



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION

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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into skateboarding and skate parks in the ACT

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Skateboarding and skate park history

Key Insights

- Australia has more skateparks per capita than any other country.
- Skateparks are used for many activities other than skateboarding.
- Approximately 26 percent of teens surveyed identify as skaters.

Whilst it is difficult to place an exact dollar figure on skatepark development in Australia, with over 1700 skateparks listed on the Australian skatepark register, (Australia Skateparks, 2019), it is clear to see that skateboarding is well provided for at a local government level.

No other government in the world has recognised the cultural significance of skateboarding as much as in Australia. (About SBA, 2012)

It is worth considering exactly what a skatepark is as the popular assumption would be that participants utilise the facilities for that which they are designed, namely, skateboarding! Whilst the notion of 'skateboarding' defines the space, a lot more goes on at these spaces than the base physical activity of skateboarding. Taylor and Khan (2011) present useful evidence in support of this, noting that participants use these spaces for what is described as 'hanging out', whilst Bradley (2010) identifies practices of 'socializing', 'spectating' and 'parenting' as being popular skatepark activities. In this context, the term 'parenting' relates to parents and caregivers supervising children in their care, who are utilising the skatepark facility.

The term skatepark itself is somewhat misleading due to the many different types of wheeled vehicles that utilise the space. My personal observation would attest to the fact that in Australia, the large number of scooter and BMX riders frequenting skateparks often means skateboarding and skateboarders are under-represented. This phenomenon is not restricted to Australia. Indeed, in the UK, Millie (2009) mentions 'conflict between users in this space, in that BMXers appear to be the dominant users, rather than skateboarders' (106).

Due to there being no 'standard' skatepark design (unlike a tennis court or football field, for example), a wide variety of skateparks exists (Kellett & Russell, 2009) and each has its own unique context and culture embedded within the skatepark and the skater (Borden, 2001) and non-skater community (Kellett & Russell, 2009).

In a guide to developing and managing skate facilities in Queensland (Brisbane City Council, 2002), it is suggested that the popularity of skateboarding moves in waves of approximately seven years. This is aligned, to a degree, with Borden's (2001) 'boom' years, where a series of internal and external technological developments influenced the rise and fall (and rise and fall again) of skateboarding participation.

With the inception of the widely televised ESPN X Games in 1995, skateboarding saw a 74.1 percent growth between 1998 and 2008 (Weindruch, 2017), with estimates by the National Sporting Goods Association of approximately 10 million participants in the US in 2008 (Weindruch, 2017). In contrast, Fetto, as quoted by Bradley (2010), places skateboarding practitioners at between 12 and 20 million in 2002. Number wrangling aside, it is important to note that Bradley finds a similar skateboarding participation rate in the US (23 percent of teens surveyed) as Australia (26 percent of teens surveyed).

Every peak has seen a subsequent lull in the sport, but Brisbane City Council's *Guide to Developing and Managing Skate Facilities in Queensland* (2002) states that each low is higher than those that came before, meaning that the popularity of skateboarding has had a steady growth rate to where it is today. The Australian skatepark guide recognises over 1700 skateparks in Australia (Australia Skateparks, 2019), with associated price tags upwards of \$1 million (King, 2014). Aaron Wallis estimates that each development carries an approximate \$200,000 price tag and that, on average, 20 new skateparks are built every year (Wallis, personal communication, 2012). Kellett and Russell (2009), however, place this figure as high as a hundred or more skateparks being built every year, albeit between 2005 and 2009. Due to the longevity of such constructions (Albany skatepark, built in 1972, is thought to be Australia's oldest, and is still actively used) and a government spend of approximately \$340 million to date (using Wallis's calculations), there is a strong argument for research that focuses on skateparks and the systems that support them.

