

Chapter 7

Toonsformation: skateboarders' renegotiation of city rights

Lee Pugalis, Jon Swords, Michael Jeffries and Bob Giddings

<1> Introduction

We live in an era when ideals of human rights have moved centre stage both politically and ethically. A great deal of energy is expended in promoting their significance for the construction of a better world. But for the most part the concepts circulating do not fundamentally challenge hegemonic liberal and neoliberal market logics, or the dominant modes of legality and state action. We live, after all, in a world in which the rights of private property and the profit rate trump all other notions of rights (Harvey, 2008: 23).

According to scholars such as Harvey, the rights of citizens are being displaced by the rights of the consumer. The renegotiation of rights can be related to the continuous process of spatial capitalist restructuring, which informs and is informed by social, cultural and democratic challenges including calls for 'justice' and 'fairness', however understood and interpreted. Urban activism has been foregrounded in the global public consciousness, with nok events including the uprisings culminating in what is now referred to as the Arab Spring and anti-capitalist demonstrations initiated in New York ('Occupy Wall Street'), which subsequently spread around the world ('Occupy Movement').¹ The causes are complex and various, and the objectives diffuse, including revolts against political oppression, social exclusion, and the tyranny of economic liberalism and predatory capitalism. Such movements are helping to reframe the rights of citizens and reenergise debates, particularly at the city

scale. They are concerned with spatial justice and fairness and expressed through notions such as the ‘just city’ (Fainstein, 2014).

Drawing inspiration from the renegotiation of the rights of global urban citizens and new theoretical deliberations (Fainstein, 2014; Marcuse, 2014; Soja, 2010), we seek to explore the right of a particular subculture— urban sports activists and specifically skateboarders² – to produce space. Skateboarders are often represented by city authorities (including politicians, local government officers, city centre managers, police officers and security guards) as ‘unruly elements’ (Harvey, 2008) that infringe the rights of consumers and do damage to the urban fabric. But, members of urban sports communities – urban sports activists – including skateboarders, freerunners and BMX bikers – can also be perceived as producers of urban city space as they reimagine, use, consume and transform cities through distinct spatiotemporal patterns. Thus we deploy the term ‘activist’ in the sense that they are actively producing and reproducing the city through everyday practices. Of particular interest are the rights of skateboard activists vis-à-vis economic consumers that city authorities across the world are seeking to entice through city rebranding and redesign (Harvey, 1990).

Through the case of Newcastle upon Tyne, or the ‘Toon’ to invoke local vernacular, we observe the ‘counter-practices’ of skateboarders as they engage in an evolving, although not necessarily antagonistic contest, with city authorities as part of their spatiotemporal tactics to access the city centre and practice their right to change it (a right to produce space) (Lefebvre, 1991 [1974]). We provide a brief (and therefore partial) tracing of the transformation of Newcastle city centre over recent decades drawing attention to the implications for skaters and examine the spatial tactics performed by urban sports activists as they attempt to renegotiate their removal from the contemporary neoliberal city. This helps us

to generate new empirical insights of fairness and justice from the unique perspectives of skateboarders. Indeed, the subculture of skateboarders is largely neglected in discussions of spatial justice – (although Borden’s [2001] work is a notable exception) and skateboarders are typically absent in formal policy debates about city roles and city futures; their voice silenced in elite governance forums and even initiatives such as fairness commissions.

A focus on the spatial practices of skateboarders is instructive as it helps to illuminate the spatiotemporal rhythms of a particular subculture. In particular, the chapter explores how the spatial performance of skateboarders is a tactic deployed to renegotiate city rights, thus remaking and contesting neoliberal articulations of the role of the contemporary city predicated on profit seeking values. In addition, the spatial performance of skateboarders generates constructive relationships with city authorities, consumers and other citizens as urban sports activists seek to access, be and participate in city life. In this way, skateboarders are key producers of city spaces: the regenerators of left over spaces often ignored by global financial capital (although sometimes co-opted) and the energisers of spaces that would otherwise be largely barren outside the temporal cycle of the capitalist working day.

The chapter begins by summarising the work of Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey who have made significant contributions to theorising the notion of the right to the city. Section two provides contextual detail of how planning and commercial imperatives have altered the city centre of Newcastle and analyses the key implications for skateboarders. This is followed by our case study of the spatial performance of skateboarders in section three, which examines how this particular subculture produce space by accessing, being and participating in city life, before concluding with some brief reflections in the final section.

