

# Creativity, Conviviality, and Civil Society in Neoliberalizing Public Space: Changing Politics and Discourses in Skateboarder Activism From New York City to Los Angeles

Journal of Sport and Social Issues

1–31

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DOI: 10.1177/0193723519842219

journals.sagepub.com/home/jss



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## Abstract

Neoliberal urbanism often draws critiques because it privatizes public space and excludes specific social groups whose interests are not in line with the development goals of local states and corporations. This article, through an exploration of the politics and discourses of urban skateboarding, suggests that this clear distinction, between entrepreneurialism and community-based place making, may fail to explain transformative changes occurring in public space today. Comparing two grassroots activist campaigns at the Brooklyn Banks in New York City (NYC) and West LA Courthouse in the city of Los Angeles (LA), this article explains the ways in which skateboarders leverage specific neoliberal ideologies to claim their right to these two settings. In both cases, skateboarders save spaces through entrepreneurial urban means that bolster neoliberal values while retaining the tactical nature of their activities. Although both activist movements pursue the common values of authenticity, entrepreneurship, and private funding, they employ different discourses to reclaim public space. The NYC skaters frame a security discourse, which ultimately

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limits their continual access to the Brooklyn Banks. The LA skate community, on the contrary, constructs a spontaneity discourse, characterized by creativity, conviviality, and civil society, successfully transforming the West LA Courthouse into a legalized skate plaza. Our findings suggest that skateboarding communities and their spatial activism are resilient enough to articulate different rationales and successfully fight to transform public spaces into urban commons. However, we argue that ‘the discourses’ matter significantly in the processes and outcomes of activist mobilizations occurring within neoliberalizing public space.

### **Keywords**

neoliberal discourses, entrepreneurship, skateboarding, New York City, Los Angeles

## **Introduction**

Critics have contended that neoliberal urbanism tends to adapt to various geopolitical contexts (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Ong, 2006). Today, a local state is often resilient and strategic in negotiating a pre-existing social reality, or newly emerging public concerns, such as those involving citizens’ livelihoods or the environmental qualities for a city’s growth trajectory (Chiu, 2013; Devlin, 2018; Jocoy, 2018). This study explores the significance of preserving two iconic, historically formed skateboarding spaces: the Brooklyn Banks (the Banks) in New York City (NYC) and the West LA Courthouse (the Courthouse) in Los Angeles (LA). Through this investigation, our research informs broader planning epistemology on neoliberal urbanism. More specifically, we argue that the variegated aspects of neoliberalism, both embodied and personified in entrepreneurial and activist qualities of skateboarding culture, have been acknowledged by local states in the United States (US) as features of good practices within neoliberal development goals. Therefore, cities and skate communities reach agreements to save sites as alternative skateparks. Cities hope to coopt the positive images skaters generate to market themselves as metropolitan areas with emerging creative enclaves.

Specifically, we ask how have skateboarders, a historically stereotyped, transgressive, reckless urban population, leveraged neoliberal goals, their collective activism, and subcultural and economic capital to help themselves occupy inaccessible, exclusionary public spaces? Although private-public partnerships or private funding for place making is one critical component of neoliberalizing cities, we argue that ‘the discourses’ matter significantly in the processes and the outcomes of citizen-led efforts to remake public space. While people may assume that the saving of the Courthouse as a legal skate spot is rooted in Nike Skateboarding’s (SB) sponsoring of sport events and financing of the restoration of space, we believe the success comes more crucially from the people. Skateboarders, in this example, were resilient and reworked their subcultural image into a larger neoliberal urban vision. They did so by collaborating with SB to achieve this goal of image remaking. Through the lens of campaigns to

permanently appropriate skateboarding spaces in NYC and LA, we identified the rationales of security and spontaneity as two different discourses constructed by the NYC and the LA skate communities respectively that grounded each entrepreneurial remaking of space. We discuss how these divergent discourses resulted in different outcomes in (re)claiming each public space. Although a neoliberal city predicates itself on excluding the practices of users whose presence fails to sustain property interests, either directly or indirectly, within public space, our analyses reveal that excluded users can strategically maneuver within the logic of neoliberal urbanism. They do so by constructing public good rationales to coopt an inclusionary strategy with the city and pro-development interests to transform a public good into an urban commons<sup>1</sup>.

## **Theoretical Overview of Skateboarding and the Cities**

### *From Spatial Contestation to Tactical Urbanism*

Skateboarders appropriate, contest, and use space differently than other citizens (Borden, 2001; Howell, 2008). While significant parts of 1970s skateboarding took place in (sub)urban roads, much was contained in backyard pools and city-designated skateparks. Recessions in the 1980s democratized the activity as skateparks closed down and the impervious urban fabric, constantly producing new spaces through urban development, provided an endless playground to explore. Prior academic treatments of skateboarding have argued that the activity has limitless potential for tactical transgression, architectural transformation, and political resistance against excessive policing (see Borden, 2001; Browne & Francis, 1993; Carr, 2010; Chiu, 2009; Donnelly, 2008; Nemeth, 2006). Recent research, however, has posited that skateboarding is much more complex than mere spatial struggles between skateboarders, city managers, architects, and other users of urban public space (see Borden, 2019a; Lombard, 2016; Snyder, 2017; Yochim, 2010). In an effort to understand skateboarding from alternative angles, scholars have focused on the evolution of skateboarding from its earlier transgressive antecedents into a lauded neoliberal activity that attracts “creative classes” to urban environs (Howell, 2005); a liberating activity for youth and a legitimate subcultural career pursuit, which influences art, film, and photography (Borden, 2019a; Snyder, 2011; Yochim, 2010); and an urban endeavor that endures spatial struggles, participates in activist movements, and harnesses its powerful entrepreneurial and political capital to reopen and reclaim public space (Snyder, 2017).

Although skateboarding is sometimes celebrated for its neoliberal characteristics, presently, in most contemporary cities, skateboarders’ increased exposure within plaza-like spaces still produces a lack of public understanding and leads to negative perceptions of skateboarding. This phenomenon has engendered planning responses that make skateboarding an illegal activity. Regulatory and physical barriers limit skateboarders’ use of space largely because skateboarding has been seen as a “sport with an outlaw aura, a punk image, and with very little public acceptance” (Browne & Francis, 1993, p. 46). Skateboarding is viewed as a subversive subculture worthy of exclusionary regulations because skateboarders predominantly use objects, materials,

and spaces for their use values. This usage denies the logic of the entrepreneurial city as pre-eminently existing to serve global flows of information and capital (Lefebvre, 1996). Therefore, cities respond to skateboarding by closing underused spaces that skateboarders have historically frequented, substituting these closures with inadequately designed, yet effectively controlled skateparks. Cities provide skateparks as contained, creative, legal, and spectacular recreation spaces to reposition skateboarding as an accepted form of leisure and as a sport compatible with reshaped, marketable urban images (Chiu, 2009; Giamarino, 2017). Notwithstanding these spatial hurdles, skaters continually contest and transgress exclusionary regulations and design barriers to appropriate urban objects and perform tricks upon them.

In his study of LA skateboarders, Snyder (2017) defines a subculture as simply a small group existing within the cultural context of larger society, carrying its own “distinct language, skill set, worldview, and set of values” (Snyder, 2017, p. 56). Borden (2001) posits that skateboarders’ language, skill set, worldview, and set of values exists in cities’ leftover spaces, where they produce new, imagined, and real spaces, claiming their right to the city through the appropriation of mundane objects often overlooked by everyday citizens. For example, at the Courthouse-one of the most frequented skate plazas in LA today-skateboarders prefer to skate atop a stage with seemingly no use to other participants in the space, ledges frequently sat upon for lunch breaks by adjacent office workers, and a fountain that has been drained of its water. At the Banks, an analogous space to the Courthouse in NYC, skateboarders prefer to skate brick embankments, a stair set used by pedestrians to walk down, and vertical concrete blocks that hold up the off-ramp of the Brooklyn Bridge.

Other property and public safety rationales for criminalizing skateboarding include minor property damage and injury liability (Nemeth, 2006). However, prior research has debunked claims made by cities that skateboarders will sue when injured or that property damage is insuperable (Howell, 2008). Regardless, cities provide skateparks to offset skateboarders’ exclusion from other urban public spaces. Planned skateparks are rife with problems as planners and architects have failed to fuse their expertise with the contextual, spatial, and architectural knowledge that skateboarders possess. Local experiences and knowledge provided by community members can play a key role in informing and improving urban policy, planning, and design of space (Corburn, 2003). Following Arnstein’s (1969)*Citizen Ladder of Participation*, Giamarino’s (2017) study of skateboarders in LA found that skateboarders rarely interact with urban planners in community engagement workshops about skatepark design. This suggested that the city of LA provides skateparks and expects skateboarders to appreciate the designated park. Many skateparks, without the lack of input from skateboarders, are poorly designed while the activity is rendered illegal in all other areas of the city. This is unfortunate because skateparks offer delineated facilities that stymie spontaneity and creativity and cities typically afford more complex spaces that become socially produced and spatially practiced by skateboarders, which creates a discursive medium for skateboarders to perform tactical urbanism and display their performances to the public (Chiu, 2009).

