Smoothing space in Palestine: Building a skatepark and a socio-political forum with the SkatePal charity

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Abstract

The history of skateboarding's development is closely connected to water and fluidity, with the birth of modern ramp practice commonly attributed to Californian surfers, who used the undulating asphalt and concrete of the urban LA landscape as a replacement for sea waves when the surf was flat. This fluidity and adaptability is echoed in scholarly and populist discourse, which tends to discuss skateboarders' abilities to be resourceful and playful within environments available to them, to adopt simulation alongside innovative DIY approaches when building their own environments and to form supportive networks across cultural boundaries. There has also been much growth in recent years of skateboarding development projects, particularly in areas of conflict and political unrest. This article focuses on my experiences with the SkatePal charity – who have been building skateparks and teaching children to skateboarding in the Occupied Palestinian Territories since 2013.

In the summer of 2014 the news was filled with reports about the most recent war in Gaza. One day in the midst of Operation Protective Edge a particularly odd news item from the West Bank came up on my Instagram feed; *Sidewalk Magazine* posted a video of Welsh skateboarder, Chris Jones, performing a backside boardslide on a rail outside a shop in Ramallah (Sidewalkmag 2014: n.pag.). Jones was out in Palestine working with a charity called SkatePal, who were building a skatepark and teaching children to skateboard within the Palestinian Territories. After discovering the project I got in touch with the charity and went out to Palestine to help with their building of a new skatepark in Asira Al-Shamalyia during the summer and autumn of 2015. I have continued to visit the skatepark each year to conduct ongoing research into the effects of the park on the local community.

In recent years there has been a proliferation of skateboarding projects undertaken in conflict zones (Skateistan, All Nations, The Bedouins, SkatePal, Skate Aid, etc.). Iain Borden identifies that these types of organizations employ skateboarding as a way to 'build social capital' and to address social issues (2015). Each project of this kind functions within a particular geographic locale and within a particular social and political landscape, but many of these projects have begun to be explored and discussed within the fields of 'peace studies' and 'sport for development' (Friedel 2015; Thorpe and Ahmad 2015; Thorpe and Rinehart 2013; Darnell 2010; Saavedra 2009 amongst others).

Skateboarding projects of this kind typically evolve from personal relationships with locals in a geographic area, and operate – initially at least – through the popular skateboarding culture of 'DIY' (Borden 2015) – sometimes in terms of the skatepark-building process (SkatePal is an example of this) and often in the

adoption of organizational structures (Thorpe and Rinehart 2013). SkatePal was started by Charlie Davis, a skateboarder from Edinburgh who first went out to Palestine to teach English in Jenin. He would take his board with him and found that local children were keen to try it out. Recognizing their interest and the lack of recreational activities and facilities for children, Charlie decided to provide some classes and put together some simple skateboarding obstacles. On returning to Edinburgh, he enrolled in a Master's degree in Arabic and began to set up the charity (Davis 2015). At the time of writing this article – June 2017 – SkatePal have built their second concrete park and are concentrating on organizing for skateboarders to visit Palestine and help out with teaching skateboarding classes to local children at two sites in the West Bank, and preparing for the building of a new skate park in another site in the West Bank.

This article is theoretically framed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's theory on smooth and striated space in their book *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988), which is explored in relation to the generic space of the skatepark. The article offers reflections on why skateboarding may be relevant to children and young people in the West Bank and by extension to young people in other contexts of socio-political disadvantage. My article begins by examining Deleuze and Guattari's theories in relation to my own articulation of skateboarding's ontology, in particular, its status as a practice that operates through a process of simulation and migration of urban environments (Payne), as a practice that connects its practitioners strongly to the urban environment through a state of 'flow' (Csikzentmihalyi 1990) and as a 'sideways' practice (Friedel 2015).

Although the SkatePal charity are avowedly apolitical in their aims (Davis 2014), my own reading of their projects reflects on how these practices of

intercultural exchange might function – for young Palestinians in particular – as a challenge to the effects of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and the control and regulation of Palestinian movement, and to the traditionalism of Palestinian culture. Skateboarding is considered a practice that embraces a transnational urban playful culture that achieves a subtle undermining of social and political authority wherever it operates.

Skateboarding's ontology: Water

Skateboarding is an activity that represents a distinctive aspect of urban life, and one that might be best articulated as a dominant practice within urban *recreational* culture. Skateboarding employs smooth surfaces of the built environment – concrete, asphalt and stone – in a flow of movement that owes much to the practice of surfing. The development of skateboarding into a popular recreational practice is commonly associated with Californian surfing communities, such as in the video documentary *Dogtown and Z-Boys* (Peralta, 2001), which presents a history of skateboarding through the pioneering 1960s' Zephyr skate team and charts their contribution towards the development of contemporary skateboarding practice.

