Published in final edited form as:

J Sport Soc Issues. 2018 December ; 42(6): 437–453. doi:10.1177/0193723518800525.

Skateboarding and the Ecology of Urban Space

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Abstract

Skateboarding poses a unique case study for considering the place of sport in human activity. The bulk of skateboarding scholarship argues that skateboarding is largely a subversion of rule governance, a view difficult to square with common and popular rule-governed skateboarding competitions, now including the Olympics. We attempt to resolve this tension by arguing for a kind of pluralism: skateboarding's engagement in rule-governed competition is distinctly subversive, yielding the claim that skateboarding is both sport and subversion. This pluralism is examined in an "ecological" framework of emergent activities defined by push-pull interactive relationships between skateboarders and their environment that change the meaning of their spaces—whether domestic, urban, or competitive—to spaces that are both wild and spontaneous. We conclude with reflections on how skateboarding provides understanding of sport in the space of ecological meaning.

Keywords

skateboarding; sport; subversion; space; ecology

Introduction

Skateboarding is a mystery: We do not really know when it began or where it is going, or even what it is. The mystery is further confounded or perhaps is caused by the fact that the two best candidates for understanding skateboarding are at odds: Skateboarding seems to be a sport as it involves equipment, athleticism, and "rule governed competitions" (Parry, 1998, p. 205), but commentators have historically claimed that skateboarding primarily *subverts*¹ rule governance (Atkinson & Wilson, 2002; Beal, 1995; Borden, 2001; Wheaton, 2007).² However, with recent expansions in competitive organization capped by the adoption of

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

¹We understand the term "subversion" to indicate interventionist strategies that disrupt normal activity. To "subvert" a rule is not to belligerently disregard it but rather to do something more radical; to use a rule in a way that disempowers the rule. Although subversion often has political meaning, it is used here most generally to indicate ways to upend, intervene, or undermine an established system.

²Nor is skateboarding a kind of game or practical activity that is often thought to lead to a kind of sport (Martínková & Parry, 2011, p. 25).

skateboarding into the Olympics in 2016 (Batuev & Robinson, 2017, p. 6), commentators are shifting positions: Borden (2016a) now describes skateboarding as “sport-like,” and Wheaton has updated an account of sport to include skateboarding as an “informal” or “lifestyle” sport (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2016) and an “action” sport (Wheaton & Thorpe, 2018). Yet, we need not read these shifts as strengthening claims that skateboarding *is* and has always been a sport, as some have claimed (Humphreys, 2003; Rinehart, 2005),³ or weakening expressions of skateboarding’s subversiveness by many professional skateboarders and skateboarding media (Clark, 2016; Hocking, 2004; Mortimer, 2008; Stratford, n.d.). If anything, the recent work by Borden (2016a, 2016b) and Wheaton (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2016) spotlight that scholars have long been pluralists about skateboarding’s subversion/sport complexity, a view that we develop throughout this article.

Vivoni (2009) provides perhaps the most robust account for how these contrary aspects coexist, claiming that skateboarding “vacillates”: alternatively subverting *and* supporting governing rules, as we discuss below. Other authors, such as Lundry (2003), resist attempts to define skateboarding, arguing that it should remain a mystery, for with stringent definition comes control and stifling of the creativity that characterizes skateboarding. (See Table 1 for a summary of these positions.) Even this article might be viewed as an exercise in such categorization, though, ironically, we advocate for a pluralism in the spirit of Lundry’s mystifierianism. We claim that skateboarding is a unique and rather undefinable emergent activity, not reducible to its constitutive parts, two of which are sport and subversion, and is thus not definable in a single manner. Skateboarding exists in a plurality of kinds and in so being is *sui generis*—of its own kind, a claim that we defend by examining the unique ecological context of its activity. To make our argument, we consider claims in support of defining skateboarding as a sport and as a subversive activity, a binary debate we reject, but which informs our own pluralistic view of skateboarding as an ecological activity.

Skateboarding as Sport

Those who identify skateboarding as a kind of sport often view it in a category along with rock climbing and BMX biking; it is a “dangerous,” “extreme,” or “action” sport (Robinson, 2015; Wheaton, 2013), with particularly high injury incidence rates among adolescents. However, it does not sit naturally in this category as participants often forsake safety equipment such as helmets even while acknowledging sometimes fatal risk (McKenzie, Fletcher, Nelson, Roberts, & Klein, 2016). Forsaking safety equipment is a component more aligned with “lifestyle” sports, which eschew extraneous equipment, achievement, and oversight, suggesting that skateboarding is a more natural fit for this paradigm of activity (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2016; Tomlinson, Ravenscroft, Wheaton, & Gilchrist, 2005). If skateboarding is sport, it exists within a plurality of sport kinds that seem to exist more for purposes of institutionalization and commercialization.

