Sheffield’s Skateboarders move to the vest-pocket park: How planning can resolve conflicts between users of valued urban spaces.

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Abstract
Conflicts between users of urban spaces can be resolved by careful consultation, planning and design, as a case study of the creation of a skatepark within a vestpocket park indicates. Woolley and Johns in 2001 wrote about the conflicts between skaters and other users of city centre spaces; and our paper evaluates what happened next, when the city planners and skateboarders collaborated in the design of a purpose-built skate park. We sampled patterns of park use, and employed questionnaires and cognitive mapping techniques to evaluate the park as a whole; while interviews with the skateboarders enabled us to evaluate the new facility’s success in meeting the four criteria of accessibility, sociability, trickability and compatability. Not only are potential conflicts resolved, but the presence of this new activity is positively evaluated by the other users, the local residents, local businesses. In a city such as Sheffield, some of the activities of youth may bring them into conflict with older citizens, even when those activities are energetic, skilled, and give young citizens a sense of self worth. Skateboarding is just such an activity, and this paper is a study of how careful planning which involves those young people can help resolve conflicts.
It also records one of those small changes in the urban fabric which can have a significant effect on people’s sense of attachment to, and ownership of, their city; and thereby add to their sense of the city’s identity as being part of their own identity. Furthermore, as the study to be reported indicates, the positive changes in feelings for a locale can be seen in those neighbours who are not the main actors (in this case, the young skateboarders) but also in the fellow users of the open space under study.

In many towns, particular areas of the centre afford just those kind of physical challenges that young skateboarders need; and they often are able to see the possibilities that the rest of us do not realize. Young people may gather in such places as a loose ‘club’ of fellow enthusiasts, supportive and admiring of each others skills. In a true sense, the young people are developing a strong personal association with particular areas of their town. Interviews with local police often indicate that they see this as a positive activity by the town’s youth, bringing focus and fellowship for the young. Yet the police may also receive complaints from the other citizens about skateboarders getting in their way, or even being a danger to pedestrians.

Woolley and Johns (2001) have discussed the uses of the urban fabric made by young people; the rise in skateboarding as an urban activity, and the possible conflicts between skateboarders and other, more ‘conventional’, users of the city centre.

Their paper described how skateboarding started as an activity of West Coast (USA) surfers on days with no surf, how it then switched to urban centres which afforded them more challenges than the flat pavements; and has spread across the world’s urban areas. Young people in developing their skills on the board have realized more potential from the cityscape than most of us had seen as being present, and as a consequence have created new meanings for familiar urban spaces.
However, these young people’s perceptions of such spaces, and the vigorousness of their activity can sometimes lead to disputes and even the banning of skateboarding from the city centres.

The Woolley and Johns paper described the ‘unique, strong identity’ of the skateboarding culture; and sought, through case studies in three British towns, to develop an understanding of why skateboarders value certain spaces in the urban structure
They conducted focus group studies with young skateboarders in Sheffield, Manchester and Cardiff city centres; and found four common themes or desiderata emerging in all three cities: accessibility, trickability, sociability and compatibility
The accessibility of the chosen central area for skateboarding was mentioned by many as a crucial factor: so one could turn up and expect to find other members of the community there.
Next comes the ‘trickability’ of the chosen area: does it have hard-landscape features which enable one to perform demanding moves with ones board?
The third theme was the sociability of the area: are there areas in which to watch others, socialize and “chill out”?
Fourthly, compatibility with other users of the space was stressed: skateboarders wished for harmony, but might find themselves moved on by police or the managers of the adjacent buildings. As a result, they may have to use unconventional hours to use their preferred spaces, or move to uncontested areas.

**Purpose-build as a way of resolving conflicts over space use**
The themes expressed in the Woolley and Johns study might then indicate whether success would be predicted for local authority ‘solutions’ to conflicts between skateboarders and other users of urban open spaces: if an away-from-centre is designated for skateboarders, would we be able to predict its acceptance and use with reference to these four desiderata?
It so happened that shortly after the fieldwork for the Woolley and Johns paper had been completed, the situation changed in Sheffield in a way which enabled us to test that proposition. In the earlier paper, Sheffield was described as considerably more accepting of skateboarders in their preferred area than were both Manchester and Cardiff in their equivalent areas. Subsequently, as a result of unfavourable press coverage and pressure from various space managers, an alternative, purpose built site away from the city centre was built, and skateboarders were discouraged from using the previously-favoured city-central hard landscape areas round Tudor Square and the City Hall.

