Skateboarding – Radical and Romantic Physical Use of Urban Architecture

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Skateboarding in an urban environment has been analysed as a creative activity where opposition to meaningless architecture is expressed. The activity becomes a symbolic challenge to the normal. To challenge the normal is also one of the most ostensible images that the skateboard media portrays. The media put forward the image of the radical skater and underground rebel who defies both order and the ordinary. Creativity takes the form of expression in movement, not only skateboarding as a physical activity but also as a movement through the city. Even if skaters stay in one place longer than other urban visitors, they move between different skating locations and therefore cover large areas. Skateboarding has a spatial and temporal aspect, but how challenging and "unusual" is this physical use of the architecture? And what conclusions can be drawn on the relation between physical activity and the architecture of the city?

Skateboarding – Radical and Romantic Physical Use of Urban Architecture

Today's society is subject to an increased importance of aesthetics and an increasing individualism.[1] New trends are adopted early by young people, which make it interesting to focus on how identity is formed and meanings are constructed in a youth culture context and in relation to ongoing societal processes of change.

This paper is based on research presented in the dissertation Spår: Om brädsportkultur, informella lärprocesser och identitet, in English: Traces. On board sports culture, informal learning processes and identity (2005).[2] This work deals with the board sports skateboarding and snowboarding. Although skateboarding is more in focus, it was, for different reasons, impossible to exclude snowboarding. Among skateboarders and snowboarders and in the media that writes about them, the terms sub-culture and youth culture have been adopted. Youth culture and sub-cultures in more general terms have been studied earlier. However, what has been lacking previously are studies of the combination of youth culture, sub-culture and sport.[3] The leaderless boarding culture revolves primarily around style and physical bodily activity, in contrast to punk for example, which is held together by style and music. Thus identity through board sports is more clearly incorporated through physical performance.

In this paper I will question and reflect upon the romantic connotations that the skateboarding subculture evoke in several areas, especially in relation to the use of urban architecture. This subject is partly elaborated in the dissertation mentioned above, and therefore a brief summary will be presented. Beside my own research on this specific topic I will particularly discuss Iain Bordens work on skateboarding, space and the city.[4] Finally I will summon up my remarks in a concluding argument questioning the challenging and "unusual" physical use of the architecture.

Traces of Skateboarding Culture and Communication

The main purpose of the studies that ended up as my dissertation was to interpret and analyse the creation of meaning and identity in skateboarding and snowboarding as social and cultural contexts. In particular, the study was about the relationship between three levels, cultural – practice – and the individual. I maintain that individuals, their attitudes, actions and expressions construct board sports culture. However, the sports culture also creates individuals. I have studied the processes and practices through which individuals create themselves by living a culture. Participating in the practices is, to a large degree, about informal learning, which means that there is a social level.

The making of meaning is interesting to study because it has implication for the individual and can therefore be related to experience and emotion. On a social level where informal learning, practice and the collective are in focus, identity becomes significant on an intersubjective level. Through the practice of board-riding, meaningful actions and common values are created. The practice is, however, performed in relationship to what already exists in society and in culture, in other words in a context. This context is to a large degree

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1   Featherstone, Mike (1991/1994) *Consumer Culture & Postmodernism*. London: Sage.
2   Bäckström, Åsa   (2005) *Spår. Om brädsportkultur, informella lärprocesser och identitet*. Stockholm: HLS Förlag. Diss.
3   See for example Beal 1995, 1996; Beal & Weidman 2003; Rinehart & Sydnor (eds.) 2003; Wheaton 2003; Bäckström 2002.
4   Borden, Iain (2001) *Skateboarding, space and the city. Architecture and the body*. Oxford: Berg.

permeated by structures that are grounded in the power relationships of society, for example, in the orders of gender and class. Studying how people make sense of things and themselves therefore involves studying and exposing power structures.

The title, *Traces*, can initially appear exaggeratedly poetic. The title alludes to four analytical themes; consumption, gender, place and identity that are reflected in different chapters. This title was also chosen because the culture leaves traces in the individual, as the individual does in the culture. Furthermore, skaters leave actual tracks in the surrounding geography on the stair rails, statue bases and benches in the city, and snowboarders may leave tracks in the snow on an untouched mountainside. These tracks communicate different messages such as resistance and the overstepping of boundaries.