This narrative about the development of skateboarding from surfing is a version of events that is commonly regarded as accurate by skateboarders and is referred to as such in the literature on the topic (Brooke 2001; Lorr 2005). Skateboard parks all over the world are archival spaces that reference the backyard pools and topography of Los Angeles and other Californian cities, such as the iconic floating benches located in San Francisco's China Town, or the chunky sloped blocks flanking a set of steps at 'Hubba Hideout'. This process of simulating 'real' spots within skate

parks has become a popular practice drawing upon specific sites in cities and town across the world.

The skatepark that we built is located directly outside the boys' school in Asira, which is out of town and nestled amongst many hills filled with olive trees. The landscape of Asira is extremely hilly. The road out of town towards the school and our skatepark is a smooth, steep rollercoaster, such that my practising of this site (moving through the hills and then to the peaks and troughs of the skatepark obstacles we were building) became more of a reference to this hilly landscape than one of waves and of water. The association of the morphology of skateparks with water is distinctly Californian. The topography of Asira Al-Shamalyia is further understood in conjunction with the political context of water in the West Bank, particularly how much Palestinian people are cut off from the waves of the sea, and from a copious supply of water that is so much a part of the conflict between Palestine and Israel (Corradin 2016; Hass 2016; Baroud 2016).

The practice of skateboarders in the streets and within skateparks embraces the simultaneity of being both *of the city* and *of the sea*, and skateparks are an architectural representation of this simultaneity. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari articulate the differentiation and relationship between 'smooth' and 'striated' space by stating that

> [i]n striated space, one closes off a surface and 'allocates' it according to determinate intervals, assigned breaks; in the smooth, one 'distributes' oneself in an open space, according to frequencies and in the course of one's crossings (logos and nomos). (1988: 481)

Importantly, this articulation of the unpartitioned, open and broadly distributed elements of smooth space, compared with the ordered, modular and segmented striated space should not be thought of as separate, but rather as existing in mixture. They write, 'smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space' (1988: 474).

Skateboarding practice undertaken within existing urban environments and sanctioned skate parks involves an attempt to make smooth through the process of developing 'lines'. At a given skatespot, a skateboarder begins by exploring the possibility of a trick happening in a particular location and then looks beyond that one trick and obstacle to what lies beyond in an attempt to link the next tricks and obstacle together in a flow of movement across and within the spot. This creation of a line from linking tricks, or even simply the action of skateboarding through a site, transforms the area into a smooth space, not just for the skateboarder but also for observers witnessing the activity. In this way skateparks and skateboarding offer an interesting case to explore in respect of Deleuze and Guattari's theory, wherein they posit the sea as 'smooth space par excellence' (1988: 479) and the city in contrast as 'the striated space par excellence' (1988: 481). Skateboarding is a type of activity that is at the intersection of the smooth and the striated and this is where its potential as a 'development' practice lies.

Skateboarding's ontology: Play

Skateboarding is, at the most basic level, a form of playing. In common thought, play is typically understood as an activity that exists within a separate world distinct from

the reality of everyday life. This is a perspective that can be attributed to the writing of Johan Huizinga (1970) in his theorizing of characteristics of play. Huizinga's theory, that play involves a 'stepping out of real life' (1970: 26), applies to an understanding of organized or striated spaces of play, such as sporting events, board games and theatrical presentations, or artistic play, in which there are often set places – buildings, areas or environments – in which these activities occur. There are often rules of engagement that set parameters for how play will begin or function, and there are uses and usefulness attached to them, whether they are for exercise, gambling and earning money, art or some other form of use.

Because of these features of play and because playing usually (but not always) involves an activity that is ostensibly non-serious, play is also commonly thought to be separate from the most important aspects of life. Stephen Nachmanovitch, on the other hand, likens play worlds to the idea of parallel universes because they operate within 'alternate time-streams that work according to their own laws and patterns different from the everyday' (2009: 15). Nachmanovitch suggests that when we play we imagine and put into practice alternative possibilities and we sharpen our creativity and discover that there is always another way to see the world and another way of acting. In this sense, play can also be understood as operating and developing smooth space; the skills and strategies developed in play may be established in places that are separate from those where we learn, live and work, but our embodied experiences of playing are carried back to our 'real' worlds, where they can have a valuable impact on the way we think things through and decide how to act.

