

VIEWPOINT

**Long Live Southbank:  
skateboarding, citizenship and the city**

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**Abstract**

'The Undercroft' underneath Queen Elizabeth's Hall on London's Southbank is one of London's best known skate spots and plans, released in 2013, to fill the space with retail outlets and relocate the skateboarders to an alternative site were met with fierce opposition by the skateboarding community. In response, the group 'Long Live Southbank' was founded to campaign for the site's preservation. This essay will focus on the Long Live Southbank's 17 month campaign, asking why the local community were so opposed to the relocation of 'the Undercroft' to a purpose built site. By analysing a range of different media produced by Long Live Southbank this essay will look at the phenomenology of skateboarding and how the act of skateboarding affects the individual's lived experience, arguing that the skateboarders' resistance to relocation was tied in with their desire to be included in the ongoing production of public space, and therefore deeply embedded within their own individual and collective senses of citizenship.

**Keywords:** skateboarding, citizenship, public space, cities, contestation

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**“What it was for nobody knows, least of all the architects”**  
(Iain Borden in Edwards-Wood, 2013)

Underneath Queen Elizabeth’s Hall on London’s Southbank is a small collection of sloped stone banks, a staircase and number of stark concrete blocks marked with chips and scratches, known locally as ‘the Undercroft’, or simply ‘Southbank’. Built in 1968 (Southbank Centre, n.d.), the space was a blank canvas, a collection of brutalist concrete structures without use or meaning, and from this emerged the opportunity for different groups to project *their own meaning(s)*; a public space onto which different publics could shape its various ends (Mitchell, 2015). Far from sitting unused, it quickly became colonised by a number of different groups. At first it was the homeless. Then in 1973, attracted by the large open space, the steep banks and the protection from rain, skateboarders descended in large numbers; followed quickly by graffiti artists and BMXers, but with skateboarding remaining the most common, and the source of the Undercroft’s global renown (Edwards-Wood, 2013).



Figure 1. The Undercroft area of the Southbank.  
Source: Mould, 2016.

The relationship between the skateboarders and the Southbank Centre - who gained ownership of the Hayward Gallery in 1987 (Southbank Centre, n.d.) – has always been fractious, with frequent attempts to remove the skaters, through measures such as

placing down gravel and the large scale reduction of the overall space (Woodhead L., 2014a). In 2013, the Southbank Centre announced its Festival Wing plan, which involved the infilling of the Undercroft with retail outlets and a proposed plan to relocate the skateboarders to a purpose built site 120 metres away, under Hungerford Bridge (Southbank Centre, 2013).

In response, the skateboarding community established the group 'Long Live Southbank' (LLSB), campaigning for the preservation of the Undercroft and opposing the relocation to the Hungerford Bridge site. After 17 months of campaigning, including collecting 150,000 signatures, taking part in TV and media debates, as well as the more covert tactics of undercover filming and the disruption of planning meetings (Long Live Southbank, 2014e), LLSB and the Southbank Centre released a joint statement announcing the indefinite preservation of the Undercroft (Brown, 2014).

The case study of the battle to save the Undercroft is an interesting example of the struggle over public space in the contemporary capitalist city. Yet, whilst the LLSB campaign has not escaped the interest of scholarly work, this work has predominantly focused on analysing the struggle over the Undercroft as a means to explain the wider forces which lead to the abstraction of space and the end of public space (Cullinane, 2015; Mould, 2016). Far less attention has been paid to the skateboarders themselves.

Why was it that the purpose built Hungerford Bridge facility, at a potential cost of £1 million, was deemed to be worse than, what one skateboarder once called, "a collection of shitty little banks" (Mike John in Borden, 2001: 188)? And why was the Undercroft deemed to be a space so worth fighting for?

This essay will aim to explore and answer these questions by looking at how the skateboarders themselves presented their arguments in the LLSB campaign. To do this I will draw on the wide range of media sources released by the LLSB campaign, aiming to understand how this particular community's relationship with the Undercroft was shaped. As such, this essay will not be a historical analysis of the LLSB campaign. Nor will it aim to include all aspects which influenced the skateboarders decision to fight the Southbank Centre's decision; factors such as the history of the Undercroft and the community's deep relationship with this history, as well as the very real fear that the Hungerford Bridge skatepark would never come to fruition, are recognised, but not touched upon.