Interest in skateboarding by mainstream markets began in 1981 when the “National Skateboard Association (NSA)” was created (Batuev & Robinson, 2017) and continued with sponsorships by ESPN (Rinehart, 1998) and other major sports brands such as Nike and Red

³“Lifestyle sport” is meant to include less regulated sporting activities that are defined less by competitive play or achievement and more by participation and sensation seeking.

Bull (Lundry, 2002). But what does it mean to have an activity that is at least “part” sport and relatedly “institutional”? And if one is to concede that skateboarding is at least part sport, does this impoverish or improve its social and cultural standing? And do skaters, participants of skateboarding, define the merits of this cultural standing? Or is it the sponsoring sports brands and related organizations that designate success, or provincial or political entities, or general popular opinion? We can ask these questions of popular sport today, even though prompted by skateboarding, suggesting that this discussion may illuminate features general to sport that are otherwise hidden.

To these open questions, we answer with a larger context of meaning to merge at least some of these moving parts under a more elemental or common context, one that emphasizes the more interactive, instinctual, and ecological aspects of sport, deemphasizing the institutional and commercial. In particular, we think that much of the tension that surrounds the nature of sport and how its members are to be categorized (or not) is inherent in the transitory nature of all ecological activity, human or otherwise—activity that resists neat categorization or speciation (Darwin, 1859). Skateboarding thus offers a unique window into the activity of sport because, as we claim, ecological and transitory aspects are intrinsic to the activity itself. We argue that skateboarding activity emerges from a plurality of elements, some of which include rule-governed activity, that is, sport, *and* subversive subcultural lifestyle,⁴ without those parts being necessary constituents of each act of skateboarding.⁵ Skateboarding is play or performance that innovates within and without rules, sometimes manifesting distinctive subversive characteristics or sometimes sport characteristics in its public perception or performance, but only as modes of an otherwise uncategorizable activity. Explaining this view helps account for the optimism of Borden and others that skateboarding will do more to change the Olympics than any change the Olympics will bring to skateboarding.⁶ When viewed through the lens of ecology made visible by skateboarding activity, we can see that popular sports are also subversive and can exist without institution and commercialization. Even though skateboarding might be “sport-like,” it makes sport more “skate-like.”

Skateboarding as Ecological

What makes skateboarding unique? We claim that it is skateboarding’s activity, what might be called “interactivity,” that distinguishes it from other kinds of athletic and subversive behaviors. By interactive, we mean to describe skateboarding’s double use of architecture and the surrounding norms and rules of how it is used, when handrails and stairs are skated their intended use is subverted while the architecture controls how they are subverted and manipulated.⁷ We describe this double use of architecture as “symmetrical” and liken it to

⁴.I am skeptical that the term “subculture” does much in the way of clarifying the social impact of skateboarding apart from its sport-like status. As Sander Holgens pointed out our personal correspondence, skateboarding is now an activity of some academic interest discussed in contexts of sociopolitical issues that permeate our culture at large. See also Dinces (2011).

⁵.To be specific, we view skateboarding as a kind of “cluster concept,” where a plurality of different properties is each sufficient to describe the activity as a whole. For a similar cluster concept account of art, see Gaut (2000).

⁶.Borden’s optimism shows when he states, What’s more, skateboarding might just help to rescue the Olympics from its over reliance on “established” sports, international rivalries and high-level performance measuring. Skateboarding suggests that other attitudes toward competition can exist, in which personal achievement is undoubtedly celebrated, but always within a more pervasive culture of idiosyncratic innovation, shared engagement and general lifestyle.

⁷.For more on skateboarding’s “subversive” element, see Glenney (2016).

skateboarding's predecessor "surfing," an activity at once controlled by its natural wave-form architecture while also subverting the wave-form by "riding" the wave and engaging in trick play: turning, flipping, spinning, etc.

