

Skateboarding and the Mis-Use Value of Infrastructure

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Abstract

Infrastructure generates social relationships as bodies (human and non-human) encounter one another moving through urban and peri-urban space. Studies explore these relationships in-depth, however there is limited consideration of social relationships generated through deliberate mis-use of infrastructure, termed the alter-sociality of infrastructure in this article. This article focuses on the mis-use of infrastructure by skateboarders and the filmers and photographers who capture their unsanctioned performances. It makes three arguments. First, skateboarders are an adjacent public for infrastructure, invested in its constant production but not in its intended use. Second, skateboarding promotes an alter-sociality of infrastructure drawing our attention to desire, damage, surveillance, and wounding generated by mis-use. Third, unlike other appropriations of infrastructure for mis-use, skateboarding is captured as video and image, circulated globally through digital technology, freely accessible, and consumed and emulated by millions of skaters across the world. As a result, otherwise ordinary infrastructure has profound subcultural significance, widely shared histories, and draws skaters from other cities and other countries to arrangements of surfaces, objects and obstacles barely noticed by other urban dwellers.

Keywords

Infrastructure, skateboarding, social relations, surveillance, media



Introduction

Infrastructure generates deep meanings for skateboarders. Skateboarders covet the assemblages of surfaces, objects and obstacles with particular material properties that allow the performance of skate tricks. These assemblages are called ‘spots’ in skate culture. Spots are not intended for skateboarding; thus urban and peri-urban landscapes all over the world produce spots, and a large portion of spots are assembled in whole or in part by infrastructure both spectacular and mundane. Envisioned infrastructures peddled to publics by planners and politicians mean little to skaters unless they materialise. Skaters chase infrastructure that is complete, under construction, in ruins; all that matters is whether its surfaces can be gauged, often by touch, and its dimensions calculated for extraordinary feats on everyday objects.

In this article I argue that skateboarders are—along with the filmers and photographers who capture their performances, the viewers who consume these performances, and the brands that (attempt to) profit from their labour—an adjacent infrastructural public (Collier et al. 2016). They are invested in the continued making of infrastructure but apathetic to its success or failure *as infrastructure*. They have little stake in whether infrastructure fulfills its intended use, skateboarders are interested in its mis-use value.

If we accept that infrastructure ‘thickens’ social relations (Simone 2008, 76), then extending this to skateboarders, the mis-use of infrastructure thickens relationships with one another, with non-skateboarders (authorities, pedestrians, property owners, spectators) and with material objects. I argue that this is an iteration of an alternative social life of infrastructure, termed ‘alter-sociality’ of infrastructure in this article.¹ Literature on the social life of infrastructure draws us to its capacity to change people’s ‘experience of social time and social space [...] [and] the shifting social temporalities that infrastructure produces’ (Appel et al 2019, 16). Extending this to the ways skateboarders appropriate infrastructure reveals alternative temporal and spatial relations. Furthermore, as skateboarding globalizes, the alter-sociality of infrastructure is reproduced in vastly different social, political, economic and cultural settings. Mis-use of infrastructure has (at least) four components: desire, damage, surveillance, and wounding.

Finally, I argue that these components are in continual circulation and consumption. Unlike many other temporary appropriations of infrastructure for shelter, peddling, drug-use or crime, the appropriation of infrastructure by skateboarders is captured as video and image, circulated globally through digital platforms (present) and audio-visual objects (past), and consumed by an audience of millions. When skaters watch skate video and view images they are drawn to the material properties of the spots on screen, imagining their dimensions, relative friction and resistance to grinding and sliding, and qualities of the surfaces on the roll up and roll away. Viewers translate the material properties of infrastructure from the screen into their own experiences of similar spots, similar assemblages. As a result, otherwise ordinary infrastructure has profound subcultural significance, its own histories, and draws skaters from other cities, other countries, to unremarkable chunks of material (O’Connor 2018a).

I explore these arguments through skate media, drawing on skateboard video and still images published in skateboard magazines, and on my own experiences with mis-use over three and a half decades. This article begins by locating skateboarding in the literature on the social life/social relations of infrastructure and makes a case for considering mis-use as an alternative—though common—spatial and temporal experience. The second section explores the ways infrastructure is archived in skate media, especially skate video, paying particular attention to Michael Truscello’s (2020) adage to engage with the ways infrastructure appears in ‘artistic texts’. The third section outlines mis-use as archived in skate media through four components: desire, damage, surveillance, and wounding. These are not hard

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categories but loose groupings to sketch the alter-sociality of infrastructure for further research on mis-uses of infrastructure in various social and cultural contexts.

Infrastructure as Spots

Explorations of the social and cultural lives of infrastructure are burgeoning in various scholarly fields, building on earlier calls to undertake ethnographies of infrastructure and other ‘boring things’ (Star 1999, 337). Susan Star challenged scholars to undertake the ‘terrifying and delightful challenge’ of ethnographic approaches to infrastructure and the systems created by, and reflective of, human organization (1999, 389). Two decades on, infrastructure has become ubiquitous in studying what Appel et al. call the ‘differentiated experiences of everyday life and [...] expectations of the future’ (2019, 3). This literature is vast and I focus here on the ‘social life of infrastructure’ as a departure point from which to consider the alter-sociality of infrastructure generated by mis-use.

