

# The Poetics of Security: Skateboarding, Urban Design, and the New Public Space

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## Abstract:

Skateboarding is a thorn in the side of landscape architects, planners, and building owners; so much so that there are now design workshops that teach a series of defensive architectural tactics for deterring the activity. The type of skateboarding that plagues these architects and the spaces they create, "street skating," has only existed for about 15 years, and in fact was born out of the barren, defensive spaces created by redevelopment. Viewed in this light, it is clear that street skating is not only an impetus for defensive architecture, but also a symptom of defensive architecture. Recognizing that redevelopment spaces fostered pathologies, cities and corporations have begun to build more friendly spaces in the past couple of decades. But they have been careful to ensure that the spaces are only friendly to a select subset of the public, namely office workers and consumers. To create such spaces requires knowledge of the minutest details of undesirable behaviors—a knowledge that can only be gleaned through surveillance. Because the resultant spaces appear open but exclude the vast majority of the citizenry, they represent a restrictive discourse of publicness. Although the destructive effects of skateboarding have been exaggerated, the purpose of this essay is not to argue that skateboarding should be permitted in public space. It is by virtue of its status as a misuse of these spaces—and because it is a symptom of defensive design—that skateboarding is exceptionally good at drawing attention to the quietly exclusionary nature of the new public space. Ultimately, skateboarding affords an observer glimpses of the larger processes of surveillance and simulation by which public space, both physical and cultural, is produced.

## Introduction

I began skateboarding in 1984, when I was 11 years old, and immediately became a devotee. When I was 18 I became a professional street skater, earning my living from royalties from sales of skateboards that bore my endorsement. The company that sponsored me, Birdhouse, was a small independent operation owned by longtime pro, Tony Hawk. My job was to appear in magazines, videos, and contests using these Birdhouse brand boards to jump down stairs, slide on benches, and generally abuse street furniture in the most skillful and creative way that I could; and by example, to encourage others to do so. I did this professionally for six years, until I graduated from college and retired.

I now work as an editor at a publishing house in downtown San Francisco. But I also continue to skate and I contribute essays and stories to a skateboarding magazine called *Slap*. As both a skateboarder and an office worker, my experience of the public space downtown is always split. I unconsciously scan my surroundings for both a place to practice my disruptive sport, and a nice quiet place to have lunch. Of course, when I come downtown to skate, I receive a colder welcome than when I come downtown to work. It is not only police, security guards, tourists, and office workers who view me differently; but increasingly, I am also treated differently by the design of public space itself. From threatening metal spikes to fortuitously-placed cobblestones, an arsenal of design tactics communicate to me—with varying degrees of subtlety—that skateboarding is not a legitimate public use of these spaces. Skateboarding is what planners and architects have

sometimes referred to as an "urban pathology." So, psychologically, I move through the open spaces of downtown as both a public nuisance and as a legitimate member of the public whose right to eat his lunch in peace is to be architecturally defended.

There is nothing that is immediately objectionable about this tension. An office worker contributes his labor and ensures the functioning of the city; an office worker is productive. A skateboarder, on the other hand, gets in people's way and chips up benches; a skateboarder is destructive. Given that the downtown is zoned for commercial use, it is clear why the design of open space should consider an office worker a member of the public and a skateboarder a nuisance; and the purpose of this essay is not to suggest that skateboarding should be permitted in public space. Rather, I intend to inquire into the processes by which public space is produced, specifically into the interrelationship between dominant and subordinate spatial knowledges: architecture and skateboarding. These discourses are not simply opposed to one another—as institution to individual, outside to inside—but are mutually constitutive, in much the same way that the Symbolic and the Real are mutually constitutive in the Lacanian framework.

For length reasons, this essay will focus narrowly on the physical (architectural) and representational expressions of this relationship, and will only indirectly consider questions of skateboard culture's modes of identification, and group formation and exclusion. This means that some pertinent questions—most notably the culture's masculinism—cannot be addressed here.

Literature on cities is replete with the metaphor of public space as the site, the physical embodiment, of democracy. Its purpose is to facilitate interaction between all citizens, not just consumers; it exists to foster debate—even conflict—among the various competing interests that are represented in the citizenry. To these ends, a public space should be both "physically and psychologically accessible," (Loukaitou 1998, 301) as Kevin Lynch would put it, to the public, in all of its unmanageable diversity. The work of William H. Whyte alone provides abundant evidence that when this is accomplished, a space will not need to be managed from the outside—it will regulate itself.

Without going too far into all of the discussions, I acknowledge here that many critics, like Rosalyn Deutsche, rightly ask if there has ever been a space that unequivocally welcomes the public. Haven't constructions of publicness always entailed exclusions? It can be further argued that to even talk of "simulated" urbanism is already to exhibit nostalgia, to project back to a virginal and originary public space that has been defiled, and to identify with the civically whole citizens who inhabited this transparently public space. In her discussion of Michael Sorkin's *Variations on a Theme Park* (1996 283-4), Deutsche appositely notes that these public citizens—be they Renaissance Italian or Ancient Greek—were members of the dominant classes, and that this nostalgia never thinks to ask where the subordinate classes were in this public space—be they workers, women, racial minorities, gays, lesbians, or others. I do not intend to suggest that we need to recuperate the lost *agora*, but to argue that in industrial America there has been a movement from a kind of paternal, Olmsteadian public space that welcomed large segments of the public on certain disciplinary conditions, towards a public space that excludes subordinate people outright and more strictly disciplines even the dominant classes.

Central Park, one of the most beneficent of all American public works, is the paradigmatic example of the nineteenth century, 'missionary' philosophy of public space. The idea was to manufacture a bucolic idyll in the dense urban center in order to divert the potentially revolutionary passions of the workers away from the industrial system that subjugated them. Allowing the workers to mingle with the elites was to have the effect of

civilizing the workers. In the early twentieth century, City Beautiful plans—which were always sponsored by corporations (Loukaitou 1998, 17)—sought to 'inspire' good citizenship among the lower classes with grand neoclassical symmetries.

Even though these spaces fall short of the ideal democratic space, the fact is that the marginalized were still conceived of as a presence. While these spaces took it as their duty to gently coerce the dispossessed, thus acknowledging the presence if not the necessity of conflict, the new public spaces have taken up the task of obviating competing viewpoints and the presence of the people who advance them. Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and Tridib Banerjee point out, in their book *Urban Design Downtown*, how the design metaphors that architects use to describe public spaces have shifted from the 'plaza' and the 'green' to the "'room,' 'terrace,' 'court,' 'garden,'" and other soothing, private spaces (1998, 229). More to the economic point, Michael Fotheringham, the architect who is presently giving San Francisco's Union Square a makeover, explains how good design should focus on the "'needs and comforts'" of the "'prime client'" (Hansen April 2001, 23). The often stated problem with Timothy Pflueger's City Beautiful inspired Union Square was that it was attractive to homeless, skateboarders, street performers, and pan handlers—people who are not clients at all. Where designers might have once used a term like "citizens," they increasingly talk about "consumers." Public space is commercial space.

Skateboarding is not terribly important in the grand scheme of things; it is a young urban counterculture that admirably seeks to challenge power relations and less admirably seeks to escape from them. But it does provide a unique perspective on the creeping privatization of public space. Like the Freudian symptom or 'return of the repressed,' skateboarding was born out of the defensive, barren plazas of redevelopment—on the sites where street life was forcibly subverted to property values.

Of course, no one defends redevelopment spaces anymore, and there has been a push for a resurgence of the public sphere in cities. The designers of public spaces in Giuliani's New York, for example, have taken certain of William H. Whyte's recommendations to heart, creating spaces that people want to inhabit. But they have been careful about selecting which people. The redevelopment spaces succeeded in excluding the marginalized people whose neighborhoods they supplanted, but their hostility also warded off the middleclass whose safety the spaces sought to assure. Pleasant and 'psychologically open' spaces have the opposite problem of welcoming everyone. To attract the upscale public while deterring the masses has been a primary urban design goal of recent years. This is a complicated task that this essay will argue has only been accomplished with extensive surveillance of undesirable behavior. This information is used to create exclusionary spaces that appear public to the selected users; it is used to simulate a public sphere.

