

CAN SKATEBOARDERS IN NOTTINGHAM BE GOOD PARTNERS TO THE CITY WITHOUT BEING 'SHOCK TROOPS OF GENTRIFICATION'?

Despite, or perhaps because of, huge improvements in their relationship with the municipality, skaters in Nottingham risk being what foundational skateboard scholar Ocean Howell has described as – usually unwitting – agents of gentrification, and, ultimately, of their own displacement. This is visible in the story of King Edward Skatepark. Within one of Nottingham's most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, and close to the city's main (unofficial) street skating spot, its development in late 2016 followed what skateboarding historian Iain Borden has referred to as fluctuating 'harmony, chance and negotiation' (see page 26 above). Here, however, these phases have been overshadowed by periods of municipal hostility.

The City Council originally framed the park's development as a potentially coercive substitute for street skating. In this context, skateboarders' involvement in the park's design and activation could risk enabling 'zones of exclusion' in Glenney and O'Connor's terms in which a ban on street skating in certain parts of the city is justified by the provision of skateparks as formally designated alternative spaces.¹ But what if skaters can exercise sufficient agency to mitigate the social harm of regeneration policies by being critical and radical, rather than malleable, 'good partners' to the city?

Conflict and Exclusion

The skatepark was built in 2016 on a disused bowling green within the largely dilapidated King Edward Park. It is a short walk from (the unofficial street skating spot) Sneinton Market – a large, gently sloping plaza with granite blocks completed in December 2011. The skaters have arguably been one of the groups keeping the plaza in constant use, and the byelaw banning city centre skateboarding – including in the new plaza – is rarely enforced.² But Nottingham City Council proposed the nearby skatepark in order to move the skateboarders, commenting that: 'when considered in the public space, [skateboarders] are regularly grouped with the 'unwanted' in society... such as the homeless, prostitutes and drug dealers who no architect wants loitering in the fringes of their buildings'.³

Cooperation and Development

Exercising their agency, skateboarders in Nottingham participated in the design of the skatepark. Although a very small facility, constructed with little over £80,000, it was regarded as a considerable success, even winning



Skater Joe Hinson being filmed by Forde Brookfield, in the otherwise empty Sneinton Market, 2017. Photo by Tom Ouirley.

the 2017 East Midlands Celebrating Construction, Value Award. This success fundamentally changed the skaters' relationship with the City Council. The Council funded formal training for local coaches to support activation of the skatepark, and have since supported more recent, larger projects, including some that took place in and around Sneinton Market.⁴ To date, more than 200 locals have engaged in beginners' sessions at King Edward Park, almost half of whom were girls and women (compared to just 15 per cent nationally, according to Skateboard England).⁵

Contrast and Resolution

King Edward Park seems to have enabled skateboarding to be broadly tolerated by the City. Currently, skaters are neither officially permitted in Sneinton Market – the 'no skateboarding' signs remain in situ – nor asked to leave by law enforcement. However, there are concerning headwinds for this tolerance in the form of three major redevelopment schemes that will directly border the area. The construction sites of these developments are currently cordoned off with wooden panels and adorned with commissioned street art. Is there a risk that skateboarders, having achieved a level of harmonious co-working with Local Government, are being tolerated as a form of what I will term skatewashing? That skaters' subcultural capital is seeing them conscripted as Howell's 'shock troops of gentrification'?⁶

Alert to the threats of gentrification on the local community and the risk of being co-opted for skatewashing, skaters in Nottingham are highlighting





Female skaters at one of Skate Nottingham CIC's women and girls' beginners' skate sessions, 2017. Photo by Tom Quigley.