Infrastructure is entangled in social life. Exploring these relationships depends upon the everydayness of infrastructure, the ways individuals and communities, urban and rural, ‘come to know and experience infrastructure’ (Graham and MacFarlane 2014, 3). As Romit Chowdhury argues, this approach to infrastructure is ‘distinguished by its emphasis on the social life of urban provisioning systems and the complex sociabilities they enable’ (2021, 86). Infrastructure can also ‘enchant’, through promises of speed, political integration, and economic connections (Harvey and Knox 2012, 524). Ash Amin’s (2014) adage to explore the lively social life of a city through its infrastructure is a useful departure point. For Amin, the abundance of literature on infrastructure in the social/human disciplines makes hybridity visible: ‘both the social and the technological are imagined as hybrids of human and nonhuman association, with infrastructure conceptualized as a sociotechnical assemblage, and urban social life as never reducible to the purely human alone’ (2014, 137-138). From this we can get a ‘sense of human being and sociality in the city, in ways that acknowledge the liveliness of socio-technical systems, and this even in the places of infrastructural absence or failure’ (2014, 138). Using material from land occupations and informal settlements in the Brazilian city of Belo Horizonte, Amin writes (2014, 157):

Occupation, and the co-construction of a habitable space through all kinds of infrastructural improvisation and innovation, has brought together people from different backgrounds into common endeavour, to discover the value of collective life by having something to work on collectively, to use infrastructure to address the larger city for rights and connections [...] many though not all the occupations are appropriations designed to live the city in another way – collectively, frugally, autonomously, creatively...

Skateboarders and filmers are constantly performing what Amin identifies as ‘improvisation and innovation’. The improvisations of skaters and filmers bring people together in urban space, they make connections across boundaries of gender, sexuality, race, class and citizenship, they make claims—often temporary and highly contentious—on infrastructure. Appropriating infrastructure in this way is certainly autonomous and creative, and most often illegal. It’s also prolific, celebrated and—at the high-end of the skill spectrum—commoditised.

The social life of infrastructure is a seductive analytic, and in this article I experiment with extending it to encompass the alter-sociality of infrastructure; its double life as delinquent playground. What makes skateboarding distinct from improvisations described by Amin is that the stakes are relatively low. Play and associated livelihoods are trivial when compared to shelter and access to services. Though as skateboarding spreads further and further from its heartlands, the shared culture of viewing infrastructure for its misuse potential spreads too.

Infrastructures go beyond their immediate functionality and, as Larkin argues, ‘need to be analysed as concrete semiotic and aesthetic vehicles oriented to addressees’ (2013, 329). A focus on the

social life of infrastructure draws our attention to the relationships between providers and intended beneficiaries, the public or *publics* addressed by infrastructure. As Collier et al. argue, ‘it is not only the things extracted, transformed, and circulated through infrastructures that are today being reshaped, but the public—or publics—of infrastructure’ (2016, n.p).

Skateboarding offers an interesting intervention into this literature. It is conceivable to think of skateboarders as addressees, as members of publics whose experience of space is shaped by the provision, upgradation, decline and removal of infrastructure. It is less conceivable to imagine skateboarders as stakeholders in the provision of infrastructure, nor subjects of its success or failure. Skateboarders engage in Larkin’s ‘semiotic and aesthetic’ embrace of materials used to create infrastructure, yet they are invested in the creation of infrastructure projects addressed to others. They chase the creation of new infrastructure, assess its policing, its surveillance, but are rarely the intended subjects of the project and sometimes are not even citizens or residents of the polity in question. In this sense skaters are not members of the intended public, or alternatively the absent publics—they are members of an adjacent public. As an adjacent public, skaters also covet infrastructure that may no longer hold its use value to the intended public, or never realised its use value to begin with.

Popular media portrayals project skateboarders as ‘extreme’ athletes promoting consumption through sponsorship and a competition circuit; a portrayal furthered following inclusion in the 2020/1 Tokyo Olympic Games. This is a specialised part of skateboarding, distinct from the core culture of street skateboarding (with occasional crossover by individual skaters). The Olympics remain controversial in skate culture, celebrated by some, resisted by many, and drawing apathy in the middle (Manzenreiter 2020; Schwier 2019). In contrast, street skateboarding is the most accessible and most diverse form; all one needs is a board and a patch of concrete. The majority of professionals and sponsored skateboarders do not participate in competitions (thus skate media is a better source for immersion in the culture), nor do they earn lucrative livelihoods in small career windows, with a few notable exceptions (Snyder 2017). They are, however, mobile.

Content production for individuals and the brands they represent depends upon access to urban landscapes, to spots. At any one spot there might be skaters drawn from different backgrounds demonstrating different degrees of mobility. Some might be from the next neighbourhood over, others may have come from another city or another country (McDuie-Ra 2020; O’Connor 2018b). Mobility is a privilege, yet skateboarders on the whole are difficult to cast as emanating from privileged classes nor are most able to transcend class in short career windows. The global picture is uneven. In some contexts skateboarding tends to be the domain of the middle and upper-middle classes, such as East Asia, whereas in other contexts it is popular and accessible to the poor and working class, as in Brazil and Southeast Asia (McDuie-Ra 2021a). The media content discussed in this article shows skaters in their window of mobility, their years of privilege, but these windows are not uniform in length, remuneration or opportunity.