Through a discussion of how skateboarding has been appropriated by corporate marketing, this essay will also argue that the cultural space of advertising and public opinion is produced by the same processes of surveillance and simulation. If it were made plain that the exigencies of capital quietly determine nearly every aspect of every space that people inhabit, many would not accept it. So it is imperative that corporate capital obscure this fact with sophism, cover it with an aesthetic gloss, and demonstrate that the interests of private profit are equal to the interests of the public at large. Accordingly, private interests study and meticulously document any challenging cultural formation—any activity that draws attention to the commercial nature of public space—then vilify it as a threat to the public while simultaneously claiming a sanitized version of the culture's philosophy as its own position. Using the example of skateboarding, this essay will argue that it is according to these joint processes of surveillance and simulation that public space is produced.

## **Misused Transportation/Misused Space: A Brief History**

Skateboarding was invented in the 1950s in Southern Californian beach towns when surfers tore the T-handlebars off of their scooters and skated on the asphalt banks of the local schoolyards as though they were surfing waves. The sport quickly took on a life of its own, and throughout the 70s people could be found riding in empty backyard swimming pools of vacant houses. The basic move was to ride up the transitioned wall of the pool, slide along the edge, and plunge back down the wall. Soon cities and private companies began building pools exclusively for skateboarders. The most commonly accepted story about the origin of street skating starts with a group of skaters being thrown out of the privately owned Skate City park in Whittier, California in the early 1980s. Apparently they didn't have the money to pay the entrance fee, so they snuck in. After being escorted out, a professional skater named John Lucero led the group in a kind of sarcastic protest in the parking lot. In full view of the owners of the park and the skaters inside, they began to do tricks on the edges of the curbs, as though they were the edges of a pool. These undesirables came back and did this day after day and soon skaters from inside the park came out to try this new style.

In the early and mid 80s the style expanded out of the suburban parking lot and into the more varied terrain of redeveloped urban centers, primarily Los Angeles and San Francisco. This happened to coincide with America's explosion of personal liability suits and, although *Landscape Architecture Magazine* reported in March 1998 that there has never been a successful skateboarding liability suit (Thompson, p. 82), nearly every one of the parks was bulldozed—to be replaced by family fun centers. By and large, the only people who could continue to practice the old style were those who could afford to build private ramps. Thus street skating quickly became the most urban and populist version of the sport: it didn't cost anything except the price of the board itself, and it could be done anywhere there was pavement. In 1999 there were an estimated 9.5 million skateboarders in the U.S. alone (Levine July 26, 1999; 70), and by all accounts, skateboarders are now a strong presence in nearly every modern city, from San Francisco to Osaka to Sao Paulo.

### **"Skate and Destroy/Skate and Create"**

This sarcastic motto from the late 80s and early 90s serves as a good introduction to the philosophy of street skating. It used to appear on bumperstickers, T-shirts, and skateboards—often one of the halves would appear independently, and often the slogan would appear just as it's written in the header above. The message is that while skateboarders consider what they do to be an art form, they also recognize that skating on street furniture is destructive, but don't feel too troubled by that fact. The reasons that they don't feel much reverence for these spaces are 1) the spaces are typically disused anyway, and 2) the skaters understand that these spaces are scripted for use only by office workers, tourists, and conventioners. Absent from this list are not only the usual suspects—homeless, drug dealers, and prostitutes—but also children, students, old people, or anyone else who does not directly contribute to a corporation's profitability and marketability (Loukaitou 1998, 181-188). As Loukaitou-Sideris and Banerjee note, "the design characteristics commonly present in the [new downtown] plazas—introversion, fragmentation, escapism, orderliness, and rigidity—are consistent with the objectives of control, protection, social filtering, image packaging, and manipulation of user behavior" (1998, 98).

These manipulative, profit-driven spaces make up the vast majority of new public spaces that are being built, and they are usually publicly subsidized through some combination of floor area bonuses, land write-off or write-down, tax abatement, zoning incentives, tax

increment subsidies, and any number of other carrots (Loukaitou 1998, 84). To spend public money on corporate window dressing—spaces that exclude the majority of the public—is simply a bad deal. But the corporations have the upper hand. A member of the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency stated, on the condition of anonymity:

'Our job is to make development happen, not to chase developers away. Developers are spending millions of dollars on a project. They can say "If you make us build this there is no way we can continue," or "Public open space may look nice, but it has inherent security problems"' (Loukaitou 1998, 95).

David Martin, the architect of the Willshire plaza in the Bunker Hill redevelopment area, frankly expresses the most common solution to this dilemma: you make buildings and plazas in such a way that "'the corporate edifice and the very expensive building facades . . . intimidate homeless"' and other unintended users (Loukaitou 1998, 146). Like the interior designs of fast food restaurants that use garish colors to ensure that no one will want to linger and tie up seating for other customers, these new spaces are designed to keep commerce (people) moving along. Architect Nathaniel Owings said in support of redevelopment's public spaces, "the key . . . is not merely a conglomeration of goods. Rather it is good circulation—ease of movement . . . [P]otential shoppers should be occupied in noticing displays of goods, not in watching out for people who might bump into them" (1969, 129). These are literally consumer spaces: they are intended to be passively and briefly consumed, but they invite no participation. Arguing with police, security guards, and concerned citizens about what public space is, and should be, is a right of passage for skateboarders. They understand that public space is precisely about bumping into other people—it is about interacting with the public, not with goods. They understand that the design of this verisimilar public space is a selective discourse that classifies its users, defining as the legitimate public those who consume and pathologizing those who put the space to any other use. Street skating is a counter-discourse, a challenge to that construction of publicness.

Skateboarding is not protest or activism, but is more like what Michel de Certeau described, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, as a 'spatial practice.' Skateboarding is "a certain play within a system of defined places" (1984, 106). As the public space of the Central Business District (CBD) becomes more authoritarian, skateboarding "'authorizes' the production of an area of free play on a checkerboard that analyzes and classifies identities. It makes places habitable" (1984, 106).

William H. Whyte provides a good example of a spatial practice, in his film *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, when he affectionately shows how people can find a place to sit even where they are architecturally discouraged from doing so. In a demonstration of remarkable adaptability and quotidian creativity, people place small blankets over spikes that are meant to intimidate them, balance on intentionally narrow ledges overlooking fountains, and remain perched on canted planters that are designed to deposit them right back onto the sidewalk (1998b). Whyte laments the way that open spaces enhance a corporate image while alienating the public that they nominally serve. In one scene he shows an intentionally solitary bench, and announces that "this is a design object, the purpose of which is to punctuate architectural photos" (1988b). But because there are no obstructions (people), this is precisely the type of bench that skateboarders love to inhabit. In spite of the corporate space's disregard for the public, a small, resourceful portion of the public can still find a way to put the space to public use.

Using a military metaphor, de Certeau calls these spatial practices *tactics*, which he opposes to *strategies*. Tactics are the arts of guerrillas, the disempowered who must hide in

and subvert the space of the Other in order to create space for themselves, must cleverly manipulate existing systems for a fleeting advantage. Strategies, on the other hand, are the institutional procedures of massive organizations whose principle strength, brute force, is also their principle weakness, immobility. Strategies, then, are used by institutions to manufacture *places*, centers of power (like corporate plazas); while tactics are used to momentarily subvert these places in order to create *spaces* that individuals can inhabit. (I will not follow de Certeau's convention of distinguishing places from spaces in this essay.) But this distinction between strategies and tactics is useful in explaining the relationship between skateboarding and corporate public space. Still, I will argue later that the example of skateboarding also illustrates how this distinction between strategies and tactics relies on a simplistic dichotomy between power and resistance, a romantic notion of the individual.

An even better discourse with which to describe the activity of skateboarding is that of the Situationists, a group of European Avant Guard artists, theorists, and activists who were prominent during the 1960s, and who influenced the thinking de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre. The Situationists hated the mechanized, rationalist urbanism of such figures as Hausmann and Le Corbusier, which sought to "suppress incidents and places that contradict narratives of authority" (Saddler 1998, 99). Guy Debord, one of the leaders of the movement, referred to the products of this brand of capitalist urbanism as 'Spectacle.' It was this urbanism that systematically replaced unselfconscious, anarchic, and deeply human places like the old Les Halles market, with proscriptive, consumerist, and dehumanizing places like the new Les Halles shopping mall and entertainment complex. So in order to create space for humans in this city of spectacle, the Situationists engaged in guerilla resistances: drift and *détournement*.