Instead this essay will be an exploration of the way in which the act of skateboarding affects the relationship between self and landscape, individual and community, community and society. Aiming to explore how conflict over public space represents wider conflicts in society, as different publics try and shape, and in turn are shaped by, the built environment.

In the hope that, whilst related to a specific site and case, it can inform wider debates around conflict and contestation over public space.

***"I don't want the new skate park; we don't want the new skate park"***  
(Rueben Russo in Long Live Southbank, 2013c)

LLSB made frequent claims that the Hungerford Bridge plan was not simply inadequate, but rejected the entire proposal out hand, refusing to engage with the planning of the new space and thereby relinquishing an opportunity to help to shape the new development in

a way that suited them. To understand why requires taking a look at the phenomenology of skateboarding, to understand how the practices of skateboarding are undertaken, and how they shape the being-in-the-world of the practitioner.

The act of skateboarding involves the appropriation of the built environment to create new bodily experiences (Borden, 2001), with creativity in skating emerging from the ability of skaters to reinterpret space designed for one purpose and inscribe it with new meaning (Mould, 2016). In the process forming an understanding of the built environment as a series of objects to overcome and master both mentally and physically (Clegg & Butryn, 2012: 11):

*“You look for interesting bits of architecture that can be skated in a unique way. You spend every bus journey looking out the window, scouring the area for interesting looking places to skate.”* (Woodhead L., 2014b)

Key to this way of looking at and understanding the city, is that it does not relate to specific locations, such as a skate park, but applies to a wider urban landscape, with the practice of skateboarding helping to shape the way in which the skateboarder understands and interprets the city.

Here we can refer to Wiley (2005) who argues that the act of physical exertion shapes the way in which the relationship between self and landscape is articulated and maintained, arguing that “exhilarating encounters with elemental configurations of land, sea and sky are less a distanced looking-at and more a *seeing-with*.” (Wiley 2005: 242 emphasis in original). This approach can equally be applied to the context of skateboarding, whereby the landscape is understood based on direct physical contact and emotional experience.

In the context of skateboarding, certain landscapes and type of architectural structures are used specifically for the bodily and emotional experiences which they create. Subsequently, these change the way in which the landscape is understood, whereby the landscape is not simply looked at but *seen-with*. As one skateboarder puts it

*“(t)he technique of skateboarding isn’t skateboarding. Your ability to do tricks is like a vocabulary and you can use in that language of tricks. You can communicate with the stuff that you find in the street and turn it into something else. [sic]”* (Ben Powell in Edwards-Wood, 2013)

In this process, the skateboard is not simply a vehicle on which to travel, but an extension of the body, ‘a fifth limb’ (Borden 2001: 100) with which the skaters’ relationship with the landscape is mediated. Applying this understanding to the Undercroft, we see that the very benefit of the Undercroft is its status as ‘found space’ – space not constructed specifically for skateboarding (Borden, 2001) – and the ability for skateboarders to communicate with this landscape and “*turn it into something else*”.

For this reason, the LLSB community felt that the destruction of the Undercroft, and the relocation to the Hungerford Bridge site,

*“would not only destroy the history, but the entire ethos of the undercroft which is the birth place of British street skating; an art form based on the interpretation of space”* (Edwards-Wood, 2013).

With the replacement of the Undercroft's found space with purposely constructed space being seen to restrict the activity and remove an aspect of creativity (Nemeth, 2006). Whilst this analysis helps to explain why the Hungerford bridge site was rejected by the skateboarding community, it does not on its own explain why the undercroft was so fiercely protected. Indeed, if skateboarding is about an engagement with the city as a whole, why was so much emphasis placed on one specific location? For this to be understood it must be looked at in the context of the wider exclusion of skateboarders from public space. A number of authors have documented the widespread exclusion of skateboarders (Nemeth, 2006; Woolley, Hazelwood, & Simkins, 2011; Wooley & Johns, 2001), with the increase in popularity of skateboarding being equally matched with a focus on urban design aimed at making skateboarding impossible (Woolley, Hazelwood, & Simkins, 2011).