Along with class, skateboarding intersects with race in both expected and unexpected ways, made more complex as the culture travels. In a general sense, as Borden argues, diverse racial and ethnic groups are ‘more easily integrated into skateboarding than in many other areas of youth culture’ (2001, 140). Despite this, analysis of race and skateboarding has often failed to account for racial diversity and the porosity of racial categories, especially as skateboarding moved away from the coast to urban hinterlands in the late 1980s (McDuie-Ra 2021c, 116-9). Skateboarding has a long history of female, non-binary and gender-queer participation. Despite this history of gender diversity, Becky Beal and Charlene Wilson (2004) note industry livelihoods have been dominated by males (see Carr 2017; Fok and O’Connor 2021). Change has accelerated in the last decade, though gender divides remain in traditional skateboarding heartlands when compared to places where skateboarding is relatively new, such as Afghanistan, Palestine and India (McDuie-Ra 2021a, 159; Thorpe and Chawanski 2021). What remains

steadfast amongst skateboarders of different backgrounds and locations is a shared desire for infrastructure that can be mis-used.

Street skateboarding gains its legitimacy from tricks performed at spots intended for other uses (Chiu 2009; Snyder 2017). Despite a proliferation of skateparks built by municipal governments and not-for-profit organisations around the world, infrastructure intended to be used by skateboarders (and scooters, bikes etc), spots are essential for the millions of skateboarders and the thousands of livelihoods bound up in the culture. Spots are rendered visible through the ‘skater gaze’ (McDuie-Ra 2021a, 33-34). The skater gaze is attuned to the possibilities for extraordinary bodily performances from otherwise mundane patches of infrastructure and its fragments: the underside of a flyover, the laneway behind a building site, a pedestrian mall linking two apartment complexes. And while this gaze is particular to skaters, it is shared by millions of skaters across time and space. A waist-high marble ledge angled down a set of seven stairs animates the skater gaze in Los Angeles and La Paz; in Sydney and Stockholm; in Tehran and Taipei. Spots are created from new infrastructures and old; functional and ruined; spectacular and mundane; on the frontstage and backstage of the built environment. Spots made famous in skate media in decades past have a rich subcultural heritage (O’Connor 2020, 155-162).

Richard Ingersoll offers a provocative take on infrastructure as ‘cathedrals of mobility’; as modern art that ‘incite[s] a painful beauty’ (2006, 101). This pain comes from the violence and destruction done by infrastructure and by the things it brings into our daily lives. He asks, ‘[a]side from their functionality as public works, dare one find them beautiful?’ To take this dare means to evoke the sublime, the ‘contradictory sentiments of fascination and repulsion’ (2006, 103). Ingersoll explains this further ‘to approach infrastructure as art can provide a way of dealing with the violence it interjects into the urban system and become a means of creating civic meaning’ (2006, 124). Infrastructure’s ‘painful beauty’ is a consistent aesthetic in skate media. Infrastructure is physically painful too, wounding bodies that slam into concrete, steel and marble while attempting tricks.

Ingersoll goes into detail on the transformation of Barcelona, a city that emerged as a global skate mecca in the late 1990s through iconic spots like MACBA (Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona), Plaça del Fòrum, Para-ll Metro Station, and the plaza in front of Sants station. Ingersoll writes of Sants ‘[i]t meets the major intersection with skeletal shading devices and is solidly paved in smooth granite (much-loved by the international skateboarders who come like pilgrims to scoot about the site)’ (2006, 118—brackets in original). We can forgive Ingersoll using ‘scoot’ to describe the ways skaters move; the fact he notices them and can understand why they love Sants is impressive considering many scholars don’t register skaters in the urban landscapes they study or just ignore them. In this way the relationship between skaters and infrastructure is closer to adoration, even love. And, crucial to the argument being made here, skateboarding, and the media that captures and circulates it digitally to millions of people in real time every day, makes infrastructure in various forms, in various conditions, highly visible.

Archiving Infrastructure as Spots

Skate media are low-brow artistic texts that make infrastructure visible, somewhere in the spectrum from hidden to broken, showpiece to mundane, ominous to hopeful. Consumers of skate media recognise different infrastructure projects through their appearance in skate media, and in turn generate an alternative cartography of urban and suburban space within and across national borders and geographic regions (McDuie-Ra 2021a, 31-35). Infrastructure is celebrated through skate media, animating its alter-social life and capturing its appropriation. Infrastructure is always in the frame, and famous skate media plays with the aesthetics of scale and juxtaposition.

Skate media has an enormous, diverse (linguistically, culturally, socially) and geographically dispersed audience. Media archiving alternative uses of infrastructure from the 1960s (magazines) and 1980s (video) have given way to digital media platforms that host an extraordinary amount of content.

As digital technology has proliferated, skateboarding is much easier to capture, edit and upload and consume. Skaters young and old oblige, upload content in a constant stream of images and video clips (Dupont 2020). Constantly mobile, skaters, filmers and photographers are archivers of infrastructure. They explore, reinterpret, perform, capture, circulate and consume infrastructure. They are unconcerned with following official routes, with using infrastructure for its designated purpose. As such they uncover patches of immense subcultural value in certain infrastructures, patches otherwise unremarkable when viewed with another gaze.

Imagining the city as archive is not new, much of it inspired by Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* (1999). As Michael Sheringham puts it in his conversation with Richard Wentworth, 'to think of a city as an archive is to think in terms of dynamic process, restless motion, multiple chronologies and levels of meaning' (2016, 519). Skateboarding animates all these four elements. It is dynamic as a craft, driven by the 'ethos of progression' (Snyder 2017, 70). Skateboarding is restless motion embodied in constant movement, regardless of rules or order. It is motion generated by the itch, the need, the compulsion to roll through the urban landscape and repurpose its infrastructure; the surfaces, obstacles, shapes and objects. Skateboarding has its own chronologies and meanings of infrastructure; life stories of a cement ledge or handrail chronicled on alternative timelines and studied, learned and circulated as the culture's 'mental furniture' (Rosenberg and Grafton 2010, 10).