We can see the uniqueness of skateboarding's "interaction" by contrasting it to "mainstream" sports that are best described as having an "asymmetrical" relation, or merely active relation with its architecture—sport activity is (largely) controlled by the architecture and the associated rule-bound activities. Even in "performance" sport that are defined as "dangerous" (Russell, 2005), such as ski-jumping and ice-skating, qualitative elements of artistic display similar to skateboarding are exhibited (Parry, 1989), but tricks are standardized with specific "point totals" that emphasize regulation of architecture and rules. By contrast, even popular skateboarding competition organizations such as "Street League Skateboarding (SLS)" introduce "an organizational compromise between traditionally loose competition rules, which reflect skateboarding values, and the need for the standardization of sport regulations . . . the SLS format does not restrict athletes in the tricks they can do" (Batuev & Robinson, 2017). Consider even the new performance-oriented Winter Olympic sport of ice dancing; it would be surprising to see ice-dancers engage in tricks that involved the walls surrounding the ice-rink or that included dancers removing a skate to plant a foot to shift a trick across the ice. In skateboarding, such innovative rule-breaking play is not only encouraged but anticipated. Those with the most creative and expansive uses of architecture are granted the most social capital for their efforts (Peralta, 2001). Competitive landscapes, although standardized to a degree,⁸ are present for maximizing their manipulation in skateboarding competition.

To argue for our claim that skateboarding's sport and subversion pairs as a lens into its "ecological" interactive human activity, we formalize this noted tension in two of the strongest reconciliatory strategies: Vivoni's claim of vacillation between the subversion and support of rule governance sport and Borden's older claim, one that is still held by many skateboarders, that skateboarding is subversion. We argue that although neither provides a satisfactory strategy as neither fully account for the competitive, rule-governed aspects of skateboarding, they provide the clearest description of "symptoms" of an activity that rewilds its environment—of a specific kind of integrative interaction influenced by environmental conditions (similar to sport) *and at the same time* subverts the intended use of the environmental conditions.

Skateboarding as Subversion

Skateboarding, as commonly practiced and conceived, appears to defy "rule governance" of sport and is perceived as a subculture lifestyle involved in symbolic and embodied performances to subvert mainstream rules and norms, what has recently been called "*la perruque*," "a tactic that 'finds ways of using the constraining order of the place' for one's purpose" (Ong, 2016). Because of this subculture lifestyle, the practice of skateboarding

⁸. Many skateboarding competitions, such as The Battle at the Berrics or ESPN's X Games, prohibit any part of the body from touching the ground during a trick. But this emphasizes how fluid of an idea a "trick" is in skateboarding as many tricks involve feet, hands, and other parts of the body making contact with the ground, making it difficult to distinguish a successful trick from a failed trick.

involves, as Belinda Wheaton describes, “bodily expression and performance to subvert—at least symbolically—this mainstream discipline and control” (Wheaton, 2007, p. 288). Furthermore, as Atkinson and Wilson (2002) note, skateboarders identify skateboard tricks as a form of “free expression,” a “temporary escape or sense of empowerment through movement” (p. 386). In sum, the thought and practice and conception of skateboarding, as both publicly conceived and self-conceived, are antithetical to “rule governed competitions” required of sport. Some even suggest that architecture designed for skateboarding, such as skate parks, are antithetical to its creative essence, which springs from discovering and skating architecture designed for *other* purposes (Lundry, 2003). Skating these found spaces, or “skate spots,” grounds skateboarding culture with places of identity. And some, such as Embarcadero (EMB) and Love Park are endowed with “quasi-spiritual” meaning (O’Connor, 2017).

However, skateboarding competitions are both common and popular, particularly, among the skateboarding “subculture.” As many scholars have pointed out, such competitions include elements constitutive of sport such as time limits (Martínková & Parry, 2011, p. 26), with usually 2 to 5 min “runs” where competitors engage in “contests” (Kretchmar, 1988), testing their abilities against others on standardized obstacles such as ramps and rails, standardized equipment, safety equipment, awards, rankings of contestants, and so on with recent attempts to standardize the format and judging (Meronek, 2018). Such contests become sources for ranking skateboarders by both the public and skateboarders themselves (Rinehart, 1998) including globalized rankings by institutions such as The Boardr. There even exist pseudo-contests, rule-guided games played outside of standardized settings such as “SKATE”—a game akin to the basketball shooting game called “HORSE” but played with skateboard tricks.

