

# Skill Acquisition and Korean Landscape Architecture: An Ethnographic Account of Skateboarding in Seoul, South Korea

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/jss](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/jss)**Sander Holsgens** 

## Abstract

This article sketches a phenomenology of South Korean skateboarding. Drawing on more than 6 years of experience in the region and 20 months of fieldwork, I explore how Seoul-based skaters negotiate their presence in the built environment through precise spatial expertise, minute bodily gestures, and everyday skillful learning. Specifically, I think through the ways in which architectural minutiae within skate parks affect the skaters' perceptual experience of the built environment. Significantly, the architectural typology of the Korean skate parks is experienced as spaces of stillness, closeness, and tranquility, providing a serene and placid alternative to the interpretation of skateboarding as a fundamentally spectacular and trick-driven practice.

## Keywords

special issue lifestyle sport East Asia, skateboarding, phenomenology

A substantial group of Seoul-based skaters attain to skill acquisition within the intimate contours of skate parks. The textural qualities and felt rhythms of and within these precisely outlined spaces shape their sense of touch, muscular reflexes, motility, and everyday skills. I would even go as far as to claim that skate parks are a *sine qua non* in their acquisition of bodily skills and techniques: Their skating bodies are oriented by

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and toward recreational spaces of this sort, which are themselves the material and tangible outcomes of the state's footprint on Seoul's landscape architectures and sports for all initiatives.

Korean skateboarding appears to be closely related to certain classic Olympic sports, as the known and tested skate park is used as the quintessential site for learning and practicing carefully composed routines and scrutinized performative repetitions. This stands in contrast to the scholarly perception that, globally, skaters tend to be urban explorers who use and therefore change urban terrains in unintended and distinctive ways, by scanning the built environment for handrails, sets of stairs, and polished granite ledges that are "skateable" (Borden, 2001; see also, Chiu, 2009; Jeffries, Messer, & Swords, 2013; Lombard, 2016). In Seoul, however, this praxis of exploring and re-interpreting found urban space takes place in an irregular basis, in favor of using purpose-built skate parks. This article explores how this local preference for skate parks affects the skaters' skill acquisition and perception of space. Risk-taking, arguably one of the key characteristics of contemporary lifestyle sports (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2011), is here averted, or at least bracketed.

I partly position this article as a critical response to the argument that "skateboarders analyse architecture not for historical, symbolic or authorial content but for how surfaces present themselves as skateable surfaces" (Borden, 2001, p. 219; see also, Borden, 2016). This form of analysis, which Borden calls the skater's eye, denotes the bodily ability to scan the built environment for skateable elements, that is, to look beyond the intended functions of architectural space. Hardly site specific and context driven, it seems as though the notion of the skater's eye takes on a universal position, suggesting that these bodily skills escape sociocultural specificities and nuanced forms of difference. Similarly, Sigmund Loland's (2007) outline of a phenomenology of lifestyle sports discusses both skateboarders and snowboarders as universal subjectivities.

Within my article, I emphasize that skateboarding roots in local rituals, social practices, and cultural ways of sensing urban space. I contend, in accordance with Åsa Bäckström (2013, 2014), that the notion of skillful coping (or the skater's eye, in Borden's terminology) is fundamentally site specific and depends upon the sociocultural and experiential context of one's skill acquisition. Specifically, I propose an ethnographic account of *Ttukseom* skate park in Ttukseom Hangang Park, located in central-east Seoul, South Korea, so as to work toward a phenomenological understanding of the perceptual experience and bodily skills of a small group of skaters. To approach a localized form of skateboarding as a phenomenological problem—and to theorize skills as an embodied form of coping with the world—requires a sensibility to gauge and describe the direct encounter between skateboarder and architecture, body and surface, skills and circumstances. This article chronicles my provisional attempt to develop and achieve such a sensibility, and my underlying point of departure is that the bodily engagement with both the skateboard as equipment and the skate park as locale for skillful learning affects how skaters respond to and cope with the world per se. In so doing, I suggest that the

technology of the skateboard and the architecture of the skate park shape the human body in its capacity to skillfully be in the world with others.

Methodologically, my study is based on 6 years of working experience in the region and 20 months of fieldwork within and around the tender outlines of Seoul, between the fall of 2011 and September 2016. Over the course of this period, my physical and theoretical trajectories, mediated by the hopes, desires, and hesitations of skaters, intersected with their diverse and ever-changing roles within Seoul and their spatial navigations of the city. I position my work in between phenomenology and a discursive form of sensory ethnography, as it is in principle an intimate reconsideration of embodied shared practices by positioning my own 16 years of experience as a skater vis-à-vis those residing within and traversing Seoul's skate parks. Sensory ethnographies, Sarah Pink (2015) writes, "both attend to and interpret the experiential, individual, idiosyncratic and contextual nature of research participants' sensory practices *and* also seek to comprehend the culturally specific categories, conventions, moralities and knowledge that informs how people understand their experiences" (p. 15). I skated alongside and filmed in collaboration with Seoul-based skaters, so as to experience and attune my own bodily skills to the spatial configuration of Seoul's skate parks and the expertise of locals.