...skateboarding has become an international phenomenon that is a virtual mainstream thread in the fabric of today's worldwide popular culture. (Petrone, 2008)

Accessibility of skateboarding and skate parks across the community

Key Insights

- Planning and managing skateparks as sporting facilities doesn't account for the urban culture that is deeply entrenched within the activity.
- Skateboarding is unregulated, largely unsupervised and is predominantly practiced by children and young adults. Placing skateparks in sites with low visibility and little passer-by surveillance puts youth at risk.
- Skateparks in isolated locations with low visibility and passer-by surveillance are more likely to attract antisocial behaviour and uncommissioned graffiti.
- People with disabilities do use skateparks, therefore provisions should be made to ensure they are accessible.
- Skateboarding is a performance sport, so placing skateparks in prominent urban locations and making skateboarding visible to passers-by is mutually beneficial for both skaters and spectators.

Most skateparks in Australia have been designed and are managed as sporting facilities (Wallis 2012) and have a propensity to be developed in existing green spaces or added to playing fields and sports precincts. Whilst this provides ample space for development, a downside is the resulting skatepark becomes difficult to access and is isolated (in terms of low visibility and incidental supervision) from the public and passers-by. I have visited many sites that fall into this category, and in the case of coastal communities, it's even more confronting when skateparks are far removed from the populated beaches and parks, due to the strong cultural and historical links between surfing and skateboarding. The famous surf towns of Kiama (**Figure 1**) and Ulladulla (**Figure 2**) in New South Wales each have skateparks located far from the more vibrant coastal zones of the community.



Figure 1. (Google Maps, Kiama, n.d.).

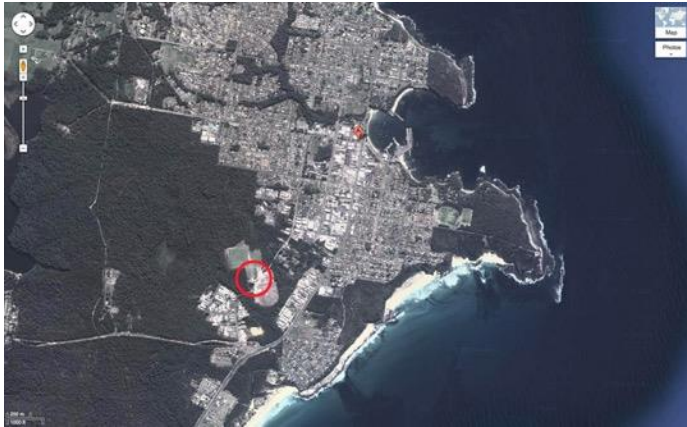


Figure 2. (Google Maps, Ulladulla, n.d.).

Little research has been done which focuses on the ways which people with disabilities access and use skateparks. The numbers of people with disabilities using skateparks is growing though, so much so, WCMX (wheelchair + BMX) is now recognised as a distinct skatepark discipline. Consideration therefore should be made to accommodate their needs. I have personally encountered people who use wheelchairs and people with sight impairments, and each group would benefit from specific design considerations:

For the sight impaired

- Ramps and obstacles that use areas of coloured concrete to mark transition areas.
- Painted markings to indicate skateable 'flow lines' through the skatepark.

For wheelchair users

- Obstacles that promote flow and carving
- Exit points from bowl areas.
- Wheelchair access from parking areas that leads directly to a skateable area for wheelchairs.

Skateboarder safety and welfare

Key Insights

- Poorly constructed skateparks are dangerous and will not be an asset to the community.
- Materials used to construct skateparks should be appropriate for the environment.
- Skateboarders are critical of poorly constructed skateparks and share opinions on social media.
- Building a skatepark requires expert design and specialist construction skills and materials.
- Re-building a skatepark is expensive.
- Youth constituents will feel like valued members of the community when desired services and facilities are provided for them. Providing sub-standard facilities can cause a reverse effect.

Preliminary skatepark analysis indicated that whilst many councils provide skateparks for their constituents, sometimes these developments showed a lack of consideration for the usability of the facility. Examples of this occurring within Australia include inappropriate use of materials and construction methods, prefabricated skateable features being used in unsuitable environments, lack of consultation with the end user, and poor choice of location. For example, the use of prefabricated metal skate ramps in areas that experience high summer temperatures (**figure 3**) are dangerous because the hot Australian summer can create an approximate surface temperature of around 80°C—hot enough to cause significant burns to any exposed skin that meets the ramp for even brief periods of time. Online site surveys have found many references to metal skateparks that present dangers from burns. In a Thrasher Magazine article, Peter Ramondetta recounts his experience with a hot metal ramp:

‘I fell on my arm and face, slid down the ramp, and just laid at the bottom. The ramps were super-hot. Everyone was freaked out and didn’t want to move me until the ambulance got there, but by the time they did I had third-degree burns on my arm and some on the side of my face because the ramps were so hot.’ (Broach, 2010)



Figure 3. Broken Hill, New South Wales. Metal ramps get dangerously hot in summer.