Theoretically the study has a culture analysis approach with a semiotic base. Inspiration comes from several sources such as Fornäs (1995), Drotner (2003), Säljö (2000). Culture is interpreted as system of signs and signifying practices.[5] Aesthetic practice is treated as communication on three adjacent levels.[6] A socio-cultural perspective is used on learning, which means that learning is regarded as participation in knowledge and skills.[7] Knowledge for Säljö is situated in social practices and he points out that everyday interaction and natural conversation are without doubt the most important learning environments.[8]

Constructing meaning is also a question of learning, and, in my view, the definitive form of collective learning. The learning studied is informal, social and contextual. To construct meaning also means to create identity, and to communicate with others. Communication can take place through different forms of language, visual and corporal. The narratives are also in a context of some kind, mingled in with the culture. One learns the stories, the telling, the signs and their symbolic meaning in social, cultural and practical contexts.[9] Culture is dispersed by structures and patterns in society, and variables such as gender, class and ethnicity affect how we make meaning and what we consider valuable. The stories about ourselves get their meaning in the telling to someone else, in the dialogue with someone else. The telling is often performed through some sort of media.

As I was interested in the practice, it was important for me to use qualitative methods and ethnography with its expansive arsenal and flexibility distinguished itself as a method. This choice of method was made in consideration of the purpose and the research questions posed in this dissertation. To illuminate and describe, to develop an understanding, to interpret and analyse social behaviour are best done in this study with the help of qualitative instruments. The work was done in three phases that occasionally became interwoven in each other. The introductory phase covered inventory, selection and analysis of the media offering surrounding the board sports during the period 1975 through 2002. Phase two had an ethnographic approach where fieldwork consisting of participant observation and interviews made up most of the material. In phase three, the empirical material was integrated with analyses of earlier research and cultural theory.

My field consisted partly of those places where board sports are practised and partly of other places of a more transitory nature where meaning about the board sport phenomenon is created and consumed. Actual locations where I have conducted my work are primarily a shop in central Stockholm that sells board sport equipment, a youth centre in Stockholm with a skateboard arena, ski centres in the Swedish mountains and a number of streets and squares in

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5 Fornäs, Johan (1995) *Cultural Theory and Late Modernity*. London: Sage.
6 Drotner, Kirsten (1991/2003) *At skabe sig – selv. Ungdom, æstetik, pædagogik*. Gyldendal: Copenhagen.
7 Säljö, Roger (2000) *Lärande i praktiken. Ett sociokulturellt perspektiv*. Stockholm: Prisma.
8 Säljö (2000: 233).
9 In consent with Hannerz (1992) I see culture as unevenly distributed.

Stockholm. I have also frequently visited the Internet to explore the skateboard and snowboard sports. In other words, the field has been more bounded by time than by location. Apart from the Internet, other forms of media have also been included in the field studies, and are accordingly included in the empirical material.

The empirical material on which *Traces* is based has several purposes. The multifaceted empirical material, from field studies and interviews, Swedish skateboard and snowboard magazines between 1978 and 2002, skateboard and snowboard videos, press articles, and websites, has been triangulated. In addition, there are three personal albums of skateboarder, snowboarder and surfer Ants Neo. Although the choice to include many types of material has made the empirical material extensive, some limitations had to be made. My choice of Stockholm for the skateboarding studies had practical reasons. Snowboarding, on the other hand, has received a more national treatment, although rather general. This has meant that I have focused on detail about skateboarding whilst snowboarding has served as an analytical reference in a more general manner.

Radical Results

One of the empirical chapters, "Pictures of board sports", is a chapter that aims to account for the cultural conceptions about board sports that are constructed, but also how these conceptions create impressions about what characterises board riding and the people that practice it. In my analysis I use Drotners argument as a starting point from which to interpret skateboarding and snowboarding as aesthetic practices. Drotner explains the effect of aesthetic production on three levels and characterises the individual level in terms of emotional intensity and corporality. The sensation is described as so encompassing that it becomes ones life, ones identity. The body is acutely present in these descriptions. It is the body that experiences, and it is there that the sensations of riding come alive. The experience of board riding is not without context. The corporeal perception arises in an environment and the attributes of that environment affect the experience. The ideal context for what is considered to be a perfect snowboard ride is the untouched mountain with its powdered snow, sunshine and blue skies. For skateboarding, a different ideal context applies. Here it is the urban environment with its asphalt or concrete as a surface.

Another chapter, "Place in time and space", discusses the importance of location to skateboarding and to a certain extent to snowboarding. A tour round Stockholm with a map, notebook and camera is the guide for this chapter. This chapter exposes the power relations and hierarchies, referring to social class, generations and distinctions of taste. One of the reasons why location has been given its own track is the discussion of society's view of youth. This cultural and societal conception is manifested in the way the city deals with young people. When social conflict arises, which location belongs to which group becomes apparent and rights to room in the city become the crucial point. Location and culture are un-equivocally intertwined. It is therefore of vital interest how skateboarding (and snowboarding) have become visible as cultural phenomena in certain locations and how places are formed by skateboarding (and snowboarding). The investigation into where in the city skateboarding is practiced and how it is performed tells us something about the relation that skateboarding and skaters have to the city and to society in general. In addition, the opposite is also clarified, that is, how the city and society relate to skaters and their sport. I show in this chapter how skateboarding in the city can be a creative activity where opposition to "meaningless" architecture is expressed. Perhaps it is the unusual use of the urban environment that makes skateboarding threatening, or at least worrying. The activity becomes a symbolic challenge to the normal. To challenge the normal is also one of the most ostensible images that the skateboard media portrays. The media put forward the image of the radical skater and underground rebel who defies both order and the ordinary. The image is strengthened by, fast