Alongside this experiential form of participant observation, I regularly conducted informal interviews with locals, produced audio-visual recordings, and developed a visual discourse analysis—though these go beyond the scope of this article. I worked with approximately 70 skaters, but became most familiar with a group of 15. This group includes skateboarders born and raised in Seoul, as well as a married couple from Busan—South Korea's busiest seaport—a Japanese competitive skater from Kyoto, an American–Korean couple in their 30s, and university students from Singapore, the United States, and South Korea. My research especially draws on the everyday involvement with the Candlroute skateboard brand, which brings together the majority of these 15 people: some are sponsored by Candlroute, whereas others are friends with founder Kim Youngjoon or wear the brand's attire on a regular basis. A considerable part of my fieldwork was performed in Korean, although there were occasions in which a transition to English was desirable. The regular presence of Northern American, European, and Southeast Asian skateboarders, for instance, proved to be a reason for South Koreans to communicate in English.

Sensory ethnographies investigate the layered and expressed relationship between sensory perception and culture, and my study positions bodily experiences (both my own and the skaters I work with) at its methodological and theoretical heart. This article starts by arguing how skate parks in Seoul operate as homelike spaces, after which I discuss why their precise and standardized architectural design affects the bodily skills and routines of local skaters. I then propose, via an ethnographic detail, the extent to which one could speak of a local, Korean practice—highlighting how skateboarding in Seoul unfolds itself as a phenomenon of habits and repetitions through which to shy away from the form of risk-taking that seems to be synonymous with lifestyle sports.

## The Skate Park as Dwelling and Locale for Skillful Learning

Skateboarding made its way into the Korean peninsula as late as the early 1990s, particularly through visiting Japanese skaters and the presence of the U.S. army within and in close proximity to Seoul. *Tussa Skateboards* is the self-proclaimed first skate-shop in South Korea, founded in 1992 as an importer of skate equipment, while the store itself was opened in Seoul's international Itaewon district in March 1996. The earliest visual material I managed to retrieve dates from 1995, whereas the country's inaugural full-length skateboard video launched in 1996, cunningly titled *Memories from 1996*. The first couple of skate parks were built in or near Seoul, notably the *Ilisan* park (February 1999), the temporary Sonpak Olympic park (December 1999), and the Gyonggi-do Anyangsi park (October 2000). By the mid-2000s, construction contractor ESP Korea had achieved a virtual monopoly in the development of wooden skate parks, and the company now claims to be responsible for the design and construction of 77 parks for "extreme sports and action sports," including Sondongu park (November 2008) and Ttukseom (September 2009).

Tim Sedo (2010) notes how especially Peralta's aggressive corporate strategy was vital in establishing a Chinese skateboarding community throughout the 1990s, which was then built around foreign—that is, predominantly Californian—practices and technologies. Building upon Sedo's (2010) understanding of skateboarding in China, it is fair to say that the practice in South Korea is similarly organized "around an often incongruous flow of American skateboarding products, symbols, knowledge, and resources" (p. 259). Exemplary of the cultural and ideological significance of these international influences is the belated foundation of the *Korea Skateboard Association* (KSA) in 2015. KSA only managed to get involved in the organization of nationwide events and the maintenance of skate parks as late as the spring of 2016 and is still struggling to take a stance among the presence of international brands, networks, and initiatives.

This notion of the United States—and Southern California specifically—as the hegemony of global skateboarding seems to be especially prevalent within existing scholarship on the practice as performed in the East Asian region. In their studies on skateboarding in Tokyo, Glauser (2013, 2016) and Dixon (2011, 2014, 2016) claim that the United States operates as the prime point of reference for the skateboard community in Japan. Similarly, Jones (2013) notes that Hong Kong-based skaters aspire to develop their performative style on the basis of online skate videos, particularly those produced in the United States and Western Europe. David Drissel (2012) observed that Shanghai-based skaters were clad in "baggy jeans and Western sports-team attire" and were self-identified *linglei*, or individualists and independent thinkers in an otherwise collectivist and conformist society. Paul O'Connor (2016), however, turns this argument on its head, by highlighting the global significance of the Chinese skateboard community, precisely because American and European professional skaters regularly visit well-known skatespots in cities such as Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Shenzhen. This trend, he notes, is "a product of the fact that Chinese cities have a surplus of

accessible office plazas and urban architecture well designed for the purpose of skateboarding” (O’Connor, 2016, p. 480). Moreover, O’Connor (2017) positions Hong Kong as a center in and of itself, by showing how China’s special administrative region is simply *another* center of the global skateboard network, not unlike Los Angeles, London, and Berlin.

