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Skatepark as Neoliberal Playground

Urban Governance, Recreation Space, and the Cultivation of Personal Responsibility

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More than 2,000 skateboard parks have been built in the United States over the past decade. Although these parks are a response to community demand, many cities have provided these facilities on certain neoliberal conditions. As a review of parks management literature reveals, cities assume no liability for injuries and expect skateboarders to secure private funding; urban managers also expect skateboarders to display character traits of personal responsibility and entrepreneurialism. This is in contrast to Progressive Era playgrounds, where cities completely financed playgrounds and took responsibility for personal safety; urban managers also sought to inculcate values of loyalty, which they viewed as necessary in an increasingly bureaucratized society. The comparison highlights how the skatepark can be viewed as an instance in which neoliberal governance practices have reconfigured the citizen–state relationship from one of entitlement to one of contractualism.

Keywords: *skateboard parks; skateboarding; playgrounds; neoliberalism; urban governance; Progressivism; personal responsibility*

At the time of writing, *Skateboarder Magazine* lists more than 2,100 skateboard parks in the United States—with parks in every state, as well as in Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico—a list that the authors acknowledge is incomplete ("Skateparks," 2006). In 1997, there were only about 165 such parks in the United States (Borden, 2001), meaning that the skatepark phenomenon has increased more than tenfold over the past 10 years. Why has this building boom occurred?

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A first layer of explanation must refer to skateboarding participation rates. The National Sporting Goods Association (2007) reports that the number of skateboarders in the United States has grown from 4.5 million in 1995 to 12 million in 2005, an increase of almost 178%; during the same time frame, participation in football increased modestly from 8.3 million to 9.9 million, whereas participation in baseball dropped from 15.7 million to 14.6 million. Other market research firms, like American Sports Data, suggest that participation rates in skateboarding are even higher (Skate Plaza Foundation, 2004). Whatever the exact figure, skateboarding is by any measure one of the most popular sports in the United States. As a result, skateboarding has now become a $5.5 billion industry (Higgins, 2006), with sufficient resources to have created nonprofits, foundations, and professional associations that not only lobby municipalities for skateparks but also provide funding and technical assistance.

Without sanctioned places to practice, skateboarders had been occupying parking lots, empty swimming pools, drainage ditches, plazas, sidewalks, streets, schoolyards, building foundations, and just about any other paved space they could get their wheels on. Municipalities have tended to perceive this occupation as an impediment to traffic flows and as a potential danger to pedestrians and to the skateboarders themselves, which translates into a liability threat for cities. Furthermore, skateboarders' use of street furniture and hand rails consistently causes minor property damage, which has spawned a secondary industry in the manufacture of architectural deterrents to skateboarding and the dissemination of anti-skate design expertise (Borden, 2001; Howell, 2005; Kay, 1998; Ravensforge Skateboard Solutions, 2006). Restrictive legislation is on the books in municipalities across the United States, but considering participation levels and property damage, the need for skate facilities has become apparent to "urban managers" (a term that I will use throughout this article to describe those individuals—public officials and their staffs, parks and recreation professionals, architects and landscape architects, and increasingly private businesspeople—who, at the municipal level, collectively determine what will be built and how it will be regulated).

With significant input from the skateboard industry, and from local skateboarders themselves, cities have hired skatepark design firms to provide facilities containing a jumble of design elements simulating the urban spaces that skateboarders have inhabited, often illegally. The parks average about 10,000 square feet (Gembeck, 2001), approximately the same size as an athletic field. Skateparks often stand alone, but like the athletic field, the sandbox, and the swing set, the skatepark has also become one of many elements that are often sited adjacent to one another on large playgrounds (see Figure 1).

The skatepark revolution is a response to demand, but urban managers' motivations for providing these parks are more complex. Through a review of their professional literature, I show that urban managers in the United States focus less on skateparks as a means of satisfying community demand and more on specific behaviors of skateboarders, such as securing majority funding for the construction of parks, refraining from bringing liability cases for injuries, and informally policing surrounding neighborhoods. The literature also notes that the parks themselves serve as zones of economic activity, where stunts are documented and distributed (in magazines and videos) by the multibillion-dollar skateboard industry. This focus in the professional literature demonstrates that urban managers view skateparks as a means by which to reward and encourage specific character traits in young people, principally personal responsibility, self-sufficiency, and entrepreneurialism.

To understand why this bundle of qualities is endorsed by urban managers, I argue that it is necessary to consider the adoption of New Public Management (NPM) in

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Figure 1.
Note: The skatepark in Berkeley, California, is sited next to a soccer field. Photo by author.

municipalities across the country. There has been much debate about what specific governance practices do and do not qualify as NPM practices, but there is general agreement that NPM is essentially a set of neoliberal governance reforms that have encouraged public agencies to function as businesses. In this article, I use the term *NPM* to refer not to specific governance practices (the purchaser–provider split, results-oriented budgeting, etc.) but, rather, to the broader shift toward entrepreneurial urban governance, and the attendant reconfiguring of the citizen–state relationship away from entitlement and toward contractualism. Whatever an individual park manager or city council member might believe about the proper roles of citizen and state, the NPM reforms have been sufficiently pervasive to have created a neoliberal governance context in which all urban managers must operate. As Peck and Tickell (2002) have argued, "The neoliberal vision of a free economy and a minimalist state . . . has become a commonsense of the times" (p. 381); this, they argue, is true at global, national, and local scales. Or, as Larner and Walters (2004) put it, neoliberalism does not describe a completed set of institutions, as much as a set of ideals, an ethos. Skateparks, I argue, are one mechanism through which to promote these neoliberal ideals, particularly as they pertain to the desired personal qualities of young citizens.