<1> The production of space and city rights

The production of space is far from being an ‘innocent’ process as interests collide as they attempt to exert control over different versions of *their city* (Harvey, 2011; Lefebvre, 1991 [1974]; Rosen & Shlay, 2014). ‘Control’ is a contentious term in the context of urban space as multiple processes coexist and coevolve. Thus, instruments of control, such as land use regulations and legal rights of access, which have powerful effects on the nature and form of the city, are prone to challenge and renegotiation. Minton (2012) argues that recent decades have seen the control and stratification of urban space intensify to produce a neoliberal city and a celebration of privatisation (Lefebvre, 1976). Further, Harvey (2008) attests that the right to the city is increasingly strangled by the privileged few, as new forms of urban ‘entrepreneurial’ governance apparatus blur the boundaries between civic and commercial objectives, actors and practices (Pugalis & Bentley, 2014). Harvey’s examination of spatial dispossession is instructive as it reveals that:

Surplus absorption through urban transformation has an even darker aspect. It has entailed repeated bouts of urban restructuring through ‘creative destruction’, which nearly always has a class dimension since it is the poor, the underprivileged and those marginalized from political power that suffer first and foremost from this process. Violence is required to build the new urban world on the wreckage of the old. Haussmann tore through the old Parisian slums, using powers of expropriation in the name of civic improvement and renovation. He deliberately engineered the removal of much of the working class and other unruly elements from the city centre, where they constituted a threat to public order and political power (Harvey, 2008: 33).

We would also add that the spatial fixing of capital through surplus absorption entails a demographic dimension as well as a class dimension: the rights of younger members of society are typically curtailed, the right to vote (or not) being a prime example. As we discuss below, street sport activists are more often than not categorised as ‘unruly elements’, which pose a threat to the extant capitalist order of city centres. Examples in Newcastle include attempts to remove, banish and ban skaters from the *public* grounds of Newcastle’s cathedral a *public* car park and a refurbished city centre *public* square. It is as if urban sports activists and other members of society depicted as being unruly are excluded from the broader public; their citizenship curtailed and rights removed. Nevertheless, it is important to note that what Harvey refers to as the ‘darker aspect[s]’ of urban transformation are not without challenge, exemplified by protest movements, but also more mundane acts, such as those performed by skateboarders, which we examine in the next section of this chapter.

We contend that the Lefebvrian concept of the ‘right to the city’ can be invoked to challenge hegemonic practices that seek to control urban space (Marcuse, 2014; Purcell, 2014). According to Lefebvre, urban democracy and the right to the city:

Manifest [themselves] as a superior form of rights: right to freedom, to individualization in socialization, to habitat and to inhabit. The right to the *oeuvre*, to participation and *appropriation* (clearly distinct from the right to property), are implied in the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1996: 174).

The concept cannot be confined to the right of accessibility – physically, mentally or symbolically – to what pre-exists, but entails a right to *change*: a social right to access, be and participate (Pugalis & Giddings, 2011). Our own reading of the right to the city, a concept

which we consider to be crucial to debates concerning justice and fairness, seeps beyond the rights of ownership and access to embrace the progressive politics of ‘use value’, which is use in respect of active presence and appropriation, a ‘right to *claim presence in the city, to wrest the use of the city from privileged new masters and democratize its spaces*’ (Isin, 2000: 14, emphasis added). It is the right of all citizens (whether they are permitted to vote or not) to access, be and participate in urban space: a collective right ‘to change ourselves by changing the city’ (Harvey, 2008: 23).

To ‘be’ in the city emphasises the temporal aspects of producing space; accomplished through active presence, whilst the right to ‘access’ can present as well as constrain opportunities. Commensurate with the production of space, the right to the city requires collaboration and, potentially, contestation; social relationships ‘between very different kinds of people’ in order to produce a ‘counter-space’ (Lefebvre, 1991 [1974]: 383). The right to the city also includes aspects of the right to participation. In addition to the right to be, such as occupying urban space, the right to participate is to constitute the (social) production of new, differential spaces through a renewed right to urban life (see Speak and Kumar’s chapter in this volume). This helps to emphasise the point that rights are the product of continuous struggle and do not necessarily have a logical end point, which is particularly pertinent in the case of skateboarding. The right to the city is thus an ‘active’ process of continual struggle, negotiation and contestation.