Skate media archives, as a verb, yet there are no archives as repository—at least no permanent public archives—where these artefacts are located and retrievable. Conventional understandings of archives, namely a repository and the material contained in that repository, have stretched with the proliferation of digital technology, storage and access (streaming) (Hoskins 2011). If, in a digital age, archives are everywhere, detached from place and authority, then they are also detached from master narratives of history and guardianship, and 'can be reconfigured again and again' (Featherstone 2006, 596).

In *Infrastructural Brutalism*, Michael Truscello pushes for stronger consideration of infrastructure's visibility, especially in what he refers to as 'artistic texts' (2020, 26). He argues that through artistic media such as film, photography and literature, 'even the infrastructure that is built to be buried—pipes, wires, and stuff that undergirds cities for example—becomes visible in ways other than breakdown' (2020, 26). He adds, 'artistic interventions depict the full range of engagements with infrastructures, from the formulation of an idea to the often-troubled construction to the historical legacies' (2020, 26). In other words, media captures infrastructure in various states, conditions, and spectrums of visibility. These 'infrastructural narratives' can be 'as powerful as, or more powerful than, the materials used in construction, potentially disrupting hegemonic legacies and contributing to new practices' (2020, 29). Skateboarding as a practice disrupts hegemonic legacies—both state and corporate—and skate media captures and circulates these disruptions to millions of consumers, making mundane infrastructure, its mis-use and its alter-social life hyper-visible. If one knows where and when to look.

Truscello sees these as interventions into humanity's collective march to self-destruction through the ceaseless advancement of infrastructure, 'consuming vital resources, condemning millions to premature deaths, and blocking potential exit routes from its own systematic suicide' (2020, 23). Artistic media may provoke calls to action, provide 'subtle intimations', inspire people to 'unbuild necropolitical structures', and warn 'against the construction of future necropower' (2020, 265). The larger counterhegemonic project at play is 'that more people realize the necropolitics of infrastructure, to see and practice beyond the neoliberal consensus that decaying infrastructure must always be repaired and that an absence of infrastructure is always an opportunity for so-called development' (2020, 265). Perhaps the key line is: 'What we deter or destroy today will mean more to our collective future than anything we build or repair' (2020, 265).

Skateboarding certainly damages infrastructure in its acts of counter-hegemonic disruption, though the larger politics behind these acts and their consumption are harder to pin down. The mantra ‘skate and destroy’ has defined the subculture for decades. However, skaters don’t want complete destruction of infrastructure. They need it to hold together—even in an altered state—to keep spots alive. Thus, unlike Truscello’s imperative to let infrastructure die and not be replaced, skaters prefer to repurpose, vandalise, and even claim infrastructure for themselves. Despite pretensions otherwise in the way skateboarding is marketed, skateboarding is not anti-system *per se*, in the sense of wanting an entire breakdown of contemporary capitalism and the socio-technical systems that reproduce it. Skateboarding projects a politics of anti-system *as intended*. Skateboarders need infrastructure to continue cycling through its stages of life. Skateboarders and filmers care about how infrastructure as objects and surfaces are arranged. They care about obstructions; physical, human, and electronic. Everything else is tangential, barely noticed, barely remembered. No one cares how the spot got made; what matters is whether it can be skated, for how long, and the risks of getting busted. With this in mind, the alter-sociality of infrastructure unfolds

The Alter-Sociality of Infrastructure

Skate media archives the mis-use of infrastructure through four components: desire, damage, surveillance, and wounding. These are not hard categories but loose heuristics to begin sketching the ways mis-use generate an alter-sociality of infrastructure. I will discuss each in turn using examples from skate media.

Desire

Skateboarders desire infrastructure for its mis-use value, seeing and feeling infrastructure with a particular gaze and sensory disposition. As Vivoni and Folsom-Fraster argue (2021, 2),

[t]o see like a skateboarder is to imagine the world anew for its unintended pleasures. However, skateboard consciousness emanates as much from keen eyesight as from all of our bodily senses. Street skateboarding as tacit knowledge of the city requires the whole body in deep reciprocity with the rhythms of urban space.

This consciousness, this sensory reciprocity, evokes desire, drawing skaters to infrastructure and translating its material elements into shared cultural vocabulary of spots. Desire for infrastructure in the backstage of urban landscapes such as the underside of flyovers, drainage ditches, or even empty suburban carparks recalibrates what constitutes a valuable geographic, topological or/and architectural subject (see Kolb 2008).

Skate video stitches these otherwise ignored cross-sections of the city into consumable blocks of space-time, bringing them to an adjacent public, geographically scattered though often close to something similar; a ledge, a handrail, and embankment that looks—to them—similar to what is on video. A popular example from skate culture is the introduction to Thai/American skater Eric Koston’s part in the video *Menikmati* (Mortagne 2000). At the time of *Menikmati*’s release Koston was perhaps the most recognisable street skater in the world. His part in the video has been viewed hundreds of thousands, possibly millions, of times on VHS and DVD and later through online streaming. Koston’s part begins in Bangkok. Backed by classical Thai music a montage of images commences: temples, street food vendors, images of King Bhumibol, urban waterways, and Buddha statues. Koston’s voiceover begins by mentioning that he was born in Bangkok but didn’t grow up there having moved to California when he was very young. He admits, ‘I always had this image of Bangkok being this sort of traditional Thai city, which is the case when you walk through the historic district where all the old temples are that are strictly dedicated to Buddha’. Then the scenery changes and cuts to long distance shots of tall buildings

including the Baiyoke Tower (II), the skytrain, highways, flyovers, and close-ups of traffic and traffic police in their distinctive brown uniforms. Koston's voice over continues over these images:

But if you go to the east-side of the city there is a huge contrast. You've got big skyscrapers, skytrains, insane traffic—which causes so much pollution that people wear surgical masks so they don't have to breathe in that garbage.