and tough music in the videos. Creativity takes the form of expression in movement, not only skateboarding as a physical activity but also as a movement through the city. Even if skaters stay in one place longer than other urban visitors, they move between different skating locations in the city and therefore cover large areas. Apart from a spatial and temporal aspect, the places also extend into the virtual realm. Opinions are formed about places that one perhaps has never seen, and these are vitally current and used as comparisons to actual places. In this way, the pavement curbs of Barcelona are used as everyday references by the skaters of Stockholm. It is also most likely that it is the curbs and not Sagrada Famila or some other classic architectural edifice that features as a reference. Skating becomes a way of assuming a visible place in society in one's own way and not to be included in the norms and rules of adults about how public spaces should be utilised. Simultaneously with the expression of the willingness to participate, the desire to do this on one's own premises is also expressed. It becomes a power struggle between youth and adulthood, between normal and unusual, between economics, culture and aesthetics. Locations are also allocated to this type of activity. The skating hall of Fryshuset south of central Stockholm is indoors, safe from the winter freeze and the rain of summer, but also away from normal citizens so that the disturbing activity is removed. Fryshuset is outside the city in a building for other young people. Here they can perform their activities undisturbed and at the same time without disturbing the ordinary populace in the city. Order between generations is thereby preserved.

Borden Basics

Skateboarding and architecture has been thoroughly studied by the British researcher Iain Borden. In the published version of his doctoral thesis he claims, "The urban practice of skateboarding implicitly yet continuously critiques contemporary cities" (2001:173). Skateboarders use the urban cityscape in other ways than it was built for and this is one way critique is being expressed. Not only do they propose a different use of the objects and architecture, skateboarders are not even concerned of its original purpose. "When skateboarders ride along a wall, over a fire hydrant or up a building, they are entirely indifferent to its function or ideological content" (2001:214). Skateboarders are more interested in the surface and shape of the architecture than the actual use of it. Apart from the indifference to "ordinary" use skateboarders tend to resist the urban landscape in making use of spaces that are "left-over". With reference to Henri Lefebvre (who in his turn cite Roland Barthes) Borden argues that skateboarding is resistance to zero degree architecture. Zero degree architecture, he claims, are spaces without explicit meaning. "Most obviously, they are left-over spaces of modernist planning, or the spaces of decision-making (typically the urban plaza) which symbolize not through overt iconography but through expansivity of space" (2001:188). In this aspect Borden also lifts the temporal facet of resistance to architecture without explicit meaning. "[S]katers construct a different temporal rhythm by staying longer in an urban plaza as others hurry through […] For the more contested terrains of postmodernity – such as shopping malls yet another temporal tactic must be deployed. Here, the skaters exploit the highly bounded temporality […] by skating in weekend and evening hours" (2001:198).

  With a socio-cultural perspective it is of course impossible to claim any place to be meaningless. Bearing that in mind Borden's analyses give fruitful insights in how the urban landscape is divided for use, not least through time. Another of his interesting points is the embodiment of architecture that skateboarders are subject to in a larger extent than other city goers, like pedestrians for instance. "Architecture following Lefebvre's body-centric formulations, 'reproduces itself within those who *use* the space in question, within their lived experience'" (2001:214). In this way skateboarders become the architecture and the city they ride their boards on/in.

Apart from Borden's studies on skateboarding in relation to architecture, and my own Swedish studies, the ethnologist Marit Breivik (2004) produced similar results in a Norwegian setting.

Reflections on the Romance and the Radical

All three studies referred above, including my own, pinpoint skateboarding in an urban environment as a creative activity where opposition to "meaningless" architecture is expressed. The activity takes the form of a symbolic challenge to the normal. To challenge the normal is also one of the most apparent images that the skateboard media portrays. How challenging and "unusual" is this physical use of the architecture? And what conclusions can be drawn on the relation between physical activity and the architecture of the city?

