

What urban planning can learn from skateboarding

Skateboarding is often seen as an activity for young people, sometimes even as a disturbance in the orderly urban landscape. But this simplified view misses something fundamental: the skateboard is a tool for understanding the city and the norms that shape its design. By using public space in new ways, skateboarders make visible which bodies, movements, and behaviors are allowed in the city and which are actively designed out.

In contemporary urban development, planning is still largely dominated by logics of efficiency, control, and predictability. Public environments are created to be passed through, not to be used for purposes other than traffic, consumption, or flows. Play, lingering, and unexpected encounters - such as skateboarding - often come into conflict with the norms that guide how we think about the city's function and design. This makes skateboarding particularly interesting: it challenges not only the physical architecture, but also the norms and values that define how we use our shared public spaces.

From a feminist and ecological perspective, this is no coincidence. Historically, the city has been designed for the efficient, commuting - often male - body. Those who move slowly, play, take detours, or pause become a problem. Skateboarding breaks with these norms. It requires presence, bodily attentiveness, and care for both the place and other people. Cracks in the asphalt, slopes, and materials become knowledge rather than obstacles.

At the same time, we see how skateboarding culture is sometimes exploited, where skateboarders are used in the marketing of new urban districts without local practitioners being given influence or long-term support. Playfulness becomes decoration rather than an actual right.

There are alternatives. There are examples of temporary, low-threshold solutions where skateboarders and municipalities collaborate to reshape the city: paddling pools that become skate surfaces in winter, parking garages filled with life in the evenings and on weekends, or abandoned retail spaces that gain a new function. These so-called "provotypes" are exactly that, provocative prototypes that explore new ways of sharing the city's resources without requiring major investments.

Here lies an important lesson for architects, planners, and politicians: the city becomes more resilient when it is allowed to be ambiguous, when the same place can be used in different ways by different groups over time. When we stop designing away the unpredictable and instead see play, movement, and experimentation as part of urban life, we move one step closer to a more vibrant and inclusive public realm.

Skateboarding is neither just a sport nor just play. It is a way of reading and understanding the city, of resisting excessive control, and of creating community where it might otherwise be lacking. The question, therefore, is not whether the city has room for skateboarders. The question is whose city we are building and which bodies we believe deserve to take up space within it.

When skateboarders take space in the city, defensive architecture becomes visible: metal studs on ledges, slanted benches, and material choices that signal exclusivity rather than

accessibility. These measures are often justified in terms of safety or maintenance, but their effect is exclusionary, not only for skateboarders, but also for others, such as homeless people or even the general public, who wish to pause and rest in a public environment but who do not fit the image of the “proper” user of urban space.

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