From Landscape Architecture Magazine, September 2004

Skateparks at a Dead End

Skateboarding is one of American teens' most popular sports. So why are skateparks sited where teens can't reach them?

By Tom Miller

A pile of broken glass lies in the bottom of a four-foot bowl in Canby, Oregon's public skatepark. A trio of preteens circumnavigates the glass shards as if they do not exist. The skaters explain, "We can't skate with glass all over the bowl, so we use our shoes to push it all into one place."

Raise the issue of the skatepark in Canby's Police Headquarters and heads turn in consternation. Patrol Officer T. Brittain concedes with a field guide of concerns. "The park routinely floods, we see regular graffiti, adjacent businesses complain about property damage from skaters and now have cameras on-site, the helmet requirement is so regularly ignored we could issue exclusionary citations every day. The skatepark has become a hindrance for us."

What's up with this place?

Sam Haney, 15, answers bluntly: "They should have put it closer to town." Like Haney, other skaters are bewildered by the decision to site the skatepark at the terminus of a dead-end road on the industrial edge of town.

Carla Ahl of Canby Planning & Building confirms Haney's observations. "It has become a place to meet at night for bad behavior. Overall, the skatepark is a good thing, but we could have put a little more thought into its location."

Canby's unfortunate situation is all the more striking when one learns that in a state renowned globally for its unparalleled concentration of premier skateparks, Canby's skatepark, at $330,000, was Oregon's second most expensive. To understand how this occurred, and how to avoid it elsewhere, a review of skateboard demographics is insightful.

Skateboarding is among the nation's fastest growing sports. With the International Association of Skateboard Companies counting nearly twenty million enthusiasts its place in the popularity polls is wedged between more traditional—and much better accommodated—sports like soccer and tennis. Skateboarding is more popular among youth ages six to seventeen than baseball.

Yet unlike baseball (or soccer or tennis), there are very few facilities to accommodate skateboarding. Nationwide the number of skateparks hovers around two thousand. A contrast quickly focuses into view: the nation's cities and towns are unprepared for the waves of skaters flooding their streets, parking garages, and plazas. To cite just one example, Portland, Oregon offers one hundred ninety three municipal baseball fields and just two small skateparks. According to Portland Parks & Recreation, each field is about one hundred thousand square feet

so baseball gets one ninety three million square feet while skateboarders have just sixteen thousand square feet. Put another way, Portland Parks & Recreation devotes twelve thousand times more square feet to baseball than skateboarding, despite skateboarding's greater popularity among youth.

It appears that skateboarding has kickflipped its way into everyday America and skaters need places to call their own. When officials neglect to provide skateparks, skaters simply make do with the local steps, benches, and ledges. This much Canby understood. Where Canby erred was in allowing the sport's detractors, rather than its supporters, to determine where and how it would be accommodated.

Canby's skatepark detractors wanted the skatepark out of sight out of mind. As a result, the town missed the first rule of thumb, which applies universally: skateparks should be sited in high visibility locations. Although skaters can vary from ages five to fifty-five or beyond, the National Sporting Goods Association pegs the average skater at fourteen years of age. The demographic will mature slightly as well-built skateparks encourage longevity among older skaters, but skateboarding is likely to remain primarily the province of teenagers.

When user age demographics are understood, two key skatepark siting criteria become apparent. First, a majority of skaters need to be able to conveniently access the skatepark without dependence on Mom or Dad or mass transit. (Parents are typically working and unavailable to shuttle kids to and from skateparks.) Mass transit is fine where available, but often non-existent in some towns and sporadic in others. The closer to schools or other youth centers the better.

Second, it is important to acknowledge that teens—skaters or otherwise—can be prone to doing foolish and sometimes dangerous things. Adult supervision is critical, but the kind of adult supervision is even more important. When possible, siting skateparks within existing high use areas, such as busy parks or near town centers, establishes the best patterns of oversight. A steady flow of spontaneous spectators and passersby creates consistent de facto supervision which rewards skaters with a needed sense of community inclusion as well as safety and security. By contrast, forced surveillance in the form of de jure supervision can direct a town's skatepark budget away from needed skatepark square footage and immediately establish an unproductive "them versus us" attitude between skaters and city officials. Encouraging community policing of the skatepark through site design has proven to be the cheapest, most effective way of ensuring youth use the facility for the park's intent: skateboarding.

Dan Hughes of Renton, Washington, who has twenty-six years of skateboarding experience, notes that skateboarding for the past twenty years has largely been an alternative recreational undertaking. Property owners, city officials, and others in the mainstream have long frowned upon skaters. Non-accommodation has calloused skate culture with non-conformity.

Canby's decision to site the skatepark on the edge of its industrial zone was the result of the "not in my backyard" effect. Neighbors to more centrally located community lands felt uncomfortable with the prospect of an unknown recreational use close to home or work. The skatepark became the ugly duckling nobody wanted nearby, and the skatepark's feared impacts were predetermined as a result.