Urban and city space, in particular, is a contested terrain as different groups and individuals seek to impose or practice their own spatial ideals in order to produce their own version of the city. Due to the finite nature of such space it is alive with social tensions, relationships and exchanges. Inevitably, the rights of some to access, be and participate in city life,

including shaping the contours of city transformations, are prescribed or curtailed by the visions, rules and activities of others. Therefore, such acts generate serious questions relating to spatial justice and fairness (see Bell and Davoudi's chapter in this volume).

<1> Urban sports activists: spatial representations and practices of skateboarders

Spatial tactics including social 'othering' and social 'ordering' have been deployed by city authorities to place particular individuals and groups as belonging to a particular place, such as a city square, or not. For those on the sociospatial margins or those deemed to be 'out of place' (Cresswell, 1996; Shields, 1991), the implications can be profound. Urban sports activists are routinely regarded as problematic by public and corporate authorities whose representations of space dominate the governance, management and policing of the city (Woolley et al, 2011). In part this is because urban sports activists are often portrayed as, at best, an unruly nuisance, or, worse still, an obstacle to the legitimate users, that is, consumers (Rogers and Coaffee, 2005). It is what Lefebvre refers to as the displacement of 'lived' and experienced spaces of representation by spatial abstractions (abstract space) and bureaucratic conceptions (conceived space) (Lefebvre, 1991 [1974]).

Skateboarders attract additional opprobrium because of concerns at the damage to street furniture and buildings, the perceived risk to other people from accidental collisions and the possible threat of legal claims in the event of injuries. The common civic responses in many cities, Newcastle included, are legal restrictions denoted with signage warning of fines for transgression, anti-skate obstacles added to street furniture and interventions by police and private security. At the extreme, revanchist forms of urban policy may be pursued as part of strategies to 'civilise the city' (Lees, 2014). In addition, skate parks or tightly-defined spaces permitting urban sport activists (that is, the right to access) may be built and/or designated to

lure street sport participants away from prime commercial areas of the neoliberal city (Nemeth, 2006). Such purposeful acts of displacement and spatial dispossession, have often been lauded as ‘good practice’ by city management professionals, with little pause to consider whether street sport enthusiasts may consider this fair or whether democratic societies may consider this just (Rogers and Coaffee, 2005; Rogers, 2006).

Despite attempts by city authorities to remove street sport participants from city spaces, especially out of the glare of tourists and other consumers, there are moments when the perceived ‘cool buzz’ of urban sports activists is co-opted by city authorities. Critical interpretations of the co-opting of street sports may argue that these are only thinly disguised commodification endeavours: evidence that the privileged few, the ‘1%’, have strangled the rights of the majority. David Harvey (2011) and Peter Marcuse (2009), for example, questioned ‘whose city is it?’. This in turn raises crucial questions about the ‘right to the city’, when particular users, uses and activities are privileged over others.

Signifying more progressive patterns of urban policy is a pragmatic recognition by city authorities of the value of urban sport activists from a social-safety perspective. In some instances this has led to the redesign and modification of inhospitable places with the objective of producing spaces that are more conducive to street sports (that is, the right to be and to participate). Gateshead City Council, for example, invested £11,000 at the Five Bridges skate spot to enhance its skatability based on the rationale that the active presence of skaters had a positive impact on the general public’s perception of safety (Jenson et al, 2012). In this sense, urban sports activists are presented as the policy solution to tackling broader societal issues, such as antisocial behaviour and street crime. Although examples are relatively rare as well as being site or occasion specific, they help draw attention to a

fundamental ambiguity of how city authorities represent urban sport activists: are they urban antagonists to be silenced, curtailed and/or displaced or are they urban energisers or even stewards of the urban environment to be celebrated?