In Seoul, I argue, skateboarding primarily dwells in the skate park, which is inhabited as though it is a home of sorts. There are skaters traversing the streets of South Korea’s capital, no doubt, but this generally takes place as brief, conscientiously planned, and choreographed performances in front of a photo or video camera. For skaters in Seoul, the skate park is as familiar as their home, which not only implies the possibility of homecoming and homesickness but also points at its experiential tonality. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard (1964, p. 26) positions the home, the house, as “our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word,” and “the feel of the tiniest latch has remained in our hands” (Bachelard, 1964, p. 36). Similarly, the textural and material qualities of the skate park give shape to the felt memories of skaters in Seoul, as though the seemingly infinitesimal architectural forms within this space are engraved onto their body, affecting its skin and muscles and motility. In Seoul, then, the skate park is the source of meticulous bodily skills, as well as the space against which to weigh one’s bodily capacity to cope with and respond to architectural design. It is, furthermore, a serene *place* full of affectivities, through which the skateboarding practice is held into wholeness and tranquility.

My reading of the skate park as an urban extension of the dwelling not only roots in existential phenomenology but also advances anthropological studies that explore sociocultural and spatial implications of how domesticity manifests itself within the South Korean public realm. In Seoul, public spaces are used in both a public and a private manner, and the intrusion of private behavior within public spaces can be “witnessed in public parks, where private acts such as sleeping, cooking and singing are juxtaposed with public acts such as walking and debating” (Cho, 2002, p. 431). For Cho (2002, 2003, 2008a, 2008b), Seoul, in other words, exists as a mosaic of public, civil, and private spaces, all of which referring to and representing diverse groups of people. The city’s Pagoda Park, for example, “is surrounded by fences and buildings and is as intimate as a home” (Cho, 2002, p. 429), encouraging elderly residents to inhabit the space with values of collectivism and Confucian morality.

Cultural geographer Valérie Gelézau (2014) accentuates this lack of a clear distinction between private and public spaces: “[i]n the same way that the space devoted to the family, the house, is protected, public spaces also tend to be closed spaces that permit non-family cells to exercise a social life outside the domestic” (p. 177). Gelézau (2014) notes that public squares were conspicuously absent in precolonial Korea, which she considers to be indicative of the fundamental relationship between public life and domesticity: public practices mirror archetypical family values, whereas public spaces are metaphors for domestic space. Although Gelézau doesn’t specify what and whose values are performed via these public practices, it is worth noticing that

both she and Cho Myung-Rae contend that domestic life and family values permeate the public sphere in a spatially and culturally significant manner.

## Coping With the Un/familiar

Taken strictly, there “is” no such thing as *an* equipment. To the being of any equipment there always belongs a totality of equipment, in which it can be this equipment that it is. Equipment is essentially “something in-order-to.” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 31)

A skateboard is an equipment “in order to” sense and touch the built environment. It is a piece of equipment, a *Zeug*, in the Heideggerian sense of the word. For not unlike the hammer, the skateboard belongs to a totality of equipment, including particular attire, architectural surfaces, and sonic landscapes. What’s more, both pieces of equipment seem to take on the role of an appendage of one’s body: just as a skilled carpenter doesn’t theorize the hammer while engaged in trouble-free hammering, a proficient skateboarder has the skateboard as equipment *zuhanden*. It is readily available, which is to say that the skateboard doesn’t have to be observed or thought when it is used for practical everyday orientation. Instead, it is simply ready to put to work, assuming one is a skilled skateboarder.

When skateboarders are coping with the world at their best, to paraphrase phenomenologist Hubert Dreyfus (Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2014), they are drawn in by solicitations within their direct environment and respond to them in a skillful bodily fashion. Coping, here, is a skillful response to a solicitation, or what Dreyfus calls a site specific and “temporally unfolding situation.” That is to say, coping is a bodily and embodied form of flexibly responding to and engaging with the so-called “significance of the current situation—a response which is experienced as either improving the situation or making it worse” (p. 257). Take Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s (1945/1962) example of our everyday coping with paintings in art galleries and museums:

For each object, as for each picture in an art gallery, there is an optimum distance from which it requires to be seen, a direction viewed from which it vouchsafes most of itself: at a shorter or greater distance we have merely a perception blurred through excess or deficiency. We therefore tend towards the maximum of visibility, and seek a better focus as with a microscope (. . .) The distance from me to the object is not a size which increases or decreases, but a tension which fluctuates round a norm. (p. 352)

This norm, as Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) would have it, is site specific and embedded within a cultural context, or *milieu*, as well as dependent upon one’s acquired bodily skills. Skillful activities such as skateboarding and hammering and sensing paintings, then, allow us to achieve a “better” grip on specific circumstances, so as to relieve our current bodily situation from a less optimal stance within the world we inhabit. Significantly, when skillfully involved in the skateboarding practice, the skateboard itself disappears from one’s view. It becomes transparent and no longer belongs to one’s consciousness—that is, one’s conscious perception—because, instead, one is involved in the task “in hand.” Or, to be more precise, the task of and

below one's feet, as the skateboard is generally positioned underneath one's body, touching the soles and sides of one's shoes and the architectural minutiae of the built environment.