The flâneur-inspired drift is an act of wandering the city according to no set route and no set schedule. The Situationists believed that one would discover the truths of the city by immersing oneself in its streets without ever going anywhere, without participating in the production of capital; the slogan was "Work to Make Ourselves Useless" (Saddler 1998, 92). The French word *détournement* can be translated as any one of the following: "diversion,' 'rerouting,' 'hijacking,' 'embezzlement,' 'misappropriation,' and 'corruption,'" (Saddler 1998, 17) and all of these meanings apply. Examples of *détournement* can be found in the Situationist art forms of graffiti and pastiche, both of which take established systems (maps, the new public space, mainstream newspapers) and hijack them, misappropriate them for their own diversion. To go for a skate is to go for a drift, to explore the streets looking for hidden places, opportunities for creative misappropriation; it is to recombine the artifacts of production and reinterpret the city for oneself. Skateboarders have even hijacked the sanitized Les Halles for their own art and diversion—it is one of the best-known skate spots in France. As Situationist thinker Constant Nieuwenhuys put it, "human beings were born to manifest themselves" (Saddler 1998, 97), even in places as lifeless as the new Les Halles.

## **Redevelopment and the Fruits of Xenophobia**

When telling the history of street skating, it is impossible to overemphasize the importance of the Golden Gateway Redevelopment area in downtown San Francisco. Until 1961, it was a 51-acre produce market run by Italian immigrants from North Beach, with streets reminiscent of the old Les Halles. Led by the autocratic and classist Justin Herman—San Francisco's answer to Robert Moses—the Redevelopment Agency designated the area as "blighted." This is a medical term that describes a spreading pathology; and for Redevelopment agencies nationwide, this designation was all that was needed to invoke eminent domain. (See Michael Doherty's and Meryl Block's "The Revitalization of the

Fillmore" in this journal for a description of the official criteria used to assess blight.)

The type of street skating that was practiced in the suburban parking lot was, by and large, limited to curbs and sidewalks. Street skating as urban pathology—the type that constantly damages planters, handrails, fountains, and anything else that is found in a city street—was born in the Golden Gateway, and the Bunker Hill Redevelopment area in Los Angeles (where the first handrail was skated by Mark Gonzales, one of the inventors of street skating). Were it not for these redevelopment projects, it is possible that skateboarding would have never mutated past its more benign form—destroying only curbs, which cities and corporations were not particularly concerned about. As Justin Herman constantly noted, the produce market was crowded and chaotic; it would have been no more possible to skate there than it is in San Francisco's

"May 24, 1956. 5:50 AM. Washington looking west from Davis." After Justin Herman, this site in the produce market would become one of the birthplaces of modern street skating, "Hubba Hideout." (Image from the San Francisco Historical Photograph Collection.)

present-day Chinatown. You cannot skate in a fine-grained city, you need the scale and austerity of the auto-friendly super block. Also, skateboarding is very difficult: it took thousands of hours to develop all of the permutations that exist today. The defensive architecture of redevelopment was a laboratory for skateboarding: vast plazas, full of modernist architecture, that were empty most of the time.

Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM) prepared the original plan for the Golden Gateway, and in 1971 the centerpiece became Lawrence Halprin's Justin Herman Plaza. The benches and higher ledges in this plaza were the first to be completely worn out by skateboarding—their edges ground down by the trucks of the skateboards. Popularly known as "EMB," short for Embarcadero, this plaza was "the birthplace of much of what makes up modern street skating" (Carroll June 1999, 72). It was skateboarding's "Holy Land" (Carroll June 1999, 72), as the addresses on the tickets that the police issued attest: Buenos Aires, Argentina; London, England; Naples, Italy; and Saga, Japan. (Costantinou June 14, 1999). They all came for EMB. Its redesign in 1999 prompted an outpouring of somber, indignant eulogies worthy of the old Penn Station.

Another prominent feature of the Golden Gateway is a series of skyways that connect office buildings to apartments to elevated plazas to John Portman's muzak-filled Embarcadero Center. The plazas are eerily pleasant but they present monolithic, two story walls to the street. The urban critic Trevor Boddy notes, in his essay "The Analogous City," that the historical precursor to this formation was the Medici family's skyways over sixteenth century Florence (1999, 128). They were built as an escape route for when street fights erupted, and as an elevated point from which the family could safely observe the vitality of the streets without having to participate in them. Right around the corner from EMB, there is a fortified skyway entrance to the plaza surrounding SOM's Alcoa building. Ironically, this defensive design destroys the self-regulating potential of the space by reducing the number of eyes in the space, and thereby creates a vacuum that can be populated by indigents. This space is known as "Hubba Hideout"—"hubba" is slang for drugs. When skateboarders took the place over, they actually made it safer.

The creative misuses of architecture that were developed here quickly spread all over the world through the skateboard media. If you go to any modern city in the world—whether you speak the language or not—and say "[EMB](#)" or "[Hubba](#)," the local skaters will take you directly to their city's equivalents: a plaza with deep steps and a tall ledge going down stairs. Although most skaters don't know the full history of redevelopment, the San

San Francisco skaters do know that Justin Herman was a classist, if not a racist; and they treat him with sarcastic reverence. *Slap's* eulogy for EMB was titled "Remembering Our Old Pal Justin Herman." There is no doubt that it would have infuriated Herman to learn that he had unwittingly helped to create a whole new urban pathology, but as William H. Whyte points out in *City*, "fears proves itself" (1988a, 158).

### **Voyeur-god vs. the Spatial Practitioner: Transcending Public Space/Creating Public Space**

The majority of America's important skatespots are the products of redevelopment. And it appears as though the firm with the most spots to its name is SOM (often in partnership with William Wurster), a firm to which Le Corbusier himself served as consultant. This list includes the Alcoa Building's plaza; the Daley Center and the Sears Tower in Chicago; the Chase Manhattan Plaza in New York; the Columbus, Ohio City Hall; and—through their redevelopment plans—Justin Herman Plaza. SOM's most prominent principal, Nathaniel Owings, felt that "Cities are the measure of our ability to be civilized" (1969, 142); and that the measure of a city, was its public space. This, he argued in his book, *The Spaces In Between*, is "the ultimate purpose of planning" (1973, 173). Owings was suspicious of the car and the suburbs because they atomized people, eroding the public sphere that he so wanted to foster. But the sincerity of his desire to improve the ground-level space of the city was matched only by the irreconcilability of his removal from that space.

To get a sense of this removal, one can flip through Owings's beautifully illustrated book, *The American Aesthetic*. About half of the two hundred or so images are unpeopled aerial photos of cities, while the other half are sweeping aerial photos of nature. This visual absence of street life is surprising at first, given that Owings's writing displays an almost activist commitment to urban public space. But this incongruent agglomeration—an abstract bird's eye city perspective meets street-level social justice meets pristine nature—is the very heart of Owings's philosophy.

In *Spaces*, Owings describes how while walking the paths around his Big Sur cliff house, Wild Bird, an epiphany shows him that "the high soaring, wide view of the hawk gives clear judgment, with high perspective, on the Earth and on the Being and on the Everything-Else-But-Me" (1973, 275). Owings believed, with Gnostic zeal, that it was this hawk's view that would help him to combat the evils of the mechanized city (1973, 276). For de Certeau this perspective of the "voyeur-god" (1984, 93)—looking down on the Earth and on the Being and on the Everything-Else-But-Me—is a theoretical "fiction" which allows the architect to remain "aloof"; it is a "lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more" (1984, 92). The "condition of possibility" of this "solar eye" perspective, "is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of . . . the murky and intertwining daily behaviors" (1984, 93) that de Certeau believed were the true architecture of the city. The difference in perspectives here is between the city as an uninhabited network of rational symmetries and the city as a nearly illegible intermingling of the daily practices of people's daily lives.