The site chosen was at the corner of a vest-pocket park, Devonshire Green, some half a mile out from the centre, where a designed and separated skating area was built, with considerable design input from the community of skaters (interviews with Chris Bailey and Seb Palmer; see also Devonshire Quarter Action Plan, 2000)

Two questions arise: how would the four desiderata predict whether such a relocation and redesignation would work?
Second: if conflicts can arise with other users of the city centre, might there be equivalent conflicts with the local residents of the area surrounding the vest-pocket park?

The many users of the one park: how do they value it, and how would they respond to the new activity arriving?

The study to be reported here wished to look at all users of the Devonshire Green space, to give a context to our starting point. Most work within our academic tradition of environmental psychology puts people and their environmental transactions under the spotlight: here we wished to focus on one place and all its users and potential users, with the hope of showing that their varying needs and interests can be made compatible through sympathetic management and consultation.
**Devonshire Green and its communities**

Devonshire Green is a small vest pocket park, just on the edge of Sheffield’s city centre, created in 1981. It is situated within an area designated as the Devonshire Quarter, which is undergoing a restoration plan 1999-2010. The City Council describes the area as an urban village, with an immediate population of over 2000, with a plan to increase this to 5000.

The area as a whole contains mixed tenure houses, it has its own primary school, health centre, church, local shops and specialist small retail outlets, offices, factories, cafes, pubs (including some with late licenses), nightclubs and the open space of the Green

"The mix of the three themes of shopping/nightlife, work/voluntary action, and living is what gives the area its vitality but also throws up problems"

(Devonshire Green Action Plan, 2000, p12)

Consultations between the council and residents have identified concern about the growth of late night bars, fear of crime, poor lighting, aggressive beggars and drug dealing in the immediate vicinity of the Green

The action report identifies physical improvements needed: making pathways reflect the evident pedestrian desire lines; repairing and adding to the stock of benches; improving lighting; adding tree planting and seasonal colour; pedestrianising the adjacent side street so as to link the Green to the café and shops; and adding CCTV “to improve feelings of security”

Yet observations of current usage indicates that the green is already a valued resource: on fine days, it has many sitting out, strolling through and (now) watching the skateboarders.

In summary, the skateboarding area, and those coming to the Green to use it, have become another constituency in an already complex social and physical mix: how have they fitted in?
The local interested communities include both residential and commercial:

Amongst the residential are the residents of a large public housing scheme to the south west of the park, one of whose ways into town is across or round the green, and for whom the children’s playground is the closest such resource. Next, there is a large privately run student housing scheme immediately adjacent to the Green on its in-town eastern side. On the western side there will be by the end of 2003 another large privately run set of apartments; but at the time of the study this area was awaiting clearance and the start of building. (How will the coming of this ‘lifestyle’ West One further change the feel and identity of the area?)

To the north and south are the commercial and retail businesses already mentioned: on the north, niche retail shops (eg a futon shop; ‘Rare and Racy’: a quality second-hand bookshop; a bookbinder; furniture shops; a charity shop) and several places to eat and drink, including a bistro: a pizza chain restaurant: a café-bar with live music in the evenings (“The FØRUM”): and several pubs within easy walking distance. The presence of an inner-city doctors’ surgery, a health centre and a chemist with pharmacy has given positive support to a local drug-using community. Another group who make use of the Green’s facilities are people using the public car parking facilities, carved out of the ‘natural’ boundaries of the park.

**Research on urban parks and their users**

Altman (1975) described parks as being occupied by society, as it is a public territory, wherein a few informal rules ‘oversee’ the behaviour that is allowed to occur within the park.