In skateboarding practice, the success of a trick often involves the long-term development (sometimes over months or years) of personalized technique, but also being able to instinctively employ those skills at the right speed and at a precise

moment in relation to a specific obstacle. A trick is a complex *manoeuvre*, often with a long back-story for the individual skater performing it. The learning and practicing of a trick often involves breaking down the movement into different elements to understand and develop the required skill, but the successful performance of a trick requires the skater to engage in a state of 'flow' (Csikzentmihalyi 1990) and what I describe as 'unthinking' that unites – in a sudden moment – years of practice and hard work with the navigation of an immediately present physical environment. The performance of a trick adopts the dual spatial practices of striation and smoothness, and as a developmental narrative it asserts that in order to be successful in the here and now, I have to always practice my skills, to be ready to respond and to trust the experience of my body to navigate a terrain and a moment of practice that I cannot be in full control of.

Skateboarding's ontology: Simulation

Play can also be understood as an essential part of developing community, which is explicitly referred to or implied in the work of Mihalyi Csikzentmihalyi (1990), Richard Schechner and Mady Schuman (1976), and Brian Sutton-Smith (2001). Each of these sources articulates how a collective culture of play and/or ritual is developed in games, sports and festivals, which develops a closeness in the participants involved, both at the time of engaging in play and afterwards. As a skateboarder it is easy to see these theories at work – when we skate, we develop a strong sense of kinship, both at the level of the small-town skate crew and at the macro level – as part of a world-wide culture. Part of being a skateboarder involves exploring new environments and encountering new people – whether that is in the next town or

village, or another country, and on bringing these other places, styles and approaches into your own skating practice or building plans.

The fraternity of skateboarding comes from a sense of belonging to a group of people engaged in the same playful activity (that of riding a skateboard), and belonging to a culture that emphasizes a separation from fixed and fixing social traditions, norms and rules. This can be seen in the way in which skaters often talk about the space of the skatepark. On a social level the skatepark is often regarded as a haven from the pressures of family and work, and as a space in which – ostensibly – differences of socio-economic background, religion, race and politics do not matter. In this way, skateparks can be understood as ideologically smooth spaces from one skatepark in a city or town, to another, and from one country to another.

This distributed space of the skatepark is echoed in the way that skate-able architecture in cities and towns around the world inspires obstacles within skateparks. The skatepark that we built is made of concrete and includes several quarter pipes; in places these are tiered, like a series of waves lapping up against the wall of the school that is directly behind the park. There are three or four flat banks, and a mini ramp with bowled corner sections including the addition of small, square tiles along the top of these corners that references the kind of decorative tiles one would see on a swimming pool. Along with these features there is also what was consistently referred to during the building process as the 'China Bank'. This particular obstacle is designed to reference a famous San Francisco skate spot (located in China Town, hence the name 'China Bank') and is inspired by (though not an accurate simulation of) a walkway in San Francisco's China Town and its iconic 'floating' benches.

Our park also contained an obstacle known within skateboarding culture as a 'Hubba'. A Hubba is a wide ledge that is usually positioned beside a flat bank or set

of steps forming what would be a kind of chunky handrail if this were an ordinary architectural feature. The Hubba feature is a direct reference to a spot known as 'Hubba Hideout', also located in San Francisco. The spot is a pedestrian walkway that leads to a set of steps flanked on both sides by one of these chunky handrail ledges. In his text on 'Hubba', Oliver Payne explains that the spot led to a concealed area where local drug-users would smoke 'Hubba' (a nickname for crack cocaine). Local skateboarders began to refer to the site as 'Hubba Hideout', and the name Hubba became connected with ledges of this kind. Payne writes, 'any ledge that bore resemblance to it the world over would soon also be referred to as a "Hubba"'. The design of our park, with its reference to pools, San Francisco's China Town, 'Hubba Hideout' and to waves of concrete, is imbued with a Californian historical context. In this sense, physical skate spots in different cities around the world become distributed widely across national borders and boundaries.

Skateboarding's ontology: Sideways politics

In *The Art of Living Sideways* (2015), Sophie Friedel describes skateboarding as a practice that involves the performer moving with the side of their body first in the direction they are travelling. As Friedel articulates, this sideway positioning might also be considered symbolically as a position that skateboarders adopt in relation to dominant culture. The act of moving in a sideway fashion can be likened to squeezing yourself through gaps, trying to go unnoticed, maneuvering through something tricky or difficult and smoothing out space. The context in which Friedel is writing, from her experiences working for Skateistan, makes this connection all the more relevant. Skateboarding – as apparently banal 'play' activity – manages to side-step much of

the broader politics of a given situation ('it's just playing'), and as a somewhat unknown quantity outside of the western world, it also manages to side-step the cultural and social politics of a given situation. This is evidenced by the fact that girls make up 'nearly 50%' of Skateistan's students in Afghanistan (Fulford-Dobson ín Percovich 2015: 172), a country where girls are not encouraged to engage in physical activity and where girls have extremely limited freedoms compared with boys (Nordberg 2014).