- 1 Brian Glenney and Paul O'Connor, 'Skateparks as hybrid elements of the city', *Journal of Urban Design*, vol. 24 no. 6 (2019) 848-849.
- 2 Nottingham City Council, *Information Governance: Re: Request under the Freedom of Information Act (2000)*, last modified October 30, 2015, accessed January 31, 2019, <http://open.nottinghamcity.gov.uk/informationgovernance/displayresponsefile.aspx?companyIdFinal%20Response.pdf>
- 3 Nottingham City Council, *Joint Young People Skateboard Plaza Consultation* (Nottingham: Nottingham City Council, 2014), p.17.
- 4 Skate Nottingham CIC, 'Skate Nottingham Big Lottery Fund 2018', December 2018, 2:59, <https://youtu.be/3A2K1yRz>
- 5 *Why Skateboarding's 'not just for guys'*, BBC NEWS, last modified December 8, 2018, accessed March 15, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-england-nottinghamshire-46486507/why-skatboarding-s-not-just-for-guys>

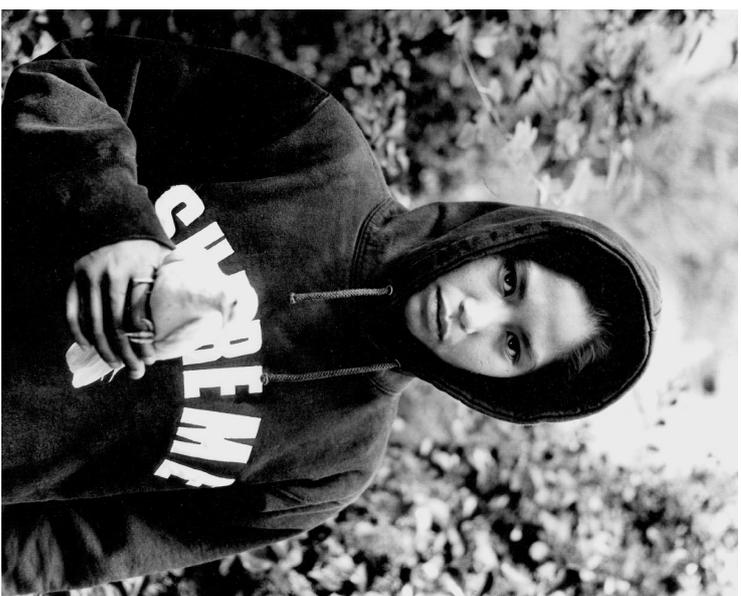
the potentially transformative role of skateboarding: grouping people of different ages and educational levels within a non-hierarchical, mutually supporting community; filling a gap created by the hollowing out of services; and; building strong relationships with other community groups, businesses and the local tenants' and residents' associations likely to be adversely affected by the new property developments over the coming years. In Nottingham – as in much of the UK – young people's services have deteriorated to an unprecedented extent.

Skate Nottingham, a Community Interest Company led by skaters, is beginning to provide services normally provided by the state that have withered or been cut. Already, the Skate Nottingham team, in delivering National Lottery-funded cultural education projects, have found themselves providing informal job search, CV and job application advice to young skaters and have signposted other third sector support services, including in cases of temporary homelessness. This heightened awareness of their agency may well be the path to skaters being both 'good partners' to the City while being both *of* and *for* the local community.

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Jamie Reyes photographed by Josie Perez Ramondetta, 2003



When I was about 13 years old, one of the local skaters from my hometown (Hoogeveen, a small town in the Netherlands) gave me a three-hour VHS tape with copies of all of the skateboarding videos that he owned. This was the best gift someone could ever give to me at the time (1998). The VHS contained classic skate videos like *Mouse*, *Goldfish*, *Blind Trilogy*, *Blind Video Days* and a couple of *411VM* magazines. I watched them all, over and over and over again.

At some point I noticed Jaime Reyes in one of the *411* videos, and I was so excited. I kept replaying the few tricks she had. I was so inspired, not only was she a female skater, which was extremely rare at the time, she was Hip Hop! At the time I loved skateboarding and Hip Hop. Even though both cultures were extremely male dominated back then, it didn't stop me from identifying with it. To me it was all about the flow and the city and architecture and curbs.

Sometimes I felt crazy for doing things no other girls were doing as society made me feel like something was wrong with me.

So, seeing Jaime doing baggy-pants steezy switch back tails in an American video made me feel like I wasn't crazy and I wasn't the only one. Women like Jaime and Elisa were already out there somewhere, doing their thing. The door was open.

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Louisa Menke is a professional skateboarder. Josie Perez-Ramondetta is a New York-based photographer.