This tension between sport and subversion surfaces for Vivoni (2009) upon considering the building of parks reserved for skateboarding:

Purpose-built spaces such as public skate parks both marginalize skateboarders from city centers and serve as training grounds for appropriating urban spaces. While in the streets, skateboarders are *both criminalized* for defacement of property *and commodified* as urban guerrilla performance artistry. *These contradictions disable straightforward claims founded on mutually exclusive processes of contestation and cooptation.* (p. 145, our emphasis)

Skateboarding, like other forms of urban expression such as graffiti, is both criminalized and commodified by the public. The subversive activity that creates public backlash also generates public interest and support that often translates into city-sponsored skate parks reserved for the activity (Lundry, 2002). These constructions ironically undermine the subversive component of the activity, which ironically again, diminishes public support, and so on. The existence of skate parks is, itself, a symptom of skateboarding’s paradoxical nature. We formalized this paradox as “Mutually Exclusive Goals in Skateboarding (MEGS)”:

- 1. Either skateboarding activity is a sport *or* (exclusive) a subversive subcultural lifestyle.

- 2.If a sport, the goal of skateboarding activity is to *achieve* rule-bound competitive success.
- 3.If subversion, the goal of skateboarding activity is to *disrupt* rule-bound competitive success.
- 4.In practice, skateboarding activity is both achievement and disruption of rule-bound competitive success.
- 5.Activities that enjoy mutually exclusive goals are paradoxical.
- 6.Thus, in practice, skateboarding activity is paradoxical.

MEGS articulates the paradox of skateboarding, subverting the very notion of rule-bound competitions as it participates in them, adding to the mystery of skateboarding, which includes many other paradoxes as it is an activity both conformist and transgressive, with influences both local *and* global, with movement that is both static and rapid, and meaning that is both domestic and urban, with both planned *and* spontaneous behavior. (For more discussion of these paradoxes as exemplified in skateboarding in Seoul, Korea, see Hölsgens, 2018, ff. Chapter 3.)

The MEGS paradox has not gone unnoticed. Vivoni (2009) proposes a reconciliation of promoting both sport and subversive goals, vacillating between the twin platforms of acceptable rule-bound behavior and subversive expression: “While weaving in and out of found and purpose-built terrains, skateboarders elude fixed categorizations. Instead, their spatial desires unfold somewhere in between domination and resistance” (p. 145). We interpret this “vacillation” claim as an edit of premise (4) as follows:

(4)*: In practice, skateboarding activity *vacillates between* achievement and disruption of rule-bound competitive success.

Premise (4)* gives weight to the competitive and commodification elements in skateboarding, but still recognizes that skateboarding has conflicting aspects—that skateboarding remains a mystery.

By contrast, Borden’s (2001) past work did not seem to take these competitive elements seriously enough to see any paradox of identity in skateboarding activity, viewing skateboarding as pure critique of capitalism, particularly, privatization of property. As Wheaton, interpreting Borden’s view, insightfully noted,

Skateboarding is a performative critical practice that challenges the form and mechanics of urban life, confronting the social, spatial, and temporal logic of capitalist space. Street skaters actively reappropriate and redefine government, business, and commercial space in the city, they critique ownership, refusing to consume architecture as pure image, using it as “a material ground for action.” (Borden, 2001, p. 239; Wheaton, 2013, p. 299)

Borden’s claim can be stated as a denial of premise (2):

(2)*: Achieving rule-bound competitive success is *not* a goal of skateboarding activity.

Skateboarding exists as critique of the commodification of space—a kind of activist activity like protesting. Borden's early work, however, neglected the commercialization and institutionalization of *this critique*, by “companies who want to establish ‘street cred’” (Lundry, 2002). Both public and private skate parks and the broad implementation of skateboard competitions in these spaces are supported by these street cred hungry companies. In sum, both Borden's older work and Vivoni take seriously the subversive nature of skateboarding and its disruption of public space and categories. Only Vivoni takes the paradoxical acceptance of skateboarding by public commodification of its subversiveness with any seriousness, recognizing that skateboarding, even in its subversion, fulfills capitalist ideals and social norms of commercialization and competition. Vivoni suggests a “vacillation” between the poles of capitalism and anticapitalist ideals, a kind of “either/or” reconciliation: either a skateboarder is part of the subversion when engaged in skateboarding or in the competitive and commodified popular culture that he or she previously resisted. Perhaps Vivoni expresses Borden and Wheaton's evolving views on skateboarding to incorporate its sportification? And perhaps skateboarding itself has evolved in a way that accepting larger competitive venues such as Street League and the Olympics is natural. As Sander Hölsgens rhetorically remarks, “Could Street League or the Olympics have happened in 1998 or 2002 (Personal Correspondence)?” To consider skateboarding's future, we may benefit by considering its more primitive past.