Brenner (2016) questions whether “‘tactical urbanisms’ provide tractable solutions, or at least opens up some productive perspectives for actualizing alternative urban futures” (p.129) in the face of neoliberal urbanism. Tactical urbanism possesses an anti-planning rhetoric and privileges incremental built environment interventions over citywide reforms or policies (Brenner, 2016). We explore the ways in which citizen-led mobilizations either generate friction against or actually subvert neoliberalism. Revanchist municipal laws, similar to those imposed on skateboarders, emerged in the early 1980s in the US. They were stoked by fear of local crime and legitimized the exclusion of ‘undesirable’ uses and users of city streets (Smith, 1996). As a response to economic recessions and global terrorist discourses, neoliberal urban policies often privilege corporate interests over those of socially marginal groups (e.g., immigrants, protesters; Mitchell, 2003). They do this through more subtle, strategic means to attract creative classes and new investment (Florida, 2002). Skateboarding provides an alternative lens for us to explore complex spatial subversions through an analysis of the two skateboarding spaces we observed. Our exploration illustrates the ways in which skateboarders combine their tactical interventions with neoliberal ideals to temporarily or permanently claim their right to neoliberal, revanchist city space.

Skateboarding is primarily seen as a tactical intervention that transforms underutilized spaces into sites of bustling, creative activity. Because cities like LA and NYC are polymorphic amalgamations of concrete and architecture, skateboarders appropriate spaces based on opportunity, as opposed to need (Campo, 2013). They discover underutilized, derelict spaces while skating the streets or passing by in an automobile, then disseminate this information through word-of-mouth, social media, or visual cues. For example (see Figure 1), the Banks, at the time of our field research, was enclosed in a chain link fence. Photos circulating on skate blogs and social media showed that there was a hole in the fence. Skateboarders, noting this “spatial tactic” – a calculated, cooperative spatio-temporal action performed by a marginalized population to navigate the everyday reality of and appropriate exclusive urban spaces (cf. de Certeau, 1984), strategized what times to go to this space to avoid police confrontation. For a limited time (cf. Chiu, 2009), they modified and transformed the site’s meaning from a closed-off space to the public into a recreational skateboarding spot.

### *Neoliberal Advocacy Embodied in Contemporary Urban Skateboarding*

Davies (2017) posits that neoliberalism has disenchanted any notion of what a public good is, as intrinsic values are replaced by extrinsic economic valuations. Thus, the key components of neoliberalism are the principles of a free market, entrepreneurialism, and an ethos of competitiveness that reorganizes society and produces precarity, worthlessness, and inequality (Davies, 2017). Neoliberalism seeks the “‘*transformation of state action*’ by making the state itself a sphere governed by rules of competition and subject to efficiency constraints similar to those experienced by private enterprises” (Dardot & Laval, 2013, p. 216). Due to this transformation, policies are disciplinary and exclusive in character. These policies are much more difficult for urban populations to perceive because the government implants regulatory, economic,



**Figure 1.** Opening in fence as spatial tactic to appropriate the Banks by skateboarders (Alley, 2017).

and behavioral rules into persons' subconscious behaviors and movements in physical space. Although neoliberalism is largely exploitative and profit-driven, it offers limited concrete forms of hope. Hope materializes as democracy and opportunities for open participation in boosting local economies if state apparatuses formulate path-dependent policies and socially-embedded regimes to operationalize neoliberalism (cf. Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Ong, 2006). While cities govern through disciplinary political and economic competition, neoliberalism, as discussed later in our comparative analysis, produces a global, neoliberal society, which manufactures neoliberal individuals who are conditioned by entrepreneurialism and competition (Dardot & Laval, 2013). Therefore, some collective groupings of individuals like skateboarders have been successful in navigating increasingly neoliberal urban environments. The historical competitiveness and entrepreneurialism associated with skateboarding has played a key role for skate communities that adopt spatial tactics to claim their right to the city.

This infusion of neoliberalism into everyday life is the reason why skateparks are preferred over the appropriation of plazas. Skateparks are usually paid through private-public partnerships. They are also a means of economic competition that spur the



gentrification of adjacent communities. Skateboarders supervise and police themselves and others in these spaces, maintain order in neighborhoods, and instill entrepreneurial qualities in individuals (Howell, 2008). In exchange for recreational space, skateboarders must act responsibly in these designated spaces, function as better users than more 'undesirable' users, willingly acknowledge and accept the illegality of their activity outside these parks, and behave appropriately within the skateparks. In rare cases, instead of building expensive skateparks, cities are realizing the marketable potential of skateboarding as it relates to neoliberal development goals. This has sometimes allowed people to skate in natural settings such as plazas after business hours and on weekends. Cities are finding it not just economically viable to tolerate skateboarding, but also beneficial in attracting creative crowds to weave authenticity, spontaneity, and vibrancy into their respective urban fabrics.

As skateboarding has become more popular, cities have started to celebrate the subculture as part of the "creative class." This celebration has allowed for temporary spatial victories. The case of Philadelphia's Love Park serves as a primary example of how skateboarding simultaneously interacts with, wins over, and confronts both entrepreneurial and revanchist urbanism. In 2000, a ban to skateboarders was proposed at an underused downtown plaza called Love Park. Economic and political restructuring created a strict regulatory regime to combat damage to the space, limit threats of liability lawsuits, and provide security and order (Nemeth, 2006). For the space to remain open, it was important for street skaters to be marketable to the entrepreneurial and competitive hunger of Philadelphia. The shoe company DC invested \$1 million to offset damages accrued at the park due to skateboarding. The city of Philadelphia also began to acknowledge that skateboarders' activities served as cultural, economic, and competitive catalysts for further development of the declining city center and influx of creatives. Skateboarders, through a successful campaign against police sweeps and the skateboard ban, brought together activist organizations, private businesses, planners, and academics to temporarily lift the ban, reopen the space, and rebrand the skate community as part of the "creative class" that generates revenue for the city through the production of marketable media imagery. Howell (2005) argues that skateboarding reshapes a city into an "Entertainment Machine" that spurs additional consumptions of space (Howell, 2005). Philadelphia originally wanted to redesign Love Park for \$800,000, but

increased flexibility and mobility of capital, the rise in telecommunications technology which allows transactions and communication to take place instantly and on a global scale, and the decrease in federal aid to cities, [had] forced business elites and political leaders in these cities into an entrepreneurial role in promoting urban economic growth. (Nemeth, 2006, pp. 304-305)

Philadelphia took advantage of the entrepreneurial nature of skateboarding companies and mega-events as a temporary, competitive boost to the economy. They then marketed skateboarding in the space to attract creatives to the downtown, which inevitably permanently closed the space to skateboarders again.

Skateboarding's competitive and entrepreneurial nature has been ignored in prior literature (Donnelly, 2008), but it has always been a competitive, entrepreneurial endeavor. In the 1970s and 1980s, skateboarding predominantly took place as a sport in skateparks where organized competitions were held (Borden, 2019a). Today, skateboarding mega-events such as the X-Games and Street League Series, held in global cities like Barcelona and Los Angeles, award hundreds of thousands of dollars to winners (Donnelly, 2008; Rinehart, 2008). Skateboarding also creates subcultural, entrepreneurial career opportunities (Snyder, 2017). This phenomenon is showcased in the documentary *The Man Who Souled The World*, a film about Steve Rocco, which documents how he transformed the skateboard industry from corporate-owned to a skater-owned, billion dollar industry (Hill, 2007). Skateboard foundations play a substantial community development role in promoting the activity as a self-sustaining, competitive, and entrepreneurial endeavor worthy of incorporation into neoliberal cities. For example, foundations constantly fundraise to build skateparks around the world, host skateboarding-oriented events globally, and support youth development in low-income communities through skateboarding camps and educational programs. Larger foundations such as the Tony Hawk Foundation (2019) have raised over \$7.9 million to help construct 611 skateparks throughout the US. Smaller foundations such as the Harold Hunter Foundation (2019) focus on hosting annual contests within parks in NYC and promote skateboarding as a healthier outlet, which "builds character, and instills a spirit of community involvement, self-efficacy, and entrepreneurship." Cities are beginning to recognize that the incorporation of skateboarding into metropolitan urban fabrics may bring about positive social and economic benefits, reduce crime, spur entrepreneurialism, and produce socially viable spaces.