The already felt, to paraphrase Erica Manning (2011), is a form of content that is pre-mapped unto experience, and Seoul-based skaters seem to prefer polishing embodied knowledge through repetition (repeatedly experiencing the already felt) over challenging their skills through bodily encounters with unknown architectural forms and shapes. In Seoul, then, skate parks are not only an architectural given but also a central locale for culturally significant ritualistic performances through which to cultivate one's committed body and to approximate a skillful and embodied knowledge of clearly demarcated spaces. The practice is, in terms of skill acquisition, remarkably closely related to certain Olympic sports, glorifying the known and tested skate park as locale for skillful learning through carefully composed routines and scrutinized mundane repetitions.

Phenomenologically, this is of vital (and existential) significance. For Heidegger, "everydayness substantially focuses on comfort and ease, on lack of distress, and thus amounts to dwelling in the familiar, convenient, and reliable" (Mugerauer, 2008, p. 28). In Seoul, skill acquisition seems to approximate this notion of everydayness, mistrusting the unsayable, unpredictable drifts of the metropolis.

Chess grandmasters have the capacity to play on the highest level while their mind is being absorbed in something completely different. Expert players do not think through a game of chess by adhering to rules or by remembering strategies and situations. Instead, Dreyfus and Wrathall (2014) argue, they simply move pawns and knights around the chessboard by intuitively responding to the specific "opportunities and possibilities for action that a particular setting offers" (p. 8). Experts, in other words, attune themselves to and skillfully cope with the specificities of a situation, for which they do not have to rely on or build upon general rules and noteworthy strategies.

Dreyfus (2014) offers multiple examples of this sort, including the difference between inexperienced and proficient tennis players:

If one is a beginner or is off one's form, one might find oneself making an effort to keep one's eye on the ball, keep the racket perpendicular to the court, hit the ball squarely, etc. But if one is expert at the game and things are going well, what is experienced is more like one's arm going up and its being drawn to the appropriate position, the racket forming the appropriate angle with the court—an angle we need not even be aware of—all this so as to complete the gestalt made up of the court, one's running opponent, and the oncoming ball. (p. 82)

For experts, then, the world, as well as the relevant whole of equipment and things and circumstances, no longer shows up as "composed out of objects with discriminable properties. Instead, one's discriminatory capacities are enriched so that one can immediately discern affordances" (Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2014, p. 8). Put differently, instead of thinking about how to hold a tennis racket and where to position himself or herself on the court, an expert player is simply drawn to the exact location where best to hit

the ball. The tennis ball itself, then, demands a precise set of movements from the player, which are not thought through or based upon rules and regulations, but are simply performed and acted out based upon the particularities of the situation at hand. Experts inhabit their skillful practices, as it were “When we inhabit something, it is no longer an object for us but becomes part of us and pervades our relation to other objects in the world” (Dreyfus, 1991, p. 44).

## Ttukseom Skate Park as an Architectural Study in Neutrals

Skateboarding exists by the grace of such coping skills, as practitioners need to, first, cope with the skateboard as equipment and, second, continuously negotiate architectural space and its affordances to successfully perform tricks. The significance, here, is that purpose-built skate parks are Seoul’s prime locales for skill acquisition, which renders skateboarding as a more formalized skillful practice. As of September 2016, the metropolitan city hosts over two dozen public spaces designed for the practice. There are a couple privately owned skate parks, including the temporary *House of Vans* (winter 2015-2016) in the Dongdaemun District, yet the clear majority is publicly owned, and are built and financed with the help of Seoul Metropolitan Government. The geographical locations of Seoul’s most significant skate parks are hardly surprising—bordering a campus’s football field (Hanyang University), underneath bridges of subway lines (Banpo, Seobinggo, Yongsan), in proximity to large-scale public shopping malls (Wangsimni, Jukjeon). Many of Seoul’s skate parks, however, can be found in or on the margins of public (recreational) parks (Sangdong Lake Park, Ttukseom Resort, Nanji Hangang Park, Unjeong, Seoul Forest Park, Pyeongchon, Sindaebang). This type of skate park is, I would argue, primarily enveloped in Seoul Metropolitan Government’s design-based attempt to facilitate accessible, inclusive, and affordable sports facilities for the city’s citizens and tourists. This, in turn, suggests that South Korean skateboarding manifests itself as and develops itself into a lifestyle *sport*.

These recreational parks, which often reveal themselves as landscape architectures, root in South Korea’s recent history of so-called sports for all initiatives (Jang, 2013; Jung, 2013; Lim & Ryoo, 2013; Yun, 2011). The collective experience of hosting the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games was a direct incentive for Korean citizens and the national government to rethink sport as a crucial activity to improve one’s quality of life (Chang, 2002; E. Hong, 2010). The 1990 Comprehension National Lifesport Promotion Plan proposed to design and manage sport facilities that would be inclusive, easily accessible, and affordable—followed by president Kim Young Sam’s (1993-1998) National Sports Promotion Five Year Plan. In 1991, the state-led National Council of Sports for All was established, and, in 2005, the nationwide 7,330 campaign was initiated, implying that Korean citizens would ideally exercise three times a week for 30 min or more. Not only were these plans and campaigns aimed at health and well-being, they were also designed to ensure a “sound” leisure culture and to further develop South Korea’s welfare society. Throughout the 1990s

and 2000s, sport was considered to be an essential catalyst for achieving a fruitful mingling of leisure culture and physical well-being (E. Hong, 2010).