The spatial performance of skateboarders is rather unique as they perceive city spaces in novel ways; envisaging alternative uses for what others may perceive as mundane architecture/urban artefacts. Steps, ledges, hand rails, curbs, walls and benches become challenges of balance, courage and skill. Nevertheless, not all parts of the city are accessible for these groups and it is important to understand the patterns of use, or appropriation, in time and space (see Lefebvre, 2004). Woolley and Johns (2001) identify four interlinking elements which generate places – or spots – conducive to skate. First, accessibility relates to the ease with which the majority of users can travel to and use a spot, with those near to other spots or public transport links preferable. Second, trickability refers to the number and variety of tricks that a spot facilitates. Generally, purposely-designed skate parks and plazas have the highest trickability. Third, the sociability of a spot refers to the opportunities for meeting friends and socialising. Finally, compatibility is the ease to which skaters use the place without conflict with other users. These elements vary by style, ability and mobility of a skater, and will change over the course of a day, year and life course of an individual.

Even 50 years after skateboarding broke out of California, and its enrolment into portfolios of global sports brands, enduring spaces for skateboarding in cities are rare in comparison with other sports. To some extent this is not necessarily an issue for skateboarders, as many skaters see themselves as urban explorers and revel in the challenge of creating new spots to skate. In this sense, the practice of skating can be conceptualised as producing new space: a small, but no less significant act of transforming the city.

<1> Changing city roles and uses: the transformation of Newcastle

Newcastle provides a striking example of the interplay between the grand plans and paradigms of a city's civic authority and their impact on urban sports. In answer to Harvey's questions 'whose city is it?', we show how skateboarders have appropriated and altered their use of the city, exploiting opportunities unforeseen in the sweeping visions of regeneration plans and maintaining a presence even in the face of civic intolerance.

During the 1960s the aim was to zone the city by function and vertically segregate vehicles from pedestrians – much as Le Corbusier had suggested – which produced the type of abstract space that Lefebvre so vehemently critiqued (Lefebvre, 1991 [1974], 2014). The proposal was for the entire northern half of the city centre to be covered by a pedestrian deck, while vehicles would travel along smooth, straight, level roads on ground level, inspired by the Buchanan report (see Figure 7.1). Whilst all of these bold plans were not implemented, there was an extensive programme of road building dissecting the city centre as well as a complex network of urban walkways and some commercial schemes which inadvertently provided an attractive space for urban sports activists to access and be (see Figure 7.2).

<<INSERT FIGURE 7.1 ABOUT HERE>>

Figure 7.1 Road building and urban walkways

Source: Burns (1967). Illustration by Michael Evans.

<<INSERT FIGURE 7.2 ABOUT HERE>>

Figure 7.2 Preference for vehicles in cities

Source: Buchanan and Crowther (1963)

By the end of the 1970s, very few residents remained in the city centre as the council determined that the city centre was primarily a place for work (and some leisure) (that is, a space of exchange values). In the 1980s, policy perspectives began to shift with a notable rise in the number of private sector apartments. Also an extensive programme of pedestrianisation commenced and a search for artefacts to utilise 'surplus space' ensued in the form of public art and street furniture which provides urban sports activists opportunities to navigate the contemporary neo-liberalised city with some ideal 'spots' for counter-practices as we discuss later in this chapter.

Since the early 1990s, the 'renaissance' of Newcastle (and Gateshead Quayside) has sought to 'open up' the city to developers as well as citizens more broadly, but particularly conspicuous consumers. Increasingly, modern landmarks started to project the values of commerce, including indoor shopping malls that produce the illusion of being public, but typically discriminate against particular publics (Giddings et al, 2005) and the majority ban the use of skateboards. Indeed, entire segments of the city have been privatised, whereby the public are granted access subject to particular codes and rules, including temporal restrictions. Inadvertently, the neoliberal city had generated ideal spots for urban sports activists. Much of the modernist architecture created plazas, blocks, walkways, slopes and gaps ideal for skateboarding (see Figure 7.3). However, their right to the city is a story of contestation and renegotiation as a combination of city authorities and commercial interests have sought to remove them from the consumers gaze. Commercial interests perceived that the urban sports activists and young people generally were adversely affecting business, and city authorities were reacting to the perception that the safety of the city centre was deteriorating (Rogers and Coaffe, 2005). A variety of anti-skate measures were subsequently

introduced across the city. For example, benches and steps in university campuses and public squares have been ‘skate proofed’ by adding metal attachments which stop skaters from grinding on them. Also, by-laws have been introduced at Haymarket (the main city centre square) to prevent skating on and around the war memorial.