The combination of tactical transgression and the entrepreneurial, competitive nature of skateboarding has empowered skateboarders. The political spaces created through this empowerment have been predicated on the intrinsic nature of the activity, imbued with mobility, pleasure, and joy, whereby skateboarders carve out an endless, accidental playground for all (Borden, 2019b). The subcultural collective has leveraged their newfound political power and mobilized activist movements that have led to spatial victories. These successful campaigns have led to short-lived successes where the spaces are still closed, but accessible through transgression (see Carr, 2010; Chiu, 2009; Howell, 2005; Nemeth, 2006) and long-term successes where spaces were permanently opened as multi-purpose and skateboarding is legal (see Borden, 2016; Giamarino, 2017; Orpana, 2016; Snyder, 2017; Willing & Shearer, 2016).

Scholars have additionally ascribed skateboarders' desire to claim city space to the historical iconicism and sacredness that skateboard spots become layered with over time (O'Connor, 2018; Snyder, 2017). This sacredness is facilitated through the dissemination of skateboard media (e.g., videos, magazine coverage, photographs, and sharing of locations via social media). This virtual and physical writing of emotional and cultural meaning within mundane spaces may motivate successful activist campaigns to liberate criminalized space. However, it usually induces skateboarders to perform a regular "secular pilgrimage" to access the everyday plaza or street (O'Connor, 2018).



The media sometimes considers the recent construction boom and proliferation of skateparks in large cities around the world as a symbol of triumph for skateboarders (see for example, Ihaza, 2018). However, the reasons for the construction of skateparks or the allowance of skateboarders in previously criminalized space is much more complicated than the media suggests. Skateparks are still fraught with design problems due to a lack of engagement with skaters. They are provided to create ideals of acceptable citizenship—the acceptance of surveillance, self-policing of order, and the bolstering of corporate capitalism (Beal & Atencio, 2016). Cities attempt to offset the closure of public space through the provision of designated skateparks, often placing them in high-crime neighborhoods and at the margins of cities to drive out other urban problems (e.g., homelessness). Therefore, the continued criminalization of skateboarding, destruction of do-it-yourself (DIY) skateparks, and construction of subpar skateparks has led skaters to harness their collective entrepreneurial and competitive power to become political activists, attend public hearings, protect the closure of public spaces, and preserve subcultural landmarks they have frequented for decades.

By comparing the two unique plaza spaces in NYC and LA, our research adds supplemental insight to skateboarding as tactical transgression, architectural transformation, political resistance, and lauded neoliberal activity. We build on prior skateboarding literature by analyzing the discourses adopted by the NYC and LA skate communities. In so doing, we examine how public plazas become multi-use, legalized skate spaces. Our findings suggest the possibility of an alternative urban future where cities can provide both designated skateparks and legalize additional public spaces for skateboarding. We argue that excluded populations can claim their right to city space when they adopt certain tactical and neoliberal discourses.

## Research Methods

The authors performed a comparative case study analysis between the Banks and the Courthouse. Research methods include content analysis of newspaper reports, skateboarding blogs, magazines, information revealed in skateboard documentary films, online forums such as SLAP, and personal communication with selected skateboard industry professionals and city officials. Archives between 2011 and 2018, when two skate activist movements occurred, were collected. An ethnographic content analysis technique (see Borden, 2001; Borden, 2019a; MacKay & Dallaire, 2014; O'Connor, 2016; Snyder, 2011, 2017; Yochim, 2010) has been employed to inform the histories and culture of skateboarding. We also conducted semi-structured interviews with key activists behind the movements and had informal conversations with on-site skaters. Specific individuals consented to the inclusion of their partial or full names within the text. We conducted participant observation as skateboarders and scholars within the two research settings. Observational data included field notes, personal anecdotes, and photographs.

## The Evolution the Spatial Struggles in the Two Sites

The two discourses, security and spontaneity, characterize skateboarders' tactics in saving the two sites. Security refers to the rationale that skate leaders attempting to

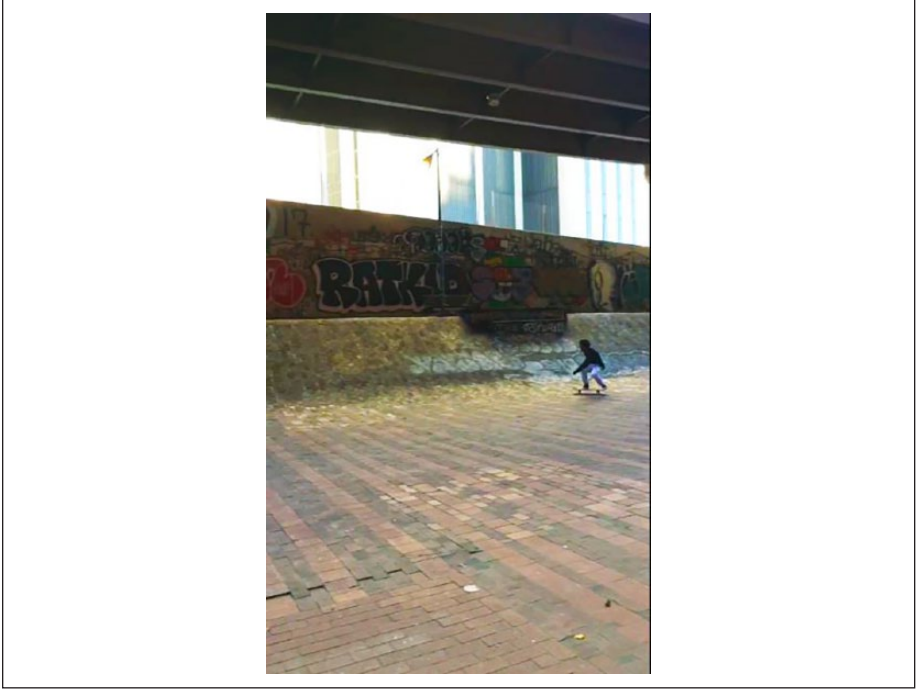
save the Banks used to justify their existence in the place. The NYC skate community suggested that they can render the long-abandoned site safer by providing small-scale makeovers and crowds of law-abiding skaters. The LA community built their actions on the concept of spontaneity, contextualizing skateboarding into a broader planning politics. Skateboarders in NYC and LA used common strategies to appropriate the spaces but had different rationales for protecting the spaces.

### *Transforming the Banks into a Securitized Space*

Abutting the Brooklyn Bridge, on the Manhattan side to the north in the shadows, this found skate space is only accessible through a wire-cut in the fence with exposed sharp edges, a small sliver of a gap between the fence, one police barricade, and a large freight storage container. It can also be accessed by strategically positioning abandoned drink coolers that aid in hopping the tall fence. Five skaters on an autumn fieldwork day in 2017 have traveled from another legalized skate spot at Martinez Playground (Blue Park) in Williamsburg to skate the Banks. There were issues of accessing the space while conducting fieldwork. The first time, a policeman guarded the cut in the fence (refer back to Figure 1) and another patrol car blocked an additional entrance for an hour. An elderly person stops and asks us if the space is still closed to skateboarders, lamenting that the city has not already reopened this recreational space to the adjacent community. Inside at the Banks, the skaters gain speed simply by traveling downhill upon the brick floor, indicative of NYC skateboarders' fast-paced, rugged style of skating. The Banks on this day, and presently due to the time-sensitive trespassing that takes place here, is about skating the banks and the concrete stanchion to partake in performing upon a slice of skateboarding history.

Unlike the Courthouse, the Banks only affords camaraderie through cheering for tricks landed by banging one's board on the ground and less through conversation during breaks. Skaters are here to skate and document tricks because at any moment the skateboarders may be asked to leave by security. For example, the skater pictured in Figure 2 would zoom up the bank and attempt to flip their board while trying to land and skate back down the brick bank. They tried this over ten times while other skateboarders attempted to go up the bank and ollie<sup>2</sup> onto the ledge to slide on it. This ledge was an object that skateboarders had strategically constructed to augment the usage of the space for skateboarders, but no one else. Any sort of break at this spot could be detrimental. Police might kick out skaters and less time would be spent interacting with the space and its architecture. Documentation and dissemination of photos and videos at the Banks indicate to the global skate community that the spot is still 'skateable.' The media also suggests that the space is perennially barricaded, criminalized, and policed. Traditional skateboarding transgression and contestation, through strategic spatio-temporal tactics to use the space, are necessary.