Not unlike skate parks, Seoul's outdoor sports facilities are generally located within or on the margins of public parks, so as to take advantage of existing greeneries and the proximity of the Han River. Ttukseom Hangang Park, including its eponymous skate park, is one of the prime outcomes of not only the nationwide implementation of the sports for all initiatives but also Seoul's move toward landscape architecture. This urban typology marks the aspired return to and implementation of a "traditional" (i.e., an all-encompassing and antiquarian) Korean understanding of the physical, natural landscape within contemporary architectural and urban design, while simultaneously freeing up space to exhibit both monuments of precolonial Korea and icons of a global society. In so doing, landscape architectures, such as the Dongdaemun Design Park and Plaza, the Cheonggyecheon Stream, and indeed Ttukseom Hangang Park, are set out to be spaces for national heritage, leisure, ecological progression, and bodily well-being (K. Hong, 2011; Lee & Anderson, 2013; Lim & Ryoo, 2013).

It is partly for this reason that Ttukseom Hangang Park houses *inter alia* the Jabeolle cultural complex, decades-old flea markets, a swimming pool, tennis and basketball courts, a gym, and an outdoor theater. The proximity of the Han River has transformed it into a popular site for water sports, including wind surfing and water skiing, and visitors are constantly reminded of how the area has acted as a monumental resort site for over a century. The state's footprint on Seoul's architectural and sociocultural landscape is, in short, wide and deep, yet there is another reason for addressing this particular site. Although the Hangang Park itself hosts a diversity of spatial forms and shapes, Ttukseom skate park seems to me to be an architectural study in neutrals: pale green and brown surfaces, unremarkable mostly wooden and partly metal skateramps, standardized handrails, and the washed-out white writings on the textureless and livid red ground floor indicating that this site ought to be used as a skate park. Most of the tones are outstandingly muted and many of the architectural details are wonderfully common to skaters, regardless of their background or expertise.

Architecturally, Ttukseom is a commonplace, and yet there are peculiar techniques required to traverse the skate park. For Ttukseom encourages carefully orchestrated and highly predictable movements in space, rather than spontaneous bodily responses to the immensity of architectural minutiae that a city of this scale offers outside the realm of skate parks. This is not uncommon for skate parks in Seoul. Their designs cannot be said to be experimental or innovative, favoring wooden ramps and stone plazas over concrete transition forms that echo the intricate relationship between skateboarding and surfing. More precisely, Ttukseom's dark-brown curved wooden elements and their metal copings stand in stark contrast to the smooth and wavelike design that one would be able to find in some of the more prominent parks outside the Korean peninsula. The implications of these designs are both spatial and experiential. Spatially, Seoul's skate parks tend to consist of a relatively large flat ground, often within recreational spaces and public parks, on top of which individual skateable elements are attached. In both Ttukseom and Cult, these elements range from 5-ft-long

handrails and 3-ft-tall ledges to steep but architecturally unimpressive ramps and so-called pyramids.

As these individual elements are simply positioned and affixed to a smooth piece of flat ground, there is a peculiar lack of verticality; stairs are conspicuously absent and so are the minute differences in height that encourage a kind of skating that resembles surfing and transition skating. Only the ramps and pyramids add a sense of verticality to these parks, yet their standardized forms and shapes seem to especially foreground that these are spaces of homogeneity. Architecturally and structurally, Ttukseom skate park could have been designed for and built at any other plaza, whereas some of the world's most beloved sites, including London's Southbank and Stockwell, as well as Venice Skatepark in Los Angeles and Morrison Park in Hong Kong, take advantage of and respond more directly to their spatial surroundings.

Once familiar with a couple of skate parks in Seoul, one would have acquired the skills and techniques to quickly and effortlessly attune oneself to the particularities of most of the country's other parks. Moreover, the lack of concrete transition forms, in favor of the cheaper and standardizable wooden ramps and stone plazas, means that Seoul-based skaters are hardly offered the chance to build upon the fine and historical relationship between skateboarding and surfing. Instead, these skate parks are designed and marketed as X Games training sites, as recreational spaces, as sports facilities, rather than as spaces that propose new spatial conceptualizations for skateboarding or reverberate the flow of waves surfers cope with. This is, before all else, important because skateboarding primarily occurs within the well-outlined contours of these relatively generic and ordinary skate parks.