An activity such as skateboarding that affirms a culture of hard work and practice, that weds a relationship between skater and urban physical environment and that stakes a claim to the physical environment of a particular place in a largely playful and ephemeral way makes the activity of skateboarding an ambiguously playful/political act. Within the context of the Palestine–Israel conflict, in which rights to ownership and occupation of land are such a central, critical issue, the activity of skating in the streets and of building something permanent on the land in Palestine has a greater political resonance than it does in the United Kingdom or United States.

Relevance of skateboarding to the local community context

In the way that skateparks so often simulate features of the Californian landscape, skateboarding activity more generally might be regarded as a US cultural export. Aware of issues around cultural imperialism, I was interested in how the local community felt about skateboarding and to what extent they supported the building of the park. The project was enabled by a partnership between SkatePal and the Palestinian House of Friendship (PHF) – an organization focused on the development

of civic education and recreational activities for young people in Palestine. The joint venture was part of a wider recreational facility for young people in the area.

The PHF (in conjunction with Nablus council) acquired the site in Asira, which is strategically located because of its accessibility to six other villages and its potential to reach 15,000–20,000 children (n.d.(a)). The activities provided by the PHF include recreational projects designed to offer children a 'right to childhood' in the context of the Palestine–Israel wars, preservation of Palestinian culture through engaging children in traditional craft and workshops, the teaching and fostering of democratic values and education, and the development of key communication skills through creative expression (PHF n.d.(b)).

These activities fostered by the PHF can be summarized as practices that begin from a centripetal (centre seeking) point and extend outwards into centrifugal (centre fleeing) activity. This is achieved through the combining of a focus on personal development through play, connecting the personal with traditional culture, understanding and fostering equality, and developing communication and relationships outside of the individual's personal and direct experience. The integration of skateboarding as part of this would not then seem to be wholly arbitrary since skateboarding fosters the simultaneous centripetal and centrifugal forces of self-discovery and personal problem-solving whilst also appealing to other cultures and external experiences, which is embedded in the ethos of the PHF.

This particular centripetal-centrifugal quality of skateboarding can be understood as a strategy of resistance (or smoothing) aimed at the effects of the occupation. A major problem faced by Palestinians is the issue of providing opportunities, work and national development so that young people want to stay in Palestine. There are many who feel a desire to migrate either for economic reasons

(Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute 2014) or for social and political security and certainty, or indeed, a combination of these factors (Migration Policy Centre 2013).

Around 20 volunteers, from a range of different countries, constructed the skatepark, and so the building site became one of cultural convergence and a space of multinational identities that included individuals from Palestine, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and Norway, amongst others. In much the same way that skateboarding practice operates through spatial distribution and cultural mobility the same process was mirrored in social engagements between volunteer skateboarders and the local people of Asira throughout the building process.

A central feature of the social forum fostered within the building site/skatepark was its function as an arena for displays of gender and physical/verbal dialogues around gender presentation. These played out in the interactions between the local community and the skateboarder volunteers working with SkatePal. The outcomes of SkatePal in the long term remain to be seen. Research and engagement in the project in future years will further our understanding of the project's effect on the local community. Specific and detail findings remain to be discovered through a long-term research engagement with the skatepark and its effect within the local community over several years.

Conclusion

Within skateboarding culture a narrative of trying, failing and eventually succeeding is prominent. This sense of personal struggle as part of practice may be attractive as a kind of mantra that has relevance to anyone who is frustrated or angered by their

circumstances. But within Palestine in particular the circumstances are considerably more detrimental than those faced by most young people in the West. Persistent failures of the peace process have resulted in a political impasse that seems to many quite impossible to overcome.

Skateparks are largely smooth spaces that bring features of other environments into their construction. Pools and street spots that simulate parts of California (or other skate spots throughout the world) occupy an almost utopian significance that converges with the host country and the specific site. Skateparks are typically designed to allow a flow of lines and the actions of gliding, carving, sliding and grinding that may offer a smoothing of spaces in a political and social landscape of restriction and/or oppression.

Skateboarding practice more generally and the learning of tricks encourages the visiting of other places and the practising of skateboarding tricks in different and new environments. In this way the skatepark can be understood as a space for the push and pull of cross-cultural and cross-social activity. In the case of Palestine, where Palestinians are subject to restricted movement in and out of the West Bank, SkatePal's projects encourage visitors into the Occupied Palestinian Territories and enables skateboarding volunteers from other parts of the world to visit, teach skateboarding, to interact with the local community and to see the situation for themselves. This is beneficial for both young Palestinians – who cannot travel or find it extremely difficult to – and for the skateboarder volunteers who experience a cultural and political landscape not clearly visible through media representations. In this sense, SkatePal's project in Palestine achieves a kind of smoothing of space politically by overcoming the partitioning and delimitation of Palestinian people.

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