*Urban public space in NYC.* NYC is slightly different than LA when it comes to the regulation of private development and the provision of urban public space. This is due in large part to the 1961 Zoning Resolution, which sought to accommodate a transforming political economy, growing population, and car-obsessed culture. This zoning



**Figure 2.** Skateboarder approaches steep banks to perform a trick by riding up, landing, and rolling back down (Photograph by authors).

amendment led to a boom in Modernist office skyscraper construction. It also incentivized private developers to purchase air rights to build more densely in exchange for providing privately-owned public plaza space. Many of these Modernist plaza spaces were foreboding and highly securitized (Nemeth & Hollander, 2010). Schmidt, Nemeth, and Botsford (2011) found that privately owned public spaces encourage more consumptive uses and contain features that control use. This suggests that entrepreneurial urbanism is a crucial factor in how public space is provided in NYC.

Around the same time as the 1961 Zoning Resolution, urban renewal was the planning fad of mid-20th-century NYC. One negative externality associated with urban renewal was the clearing of residential apartment blocks to make way for behemoth highway installations. This happened to the Brooklyn Bridge. Two highway off-ramps cleared residential blocks abutting the northern side of the Brooklyn Bridge and created an interstitial space between the stanchions supporting the off-ramps and the stone and steel structure of the bridge (Endo, 2010). Strong zoning regulations, unplanned interstitial spaces of urban renewal, and a legacy of progressive parks planning have put NYC at number nine on The Trust for Public Land's (2018) ParkScore. This has led to a proliferation of public and private spaces for recreation that skateboarders can appropriate, contest, and perfect their craft within. One of these spaces was the Banks.

*Popularity in skateboarding subculture of the Banks.* In the historical documentary titled *Deathbowl to Downtown: The Evolution of Skateboarding in New York City*, viewers find out that the popularity of the Banks as a street skateboarding space began in earnest in 1989. To local skaters coming from New Jersey, Long Island, and all five boroughs of NYC, the Banks was “The Meeting Spot” where skateboarders practiced before venturing out into the concrete jungle and appropriating found space for creative reinterpretation (Charnoski, Nichols, & Goldsmith, & Charnoski, & Nichols, 2008). As former NYC urban planner Daniel Campo alludes to in their ethnography of Shantytown, a former DIY skate spot across the East River (now the site of East River State Park), the Banks were part of NYC skate culture’s spots that were easily accessible by subway or skateboard, and made popular through photographic dissemination in skate magazines and videos (Campo, 2013). Campo coins Shantytown an “accidental playground” because it was situated on vacant land and uniquely skater-owned, appropriated, policed, and designed with common skatepark objects such as a “volcano” and “quarter-pipe.” Unlike Shantytown, the Banks have been owned and operated by the Parks (DPR) and Transportation (DOT) departments. The space was designed by renowned landscape architect M. Paul Friedberg. Friedberg’s intuition was to make the brick embankments simultaneously juxtapose and render harmonious their relationship with the grandiose bridge. However, the curved brick embankments attracted skateboarders. They resembled the South Bronx pool known as the Deathbowl that skaters frequented in the late 1970s. The stanchions holding up the off-ramp served as vertical walls that skaters could ride up onto.

The Banks thrived as East Coast skateboarding’s mecca. The Banks has survived as a skateboarding space because of its geographic location, buttressed by downtown Manhattan’s securitization, the permanence of the bridge, and the bridge’s importance as an architectural and cultural landmark. It also edged out former DIY skate spots such as Shantytown as NYC’s skateboarding hotspot because it was protected from large-scale redevelopment. Whereas Shantytown was a derelict DIY space ripe for redevelopment on the Williamsburg, Brooklyn side of the East River, the Banks served as a vital, interstitial recreational space that supported the structural integrity of the Brooklyn Bridge. It is located on the southeast border of Manhattan Island in the interstices of the urban grid. The recreational land use designation and existence of the bridge permit almost no floor-area ratio. This prevents developers, who are hungry for strategic locations to develop compact neighborhoods, from redeveloping the space. The land property belongs to several municipal agencies, further complicating any development plans. Skaters provide the deserted space an extra function that only they find valuable. As Chiu (2009) states in his rationalizing of the Banks as NYC skaters’ favorite setting, “For decades, nobody wanted the space except the skateboarders (Porter, 2005, as cited in Chiu, 2009, p. 29).”

Throng of skaters met at the Banks in Manhattan to cultivate subcultural capital and community. They used the space to progress their personal skills on skateboards before pushing in the streets or hopping on the subway to get to other interstitial, accidental public spaces in the city. Marginal spaces such as the Banks were some of the only existing places where skateboarders could skate without harassment (Porter,

2005). This all changed when one of the nation's most horrific terror attacks struck NYC in 2001 and led to the securitization of Lower Manhattan.

*Initial threats to the Banks.* Right after 9/11, downtown Manhattan and NYC landmarks became highly securitized, barricaded, and policed. This threatened accessibility and inclusivity, which precluded interaction between acquaintances and strangers and stymied the free conduct of social life (Nemeth & Hollander, 2010). The Brooklyn Bridge is a National Historic Landmark in Lower Manhattan. The Banks' situation between the bridge and the headquarters of the NYC Police Department (NYPD) led to proposals to comprehensively demolish the space and turn it into a more visible park in the early 2000s (Chiu, 2009). From November 2004 to July 2005, DPR once enclosed the whole area for a park renovation project. Skaters believed that the city intended to keep skaters away to address public safety concerns. After a negotiation between local skaters and DPR, the plaza was reopened in July 2005. It then became a park of multiple uses that accommodated skateboarding. Some benches and planters were removed from the original design so that more of the bridge's brick ramps were accessible to skaters (Chiu, 2009).

Steve Rodriguez, a leading skateboard activist in NYC and one of the key informants of this study, indicated that the city sees the bridge as a prime target for future terrorist attacks. This security rationale is a huge reason why the Banks has been closed since 2010. Despite the persistent police presence and fencing off of the space, the Banks has remained under the jurisdiction of DPR. Therefore, it is still technically a true public space that skateboarders can make their home. A complex bureaucracy, comprised of federal, state, and local agencies, oversees the areas surrounding and including the Banks. The annual overturn of uses within the space, from a police parking lot to a construction site back to a skatepark, the lack of governmental transparency regarding the permanent reopening and recognition of the Banks as a skatepark, and competing interests in what the space should inevitably become have led to ongoing campaigns to preserve the Banks by the local skate community.

*Ongoing campaigns to save the Banks.* While our focus is on the current fight to save the Banks (post-2010), it is important to briefly note the successful campaign to prevent the space from complete destruction back in the early-2000s. This campaign was led by Steve Rodriguez and local skateboarders before the advent of social media. Back in 2004, Steve Rodriguez convinced DPR that the lower banks, the larger banks closer to the East River, should be preserved because skateboarders transformed the space from an underused place populated by junkies to a recreational park frequented by skaters. Rodriguez currently serves as the main liaison between city officials and the skateboard community. He also served as a skateboarding consultant during this initial campaign to make the Banks officially recognized as the Brooklyn Banks Skatepark. From 2004 to 2009, the iconic spot was resurrected (Eisenhour, 2009) as DPR recognized skateboarding was the most competitive, secure use of the space. This was up until renovations were slated for the Brooklyn Bridge, residents complained to the local community board that the skaters were a nuisance, and local contractors decided to

keep the space open as a construction site to keep making money on the rehabilitation project. Key features of the Banks, such as the small bank and the nine-stair set, were demolished. The large bank was preserved while DPR allowed the DIY construction of a ledge on the bank, rails, and other ramps.

In 2010, DOT permanently closed the Banks to skateboarding for structural rehabilitation and painting renovations to the Brooklyn Bridge off-ramps, which are situated directly above the Banks. Although the Banks were supposed to reopen after 2014, this was not the case. On popular NYC-based skate blogs such as *Quartersnacks* and more corporate-branded websites such as *Green Label* (Mountain Dew), the local and global skate community declared that the Banks were finished as a spot and would cease to exist (Pappalardo, 2013; Quartersnacks, 2010). When the renovations were supposed to be completed in 2014, Rodriguez reached out to both DOT and DPR to permanently reopen the space as a skate plaza. Rodriguez claims that the idea to partner with a large corporate company such as Nike or Converse, the Tony Hawk Foundation, and even the Beastie Boys to pay for maintenance of and police the space was initially his idea. This strategy, as will be discussed later, was successful at the Courthouse. Therefore, an activist model exists to launch a successful campaign and enter into a formal contract with a corporation and the city through a private-public partnership. However, the Banks is situated near a National Historic Landmark that is overseen by agencies including the Department of Homeland Security, National Park Services, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, DPR, DOT, NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission, and NYPD. This makes it extremely difficult for skaters to deal with this multi-layered bureaucratic conundrum and reopen the space. Even community board meetings and the local planning processes are drawn out and delayed, which makes it difficult for even the smallest thing, such as removing the fence surrounding the Banks, to be accomplished.