The montage shifts to still shots of skate spots: cement, stairways, handrails, and ledges. These shots evoke desire and surprise for the audience. Bangkok has mundane infrastructure too; perfect spots. These spots are part of municipal buildings, banks, transport links, apartment complexes. Koston continues:

With every modern city you can usually find skate-spots and the ones we found were really good. But of course there were security guards there. All we did was told them we were there to do work and gave them a little bit of money—which barely equalled two US dollars—and they let us skate. Even for beer and cigarettes.

The montage cuts to a group of Thai security guards sitting on a staircase drinking beer from bottles and smoking cigarettes as Koston performs a backside 50-50 (grinding the right angle of two surfaces with the trucks or axel of the skateboard) down the 'hubba' (the ledge angled downward at a consistent angle to a staircase). He adds: 'It's crazy cause that would never happen in the US'.

Koston marvels at Bangkok's modernity; at the infrastructure. The assemblages of concrete, marble, steel and wide, open space are new, untouched, and barely policed. Revisiting his part two decades later, it is useful to consider a few elements of this opening montage. Koston and the filmer, Fred Mortagne, travel to Bangkok to find spots, capture footage, and create a narrative about Koston's heritage. Once there, the infrastructure draws them in. The performance of skateboarding is travelling too; the skill, the creativity, the daring. It needs no specialised arena or equipment; Koston arrives with his board and mis-uses local infrastructure. To make this happen, to identify and locate infrastructure in Bangkok that makes his calibre of skateboarding possible, the skater gaze travels; the aesthetics, the particular 'codes of appearance', as Ghertner puts it, that promote a common desire shared by skaters delinked from 'calculative instruments of map, census and survey' (2015, 40), and as a 'critique of the processes of exchange and consumption in the modern city' (Borden 2001, 237). The material desire takes Koston out of the social and cultural context, momentarily, drawing focus of mind and body to the marble hubba under his board. Yet once the somatic moment passes, the differences in the landscape, its people, and its cultural mores come to fore; the guards, the beer, the permissive curiosity.

Damage

Skateboarding damages infrastructure. A vital part of appropriating infrastructure as spots is using its edges, surfaces and voids to perform skateboarding tricks. While this includes using elements of infrastructure to launch and land tricks, effectively clearing objects by launching and landing on flat surfaces, skateboarders desire the sensory stimulation generated by grinding (using the trucks or axels) and sliding (using the wooden base of the board in the middle or at either end—tail, nose—and occasionally on the topside, dubbed 'darkslide') ledges, handrails, curbs, barriers, pylons, posts, poles and all manner of unnameable patches of infrastructure. This is referred to as 'shredding' in skateboarder terminology.

Shred also suggests the change to the material surface of a spot; the worn edges of a marble ledge have been 'shredded' by skaters. Skaters modify angled surfaces of concrete with wax, resin and paint to make it easier to slide or grind with parts of the skateboard. Wax, caked and baked onto surfaces along with chipped edges, paint marks and scuff marks, leave a trail in urban landscapes. Vivoni argues that these scuffed surfaces, 'represent an alternative vision of the city in which the market value of built forms is contested by the emergence of new urban experiences' (2009, 133).

Take for instance the video *Civic Central* featuring Rowan Davis released in 2021 (Tabone 2021). *Civic Central* is unusual in that it focuses on one skater (Davis) and one spot, the former Civic Station in Newcastle, Australia, now known as Museum Park or Civic Plaza. Throughout the video, Davis shreds the infrastructure of the plaza: rounded concrete ledges, ‘heritage’ benches from the old train station, a wooden signage block, stairs, concrete blocks and a repurposed footbridge (circa 1937) from the original train station exhibited on the grass; Davis rides along the top of the old bridge and launches off it into a frontside big-spin over the grass, landing back in the plaza and rolling away. In *Civic Central* damage to the infrastructure can be seen on screen. The edges of the white-grey ledges throughout the plaza are a murky black from being grinded down by steel trucks, from paint marks transferred from the bottom of skate decks, and from coatings of wax to ease shredding. Davis has obstructions to contend with too, there are some skate stoppers sunk into parts of plaza, and the entire eastern side has orange plastic barriers arranged to prevent skateboarders from launching tricks down a set of three concrete blocks between levels of the plaza. At one point in the video, Davis performs two tricks over these barriers (a nollie heelflip and a switch tre-flip); the top row of barriers have been moved just enough to give him space to roll up to the edge, but the bottom row of barriers remain in place to make the trick more difficult and more impressive on video. Attempts to prevent damage end up being part of the assemblage; part of the spot.