Even in relatively mild English summer conditions there are reports of young children suffering third-degree burns after crawling onto a hot metal ramp (Mother's Warning as Baby Suffers Excruciating Burns, 2016).

Skateboarders are vocal in ousting substandard skateparks that are dangerous on a material level and un-rideable by design standards. Examples of this can be seen by star ratings and comments for skateparks listed in the Australian skatepark register, (Australia Skateparks, 2019), as well as articles such as Kingpin Magazine's '10 worst skateparks ever built' (2014). This collection of skateparks are extreme examples of how wrong the process of building a skatepark can be, and one can only assume that no skater consultation took place during the development and construction of the parks. As a result, the ensuing facilities are uninspiring at best, un-useable at worst, deterring skaters from engaging with the space.

In 2012, the much-anticipated development and construction of Kincumber South skatepark in New South Wales quickly turned into a disappointment due to the low quality of the final construction and safety concerns surrounding its design. The concrete finish was rough, and the transitions were lumpy, and inconsistent (**Figure 4**). After a grand opening, a hasty closing followed due to community backlash. The worst parts of the park were bulldozed days after the official opening and rebuilt to a more professional standard (**Figure 5**). Investigations revealed that whilst the park was designed by a professional skatepark designer, the concreting was passed on to a local contractor who had no skatepark experience or expertise.



Figure 1. (Poor build quality, 2009).



Figure 2. (Minor alterations, 2009).

Skate parks, including planning and maintenance

Key Insights

- Councils who engage in community consultation during the planning phases of skatepark design build rapport with youth constituents. This consultation process should be transparent and authentic and focus on users most in need of the development, as opposed to those most vocal and confident.
- Whilst skateparks are often the 'go-to' facility for their youth constituents, many young people, especially girls, don't benefit unless they're skaters.
- Access to transport, shops, drinking water, toilets and shade should all be considered so the skatepark is a safe and comfortable place to spend large amounts of time.
- Residents can be very oppositional about development proposals which can have impacts on how valued young people feel within their community.

Skateboarding is an unstructured activity (Bradley, 2010), both in terms of individual participation (Howell, 2008) as well as the processes involved in skatepark development (Kellett & Russell, 2009). In Australia there is no governing body that oversees the planning and development of new skateparks (Kellett & Russell, 2009) so it falls to local councils to manage the planning and development of a new skatepark. Aaron Wallis, director of play space design company Playce and former principal of global skatepark design and construction company Convic, is critical of councils that utilise a sporting development model when providing skateparks for a generalised youth market. He argues that skateboarding represents only a small percentage of the youth community (and barely any girls), yet councils routinely commit to skatepark development as a means to provide a space for all youth. He has determined that skateboarding is treated by councils as a 'sport' so therefore the development is managed by the recreational services department, which holds authority over parks, green spaces, open spaces, and so on. These green spaces thus become the 'youth space', but they are often isolated and under-provisioned by utilities (such as transport, toilets, drinking water, shade and shops). As an urban designer, Wallis is adamant that 'youth spaces', which may incorporate skateable terrain, would be better managed by the strategic planning and urban design sectors within councils. Wallis proposes that the resulting development would integrate more youth into the community and urban fabric than is currently occurring (Wallis, personal communication, 2012). The key problem here, therefore, is not necessarily the volume or quality of facilities provided but the way in which local councils plan for skateparks using a sporting facilities framework rather than an urban design framework.

