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COMMENTARY

Skateboarding, Space and the City: Architecture and the Body by Iain Borden Sam Spurr

The city is negotiated in a multitude of manners, and as I sit in Sydney's Martin Place - a moment's pause in the fiscal traffic of the city - I watch pram pushers and the yellow blur of off-road courier cyclists, whilst tied-up businessmen and sky-high heeled women vie with construction workers for pavement. Each is affected by, and affects, the city's terrain. Each is a part of, and apart from, the urban geography. Their paths are molded by the contours of the ground, the colours of the shop windows, the heat reflecting off the aluminum sheeting. I watch the heights of skyscrapers moving up and down in the zenith of my vision, a feeling of falling as the street narrows and descends into the harbour.

This is the Lefebvrian City: an amorphous space in constant transition, a space for the flow of ideas, events and activities. It is this city which serves as the topography for Iain Borden's *Skateboarding, Space and the City: Architecture and the Body*. This inclusive title encapsulates Borden's aim to show how the practice of skateboarding enacts, both politically and dynamically, a relationship between space, time, and the social body. There is a fervor informing this book, fuelled by Borden's belief that an alternative understanding and engagement with urban architecture is possible in order to counter those constructed by dominant capitalist ideology. Using Lefebvre's texts as a theoretical framework, Borden proposes skateboarding as a means of championing those theories, not only in resisting and refusing capitalism, but also by "restlessly search[ing] for new possibilities of representing, imagining and living our lives." [1]

Iain Borden, architectural historian and skateboarder, is a well-known figure in the burgeoning genre that connects architectural and cultural theory. As part of the Strangely Familiar group of architectural historians, Borden is an avid questioner of city space as a culturally, as well as a historically, produced entity. Based on his postgraduate thesis, this book is grounded on a definition of architecture as a space for productions and reproductions; which is neither stable nor fixed, but instead constituted by the discourses and practices of social life. [2] Borden firmly places himself amongst the new wave of body-space focused architects by claiming that the conventional architectural historian has concentrated on the production of buildings as opposed to the production of spaces. His aim is to recreate the historian as a revolutionary, whose role is not simply a retelling of the past, but a rethinking of the possibilities within it, and thus the possibilities of the present and future.

The bodies of Borden's metropolis seem to wade through an ambiguous notion of 'space,' and it takes some time to understand how he has defined this contested term. As opposed to a fixed form, space is built not only on theories, "but also practices, objects, ideas, imagination and experience." [3] Here it is possible to see the influence of Bernard Tschumi's architectural texts and his ideas on the event as the construction of architecture. What differentiates Borden's work is his politically charged attack on the material consequences of making monuments, as opposed to celebrating events. Unlike the silent city of buildings, the living city is a matrix of experiential opportunities. This recognition is a crucial one for a profession seeking to understand new relationships between the built environment and changing spaces. The difference between approaches may be located in the

emphasis on *things* rather than the more abstruse practices of semantics, the symbolic and the performative. [4] While the first two fields have been explored in the past few decades, the absence of work on the performative represents a gap in contemporary architectural thought. As a result, Borden's definition of the performative necessitates early elucidation. As the text progresses, one ascertains that skateboarding may be seen as successfully performative in its essential 'liveness' and its temporal immediacy. Skateboarding thus denies the codification that characterises the production and reproduction of other signifiers. Instead, skateboarding is where action and creation coalesce. The *doing* becomes a *creating*. It actively writes the city, instead of passively reading it, in the sense of J. L. Austin's *performative utterance*. [5] Thus, Borden makes the intriguing claim that the act of skateboarding actually becomes architecture, "not as a thing, but as a production of space, time and social being." [6]

Borden puts skateboarders above the average, "scopically focused" pedestrian because they engage with space using their entire bodies. Skateboarders experience a visual and phenomenological connection to speed which is shared only with the cycle couriers. The board becomes an extension to the body, a prosthesis, which constructs a specific mode of movement and engagement. The city is transformed into a series of ramps, of slides and runs - a city of surfaces and textures. Through these fragments, a unique relationship is constructed with distance and time. This temporal state of being is firmly placed in the present where to stop skating means to literally stop time. Unlike the inflexibility of "clock time," skaters use "temporal distance," that is, time measured by session durations, the limitations of each run, and the rhythms of movement. [7] This motility of the body allows the skateboarder to live out Merleau-Ponty's belief that by literally refusing to be held by either specific places or specific times, movement actively assumes space and time.