The plaza appeared following the controversial remodelling of the city centre and the closure of Civic train station in favour of a light rail system. Skateboarders were immediately drawn to the plaza, causing damage to the new infrastructure in the plaza and adjacent buildings. Skate stoppers and other obstructions were put in place. Skaters would remove obstructions, the city would put them back. However, after lobbying from the skate community the museum agreed to allow skateboarding, and even repaired some of the damaged ledges with steel brackets to make them easier to grind and slide. *Civic Central* archives this era, this open moment in the city’s central infrastructure.

For property owners, municipal authorities, law enforcement, and even some citizens, shredding is damage. Damage to the material objects and surfaces is the hallmark of mis-use. And it provokes responses; including encounters, deliberate obstruction with other materials, and electronic and human surveillance. At some spots the heavy coating of wax is interrupted by skate-stoppers—metal clamp-like objects spaced along an angled surface to prevent skateboarding—suggesting that skaters once flourished at the spot before the intentional obstruction by property owners or local authorities. In a few cases there will be wax, skate-stoppers, and holes where skate stoppers have been removed (illegally) to allow skateboarding to continue along the concrete. Sometimes skaters even fill the empty holes with fast-drying concrete and other synthetic fillers to remake the surface.

By contrast, infrastructure deep in the backstage raises little ire; no one seems particularly concerned with protecting concrete retaining walls underneath a flyover or a painted curb in an abandoned manufacturing facility. Assemblages that incorporate memorials or other monuments are often protected from damage, and yet, to skate them and leave a trace, to inflict damage also makes a statement about the figure, moment, or epoch being memorialised (McDuie-Ra 2021b).

Protection from damage also varies between socio-cultural contexts. As noted in the previous point on desire, Koston was able to assuage any concerns about damage to infrastructure by buying beer and cigarettes for the Thai security guards in *Menikmati*. Through the 2000s and early 2010s, China’s cities were coveted by skateboarders because the infrastructure is often unprotected, a mixture of different notions of space, publics, and responsibility—outside space viz. spaces of dwelling and care (see Shiqiao 2014, 98-102; see McDuie-Ra 2020; 2021a, 83-88). Conversely, in some locations new infrastructure comes with defensive architecture already built, while in other cases new infrastructure can take years to be discovered by skaters and years until damage starts to show up on the surfaces; only then does damage provoke a response.

Surveillance

Skateboarding begets surveillance. In this case I am referring the surveillance of infrastructure as opposed to infrastructures of surveillance. The former being the human and electronic systems that seek to protect property from damage or mis-use through the ‘focused, systematic and routine practices and techniques of attention, for purposes of influence, management, protection or direction’, that ‘occurs as a “normal” part of everyday life in all societies that depend upon bureaucratic administration and information technology’ (Lyon 2007, 14). The latter refers to the human and non-human systems that ‘abstract human bodies from their territorial settings’, into ‘discrete flows’ which are ‘reassembled into data doubles that can be scrutinized and targeted for intervention’ (Haggerty and Ericson 2000, 606). The actions of skaters and the specific objects and obstacles upon which they perform these actions (as well as the prospects of damage) undergird the surveillance of infrastructure’s mis-use; bodies matter in the moment, not as abstracted data. Race structures surveillance of skateboarding bodies too, responses are harsher when ‘blackness enters the frame’ (Brown 2015, 11, 162-4). The alter-sociality of infrastructure centred on mis-use activates existing surveillance systems, encourages the creation of new surveillance systems, and pushes skateboarders to appropriate infrastructure that is poorly surveilled.

Once skaters affix their gaze onto a particular assemblage and have considered the possible tricks they can perform, they will usually check the spot for electronic and physical surveillance. Evidence of surveillance does not necessarily mean that the skaters will abandon the spot, indeed skaters will usually skate for a while to test the surveillance system in place. At some spots the response to skateboarding is swift; security guards or police appear quickly, harass, detain or pursue fleeing skaters. The condition of the material surfaces of the spot is also indicative. If there is a spot that clearly fits the criteria of desire but is free of damage—wax, paint marks, chips, wear—and it is proximate to other spots indicating that there are clearly plenty of skaters around, the chances are high that surveillance is swift and effective. Spots with swift surveillance may still be skated, but skaters have to come prepared to get only one or two tries before having to flee. Some will take the risk if desire for the spot is too great or if they think the forces marshalled by the surveillance technology will be open to negotiation.

In other spots the response to surveillance is slower, underscoring the distance between ‘controlled space’ and the ‘control space’ (Klauser 2017, 132). Slow surveillance gives skaters more time to play, to attempt complex tricks, and to set up camera equipment to capture the performance. Surveillance at a single spot may be uneven—sometimes it is a bust, sometimes it is not, and the determinants can seem random. Conversely, surveillance can flow in a regular rhythm. For instance some spots are surveilled during the day but not at night, during the week but not the weekend. Surveillance rhythms can change over longer periods of time too; a spot might have been free of surveillance for years but following material improvements, an increase in value, a new tenant, or the targeting of damage and trespassing—among a myriad of factors—surveillance is upgraded and the response much faster. Entanglements of improvement of surveillance are a major problem for skaters in gentrifying areas. The reverse is also true, spots that were once surveilled become less important over time as urban flows bypass them, economic malaise sets in, and/or the infrastructure falls into disrepair or ruin.

Spots entirely free of surveillance are almost always found where infrastructure is old, remote, under-utilised, or hidden from view. Un-surveilled spots are open to modification by skaters; improving objects and surfaces for play, culminating in intricate DIY spaces incorporating existing infrastructure in vacant lots, underneath flyovers and bridges, and in abandoned buildings. Hollett and Vivoni argue that DIY skate spots disrupt neoliberal cities and position skaters as ‘spatial activists’ (2020, 13). There are scores of famous DIY spots built away from the ‘techniques of attention’, that, ironically, become iconic spots known around the world through skate media. Perhaps the most famous DIY is Burnside, built under a bridge in Portland, which marked 30 years in 2020 with, what else, a skate video (Shmittty 2020) and feature in *Thrasher* (Brook 2020).