Skateboarding as Wild

As discussed above, we view skateboarding as an ecological activity in a “surfing-origins” narrative—skateboarding mimics a kinetic activity organized around engaging the natural form of a wave in a push-pull manner where the wave influences the behavior of the surfer and the surfer influences the surface of the wave with his or her own kinetic energy. How so? Urban architecture, at once stifling and void of wildness, can be made new—can be rewilded—through the skateboarder's push-pull contribution of kinetic movement that breeds a kind of elemental wildness in spaces urban, competitive, and domestic.⁹ Our pluralist response to MEGS is a false dilemma:

(1)*: Skateboarding is more than a “rule-bounded” and “subversive,” being an integrative and emergent “wild” activity.

We might further clarify this notion of “wild” by looking beyond surfing to even more basic ecological activities and their practitioners.

By “wild” activity, we do not mean something in contrast to human activity. As environmentalist Jack Turner states, “Wildness . . . is determined not by the absence of people, but by the relationship between people and place” (Turner, 2013, pp. 204–205). Like Turner, we follow Thoreau in claiming that wild acts begin with a deconstruction of the tame and a call to a different order,

⁹ We do not mean to dismiss an important difference between urban landscapes built specifically for skateboarding, like skate parks, and landscapes built in accordance with urban planning strategies that often attempt to build structures that prevent skateboarding. We agree with Whitley's (2009) contention that skating these later structures is akin to skating “in the wild.” By contrast, skate park and contest structures are more domesticated landscapes, built to ease the difficulty of skateboarding with smooth transitions, low rails, and smooth ledges.

I wish to speak a word for nature, for absolute Freedom and Wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and Culture merely civil,—to regard [hu]man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society. (Thoreau, 1854)

As Thoreau instructs, merely walking can be a wild activity if one walks in a way that participates with the ecological order as opposed to, for instance, social or political orders. In the wild, there are no fixed fences or boundaries or “private” spaces, only an interactive play of organisms found in temporary and often shifting spaces. One may walk ecologically if they do so along natural lines: trails, valleys, streams. In doing so, one often disrupts social or political lines: climbing over fences and rock walls. An ecologically informed social or political border, then, will fall on natural lines and in doing so will change, drift, and transform with the natural transitions of these lines, not unlike dirt trails that develop between sidewalks.

In an essay discussing Thoreau’s own skating experience, albeit on ice, Ian Marshall (1993) quotes Thoreau’s juxtaposition of walking and river skating: “The skater can afford to follow all the windings of a stream and yet soon leaves behind and out of sight the walker who cuts across.” Skating, then, might be understood as an activity more adept than walking at discovering natural lines. As Thoreau continues, following the river trail provides a novel and “wilder” vision of our landscape, “a journey on skates along the course of this meandering river . . . we see all things from a new and wilder side” (p. 462). Skating speeds the subject along, allowing them to take in greater diversity and spectacle than otherwise, providing the context for an integrative moment, what we describe below as an “ecological thought.” As Marshall comments, “On skates Thoreau seems to feel that *physically* he can encompass the bigger picture, a vision of biotic unity which constitutes spiritual recognition as well as ecological insight” (p. 464). Biotic unity is a consistent thread in Thoreau’s writings, consisting of an interaction with one’s environment, where the environment shapes one’s will. This is how the skateboarder integrates himself or herself within the environment in a wild way.

Borden anticipates skateboarding’s wildness when he describes it as a subjective experience beyond the body, “the spatiality of the skateboarder goes beyond the proximate body, and instead is conducted in relation to two physical ‘Others’ to the skater: the skateboard, and the terrain” (Borden, 2001, p. 97). The act of skateboarding is beyond body-centric, inclusive of both the tool and environmental structures. Borden argues that this act deployed by the body creates the space around it, quoting Lefebvre (1991) in support:¹⁰

There is an immediate relationship between the body and its space, between the body’s deployment in space and its occupation of space . . . This is a truly remarkable relationship: the body with the energies at its disposal, the living body, creates or produces its own space; conversely, the laws of space, which is to say the

¹⁰ Atkinson and Wilson (2002) also heavily cite Lefebvre’s Marxist critique of space as endowing the subject with a unique meaning: In [Lefebvre’s (1991)] analysis of social space, he extends his ideas about the transgressive potential of leisure spaces, arguing that spaces of leisure—the every day and the body—constitute a potential vast “counter-space”; they show evidence of a “truly productive capacity” (p. 383). Lefebvre acknowledges that although, historically, these spaces have been assimilated into the capitalist system, leisure spaces are also contradictory spaces with a tendency for “transgression of users.” (p. 385).

laws of discrimination in space, also govern the living body and the deployment of its energies. (p. 170)

The space circumscribing the body is created by the energy and will of the body itself. When the body engages a piece of architecture, reimagining it as a natural form, wildness is recreated—the artificial architecture is “rewilded”—as wildness is manifested within the dialectical process between built technology and nature. Through this interaction, the elemental wildness of the human spirit is activated within the urban environment.