To put this citizen–state shift into broader perspective, this article undertakes not a comprehensive history but a historical comparison between the skatepark revolution and the Progressive Era playground movement. In terms of the broader governance contexts, there are some clear parallels. Of course, NPM is not entirely new; in fact, the basic concept of professional, efficient, managerial-style governance, modeled on business practices, dates back to the Progressive Era. Like skateparks, playgrounds were urban managers' rational response to a demand for recreation space. Also like

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skateparks, playgrounds were conceived of as places to contain young people who might otherwise be playing in the streets, while simultaneously cultivating in those young people social values that advocates deemed desirable. However, as self-described social engineers, playground advocates were more aggressive in their attempts to inculcate appropriate personal qualities through extensive activities programming and through supervision. Furthermore, these socialization efforts extended to a much broader range of concerns than those addressed by skatepark advocates—from national identity to work habits, from gender roles to class relations. To address all of these issues and more, playground advocates put particular emphasis on the cultivation of loyalty (Gagen, 2000b), which they viewed as a necessary quality for success in an increasingly corporate economy, bureaucratized government, and fragmented society. In contrast, skatepark advocates have focused narrowly on the promotion of an almost opposite value of personal responsibility, a quality that is prized in an increasingly neoliberalized society. As a review of parks and recreation literature makes clear, today's urban managers view skateparks as a type of playground (Dahlgren, 2006); I argue that the skatepark is, in fact, a neoliberal playground.

I do not assume, in my analysis of either skateparks or playgrounds, that young people have been completely contained or that they have passively absorbed the qualities that urban managers have hoped to instill (Gagen, 2000a, 2000b). Rather, I assume that just the opposite is true—that the relationship between young person and state is always fraught with contestation. Goodman (1979) offers evidence that during the Progressive Era, children on the Lower East Side of New York City regularly flouted playground rules; children on one Bronx playground even went on strike against their playground supervisor. Today's urban managers are aware that skateparks are unlikely to lure all skateboarders away from so-called street spots (Dahlgren, 2006). Owens (2001) shows that some skateboarders are not interested in using skateparks precisely because they view the parks as part of a containment strategy.

As Borden (2001) demonstrates, skateboarding is a complex culture, based on the creative reappropriation of urban forms. However, my subject is explicitly not the activities and motivations of skateboarders. Existing studies on the relationship between skateboarding and urban management tend to focus on the lack of provision for skateboarders, their exclusion from public space, and their marginalization from the decision-making process. This study takes an obverse approach, examining the ways that skateboarders have been included in the decision-making process and the ways that their needs have been addressed. This article, then, will focus not on youth culture but, rather, on how urban managers conceive of their own strategies for handling youth culture.

To ascertain those conceptions, I rely on discussions of skateparks in professional literature from the fields of public management and parks management and, secondarily, on skatepark advocacy materials. These sources are supplemented with reportage from national and local news outlets and from skateboard media. For information on the playground movement, I rely on primary-source publications from the Playground Association of America (PAA), like the magazine *The Playground*, and on secondary sources that use much of the same evidence base. The publication that I refer to most frequently is *Parks & Recreation* (*PR*). This magazine is published by the National Recreation and Parks Association, an organization that traces its lineage directly to the PAA. *The Playground* and *PR* are both aimed at parks professionals and urban managers more generally, and both contain a similar mix of articles: part practical management, and part recreation boosterism. Both publications also contain a similar mix of

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authors, ranging from the leaders of the national organizations, to city employees, to representatives from stakeholder industries (like real estate and insurance). But before moving to a discussion of my primary-source findings, I begin with a review of the pertinent geography literature.

Governance, Young People, and Skateparks in Geographic Literature

In recent years, the subject of skateboarding has spurred much academic interest in the fields of geography, architecture, planning, and urban design. Borden (2001) argues that skateboarding performs a critique of architecture, reasserting use values where exchange values have come to dominate. Many studies since Borden's have focused on practitioners' marginal status as users of public space, citing exclusions accomplished through anti-skate architecture, municipal codes, signage, aggressive policing tactics, and moral panics. These works advance a critique in line with the influential works of Davis (1992) and Sorkin (1992), arguing, in essence, that these exclusions should be viewed as instances of the erosion of truly public space (see Németh, 2006; Stratford, 2002). Although there are considerable differences in specific locales and methodologies, nearly all of the recent studies on skateboarding include a call for more participative governance, integrating skateboarders into the design and planning of public space (Freeman & Riordan, 2002; Németh, 2006; Nolan, 2003; Owens, 2001; Stratford, 2002). For example, Stratford (2002) looks at the relationship between skateboarding and urban governance by focusing on the spatial politics of Franklin Square in Hobart, Tasmania, a case that she uses to demonstrate that skateboarders currently have a "feral" status (p. 198). Stratford concludes that "recent shifts in how urban governance is conceived and practised and in the reconstruction of the citizen (autonomous, responsible) mean that skaters *need* to be accommodated in the city. They must be embraced as moral subjects and provided with opportunities to participate in responsible community life" (p. 202).

In terms of focus, the literature on skateboarding tracks closely with recent geography literature on children and young people generally. For example, in her consideration of teenagers, Valentine (2004) argues that moral panics have been used to justify the restriction of young people's freedoms in public space, thereby imposing an "adultist" hegemony, which leads the author to question whether such spaces can be considered truly public. Valentine concludes with a call to enhance "participatory governance" by involving children and young people "in the creation of public spaces," ensuring that they "can begin to be counted as legitimate members of the polity" (p. 111). One of the benefits of such an effort, Valentine argues, would be to help young people "to develop a sense of empowerment and 'ownership' of the places and communities within which they live" (p. 108).

The skatepark movement has been understood by urban managers and others as precisely such an attempt to involve young people in the planning of public space and to instill in them a sense of ownership, autonomy, and responsibility; however, this step toward participatory governance has only been taken on certain conditions, which I elaborate on below. This article attempts to build on the work of Valentine, Stratford, and others by considering how such an effort to increase participation and ownership interfaces with the realities of contemporary urban management, particularly considering the shifts in governance practices related to the broad-based adoption of neoliberal principles like those articulated in the praxis of NPM.