Skateboarding activates surveillance of different patches of infrastructure and reveals their varied speeds. And in turn, surveillance keeps the mis-use of infrastructure moving, from spots with swift surveillance to spots with a longer lag between attention and intervention. Skateboarders are thus highly attuned to the surveillance networks at a micro scale, their rhythms, their irregularities, their glitches. Skaters hold multiple attunements to surveillance simultaneously, within limited geographic ranges (a neighbourhood or district) and across geographic scales (comparing a spot in Los Angeles with a spot in Shenzhen for example). And while navigating surveillance is essential, at times skaters choose to taunt surveillance. Perhaps the most compelling example of this comes from Palestine.

Palestine is subject to extreme surveillance in multiple layers (Handel and Dayan 2017). Along with electronic surveillance and human surveillance from watchtowers and checkpoints, surveillance shapes everyday infrastructure too; walls, check posts, barriers, throughfares; what Eyal Weizman (2017) calls the ‘architecture of occupation’. Constant refashioning of infrastructure to control and monitor movement does produce potential spots, but these spots are difficult to skate because of the intensified surveillance embedded in the landscape, above it, and below it and where ‘the distinction between “inside” and “outside” spaces, private and public, cannot be clearly marked’ (Weizman 2017, 4). Skaters still try, however, and Palestine has become a gathering place for local and visiting skaters through activist collectives like SkatePal and Skate Qalqilya.

In *Pieces of Palestine* (Harris 2017) skaters search for spots in Bethlehem, Ramallah, and Nablus. The video has the barest thread of a narrative, it is ‘pieces’ of visual and sonic texture. In one memorable sequence, French pro-skater Sylvain Tognelli skates along the notorious infrastructure of the ‘separation wall’ in Qalqilya. The wall has narrow ledge running across its length, about a metre off the ground. Tognelli starts off running on this ledge, then drops his board and rolls. The wall ledge alters in height creating a small hip (or launch), which Tognelli ollies off, and lands on the wall (a ‘wallie’) riding on a vertical section before dropping back onto the road. An alternative angle captured by photographer Sam Ashely in *Free Skateboard Magazine* shows a surveillance tower looming over Tognelli and the patch of wall (Ashley 2017). Fleeting in the moment, Tognelli’s wallie is captured, edited, and circulated around the world. Anyone with a connected device can view and share this moment when the infamous ‘wall of separation’ is reduced to an angled slab of concrete.

Wounding

Skateboarders are wounded by infrastructure. They shred skin, bleed, break bones, teeth and suffer serious injury in their appropriation of infrastructure. Harris Solomon explores what he calls the ‘politics of injurious infrastructures’ (2021 2) through pot holes and other urban breakdowns in India. Through his ethnography of traffic accidents and their aftermath in Mumbai, Solomon considers the relationships between mobility and wounding. Infrastructure that engages the flow of bodies is ‘also at the heart of the pervasive damage to everyday life wrought by traffic accidents’ (2021, 4). Potholes are intrinsic to wounding, but have also become sites to make public statements about the condition of infrastructure and breakdowns (2021, 13). Solomon’s work is a crucial point of departure for thinking through the mis-use of infrastructure. The wounding caused by India’s potholes comes from everyday mobilities through the city; from attempts to use infrastructure as intended, as it is meant to be used. It breaks down, it attacks, as Julie Chu (2014) puts it, and Solomon argues that existing social inequalities have a major bearing on who is exposed to this kind of wounding, ‘who encounters holes, and who does not’ (2021, 14). Skateboarders are wounded by infrastructure all the time. Some critically. However they are not injured in using the infrastructure as intended, they are injured mis-using infrastructure. They are not injured moving *with* the flows of city, but moving *against* them; on purpose. Infrastructure doesn’t attack them in so much as they attack it, and in turn are prepared to live with the consequences.

Wounding is an important spectacle in the alter-sociality of infrastructure. ‘Slam sections’ featuring miscues, falls and injuries appear in skate video from the very beginning. *The Bones Bridge Video Show* released in 1984 (Peralta 1984) and widely regarded as the forerunner of the genre (Dinces 2011) features a slam section near the end of the video. This set the tone for videos through the 1980s and early 1990s. As technology for viewing videos began to shift in the 2000s towards DVDs, slam sections were often included as bonus footage as ‘extras’ features. As hard copies gave way to streaming platforms heralding the contemporary skate media ‘content glut’ that is both bemoaned and marvelled in equal measure (McDuie-Ra 2021c), wounding has been featured within longer edits of skate video parts, referred to as ‘rough cuts’. Rough cuts are extended footage of a video part; an edited video part might be 3-6 minutes, a rough cut might be up to 30 minutes of footage of multiple attempts at a trick, encounters with the public and security, and, of course, wounding from unsuccessful attempts at a trick. Most rough cuts do not have any music; the sound of bodies crashing into infrastructure is audible too along with howls and groans when infrastructure wounds.

