006).

16

17 Overall whilst skaters recognized the trickability of Exi this spot was severely compromised by

18 the lack of sociability, exacerbated by problems of accessibility and compatibility. The Park was

19 never spoken of with any affection; "the police came down and said gan [sic] down Exhibition

20 Park, it's where you can skate" (Lewis).

21

22 *The Law Courts - Quayside, Newcastle. "The most perfect set of eight stairs".*

23

24 Newcastle Law Courts, opened in 1990, is arguably the best 'street spot' for skateboarders in

25 Newcastle. It is located on the Quayside rather isolated from other skate spots although

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[1] Radgie is a widely used Tyneside word for someone who is angry, aggressive, troublesome.

[2] Chav is a derogatory term used throughout the UK to describe youths perceived as a kind of aggressive, anti-social underclass. We use the term here because the skaters did, as indicated by inverted commas.

development of a riverside pathway along the Quayside and the Baltic Plaza, just across the river

in Gateshead linked via the Millennium Bridge, have created a range of nearby spots. Given the

isolation and primary use of the building as a Crown Court, it was somewhat surprising to find

this spot was so popular and skated so often.

Trickability is relatively low. The architecture of the Law Courts provides a main obstacle of two

sets of eight stairs, one after another. Behind the back of the building there is also a low but long set

of three steps with a ledge which increases gradually in height. The Law Courts catered for a very

specialist skateboard style; gap skaters, a gap being an interruption, in this case the stairs inbetween

the entrance deck and plaza below. Whilst observing skaters at the Law Courts it appeared that only

the most accomplished skateboarders were using the spot frequently and even then only the most

basic flip tricks were attempted down the stairs. Skaters would often not successfully land any tricks.

However, during the observation it was noted that the spot was the only significant stair set used in

Newcastle. Therefore it seemed its uniqueness in the performance of a trick justified its use over its

trickability and the Law Courts remain a recurrent feature in skaters' videos.

Accessibility is limited. Newcastle's whole Quayside is not well served by public transport but the site

is only a 10 minute walk from the city centre. The Law Courts' place in the skate scene is enhanced

by its sociability; "loads of us and everytime someone landed something everyone would be

cheering and banging their boards" (Adam). The arrangement of the stairs at the Law Courts

unintentionally provides a viewing area for those not skating. Wide pavements and landings allowed

people to stand close to the action whilst the handrail provided an element of safety, providing room

for skaters whilst stopping people encroaching the stairs. The ability to watch others skating was

important for younger skateboarders who would head to the Law Courts to learn from older riders.

Furthermore, the space either side of the steps allowed skaters to form an orderly queue. Any

attempts to push in were met with shouts, most commonly of 'snake'. This piece of skateboard

etiquette was taken quite seriously by the skateboarders, who only allowed people to queue jump on a

few occasions. This highlighted some of the problems of Exhibition Park. This also illustrates

behaviour cited by Borden (2001); although skateboarders resist areas where use of space is prescribed

1   by others, where they reconstruct space for their own pursuits they assert their own values and

2   etiquette.

3

4   The Law Courts were surprisingly compatible with skateboarding given the normative use as a Crown

5   Court, as well as being located on Newcastle Quayside, a area synonymous with Newcastle's

6   night life; "never any bother" despite the party goers (Skater1). One respondent described how

7   he was once approached by men on a stag do. They offered him "two pound if he could jump

8   the stairs" (Skater1), which he did, earning himself the reward. Although this is an extreme

9   example of the compatibility, it was evident from the observing on a Saturday afternoon that

10 skateboarders provided a source of public entertainment for passersby who often stood to watch and

11 in some cases took photos of the skateboarders performing.