<<INSERT FIGURE 7.3 ABOUT HERE>>

Figure 7.3 Unintended ideal skateboarding spots

Source: the authors

One policy response was the decision of the city council to provide a purposely-designed skate park at the outer northern edge of the city centre, which was completed in 2004. Whilst skateboarders are often seen to be co-operative during the skate park design process (Rogers, 2006), their interest can wane post-completion as they seek to reproduce the city in alternative ways. Atencio et al (2009), for example, suggest that skateboarders are particularly excited by finding unique and challenging spots to skate, which can be contrasted with the unvarying layout of skate parks (Thompson, 1998). This supports the notion of skaters as urban explorers. Indeed, Nemeth (2006) notes that bespoke skate parks can be perceived as token gestures by urban sports activists, and consequently they resist attempts to control them in tightly defined urban spaces.

<1> Skaters’ right to change space

For a brief period of time after it was built, skateboarders frequently accessed the purpose-designed Exhibition Park site (see Figure 7.4). However, it was subsequently appropriated by BMXers and scooterists alongside skaters, and as a place for other young people to congregate. In this sense, a more diverse group of young people ‘claimed’ their right to the

skate area of Exhibition Park. This draws attention to the nuanced complexity of rights between members of the same or similar subcultures but a detailed discussion of this is beyond the scope of this chapter. Coupled with its static layout, many skateboarders soon became tired of this urban space (Jenson et al, 2012) as they subsequently sought to reclaim a right to change the broader neoliberal city (Figure 7.5), of which four are described below.

<<INSERT FIGURE 7.4 ABOUT HERE>>

Figure 7.4 Exhibition Park

Source: the authors

<<INSERT FIGURE 7.5 ABOUT HERE - COLOUR>>

Figure 7.5 Skateboarding spots across the city

Source: the authors

The first one is Law Courts (see Figure 7.6). Newcastle's Crown Court building on the Quayside might seem an unusual place to be appropriated by skaters, but its double set of eight steps with a convenient viewing space behind a rail make it a popular spot amongst the city's skateboarders. They are 'in session' when the court is not, usually in the evening and at the weekend.

<<INSERT FIGURE 7.6 ABOUT HERE>>

Figure 7.6 The Law Courts

Source: Adam Thirtle. Reproduced with the author's permission.

The second one is Old Wasteland in Shieldfield (see Figure 7.7) to the northeast of Newcastle city centre which was once home to large factory buildings. Most had been demolished, but the base of some remains. For a long period of time, these spaces were commercially unattractive but their large, flat concrete bases make for excellent skating and had been enjoyed by the skateboarders for a number of years. The Wasteland also had the advantage of being ‘hidden’ from the broader public, and so, its use remained undisturbed. In recent years, much of the area has been redeveloped and ‘revitalised’, necessitating the decampment of skateboarders from what is now termed the Old Wasteland, to an alternative site (known as the New Wasteland and described below), which is even further away from the city centre.

<<INSERT FIGURE 7.7 ABOUT HERE>>

Figure 7.7 The Old Wasteland

Source: the authors

The third one is Five Bridges (see Figure 7.8) and is located under a flyover in Gateshead. It has the advantage of high trickability, sociability and compatibility, and through repeated appropriation has become a council’s recognised skate plaza (as distinct from skate parks which usually feature bowls) with a growing national reputation, evidenced in its use by touring pro-teams for demonstrations. Despite its medium level accessibility, and in contrast to Exhibition Park, the journey is largely deemed to be “worth it”. It is popular throughout the year, particularly during times of poor weather as the flyover provides some protection.

<<INSERT FIGURE 7.8 ABOUT HERE>>

Figure 7.8 The Five Bridges

Source: the authors

The fourth site is New Wasteland (see Figure 7.9) which is 2.5 km east of the city centre and part of a factory site demolished in 2004. Whilst it is near a Metro rail station, its position beyond the residential area of Byker is perceived as distant – socially and geographically from the city centre. The site was first used by BMXers who adapted a step on the old factory floor by adding a concrete block. During the summer of 2012, skaters began to modify a different part of the site, producing *their space*.