This has the impact of putting greater pressure on the remaining spaces where skateboarding is possible:

*"I have spent far too many days, skating around the city, coming across spots I used to skate but now have those ugly metal caps on them [skatestoppers], getting the police called on us by security and then seeing the same happen to buskers and BMXers and everyone else. These days it always ends up with us returning to Southbank. The more time we spend trying to skate the rest of the city, the more Southbank feels like a little haven of freedom where people can go about expressing themselves without constantly getting shut down."*  
(Woodhead L. b., 2014)

What the above quote shows is that the undercroft represents more than just a space which is good for skateboarding; it is also an area where this group feel able to express themselves without fear of being moved on or criticized. They are afforded a freedom, one that emerges from the capability of the skaters to shape the landscape discourse, allowing for the acceptance of practices and performances which elsewhere are deemed deviant and unnatural (Wiley, 2007). In this way, the skaters exert a power onto the landscape, imbuing the architectural forms with new meaning through endless repetition of physical acts and as such, transform how and what we understand these architectural forms to be.

Thus, through the direct agency of the skaters they were able to carve out and appropriate the space in a way which suited the needs and wants of the community.

*"It's home for a lot of people, not in the sense of somewhere that you live, but somewhere that you feel comfortable. (Whitter, 2016)"*

Furthermore, this occurs within a wider landscape where skateboarding is heavily excluded and the skateboarders themselves often feel marginalized. As one LLSB member states: "We often feel like we're maybe always existing outside of society (Long Live Southbank, 2013b)" with skateboard culture largely organized around the rejection of societal values (Borden, 2001). The ability to maintain control over small aspects of the city, therefore, takes on amplified importance (Cresswell, 2004). Emerging from this, contestation over the Undercroft became not simply a contestation over where people could, or could not skate, but part of the wider struggle of who feels welcome in society

(Mitchell & Lynn, 2005). As a result, the ability to shape and define the meaning of the Undercroft - the end to which it was put – and the resistance of exclusion and removal from the physical space, was deeply tied up with the skateboarder's individual and communal sense of *citizenship*. Citizenship in this sense transcends the legal relationship with the state, seeing it as an ongoing negotiation of identity and difference which comes into being through practice (Spinney, Aldred, & Brown, 2015). Skateboarding therefore represents one such practice which helps shape both the individual and communal sense of societal membership, one which works alongside a range of other practises to constitute citizenship as 'an ensemble of different and unstable belongings' (Spinney, Aldred, & Brown, 2015: 326).

The act of skateboarding can therefore be seen to help to mediate the relationship between both the skateboarders themselves and society at large, constituting the basis by which individuals can form a political identity and argue for political entitlement (ibid). Consequently, the Undercroft can be seen as an area in which this group were able to state their claim to acceptance with its removal being a signal in a wider sense of their position in society and was closely wrapped up with their individual senses of citizenship. As such, the battle for the Undercroft became representative of a wider battle to 'not be excluded from the on-going creation of public space' (Mould, 2016: 16) and a means to stake their claim to their right to the city.

An important facet of this is the way in which the LLSB campaign deemed itself to be in direct opposition to the forces of capital which were leading to the destruction of the Undercroft, releasing videos such as "Southbank Centre - Consumerism over Culture", "Southbank Centre - A Festival of Irony" and "Undercroft users' opinions outside the Festival Wing "Open Forum" #1", with statements such as - "*Capitalism, that's what it is, it's all about the money... all they think about is money* (Tomach Lipa in Long Live Southbank, 2013a)" and "*I'm probably using this space 5 times as much as the people enjoying the art, it's just that I'm not spending 5 times the amount of money that they are* (Jason Caines in Long Live Southbank, 2014d)"

Part of this opposition is related to the fundamental nature of skateboarding, its prioritization of use over exchange value and the critique this offers for a city organized primarily for the accumulation of capital (Borden, 2001). In addition to this, the resistance of the relocation was about being able to maintain and exercise the right to be involved in the creation of the city and resist the coopting of citizenship into state and capital sanctioned channels. Therefore, resistance was about the ability to practice citizenship on their own terms.

Here we can look to Miraftab's (2004) distinction between 'invited' and 'invented' spaces of citizenship to offer a distinction between the Undercroft and the Hungerford Bridge site.

The Undercroft, as a space which has been claimed by the skateboarders themselves through their own actions, and standing in opposition to authority, represents what Miraftab (2004) terms 'invented space'. It therefore represents a space where skaters could practice citizenship on their own terms, shaping the world in a meaningful way through their actions, and in the process, achieving more substantive forms of citizenship. The colonization of the Undercroft was therefore deeply embedded with the communities right to appropriation, a right not just to occupy, access and use the space but also to be involved in the production of it, and help shape its production to meet the needs of its inhabitants (Purcell, 2002).