Here, I trace the indications of cultural difference. Like Ocean Howell (2001, 2005, 2008), Iain Borden (2001) suggests that skateboarding revolves around the so-called "unused time" of particular architectural details and urban elements, as skaters use "spaces outside their conventional times of use, substituting one temporal rhythm for another" (Borden, 2001, p. 198). Consequently, the temporality of this form of skateboarding depends upon a diversity of rhythms within a city, as well as the rhythmic intervals that draw up and shape architectural textures and minuscule urban encounters. Moreover, Borden (2001) contends that the experience of skateboarding consists of the tangible relation between the self and the physical minutiae within the built environment. This relation with urban details manifests itself through the skaters' use of architecture's "textural and objectival qualities to create a new appropriative rhythm distinct from the routinized, meaningless, passive experiences which it usually enforces" (Borden, 2001, p. 200). In so doing, skaters redefine the meaning and significance of architecture (and its surfaces, forms, textures, material, but above all, its use, reproduction, and representation), as well as work toward a heightened and intensified awareness of their body and its motility.

In Seoul, this form of skillful coping with architectural space takes place predominantly within the skate park, which brings together skaters of all levels of expertise. Significantly, then, skate parks escape the kinds of urban rhythms that generally condition the temporality of street skateboarding, even though their

designs are crowded with “simulacra of regular street furniture such as benches and hand-rails” (Carr, 2017, p. 28). Ttukseom skate park breaks away from the rhythm of the city of Seoul in yet another manner, in that it is located in a recreational park that is designed to embrace and encourage formalized ludic activities within pre-defined spatial configurations. Simultaneously, Ttukseom Hangang Park marginalizes the psychogeographical sensory and cognitive mapping of urban landscapes that Jeffries et al. (2013; Jeffries, Messer, & Swords, 2016; Swords & Jeffries, 2015) notice among skateboarders in northern England. For Ttukseom’s functional layout and recreational meanings dominate to such an extent that it would be a herculean task to see, experience, and sense the area in a manner that diverts from or critiques its intended use.

In other words, the time of Ttukseom skate park seems endless—the only measure being the presence of skateboarders themselves. The significance of this seems to me to be the following. First, novice practitioners acquire skills within an area that renders skateboarding as a sport, rather than as a subcultural lifestyle or a transgressive and possibly anticompetitive phenomenon. Second, the one-dimensional, yet, nevertheless, tangible rhythmic and spatial dimensions of the skate park condition the diverse set of bodily skills required to successfully use the skateboard as equipment “in order to” traverse and negotiate its architectural design. As a result, the skater’s eye—the ability to scan the built environment for skateable elements by “looking” (sensing) beyond the intended functions of architectural space—is fundamentally compromised. It is simply a redundant skill, as the skate park houses merely skateable surfaces textures. Architectural design, here, is a commodity, and this affects how Seoul-based skaters perceive and sense the built environment. I would like to illustrate these points via an anecdote of a poignant encounter between a competitive Japanese skateboarder and a talented, yet inexperienced Korean practitioner.

### **Being Gravitated Down Toward the Earth (as Most Skilled and Unskilled Bodies Seem to be)**

At 10:15 on a Friday evening in March, 2016, Katsuya is waiting for his friends to show up. It is a clear, lukewarm spring night, after a winter that had seemed to go on for far too many months. For Katsuya, Ttukseom skate park is as dull a space as it would be possible for him to imagine: a smooth, vaguely colorful plastered floor, countless fences and litter bins, lightly soiled ramps, and somewhat unstable handrails. Katsuya, a 22-year-old skater from Kameoka in Japan’s Kyoto Prefecture, had recently obtained a work visa to spend 9 months in South Korea. He told me that, to his own delight, his love for skateboarding had made him into a social disaster. Whereas I get up early and work while it is still dark outside, he flourishes during the late evenings. Katsuya would sleep until 6 p.m., have dinner with the people he stayed with, and skate until his body would no longer carry him. He would tend to bypass showers and baths and would oftentimes simply forget to take care of his administration and everyday societal necessities.

There is, to paraphrase Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964), a certain kind of intimacy he would invariably evade; one could live beside him but never with him—he would move to another city the moment his hosts got used to his presence. Katsuya frees up some of his spring breaks and most of the long, humid summer months to leave Japan, if only to prove to himself that he would be able to make a living from skateboarding. He is not unsuccessful, winning prize money, and attire on a biweekly basis—and it is fair to say that he is a welcomed face within South Korea's skateboard community. In conversation, he is focused and warm, speaking lively and spirited, with an edge of urgency.

Jong-Pil, a third year undergraduate student in pedagogy, sat down besides Katsuya and myself at the edges of Ttukseom skate park. He was dimly aware of Katsuya's background, although they had never shared a word prior to this encounter. Noticeably exhausted by the endless struggle with his skateboard, he wiped the edges of his chin with the collar of his shirt. For the past half hour, he continuously fell and struggled to get up, posing both vainly and full of embarrassment in front of Katsuya and myself, while his heavy breathing revealed an injured, or at least painful, body. Jong-Pil expressed the familiar burden of concern, as though he sensed that Katsuya was disheartened by the absence of his friends and the less-than-impressive design of the skate park.