Owings's literally 'top-down' approach did cause him to misunderstand urbanites' daily lives. After his hawk's view epiphany, he returned to San Francisco only to learn that "an Afro-haired youth" had "emerged from the gloom of the Mission District into the sunlight of Market Street, a street which marks the edge of the business district," and "sprayed bullets indiscriminately" (1973, 278). Shaken by the story of this young man, Owings resolved that he "would try to help the others of his kind to live within a tolerable habitat . . . and I returned to the sanctuary of Wild Bird" (1973, 278). There he pondered "calyptte anna" (humming bird) and a yucca plant, and another epiphany showed him that he had to introduce the openness of nature into the supposedly stifling density of the city (1973, 278).



One would hope that Owings would have responded to the shocking story of the young black man from the "gloom of the Mission," by actually going into the Mission and spending time on its streets. ("Must one finally fall back into the dark space where crowds move back and forth?" [de Certeau 1984, 92]). Instead he went to the sanctuary of Wild Bird to ponder nature and fantasize about what the city should look like from the perspective of God.

From this remote height, Owings could not perceive the contradiction between his desire to improve the environment of the urban dispossessed and his desire to "bring suburban ease to downtown" (1969, 129). From the cliffs of Big Sur, Owings was too far away to see that his humanism was radically incompatible with his anti-urban belief that slums were "festering sores" (1973, 117). Had he spent time in people's neighborhoods, perhaps he would have argued that "the high rates of mortality and disease among slum populations stem not only from contagion, poor medical services and malnutrition but also from a kind of body despair. People do take on the quality of their surroundings" (1969, 123). This specious, degeneration theory-inspired logic seems to suggest that it wouldn't make too much difference if these populations were provided urgently needed and long denied social services. The obvious conclusion is "that there are no wise solutions short of tearing it all down and starting over" (1969, 99). From the cloistered perspective of the voyeur God, Owings could not see that this program was anathema to his most deeply held belief that "What we do must be done out of love, not fear" (1973, 286).

Keith Hufnagel photographed by Gabe Morford. © Morford.

Owings ends his introduction to *Spaces* by declaring that

nonarchitecture—open spaces—will be the objective, and the buildings will simply frame them. We can use the oldest of all forms, yet one which is considered new today: we can reintroduce into our crowded cities the open space—the plaza—where man can dance, celebrate, and experience the joy of living in the spaces in between (1973, x).

It is not clear how he intended to encourage this celebration of life by providing such barren spaces, but he turned out to be successful in spite of himself, as the above photo will attest.

This is another of SOM's gifts to skateboarding: the AP Gianini Plaza at the Bank of America building in downtown San Francisco. It is an enormously unpopular corporate space, famous among urbanists for its disregard for sunlight and for being generally inhospitable; the 1971 Urban Design Plan for San Francisco uses the plaza as cautionary example (p 88). In keeping with Owings's Gnostic, aerial perspective, the Japanese artist Masayuki Nagare's massive black sculpture on the north end of the plaza is named "Transcendence." But from the street level perspective, the perspective of people's everyday lives, this sculpture is didactic and pretentious; San Franciscans have always disdainfully referred to it as the "Banker's Heart." Skaters see nothing so high-minded as 'transcendence' in this object; instead they see an opportunity to celebrate the messy vitality of the street, a chance to reaffirm the chaotic daily life that this object seeks to transcend. This space as a whole instructs its users to briefly observe this sculpture commemorating the rejection of street life, and move along. Like Situationist graffiti, skating in such a space amounts to "'words of refusal or forbidden gestures'" (Raoul Vaneigem quoted in Saddler 1998, 97).

The above photo of Keith Hufnagel, taken by Gabe Morford, is one of the culture's best-known images, and served to popularize the Banker's Heart as a spot. But when Ken Kay gave the plaza a makeover in 1996, he obstructed the approach to the sculpture with what

he called a Japanese Garden—intended to "thwart skateboarders" (Leccese November 1998, 80). Once again the Banker's Heart was condemned to be almost universally unappreciated by the public. In justifying the makeover, Kay stated that the plaza had been "one of the most hostile urban spaces" in the city, "a catalog of the design mistakes of the 60s" (Adams December 3, 1997). And no one argued with him. [But in making the space less hostile, he has limited the scope of its use.](#) The design mistake that he has rectified is not that of excluding the public at large, it is that of inadvertently letting the wrong people in. Kay even ran architectural design workshops titled "Banish the Boarders," advertised in the commerce-intensive *Downtown Idea Exchange* (January 15, 1998; 4).

Ken Kay's new Giannini Plaza, still one of the most hostile spaces in the city.

Like many of SOM's spaces, Giannini Plaza failed because no one wanted to be there—least of all the white, educated office workers whom the design longed to lure back from the suburbs. And urban critics have been unforgiving, lavishing such spaces with descriptions like paranoid, cruel, wasteland, bunker, citadel, fortress. But how to appeal to the office workers, conventioners, tourists, and potential business tenants without simultaneously appealing to the undesirables? And how to deter the protestors, restless young people, drunks, and underemployed without simultaneously deterring the brown baggers?

### **The Makeover: New Public Space from Punishment to Discipline, from the Fortress to a Poetics of Security**

In his great 1975 book, *Discipline and Punish (Surveiller et Punir* in the original French), Michel Foucault narrates the history of technologies for maintaining order as an evolution from corporal punishment to internalized discipline. Authority has done away with the scaffold and the yoke because such corporal punishments arouse sympathy for the criminal/victim, and thereby reveal the criminality of authority itself. Order in an industrialized society, then, is maintained on the principles of Jeremy Bentham's prison, the Panopticon. This design allows prisoners to be seen from a central tower, but does not allow the prisoners to see who is in the tower—which is at the level of the cells, not elevated, so that there is never any place to hide. Unlike the authority that the prisoner knows is administered from on high, this invisible authority has insinuated itself into every recess of a prisoner's space, and finally into his consciousness. Because they assume that a pervasive and unverifiable authority can watch their every move, the prisoners will behave *themselves*, internalize discipline. The prisoner "is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication" (1995, 200). Mike Davis's brilliant Fortress LA analysis draws many insights from the theoretical framework of Foucault's Panopticism.

I had a harrowing experience about six years ago that illustrates the ineffectiveness of corporal punishment, and ultimately, the problem with transparently defensive architecture. A few friends and I were skating with at least 15 other people in Union Square in San Francisco late at night when a squad car tore into the square and sped towards us. My friends and I got away, but I later heard that several people were tackled, arrested, and taken to jail—just another night in a sweep that had been going on for some time. While we were catching our breath, a 30-something couple in expensive eveningwear rushed up to us. The man indignantly announced, "They could have run one of you over! You should report that!" I walked away from the scene feeling emboldened, and the couple walked away feeling less secure in their own authorities. As with dozens of other people who witnessed the scene, I believe that the couple also left wondering about the nature of public space. Do they really violently force people out of public plazas? Who determines which

people should be permitted and which people should be physically ejected?

*Hubba Hideout"—a skyway entrance to the plaza surrounding SOM's Alcoa Building—with spraypaint, 'pig ears,' and strategically placed benches.*

Chasing people with squad cars and tackling people in the street is counterproductive to regulating behavior. In terms of architectural strategies for discouraging skateboarders, [the design techniques illustrated here](#) similarly have all the subtlety of tackling someone in the street. An architect at the Department of Public Works told me that they refer to these metal clips as "pig ears." Skateboarding does scar coping and leave paint streaks on benches; even so, it becomes difficult for police, architects, and planners to assert that skateboarding is a public incivility when public spaces are filled with deterrents that are only slightly more benign than those that are used to keep pigeons off of ledges. Public space itself appears to be equally uncivil. One citizen who described herself as "a middle-aged lady with a bad leg" wrote to the Editor of the *Examiner* to complain that the pig ears "are far uglier and distracting than the skateboard marks," and are "so mean spirited!" (Fuller December 20, 1999). Regardless of which side of the argument you come down on, these tactics provoke questions about the publicness of public space. For the purposes of maintaining order, it would be better if these questions were never asked at all.