<<INSERT FIGURE 7.9 ABOUT HERE>>

Figure 7.9 The New Wasteland

Source: the authors

Utilising Woolley and Johns’ framework sketched out above, Table 7.1 provides a summative analysis, demonstrating that city centre spots are still the most popular and score highly on nearly all the measures. However, in terms of compatibility with other users (as represented by private and public authorities) they are currently, virtually unusable. Despite its proximity to the city centre (albeit on the periphery), the purpose-designed site at Exhibition Park only scores medium on accessibility due to the lack of public transport options. In addition, it scores low for trickability, sociability and compatibility with other users; and is not popular with many of the skaters. The sites at the periphery score medium to high but are not as popular as the city centre. The New Wasteland scores medium for trickability and sociability but there are issues with accessibility, and safety as represented by compatibility. Its isolation and position adjacent to an area of urban deprivation are especially off putting to younger skateboarders. The skaters themselves can be

targeted by other youth groups (Jenson et al, 2012) and for younger participants sites nearer to the city centre are viewed as both more accessible and safer. We will now analyse the rights of skaters to access and be in the city, followed by the right to participate and then the right to change.

Table 7.1 Analysis of skateboard sites using Woolley and Johns’ (2001) framework, based on skateboarders’ comments

	<i>Accessibility</i>	<i>Trickability</i>	<i>Sociability</i>	<i>Compatibility</i>
<i>city centre, historic sites no longer</i>				
Bank of England	High	High	High	Low
City Library	High	High	High	Low
Monument	High	High	High	Low
Haymarket	High	Medium	High	Low
<i>skate park</i>				
Exhibition Park	Medium	Low	Low	Low
<i>periphery</i>				
Law Courts	Medium	Low	High	Medium
Old Wasteland	Medium	High	High	High
Five Bridges	Medium	High	High	High
<i>distant</i>				
New Wasteland	Low	Medium	Medium	Low

<2> The right to access and be, or displacement and dispossession

Interviews with skateboarders indicate that they continue to be displaced from some of *their* favoured spots, supporting Harvey’s (2008) broader observations of neoliberal tentacles spreading throughout the contemporary city, favouring commercial patterns of land use and property rights above all else. This is reinforced formally and informally by the public and corporate authorities who dominate city management, governance and decision making (Woolley et al, 2011). As already noted, some ‘public’ areas of Newcastle preclude skaters

through legal restrictions and other parts of the city utilise interventions by police and private security.

Drawing on Lefebvre, Borden (2001) suggests public urban spaces can accommodate counter-cultural activities alongside other uses and claims to spatial rights. Nevertheless, in Newcastle most spots are only accessible at moments dictated by the temporal rhythms of commercial activity. For example, the Monument (a popular city centre square) can be skated at night and the Law Courts outside of business hours. Thus the skateboarders are effectively excluded from accessing and being in the majority of the city centre unless informal arrangements are brokered, whereby skaters claim such spaces when commercial or institutional use is not active. In this way, a kind of time zoning for alternative uses could be established.

The Old Wasteland is perhaps the most obvious example of a space rejected by commercial interests and reproduced as a 'counter-space'. It had been skated for at least 20 years and skateboarders even raised money through entrepreneurial activities to pay for the construction of ramps and rails. It became a treasured spot, which was maintained and enhanced by skaters, whilst city authorities designated it as derelict. However, as corporate interests looked for profitable spaces for commercial building outside the city centre, it was acquired by developers. Construction encroached onto the skate floor and in March 2012 the site was excavated. Yet, even this neoliberal expansion into *the skateboarders' space* generated neither resistance nor protest, although skaters and BMXers paid fond farewells with 'sessions' and graffiti. Their displacement from the site had been anticipated by the skate community during 2010 when the initial fieldwork for this research was conducted. The situation was summarised by one participant, who said "We'll just find somewhere else"

(Skater B3). Whilst it had provided an exemplary 'home' for several generations of skateboarders, the reaction of these urban explorers was to simply produce some new spaces. What this helps to demonstrate is the hardiness of skaters. Far from being perturbed by the trumpeting of capitalist values (Harvey, 2008), they display a remarkable resilience and appetite to explore and regenerate new spaces.