The freedom and privacy gained in a park is to some extent controlled by these unspoken rules (more than any formal rules on a noticeboard) and also by the physical features of the park, which serve to facilitate or delimit the activities going on there.
Many such activities may try to co-exist within a park: perhaps by defining by sub-area of the park or by time of day. And whereas buildings and built areas may allow people to mark out and personalize an area (as in a bedroom, or a corner of a library, for examples), claims over particular areas of open space are often only achieved through presence and traditions of usage. However, specifically designed areas of a park (eg the playground, and latterly the skateboard area) in this respect are more like built areas than open spaces. Contrast this situation with the average urban-centre space favoured by skateboarders: where there are few possibilities for acknowledged proprietorship.

Conflicts are still possible of course: who has a 'right' to be there? Can other park users intrude on the newly designated area? Do other park users see land lost to the new facility? Symbolic and physical responses to territorial encroachment were evident at the skatepark when our study started: marking out own place

Patsy Eubanks Owens (writing in 1999 about the North American experience) suggests that skateparks in public places will give the general park user more appreciation of the skills shown by the young, and thereby reduce the chances of conflict. This is in sharp contrast with a typical parks management book (Welch, 1995) who sees skateboarders as a nuisance, and encourages the use of rough surfaces on paths to discourage them.

**Studying Devonshire Green**

We wanted to capture the views and feelings towards the Green, and to its usual and new users by as many of the ‘interest groups’ as possible. A multi-method approach seemed called for:

- How did people actually use the area? We needed to observe the park across time to gain a general picture
- What did they report as their use? We needed survey data on this, and on people’s perceived values and perceptions of the park hence questionnaires to a sample of users to include all interest groups.
Following up on the image of the park, we felt that cognitive mapping techniques would elicit more than words could report. And to pursue issues that are perforce only touched on in a survey/questionnaire, we felt that a set of semi-structured interviews would enable us to develop ideas with a subgroup of users. Finally, we wished to compare what the users were doing and feeling with what had been anticipated by the city planners, and by the designer of the skatepark: hence interviews with key people.

Observations: as our main focus was on opinions and perceptions, we wanted only a general observation of activity patterns, sampled enough to reassure ourselves we knew the broad patterns. (Other studies with different foci would devote more time to long-term activity sampling.)

The observation times were chosen to catch the main periods of usage: Balmer’s pilot studies having shown little use of their study-area park before 11 am (Balmer, 1972); and during our period of study (Autumn through to Spring) early evening darkness suggested the end-boundary for observations. Over the several observation periods, the activity patterns of 1198 people were recorded: gender, ethnicity, whether alone or with a group, route taken through the park, use of benches and other features. A separate record was made of the skatepark usage: sampling took place over the first six months from its opening in September 2000: numbers using, watching, type of rider used.

Questionnaires

Realism about people’s tolerance for being stopped for a questionnaire suggested that we should limit the number of questions asked to what could be asked in a 2-5 minute period. (Longer and more in-depth interviews were later conducted to follow up issues arising from these answers.)

The focus was on opinions of the park and its facilities and affordances: as background, we drew upon the City Council’s Devonshire Quarter Action Plan
2000, and interviews with the officials in the Council Planning Department with responsibility for the area.
We used these brief questionnaires to sample opinions from users both on and off site; local non-users; residents and workers in premises bordering the area.
After initial piloting, the questionnaire included: brief/longer versions
A description of the park (by either short checklist/or by 10-item semantic differential )
Preferred features of the park
Perceived safety of the park (eight items)
Presence of the skatepark (three items)
Drawn cognitive map of the park
Self report of frequency of usage on weekdays and at weekends
Brief demographic data

A laminated one-page version of the questionnaire was handed to participants, and their responses to the items recorded by S.P.. Each person passing SP on the midpoint path in the park was invited to participate: and 136 fully completed questionnaires were collected: there were a few refusals (mainly Asian-origin mothers with children). There were 11 participants under 18 years, 69 between 18-25 years, 24 between 26-35 years; 27 between 36-60 years; and 2 over 60 years old (3 people did not give their age)
A longer version of the questionnaire was left in the premises adjacent to the park: shops, restaurants and student flats: 47 fully completed forms were collected back.
Cognitive maps: as an adjunct to the preferences questions, people given the longer version of the questionnaire were asked to draw a freehand sketch of the Green, and then to mark on it their two most positive and two most negative aspects of the park, with brief explanations why chosen.
Semi-structured interviews with skateboarders
The issues specific to the skateboard users of the park warranted longer and more focussed techniques of opinion gathering, so semi-structured interviews were conducted and recorded with users on site: 24 individual interviews and four focus groups (with a total of 15 participants) took place.