As a means of stimulating a sense of connectedness, constructed youth engagement often occurs during the design phase of a new skatepark, and Bradstreet (2009) claims that 'public process' is the

single most important phase in developing a new site. Jenson et al. (2012) argue, however, that skaters often see this as a token gesture, and Taylor and Khan (2011) add that youth feel that their opinions are not as valued as more vocal adults who may oppose the development. Whilst adult acknowledgement of youth needs can foster a sense of community connectedness, the youth that are often in an advocacy position do not necessarily represent the needs of their constituents (Whitlock, 2007). Most revealing perhaps is Whitlock's (2007) findings that youth who are most in need are also the least likely to participate in community-initiated activities, such as focus groups and forums. Woolley et al. (2011) suggest that providing youth with a designated skate spot entitles the city to outlaw even greater tracts of the urban landscape to skating. Some skaters also believe that purpose-built skateparks become a way to be controlled by powers who do not understand or appreciate skate culture (Bradley, 2010; Jenson et al., 2012), effectively placing skateboarding and skateboarders 'out of sight' (Németh, 2006). Thompson (2002) notes, 'They build one (skatepark) just as an excuse' (37). A converse argument exists though, where Shannon-McCallum and Werner (2008) explain that on a municipal level, a skate facility was regarded by skaters as symbolising the amount of care that the community had for youth. Based on these demonstrated conflicts in youth engagement, further research is needed to determine the effectiveness of current planning models.

My personal experience

In 2012 I was invited to be part of a steering committee for a new skatepark being developed in a park not far from where I lived. The committee was made up of a selection of community members: neighbours and surrounding residents, existing and potential park users, those who could offer expertise in the design, and representatives from the local council, namely a recreation development officer and a project manager. As an active skater myself, and father of three young skater children, I was keen to be involved, and to act as a representative of the skater community.

As it was, my town already had a public skatepark, built in a land depression at the end of a dead-end street, under a bridge, next to a vacant block, sandwiched between the highway and railway line (**Figure 6**). The closest occupied building was a pub about 300 metres up the road, which has a local reputation for being somewhat rowdy. Visibility into the site by the general public was extremely poor, verging on non-existent, which contributed to low levels of use from younger, less experienced skaters, female skaters, and supervisors who simply found the space to be unpleasant. My mother-in-law had long since refused to take my children there due to the unease that she felt in the space.



Figure 6. Sandwiched between the railway and highway, Katoomba skatepark suffers its location.

A nearby park was chosen as the site for the new skatepark, and local residents were invited to provide feedback on the development. In my role as a steering committee member I read and considered this feedback, and whilst none of it was particularly scathing, I was still surprised that of the 23 respondents, only 2 were in favour of the development, leaving an overwhelming 21 negative responses. People worried that the skatepark would attract teenage boys demonstrating antisocial behaviour, with the greatest fear being them congregating after dark. Some residents already recognised the park as a magnet for antisocial behaviour and were concerned that building a skate facility would escalate this. One elderly female resident made threats to council that she would shoot contractors when they began work, which resulted in police being engaged, weapons checks being done, and work being held up for a week (Dudley-Bestow, personal communication, 2019). I knew that this wasn't a localised issue as I had closely followed a highly criticised development in Newcastle, New South Wales, where:

...the 'Protect Empire Park' group was particularly vocal with its concerns about graffiti, vandalism and other antisocial behaviour the skate park might attract...At one point there was even a push to relocate the project to Broadmeadow. (McMahon, 2011)

The community distaste that surrounded both of these developments left me reflecting on where skateboarding stood in its position of a not quite here, not quite there sport/pastime/hobby/profession. As a 40-something skateboarder, I took issue with the way skateboarding and skateboarders were actively shunned and abused by some members of the broader community. When visiting regional parks, I questioned their planning and construction, and critiqued why council bureaucrats who were even further removed from the target group of users than I was, had ultimate say over the end result. Council planners were in a position of power to dramatically affect whether skateparks became hubs of youth community and places of pro-social development or dangerous, isolated blackspots that attracted and bred antisocial behaviour.