In contrast, the Hungerford Bridge site represented a state sanctioned, invited space; whereby the power to determine spaces of citizenship are held by government and affiliated organizations. The move to Hungerford bridge would, therefore, not only have been seen to have the impact of controlling and coopting their culture - distilling it to a thinly veiled strain of consumption values (Mould, 2016), but also of denying the communities agency to define their own spaces to practice citizenship. Leading them to argue that “*The (Hungerford) skate park would have been a pastiche of our culture*” (Edwards-Wood, 2013).

Accordingly, LLSB’s campaign can be seen as an example of the struggle through alternative practice to carve out and create space against the tendency towards abstraction and the end of public space (Mitchell, 2015).

One aspect linked with this is the undercrofts high level of visibility, with a key difference between the undercroft and many other skate spots being that over the course of a day many thousands come to watch the skateboarders (Edwards-Wood, 2013). Nemeth (2006) argues that this visibility is a key part of how different group stake their claim as citizens to representation in the public sphere, with removal therefore signifying a means of marginalization. From this perspective, we can therefore see that the purpose of public space is to be a space in which the multiple different publics are able to represent themselves through appearance (Mitchell, 2015), with relocation posing a potential threat to the skater’s citizenship. This argument is supported by Spinney (2010) who finds that trial bike riders on the South Bank (but not at the undercroft itself), regarded encouragement from members of the public as a major motivation for choosing to ride in particular spots. This leads him to conclude that ‘the reactions of other users are vital in interpreting the actions of trials and BMX riders as appropriate’ (Spinney, 2010, p. 2927). However this perspective is challenged by a statements made by one skater who said that:

*“(Whilst) the constant flow of spectators does make Southbank unique ... Sometimes it feels a bit like there are lots of people watching and expecting to see something good - either a slam or a trick. So in that sense it can feel a bit like your part of a ‘performance’...I do prefer skating there in the evenings and at night, you don't feel so much ‘on show’ (Local Southbank Skater, 2016).”*

The individuality of experience evident here illustrates that whilst the practice of skateboarding does, to a certain extent, help mediate the relationship between individual and society, it does so in a highly personal way that occurs alongside a range of over practices (Spinney, Aldred, & Brown, 2015). Therefore, it is important to resist the tendency to proscribe homogenous views to a diverse subculture, which undoubtedly comprises a range of different worldviews and lived experiences. To a certain extent, the above quote (obtained through an interview), poses a critique of the methodology of this essay in assuming that the LLSB campaign represents the general consensus amongst the Undercroft community; it presupposes that the view of the skateboarders is broadly the same. This leads to the conclusion that more expansive means of research is necessary to explore the multitude of ways in which the skateboarding community experiences and views these issues.



## Conclusion

Whilst skateboarding continues its ascension into the realm of recognised sport - exemplified through the inclusion of street skateboarding in the 2020 Olympics (BBC, 2016) – it continues to fall victim to the dominant discourse which frames it as an anti-social activity (Nemeth, 2006), and as a result, exclusion from the urban city continues unchecked (Mersom, 2015).

What I have hoped to highlight in this essay is that the prevailing policy measures of provision and exclusion are inadequate in the context of skateboarding. As a means of engagement with the city, the constructed environment of the skate park cannot encapsulate the full experience of skateboarding. Moreover, when skateboarding represents a means by which the individual comes to understand their position and relationship with society at large, the exclusion of skateboarding becomes a question of citizenship. And when, as in the case of skateboarding, the majority of participants are young (Wooley & Johns, 2001), or do not prescribe to dominant societal values (Borden, 2001), the exclusion of skateboarding from public space poses crucial questions about the way in which different voices are heard, and the influence these voices are given in shaping the ends of our public spaces. The critique that skateboarding offers of the modern capitalist city, through its emphasis on use over exchange value (Borden, 2001), means that how we treat skateboarding and, as a result, skateboarders, is therefore a lens with which to view the commodification of citizenship; the extent to which we value individuals as people rather than producers and consumers.



Figure 2. The Undercroft area of the Southbank.  
Source: joannapoe via Flickr. Used under Creative Commons.



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