Jong-Pil has a raspy, yet comforting voice and a perpetual smile. He grew up peacefully and prosperously in the Chungnam Province, and at the age of 19 started his adult life at Konkuk University, a mid-tier college only a stone's throw away from Ttukseom Hangang Park. Katsuya liked him right away, just talking to him on the margins of the skate park. They exchanged a few words in Korean and English, initially sharing their thoughts on Adidas's highly anticipated *Away Days* skate video, which would premiere in Seoul in May 2016. Katsuya mentioned professional skater Mark Gonzales favorably, as he was "raw, authentic, and from the streets." "The best skateboarders," Katsuya said,

are the ones who are willing to make the city their own, for whom urban space is like a playground, whereas the worst are those who skate as though it is a sport and prefer new attire over the excitement and pleasure of exploring the world.

They are the ones, he deduced judgmentally, who refuse to leave the skate park, who let the authorities decide where and how to skate.

The young Korean skater was holding on to the handrail and grabbed his brand-new phone out of his backpack, gasping and coughing to recover from his intense skate session. Even though he was still catching his breath, I could see his eagerness to talk to Katsuya, who was glamorous to him simply because he wouldn't let himself be confined by the limits of a skate park. In Seoul, Jong-Pil would later explain to me, there is no dirt, no disobedience; even all the skaters look like they just got out of the shower. Katsuya, on the contrary, continuously displayed his love for the disorderly and noncompliant and stood out among his Korean peers, as he allowed himself to wander around in the foreign and unhomey.

The conversation was more or less ruined by a teenager, who injured his shoulder by falling on a loose chunk of metal. Jong-Pil ran up to him with a bottle of water and a towel, hoping to soothe his pain. The teenager, whom I had never seen or met before, said he was fine and left the skate park without delay or hesitation. Jong-Pil grabbed the sharp piece of metal and placed it safely underneath a quarter pipe, one of the largest obstacles in the park. He was noticeably distressed and slightly irritated and shared his dissatisfaction regarding the state of Ttukseom skate park. “This is outrageous,” he said, “for those in our government enrichen themselves through corrupt deals, and we won’t even get a safe and secure skate park to stay healthy and learn new skills. This truly is yet another example of *Hell-Joseon*,” he moaned, suggesting that contemporary South Korea is as hell-like as the slave society that we call the Korean Joseon Dynasty (1392-1897). Jong-Pil gestured toward to the hand-rail that had broken down earlier that month, and a large ramp, which was full of holes and was in the process of becoming a breeding site for fungi. “How can we skate here?,” he asked Katsuya and myself.

Jong-Pil’s frustration was fed by an incident that had taken place a handful of days prior to our insightful encounter. A Taiwanese skater—a tourist, so to speak—lost his balance by riding over multiple loose screws on a damaged ramp, tumbled down, and ended up with a deep wound in his right calf, for which he spent a night in Konkuk University’s hospital. Katsuya looked puzzled and said that a frog who lives in a well does not know the depths of the ocean. I had heard the proverb before, but asked him nevertheless to explain what he meant. He suggested that everybody (and by extension: every body) is weighted down to earth by its gravity. But that does not mean that everyone can or indeed should try and climb mountains, swim in the ocean, or aspire to be a skateboarder. Being a skater, he explained, means that you are willing to wrestle with the world and embrace all its irregularities, instead of wanting to be safeguarded by someone else’s mechanisms or schemas. Katsuya believed that was precisely the way in which Korean skaters understood skate parks: as secured and protecting refuges, which were familiar, predictable, and impervious. His own stand seemed to be the opposite: skateboarding ought to be a form of risk-taking, as it exists by the grace of spontaneity, the unexpected and unplanned, as well as the ever-changing and vigorous.

Katsuya’s convictions, I would argue, stand in stark contrast to those who acquire their skateboarding skills within Seoul’s skate parks, for Jong-Pil is hardly unique in his reliance on these spaces as safe havens of sorts. Jong-Pil was on the verge of criticizing Katsuya’s firm words when a handful of skaters arrived at Ttukseom—Katsuya’s Korean friends, all of whom were seasoned skaters. They were carrying unsightly plastic bags, filled with microwaved ramen, energy drinks, and disposable towels—preparing a dinner as one would in front of a television on the verge of a long-awaited weekend. Jong-Pil noticed straightaway he was now the youngest person around and decided to keep his seemingly inevitable critical response to himself. Katsuya, however, advanced the conversation by asking his friends why they would constantly reside in skate parks and, in turn, why they would hardly explore the spatially varied cityscape of Seoul. Their responses were telling: they felt as though

they enjoyed the familiarity and familial nature of skate parks, just like one feels at home in one's apartment, whereas streets and public squares were not theirs to expropriate and exploit.

In Seoul, there is a conspicuous absence of risk-taking roots in cultural difference, which renders it unique, or at least at odds with the scholarly perception of the practice elsewhere: skate parks such as Ttukseom counter the spectacle of heightened bodily experiences with bodies at rest, with serene and familiar affectivities, with a sense of domesticity. These spaces may be designed for training (and even disciplining) the senses, yet unlike the idea that skaters concern themselves primarily with a deliberate form of risk-taking, as suggested by existing literature on action and lifestyle sports (Wheaton & Thorpe, 2011), skate parks also manifest themselves as spatial configurations within which to be at ease and be comforted. This resonates with skateboarding in Hong Kong, as the local governments enforce the use of mandatory helmets in the city's skate parks (O'Connor, 2016). The difference, here, is that the risk aversion in Seoul is skater-led, as opposed to being imposed by the state via formal rules and regulations.