<2> The right to participate or co-option

In parallel with pernicious as well as gentler acts of displacement, is the countervailing force of co-option. In 2012 and 2013, for example, Newcastle hosted an Urban Games involving skateboarders in the city centre with the support of the city council and NE1, the Business Improvement District company. The games were organised by Solar Learning, a company promoting entrepreneurial youth with a hope to transform the city into a more play-friendly environment, although the short term nature of funding curtailed the longevity and sustainability of the programme. Importantly, this kind of engagement with the activists happens on the terms of those paying, in places and at times of their choosing. Once the spectacle is finished and the marketing done, it is not uncommon for urban sports activists to be once again rendered a visual nuisance and public inconvenience, and subsequently displaced.

Co-option is but one form of skateboarders engagement and participation in broader city policies and initiatives. There has also been less cynical engagement in other locations. For example, Five Bridges was reconfigured to accommodate jumps and ramps to encourage the active use by skaters in order to serve broader policies, including combating antisocial behaviour, as discussed above. This pragmatic recognition can also be seen in the relationship

between skaters and the police after younger users of Five Bridges sought police help when being bullied in the area:

The youngsters who use the Five Bridges skate park in Gateshead were harassed by gangs who picked on younger members of the group. Neighbourhood Beat Manager Steve Purnell found out and acted to stamp out the trouble 'I asked them what we could do to help. The main thing was that they could skate without problems...most of the kids have my phone number and can ring if they need anything' (Ford, 2009).

However this recognition tends to be rare and site specific, and is highly contingent on individual personalities, which suggests that the scope for urban sports activists to participate in city management process is more limited.

<2> The right to change: a revolution or compliance

Urban sports such as skateboarding have often been posited as direct challenges to authority (for example, Beal, 1995 and Landers, 2012), but our research found instances of direct, purposeful contestation are uncommon: "People think [skaters] want to go and destroy stuff. We don't. We just want to skate and have a good time. It's hard because everyone thinks we're just hooligans." (Skate 7/14).

There are instances where skaters have campaigned against changes to treasured sites, such as action at London's South Bank (Jones, 2014), but these are rare and no such campaigns have been waged in Newcastle. The alternative is demonstrated by the compliant move of skateboarders from the Old to the New Wasteland. Again a former factory site, the spot offers some advantages and has undergone similar transformation to the Old Wasteland, at the

hands of the skateboarders. Perhaps its greatest virtue is that users are shielded – out of sight – due to a high wall around the site. However, as already explained, there are a number of downsides. In this sense, the New Wasteland symbolises the production of a counter-space, but the concept of a new right and a respatialisation of justice is significantly compromised by the notion that the location is third choice to the city centre and periphery because of difficult accessibility and concerns about safety.

Over time and in a general sense, skateboarders in Newcastle have developed a mutual understanding with those charged with managing and policing the city, which can be a negative or positive experience:

‘... when we were skating down there [in the city centre], we just sit down to eat, security guard comes out, swears at you and all sorts, telling you to move along. And that same day we went down the Quayside [Law Courts] and we met one of the nicest security guards you could ever meet, he had a proper conversation with me, he said he wouldn’t mind us skating here but we gotta move you on because my supervisor wants me to.’

The relationship with the broader public is equally complex with reported abuse and celebration of performances in equal measure. Yet, in Newcastle, skateboarders are not consciously contesting the neoliberal city. Rarely do they seek conflict and our observations indicate that they prefer to avoid such spatial disputes through their distinct spatiotemporal performances, which are highly adaptive to changing patterns of city development. This tempers perspectives, especially those propounded by some radical scholars (exemplified by those readings of the ‘right to the city’ that emphasise its revolutionary potency), that urban

sports activists are actively transgressing neoliberal market rules and directly challenging dominant, consumption-orientated images of the ‘civilised city’. Through the case of skaters in Newcastle, we have found that the spatiotemporal performance of this urban youth subculture searches out the path of least resistance. This tends to result in the production of new skate spaces in the interstices of the neoliberal city. Nevertheless, we would stress that the civic-legal constraints and behaviour of security staff, combined with the outlook of the sports’ activists, result in a wholly asymmetric power relationship between city authorities and skateboarders. This raises the questions: Is this just? Is it fair? “We see the world differently to what people think: they think we want to go and destroy stuff. We don’t. We want to go skate stuff and actually have a good time. It’s hard because everyone thinks we’re just some hooligans.” skater1

