

Skateboarding, Space and the City: Architecture and the Body

Borden, Iain. Berg, Oxford, 2001 (reprinted April 2003), 318pp

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Drawing on the work of Henri Lefebvre, Borden asks readers to rethink architecture. It is not just about an object or thing. Architecture is an ongoing process constructed by space, time and social beings. As he states, “space is part of a dialectical process between itself and human agency; rather than an a priori entity space is produced by, and productive of, social being” (11). He applies this thinking in his historical examination of skateboarding.

Utilising a vast archive of skateboarding magazines as historical sources of evidence the author is able to observe what skaters thought were significant at a certain space and time. For him, this is a more reliable method of gathering data than conducting interviews or questionnaires especially when considering how spaces for skateboarding has constantly been transforming throughout the past 3 decades. Problems of reliability would be enhanced in an interview or questionnaire when a skateboarder is asked to recollect her/his description of a particular skatepark in the seventies and what s/he was able to do in it (5). Thus, Borden justifies his methodology rather convincingly.

He details how skateboarding has evolved from being a modified scooter in the fifties for children, to being a pastime reserved for US west coast surfers in the seventies, to being a “suburban pool party” where skateboarders carved emptied swimming pools, to becoming a distinctive urban youth subculture which exists today. For this history to have evolved, many factors have to be considered. Borden, having been a skateboarder himself in the seventies and early eighties, identifies that the skateboard device (chapter 2) has always been in the process of modification. Its mutation reflects the spaces where skateboarders sought to skate. For instance, skateboarders in the seventies wanted to emulate surfing manoeuvres while riding downhill or carving ditches. Their mobility was restricted because the skateboards were small and narrow. It

was not until the advent of carving swimming pools (chapter 3) that the demand for wider, longer boards with more durable trucks and wheels was heard. Not only did carving swimming pools or manufactured skateparks (chapter 4) determine the variability of the skateboard device, it also affected how skateboarders utilise space on the ground or in the air (chapter 5). Skateboarders are not able to invent or manage highly technical moves such as the McTwist or 900 without having adequate skateboard terrains underneath their feet. It is this interaction between space (i.e. a constructed skatepark) and body (the skateboarder) that is the basis for Borden's conception of architecture. He argues that space and body are internalised within each other. He states, "Architecture is both external and internal to skateboarding, its concrete presentness being at once the other and the accessible symmetry to the skateboarder's physical activity – separate to, yet brought within, the skateboarding act" (135).

His argument moves on from describing the interactions of space and body in drained-out swimming pools and constructed skateparks to urban settings (chapter 7 and chapter 8). Many factors led to this step in the skateboarding evolution. Skateparks were becoming too expensive to maintain especially with insurance costs. Moreover, skateparks were probably perceived as the antithesis to the anarchist tendencies of the skateboard subculture (chapter 6). Another aspect of change was that skateboard devices were becoming slimmer and lighter for higher ollies and other technical street moves. In any event, Borden demonstrates a good awareness of how skateboarders perceive the city and the elements contained within it such as handrails, stairs, benches, etc. For instance, he touches on the contrasting perception of handrails between non-skateboarders and skateboarders. While non-skateboarders may see handrails as tools for mobility up-and-down staircases, skateboarders see handrails as obstacles that are skateable.

The weakest aspect of this excellent book is the chapter on skateboarding as a subculture (chapter 6). Although it touches on key issues in regards to gender and homophobia, it could have touched on the idea that skateboarding is

perhaps no different than any other male-dominated sport such as football or activity such as b-boying. Another point of criticism is that it makes generalisations on certain aspects of the subculture without convincing evidence. For instance, it is a bit farfetched to argue that skateboarders such as Christian Hosoi adopted gang culture to market his products by describing a photo of him wearing a black leather jacket (141).

Having been skateboarder myself along the California central coast in the late 80s, I feel Borden made a worthwhile attempt in capturing skateboarder sentiments on how they confront different spaces. It certainly rekindled memories of how a skateboard felt underneath my feet and the excitement from skating urban centres.

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