The relationship with other cultural activities, e.g., music and visual art

My personal experience

In June 2017, I exhibited a photographic response to the preliminary phases of my research entitled *Skateparks: Trace and culture* (Johnston, 2017) (Figure 7). The exhibition was held at the Blue Mountains Cultural Centre's Braemar Gallery in Springwood, New South Wales and was launched by the Lord Mayor of the Blue Mountains, Mark Greenhill OAM, and Professor Peter Hutchings, Dean, School of Humanities and Communication Arts, Western Sydney University. The show consisted of 20 large-format archival prints, and the work focused largely on the aesthetic potential of a skatepark. My goal was to exhibit the work to a largely uninformed audience so they could gain an appreciation for the nuanced beauty of the spaces, and leave with a changed attitude towards skateparks and skateboarding in general. The work that was exhibited has been reproduced in the accompanying photographic book, but I have selected some key pieces to present in more detail below.



Figure 7. Exhibition advertisement, *Skateparks: Trace and Culture*.

Focusing on the idea of unintentional beauty within the built environment of a skatepark, I investigated ways in which this might influence a new approach to representing the skatepark. Borrowing from Anderson's (2015) theory, which states that a trace carries the potential of thought, reflection and reminiscence, I have created my own photographic trace by capturing the landscape of the skatepark as a way to influence the thoughts and opinions of a broader, non-skateboarding literate audience (**Figure 8**).

The resulting images offer the viewer a chance to see the skatepark in a new light, where the formal lines, curves and shadows reflect the vision that the skaters themselves are highly tuned in to. It allows an outsider the opportunity to experience the skatepark as I and those who use it do,

consuming a common language of form, composition and beauty. It is as though we are bearing witness to the efforts made, lines carved, tricks handled and not handled, knees scabbed and clothes torn. The evidence of frenzied action is etched onto the surface of the skatepark itself, not dissimilar to the lines on the face of a person who has an interesting story to tell. Some skateparks have been continuously utilised for over 40 years and have lived through the trials and tribulations of three distinct lows that saw many other parks bulldozed, including my childhood park at North Ryde, now a bus depot. The character marks on these survivors are endearing and act as a reminder as to where skateboarding has come from. These not-so-perfect parks (compared to today's standards) offer the rider a unique set of challenges that come with kinked transitions and rough concrete landings.

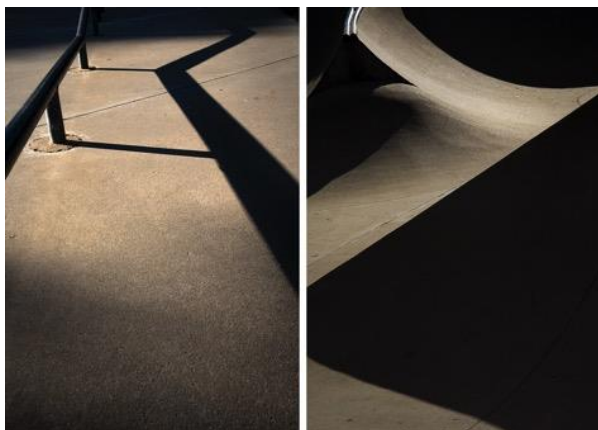


Figure 8. (Moama, Orange, 2017)

Commissioned artworks in skateparks are used as a way to add vibrancy and personality to the space. My local park is affectionately referred to as Katoomba Surf Club due to the large commissioned artwork adorning the back of the main ramp; Katoomba is a long way from the coast, so I guess it is fitting that this is the closest we get to surfing. Irony aside, the work has managed to last the test of time, having avoided encroaching graffiti for the last couple of years.

Edwards-Vandenhoeck (2012) explains that local councils commission graffiti as a way to deter illicit graffiti from occurring in the space. She is somewhat critical of this approach as commissioned pieces tend to be a sanitised version of the 'free, spontaneous and illicit' graffiti that might naturally appear otherwise (2012). I tend to agree that much of the commissioned graffiti that I have recorded displays an unauthentic appeal, and lacks the street credibility and cultural relevance of illicit pieces. Outlandish caricatures posing on and off skateboards, declaring metaphorically and literally that 'this is a skatepark', or, rather, a 'sk8 park', seems to be somewhat off point and almost patronising. The rationale is sound but the finished product can be somewhat dull (**Figure 9**).



Figure 9. Commissioned artwork suffers a working over.