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Many studies have considered the effects of neoliberalism on the everyday lives of young people but have focused on the losses imposed by these governance practices. Stratford (2002), for example, argues that the neoliberal tendency toward the privatization of public space has increased "tendencies to surveillance and exclusion" and that "private public governance does not benefit minors" (p. 199). Katz (2004) similarly focuses on the "losses and limits" (p. 174) that global economic restructuring has imposed on the everyday lives and the future prospects of children in the Sudanese village of Howa and in the New York City neighborhood of Harlem. "Up for grabs," in these restructurings, "are what constitutes being skilled, what kinds of knowledge are admissible and useful, what work attitudes are acceptable, and by whose authority these are determined" (p. x). Katz's analysis of parks and playgrounds in New York is particularly pertinent to my study. For Katz, public disinvestment in the provision, maintenance, and staffing of these spaces negatively affects "working and middle class" children's prospects for "skills development" (p. 174). Among the "most valuable" of these skills is "flexibility" (p. 178), a personal quality that is prized in the current work landscape as well as in neoliberal theory. Katz argues that public disinvestment in park and playground space severely limits the opportunities for young people to develop the skills to acquire meaningful work; therefore, such disinvestment should be regarded as a profound form "of deskilling" (p. 174).

I seek to complement Katz's study on the effects of disinvestment by analyzing one area in which urban managers have made careful reinvestments into a new kind of playground for young people. I will show, however, that these investments have only been made on certain neoliberal terms—in exchange for a park, skateboarders are typically required to secure private funding, supervise and police themselves, maintain order in surrounding neighborhoods, and more. In that sense, skateparks can be thought of as instruments of selective "reskilling," attempts by urban managers and other public officials to cultivate a bundle of personal qualities—flexibility, ownership, personal responsibility, self-sufficiency, and so on—that are required by neoliberal social, civic, and economic relations. If Katz and Stratford have highlighted the losses imposed by neoliberal governance, this study will focus on one of the things that young people have gained. With this in mind, I move now to a fuller description of what I mean by a "neoliberal governance context."

NPM as Neoliberal Municipal Governance

The concept of neoliberalism has been taken up in many fields and has recently received much scrutiny in the emerging literature on governmentality (Dean, 1999; Larner & Walters, 2004). Harvey (2005) has argued that neoliberalism is "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state," in this theory, "is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices" (p. 2). The consequences of these ideas have been legion in the fields of economic development, international relations, and monetary policy, as well as in a dozen other areas.

At the scale of municipal governance in Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) countries, the neoliberal turn has found expression in the theory and practice of NPM. The study of NPM has generated dozens of books and hundreds of articles, issuing mostly from the fields of public administration, public

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management, public policy, and economics. There are some questions about whether NPM is indeed a universal new governance paradigm in the United States. In 2001, Moon and de Leon concluded that NPM programs were not taken up universally but tended to be adopted in larger cities with better economic conditions, whereas smaller, poorer municipalities were late adopters. In 2005, Page argued that NPM practices have in fact been broadly adopted in the United States, with some variations, although he disputes the claim that these practices represent a discontinuous break with existing governmental practices, arguing instead for an evolutionary interpretation of NPM adoption. Crucially, however, Page (2005) points out that NPM reforms have been codified in federal and state law, as well as in voter expectations. So even in those places where the principles have not been formally adopted, local governments are still forced to deal with the broader realities of ever-shrinking subsidies from the federal and state governments and a citizenry increasingly averse to high-tax regimes. Although more research is needed to determine the full reach of these theories and programs, this article will assume that municipalities in the United States operate in a neoliberal governance context.

If there are some questions about its reach, there is a consensus in virtually all of this literature that NPM is founded on a reaction against the perceived inefficiency of welfare-state bureaucracy, favoring a purportedly "postbureaucratic" form of government (Page, 2005, p. 713). It is a movement that emphasizes the desirability of market-oriented approaches to management of public affairs, with an attendant endorsement of privatization, public–private collaboration, efficiency, citizen initiative, and an expanded role for the nonprofit sector (e.g., Barzelay, 2001; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000; Hanlon & Rosenberg, 1998; Hood & Peters, 2004; Kane & Patapan, 2006; Lane, 2000; "Leviathan Re-Engineered," 1996; Salskov-Iverson, Hansen, & Bislev, 2000; Tucker, 2004; Walker, 2001; Weikart, 2003).

This article focuses on NPM's implications for identity formation. Whereas public managers are increasingly encouraged to identify as entrepreneurs rather than bureaucrats (Borins, 2000; Osborne & Gaebler, 1993; Osborne & Plastrik, 2001), individual citizens are encouraged to think of themselves as consumers of public services, thus replacing language of entitlement with language of contractualism (Carney, 2002; Stark, 2002; Weikart, 2003). Both public servants and citizens are encouraged to take personal responsibility for their own advancement and welfare (Andrisani, Hakim, & Savas, 2006). As Hindess (2004) notes, the hallmark of neoliberal reforms generally is "the attempt to introduce not only market and quasi-market arrangements but also empowerment, self-government and responsibility into areas of social life which had hitherto been organised in other ways" (p. 35). Hindess further argues that such personal qualities are not endorsed for their own sake, but "as instruments of regulation" (p. 35).

Larner (2000) cautions that such instruments should not be regarded as entirely effective. Neoliberalism, she writes, is "more an ethos or an ethical ideal, than a set of completed or established institutions" (p. 20). However, it is precisely neoliberalism's status as "ethos" that lends it a kind of atmospheric authority. In their critiques of neoliberal social relations, both Harvey (2005) and Bourdieu (1998) are careful to acknowledge that most people who administer and maintain neoliberal reforms do so passively, as practical responses to their everyday circumstances. As Harvey (2005) argues, neoliberalism "has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world" (p. 3). In the following section, I argue that the prevalence of NPM concepts in the discourse surrounding skateparks provides one measure of how neoliberal reforms, to government and to personal identity positions, have become common sense.