The Ecological Model in Inner and Outer Spaces

The “stoke” or “wow” feeling that is often reported in conjunction with skateboarding and surfing provides some evidence for this “wild” relation. Atkinson (2009) discusses a similar phenomenon in Parkour. “During a free running flow experience, traceurs relinquish self-consciousness and doubt and become ‘one’ with the activity and the physical habitat in which it is performed” (p. 190). This raw kind of inner experience is often the basis for continued participation in skateboarding performance and is sometimes compared with the rush of emotions felt with success in sports, such as a major win in a contest (Creagan, 2014). However, for Parkour and skateboarding, this feeling emerges from outside socially competitive contexts and may be inhibited by the anxieties and frustrations of competition. This feeling is most prevalently reported in skateboarding media when one successfully invokes the natural lines across the artificial rails, steps, and ledges in the urban environment, uses that are also altered by the environment. For instance, when a skateboarder observes these elements of urban architecture, he or she can activate a novel trick idea that, when performed successfully, generates an experience of “wow,” one which is both novel but also anticipated.

A similar phenomenal experience has recently been discussed by Tim Morton (2012) and may help in understanding the experience and its possible integrative roots. Morton’s work, *The Ecological Thought*, encourages a paradigm shift in the way we acknowledge the Other: any sentient or nonsentient thing outside our own being, including animals and objects. Ecological thought is in contrast with a traditional “Western” point of view, where what lies outside “the human” is fragmented, nonhuman, *on the outside*. Morton argues that, in truth, there is no outside, no separateness, just the mesh of ecology of which humanity is a part.

Morton describes the “mesh” as the interconnectedness of all things both simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, as we cannot accurately describe or understand *why* they are so familiar within our capitalist consumer-oriented viewpoint. Morton (2012) calls phenomena that trigger ecological thoughts of the mesh, “strange strangers”—sentient or nonsentient objects of the lived environment that force us into a profound realization of the interconnectedness of all things (p. 15). “The strange stranger lives within (and without) each and every being . . . The more you know, the more entangled you realize you are, and the more open and ambiguous everything becomes” (Morton, 2012, p. 17). As Astronaut Eugene Cernan (2007) described his experience of the Earth while in orbit,

When you head on out to the Moon, in very short order, and you get a chance to look back at the Earth, that horizon slowly curves around in upon himself, and all

of sudden you're looking at something that is very strange, but yet is very, very familiar.

Through the interactive space of one's lived environment, one experiences the skateboard in a symbiotic and strange relationship, bringing into one's awareness a connection with nonsentient objects. The more one experiences this interactive medium, the more one recognizes their entanglement in all things. The skateboard becomes a tool for engaging in the mesh, a way of being that has been the focus of explorations by both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty (for more, see Hölsgens, 2018).

To understand how wildness is accessed through the human kinetic activity of a skateboarder, consider again the surfer's activity, but from an outer space perspective. His or her environment consists of the wave with which he or she interacts. The wave itself is wild: Often unpredictable and cascading over the shore in a series of endless oscillations and produced by the gravitational pull of the moon itself pulled by the earth that itself is pulled by the sun—an energy forcing water through space, causing a natural convex form with which the surfer engages. The surfboard is a medium through which the surfer engages the wave's convex shape, becoming a part of the surfer's interacting with this natural architecture. In this experience, the surfer gains the wildness of the oscillating ocean waves; he or she engages the ebb and flow of rushing water, experiencing something akin to a horizon-expanding religious experience (Taylor, 2007).

From outer and inner space perspectives, the skateboard and the sideways “surfing” that allows a diverse complexity of interactive behaviors is an example of a strange stranger. Skateboard use, we conjecture, triggers ecological thoughts—a realization that one is in a push-pull relation with all environments: natural and artificial. If a strange stranger, then the board and sideways body stance by which the boarder rides that often defines skateboarding activity is expanded in meaning¹¹ and includes the “place” or even spatial path in which these activities are located. In what sense is skateboarding and its space meaningful? We have been arguing that what sets skateboarding apart is the integrative relationship it has with its space, giving its activity a “wild” relation. Why is this integrative relation “wild”? A skateboarder “creates or produces its own space” to summarize Lefebvre and Borden, affecting its landscape while at the same moment being informed by the landscape, seeking to push the limits of space more than of body.