Educational campaigns are sometimes threaded into commissioned graffiti pieces, where kids are encouraged to wear helmets in Sheffield, Tasmania and practice safe sex in Katoomba, New South Wales. At Collarenebri and Coonabarabran in New South Wales, Hobart in Tasmania and Batchelor in Northern Territory local fauna are on display in commissions, while the shifting plane perspectives of the large-format graffiti at Nerang, Queensland displays a sophisticated spatial design aesthetic. Blackall, Queensland offers us a throwback to skateboard magazines prior to YouTube, where multiple exposure sequences were a popular way to demonstrate the intricacies of tricks. Here the sequence of dropping in is captured across a sequence of five illustrations, all painted on the side of a hot corrugated iron shed (**Figure 10**).



Figure 10. Blackall, Queensland mural reflects multiple exposure sequences that were popular before YouTube.

Music and skateboarding share a close relationship, and music traces appear at skateparks in the form of stickers, graffiti, photographed music events, posters for music events and background music that adds ambience to skate sessions. The skate scene itself even has its own music genres—skate punk, skatecore and skate rock—and bands that can be identified as sitting within these genres include Suicidal Tendencies, NOFX, Pennywise, Blink-182, The Offspring, and Guttermouth. This is a far cry from Jan and Dean’s 1960s hit ‘Sidewalk Surfin’’, an audio representation of the clean-cut, short-lived skateboarding ‘fad’ of the sixties.

Music is often played at skateparks via portable systems brought by the skaters themselves (**Figure 11**), and organised skate demonstrations and competitions will often have DJs providing music for

the event (Waterloo Youth Week Skate and Scooter Jam, 2019). It is also common to see skaters listening to music through headphones while they skate, demonstrating that music is important for the flow and vibe of the session.

In Nowra, New South Wales I chanced upon the set-up of an event called Snake Sessions, funded by the Bundanon Trust (Snake Sessions, 2016). This live art event is a site-specific two-week residency that focuses on regional communities, incorporating music, skateboarding, BMX, parkour and dance, all within the skatepark environment. The residency culminates in a performance event that utilises the local community, putting into practice the skills and techniques that they have learnt during the extent of the residency (**Figure 12**).



Figure 11. Impromptu DJ session, Venice Beach, USA..



Figure 12. Snake Sessions, Nowra.

Any other related matters you would like the Committee to consider.

Reconstructed Space

In Borden's (2001) seminal text, *Skateboarding, space and the city: Architecture and the body*, skateboarding is described as being practised in both *found space* and *constructed space*. Found space relates to the pre-existing urban landscape being utilised for the purpose of skate pursuits. *Street skating* (as a skate discipline) is practised in found space—streets, schools, shopping plazas, drainage ditches. In found space, the skater is utilising the built environment for activities for which it was not otherwise designed (Jenson et al., 2012). Borden (2001) contextualises this with a real-world example:

In the case of the handrail, the skateboarder's reuse of the handrail—ollieing onto the rail and, balanced perilously on the skateboard deck, sliding down the fulcrum line of the metal bar—targets something to do with safety and turns it into an object of risk. The whole logic of the handrail is turned on its head. (192)

Such use of public space, though, can cause skaters to be viewed as 'problems' or 'nuisances' (Woolley et al., 2011). Vivoni (2009) states that skateboarders are excluded from many public spaces due to public safety and property maintenance, and offences that a skateboarder can commit include 'noise pollution, loitering, property defacement and trespassing' (142). Woolley et al. (2011) add to this by outlining the three control methods being used to deter skateboarding in public space: social (security staff), legal (by-laws and curfews) and physical (constructing skateparks and creating unskateable features in public spaces). The problem with these various methods of control is that they further marginalise skateboarders from the broader community, cementing preconceptions of what skateboarders represent—'risky', 'devious' and 'unsavoury deviants' (Taylor & Khan, 2011).

Constructed space describes sites and spaces that are developed with the sole purpose of the skater in mind, in other words, a skatepark. Here, *vert skaters* (as a skate discipline) skate on transitioned ramps that are not commonly encountered in found space (**Figure 13**). The vert skater therefore will rely on purpose-built skateparks for their preferred terrain.



Figure 13. Singapore's East Coast Park offers the skater features that aren't usually found in the natural urban environment.