Wounding is such an integral part of the alter-sociality of infrastructure that skate media platforms produce stand-alone features on wounding. The preeminent skate media platform *Thrasher* (which continues to produce hard copy magazines as well) has featured a section called ‘Hall of Meat’ since 2009. There are hundreds of examples of wounding archived in the Hall of Meat section and all are similarly horrifying. For example, Australian pro-skater Gabriel Summers (a.k.a. Gabbers) attempts what looks like a kickflip to boardslide down a double set of stairs in a schoolyard (*Thrasher Magazine* 2020). He mistimes his flip at high speed and falls down the entire 18-stair double set landing on his hip and then banging his head. Blood immediately forms on his temple and he lies motionless for a time, defeated. The clip closes with Gabbers being loaded into an ambulance in a neck collar, face covered in blood, eyes wild with confusion.

In all this footage, the infrastructure in question stays resolute in the frame as the human bodies crumble. The blurb under US pro-skater Jamie Foy’s Hall of Meat clip directly references the infallibility of infrastructure: ‘Jamie has crushed some serious spots this year but sometimes the tables get turned’ (*Thrasher Magazine* 2017). The clip shows Foy riding towards a spot assembled from a small concrete access ramp and a tall handrail parallel to the pavement. Foy mistimes his launch (ollie) off the ramp and flies directly into the handrail, hitting his shins on the upper steel rail and somersaulting in the air, landing down on the pavement on the back of his neck and head before stopping still on his back. Foy rolls into a sitting position clutching his shin and head, while a voice off camera asks if he is ok over the whir of a generator lighting the spot of night-time filming. Infrastructure at the centre of frequent wounding, even across many years, gains a reputation in the culture for its capacity to injure. Such a reputation repels some but draws in others, eager to make a name for themselves on notorious urban objects.

This is a privileged wounding. Choosing to risk severe injury for joy, for play—even when there are livelihoods attached—is very different to being swallowed by a pothole when trying to get to work in the Mumbai monsoon as in Solomon’s study. Skaters may share space with other mis-users but rarely do their share the same consequences. However, it is also inaccurate to assume that skateboarders can necessarily bare the wounds they self-inflict. While there is a small upper-class of skateboarders with access to health insurance and/or living in polities with free access to medical care, many of the millions of skateboarders around the world have limited access to treatment. Many skateboarding dreams—and in some cases livelihoods—end here.

It is not just the material infrastructure that wounds. Human intervention to protect infrastructure from damage can result in serious wounding. Distinct from surveillance, encounters generated by the misuse of infrastructure by skaters might result in skaters being threatened by—or threatening—citizens and authorities. Hostile encounters can involve: physical altercations; threats of violence with guns, knives and power tools; and obstructing skaters from performing tricks on infrastructure by physically

blocking their path, spraying water onto surfaces or onto skaters, throwing objects onto the ground to stop skaters from rolling along, and throwing objects directly at skaters' bodies. These encounters are captured and circulated in skate video too, consumed by viewers epitomising the hostility between appropriators and defenders of infrastructure.

Conclusion

That infrastructure produces social relations, rather than simply materialising existing social relations, is well established in the burgeoning literature on infrastructure in social, cultural and spatial studies. Infrastructure is understood as promise (Appel et al. 2020), enchantment (Harvey and Knox 2012), and most crucially, 'lively' (Amin 2014), characterised by innovation and improvisation in everyday activities, mobilities and encounters. A focus on skateboarding in urban landscapes considers the alter-sociality of infrastructure; social relations generated by the appropriation and mis-use value of surfaces, objects and obstacles entangled in the creation, modification, decline, and demolition of infrastructure.

This makes skateboarders an adjacent public for infrastructure, invested in its creation but not in its intended functioning. Unlike other human (and non-human), appropriators of infrastructure for mis-use, skateboarding is captured, circulated and consumed around the world through skate media. Mis-use is a spectacle that has value in the culture, spurring the continued search for more spots, chasing infrastructure and archiving moments of appropriation and reinterpretation. Capture, circulation, consumption and archiving of street skateboarding brings mundane infrastructure into the viewing frame of 'artistic texts' to return to Truscello's (2020) phrase. Skate media makes for a compelling series of texts for witnessing the alter-sociality of infrastructure and its re-enactments.

The alter-sociality of infrastructure generated by mis-use has at least four components. Desire: skateboarders desire infrastructure for its mis-use value, seeing and feeling infrastructure with a particular gaze that traverses geographic scales and cultural and linguistic boundaries. Whereas intended publics may desire, say, a flyover for the connectivity it brings motorists or its modern façade, skateboarders desire its underside—the pillars, the embankments, the barriers—that allow for playful appropriation. Damage: skateboarders use the edges, surfaces and voids of infrastructure to perform tricks, seeking sensory simulation through 'shredding', the grinding, and sliding and scraping involved in performing tricks. Shredding inflicts damage that leaves traces on infrastructure drawing the attention of property owners and authorities leading to hostile encounters. Surveillance: skateboarding activates surveillance systems, encourages new surveillance systems, and pushes skateboarders to appropriate infrastructure away from surveillance. Skateboarders are highly attuned to the rhythms, irregularities and glitches of surveillance at different spots, and will gravitate to spots with the most reliable glitches. However, from time to time skaters will challenge surveillance systems directly, taunting them in moments of defiance. Wounding: skateboarders are wounded by infrastructure by purposefully moving against its flows. Skaters leave flesh, teeth and blood on the surfaces of infrastructure, they break bones, they suffer head injuries, and this is all part of the spectacle, captured and consumed in skate media. As bodies wound, infrastructure remains steadfast, waiting for the next battle.

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