My study shows that there are stereotyped notions about what boarding means and what it means to be a skate boarder. These notions both create and are created by the skate boarders themselves but are also used by advertisers for products not related to board sports at all. These notions are based on ideas of resistance and radicalism. Resistance takes concrete form in its attitude to organized sports and to multinational brands and in the unusual use of "normal" places in the urban environment. To be a boarder is, apart form the boarding skills required, to be also part and parcel of these attitudes. Even though skateboarding may symbolise different things for different people there are three points where the symbolised expressions that skateboarding communicate are comprehensive. Skateboarding has been coupled to that which is young from the time when the first skateboard appeared in Sweden. The sport is still described as young, fresh and futuristic despite the fact that it has existed for three decades. It is also the young generation that has begun to skate and snowboard. More important than youth itself, however, is the cultural and social importance that the young have in society. Boarding is combined with that which is considered youthful. In this case, it is not a special age group that bears the meaning but rather the characteristics of youth. Board sports can in other words be described in terms of liveliness, vitality, strength, newness, speed and action. Youthfulness is also highly attractive in the modern western world. A youthful paradox has become a part of the boarding tradition. To protect the free and the pleasurable is a practice that boarders in particular and perhaps youth in general pursue with the aim of distancing themselves from the conscientious norms of the adult world. This resistance is however pointless as even the parent generation has also adopted the youthful ideal. Through this paradox, youth have become role models for their parents instead of the opposite. Skateboarding and snowboarding are, thirdly, a visual event. It is important to see, to make visible and to be seen. Filming rides in order to publicly show them later is common. Furthermore, skateboarding often takes place in public spaces where it is available for all to see.

Sub-cultural expression is created in opposition to hegemony. Even if this is expressed in contrast *to* something, it can still have a message of freedom *from* something, which ties the expression to an argument for independence. Hegemony and sub-culture exist in several ways in this study. The relationship between unorganized skateboarding and organised sport is one example, the skateboard market contra the multinational sports companies is another, youth contra adulthood a third. Opposition, a practice with help of visual symbols or activity that challenges and question the current societal and cultural understanding, is conspicuous for outside observers. The radical is apparent in the boarding press, both in text and pictures as a testing of boundaries on several levels. I see boundary and freedom as two key concepts that are intimately connected. On first reflection, freedom can mean the absence of boundaries, but boundaries and limits can also mean freedom from responsibility, where boundaries are instead the basis for this responsibility. In the youth research area, it has been said that the whole period of youth is a borderland between childhood and adulthood. In the empirical

material in this study, metaphors for boundaries and freedom are distinct in several areas and levels. I have spoken of the sense of freedom through board riding and the arousal of that feeling in tune with the elements of nature. The opposition evident in the material and context at an individual level can be interpreted as a challenge of boundaries. Social boundaries are mentioned when I speak of inclusion and exclusion in the board sports community. The freedom of the game and the unorganised practice of board sports have also been mentioned. Freedom is an ideologically loaded word, excellent as a political slogan considering the increased individualism that Ziehe (1989) argues. According to such an explanatory model, it is possible to choose freely between the styles and expressions presented in the multi-faceted world. The choice becomes individual made on the basis of free will. Considering the structural influence that I have proved in this study, it becomes difficult to characterise such choices as unbound and independent, even if they can naturally be experienced as free by the individual.

My reasoning about the creation of meaning shows that this has a self-propagating aspect. I maintain that one creates oneself by creating meaning around one's activity and that the relation between identity, learning and culture is strong. The boarders included in my study show examples of how the self is constructed and maintained in relation to and in conjunction with the media products that surround the culture. Boarding is a fundamental part of life for many of my informants. In the formation of a coherent self, the Other that is the antithesis of the stereotype skater is made clear. The Other may be despised, but is also highly necessary as an opposite pole to the right and the normal. Creating one's own identity as a skater means creating your identity in contrast to the Other, but also to create an identity in relation to the ideals and conceptions surrounding the sport. This does not mean that one must become exactly like the ideal image, as no one skater is the ideal. However, one must always relate to the ideal, which, through this process becomes either confirmed or questioned. In this way, the individual becomes part of the collective, and vice versa. When skaters discuss which brands are the best and what knowledge is relevant, they are also building a community of shared values. The shared values are constructed and therefore changeable, but they still work as a reference point from which to judge right and wrong. That which is collectively considered to be right and real is a part of the collective community and a part of the communal collectivity.

To create meaning on a social and collective level means, amongst other things, creating mutual memories. Whether they consist in concrete form such as photographs in Ants' album or of tales of trips made, places to travel to, tricks one has performed or failed at, it is the memories that create meaning. Memories become after-images that support both experience and the community as such. After-images also become patterns for events to come and help structure future interpretation. The comparatively solid geographical locations with their architecture and buildings become relatively stable frameworks within which meaning can be created. In my view, skaters re-interpret the importance of places through their use of the city. I maintain that there is cooperation between people and environment regarding the importance of architecture, but it is the interpretation of people and their usage that gives meaning. The ongoing interpretation and re-interpretation of the environment can be attributed to an individual level but it is in interaction between subjects or between subject and object that creates meaning.

Finally I would argue that all resistance has a romantic undertone of being the voice of struggle against non-righteous power. Who decides what is righteous and not is of course a completely different story.

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