*Outcomes and current situation of the Banks.* In our communication with municipal authorities sharing the proprietorship of this area, DPR refused to comment and deferred to DOT. They suggested that the main reason the park is fenced off still has to do with the ongoing bridge and expressway construction. As Brooklyn Bridge Outreach states,

The area under the Brooklyn Bridge in Manhattan, known by some as the “Brooklyn Banks” or “Red Brick Park,” is not a NYC Department of Parks property. Several years ago skateboarding features were installed in this space without DOT approval. The area was closed in 2009 and it has remained an active construction area and essential staging area for contractor’s equipment for several Brooklyn Bridge Rehabilitation Contracts. . . . This area will continue to be needed to facilitate the essential work maintaining the State of Good Repair of the Bridge into the future (Brooklyn Bridge Outreach, personal communication, June 4, 2018).

Therefore, it appears as though the minor DIY construction and installation of ‘skateable’ objects (e.g., benches, rails, and marble ledges), a strategy long employed



by skaters at spots such as Shantytown, may have rubbed DOT the wrong way. Also, the persistent fear of terrorism, recent vehicular rampages in NYC, and delayed construction (meant to be completed in 2014; now 2023) has led to further securitization and surveillance of the Banks by police, construction workers, and city officials. Nonetheless, the Banks is still accessible to skateboarders through minor acts of transgression (e.g., fence-cutting, fence-hopping), mentioned in popular skateboard magazines as a viable skate space (Alley, 2017), and documented with spatial performances on skate blogs and in social media (NY Skateboarding, 2018).

After a story broke of a few holes in the fencing, an additional day of fieldwork was conducted in the fall of 2017. The experience of the space was much different than fieldwork at the Courthouse, where we observed skaters were able to enter as appropriate spatial users. Surveilled by police and barricaded by fencing, one could only enter through a small hole in the fence and were followed by other skaters. The attitudes expressed by skaters were that of gratitude. They were happy that the space is slowly being reopened by the skaters themselves and that they are allowed to skate the space. They also hoped it would not be destroyed, that the architectural integrity and authenticity would be preserved when the construction is completed, and that fencing is ultimately removed. The question, however, still remains as to when the space will be reopened and what DPR will want to do with it. As of today, Brooklyn Bridge Outreach suggests that the area continues to be a security-restricted space for NYPD. It is not open to the public. The skate community, led by Steve Rodriguez, continues to consult with city agencies and leverage funds available in similar spaces to construct permanent skate plazas and skateparks until there are more updates on the permanent reopening of the Banks. Money has been earmarked for a similar effort at the Banks.

In short, skateboarding at the Banks did provide an alternative form of community policing, or “eyes on the street” (Jacobs, 1961), in the sense that the constant presence of skaters would likely deter potential minor crimes in hidden spaces underneath the Brooklyn Bridge. The skate community’s security discourse, which at times was imposed on them by the consistent securitization of the space, reached its limit in the post-9/11 era when the fear of terrorism escalated to such a level that skaters could no longer justify their occupancy of unauthorized municipal property. That kind of danger is obviously and simply not the kind that skaters will ever be able to safeguard against. Their security discourse fell short in sustaining itself. In their efforts to reclaim their right to the space, the skate community failed to articulate other rationales linking to a broad neoliberal urban vision. At a time of crisis (e.g., fear of terrorism), this vision often desperately seeks efficacious usage of space to ensure the provision of larger public goods.

Skateboarding has decentralized from its California roots and globalized because of the evolution of social media and technology that allows for the rapid sharing of photography and videography within and across the skateboard world (Pappalardo, 2015). This technology allows skaters to show that NYC has become a place where skateboarders can come to make a career and even start independent, skater-owned companies. NYC will continue to attract skateboarders due to the city’s reputation as a haven



**Figure 3.** A skateboarder approaches the stage at the Courthouse to ollie (jump) onto it (Photograph by authors).

for art, fashion, creativity, and entrepreneurship. Therefore, a large community of skateboarders is available to launch a successful, entrepreneurial, and competitive activist campaign when called to action. They will need to convince local residents and all pertinent city agencies to permanently legalize the Banks. For now, skateboarders will continue to access the space, as is evidenced through Instagram videos from NYC skate legends such as Zered Bassett and Brian Anderson. The space will continue to be contested through minor transgressions until the time is right to mobilize via social media, lobby the city through a private-public partnership to maintain the space, and permanently win back the red-bricked and banked space next to the Brooklyn Bridge. Moving westbound to LA, we explore an alternative strategic turn in reclaiming a threatened public skateboarding space.

### *Remaking the West LA Courthouse as a Spontaneous Space*

The Courthouse contains smooth concrete, a funky amphitheater stage that is too high for most skaters to hop up onto (see Figure 3), concrete ledges with purposefully designed metal iron to prevent damage, stairs to jump up and down on, and a drained fountain that has been redesigned with a concrete box and angled walls for skaters to ride on. During a wintry fieldwork day, there are approximately 20 skateboarders using various objects scattered throughout the Courthouse. Two are jumping off the stairs, three are carving the drained fountain walls, ten are grinding and sliding on top of metal ledges, and five are attempting to jump waist-high onto the stage—a difficult task.

Skateboarders relay how iconic this space is and how appreciative they are that LA has permanently legalized the Courthouse and repurposed it from a derelict courtyard to a bustling, multi-use skate plaza. For example, the security personnel of the Courthouse would watch skateboarders, even filming their tricks to post on

their personal social media pages. Nearby police park their patrol cars, notice the skateboarders, and walk into their station without mentioning anything to the skaters. The cops' presence deters behaviors that skaters might indulge in otherwise—drinking and smoking during breaks. This space allows skaters to build community, friendships, and solidarity while progressing their skill sets and spatial repertoires upon the architectural objects. Their practice and presence continually layer the space with sub-cultural capital and meaning for the global skate community to consume through social media documentation and rapid, digital dissemination of tricks in this space.

*Urban public space in LA.* LA public space for recreation is scarce. Space is provided and differentiated across a private-public gradient, which encourages privatization. Developable land is in short supply and private developers have leverage in the provision of space and who can use it. Out of the top 100 largest U.S. cities, LA is ranked 66th based on metrics that measure important indicators of park space provision, including acreage of open space, accessibility, and investment (The Trust for Public Land, 2018). Davis (2012) has stated that democratic, recreational space is virtually extinct, as municipal policy has taken a security offensive by responding to a middle-class demand for increased spatial and social insulation, with liaisons emerging between urban planning, architecture, and a police state. Parts of LA resemble a fortress city securitized by defensive built forms and surveillance technology.

This dearth of space for recreation is largely the result of poor public space planning and militarized urban policy in LA. Quimby is a 1965 law that incentivizes private developers to pay a fee in-lieu of providing park space. It produces a zero-sum game. More space is consumed for unaffordable residential development while the Department of Parks and Recreation's (LA Parks) coffer fills up with unusable money, as they struggle to find land to develop public space (Giamarino, 2017). Due to the sprawling nature of LA's metropolis, lack of accessibility to public space encourages skateboarders to flock to plazas and courtyards. They then attach more meaning to places where their activities can exist, even if for a small amount of time. Therefore, when space becomes threatened by destruction or privatization in cities lacking adequate park space, citizens will fight to sustain its existence.

*Popularity in skateboarding subculture of the Courthouse.* In an effort to provide municipal services to a rapidly urbanizing, growing, and sprawling city, the West LA Civic Center was built in 1965 and reflected a mid-century Modernist architectural style (Snyder, 2017). Due to the car-centric nature of life in LA, the plaza became an almost vacant space in the 1990s. Populations vying for space, particularly the homeless and skateboarders, began to occupy and use the space for alternative reasons beyond its functional design. This is when street skateboarding became popular at the Courthouse—the early 1990s. Skateboarders took advantage of its lack of use and invisibility, opportunities for sociability, and the presence of 'skateable' architecture.