By contrast, in San Jose, California, long a hotbed of skateboarding, police and city planners worked with Dreamland Skateparks to determine the best site for a skatepark. San Jose's CPTED process determined that the ideal location for a skatepark for police is one that can be passed and observed from the ease of their own vehicles. By reducing the supervisory presence from on-site oversight to simple drive-bys as necessary, San Jose's police believe they will decrease inevitable unease that occurs when skaters and police meet face to face.

Design Matters

Good visibility is critical to a skatepark's success, but high quality design is just as important says Carter Dennis, director of the San Antonio Skatepark Coalition in Texas. Proper design helps to establish respect at and for the skateparks because it attracts older, more mature skaters who have a clear appreciation for the privilege of a skatepark. Adult skaters tend to be comparatively more proficient than teens and their combination of age and ability sets the tone and example for other users. "Skaters need to be excited about their park's potential if you want them to care for it. You have to hire designers who actually skate. And I don't mean 'used to skate.' I mean, they skate today; they know what's going on in skateboarding right now."

Steve Gump, a 40-year old skater and father of two who frequents Newberg, Oregon's skatepark, supports Mr. Dennis's suggestions. "No amount of non-skater supervision can replace the calm efficiency of adult skaters self-policing the skatepark. We regulate by example. It's a cultural thing. But it only happens when the parks are good enough to attract skaters of all abilities, including the older generation. I don't waste my time at poorly designed parks that don't challenge me. Each park establishes its own behavior. If you want older, more responsible skaters out there, you need to design for us too. That means providing terrain that challenges high level skaters."

Visibility and design help to select the best site for a skatepark. Knowing how many will skate and frequent the skatepark may be equally valuable, as the number can surprise even recreation professionals. A recent survey directed to skatepark managers through the National Parks & Recreation Association revealed that the single most common complaint among skatepark managers is that they did not build their skateparks large enough to meet need. As a result their parks are overcrowded and unsafe, which translates into skaters inevitably returning to the locations they used to skate prior to the establishment of the skatepark.

So how many will skate? Counting hands at community meetings rarely provides an accurate assessment of how many will use the skatepark. There is the challenge of getting youth to city meetings. Another is the indifference many young adults have today for government process; even if they can attend they may be unlikely to bother. Further complicating matters is the reality that skateparks will necessarily be destinations more regional than local until each community has provided its own facility. With just two thousand spread thinly across the nation today, skaters will be traveling across city lines to share skateparks for years to come. And because each skatepark is unique—more like a golf course than football field—skaters will always travel to "session" something distinct, no matter how many skateparks are provided.

Unfortunately no known data collection exists to determine the number of skateboarders in any given area. One crude but approximate measurement to gather a number of local skaters is to extract a local number from the estimate of twenty million nationwide. The US Census reports over 292 million residents nationwide. The International Association of Skateboard Industries suggests 20 million Americans skateboard, so 7% of Americans skateboard. Assuming Philadelphia, Pennsylvania has an equal share of that percentage, more than 105,000 of Philadelphia's 1,500,000 residents skateboard. Philadelphia is at the forefront of skatepark controversy today with the city's decision in 2002 to render inaccessible to skaters "Love Park" (aka JFK Plaza), a city plaza globally renowned for its unintentionally attractive skateable elements. Inevitably, that decision prompted outrage among local skaters who began to organize and lobby for skateparks. The city is currently in the process of planning a million dollar plus investment in skate facilities. While there is no established guideline for skatepark size, if Philadelphia employs a standard based on Oregon's acclaimed parks—about one to two square feet of skateable surface per resident—that investment will initiate the beginning of continued financial support for city skateparks in Philadelphia.

Once a reasonable guess at the number of expected users is generated and high visibility sites are identified, some communities favor sites that offer opportunities to expand in the future. Given skateboarding's burgeoning growth over the last ten years it is unlikely many communities have the financial resources to meet the skatepark need all at once. As the nation's youth trend away from traditional team sports to more individualized activities like skateboarding, developing skateparks in phases can be a wise move. A practical way to develop skateparks in phases is to ensure the sites selected allow for expansion.

While developing a successful skatepark can be a challenge, it need not spin communities new to the process like a Tony Hawk 900. By taking into careful consideration the three key elements of high visibility, proper design, and adequate size that compliment the traditional environmental concerns such as topography, subjacent support, and drainage already familiar to landscape architects, city decision-makers are well poised to provide superior skateparks for their communities. The kids get it. Canby skateboarder Haney ponders the glass in his bowl and offers, "We don't want hassles with cops and whatever. We just want to skate."

Author bio

References

"The Makings of a Skatepark," *Landscape Architecture,* April 2004.