Borden points out that this sense of complete physical immersion in one's environment has always been lacking in the imagination of architects and urban planners. He proposes that skateboarding actualizes Lefebvre's notion of *rhythmanalysis*, tapping into the rhythms of life's social, sexual, and intellectual relationships. According to Lefebvre, "to fully engage with architecture as a reproduction of the rhythm of urban life one must not, for example, stand outside a building and stare at its façade, but should be inside and outside of it as when stood at a window or balcony." [8]

Borden describes the skater's passage across the city as a recomposition of urban and architectural elements. I am reminded of a modernist film: fragments of the city are psychogeographically collaged, and again time and space are blurred, not visually but through this particular embodied performance. These new urban compositions recreate the city as memories, Situationist desire lines, the purely tactile body. On the skater's map nothing is fixed. The surface topography is unreliable, subsuming the experiences waiting to be discovered and renewed.

Watching the street parade of skater 'haute couture,' it seems naïve to propose that skateboarding, as a 'lifestyle' remains completely resistant to the capitalist economy of production and consumption. Against a growth in skater fashion - clothing, shoes, boards - Borden raises the question, if the lifestyle is commandeered by capitalism, can its practice remain subversive? Despite commodification of the skater 'lifestyle,' it can be argued that skateboarders use space, yet give nothing back, thereby reasserting use over exchange. [9] And it must be acknowledged that of all the various urban visitants throughout the western world skateboarders are some of the least welcomed. The city has always felt like the domain of the busily suited. Sydney, in particular, is easy to see as a place controlled and constructed for those dedicated to the business of gross national product, foreign currency exchange, and stock bonds. The skateboarder's presence, like the homeless person or the hippy tourist, subverts the normative role of the city pedestrian. Legislated against and banned, skateboarding becomes a deviant activity working against the prescribed scripting for the performance of city pedestrians, leading to a situation where "the city becomes the interrogator rather than the determinant of the self." [10] Skateboarding "challenges the notion that space is there to be obeyed," refusing to accept the city in its conventional arrangement of thoroughfares, walls, and stairs. [11]

For the many who lack the aerodynamic balance needed for sailing a skateboard, there are moments of frustration as Borden minutely explores this very personal practice. With more rigorous editing

some of these moments could have been avoided, making the text more accessible for a general audience. Despite its occasional frustrations and flaws, *Skateboarding, Space and the City* is, however, a seductive read. While at times Borden's connections between the politics of architectural space and skateboarding seem tenuous, his enthusiasm is infectious and he formulates his challenge to capitalist hegemony, armed with only a humble skateboard, with such passion that it is worthwhile persevering through some of the denser chapters. Indeed, walking back through Martin Place, jostled by the crowds and domineering office blocks, I would relish, for just a moment, some speed, a bit of freedom, and some of that balance to kick back on a board downhill and experience the city anew.

[1] Iain Borden, *Skateboarding, Space and the City: Architecture and the Body* (New York: Berg, 2001), 10.

[2] Borden, 9.

[3] Borden, 23.

[4] Borden, 6.

[5] See J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975).

[6] Borden, 1.

[7] Borden, 111.

[8] Borden, 112.

[9] Borden, 237.

[10] Borden, 263.

[11] Borden, 231.

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In this version of the skate city, skateboarding is expelled from urban centres and confined to the invisible hinterlands of suburbia and industrial estates. Except this is not the whole story. Skateboarders are fighting back.Â Iain Borden is professor of architecture and urban culture at University College London. His book *Skateboarding, Space and the City* is published by Bloomsbury. A new edition will appear in 2017. Where are the best places to skateboard in cities? Share your stories. Topics.