Who uses Devonshire Green? Observations show the pattern for general users and skateboarders
Analysis of the observations indicates patterns of use characterizing the different times of day and days of the week: nearly twice as many users were observed using the park during the sampled hours at the weekend as were observed at equivalent times midweek. At lunchtimes, the male female ratio was approximately 60:40; but the evening ratio was much less balanced: with a split of nearly 70:30
This difference is largely accounted for in the drop in the number of female groups using the park and its paths in the evenings: in daytime, the park is perceived as safe for all to use, but the evening change might reflect increased fear of crime and incivilities to females
Under-use of the children’s formal playground was notable: Indeed, the ‘users’ recorded were all in either their teens or twenties, using the place as a ‘hang-out’
Path routes across the Green: the majority of users keep to the established paths, but a significant minority of journeys are made along what in winter can be a muddy ‘desire line’ path

Skateboarders arrived to use their dedicated facility even before building work on it was completed; and on the official opening day in September 2000, large numbers of skaters and watchers were present, with still over a hundred present by the end of the afternoon.
Throughout our study period, the numbers continued high: for example, on a dry November Saturday lunchtime, a total of 137 users were logged in a two hour period, of whom only 18% were simply watching activities)
Weather, time of day and day of the week were seen as the main determinants of patterns of usage: dry weekends being predictably the occasions of heaviest use. But throughout our period of study, only two females and one non-white male, were seen as users. Riders’ estimated ages ranged from 8 years to 24 years, with not surprisingly the younger children’s use being predominantly daytime, leaving evening use to the others. (Late use is facilitated by there being lighting provided until 10.30 pm)

**General views of the Green: responses to the questionnaires**

`How does the general user view the Green? And, given that the skateboarding area is to one side of the park, how far does this general view include reference to this area and its users?

Analysis of people’s affective quality ratings used Russell and Pratt’s adjective method (1980), with a scatterplot to discover the predominant dimensions. Within a framework of four bipolar dimensions, the main one used was exciting-gloomy, with the sample split on their evaluation of the park as either exciting or gloomy. Next dimension used preferentially was that of arousing-sleepy, with pleasant-unpleasant as the third. Again, on each of these, there were varied perceptions: with some seeing the park as arousing and exciting, and others as sleepy and gloomy: there is no consensus, but rather it suggests that the park has the potential to create a lively place for the surrounding community to go to, but has not yet avoided some negative overtones.

A first hypothesis reasonably could be that lower ratings of the park might be associated with any higher fear of crime there: in fact no such association emerged from our analysis. (And indeed, fear of crime was not a major concern)

Another way into people’s perceptions of a place is to ask them to sketchmap the place, and then to analyse inclusions and exclusions; with as an additional test, asking people then to indicate most and least valued features of the place. There was a good response to this exercise: many people put a considerable effort into drawing as full a map as they could.
Fifty percent of maps simplified the park’s outline to a rectangle; with 32% making more attempt to capture its more irregular shape. The remainder offered no defining boundaries. A quarter of the maps extended to include surrounding buildings, with 80% of these including the FØRUM café. This has a bright blue exterior in an area characterized by more conventional elevations; and is also a focal point for virtually all categories of park user, combining as it does a café, a range of shops, and an evening meeting point (it has a late alcohol licence, one of very few in this part of the city)

All participants included the simple network of paths; interestingly, 95% included the skatepark, compared with only 55% including the carpark (an area of approximately the same size, and arguably greater visibility.

Supporting comments included:

“The Green didn’t seem to have much purpose before the skatepark”

“Now it has a ‘focal point’ whether or not you use the skatepark or not”

Others even stated that they thought it was a shame that it had been placed away to the side; and would have preferred it to have been made more of a central feature.

(We note that, prior to its coming, only a small number of people had listed a skatepark as a wished for feature. Now that it is there, over a quarter of respondents said that they went to watch the skateboarding in their lunchbreak; and a third of respondents made a point of stopping off on their way home.