12

13 The compatibility with the day to day function of the Law Courts is perhaps more interesting with an

14 informal agreement being reached between skateboarders and other users. The same skater who

15 earned the two pounds recalled the time when he was younger when he had attempted to skate

16 there during work hours. A security guard had approached him and rather than simply moving

17 him on, suggested if he came back after 6pm the courts would be closed and he could skate as long as

18 he wanted. Throughout the participant observation the skateboarders were never removed from the

19 Law Courts; "they work there nine until five, so we work there six until dark" (Skater1).

20

21 *Five Bridges - Gateshead "Winter home".*

22

23 Five Bridges is one of the most popular spots in NewcastleGateshead, and has featured in

24 national skate magazines. It is the prime location for touring professionals and promotional

25 events. It is located under a motorway flyover, offering protection from the elements and

26 reflecting a trend for such locations (see Vivoni, 2009). When it was originally appropriated its

27 trickability was limited, only offering a flat bank with a rail, some curbs and gaps (where skaters

28 had removed flagstones). It has been developed in partnership with Gateshead City Council (see

1   below) and now features grind rails, ledges and flat boxes. These were completed in 2005 and

2   greatly increased the spot's trickability.

3

4   Trickability at Five Bridges is high: "big bank, curbs around the sides and gaps where the

5   pavements had been taken out of the floor. We would choose a trick and not leave until we

6   landed it" (Adam). Five Bridges contains a single round rail and a double rail which can be used

7   for a variety of grind and slide tricks, two manual pads of different sizes, several blocks, a kicker

8   ramp which links to a ledge and sloping sides to a pedestrian walkway. Most recently a mini ramp

9   was constructed in the previously unused side of the location. The site is good for novices and

10   visiting pro-teams and the large space allows many skaters to use the site without cramping tricks

11   (Figure 2).

12

13   *(Figure 2 position here. Caption on separate sheet at end).*
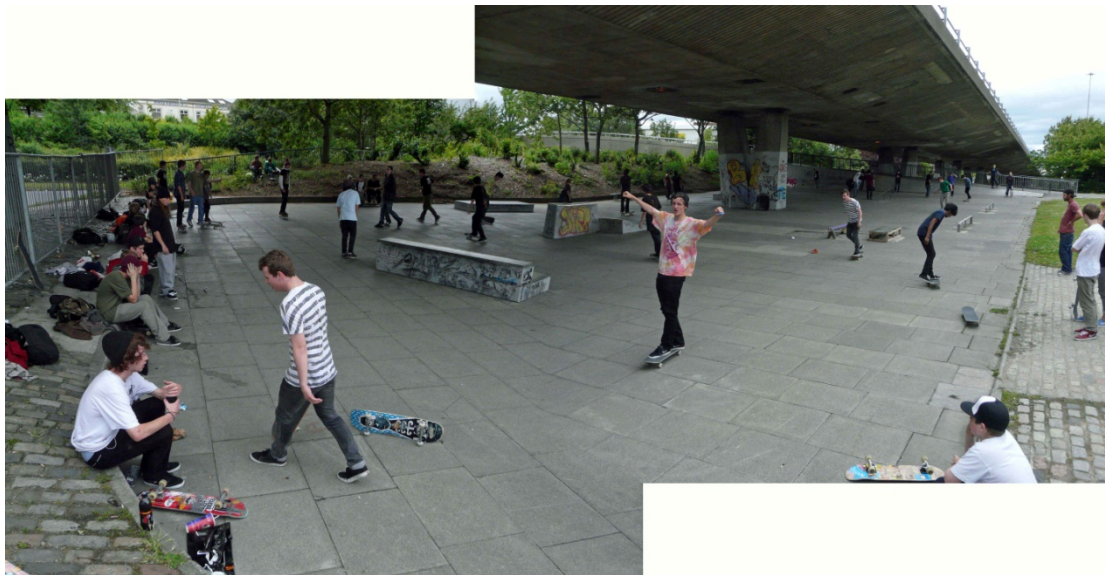
14

15

16   In terms of accessibility, the location is the furthest away from the other favoured spaces. To get

17   there from Newcastle city centre, skateboarders have to travel by Metro and walk 10 minutes

18   from Gateshead Metro station. This was once a drawback for skaters who did not see the value

19   of travelling all that way "for a bank and two pavement slabs" (Skater1) but now it is less of an

1   issue since its redevelopment into a "sick spot" (Skater12) . In addition, the site can be skated in

2   all weathers, even when deep snow closes all other local sites.