Over the course of three decades, the Courthouse became layered with skateboard history and sacred symbolism, a topic frequently discussed in the popular skateboard podcast *The Nine Club* (Roberts, Bagley, & Hart, 2016-present). The space has been

permanently etched within the mystique of LA's skateboard subculture. Therefore, the space has been consistently occupied and frequented by skateboarders over the past 30 years. The Courthouse has recently been featured in the popular *Kingpin Magazine* as one of the 25 most iconic skate plazas in the world (Campbell, 2014). LA-based skateboarder Paul Rodriguez also listed the Courthouse as a must-skate for those visiting LA's sun-soaked streets (Tavana, 2015). Notwithstanding the importance of this space in the lore of local skateboarding culture, skateboarding is still illegal in most public spaces in LA—sidewalks, streets, and plazas included (Giamarino, 2017). The Courthouse in 2014 was not considered a designated skatepark. The city of LA and West LA neighborhood residents pushed to permanently close this iconic spot shortly after the vastly popular Stoner Skate Plaza opened just a few blocks away. It provided a legal, contained skatepark for the skate community, which became a reason for the city and its residents to push to criminalize the Courthouse.

*Initial threats to the Courthouse.* As chronicled in Snyder's (2017) *Skateboarding LA*, the Courthouse, in June 2014, was slated for skater-friendly upgrades to curb damage. Nike SB spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to remove anti-skate brackets on all the ledges and the stage and installed angled metal to prevent the trucks of the skateboard from chipping the concrete on the ledges. Retired professional skateboarder Aaron Snyder, Snyder's brother, did some digging and found out that this would be the last hurrah for the Courthouse. After an event in 2014 for *Go Skateboarding Day*, an annual event held on June 21 of every year in which skateboarders take to the streets, skateparks, and plazas, skating every impervious surface possible, the space would be permanently off limits to skateboarding. Skateboarders would be further criminalized in LA. A campaign to save the Courthouse and make it a permanently legal skate plaza was kickstarted by lead activists Aaron Snyder and Alec Beck, professional skateboarders, the local skateboard community, and skate corporations.

*The entrepreneurial coalition's campaign to save the Courthouse and secure its legitimacy.* Because skateboarding's history and culture is directly tied to and embedded within LA, the activist campaign in the contemporary, entrepreneurial city of LA was a fairly easy struggle compared to the Banks. There was a caveat. The archetypically apolitical skate community would need to mobilize, attend community hearings, and find funding to upkeep the area and curb damage. The facile efforts of the campaign were due in large part to the small amount of corporate stakeholders and cooperation of government agencies involved in the activist campaign. The Courthouse is a municipal space containing a library, a police station, and courthouse, all overseen at the local level by the city of LA. In 2014, skateboarders only had to convince adjacent neighborhood residents, the local city council, and City Councilperson Jay Handal that they should allow the space to be permanently reopened.

First, skaters successfully used social media pages such as Instagram to share information on community meetings where skaters could participate in public discussions regarding the proposal of future plans for the Courthouse. Then, they established a private-public partnership made up of professional skaters and a few supportive city

officials. This culminated in a five—year contract between Nike and the city of LA. Nike agreed within an hour of the skate community reaching out to them to allocate \$10,000 a year to maintain the space. For a large corporation such as Nike, it was a small sum considering they had already spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to renovate the space for *Go Skateboarding Day* in 2014. Skaters interacted with a relatively empathetic city council and residential community. They convinced the city that any media coverage within the space that skaters might garner would boost LA's marketability as entrepreneurial, creative, and competitive. In addition, skaters suggested that by allowing skateboarding, the self—policing nature of the activity would keep out more illicit behaviors (i.e., drug use) and undesirable populations (i.e., the homeless). We focus here on the economic power leveraged by the local skateboard community and the neoliberal behaviors exhibited by individual skateboarders that led to the successful legalization of the Courthouse.<sup>3</sup>

The campaign was borne out of a proposal by LA Parks to build a hideous sound wall around Stoner Skate Plaza, which would fortress the skatepark and keep eyes off the street. This was in direct contradiction to the original reasoning to build the skatepark—to increase visibility, encourage more foot traffic, and have skateboarders deter gangs from occupying the park space. Out of this initial proposal, the West LA Community of Skateboarders/Stoner Skate Plaza Association was formed by skaters Alec Beck and Aaron Snyder to broach the subject of saving the Courthouse at community meetings concerning the sound wall (Eisenhour, 2014). Within three days, the skate community was mobilized via famous skaters' social media pages. The posts encouraged skaters to attend community meetings, respect the space while it was remodeled for *Go Skateboarding Day*, and not skate it while the local city council deliberated whether or not to accept Nike's \$50,000 proposal to maintain the space and prevent minor damage. The city council, in a 12-1 vote in July 2014, decided to approve the contractual agreement. This was done largely because the skateboard community leveraged its entrepreneurial, economic, and political power to maintain and self-police the spot. They also exhibited neoliberal behaviors of citizenship, responsibility, and civility by not skating or trashing the space while deliberations were in progress (see Figure 4). The activist campaign finished with a ribbon-cutting ceremony that prominently displayed Nike's corporate branding. This branding convinced the city council that the space would likely attract more foot traffic and help make LA a preferred destination for skateboarders and other creative classes (Altema, 2014).

*Outcomes and current situation of the successful reopening of the Courthouse.* Today, the agreement between LA, Nike, and skateboarders is in its fifth and final year. Skateboarders continue to respect the space, the other uses that happen during business hours (i.e., employees walking or having lunch), and those that happen on a continual basis (i.e., the presence of homeless encampments). The successful movement marked “one of the first times that skateboarders . . . successfully lobbied their local government to allow them to reclaim a spot that was illegal” (Snyder, 2017, p. 230). During one day of fieldwork in 2017, a skateboarder in the space stated that it was fascinating how the Courthouse became decriminalized and truly public. The skater stated that,



**Figure 4.** Skateboarder-created signage asks skateboarders to exhibit neo-liberal/lauded behaviors to permanently legalize space (Eisenhour, 2014).

Note. Text reiterates the neoliberal dictates and requirements of skateboarders to permanently decriminalize the space:

'Yes Skateboarding:

*This isn't a skate spot, it isn't a skatepark, it's something new. The city has agreed to let us skate here because they believe we deserve it. They now understand that we deserve the privilege to enjoy this **sacred spot**.*

Don't give them a reason to take it away.

**Open skating only when there is no event or permit.** If you are asked not to skate because there is an event, come back later.

**Pick up your trash and recycling.** Keep this place spotless.

**If someone is walking by, be courteous and stop skating.** You may be able to skate around them easily, but they don't know that. We don't want to make anyone nervous.

**Park in the street. Never park or skate in the police lot.** They helped us get here, let's give them the respect they deserve for doing the job they do.

**No stickers.** Ever. If you see a sticker, peel it off.

Let's work together to maintain the respect from the community and show them we deserve this spot.

**If someone's blowing it, help them out.** (Make sure the kids get it).

We want to make it look like we aren't here (no trash, stickers, etc.). Since we are here, let's add value to the spot: Help people carry stuff, say hi, be cool. Thank them for letting us skate in their house. Give them every reason to continue to believe this is a good idea.

In short, be skateboarders.' Thank you Alec Beck, Stoner Locs and the Los Angeles Community of Skateboarders

The idea of repurposing a courtyard is crazy that for this spot particularly, it wasn't intended for skating, but skaters made it their own way. It goes to this idea that the public should be able to use space however they want to use it, not just for certain designated ways.

Snyder described the successful activist campaign at the Courthouse as "the perfect storm of corporate sponsorship, community activism, and government cooperation"



(Snyder, 2017, p. 231). The more sacred or loved a space is, the more likely populations are willing to fight to preserve its existence. This sacredness was reiterated after the Courthouse's liberation in a video uploaded to YouTube by professional street skateboarding legend Eric Koston. He explained to newer generations the significance of this space's legalization to the skate subculture (Nike Skateboarding, 2014). A campaign is also likely to be more successful if a large population is motivated. Also, the persistent presence of skateboarders in the space has created a knowledge transfer to those unfamiliar with the activity to aid in reversing negative perceptions of skateboarders (Snyder, 2017). This case provides important lessons for future activist campaigns taking place in public space. It shows the importance of the roles that the use of social media, presence of corporate branding, and the marketing of entrepreneurial, competitive urbanism play in motivating and mobilizing a socially marginal and policed community to leverage its political and economic clout in the fight to decriminalize urban public space. Through planned activist activities, excluded social groups can harness their political-economic power to help persuade and lobby city officials to grant public space back to them. Now, the firm establishment of skater-led community associations may provide other possibilities for the liberation of future threatened skate spots in LA and beyond, including the Courthouse in 2020.<sup>4</sup>

## **The Comparison of the Two Cases and Its Implications for Urban Planning Politics**

Skate activism exhibits neoliberal characteristics expressed by individual skateboarders that cities laud in everyday citizens. Cities may reward groups that adopt neoliberal discourses with permanent and programmed claims to city space. The common discourse both cases reveal is that skateboarding is an embodied spatial practice that has the potential to make a city authentic, especially when skaters occupy naturally formed, instead of purposely built, spaces (Chiu, 2009). We argue, however, that the separate discourses the two skate communities shaped led to different outcomes. The common strategies of the two activist campaigns were authenticity, entrepreneurship, and private funding. Entrepreneurship is a capitalist endeavor embraced by and embedded within neoliberal urbanism. Both communities partnered with private corporations to lobby municipalities to allow skateboarders to appropriate public spaces that criminalized skateboarding (Dardot & Laval, 2013; Snyder, 2017). Skaters' discursive constructions of their additional strategies influenced the actual outcomes in NYC and LA differently.