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Skateparks as "Concrete Curriculum" for Self-Management

In a 1998 *Los Angeles Times* article titled "X Games Offer Rush of Risk and Profits" (Perry, 1998), Frank Farley, a psychologist at Temple University and past president of the American Psychological Association, said, "I'm one of those who believes that the extreme sports, the adventure sports, the thrill-seeking sports are more in tune with what America is all about than the traditional three Bs [of] basketball, baseball and bowling. The new sports," Farley continued, "are more individualistic, riskier and allow for greater creativity than the highly structured and repetitive traditional sports. All great human activity is based on risk taking" (p. 1). Articles in the national press and in business magazines typically make this connection between entrepreneurialism and risk. For example, *Entrepreneur Magazine* published an article arguing that skateboarders' "ability to face fear head on and push themselves to succeed at feats others have never tried are also qualities found in every successful entrepreneur" (Pierce, 2006). In 2006, a professional skateboarder and business owner, Jamie Thomas (Higgins, 2006), "was named Ernst & Young's entrepreneur of the year . . . for San Diego in its consumer and business products and services category" (p. A1). The announcement stated that "unstoppable drive and a fearless approach to anything he does have made Jamie Thomas not only a great skateboarder, but a winning businessman" (see http://www.infosonics.com/files/awards/EOY_2006.pdf). A *New York Times* article on the award (Higgins, 2006) quoted Thomas as saying, "Skateboarding and my pro career were like boot camp for business. . . . Trying tricks, envisioning outcomes, persevering—that's exactly like business" (p. A1). Among the so-called extreme sports, skateboarding has been singled out as an incubator of entrepreneurialism.

Skatepark lobbying organizations have mobilized the image of the entrepreneurial skater in the promotional materials they publish for urban managers. For example, the Skate Plaza Foundation advocates for skateparks that perfectly replicate existing urban plazas, like the famed Justin Herman Plaza in San Francisco, to better serve the visual requirements of the skateboard media by giving professional skateboarders, videographers, and photographers "a legal place to practice, film, and shoot photos" (Skate Plaza Foundation, 2004). After referring to the revenue—"upwards of $100 million"—that skateboard industry activity in JFK Plaza brought to Philadelphia through televised competitions, the Foundation promises that "the skate plazas will be prominently featured in all major skate media. . . . Each skate plaza will become travel destinations [*sic*] for skaters the world over—from professional skateboarders and skate media to skateboarders seeking to make a name" (Skate Plaza Foundation, 2004). Skate plazas, like the one that opened in 2005 in Kettering, Ohio, are advertised to urban managers not only as recreation spaces but also as zones of economic activity. These facilities not only serve the traditional recreation-space function of reproducing the labor force, but they are themselves sites of production for the $5.5 billion skateboard industry.

Although urban managers view skateparks as spaces that foster appropriate attitudes toward work, their professional literature focuses more attention on how skateparks encourage desirable civic qualities. In 2002, *Parks & Recreation* published an article titled "Skate Park Society Builds Responsibility and Community" (Spohn, 2002), in which the author argued that skateparks teach young people to be "self managing." Addressing urban managers' concerns about the potential for vandalism and even physical conflict, another article in *Parks & Recreation* (subtitled "City-Run Skateparks Are Not a Recipe for Disaster"; Rankin, 1997) argues that skatepark users "police themselves." Lobbying groups from the skateboard industry have worked to

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reinforce these perceptions among urban managers. The Skate Plaza Foundation (2004) literature states that the Kettering plaza will be a "guerilla community center" (see also Gilligan, 2004). The metaphor of the guerilla is employed in these promotional materials not to present skateboarders as combative, which would hardly help the cause of securing permission and funding to construct the plazas; rather, what the foundation is selling to cities is the promise of self-sufficient young people. Guerillas do not rely on institutions; they look after themselves.

The discourse surrounding liability at skateparks also illustrates the personal qualities that urban managers endorse. Changes in liability law mean that most facilities must be "Skate at your own risk," because, ironically, supervision increases liability for municipalities (Gilligan, 2004; Spohn, 2001; Thompson, 1998). Skateboarders are consistently praised for exhibiting the self-supervision and personal responsibility required to make this arrangement viable. In considering legislative reforms aimed at limiting governmental liability for skateboard injuries (which passed handily), the California Assembly Committee on the Judiciary (1997) quoted a young skater as saying that "it's already unwritten code among skateboarders, 'We know we could be hurt and are willing to take that risk'" (p. 3). Writing in a Portland daily newspaper, one journalist (Green, 2000) marveled that

> they've broken their bones, chipped their teeth, sprained their ankles, gouged their heads bloody and knocked themselves out cold. But—to the surprise of some Oregon and Southwest Washington cities, counties and recreation districts—one thing almost all injured skateboarders haven't done is sue. (p. D01)

Landscape Architecture Magazine reported that as of writing in 1998, there had never been a successful skateboard liability case (Thompson, 1998; see also Manshester, 2002):

> If cities refuse to build skateparks because they view skateboarding as an inherently dangerous activity and dread the prospect of injury claims, the evidence is that both of these notions are largely unfounded. According to the Consumer Products Safety Commission, skateboarding has a smaller percentage of reported injuries per participant than soccer, baseball, and basketball. . . . Granted, many skateboarding accidents are simply not reported—but this speaks well of skateboarders, who apparently feel that safety is their responsibility, as are injuries when they happen. (Thompson, 1998, p. 81)

Skateparks are not only the product of new limited-liability legislation; they can also be viewed as both incentive and reward for young people who accept that they are responsible for themselves.

Liability discourse is one of many pieces of evidence that urban managers interpret this language of self-sufficiency and ownership literally—in terms of demonstrable results—and not as rhetorical window dressing. Another way to trace the material expressions of "ownership" is to consider funding schemes: Skateparks are typically paid for through public–private partnerships. Oregon, for example, has a "60/40" grant requirement, where the 60 comes from a private source like a foundation or a local lobbying group. Philadelphia has approved the siting and design for a new skatepark but requires $4 million from private sources before the park can be constructed (Saffron, 2005; see Figure 2).[2] There are a number of national foundations that provide significant financing and technical assistance in response to these sorts of requirements. The Tony Hawk Foundation, named after the famous professional skateboarder, advertises that it has awarded more than $1.5 million for 313 public skateparks since 2002 (see

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Figure 2.