3

4   The social aspects of five bridges are valued very highly amongst the skateboarders, a "good

5   place to hang out", as there was "normally someone there" (Skater1), and thus you "could not

6   land anything but still have a good day" (Skater 2). There is plenty of room to sit around the

7   sides, including raised banks and a walkway allowing good views. During several big events over

8   200 skaters were counted without any obvious problems limiting activity.

9

10   The compatibility of Five Bridges evoked one major issue; safety was the main concern. It is on

11   the middle of a sunken roundabout, under a flyover, isolated and partially obscured by thick

12   scrub, which provides a potentially threatening setting. However, it is an area which is primarily

13   used by skateboarders and therefore it is likely that you would see a friendly face. The issue of

14   safety was one which seemed to split skaters. Some of the participants viewed the spot as a bit

15   unsafe or 'sketchy' and were worried about conflict between themselves and other groups who

16   sometimes use the space. Conversely, those who found the location out of harm's way did so

17   under the pretence that the other skateboarders were "reluctant to skate unfamiliar places",

18   whilst pointing out that a police station is close to the location "How can you be scared when

19   you've got to walk past all those police?" (Skater2).

20

21   It has been enhanced in 2004 with £11,000 funding from Gateshead City Council who have

22   recognized Five Bridges as a key skate spot. This is an increasing practice which involves local

23   authorities legitimizing particular skate spots and enhancing their use rather than creating conflict

24   (e.g. London South Bank, Borden, 2001). The result is similar to that of skateparks, in that plazas

25   act as honey pots for skaters, concentrating them in one place, although this approach appears

26   more effective. However Gateshead's investment was prompted primarily because the Council

27   became aware that the presence of skaters made the site feel safer for other people. The precise

28   version from older skaters or Council staff varied in detail but that core purpose remained. Either

(1) a local councillor had an elderly woman talk about the skaters at his surgery. Bracing himself

for complaints he is amazed to hear she liked the skaters because she felt safe when they are

there or (2) pro skaters using bridges were approached by Council to help transform the space

because people don't get mugged or stabbed with hypodermics when skaters are occupying the

space or (3) the Council allocated £11,000 from housing development mitigation off-set funds

to develop the spot, aware that the presence of skaters seems to decrease anti-social use and also

so skaters don't keep taking up flag-stones.

Five Bridges is the core site in Newcastle and Gateshead for skaters. Trickability and sociability

are very high, access reasonable. Only compatibility is a concern, but the history of the site shows

that the very presence of skaters has been used and encouraged as part of a wider community

safety agenda.

The Wasteland - Heaton, Newcastle. "Long summer days".

Heaton Wasteland is the other most skated spot in NewcastleGateshead, affectionately known as

a "summer playground" (Adam). Located on brownfield to the east of the city where a paint

factory once stood, the Wasteland is, like those discussed above, on the periphery of the city. The

factory buildings are long gone, leaving a large concrete floor which has been skated since at least

1999, annexed by the skateboarders (Figure 3). However it is private property and in 2009 was

sold on by the City Council to a developer

Like Five Bridges, when the Wasteland was first appropriated it did not offer much more than a

smooth flat area with the odd gap and raised edge, so trickability was low. However skaters have

built ramps, grind blocks, manual pads and rails on the site. Temporary jumps using wooden

pallets, chairs, sofas, bricks, hardboard sheets and the like are commonplace and can be re-

arranged to create variety and challenge (e.g. Figure 3d). Permanent structures have required

raising funds and organizing building events, relying on older skaters with construction skills,

1 including prefabrication of metal edges. Vandalism has been recurrent with ramps and ledges

2 damaged or destroyed, but skaters have rebuilt each time.

3

4 "…built wooden block, wooden ramp, then everything got burned, two blocks, both got burnt.

5 Built again, metal ramp, metal rail. People started coming down more. Main concrete block got

6 smashed. Metal ramp got stolen, wrecked." (Bish)

7

8 The large area of the old floor allows many skaters to use the site simultaneously without

9 degrading trickability and the arrangement of blocks and rails allows transitions and multiple

10 users. The skaters' development of the Wasteland demonstrated an unexpected degree of social

11 capital.