Adjacent to the skatepark is a children’s playground with equipment: as few as 35% of the maps included this feature. More included the artificial mound (38%) and more still drew in the trees (55%). Park benches were included on 33% of maps.

Asked to name the most positive aspects of the park, the skateboarding area was mentioned by 41% of people; next was the park’s identity as an open green space, with ‘interesting shops visible from it’. The mound was the next most frequently noted feature, valued because it was nice to sit on; and because it affords a feeling of space.
Easily the most frequently cited negative feature was the poor maintenance of the park: 50% of the sample elaborated this by noting broken benches, muddy paths and uncleared litterbins.

41% noted that certain areas of the park (eg the less-visible children’s play area) made them fearful of crime, especially at night. One person noted that it was “only when I was drawing the map that I realized that I felt better in the more open spaces of the park, although visually I do prefer the trees”.

Trees indeed featured very high on most participants’ lists of preferred features, as did seats, the vista of open grass, and the planting.

And after these appearance factors came the skatepark: a particularly noteworthy finding, given that few of the respondents were themselves actual participants. If our research question was to discover what impact the coming of the skatepark had on the general users of the park, then the answer would to be a positive one. The skatepark has been accepted by the wider community; and many comments were to the effect that it had given Devonshire Green a focus.

It also helped increase the feelings of safety at night: 53% of people reported that the skatepark’s coming made them feel safer (as against only 6% saying they felt less safe). People typically referred to there now being more people around in the evenings; and that people were there for a purpose (rather than just ‘hanging around’ which can make passers-by feel anxious). Floodlighting of the skatepark until late was again a positive contribution to general safety in the whole park.

**The skatepark at Devonshire Green: the users’ evaluation**

We have seen a generally positive response from general users to the coming of the skatepark. How in their turn had the skateboarders reacted?

The initiative was a joint venture between city planners, a design engineer, and prominent riders on the Sheffield scene.

We interviewed users once the park was in full usage. Many of them used the skatepark everyday; or at weekends on a regular basis. Among the users were several who travelled from other cities specifically to use the park; and we also
noted regular visiting by a man over in Sheffield from New York (who made favourable comparisons with parks known to him the USA)

**Accessibility and Sociability**

All interviewed commented positively on the proximity of the park to the city centre; and the ease with which one could find it. It was also seen as convenient for the universities and their halls of residence, accessible by Supertram, which runs close-by, and which gives direct access to the railway station. (However, one should note that most skateboarders would ‘ride’ to the skatepark through the city rather than on public transport,)

Some commented on the local area as being ‘a bit scruffy’, and linked that comment to the nearby housing estate. Against this, the surrounding grassland park received positive comments, as being for example ‘calming’.

Its openness allowed passers-by to watch and maybe get attracted to the sport.

To the suggestion that there could be more trees planted around the skatepark, most were hostile, citing the loss of vistas both outwards and inwards; and also suggesting that greater enclosure would make the place less safe. (In the evening, the more enclosed children’s playground does attract some drug use)

The atmosphere created by the design, and its location in a larger park, would seem to have met John’s criteria of factors predisposing to sociability: as indeed could be seen in the welcome given to skaters from away.. Most local skaters were regulars, and the park had become a reliable place to find friends and .fellow enthusiasts: one could arrive alone, safe in the expectation that the activity would be in session, without interference from other users of the space.

**Trickability**

Trickability, the third of Woolley and Johns’ desiderata for a good skating place, was defined as a place lending itself to numerous skilled movements. Seb Palmer, one of the skatepark’s designers, was interviewed on his aims for the Devonshire Green park: he had grasped the opportunity to build in features and challenges that city streets could not so easily offer; and to provide as many
'lines' (routes of movement through the skatepark) as possible in the space. Skaters we talked to suggested further features that might have been included (and we also had comments from rollerbladers and bmxers about the suitability for their activities)

All however welcomed a dedicated and challenging space, available until late evening (the lights go off at 10.30)

Compatibility

The fourth criterion for a skatepark listed by Johns was the compatibility of the place with surrounding patterns of activity. At the time of Woolley and Johns' study, the main preferred skateboard area was the paved square near the centre of town, which was also access to the town's three theatres and library. With the coming of the Devonshire Green dedicated space, one should predict very little conflict between skaters and others; and indeed we have already mentioned positive effects of the skaters' presence: eg on increasing feelings of safety for other users of the main park; and the giving an additional focus and point of interest to Devonshire Green.