Like the eyes inside the tower in the Panopticon, these disciplinary tactics are only effective if they are pervasive and unverifiable. Andrew Bernheimer's and Jared Della Valle's redesign of the Philip Burton Federal Building—the 1996 winner of the prestigious San Francisco Prize—provides a good example of this logic. The plaza needed to be redesigned because it was a gusty place to have lunch, because skaters misused it, and because a terrorist could drive a bomb up to the front door, as one did in Oklahoma in 1995. The sponsors of the contest, the Government Services Agency and the SF MOMA, knew that the public would not accept too militaristic a design. The GSA project executive said "'We didn't want to make the building a fortress.' . . . The resulting competition brief bore the title 'The Poetics of Security'" (Nyren February/March 1999).

*The design of the Federal Building Plaza discourages public speaking and laying on benches. These benches even discourage users from facing their companions—and they certainly discourage people from lingering.*

The logic of a Poetics of Security dictates that, in order to be effective, a design must be proscriptive, but appear humanist. In Mike Davis's terms, a space cannot be transparently militaristic; it must instead deploy ever more refined ruses of discipline. In most respects the resulting design does succeed in being accessible yet defensible, cozy yet 'surveillable.' The desire to defend federal property against terrorist attack is completely sensible. But looking at [the details like those pictured here](#), it becomes clear that the space also defends against those who might skateboard, or even lay down, on one of the benches.

*This bench prevents its users from laying down. It also prevents skateboarders from sliding across its edge.*

It is telling that in describing the design, the judges gave none of the standard lines like "it will be a benefit to the entire community." Rather, they said that it "improve[s] not just a little corner of the city, but a little corner of our consciousness"; it "tell[s] us something about who we are and where we are" (GSA 1998). This space studies and classifies its users, dictates to them whether or not they are legitimate members of the public, improves their consciousness, tells them who they are.

*The sign here indicates that "anti-rolling devices have been installed for your safety." Unlike the aggressively spraypainted "NO SKATING" sign, skateboarders are here more compassionately pathologized.*

It so happens that the design doesn't do a good job of telling skateboarders who they are right up front. It leaves a number of possibilities open to them; and the managers were forced to resort to more corporal deterrents. Because there was a lapse in the design, another healthy debate about the publicness of the space ensued. In an editorial local pundits Matier and Ross smugly noted that even though the taxpayers had spent three million dollars to keep the terrorists out, they were unable to keep the local skaters out (November 8, 1999). I'd guess that Matier and Ross believe that the skaters should be kept out. Regardless, skateboarding has instigated the disclosure of a fact that this design is laboring to obscure: people are being kept out.

On the site pictured below, skateboarding has stirred a more pointed debate about public space. This is the Ribbon of Light sculpture, a series of cement blocks that run the length of the Embarcadero. The architects originally wanted to build ramps and banks into it, but the city protested that it would attract skateboarders. When it was finally built in 1996, the Ribbon was hailed by the chairman of the San Francisco Arts Commission, Jill Manton, as "art as an environment instead of art as an object" (Gillette April 1996, 83). The opposition that Manton draws between environment and object gets right to the heart of the issue. Is public art to be an environment that people inhabit, or an object that people passively consume?

In apparent contradiction with Manton's ideas about the piece, Stanley Saitowitz—one of three architects on the project—views the line of the Ribbon as being like the centerline on a road which "'tells cars how to behave.' The line, in this version, would tell pedestrians 'how to behave'" (Gillette April 1996, 86). This conception of the piece emphasizes its directive potential more than its participatory potential; it is art as object rather than art as environment.

#### *The Ribbon of Light.*

As for the skateboarders, Saitowitz feels that they "have taken to [the Ribbon] in the most unpleasing way. I try to talk to these people. I say, 'Can't you understand you're ruining something that belongs to you, the people?'" (Adams December 20, 1995). As with the ubiquitous signs that inform skateboarders that their behavior must be regulated for their own safety, Saitowitz here ascribes to the skateboarders what psychoanalysis might call a hysterical aspect, and the assignment is not entirely inapt. When a subject is permitted no systemic access to speech, the subject may act out grievances on his or her own body (as with Freud's Dora, or the shell shocked soldiers of World War I). Since the various discourses of urban youth are systemically elided from a public space that purportedly 'belongs' to these young people, it is reasonable to expect that these people might express themselves in whatever way is still available, even by 'ruining' their own public space. It is only thus that the spaces do in fact belong to them. In this sense, skateboarding might accurately be called a hysterical discourse.

But to address the civic dimension of Saitowitz's comment: hasn't he backed himself into a corner by identifying the skateboarders as "the people"? If the Ribbon does indeed belong to the people, shouldn't the people determine its meaning and use value? Or does the artist make that determination? Saitowitz's statements seem to indicate that the public's conception of the piece is the legitimate conception, provided it coincides with his own. But Saitowitz cannot have it both ways. If the public's is the legitimate conception, then his fierce disapproval of the prevailing use should have no more civic weight than any other single citizen's opinion. As de Certeau would put it, Saitowitz 'transmutes the misfortune of

his ideologies into ideologies of misfortune' (1984, 96).

Saitowitz's case is not helped by the fact that the sympathies of one of the other designers of the Ribbon, Barbara Stauffacher Solomon, are firmly on the side of art as environment. "I love it that the skateboarders love it, and Stanley hates it that the skateboarders love it" (Gillette April 1996, 100). In describing why she loves that the skateboarders use the Ribbon she says, simply: "It's part of the world" (Adams December 20, 1995).

The third artist on the project, Vito Acconci, is an outspoken critic of art-as-object. Because this conception of art promotes the "safety of the panorama," disciplines the body, and reinforces "dominant class" relations, Acconci responds with spaces that encourage chaos (2000a), "express a minority voice," and act as a "cancer" (pathology) on the dominant space (2000b, 176). "Our goal is to make spaces that free people—to make devices and instruments that people can use to do what they're not supposed to do, to go where they're not supposed to go" (2000a). He is presently building a skateboard park in an old factory in Avignon, France.

Regardless of their differing conceptions, none of the three designers could have been pleased to see the city cover the Ribbon with pig ears. No one was pleased about it: the pig ears make a farce of a work that was intended to be "expressive of the democratic spirit and the working-class history of the area" (Gillette April 1996, 83). But again, we see that skateboarding has here stirred a high profile debate about the publicness of public space, a debate taken up architects, citizens, the *SF Chronicle* and *Examiner*, *Landscape Architecture Magazine*, and NPR's *All Things Considered*.

Tony at 50 California Plaza, "Brown Marble," in the early 90s.

Now we come to a space that has had more success in eliding this debate, the plaza at 50 California St. This is a famous skateboard spot, popularly know as "Brown Marble," where arrests and scenes like the one I described in Union Square were once common. No longer. The police haven't had to say a word to a skater in Brown Marble for some time because there isn't any brown marble there anymore. There is now a series of faux-limestone benches with armrest-like cornices strategically placed every couple of feet, expressly to discourage the slide of a board across the edges of the benches (Kay 1998, 4).

Ken Kay's newer, friendlier 50 California Plaza.

In a classic Foucauldian turn, Ken Kay (the architect who remade the Banker's Heart Plaza) has built the police force into the design itself. The result of extensive surveillance, the design predicts every potential movement of a skateboarder through the plaza, literally down to the level of individual gestures. The design erases the very potential for the presence of this subset of the public, and thereby has erased the possibility of questions about the publicness of the space. Finally, like the addition of volleyball courts in Berkeley's People's Park, a Starbucks was planted in the space to intimidate the undesirables and attract the brown baggers. Loukaitou-Sideris and Banerjee report that the vast majority of such plazas' users are white, educated office workers between the ages of twenty and fifty (Loukaitou 1998, 183). It is only this selected public that is permitted to experience this space as psychologically accessible, transparently public.

Divots and cobblestone: the new Ferry Plaza appears public by virtue of the invisibility of its deterrents.

Still, I'm sure that some of the more sociologically minded members of the selected public are aware that the design of 50 California is exclusionary. The new Ferry Plaza, however,

has no need of inappropriate cornices. The architects, ROMA, had inadvertently built other skatespots: Pier 7, a few hundred yards away in San Francisco; and 3rd St. Promenade in Santa Monica. Determined not to let it happen again, they studied and measured the minutest gestures of skateboarders in order to obviate their behavior. These cobblestones obstruct the approach to the bench, and these axons (the divots) are precisely the width of the baseplate of a skateboard truck, which means that when someone attempts to slide the edge, they will be locked in place. But unlike pig ears, these design elements could easily be the architect's poetic license. All of which makes the space one of the most refined examples to date of a Poetics of Security. Because the new Ferry Plaza understands its potential pathologies in such micro-scopic detail, the space appears more public. Though this was also a very expensive project, Matier and Ross will not be writing any sarcastic articles about this space. It's just there.