12

13 This was most obvious in the way skaters collectively raised money for building materials. At first

14 a donation pot was placed on the counter at Native for customers' to donate. While this was a

15 useful and steady source of revenue it did not bring in large sums. To remedy this competitions

16 of 'S.K.A.T.E.' were organized with entrants paying a fee to compete. S.K.A.T.E. is a

17 straightforward game where two skaters of similar standard set each other tricks to complete.

18 Failing to complete a trick after your opponent results in a penalty, in this case a letter in the

19 word skate. Once you have all the letters you are out with the winner going forward to compete

20 against another winner. The entry fees were split between a prize fund and a materials fund:

21

22 "two pound, with half of the money going to the winner and half going on cement, rails or

23 whatever we needed" (Skater2)

24

25 Sociability is high. There is plenty of room, a surrounding ledge low wall provides seating and a

26 good view (Figure 3a), a corner shop is nearby for food and drink and in the summer there is

27 almost always someone skating. The Wasteland provokes great affection. "it's amazing, everyone

28 loves skating it" (Skater13).

1

2 Accessibility is a problem. The site is 20 minutes walk from the city centre, (although a Metro

3 station is within 5 minutes), and not conspicuous, tucked behind some flats on one side and

4 scrub on the other. You have to know where it is, but this aids compatibility. Given the

5 Wasteland is hard to find and the skateable floor hidden by scrub the Wasteland provides a

6 secluded and quiet place skateboarders can use without official disturbance. Since development

7 started with some land clearance in early 2010 skaters have still used the site even when

8 contractors have been present, on one occasion a driver used his JCB to help clear debris off the

9 site, although in June 2011 new 'Trespassers will be prosecuted' signs have appeared. The spot's

10 invisibility to all but those in the know means it is place where skaters do not attract attention,

11 and thus creating a high compatibility. The Wasteland does have other users: primary school age

12 children playing, teenagers hanging out smoking and drinking, older drinkers and rough sleepers,

13 BMXers and micro-scooters. All these users seem to use the space without conflict and value the

14 seclusion and lack of official sanction. For the skaters problems have arisen from groups of older

15 youths (again invariably 'chavs') drinking, riding motorbikes, destroying skate structures,

16 threatening skaters, and, in one instance, shooting with air rifles: "get trouble here sometimes.

17 They think you're scared of them so they can take what they want" (Peter).

18

19 It was clear the Wasteland was the favourite spot for skaters. Over the years an emotional

20 attachment to the area has been constructed through the process of using and enhancing it; "it

21 means more to everyone, because we built it" (Skater14)

22

23 *(Figure 3 position here. Caption on separate sheet at end)*

Haymarket - City Centre, Newcastle. "Back in the day."

The Haymarket (essentially a war memorial with surrounding steps and adjacent pavement on the northern edge of the city centre) is unfamiliar to younger skateboarders, but had an abiding legendary status amongst those who had been skating Tyneside for over a decade and retained a strong affection.

Haymarket was a popular location due to the high level of trickability afforded by the low steps around the memorial. Its location next to a Metro station meant accessibility and sociability were high; "Haymarket was the central spot. It's where you'd hook up" (Skater4). However complaints that skaters were damaging what is a war monument led the council to pass a bylaw banning skaters from the area with the threat of a £500 fine should they be caught. This was the formalisation of the council's attempt to discourage skaters from using the north end of

Newcastle's busiest shopping street. Informal attempts to skateproof the area were made before the bylaw was past. In 2002 the council scattering gravel on the paving. The skaters, however, responded with a call to arms:

"within a matter of hours, the skateboard community arrived at Haymarket with brooms and shovels. Swept it aside, filling all of the surrounding bins with gravel and then they began to skate again." (Skater15).

Rogers & Coaffee (2005) suggested that the spreading of gravel around the Haymarket skate spot in central Newcastle was a transitory tactic to encourage skaters to go to the newly opened city skate park. In contrast to active attempts to move skateboarders on passive measures such as skate proofing are much more effective in making many places, and in some cases entire city centres, unskateable, often backed by legislation and the threat of fines (Rogers & Coaffee, 2005; Nemeth, 2006; Vivoni, 2009).