Note: Rendering of Anthony Bracali's design for the Schuylkill River skatepark, showing relationship to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Although this project has been approved, $4 million in private funds must be raised to finance construction. Image courtesy of Anthony Bracali, AIA.

http://www.tonyhawkfoundation.org). The Skate Plaza Foundation, which is the nonprofit arm of a skateboard shoe manufacturer called DC, has provided funding for parks in the Midwest and the South and is currently working with Californian municipalities. Skaters for Public Skateparks is a nonprofit providing advocacy and fundraising assistance, with representatives in every region of the United States (see http://www.skatersforpublicskateparks.org/index.html). There are also several instances of cities accepting donations from skateboard equipment manufacturers in exchange for naming rights, as with the Etnies Skatepark in Lake Forest, California, whose namesake is a skateboard shoe manufacturer (Borgatta, 2002). The Etnies/Lake Forest deal was given an award by *Public Management Magazine* for outstanding public–private partnership ("Program Excellence Award," 2004). But the majority of the private financing comes from the fundraising efforts of local, single-issue civic groups like the Klamath Alternative Sports Alliance in Klamath Falls, Oregon; the Temuchin Skatepark Fund in Ithaca, New York; and the Walla Walla Skatepark Association in Walla Walla, Washington.

Financing, however, is only the first stage; once a park is constructed, urban managers expect that the park will be largely self-supervised, self-maintained, and self-policed. Posted Rule Number 8 at the skate plaza of Kettering states that "the skate plaza is self policing" (City of Kettering, 2005). An article in *Parks & Recreation* argues that a "well-designed skatepark will produce a cadre of built-in supervisors" (Newman, 2003). Another, titled "Pay to Play," is explicit about the financial benefits of this self-management: "This free labor can factor into the cost of the skatepark," the author argues, "and could relieve the park department from providing staff supervision" (Gilligan, 2004 p. 63; see also Johnson, 2000). The author refers to skaters' experience in a park as a "concrete curriculum . . . a lesson plan encoded in concrete" (Gilligan,

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2004, p. 62). As always, skatepark lobbyists have played to these expectations. According to one lobbying aid, produced by a skateboard manufacturer, the "work isn't done" once a skatepark is built. "POLICE YOURSELVES," the aid mandates: "The most important thing is that you make the rules as well as obey them" (Consolidated Skateboards, n.d.; see also Gragg, 2005).

Many urban managers have recognized that the potential of skateboarders to maintain order on a volunteer basis does not stop at the gates of the skatepark. Professional public management literature, local press outlets, and academic studies have all commented extensively on how the presence of skateboarders can deter vandalism, drug use, prostitution, and homeless encampments—skateboarders provide "eyes on the street" (Christ, 2000, 2001; Duin, 2000; Dundas, 2005; Gilligan, 2004; Howell, 2005; Levin, 2006; Pflaum, 2004; Saffron, 2001; Spicer, 1994, 1995b; Spohn, 2002; Zelinka & Johnston, 2005). Police in Portland reported that the Burnside skatepark, which was built without the city's permission by skateboarders, was responsible for a precipitous drop in car theft and robberies in the surrounding neighborhood (Dawdy, 2000). Leveraging this potential, the city had at least 75 park users sign agreements that they would maintain the surrounding areas, in exchange for municipal sanction of the park (Spicer, 1995a). The secondary effects of skateparks are so well established in the minds of Portland residents that the parks have even been recognized as a potential force of gentrification; in one neighborhood that is slated for a skatepark, "The biggest concern for people nearby is displacement of poor or homeless for whom the area long has been a refuge" (Christ, 2001). Such concerns notwithstanding, urban managers across the country are adding skateparks to their toolkit for the revitalization of poor and former industrial areas.

The best evidence that urban managers view skateparks as a means of promoting personal responsibility is the growing trend for cities and other government agencies to sanction illegal, self-built skateparks after the fact. In cities across the country, skateboarders with construction experience have built parks on vacant parcels of land (often beneath overpasses) without permission, using their own materials and labor. Such parks exist in Seattle, Portland, Philadelphia, San Diego, Los Angeles, and Oakland at least. In all cases, the skateboarders were censured for working outside of official channels but also praised for their initiative and voluntarism, and in all cases, the parks were eventually given government sanction, except in Seattle where those negotiations are currently under way (Levin, 2006). The most high profile of these cases is the Bordertown Skatepark in Oakland, which was built beneath a highway on land owned by Caltrans, the state's transportation authority (see Figures 3 and 4). When Caltrans discovered the park in 2005, they announced that it would be bulldozed immediately. However, the park was saved when local political elites—including Mayor Jerry Brown and U.S. Senator Barbara Boxer—weighed in on the side of the skateboarders (Lundstrom, 2005; Zamora, 2005a, 2005b). The president of the city council, Ignacio de la Fuente (Zamora, 2005a), remarked that

> it was amazing to see something so large and complex built totally by youth volunteers, and paid for out of their own pocket money. . . . Obviously, Caltrans has some concerns about liability and its land being built on illegally, but you'd have to have your head in the sand to not see there is something wonderful happening here. (p. B1)

The original DIY skatepark, Burnside in Portland, was sanctioned in 1994. Explaining the Portland City Council's decision to the *New York Times*, a spokesperson said that "the Council admired the skaters' 'just do it' attitude" ("Homemade Skate Park," 1994).

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Figure 3.

Note: Bordertown skatepark in Oakland, California. Although it has received municipal sanction, Bordertown remains closed until the skateboarders' nonprofit organization can raise $2.5 million for an insurance policy. Because skateboarders are not present, it has become a graffiti spot. Photo by author.

