

City Mill Skate: an investigation into skateboarding, architecture and community

City Mill Skate is a proposal for a set of incidental obstacles or 'skate dots' to sit within the fabric of UCL East, a new campus development in East London due to open in 2022, forming a series of interlinked architectural punctuations akin to a sculpture trail. This proposal contrasts the totalised and singular environment typically associated with contemporary skatepark design. In terms of scale, these 'skate dots' are closer in dimensions to conventional pieces of street furniture, vs the spectacularised scaling and signet architectural forms of conventional skateparks. *Skate dot* is a recently coined term that plays on the established label of *skate spot* and describes an incidental piece of architecture that lends itself to the act of skateboarding. A *skate dot* is therefore essentially a constructed equivalent of a skateable architectural feature commonly found 'in the wild'.

Initially, our objective is to develop some interim skateable architecture on the UCL East construction sites via a series of community-led 'DIY build'¹ test projects, as we are especially interested in the agency skateboarding has to create cogent, self-driven social groups.

These cohorts find a way to engage in a physical activity that not only generates key life skills as a by-product of hedonism (and a hedonism that often exists outside of monetary valuation and exchange), but also capitalises upon and transforms often forgotten or use-less industrial spaces in the public realm. Converting these sites from areas of neglect, into zones of enjoyment, identity creation and tacit activism for the rewards of an identity constructed via physical actions vs one mapped solely by purchasing habits.

We plan to apply key insights from DIY test projects, to inform a design strategy for permanent skateable architecture to be embedded within the final UCL East campus. Alongside this we will instigate an activation programme to build on the pilot community of 5x local skate users groups (totalling 26x key respondents) we have established thus far. To consolidate inclusive placemaking at the City Mill Skate sites and build further public engagement with the project, we will maintain an ongoing digital archive and social media channel, to promote the initiative to skaters further afield and a broader spectrum of East London community groups

Our primary concern with City Mill Skate is to avoid imposing a pre-determined set of final outcomes on the local skate community. Instead, we recognise the need to construct a proposal from the ground upward – that is, to empower local users and use their insight as fundamental to the project. Using participatory methods instead of the prescriptive approach often used by local government during the procurement of municipal skateparks. This is to ensure the final spaces are accessible for a diverse range of users, spanning differing ages, genders, abilities and skill levels. Drawing from existing research, we have constructed an argument to support the values and benefits of skateboarding in terms of health and well-being, particularly in relation to young people and gender equality in sport. In thinking about the university student cohort, we are keen to understand how contemporary youth construct and make sense of their worlds through their engagement with culture and leisure and specifically how this could take place in the public spaces of a university campus.

Our pilot research has shown that skateboarders are already reclaiming unused local spaces in E5, on the periphery of the recently redeveloped E20, for their own leisure. Through such placemaking they are undermining the interests of capitalist economies that underpin public space as a place of exchange. In neighbourhoods bordering the site, the right to public space is becoming increasingly transactional through the sale of coffee, lunch and other commodified lifestyle leisure. This corresponds to Borden's assertion that skateboarding is a critical practice that challenges both the formal and mechanical components of urban life' (Borden, 2002, p.?)¹ The appropriation of public space under the A12 by BMXers and skateboarders corresponds to Borden's proposition that through skateboarding, use values oppose exchange values. This useless space becomes useful through the skater and BMXers habitation. Skateboarding is not introduced here, as an 'instrument of development' to draw from (Howell, 2005, 33)², it is instead a refusal to adopt the

¹ Borden, I. Another Pavement, Another Beach: Skateboarding and the Performative Critique of Architecture in Borden, I., Kerr, J., Pivaro, A, Rendell, J. (2002) *The Unknown City: Contesting Architecture and Social Space*. MIT Press: Massachusetts, USA.

² Howell, O. (2005) The "Creative Class" and the Gentrifying City: Skateboarding in Philadelphia's Love Park. In *Journal of Architectural Education* (1984-), Vol. 59, No. 2 (Nov., 2005), pp. 32-42. Taylor Francis Ltd.

logic of capitalism, an alternative space without commercial value, sited away from zones of gentrification. Whilst we acknowledge Howell's observations on the 'serendipitous reclamation of Love Park' to become revenue generating we assert that the current habitation of the Mabley Green space demonstrates that skateboarding can be used as a positive catalyst for local young people seeking to construct an identity outside of the structures of consumer exchange. It allows them to create a sense of self as individuals, but also in cohesive groups. It provides an inclusive alternative in which they can influence and change the culture of their local area.

A participatory design process is therefore central to this approach, a local project in which skaters' active participation is sought alongside professional fabricators of skateable structures. This process is supported in different ways with events such as co-design sessions, DIY build events, design workshops in schools and youth centres. Activities are oriented towards 'doing' and 'seeing' things differently to generate interest and engagement within communities. The pilot work thus far has led us to envision 'skate dots' as the best approach with which to pursue an open-ended design process that allows for a more dynamic set of outcomes. We will use this vision as a tool to open up conversations across a broad audience.

By creating a series of skate dots, City Mill Skate aims to recreate the experience of street skateboarding in the wild - i.e. a journey navigating the city and its other inhabitants via a series of interconnected architectural curiosities that almost form a kind of hedonistic sculpture trail. The idea of fun as a catalyst for wider participation and engagement in tertiary education is also a key part of the City Mill Skate project. The creation of skate dots therefore allows for a range of skateable architectural elements to be embedded in a multi-use social space, allowing for a more dynamic set of interactions between different user groups vs a traditional skatepark – echoing instead the social dynamics of celebrated public plazas, such as Justin Herman Plaza in San Francisco, Love Park in Philadelphia and the Southbank Undercroft in London, that have served as both test sites and open air clubhouses for different generations of skateboarders.

ⁱ An established model for community-based construction projects, where groups of local skateboarders actively participate in the design and construction of a piece of skateable architecture, using readily available building materials and without the need for heavy machinery.