Although Haymarket is not actively skated any longer (at least during daylight) it remains an important meeting place for skaters before heading to other spots; sociability is the one remaining characteristic: "An old school love affair"(Skater2).

Skaters, the city and the accidental youth club.

The five key skate spots identified from the maps and interviews are strikingly varied, lacking any common set of multiple characteristics within Woolley & Johns (2001) framework which define all top spots, with the exception of sociability, or, in the case of Exi Park, the lack of. The Law Courts, Wasteland, Haymarket and Five Bridges each had their own highly prized individual features but the one factor uniting all four cases was the highly sociable quality, especially the chance to hang out around friends. Conversely Exhibition Park featured in many maps and interviews because of its perceived anti-social aspects, at very least the numbers of others users,

notably BMXers or, worse, fear of crime or violence. The two most popular spots – the

Wasteland and Five Bridges – demonstrate the same characteristics of high trickability, sociability

and compatibility, with low accessibility. A capacity for a variety of tricks, and a space which

provides a social aspect to skaters without intrusion, then, outweighs difficulties in getting to a

spot.

Two further elements not included in the Woolley and Johns' (2001) framework are important to

consider. These are revealed by the focus on a continuous urban area of NewcastleGateshead, in

contrast to the three cities studied by Woolley and Johns. First, spots, on Tyneside at least,

cannot be analysed in isolation. It was clear from all aspects of our methodology than skaters

would appropriate spots in sequences as part of a circuit (e.g. Figure 1a). The order spots were

visited depended on starting points determined by access to different forms of transport and

where skaters live. The mix of spots skaters visit is influenced by the types of skaters (both style

and experience), accessibility, but more importantly the variety and complementarity of one spot

to another. Through interviews it became clear skaters would become bored relatively easily and

chose to visits spots on the same day that offered a variety of skating environments.

Second, to understand not only why particular spaces become popular, but how they are

appropriated a temporal dimension is important. Time is revealing both in terms of when spots

are used, and how long they are appropriated for. The absence of other users means the

Wasteland is accessible whenever it is light enough to skate. In contrast, the Law Courts

demonstrated that some spots are constrained by other uses and thus have unofficial opening

times. The trickability, sociability and compatibility of a spot combine to influence how long

skaters appropriate a spot for. The Wasteland, for example, would be used for the longest

periods of time because it offered variety, the opportunity to hang out with friends, and a low

chance of being moved on. Haymarket, however, would only be used until skaters were moved

on, or they thought they were pushing their luck. By adding temporal and relational dimensions

to Woolley and Johns' framework a more rigorous story of skaters' use of the city can be gleaned.

1   Moreover, once an overview has been provided further examination of skateboarders' activity

2   can be achieved.

3

4   In our study sociability of spots was the most interesting. Friendship dominated several

5   interviews and was an unexpected element in many maps:

6   "skate the whole summer…. Bridges, Wasteland, hang out with friends, sit down, hang out and

7   seeing your friends" (Will).

8

9   Friendship was an unexpected element in the maps which we had originally assumed would focus

10   on physical structure. Friends were depicted on 13% of maps and several maps consisted solely

11   of portraits of friends, up to 8 people in two cases (e.g. Figure 1b). Maps showed other social

12   activities such as eating, drinking, snow ball fights and car rides, with 10% of maps including

13   affectionate joshing of friends. Where skaters were drawn 47% were shown smiling, some with

14   speech bubbles indicating excitement and delight.

15

16   The importance of sociability within the skate scene has been recognized for some time (Borden,

17   2001; Woolley & Johns, 2001; McCulloch *et al.*, 2006; Weller, 2006). Skating and skate spots have

18   proven to be important within wider studies of teenage lives and subcultures, bringing together

19   individuals from different parts of a city or different schools (Borden, 2001; McCulloch *et al.*,

20   2006; Weller, 2006). There are limits to this panacea, in part because of the predominantly middle

21   class backgrounds of skaters in the UK, which often provides them with the financial means to

22   acquire boards and clothes, but creates class-based divides from other subcultural groups notably

23   chavs (see McCulloch *et al.*, 2006; Martin, 2009). Revealingly Rimmer (2010), exploring the value

24   of a music based subculture amongst young men from a Tyneside estate who the skaters would

25   certainly define as chavs, identified striking similarities in the social value of the music scene as

26   well as status gained from DJing or MCing, echoes key elements of the skaters' subculture.