### **Public Space: "Right to Pass by Permission, and Subject to Control, of Owner"**

Because I was curious about how the designers of some of these details felt about them, I took a trip to the San Francisco Department of Public Works where I introduced myself as an editor of *Urban Action*. I spoke to two landscape architects both of whom were very solicitous. One was acutely aware that "San Francisco is the most famous skatespot in the world"—this was the architect in charge of everything-proofing the city: skateproofing, bumproofing, graffitiproofing, and so on. (She is also the architect who told me that the anti-skate metal clips are called "pig ears.") My line of inquiry was 'how do you deter unintended use of a space without making the space hostile?' The most important element, they told me, was visibility; there can't be any places to hide. At the same time, the space couldn't be so empty that no one would want to use it. So you try to predict the behavior of undesirables and obviate those behaviors with subtle design techniques: bright lights in corners, narrow benches, rigid circulation patterns, and so on.

None of this was news to me, but I was surprised to see the extent to which these tactics were deployed. There is a [rounded ledge in the new Justin Herman plaza](#), for example, that was designed specifically to be unskateable: it doesn't have any edge to slide. (The determination of how convex the surface needed to be would have required detailed measurements.) Skaters are quick to spot subtle deterrents like the divots in the Ferry Plaza benches, but even skaters are surprised to hear that this ledge is a deterrent. [Incidentally, they eventually figured out how to skate it anyway.](#)

This architect also showed me a design that she was very proud of: the Haight St. entrance to Golden Gate Park. This entrance used to be filled with drug dealers and indigents of every description, so one would expect a defensive design. Still, I was surprised to learn that every detail of every design element was intended to deter some behavior. The flat handrail is too high to sit on and is buttressed with tight vertical bars so that people can't slip under it to relax on the now completely visible slope, the planters are canted to discourage sitting, the pillars are constructed out of a textured slate that is unattractive to graffiti artists, and so on. The architect pointed out that the real accomplishment here was not only the subtlety of all the deterrents, so much as it was that these deterrents created an airtight network that filtered out unintended users, and controlled the behavior of selected users. Having considered myself well attuned to these tactics, I was again surprised to see how pervasive they were. I believe that a casual observer would be amazed to see that this impenetrable network of disciplinary tactics extends over the entire city, with barely visible points surfacing on every block and in every open space.

The other thing that surprised me about my conversation with this architect was the contempt with which she spoke about the undesirables. Speaking specifically about skaters



and graffiti artists, she smiled at me conspiratorially and described them as "people of slightly lower mental capacity" (which seemed to me a remarkably incautious thing to say to someone who identified himself as an editor of a student journal called *Urban Action*).

When talking about the whole range of undesirables, she expressed her envy of the [tiny "Private Property" plaques](#)—"Right to Pass by Permission, and Subject to Control, of Owner"—that appear in the pavement in many open spaces, and even on a number of sidewalks that are unconnected to open spaces. "That's what we need," she said, "they can just ask anyone to leave at any time." The challenge, as this architect sees it, is to design public spaces so that they convey this same sense of private property, so that they communicate to the undesirables that they may be thrown out at any moment. This is a textbook expression of Oscar Newman's 'Defensible Space'; only here the purpose is not so much to deter violent crime from housing projects, but to deter any gesture that makes a space less pleasant for consumers. That is the logic of a Poetics of Security.

Although he wrote in favor of gentrification and select redevelopment projects, William H. Whyte also believed that the well-behaved drunk at least had a right to be in public spaces. And he loved the leafleter, the surreptitious vendor, the street performer, the disheveled man soaking his feet in the fountain, and the man just standing there talking to himself—as for the pigeon lady: "every square should have one" (1988b). But Whyte notes how even one of his researchers was asked to leave one of the corporate plazas of New York. The reason that Jerold Kayden and the New York City Department of City Planning can claim Whyte as the primary influence on a (partially successful) resurgence of a public sphere in the new book, *Privately Owned Public Space*, is not so much because of Whyte's intentions, but because his research is a body of comprehensive urban surveillance. Whyte's Street Life Project meticulously filmed, photographed, timed, and charted the way that every user—desirable and undesirable—used every element of every open space. This type of micro-sopic surveillance is the most important tool in simulating a public space that will welcome the upscale and deter Whyte's characters.

### **Public Space and the Enforcement Benefits of Selective Simulation**

Viewed in this light, it is clear that there is something of the theme park in these designs. The theme is that of uncontested public space, a unified and pristine public sphere. Certainly there are behaviors that should not be allowed in public space: muggings for example. But what about Whyte's pigeon lady? What about a polite homeless who wants to read on a bench for an hour, then go somewhere else? Different people will have different answers about where the line should be drawn, and these discussions can and should be contentious. These debates are part of what makes a public space public. The presumption that is built into these 'pre-regulated' spaces is that no member of the selected public should even have to consider these questions. The fact that defensive architecture isolates and exacerbates the same problems that it defends against is of little concern. It's as though the selected public has an inalienable right to be shielded from unsightly social problems, and it is the job of public space to uphold that right. Disneyland's Mainstreet USA simulates a charming turn of the century business district while leaving out the immigrant laborers and TB victims and horse manure, but these new spaces simulate an imaginary present: a glimmering downtown agora, without all of the homeless and without all of the troublesome debate.

While downtown is remade as a themed version of a public sphere, this design aesthetic of selective simulation finds its obverse in the peripheral skatepark. These are built by cities for public use, often with significant input from the skaters themselves. The parks provide

young skateboarders an opportunity for civic engagement: many an apathetic 16-year-old has become an effective activist in his local town in pursuit of a skatepark. So my purpose is not to suggest that skaters should stop lobbying or that cities should stop building.

Themed corporate plazas of this type appear in the peripheries of modern cities worldwide.

Still, it is impossible not to notice that skateparks are themeparks. Here in the outskirts, there are spaces full of handrails, stairs, and benches that are not intended to be held onto, walked down, or sat upon. The words "Hubba" and "EMB" are common descriptions of design elements in the skatepark lexicon—again signifying 1) a tall, inclined ledge, and 2) knee-high steps with deep backs. While the downtowns are being Disnified with spaces like the private-public plaza, the redeveloped "Japan Town," and the merchandise-intensive historic wharf; the peripheries of cities are now the sites of a Lilliputian downtown, a themed post-redevelopment city, there for the destroying. Here angry young skateboarders can have all of the fun of contesting the commercialized city, with none of the fuss of social conflict. Skateparks are Olmstedian safety valves. But instead of defusing the urban-born passions of the masses by returning them to bucolic nature, these spaces offer just the opposite: a return to the idyll of the modern urban center: the "natural" setting of what might provisionally be called a spontaneous or even "organic" street culture.

The purpose of this simulation is enforcement. George Kelling's and James Wilson's theory of 'broken windows' provides a good way to frame this issue. The idea is that small signs of disorder, like broken windows or the scuffs and scrapes left by skateboarders, encourage more disorder that eventually leads to petty crime that eventually leads to serious crime. So to prevent serious crime, you must crack down on small-scale disorder. This influential enforcement program is widely credited with cleaning up the subways and streets of New York; and it was applied in San Francisco as Operation Matrix under Mayor Frank Jordan. (I believe that my experience with the police sweep in Union Square was part of Operation Matrix.) It is also used as a justification for the types of micro-sopic exclusionary architectural designs that I have been describing. Though this is not the place to take up an argument with the theory of broken windows, it is worth noting that it is usually ill applied to skateboarding. Far from encouraging serious crime, skateboarders are often excellent 'mayors.' Recognizing this fact, the Parisian suburb of Créteil actually replaced the worn out benches in their plazas in order to keep the skaters from abandoning the plazas to the real criminals. An integral part of the broken windows program is to be prepared to win court challenges to what can seem like draconian police tactics. A city that can demonstrate that it has made good faith attempts to accommodate a targeted group has a stronger moral and legal position in court (Kelling 1996, 228). This is why stepped up street enforcement and even sweeps often accompany the creation of a skatepark in a city.