Whilst I have defined skateboarders as belonging to either a street or vert identity, crossovers exist between the two groups. Within most skatepark environments, specific space would be dedicated to both street skaters and vert skaters. Therefore, it is possible to be a street skater without ever skating on the street, or, to be more precise, in *found space*. The street skater will skate on features within the skatepark that mimic the street (or urban) environments. These 'contrived spaces' (Wallis, personal communication, 2015) offer the park skater many of the features that a street skater would seek out in the natural urban environment—handrails, ledges, gaps and stairs, albeit in a safe, controlled environment.

Reservoir Skatepark in Melbourne is a wonderful example of how far a skatepark designer will go to mimic the obstacles that a street skater might seek out, with much of the park being constructed with objects either gleaned from the urban environment or appropriated to reflect desirable urban features. The US-style fire hydrant and Jersey barrier, (a widely utilised concrete road barrier), brings an exotic piece of New York style to the outer suburbs of Melbourne. In this instance, the boundaries between skate feature and civic furniture is so blurred that it is difficult for some to tell where the skatepark begins and ends. I witnessed a couple supervising their child and enjoying lunch on a skate obstacle craftily disguised as a picnic table (**Figure 14**). The irony isn't lost on me: the skaters get a dedicated park with a bench obstacle, but they can't skate the bench because the general public uses it as a seat.



Figure 14. Skate obstacle or picnic table? The boundaries are blurred at Reservoir Skatepark, Melbourne.

Similarly, an innocuous metal pole documented in Launceston, Tasmania further blurs the boundaries around contrived street-skating features found in skateparks (**Figure 15**). The metal pole, bent over as though it has been run into by a car, offers the skaters a chance to ‘pole jam’, where the skater uses the pole’s angle to grind and launch (**Figure 16**). When pole jams are skated in found space, they are created through an act of alteration to the natural environment where practitioners bend an existing pole, with the help of a car or angle grinder. The skateboarding zine *Papier* featured an article that demonstrated this very act (Skateboard Terrorists, 2015). The context in which the pole jam exists in a skatepark, mimicking found space vandalism, demonstrates the importance that skatepark designers place on recreating an authentic street-skating experience. Despite this, literature points towards skaters preferring street skating in found space, where they are able to discover, invent and reinterpret the way that the ‘natural’ environment is used (Jenson et al., 2012; Németh, 2006; Woolley, 2001).



Figure 15. A pole jam. A skate obstacle in created space mimicking a vandalised pole in found space.



Figure 16. (*No-comply pole jam*, 2015).

Building on Borden's definitions (2001) of found and constructed space, my research has established a third classification: *reconstructed space*. This term refers to a skatepark that has undergone a transformation at the hands of the user as a way to stamp a sense of ownership over it.

Reconstructors of space embed social and cultural knowledge and meanings linked to place and history, which go on to form part of a subcultural language of place. Such narratives may not be immediately evident to a casual observer. For example, graffiti at a skatepark is often viewed on a macro level, where graffiti is either present or it isn't, but on a micro level, when we read, analyse and understand the graffiti, we discover relationships that occur between the user and the space.

Visual traces that I have documented include material phenomena such as graffiti, littering, embellishments, stickers and vandalism. Indeed, as I have come to see it, any reconstruction which has altered the original skatepark, both structurally and non-structurally, can be valued for the insights it gives into the cultural and social practices of the skaters who use the space, and the broader culture to which they belong.

Case Study

A demonstration of deep connection between skaters and skateparks

The Oxford English dictionary defines an epitaph as ‘A phrase or form of words written in memory of a person who has died, especially as an inscription on a tombstone’ (Oxford Online Dictionary, 2019), and it was the discovery of these recurring memorials across a number of skateparks both in Australia and abroad that was the turning point in my field research. It marked the point where I diverged from analysing the physical features and locations of individual skateparks to actively seeking out recurring traces and cataloguing them. I had seen an RIP dedication in the past; in fact, there is a dedication to someone who has passed away at my local skatepark. But what I was not aware of was the broader global practice and the variety of ways in which these epitaphs have been marked into the landscape. Some are as insubstantial as a marker scrawl on the back of a ramp while others consist of elaborate graffiti that covers a substantial area of the skatepark. At my local skatepark, one of the bowls features an extension section that represents a tombstone, complete with ‘RIP’ in mosaic tile across the top edge (**Figure 17**).