27

1   During observations of large numbers of skaters together at Five Bridges and the Wasteland the

2   willingness to join in together, demonstrate tricks and share space was conspicuous. Whilst

3   skaters would usually arrive in friendship groups of similar age they would mix freely, work to

4   accepted protocols for taking turns and using space. McCulloch *et al.* (2006) have also identified

5   this mixing, in particular across age groups along with the willingness of skaters to look after each

6   other. Many skaters seemed to at least recognize one other. Groups seemed happy to team up in

7   mini competitions such as games of S.K.A.T.E. with turns decided by rock-paper-scissors game

8   (Figure 3b). Only once did we witness any invective, resulting from a near high speed collision

9   and even this led to no further trouble. Combine this sociability, especially amongst a largely male

10   teenage group who are routinely seen as part of the problem of youth on the streets, along with

11   the active maintenance and development skaters give to spots and Bolden's depiction of a parallel

12   world starts to look like a very positive subculture (Figure 3a). Weller (2006) highlighted the

13   skaters' role contributing social capital and revitalizing spaces. The Tyneside skate scene's

14   unifying character is this same sociable, active, entrepreneurial subculture; there were days when

15   Five Bridges or the Wasteland looked like an accidental youth club.

16

17   The skaters presence at Five Bridges has been recognized by Gateshead Council as a means of

18   improving the general safety at an important pedestrian node the design of which created a

19   threatening and obscured walkway area. Five Bridges is a recognised example of the potential

20   impact of skaters as a gentrifying or policing force. However there are limits to this. Skaters

21   themselves feel threatened, primarily by other youth groups. Skaters cannot be taken for granted

22   as a means of informal policing without, at very least, occasional official intervention and

23   encouragement.

24

25   The physical cityscape and skate spots will change. Haymarket had not been routinely skated for

26   several years. A developer has acquired the Wasteland and JCBs have leveled the soil around the

27   concrete floor. There are rumours that Five Bridges may need major renovation to the fly over.

28   However the skaters' psychogeography is a map of opportunity and experiment, not an

1 immutable plan: "we'll just find somewhere else" was a common response when we asked about

2 the longevity of spots.

3

4 The one constant in Tyneside's skate playspace is the sociability of the scene and the social

5 capital the skaters create. The Tyneside skateboard scene represents an asset to the wider

6 cityscape. The skaters are not a problem; their scene is sociable, entrepreneurial and protective of

7 spots in the city they value. Rather than legislate or design out skaters civic leaders would benefit

8 from allowing skate scenes to colonise and re-invent parts of the city as a wholly natural part of a

9 city's fabric.

10

19

20

21

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9

1   **Figure captions and tables**.

2   Figure 1. Examples of skaters' maps. (a) Map with multiple spots, outlining day out circuit

3   moving between each and also showing food and social activity. The map includes the Heaton

4   Wasteland, Native Skates and Five Bridges whilst Exhibition Skate Park ("EXI") gets written off

5   apparently due to in line skaters; (b) map dominated by friends. The spot shown is the Law

6   Courts.

7

8   Figure 2. Five Bridges during locally organized S.K.A.T.E competition.

9

10   Figure 3. The Wasteland. (a) The large space can hold many skaters, the low wall around the edge

11   good for sitting watching, (b) sociability: rock-paper-scissors being used to decide turns, (c)

12   creative: the wasteland features in many local skate videos, (d) versatility: tricks can be re-

13   arranged and re-built.

14

15   Table 1 – Summary of skate spots based on Woolley and Johns' (2001) framework

16

	Accessibility	Trickability	Sociability	Compatibility
Exhibition Park	Low	Med/High	Low	Low
Law Courts	Medium	Low	High	Medium
Five Bridges	Low	High	High	High
Wasteland	Low	High	High	High
Haymarket	High	Medium	High	Low

17

18

19

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