Thankfully there have been no outright sweeps in San Francisco since the opening of the Willie Brown Skatepark last year. Still, the fact that the park's champion was former supervisor Amos Brown should suggest that this was not strictly a beneficent act. Amos Brown was a great proponent of the sweep, and he had a distaste for homelessness that baffled many San Franciscans. But he was perhaps even more outspoken on the subject of skateboarding: "'It's wrong for skateboarders to violate the public's safety in the same way that it is wrong for a drug pusher to do so,'" he said. "'I see these two crimes as equal. I don't see one being more severe than the other'" (Layne January 19, 1997). Given that Brown consistently pathologized skateboarding in the most histrionic terms, it's no mystery why this (poorly designed) themepark is located far from transportation in the recesses of the Crocker Amazon district, miles from downtown.



## **X-treme Sports, X-treme Investing, X-treme Space**

To fully appreciate the profit motive in these various simulations, it is necessary to take a trip back to the Ribbon of Light on the Embarcadero. Skateboarding has been sanctioned and in fact welcomed with fanfare and city sponsorship on this exact site for the last three summers when the X Games was in town. The X Games is a festival put on by ESPN to showcase what they term "Extreme Sports," and skateboarding has always been the flagship event. Directly behind this pig ear-covered public art, there was a "street course," complete with handrails over empty gaps, benches on top of steep banks, and staircases that led to nowhere. The existing public space here—the Ribbon—is militarized and exclusionary, but the contrived public space welcomes the excluded behavior. This is because the X Games boasts sponsorship from every corporation, and brand thereof, that might want to target a young, rebellious market including not only Mountain Dew, Sprite, and M-TV, but also AT&T and the Marines.

Skateboarding is a spatial practice, an everyday activity that challenges commercial space; but the X Games elides this unmarketable fact, representing skateboarding as paroxysmal, macho thrill-seeking—like 'skysurfing' (jumping out of an airplane with a snowboard attached to your feet). As pro street skater Jason Dill put it, the X Games is to skateboarding as Kenny G is to jazz. No skateboarder had ever used the word "Extreme" to describe the sport. That word is purely an advertising strategy—a strategy has been wildly successful. There is "Extreme Pizza" in my neighborhood; Nissan has an SUV called the X-terra; there are firms that offer "Extreme Consulting"; one can read about "Extreme Investing" in online publications; there is even a fund called "Synergy Extreme Canadian Equity Fund."

There is a *New Yorker* article about skateboarding that is authored by a writing teacher from Iowa who had had no experience of the sport, and even he was quick to discern that the X Games was "a dog show for the skateboard illiterates at large" (Levine July 26, 1999; 74). Although the author shows a great deal of admiration for skateboarding—making a protracted and earnest comparison between skateboarding and ballet—there is no respite here from the commodification. He compulsively justifies skateboarding's presence in the high brow, advertising driven space of the *New Yorker* with impressive sales figures—\$838 million in 1999! (July 26, 1999; 70). The subtitle of the article tells the whole story: "a multimillion-dollar industry that still can't shake its outlaw image." The subtext here is that to be a multimillion-dollar industry should mean integration and cultural acceptance. The fact that skateboarding is literally illegal draws attention to the choice of the word "outlaw"; it's almost as if skateboarding is illegal because it doesn't make enough money. In any case, the premise is clear: to be profitable is to be a legitimate member of the public.

Looking back through newspaper and magazine articles about skateboarding, it begins to seem that skateboarding was in fact illegal by virtue of being unprofitable. The first successful X Games was in 1995 and the pre-95 articles were typically discussions about why skateboarding needed to be banned; namely because the skaters were obstreperous punks, gang members, or petty criminals who got in people's way in the commercial districts. After '95 even such sage publications as the *Christian Science Monitor* began advancing the misunderstood-good-kid perspective, skateboarding as a healthy alternative for 'at risk' youth (Sappenfield August 15, 1995). As the *LA Times* observed last year, "skateboarding, once seen as an outlaw sport of hooligans and underachievers, is becoming downright legitimate" (Husted December 4, 2000). Like the *New Yorker* essay, all of these articles go on to discuss X Games and sales figures. These articles—before and after—were discussing the same group of people, maintaining the same culture; skateboarding was the same illegitimate, pathological activity that it had always been. The only difference was that

corporations had devised a way to profit from it.

Another major turning point in the popular perception of the sport was a 1998 Nike ad campaign that showed metal bars obstructing home plate on a baseball diamond, a golfer being chased off of the green by a cop. "What if all athletes were treated like skateboarders?" the copy challenges. Why are golf and baseball considered legitimate public activities while skateboarding is considered a pathology? (The same images could have been accompanied by the question 'what if everyone was treated like homeless?' were it not for the fact that homeless don't usually have disposable income.)

Nike ran this campaign because of a skater demographic bulge and because skateboarders only bought shoes from companies owned by other skateboarders. In fact, in the early 90s, skateboarders bought their equipment, shoes, and clothes almost exclusively from a handful of small, skater owned and operated companies. Their loyalty was fierce and Nike was not welcome. Even more troubling, these skate shoes—like Etnies—were quickly becoming a casual wear staple in the general public. Nike was losing market share and understood that they had to penetrate the skateboarder's world if they wanted to remain competitive.

They accomplished this by hiring Goodby, Silverstein & Partners, the 'Got Milk?' ad firm. The cultural critic Thomas Frank went to an ad convention to hear a best practices presentation on this campaign. He reports in *Harper's* that the advertisers did not set out to decide whether the skaters' "hostility" towards Nike "was justified or warranted but to liquidate it" (July 1999, 78). This "'grass-roots'" campaign—like most hip, youth-oriented campaigns—was crafted by a group of anthropology PhDs who studied and surveyed skateboarders using ethnographies and other anthropological research methods (July 1999, 78).

There are now successful market research firms that are exclusively devoted to providing "information, research, news, trends, and photos of global youth ages 14-30" (Look Look Accessed April 15, 2001). The employees of these firms routinely describe themselves as 'cool hunters' and 'guerilla marketers' (the job of a hunter and a guerilla alike is to inhabit a space with their opponent without being seen). People concerned about the anti-democratic potential of marketing should disabuse themselves of the image of the marketers peering down on us from their Madison Ave. offices: the marketers have descended into the street to provide corporations "24/7 coverage" of countercultures (Look Look Accessed April 15, 2001). All of the quoted material in this paragraph is taken from the website of a firm that is appropriately named "Look Look." I know a graphic designer who left a skateboarding magazine to work for Old Navy, another company that was anxiously trying to target the skateboarder demographic. He has told me that the design rooms of Old Navy are filled with surveillance-style, long lens, 'sniper photos' of skateboarders drifting through the city, walking down the street, living their daily lives.

This combination of surveillance and simulation reaches its creepy, Foucauldian zenith in the new skateboard video games: Tony Hawk Pro Skater and Tony Hawk Pro Skater 2. To make the Tony Hawk games, Activision paid pros to skate in full-body sensor suits that digitally mapped every micro-scopic gesture of a skater's style. How far down does this skater crouch before doing a trick, is her elbow bent or straight at the peak of the trick, how close together are his feet when he lands? Using these surrogate spatial practitioners, you can *détourne* all of the famous redevelopment spaces, including Justin Herman Plaza, the Alcoa Building Plaza's skyway, Philadelphia's JFK Plaza, and many more. In the background you hear an angry cry of " . . . truth devoured / A silent play on the shadow of power / A spectacle monopolized / The camera's eye on choice disguised." These overwrought, but

sincere, lyrics about corporate media manipulation are by the anarchist band Rage Against the Machine; the song, "Guerilla Radio," is the video game's theme music. Here you don't even have to go to the trouble of traveling to the themed skatepark; for that matter, you don't have to go to the trouble of learning how to skate. You can contest the exclusionary design of the city from anywhere—from a sofa inside a gated community. Thanks to a metonymical slight of hand you can misappropriate the artifacts of capitalist production by immersing yourself into an even purer simulation: a nowhere space, populated only by consumerism. These games have sold over 5 million units.