Comparing the two skate activist movements in Table 1, we find, identify, and elaborate on the different discourses that the communities in NYC and LA employed. NYC skaters incorporate security as a bonus value into their discourse constructed for reclaiming the Banks. Their attempt succeeded in the early stages of the post-9/11 era, when skateboarding actually safeguarded an underused, undevelopable space that pro-development corporations did not have an interest in. However, the skate community stumbled when articulating their interests with broader values of public goods and common interests shared by New Yorkers and city officials who, long after 9/11, began hoping for something more transformative within the space for the park. A similar

**Table 1.** A comparison of the neoliberal principles and discourses used by skateboarders in the two settings (created by Authors).

Settings	Common discourse	Different discourse	Environmental features	Members of partnership	Neoliberal advocacy
The Banks	Authenticity Entrepreneurship Private funding	Security	Safety Visibility	Professional skater and skate corporations, laymen skaters	Self-policing Self-financed spatial upkeep
The Courthouse		Spontaneity	Creativity Conviviality Civil society	Professional skaters as a corporation itself, layman skaters	Individual responsibility Respect for community Downtown vibrancy

articulation by skateboarders at Shantytown led to the permanent destruction of that DIY skatepark in exchange for the construction of East River State Park, which provides greater public goods-waterfront park space, a soccer field, and flea markets (Campo, 2013). To this end, skaters had dominated and occupied the Banks and excluded possible uses that could also provide similar safety functions. The rather thin, one-dimensional security rationale hardly justified the long-term presence of skateboarders, who at that time could have only wished for the city's continued tolerance. Instead of continuing to be empathetic, if not sympathetic, to skateboarding's existence at the Banks, in exchange for more 'eyes on the plaza,' the city later found it safe enough to simply enclose the whole area.

The tolerance theme proposed by Florida (2002), as a critical component of a creative city model among the "3 Ts" (along with Talent and Technology), did not impress a global metropolis such as NYC, which has already been more culturally diverse than most other American cities. The 2008 financial crisis has driven American cities to long for something more than just a 'safe city.' Putting forth a security discourse does not fuse further opportunity for Lower Manhattan's desire for public spaces that favor pro-business interests, the tourist industry, and luxury apartment development. Neoliberal developments like DUMBO's residential redevelopment and the completion of the 9/11 Memorial have proactively grabbed local and global attention through their significance as place making projects. NYC skate activists, in efforts to save the Banks, appeared to DOT and DPR as a social movement lacking enough altruistic value. The skate community failed to convince the city to officially allow for skateboarding in the space, especially since dozens of skateparks and alternative skate venues have been built over the past two decades.

However, the Courthouse's skate community tackled more strategically a spontaneity rationale that legitimized the saving of a naturally formed, or found, skate plaza. Their spatial struggle tends to give LA, a city known for urban sprawl and fortress-like

environments (Davis, 2012), something that the city has long been missing—vibrant public spaces. Keeping the plaza more spontaneous and inclusive, rather than simply tolerant, helps the city to refashion itself. The skate community and their social scene, when situated in LA's larger urban development context, embodies something beyond an ad hoc, tactical place making intervention. It is something that juxtaposes a body of more enduring ideas and city-branding images, characterized here by what we term the '3 Cs'—creativity, conviviality, and civil society.

### *Creativity*

Skateboarding has historically been characterized as a creative reproduction of urban space, transcending a prescribed spatial meaning and instilling an alternative use value into a setting (Borden, 2001). Skateboarders constitute one of the pioneering creative classes of modern cities. Their city remaking efforts have inspired more sub-cultural groups, such as parkour enthusiasts and flash mobs, to engage with the built environment in unconventional, daring, and often innovative ways. Collectively, they directly, or indirectly, inspire contemporary architects, landscape architects, and urban designers to reshape public space into more spontaneous and fluid forms. In the early 2000s, as street skateboarding was legislated out of public spaces in American cities, skaters had to remake themselves into entrepreneurs by venturing into a variety of startup businesses and industries, including fashion, film, digital media, and other various art forms. In short, skaters are both social and economic creative classes for neoliberalizing cities. For LA, including skaters into its contemporary urban landscape helps to reinvent new creative city images, which helps assuage the stereotype of the city as a sprawling landscape filled with affluent suburbs, overly-touristic downtown spaces, and heavy vehicular traffic. This concept of creativity interested a major corporation (Nike SB) enough to finance the renovation and maintenance of the courthouse plaza, where throngs of skaters endorse their corporate image actively on a daily basis. This space is a win-win strategy for Nike, the city of LA, and the skate community. Ultimately, the city government benefits most from the corporate-community partnership. They do so by saving their municipal budget spending and time in facility maintenance, park policing, and response to adjacent neighborhoods' complaints.

### *Conviviality*

Henry Shaftoe (2012) defines "conviviality" as "the state of being sociable, jovial or festive—all signs of good health and wellbeing and effective public spaces are the prime locations for the nurturing of such states of mind and body." More importantly, this sense of conviviality gives a city the qualities of being alive, welcoming, and friendly. It also prevents any public space from being claimed or dominated by one particular group. At the Courthouse, the skaters' activism was supported by the fact that skaters and non-skaters (e.g., regular pedestrians, office workers, and the homeless) have shared the site together since the 1990s. LA acknowledged that the skaters' existence

would inform the public how different groups may find their own spaces in an all-inclusive plaza that values diversity, peace, and safety. This hopeful potential of spatial existence by individuals or groups is lauded by any type of neoliberal discourse. Moreover, skaters' choreographic routines showcased embodied physical performances that present a vibrant downtown scene more vividly and enduringly than other consumption-based cultural landscapes, such as outdoor concerts or sidewalk cafes that mainly appeal to more privileged, included, and affluent citizens. The value-freeness of skateboard culture, evident in its longtime occupancy of a space to extract a use value, endorses a sense of conviviality for the Courthouse and LA in general. Castree (2008) suggests that neoliberalism provides a shell for capitalism. Conviviality here, as a social dimension of neoliberalism, provides Nike a protective discourse to justify its sponsorships of festive skate events that regularly draw crowds of teens, young adults, and tourists craving culture to this space.

### *Civil Society*

Instead of abiding by the regulations authorities impose on them, skaters regulate themselves and produce an impression that they are willing to respect and befriend other users of space. The sign posted within the courthouse plaza (refer back to Figure 4) sends an important message of a cognizant, responsible, self-regulated skate community. Castree (2008) suggests that "civil society" is one of the major features of neoliberalization, equally important when compared with other characteristics such as deregulation, privatization, and marketization. Even though the legalization of the plaza as a skate spot does give Nike more opportunity to brand itself and market its products, the legalization does not solely rely on Nike's financial power to maintain the built environment. Relying only on Nike's corporate contributions would simply recreate and reproduce images of privatization and marketization of public space. Rather, skaters appropriate the power of private funding in claiming their right to the plaza by educating the public that a skater is/can be a mature, empathetic citizen, not a hoodlum or a vandalizer. Instead of surrendering to corporate control, as seen in urban plazas elsewhere, skaters here partnered with a corporation and coopt Nike's and LA's city-branding desires to help improve the public image of skateboarding and decriminalize the space. Thus, the corporate-community partnership convinced the city and the public that skaters deserve a right to the Courthouse, and to the city overall, by reiterating their new identity as members of a civil society.