<1> Concluding observations

The power structures within urban cityscapes are by no means fair, but this chapter through the empirical case of urban sport activists and, specifically, skateboarders in Newcastle has examined how they renegotiate city rights through their unique spatiotemporal performances. We have invoked the concept of the ‘right to the city’ originally developed by Henri Lefebvre and subsequently deployed in modified forms by a succession of critical urbanists, to help us to structure an analysis of the methods and tactics utilised by skateboarders to change and produce space. Our research findings indicate that skateboarders are not necessarily seeking to be permitted rights to skate across all areas of the city centre at any time, much preferring to be out of the gaze of the broader public. Their requests are much more practical and prosaic. Ultimately, they call for respect and the ability to be left alone. As one of them remarked: “What I don’t like even when we’ve been skating along and we’re just a bit tired and we sit down and have a drink and we get asked to move along ... Can we finish our food

at least? ‘No, you’ve got to move along’.” (LBM). In this sense, this particular group of skateboarders are seeking to comply with broader patterns and modalities of city rights, for example, by way of iterative negotiations – seeking to renegotiate momentary rights at particular timespaces that do not explicitly clash with or are not necessarily devised to challenge the temporal rhythms of commercial activity. Such a compliant renegotiation of momentary rights, exemplified by skateboarders’ preference to avoid spatial disputes, is a valuable research finding, as much Lefebvrian-inspired research tends to emphasise the revolutionary and, arguably, more antagonistic potency of the right to the city.

This chapter has helped to demonstrate how urban sport activists acknowledge normative, legal and habitual city rights and roles. In the case of Newcastle, the role of urban sports activists in producing counter-spaces, however fleeting or innocuous, is much more amicable than popular opinion may suggest. Whether such acceptance of city relationships is unique to this location, is not entirely clear. This warrants further research to explore the vigour and manner to which urban sport activists contest dominant city roles, rules, conventions and practices in other places.

It needs to be recognised that no single group, whether those pursuing counter-practices or not, is able to claim exclusive right to the city, and there is potential for conflict within the urban sports community, as well as with other user groups. It may be for this reason that city authorities have been antipathetic to urban sports. Yet, by grappling with the issue of *social justice for all*, it should be possible to explore how the design of public spaces in the city centre could mitigate conflicts and enable the accommodation of different kinds of users including skaters who, contrary to common assumptions, can energise space, improve the perception of public safety, and deter antisocial behaviour.

A key implication of this research is that the fairness of city rights and city roles is deeply situational. Returning to David Harvey's opening quotation, which lamented the inadequacy of 'the ideals of human rights' that do little to penetrate everyday life and alter spatial practices, it may be that fairness is often a very simple request. As one participant said: "All I want is somewhere nice I can sit with my friends." (BMX3).

The overall pattern is that increasingly, to avoid conflict (the antonym of compatibility) skateboarders are searching for and producing new skate spaces further from the city centre and the purview city authorities, with adverse effects on accessibility, trickability and sociability. Already displaced from the Old Wasteland, Gateshead Council has plans to demolish the flyover, which would obliterate the Five Bridges spot; and a shift in policy could place the Law Courts site out of bounds. It appears unlikely, over the short term at least, that there will be a radical reconstitution of dominant perceptions of skateboarders and urban sports activists: one whereby this urban youth subculture will be acknowledged by city authorities and commercial interests as legitimate users (and producers) of urban space in the neoliberal city, perhaps precipitating a fundamental reorganisation of city life and promoting the values of spatial justice. Yet, the resilience of skateboarders would suggest that they will continue to explore, energise and regenerate spaces often deemed redundant at particular moments in timespace to the untrained eye. For this reason alone, urban sports activists are valued city makers and their right to the city should be acknowledged.

<1> References

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¹ Unified by the slogan 'we are the 99%', which draws attention to prevailing economic disparities via the wealth and power wielded by a minority (that is, the 1%).

² Although skateboarding is often perceived to be a teen pursuit (that is, city youths), the demographic profile of skateboarders is more diverse and while the scene is mainly male, it is not uncommon, as we have observed, for skaters to be in their thirties, forties and fifties.