Figure 17. A mosaic tile RIP memorial at Katoomba skatepark.

More noticeable in the epitaphs than in any of the other recurring traces recorded are the nuances that have been applied to the styling, which shed light on cultural differences from site to site. For example, the epitaph trace documented in Coober Pedy (**Figure 18**) in the South Australian desert indicate Indigenous connections in the colour of the paint used as well as the incorporation of hand stencils, which reflect Australian Indigenous rock paintings. In Singapore an epitaph is handwritten and includes motifs that reflect SMS icons (**Figure 19**) with a heart on its side using the characters <3. In another, a colon and open bracket character are combined to make a sad face. On a cultural level Coober Pedy is as far removed from Singapore as it is by miles, illustrated clearly by the visual style that has been applied to what is essentially the same message. Each place shares the same intent, though, which is to honour the memory of a friend who had a deep connection with the skatepark.



Figure 18. An epitaph found at Coober Pedy in South Australia features Aboriginal motifs.



Figure 19. An epitaph found at Bishan Road, Singapore includes motifs that reflect SMS icons.

Due to the perceived physical risks that revolve around skateboarding, the casual observer might wonder whether a skatepark epitaph marks the spot where a skater has suffered a fatal injury, like the way a roadside memorial marks the spot where a fatal vehicle accident has occurred. Due to the public nature of information, it has been possible to trace some epitaphs back to the event that caused the untimely death, and these rarely (if ever) relate to skateboarding or the site where the epitaph is placed. The skatepark epitaph therefore should be compared to a plaque at a beautiful lookout or a bench seat in a park that has been marked as a special place for the deceased. The graffiti is not a piece of vandalism but a heartfelt dedication to a lost friend, spoken with appropriate cultural voice. As Anderson writes, ‘Youth cultures do not necessarily care about how their traces are seen by the mainstream. They are more concerned about how they are seen and read by their own culture’ (Anderson, 2015).

What I find most heartbreaking about these traces is that they refer to real people, most of whom have probably passed away at a young age, who were active in the local skateboarding community. The fact that the skatepark has been chosen as the location for the epitaph demonstrates the importance of this place within the immediate community.

Oscar Valentin was 18 when he died in a vehicle accident on April 7, 2018. Only four months later on August 11, 2018, Oscar's best friend, Angus Prior, tragically took his own life in a 'moment of madness' (Cross, 2018) at the age of 18. Oscar's passing was simply too painful for Angus to bear. Both boys lived on Sydney's northern beaches and were committed skateboarders, and Mona Vale skatepark was 'a second home' (Cross, 2018) to them. I first became aware of Oscar's and Angus's passing when I read about them in a news article, and what struck me in this and subsequent articles was the way that skateboarding was represented in an almost holy manner. At Angus's funeral, a guard of honour was made from skaters holding their skateboards aloft whilst the funeral procession left the church (**Figure 20**).



Figure 20. (Guard of honour, 2018).

After Oscar's funeral service, family and friends walked to Mona Vale skatepark to lay wreaths (**Figure 21**). A shrine of photographs and other memorabilia had been prepared on the guardrail behind the main quarter pipe. Oscar's skateboard sat front and centre. The quarter pipe and safety rail behind had become a headstone, the skatepark a cemetery (**Figure 22**).



Figure 3. (Family and friends place wreaths, 2018)



Figure 4. (Mourners at Mona Vale skatepark, 2018)

The story of Oscar and Angus is certainly a tragedy, and I highlight it because of the way in which skateboarding became an important part of the funeral proceedings; in Oscar's case, where a traditional funeral might progress to a cemetery, the skatepark was a more fitting destination. This process reminds me of similar ceremonies that exist around surfing culture, where the community engage in a 'paddle out' and, for that moment, regard the ocean as altar and shrine (Luttrell, 2017) **(Figure 23)**.



Figure 5. (Paddle out at Clifton Beach, 2017).

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