A few of the respondents in the general survey attributed litter to the skateboarders (we feel unfairly as our longitudinal surveys of the location of litter did not indicate that the skateboard area was littered: indeed, skateboarders had repeatedly asked for there to be more litter bins in the park as a whole)

We had predicted that the new, purpose-built skatepark would be much better received by others than had been its predecessor area, given that the new area did not obtrude on any other park users activities. But equally, a skatepark visually screened and separate from the rest of public activity could attract 'undesirables' as indeed had the existing, screened off children's playground, whose surrounding bushes had seemed to attract drug users.: indeed, many of the park users commented on the need for the playground to be visually open. (In a similar situation, the removal of vegetation from Bryant Park had solved their drug user problem)
Users reported that the new location for their activities was easily accessible (being a short walk from the city centre, close to a major frequently served bus routes, and with a ‘local’ shop and refreshment facilities at the edge of the park)

It has undoubtedly added to the atmosphere of the park, whose other users report favourably on the interest it brings; and the setting provides for the sociability that skateboarders see as the major attraction of the activity:

*Skateboarding is a bit of a social thing…not the skatepark especially: it just happens to be a place where we can all go*

Most people agreed that the skatepark had become their focal point for meeting up: one could arrive by oneself and expect to find fellow skaters there; or use as a regular meeting point whence to go on to other locations elsewhere in town.

(Although the old venue, Tudor Square, is banned for skating in, the dedicated skaters find there has been no trouble with the police: this is because they still have little sessions elsewhere in town, but these are for short periods of time, and do not lead to complaints of skaters hanging around)

So for Woolley and Johns’ criteria of accessibility, ‘trickability’, sociability and compatibility, the move to Devonshire Green has showed itself a success. The criterion of trickability (how the place affords itself to the many skilled and challenging movements) seems satisfactorily met for most of the skateboarders (although we heard from some BMX bikers also wanting to use the space that they felt the design forced all activity towards one focal point)

Our surveys of the various users of the Green indicated that there was now little conflict between skaters and other users, compared with the previous, in-town, venue of Tudor Square, where theatre goers had found skaters weaving through their access routes. Non-riders’ using the Devonshire Green skatepark as a place to sit and watch could have been a further source of conflict: in the planning of the area, it had indeed been a feature of the design that there were
wooden stubs round its perimeter, defining its area whilst affording extra seating for the park.

But, after some initial adverse reactions from the skaters (..”it’s not a circus”..), the skaters fairly quickly came to accept that their presence and tricks were seen by other users as adding to the park’s attractions and safety.

**Conclusions**

The study set out to investigate the effects of transferring skating activity from the town centre to the vestpocket park: effects upon the skaters and upon the other users. The evidence strongly suggests that with a well designed and sensitively sited venue, all categories of park user can benefit.

The added presence of this new activity, we would argue, should help reduce fear of crime, because such fear is clearly related to feelings of isolation and lack of surveillance. We had found that some general users of the Green had rated the park as sleepy and gloomy: again, one can hope that the coming of the skatepark should help ameliorate this, along with other physical improvements planned for the park as a whole.

In summary, our study has shown that the new skatepark has managed to support both the youth/skaters’ need for a place to call their own and possibly personalize via decoration and graffiti. But yet it has notably remained a public space too in the sense that the public do not feel alienated by its addition to their park. The young skateboarders of Devonshire Green have, we would argue, added considerably to the distinctiveness and identity of that neighbourhood. And we would further argue that this effect will be felt well beyond the Green’s immediate neighbourhood, as its fame and its users spread across the city and beyond: many day visitors to the city previously came, with their boards, because of the trickability of Tudor Square: and the affordances of the new area at the Green is being noised abroad on several of the well-visited skateboarding websites.

*Altman, I (1975) The environment and Social Behavior. Monterey: Brooks Cole*


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