This notion of the wild in skateboarding—a relationship of ecological interconnectivity—invites an insightful comparison with the idea of wilderness—places set apart for either protection or intentional forms of human interaction. Comparing skateboarding and its wildness is made explicit in youth programs such as Elemental Awareness, which teaches wilderness survival skills of starting friction fires with bow and stick to urban youth, often in the context of skateboarding culture such as YMCA Skate Camp in the Sequoia mountains. These survival skills provide a kind of awareness of the natural world often experienced by

¹¹In some preliminary research, the sideways stance, known as either “regular” if the left foot is forward or “goofy” if the right foot is forward, shows significant effects on balance, with the forward foot having greater basis of stability. See Wong, Patton, and Brown (2015). Just as the world is approached as “right handed” or “left handed,” might it be the case that the skateboarder approaches his or her world “sideways?”

skateboarders in urban landscapes. As Todd Larson (2015), director of Elemental Awareness, states,

Our philosophy is that if one knows skateboarding, the awareness of the urban landscape becomes heightened because you are seeing the world through the different eyes. You notice the architecture and see its potential for creative expression. The same can be said for the natural landscape by a passion for wilderness skills. A walk through the forest becomes an endless potential for activities, crafts and self-preservation. There is much crossover of these two realms, but if both are fully explored and understood, then comfort and creativity can be experienced wherever you are. There are many ways to achieve this awareness through one's passions, but for us Skateboarding and Wilderness Survival have been the vehicle that speaks to us and our participants. (email interview)

The skateboarder observes his or her urban environment with “wild” eyes, not unlike a survivalist in nature, tuned to architecture that is hospitable to interaction, thereby rewilding the meaning of different spaces. Identifying this wild interactive relation of skateboarding, and its absence in the related fringe sports of ski-jumping and ice-dance, grounds our argument that skateboarding is not limited by the categories of “sport” or “subversion” as it is an emergent ecological activity.

Problems

One may argue, however, that skateboarding, like its street ken graffiti, contributes to the destruction of surfaces and their related social structure, an act that contributes to the occupation of “common” spaces and undermining public and private spaces (Andron, 2018). This is why skateboarding is in many contexts prohibited (think of all the “No Skateboarding” signs throughout cities): It contributes to the demise of urban architecture, both physical and social. The mantra of 1990s’ street skateboarding, “*skate and destroy*,” supports this argument. This activity, then, is in many cases prohibited with good reasons; *more* is preserved in the absence of the destructive skateboarder (Vivoni, 2009, p. 136).

Although skateboarding is often perceived as a destructive subculture, its abstract power lies in its ability to transcend the external outcomes of its practice. Yes, there is narrative force in its urban escapism origin story—a tool to destroy the restricting and stagnant suburbs of southern California—but within that protest something else was discovered that can fulfill humanity’s desire for wildness. Borden expounds this emergent quality as a “second nature” in skateboarders, who take, “artificial architecture and adopt it, manipulate it, rethinking it as natural space” (Borden, 2001, p. 30), allowing for a pluralism of spaces for subversion, including competitive spaces. It is in the individual’s “rethinking” that wildness is born and preserved as it recreates the natural form of what is wild, displacing the domestic in urban environments.

One may further object to our description of the urban activity of skateboarding as “wild” as the spaces of skating are not changed in any significant manner. In other words, skateboarding does not really rewild as it does not truly shape its landscape. As Vivoni (2009) writes, Skateboard scuff arises from an unspoken collective

effort. Filth traces adorn concrete surfaces as both markers of previous use and harbingers of unscripted encounters in public space. Candle wax and board art coalesce on concrete ledges as skateboarders glide across varied surfaces. (p. 136)

At best, skateboarding is impotent in its “wilding” affect, relying on the available architecture, leaving behind mere surface marks and scratches. Interactions with physical surfaces, however, have a spiritually deep meaning, a claim echoed by Emerson, a saint of re-wilding who writes, “We live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them. (Emerson, 1844, p. 65)”

The physical “depths” skateboarders reach when interacting with architecture are not at issue as rewilding concerns what is within a *social* structure; it starts with a subculture that questions human methods of rapid urbanization—questions that are encouraged by rewilding experiences. The individual is led to inform architecture through its interaction rather than merely deconstruct it. This interactive engagement should encourage reflection and critique: Is the urban environment constructed in such a way that allows humanity to access its natural wildness? Does urban construction support/fulfill humanity’s desire for ecological interconnectedness? This is what, in many ways, skateboarding provides society and sport when it cuts across the normal uses of urban and competitive architecture.