One could spend a lifetime cataloging these appropriations, and some of them are much more audacious than the skateboarding examples—like the Ghandi 'Think Different' Apple ads which seem to suggest that buying a computer is somehow akin to civil disobedience against violent imperialism, a heroic and revolutionary act. But my purpose is not simply to point out this manipulative sophism; it is to attempt to illustrate the process by which cultural space is produced. The process is one of surveillance and simulation, a Poetics of Security. Like exclusionary architectural details, these appropriations proliferate into a tightly knit network, with points surfacing on every block in every city, penetrating nearly every space that people inhabit.

This Poetics of Security marks a shift in the exercise and administration of power since the era of renewal. Because corporations and bureaucracies were once characterized by their supposed monolithic impassivity, they were forced to rely on strategies. That is, they were forced to maintain order by imposing their brute force from on high to establish places that serve as their centers of power. Because these places were produced by the lumbering strategies of unsubtle force they inevitably bore cracks and hidden corners: small spaces where the everyday tactician could *détourne* this power.

But these institutions have, for the past couple of decades, diligently studied and simulated the tactics of the spatial practitioner. As Thomas Frank always points out, the various business literatures of the last 20 years have undertaken the same studies of power that the dissenting intellectual community made in the 60s and 70s. With echoes of the writing of Deleuze and Guattari, or de Certeau, or Richard Sennett's *The Uses of Disorder*, business books now bear titles like *Embracing Chaos*, *Guerrilla Web Strategies*, and *Creative Destruction*. In 1970, Richard Sennett argued that those who wanted to create a just, anarchist city, would need to focus on "'sensitizing' public service bureaucracies to the public" (pg. 198). The corporate bureaucracies that have replaced the public service bureaucracies have indeed become more 'sensitized' to the public; not for the purposes of creating a more democratic city of free associations, but for the purposes of narrowing the definition of who the public is, for accelerating the creation of an exclusionary city of rigid spatial hierarchies: a city of profit. In retrospect, de Certeau's institutional analysis appears dated when he asserts that the weaker a force becomes, "the more strategy is transformed into tactics" (1984, 37). What has actually happened in recent years is that these institutions have become more agile and responsive to individuals, even while they have undertaken—with the help of the reigning neoliberal economic policies—an unprecedented consolidation of power, becoming still more powerful than before.

While strategies have only a vulgar understanding of their adversaries and are characterized by their imprecision, [the type of micro-sopic exclusionary designs](#) that I have detailed in this essay demonstrate subtlety and precision of knowledge. If these techniques are still strategies, not tactics, they are at least *guerrilla strategies*. Graffiti, for example, is a textbook tactic—but the massive IBM recently graffitied the public sidewalks of San Francisco and New York with a cryptic stencil—in the style of political graffiti—of a peace sign, a heart, and a penguin that is the logo of their new operating system. On some street

corners in the Mission neighborhood in San Francisco, this stencil appears only inches from other stencils in the same style: one advertising a dyke march, one demanding 'U.S. out of Vieques,' and one protesting the gentrification of the neighborhood. Corporations and bureaucracies are now in the business of simultaneously establishing places of power and 'détourning' them; they prevent unprofitable disorder in these places by inoculating them with a small dose of scripted, simulated disorder. As with the video game example above, we don't have to resist being entirely determined by our institutions, because our institutions will now resist for us. Institutions with a profit motive have a stake in ensuring the objectual nature of their spaces (physical or cultural), and in avoiding the inefficiencies of participation. Slavoj Žižek provides one uncanny example of this dynamic in his frequent commentaries on "canned laughter": we don't even have to decide what we think is funny anymore, because TV will do it for us!

Skateboarders are attuned to the fact that their culture is increasingly being surveilled and marketed as a kind of dark, exotic, urban authenticity, and they regularly express their aversion to the trend. In the pages of the original skateboard publications, even the small class of professional skateboarders who participate in the X Games openly deride the games, explaining that they participate only for the purses, and that they thus conceive of their participation as another *détournement*: they are manipulating an exploitative system for their own benefit. Of course it must be noted, however, that the X Games appropriation of the culture would have never succeeded if these skateboarders hadn't lent authenticity to the marketing efforts—in a sense, these skateboarders can only 'détourn' this system insofar as they have already enabled it.

The easy outside/inside, authentic/'sell-out' view of the relationship between skateboarding and corporate marketing (a view that is propagated on both sides) is further complicated by the fact that the increased publicity does in fact help spread and reproduce the destructive *activity* of skateboarding in towns and cities around the world. The larger consumer system may have absorbed the culture of skateboarding, but at the cost of encouraging a real physical disruption of the consumer city. The Gap is another company that eagerly employed skateboard imagery in their marketing campaigns, and the plaza of their new corporate headquarters in downtown San Francisco is the site of an entertaining requital: the ledges of the Gap's plaza are zealously guarded by private security forces, and are presently being covered with pig ears.

### **Conclusion: Urban Pathology as Surreptitious Creativity**

The micro-scope networks of surveillance continue to insinuate themselves into the smallest recesses of public space. But skateboarding continues to insinuate itself further into the networks of surveillance, seeking out and exploiting even smaller fissures. San Francisco skaters know, for example, that you can continue to skate the ledge at Giannini plaza, provided you don't skate north of the third pillar of the Bank of America building, where you will once again become visible to cameras and guards. Skateboarders know when the security guards work, they know where the cameras are, they know from which direction to enter a space, and they know how slip out of it undetected. Simulations of public space are becoming more sophisticated, but so are the skater's tactics for 'détourning' those spaces, reintroducing into them the debate that has been elided.

Ken Kay was not completely successful in 'banishing' skaters. Shawn Connolly exploits a crack in the design of 50 California Plaza. Photo © Richard Hart.

The question of whether or not a destructive activity like skateboarding should be

allowed in public space proceeds from an assumption that what we have is public space to begin with. If we recognize that what we have is commercial space, however, it becomes clear that skateboarding is not destructive of public space at all, but rather, productive and creative; it creates public space, if only for a moment. In downtown San Francisco, the network of exclusionary designs has been quite successful in filtering out everyone except the selected public. Most homeless are first of all concerned with sustaining themselves, not in challenging exclusionary architecture, so they have taken the hint and left. Skateboarding, on the other hand, was born out of such architecture, and it is in its nature—part of its everyday functioning—to challenge defensive design. Lacanian terms, skateboarding is like the protean Real in its relationship to the Symbolic Order of the downtown. Skateboarding is the obverse of defensive design; it is not an attack on exclusionary architecture but in fact, a symptom, an irreducible component of such architecture. This is now a symbiotic and irreversible relationship: skateboarding cannot exist without defensive design any more than defensive design can exist without skateboarding, or for that matter, any number of other urban countercultures. Slavoj Žižek often reminds us that the Real does not undermine a Symbolic Order from the outside, the Real is rather a *constitutive* failing of a Symbolic order.

*Public Space: Elias Bingham slides over the cobblestone and the divots in ROMA's new Ferry Plaza. Photo © Richard Hart.*

Skateboarders are not interested in transformative politics, and the culture has little potential in that arena. Skateboarding hints at the possibility of a more spontaneous and 'non-alienated' experience of the city, but only obliquely. The average skateboarder's primary concern is that they themselves are able to have that experience. Though it is just a young urban counterculture, with all of the attendant solipsism, skateboarding is also an ineradicable residue of the public that persists in spaces that increasingly enforce privateness.

When I have lunch downtown I see how for some of my professional colleagues, the skateboarders are simply something interesting to look at. Here skateboarding is what William H. Whyte would describe as "triangulation," one of the seven elements of a successful public space, a focus of conversation and a testament to the cultural diversity and vitality of the city (1988b). Others of my fellow downtown workers feel that they have a right to be always comfortable in the city and that skateboarding infringes on that right—they feel that it is an irritant, even a menace. Skateboarding challenges them to examine their reasons for feeling entitled to the comfort of a simulated public space, produced by surveillance, directed toward profit, and enforced by spikes and guards. In all cases, skateboarding challenges observers to examine their preconceptions of what and who a city is for. If nothing else, skateboarding makes people feel uncomfortable; it gives lie to the simulation and reintroduces conflict. As the saying goes, it reminds people that they are in a city—which is, after all, the greatest measure of our ability to be civilized.

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