Such statements of admiration have been common, and they suggest that what is at stake for urban managers is the promotion not only of a self-sufficient citizenry but also of their own public images. At writing, Boxer's official Web site prominently features a photo of the senator being interviewed in front of one of the transitioned walls at Bordertown. As part of their 2004 campaigns, two separate mayoral candidates in Philadelphia skateboarded across JFK plaza to publicly protest a skateboarding ban in that space (Howell, 2005). The fact that an activity like skateboarding holds promotional appeal for public officials cannot be understood without reference to the NPM revolution. In 2000, *Public Administration Review* published a study titled "Loose cannons and rule breakers, or enterprising leaders? Some evidence about innovative public managers" (Borins, 2000). As the title suggests, Borins defends the tenets of NPM, making the case that the maverick public officials who appear to be taking unwarranted risks are often the most effective (Borins, 2000; see also Osborne & Gaebler, 1993; Osborne & Plastrik, 2001). Although Boxer states that she is supporting amenities for her younger constituents, one wonders whether a U.S. senator would also support an unengineered, illegal structure, built by people who were trespassing on public land (referring to them as "volunteers"), were it not for the currency of the ideas advanced by Borins and others (Zamora, 2005b). In a neoliberal governance context, it is in the interest of public officials to associate themselves with any entrepreneurial activity that produces measurable social and financial benefits.

To put the skatepark into historical perspective, I turn now to a brief history of the Progressive Era playground and, finally, to a comparison of the skatepark and the playground. This comparison highlights the different character traits that have been

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Figure 4.

Note: The skateboarders who illicitly constructed Bordertown incorporated the pillars of a freeway overpass into the design. Photo by author.

endorsed by urban managers in neoliberal and Progressive governance contexts: self-sufficiency and loyalty, respectively. I also highlight the different mechanisms by which urban managers believed those traits should be instilled: autonomous responses to social conditions on one hand, and socialization through directed play on the other. If

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the skatepark is a contemporary variation of the urban form established by the playground movement, this comparison demonstrates the shift in social function that this form has undergone.

Socialization for Loyalty on the Progressive Era Playground

Playgrounds began to appear in the United States in the late 1880s and early 1890s in northern industrial cities. The first playgrounds were attached to settlement houses; for example, Chicago's first playground was opened at Jane Addams's Hull House in 1893. The idea caught on quickly, and by 1906, the PAA was created under the leadership of settlement house workers (Jane Addams), tenement house reformers (Jacob Riis and Lawrence Veiller), philanthropists (Joseph Lee), and leaders of the Young Men's Christian Association (Luther Gulick and Theodore Roosevelt). By 1928, the PAA reported that more than $31.7 million had been spent on public recreation over the previous year and that 872 cities now boasted 12,159 individual playgrounds (PAA, 1929). These playgrounds were sited disproportionately in working class neighborhoods, and they contained any combination of three principle elements: sandboxes, equipment (like seesaws and swings), and athletic fields and courts. They tended to be divided by gender and by age (Cranz, 1982; Gagen, 2000b). Statistics published by the PAA show that playgrounds across the country were overwhelmingly funded through municipal appropriations, taxes, and bonds, whereas only a tiny fraction were funded (even partially) with private and voluntary subscription (e.g., PAA, 1909).

In the first instance, the playground was aimed at the problem of "scrub play," that is, play initiated by children themselves (Rader, 1990, p. 224). Of particular concern were games like stickball that occupied the streets in immigrant neighborhoods. Photographs of such play were featured in Riis's (1890) famous *How the Other Half Lives* and contributed to a moral panic among the middle and upper classes. Cavallo (1981) and especially Goodman (1979) have demonstrated that the politics of traffic flow was part of the rationale behind providing playgrounds; urban managers sought to free up the streets for the efficient flow of workers and goods (see also Gagen, 2000b). But the motivations of the Progressive reformers/urban managers were much more complicated.

To understand why the movement grew so quickly, it is important to understand that, from the reformers' perspective, the city that was emerging in the wake of the Civil War was not a stable proposition. On one hand, this city was menaced by the rampant individualism and greed of the laissez-faire capitalist, who was responsible for creating and profiting from an inhumane environment for the poor, in terms of both work and living conditions. On the other hand, this city was threatened by the competing practices and worldviews—anarchism and socialism, Catholicism and Judaism—of the new immigrant working classes. Taken together, these conditions seemed to portend a whole complex of threats to the very fabric of civilization; these threats included labor radicalism, racial strife, social fragmentation, rampant commercialism, moral and physical degeneration, disintegration of traditional gender roles and so also of the traditional family, and diminution of national identity (Cavallo, 1981; Gagen, 2000a, 2000b, 2004; Goodman, 1979). Although advocates tended to be more focused on some problems rather than others (Americanization efforts, for example, were of primary importance), they believed that the playground was a means by which to address all of these threats.

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For the purposes of this article, the precise mechanisms through which each of these social ills was to be addressed are less important than the fact that playground advocates had faith in the malleability of young people through scientifically conceived socialization efforts. These efforts were designed with reference to theories of developmental psychology, with significant influence from evolutionary theory. "Recapitulation theory," for example, had much currency within the PAA. The theory posited that children develop through a series of stages that correspond to the evolutionary development of "the race" (Cavallo, 1981, pp. 56-60, 76-81).[3] Because children up to age 3 were "'infused' with memories of the species' primordial amphibious origins, 'when our seaborne ancestors first made good their footing on the beach,'" the play style appropriate to that age was manipulation of sand (p. 77). In the next stage, interactions with more sophisticated equipment, like swings and, later, jungle gyms, were meant to guide children through their simian phase, and so on. The final two stages prior to adulthood were "the 'Big Injun' or self-assertive" stage, which ended around the 12th year, and "adolescence, 'the age of loyalty,' [which] extended into the mid twenties" (p. 77).

If there was broad agreement that children proceeded through developmental stages, there was also broad agreement that their development must be directed, that there was a "normal course of play" that would not unfold properly without social influence from trained adults and from peers who were developing normally. Accordingly, playgrounds were to be supervised at all times; signage was often present informing users that play was not permitted unless a "play leader" was present (Cavallo, 1981, p. 79). These play leaders—sometimes described as "play efficiency engineers" or "social engineers"—were charged with "organizing instincts," directing young people's development toward socially appropriate identities (Cavallo, 1981; Goodman, 1979). This socialization was to be achieved through extensive programming—occasional parades for all children, ring games (like ring-around-the-rosy) for children in preadolescent developmental stages, crafts and folk dances for older girls, team sports and interplayground competitions for the older boys, and a variety of other directed activities.