Furthermore, these Seoul-based skateboarders seemed to share the understanding of skate parks as excellent locales to improve one's skills, as one would slowly attune oneself to the design of the park—its obstacles, materials, surfaces, rhythms. In so doing, or so the logic goes, one manifests and displays oneself as a healthy, competent, and resilient human being. Not unlike gymnastics or figure skating, this group of skateboarders would practice a carefully orchestrated set of movements until they would get it right, that is to say, until this causation of bodily maneuvers can be routinely performed.

It is, in that sense, significant that Ttukseom skate park is said to be falling apart, bringing about both injuries to oblivious and unskilled skaters, as well as an aesthetic of superficial damage. This deterioration enrages many of the Seoul-based skaters I worked with, but appeals to, for instance, Katsuya. The latter is reluctant to consider the park's wooden ramps to be hard and lifeless matter that should be in a state of architectural stasis, but, rather, should be as soft, tactile, and spirited as the skaters who would encounter them. Katsuya, then, was constantly seeking the tangible traces of skaters' rites of passage, so as to familiarize himself with the type of skills that would dwell in these skate parks. He embraced scratches on metal surfaces, bruised pieces of wood, and oily handrails.

## **Conclusion**

Ttukseom skate park hosts plenty of expert practitioners who cope with the architecture of the park in an effortless, intuitive fashion, responding to the particularities of architectural minutiae via miniscule muscular adjustments. But whereas experts seem to transcend rules and regulations, so as to enable themselves to respond to the specificities of a situation, those who are novice attempt to successfully negotiate yet mainly struggle with the skateboard as equipment, let alone the intricate relation between delicate and precise bodily movements, and a diversity of

architectural surfaces. Their faces down, their muscular focus seems to be redirected from facial expressions to the tensile inner lines of thighs and calves under the struggling weight of an unbalanced and restless skateboard. The skateboard itself is here a piece of equipment to routinely negotiate the regularity of habitual and familiar spaces.

Paraphrasing Åsa Bäckström (2014), one could categorize this sensory coping with architectural space as a kinesthetic experience, in that it orients the human body, the skateboard as equipment, and the materiality of the terrain toward one another. Indeed, within the realm of Seoul's skate parks, "bodily knowing describes not doing itself but the living body's movement ability" (Bäckström, 2014, p. 764), which is a tactile and haptic sensibility and sensitivity that is heard, felt, seen, touched, remembered, and expressed. Yet, simultaneously, this points toward the nuanced and layered distinction between remembering and embodying the skilled muscular sensations as trained within skate park and the finely tuned sensory ability to instantaneously screen and cope with unobserved urban space, the latter bodily phenomenon being defined as the skater's eye (Borden, 2001).

Consequently, the potential stimulations of the diverse architectural spaces in the wider cityscape are hardly perceived, as the senses of these skaters are not attuned to these urban details and, instead, favor the familiar contours and outlines of the skate park. In Seoul, the skater's eye is habituated in such a fashion that it merely recognizes and responds to purpose-built recreational parks, rather than observe the unfamiliar, the inconvenient, and the unreliable. The skate park can be dwelled in and is a place of felt memories and remembered knowledge, whereas the city at large presents itself as an unhomey space that does not resonate with one's carefully acquired skills and bodily motility. What is preferred, here, is a knowledge of familiarity and a flight of mystery, rather than a skillful openness toward the world unfolding in possibly unforeseen ways. So skateboarding in Seoul provides a counterpoint to the understanding of lifestyle sports as risk-driven practices.

As a result, Seoul-based skaters acquire highly specialized and site-specific skills that are rooted within the precisely defined spatial configuration of the skate park, rather than bodily techniques to cope with the microscopic details of found spaces and the incalculable dynamisms of unknown terrains. In Seoul, the skilled activity that we call skateboarding is deeply formalized, for it exists as a carefully outlined performative practice, dwells in a recreational park, and flourishes by repetitive bodily engagement with architectural details, through which skaters work toward a remembered form of felt knowledge. The city's skate parks—Ttukseom being but one example—strike me as precisely outlined spaces to which skaters hope to attune their bodies. Via an ethnographic account of coping skills, I have argued that the Seoul-based skaters I work with seem to prefer repeatedly experiencing the already felt over putting their skills to the test by exploring architectural and urban spaces they are less familiar with. In so doing, their bodily skills are, or are striving to be, in tune with the particular architectural minutiae within these spaces. Their bodily negotiation of architectural space, then, stands in contrast to how the practice is experienced elsewhere. More precisely, their preference for purpose-built skate parks counters the persistent idea

that skateboarding is a universal, spectacular, and risk-ridden form of urban flânerie or psychogeographical mapping.

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