### **Conclusion: Neoliberal Discourses as Key Factors Framing Skate Activism in NYC and LA**

The neoliberalization of cities at large tends to facilitate, and is facilitated by, exclusionary policies of privatization, policing, and enclosure of public space, ostensibly justified by local municipalities' and entrepreneurs' various discourses of urban visions. However, our research suggests that a skateboard community and other

marginal communities practicing spatial activism can be resilient enough to articulate different rationales that can take a public good (e.g., policed recreational space), and through grassroots activism, transform it into an urban commons where previously sanctioned activities are allowed to co-exist. An orthodox creative city discourse embraces the idea that city governments can manage to attract “creative classes” to their cities to accumulate capital over increased investments in intelligent industry, entertainment, art, and so on (Florida, 2002). Critics, however, argue that this growth trajectory tends to spur gentrification (Howell, 2005). Skateboarding, as a creative spatial practice, reflects another alternative, grassroots reality for a population of ‘non-elites’ to claim their right to the city. They combine their intrinsic spatial tactics with certain, temporary neoliberal actions to prevent their spaces from being privatized, destructed, policed, and permanently closed. Therefore, this comparative analysis is important for several reasons (see Table 1).

Spatially, through a fun, playful, and shared re-imagining of space, skateboarders creatively reinvent the city as a playground to practice skills and move across geographic demarcations as a single in-between terrain. They successfully defy the spatial logic and organization of consumption in the public realm (Lefebvre, 1991). Tactical urbanism, when done at the right time, can subvert revanchist policies and lead to victories within and across what urban sociologist Suzanne Hall (2012) calls “prosaic publics,” which are “small zones or spheres of familiarity and intimacy” (p. 131). These zones allow for multiple, harmonic uses and powerful contestations and contradictions, which can be overcome and enhanced through activism.

In both spaces, skateboarders sought common strategies. First, to sustain authenticity for each respective skate culture (Chiu, 2009), skateboarders continued to appropriate the spaces and participate in the activity of skateboarding. Second, the skateboarders were naturally drawn to these spaces because they provided a natural, yet overlooked, architectural landscape for them to perform tricks within (Borden, 2001). Third, hopping fences, skateboarding upon wavy red brick banks, on ledges, and atop stages, skateboarders’ practices in both spaces were embodied upon the architectural objects. Finally, the skaters socially produced and cultivated meaning within both spaces that, over time, became layered with subcultural knowledge and capital. This led to a common strategy to campaign to save the spaces when they were threatened by neoliberal revanchism. These similar practices are where the campaigns to save the Banks and the Courthouse diverge.

At the Banks, the security discourse and the intrinsic function of self-policing are obligations imposed on skateboarders from the outside by municipal authorities. Authority does this to ostensibly tackle NYC’s goal of providing a public space in the least maintained and most cost-effective way possible. Without more nuances in NYC skaters’ discursive tactics, like adopting a spontaneity discourse, the skate community here fell short in transforming this compromised situation into something more stable and permanent. Fears of global terrorism and the power and complexity of the institutional structures governing the setting were too much for the skate community to overcome.

With the case of the Banks, there have been short-lived, successful collaborations between skateboarders and city officials. Steve Rodriguez, NYC skateboarders, and DOT have worked together before to revamp derelict spaces and reopen them as skate-parks (see Stapinski, 2016). This would not be the ideal outcome of a collaboration at the Banks. The idea of completely reconstructing the space and not leaving any native architecture intact would destroy the sacred meaning of the Banks. For now, ongoing discussions are happening between Steve Rodriguez, DOT, and DPR regarding updates on the reopening of the space, which looks slated for 2023. This is yet another delay in a space that's been securitized and surveilled since 2001. Due to the nature of the tactical transgressions practiced by skateboarders within the Banks, skateboarders still appropriate the space. They are waiting to act and collaborate with corporate partners, DOT, and DPR in order to outbid and out-compete all alternative uses that the Banks could be redeveloped into.

At the Courthouse, skateboarders convinced local city officials and residents to reopen the space for skateboarding through their spontaneity discourse, which included the neoliberal tenets and sub-discourses of creativity, conviviality, and civil society. Their spontaneity discourse was facilitated by entrepreneurship and the private-public partnership with Nike. Skateboarders installed signage that dictated proper behavior. This tactic demonstrated that skateboarders could be responsible citizens by respecting the space while the local city council, the community, and skateboarders collaborated and voted on whether or not the space should be permanently reopened to skateboarding.

Skateboarders in LA were more robust with their collaborations, as they created a local grassroots organization with the support of hundreds of skateboarders to engage in strategic talks with city officials, skate corporations, and the local community. Their entrepreneurial and competitive nature allowed them to possess leverage in these negotiations by supplying a maintenance contract to the city council at no cost. Further influence was built by exhibiting that their use value was more valuable than others using the space (e.g., the homeless). This strategic adoption of neoliberal characteristics and subsequent employment of a spontaneity discourse led to the permanent reopening of the Courthouse. As the contract with Nike expires at the end of 2019, a new private owner may purchase the space from the city, which will present a new set of challenges for the skate community. They may have to convince a corporation to relinquish control of the space back to the skate community, along with the promise of another contract with Nike to offset maintenance costs.

In entrepreneurial cities with shrinking public spaces, to save sacred space, the leveraging of political and economic power by subcultures is a vital aspect of any grassroots activist campaign. In NYC and LA, public space is shrinking, surveilled, policed, and caters to consumptive practices that seek to extract the most profit out of leftover spaces. Neoliberal, revanchist municipalities, acting as competitive market entities, are looking to spend as little money as possible to establish the most competitive, safest use for a space. Therefore, LA skateboarders established a private-public partnership between the city council and Nike to maintain the space, which serves as an informative example for future skater-led activist campaigns to reclaim space in



neoliberal cities. A private-public partnership is an important aspect of a successful campaign to transform public space into an urban commons, but it is not enough in fights waged by marginalized populations to claim back city space.

The Courthouse example suggests that skateboarders must also show that they can exhibit characteristics associated with the concepts of creativity, conviviality, and civil society. They need to respect the surrounding communities and municipal laws and expectations, which can be compromising and problematic to other authentic, organic uses and users of public space. For example, skaters cannot drink, do drugs, or litter. Also, they cannot skate during business hours and are expected to police the homeless. At the same time, they must peacefully co-exist with other users and not collide into pedestrians.

Tactical urbanism can subvert neoliberal urbanism, but revanchist laws still produce negative results for skateboarders, as evidenced at the Banks. The Banks is overseen by multi-scalar, complex bureaucracies and governmental transparency is lacking. The biggest barrier preventing a successful campaign is that the Banks is adjacent to a National Historic Landmark. The city sees the space as a populated target worthy of securitization and surveillance due to threats of global terrorism (a fear fetishized by media outlets). Additionally, skateboarding at the Banks is prohibited due to delayed rehabilitation regarding infrastructure improvements. This leaves the public susceptible to policing and short-lived experiences using the space if they are to transgress the fenced off boundaries. Unfortunately, little has been done to speed up the reopening of the Banks in the hope of capitalizing on more profitable development and design proposals.

Nevertheless, when spots are virtually and physically inscribed with symbolic, sacred, and subcultural meaning, affected populations can mobilize, adopt spatial tactics and neoliberal discourses, and fight to save their at-risk landmarks. In addition to leveraging entrepreneurialism and competitiveness, the employment of a spontaneity discourse that articulates the '3Cs' (creativity, conviviality, and civil society) by excluded groups can aid in their efforts to preserve, secure, and reclaim their right to city space.

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### **Acknowledgments**

The authors would like to thank Gregory Snyder and Paul O'Connor for their insights on skateboarding; the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on this article. The authors thank Steve Rodriguez and other skateboarders for agreeing to be interviewed for this research. The usual disclaimers apply.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding


The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Notes

1. Harvey (2012) defines the urban commons as “an unstable and malleable social relation between a particular self-defined social group and those aspects of its actually existing or yet-to-be created social and/or physical environment deemed crucial to its life and livelihood” (p. 73). He distinguishes a commons from state-sanctioned public goods (i.e., exclusionary, securitized, surveilled public space) based on the political and spatial tactics adopted by marginalized groups that allow them to successfully claim their right to co-exist and appropriate public space.
2. An ollie is when a skateboarder puts pressure on their back foot and slides their front foot forward to lift their board off of the ground.
3. For an in-depth, ethnographic account of the campaign, see Snyder’s (2017) *Skateboarding LA*.
4. It is worth noting that the West LA Courthouse, due to a bill signed by former Governor Jerry Brown, was recently put up for sale and is expected to generate millions of dollars in revenue for the State (Catanzaro, 2018). Because the contract between Nike and the City is ending in 2019, and the property of the Courthouse may become privatized, the future for skaters has become precarious again. Such issues of changing proprietorship and private-public partnership support what Brenner and Theodore (2002) have suggested, that is, neoliberalism is historically contingent and path-dependent.

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