Which personal qualities were to be cultivated depended on gender and age. Gagen (2000b) has examined the strategies through which reformers sought to maintain heterosexist gender divisions and encourage qualities of domesticity in adolescent girls. But here I will focus on those personal qualities that playground professionals deemed desirable and appropriate for adolescent and immediately preadolescent boys. In these stages, playground professionals sought to draw out and cultivate the instincts for cooperation, social unity, and especially loyalty (Cavallo, 1981; Gagen, 2000a). This was to be accomplished through the experience of team games but also through the attendant development of the musculature, which playgrounders understood to be intimately related to psychological and moral development (Cavallo, 1981; Gagen, 2004).

In explaining the rationale behind such directed play, Gulick (PAA, 1909, p. 25-67) stated that "the child does not exist as an independent integer. He is a part of the social whole. He needs the rest as much as the rest needs him, and these complex forms of control are genuine, though indefinite and limited" (p. 296). In the playgrounders' view, adolescence was a critical stage: Although the adolescent boy had a predisposition to absorb Gulick's lesson, left to his own devices in the urban circumstances in which he found himself, he was likely to remain mired in an earlier developmental stage characterized by selfish, individualistic, and "savage" behavior. Playground professionals blamed this "moral anarchy" as much on the "public-be-damned" capitalist as on the lawless immigrant, but the environmental consequences were the same (Cavallo, 1981). The remedy was to ensure that young people renounced such individualism; as one playground professional put it, the "mark of all morality is subordination" (p. 78).

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Playground advocates believed they were doing more than simply deterring crime by keeping adolescents off the streets; they understood their work in terms of a broader sociological analysis of economic relations and nationhood. Neither a corporate industrial economy nor a country of immigrants could function, they believed, without social unity. Consistent with other Progressive reform movements, many playground advocates further believed that the proper governmental form for such a nation was an efficient, centralized bureaucracy based on the model of corporate business (Cavallo, 1981). If this corporate, bureaucratized nation were to thrive, the next generation of Americans would have to be equipped with a "corporate conscience," which Lee (cited in Cavallo, 1981) described in these terms:

> The point is not in making money but in making good, in holding down the part assigned to you in the economy of the social whole to which you may belong, as the boy in the school team holds down third base. It is only as he thrills and vibrates to the structure of the whole, as the life of the social organism flows through him and compels him to his task and his place, that the full life of the individual comes forth. (p. 100)

To successfully navigate Taylorist workplaces and bureaucratic civic institutions, tomorrow's adults would need to instinctively subordinate themselves to authority and to group goals (Cavallo, 1981; Goodman, 1979). Playgrounders conceived of loyalty as a cognitive skill that they could cultivate in young people, a skill that was necessary for the success of an individual as well as for the success of the economy and the nation.

Comparison and Conclusion: The Neoliberal Playground

Skateparks and playgrounds share many characteristics. In the first instance, both are public responses to citizen demand for recreation space, and there can be no doubt that these provisions have benefited the lives of millions of young people.

Both playgrounds and skateparks have also been embraced by city planners, boosters, and property owners. As Cranz (1982) shows, playgrounds were "an early form of urban renewal, since they could replace less desirable land uses such as city dumps, cemeteries, slums, the empty grounds of defunct reformatories or breweries, old piers, rooftops, and vacant lots" (p. 84). In a 1928 *Playground* article titled "The Economic Values of Recreation," the president of the Chamber of Commerce of the USA argued that the playground movement had received "decisive" support from business leaders and planners who believed that public recreation space helped property owners enhance land values, cities attract manufacturers, and manufacturers retain workers (Butterworth, 1928). "A commodious playground, teeming with youngsters every day of the year," he argued, "is evidence of a city's greatness quite as impressive as smoking factory chimneys" (p. 498).[4] Skateparks have similarly served as a tool to enhance land values and replace less "desirable" land uses. In the 2000s, as economic competition among cities revolves less around attracting employers and more around attracting workers (Clark, Lloyd, Wong, & Jain, 2004; Dewan, 2006; Florida, 2002; Howell, 2005), skateparks have taken on additional functions. "The mayor of Louisville, for example, sees a skatepark as an important facet of major downtown urban renewal, one that attracts and retains young, tech-savvy residents, employees and business owners, the type of residents that desire downtown living near new urban entertainment facilities and parks that cater to 'alternative' lifestyles" (Hadley, 2003, p. 10; see also "Mark(et)ed for Success," 2002).

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Both skateparks and playgrounds have been conceived of as safety valves, containing at least some of the play that would otherwise occupy city streets, endangering young people and impeding the flow of workers, shoppers, and goods (Gagen, 2000b). However, neither Progressives nor skatepark advocates have harbored illusions that this type of containment strategy could be completely effective, and in both cases, discussion of this strategy occupies a small percentage of the respective bodies of professional literature, relative to discussions about appropriate personal qualities of young people.

On the subject of which qualities were deemed appropriate, the two movements diverge. To understand the fundamental difference between the playground and the skatepark, it is useful to consider some typical descriptions that proponents of the respective spaces have offered. Describing the scene at the Progressive Era playground, Lee (cited in Cavallo, 1981) wrote,

> Rhythm is the social alchemist, who can fuse individual minds and temperaments into one substance by his spell. When people sing or march or dance together, each knows with accuracy, as in the ring games, what all the rest are doing and are going to do and in great part how they feel about it; each knows that the other knows—and so on; to the depth that the song or the movement goes the mutual understanding is complete. And it goes deeper as the rhythmic influence continues . . . until the whole emotional being of each member of the company swings to the same pulsation like a tidal wave. (pp. 79-80)

Compare the visual metaphor of a rhythmic tidal wave to one recently used to describe a skatepark (Spohn, 2002): “The scene is like a microscopic view of a large electron with dozens of positively charged particles rapidly swirling around each other, converging, nearly colliding, dodging, and sailing off again” (p. 77). If skatepark advocates imagine a social totality, it is one composed of autonomous parts, whereas Progressives conceived of playgrounds as sites of social fusion. Skatepark advocates have sought to cultivate individualism and entrepreneurialism, qualities that Progressives regarded as “asocial” at best (Cavallo, 1981, p. 3). In the frequently racist categorizations of developmentalist theories, the promotion of such qualities would likely have been viewed as ensuring that young people would remain mired in earlier evolutionary states, or savage states like the “Big Injun” phase of Recapitulation theory.