As a final example of how one might go about the ethnological and sociological study of wildness in urban space, we should look for architecture that enhances interactive and common spaces—architecture that is “hybrid.” One such architecture is skate park design, which often draws directly from elements in cities in which they are housed, thereby enhancing the interactivity of skateboarding’s use of space. Not unlike the hybrid ecology of zoo reserves such as the San Diego Zoo Safari Park, which includes a massive artificial animal reserve built to simulate the natural environments for safari animals, skate parks are hybrid “wild” spaces. They include stairs, rails, curbs, and barriers designed to re-create the natural built environment for the more controlled use of skateboarding. Ironically, just as skateboard park design evolves, so too does urban designs, which of late include prohibitive features like “skate stoppers”—hostile architecture—to further exclude skateboarders from returning to their natural urban habitats. One significant hypothesis suggested by Paul O’Connor (personal correspondence) to demonstrate the wild push/pull process unfolding in our cities is if future skatepark design includes these hostile features, showing the adaptability of skateboarding to their ever-evolving urban spaces, a process also known to occur in wild species of animal (Schilthuizen, 2018).

Conclusion

We claim that skateboarding succeeds in creating an ecologically interactive relationship between the skateboarder and his or her urban and competitive environments. With skateboarding fulfilling this unique niche, it serves as a powerful critique for our current period of rapid urbanization. How? For one, it causes a disruption in the ways we approach urban planning, serving as a negative critique of domestication and safety, provoking us to look for better interactive alternatives, such as Antoni Guadi’s architectural design work in Barcelona that emulates natural design (Nonell, 2000). Such emulation may satisfy

skateboarding's critique, demanding this as a more appropriate way to fashion our cities to be more human. We want our cities to invoke the "wow" experience of skateboarding—to preserve the interactivity necessary for the spirit of humanity that is so desperate for common spaces of interactive expression that they create a "gum wall" in Seattle and "love locks" in Paris.

In addition, framing skateboarding in its ecological context can answer "the sport" question posed in the first paragraph. We answer that any "sport" definition impoverishes emergent activities like skateboarding, which by our pluralist definition have a whole greater than their parts and thus need not be defined by their parts. Emergent activities such as skateboarding can resist external definitions from institutions and commodification if their interactive nature is kept in focus. This focus is crucial if sport is to learn anything from its subversive cousin, skateboarding.

And what can sport learn? Skateboarding serves as a critique of sport as a rule-bound activity. When interactive, however, sport exemplifies its subversive and transitory nature like other ecological activities. The history of even popular sport—baseball, basketball, football—are all witness to a subversive nature. Events such as Maradona's "Hand of God" (Tamburrini, 2000), Nelson's "Hack-a-Shaq" (Skinner, 2011), and Perry's "Spitball" (Lehman, 1981) register fault lines of change prompting self-critique of rule-bound play, "when is a rule-breaking unsportsmanlike and when is it innovative?" As sport attempts to stifle creativity of the human spirit by limiting participants to "activity" and controlling their spaces, skateboarding can exhibit the natural evolution toward interactive play and rewilding of space. In this sense, sport can learn to skate the evolutionary trajectory, rewilding its own ecological spaces of play.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to Sander Hölsgens, Iain Borden, Andy Dicker and Jordan Wilk and everyone at YMCA Skate Camp, Todd Larson and everyone at Elemental Awareness, and last but not least The Worble Crew including: Tom Mull, Dave Mull, Charley Mull, Dylan Christopher, Chris Colburn, and Alex Farrara. We also thank Shawn E Klein and the participants of the *3rd Annual Rockford University Sports Studies Symposium*, April 2013, where a previous draft of this paper was read.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Brian Glenney received support for research reported in this publication by an Institutional Development Award (IDeA) from the National Institute of General Medical Sciences of the National Institutes of Health under grant number P20GM103449. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the author and does not necessarily represent the official views of NIGMS or NIH. Steve Mull received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Table 1.

A guide to various positions discussed related to skateboarding as sport and/or subversion.

Is skateboarding a subversive activity?	Is skateboarding a sport?	
	Yes	No
	Yes Gilchrist and Wheaton (2016), Borden (2016b), Vivoni (2009)	Borden (2001), Atkinson and Wilson (2002), Beal (1995), Wheaton (2007)
	No Rinehart (2005), Humphreys (2003)	Lundry (2003)