That is not to say that there are no points of agreement. For example, both playground and skatepark advocates have hoped to cultivate a sense of ownership among users. On the playground, however, the feeling of ownership was conceived of primarily in terms of the enforcement of rules and the prevention of vandalism through the mechanism of peer influence (Cavallo, 1981). Advocates expect that this same process will occur in the skatepark, yet here, the meaning of ownership is much broader and more literal. Skaters “own” their parks because they are responsible for a significant portion of the funding, whereas playgrounds were funded almost exclusively with public moneys. Skaters own their parks because they manage, police, design, and even build those parks. In both spaces, peer influence has been seen as important, yet on the playground, even peer influence was to be molded and supervised by an adult who had received training in playground management. In the skatepark, by contrast, supervision is self-supervision.

As a consideration of liability makes clear, skatepark advocates believe that the feeling of ownership that is associated with self-management extends not only to the space of the park but also to the body of the skateboarder himself or herself. General liability restrictions, along with the so-called hazardous sports legislation—enacted in California, Utah, and other states (Spohn, 2001)—have relieved governmental agencies from

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personal injury liability, thus enabling the boom in skatepark construction. In one sense, then, skateparks can be thought of as legally binding contracts: recreation space in exchange for the acceptance of personal responsibility. Given the explosion of liability lawsuits in the 1980s, and the neoliberal governance context (ever-shrinking subsidies and tax base) in which most municipalities operate, the wisdom of such an arrangement seems apparent, because in many cases, the alternative is no public recreation space at all.

To the Progressives, however, this idea would have been anathema. In fact, the establishment of liability law was one of the many Progressive reforms that were concurrent with the playground movement. The laws were founded on the belief that because the worker in a modern industrial factory or mine had little control over the actions of fellow employees and even less control over the work environment, the risk should be placed on the employer and the state (Urofsky, 1983). Similarly, on the playground, the responsibility for safety rested with the play leader, not the individual child. Cavallo (1981) shows that the playground movement was a product of reformers' desire "to transfer control of children's play from the children and their families to the state" (p. xi). The skatepark revolution is an instance where that transfer is being reversed, where control is being devolved from the state back to children. Consistent with other neoliberal reforms, the skatepark revolution marks a move away from a parens patriae relationship between citizen and state toward a more contractual relationship.

The reconfiguration of this civic environment also becomes clear when one considers the range of social issues that the respective movements have taken up. Progressives addressed the playground to issues of national identity, gender roles, family composition, crime rates, race relations, class relations, work attitudes, hygiene, household living habits, physical development, and a host of lesser concerns. In contrast, skatepark advocates have focused on the transactional aspects of the relationship between citizen and local municipal agency: demand, liability, maintenance, funding, land use, and so on. The endorsement of personal responsibility is directed toward the smooth functioning of this contractual relationship. Skateparks are a selective investment in the reskilling of young people to navigate this new civic environment. Even those discussions in which skatepark advocates endorse the personal quality of entrepreneurialism revolve primarily around the provision of the facilities themselves, as when young people construct and secure funding for parks.

Whereas playground advocates were self-described social engineers, whose activities were informed by complex social theories, the activities of skatepark advocates are comparatively untheorized. Skatepark advocates do not seek to instill and govern identities, so much as they seek to reward and encourage ("incentivize") specific preexisting, measurable behaviors, such as not bringing lawsuits for injuries, cleaning surrounding neighborhoods, funding and constructing one's own recreation space, deterring less desirable land uses, and so on. To reiterate Hindess's (2004) observation, neoliberal reforms to government are characterized by "the attempt to introduce not only market and quasi-market arrangements but also empowerment, self-government and responsibility into areas of social life which had hitherto been organised in other ways" (p. 35), in this case, areas that playground advocates had sought to organize through state mechanisms.

With shrinking budgets and market-inspired organizational reforms, urban managers in the United States have largely stepped away from the role of social engineer, yet, that withdrawal has been predicated on certain neoliberal terms. Skateparks provide one example of how municipalities are renouncing the intervention into social life for the purpose of engineering normative identities, while they simultaneously begin moving away from the idea that it is the proper role of local government to promote

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social justice by using public funds to promote social unity. As Gulick (cited in Goodman, 1979) wrote, the playground aimed to cultivate "the corporate conscience, which is rendered necessary by the complex interdependence of modern life" (p. 53). This article has argued that the U.S. skatepark is a neoliberal playground, one that aims to reward a personally responsible conscience, which is rendered necessary by the complex independence of today's modern life.

Notes

1. At various stages of research and writing, this work has benefited from the comments of Thea Chroman, Sarah Lopez, Greig Crysler, Paula Fass, Richard Walker, Paul Groth, and finally, Allan Pred, who is dearly missed.

2. The proposed park is unusually expensive because of the elaborate design and the location adjacent to the Modern Art Museum on the Schuylkill River. By comparison, the City of Portland estimates that it will cost $9 million to develop 19 parks (Nkrumah, 2005).

3. By *race*, playground advocates meant the human species. However, their descriptions of the species consistently represented physical and psychological characteristics commonly associated with White Protestants as occupying the highest point of human evolutionary development.

4. An analysis of influential city planning texts in the early part of the 20th century confirms that planners were enthusiastic advocates because they understood playgrounds as a strategy for bringing up and stabilizing surrounding property values (e.g., Comey, 1929; Lewis, 1916; Marsh, 1909; McFarland, 1929; Robinson, 1911).

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