

The Political Grind  
The Role of Youth Identities in the Municipal Politics of Public Space

John Newman Carr

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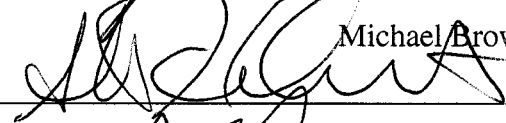
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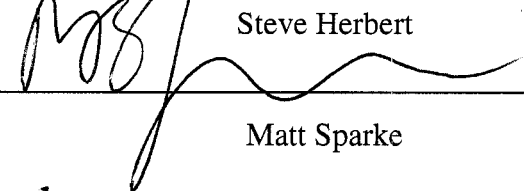
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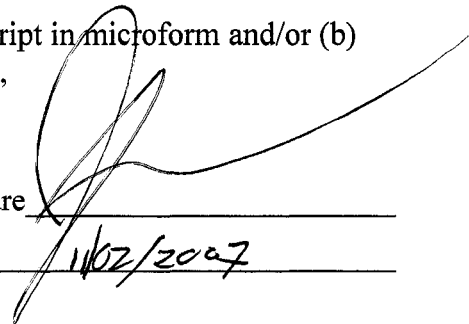
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University of Washington

**Abstract**

**The Political Grind: The Role of Youth Identities in  
the Municipal Politics of Public Space**

John Newman Carr

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:  
Associate Professor Steve Herbert  
Department of Geography

While it is typically considered a universal public good in contemporary liberal states, public space is a scarce and hotly contested resource. This study explores Seattle, Washington's experiences attempting to politically accommodate a new set of claims to public space on behalf of a particularly problematic set of users, young skateboarders. In order to understand how activists, neighborhood groups, bureaucrats, and elected officials negotiated political decisions about the allocation of public space I focused my inquiry upon the role of and identity during a series of struggles over public skatepark projects in Seattle. The core research question was: how does the way the users of public space are defined during the political process impact the governmental allocation of such public goods? The findings indicate that struggles over where, if anywhere, skateparks should be provided have largely been resolved in terms of who young skateboarders are. Such discursively ubiquitous but politically excluded populations as young skaters – whom I describe as discursive proxies – serve several essential functions in the politics of public space. First, discursive proxies enable the transformation of “where” questions into “who” questions. Questions about how to allocate scarce public space resources were largely resolved in terms of one-dimensional discursive struggles over what kind of people the ostensible users of that space would be. Second, debates over who such discursive

proxies are serve as a proxy for much more profound and potentially problematic political debates. Third, the discursive proxy enables the negotiation of the “distributive dilemma of liberalism.” Modern liberal states are premised upon the universal provision of public goods – including public space – without regard to class, race, economic might, or the like. Paradoxically, liberal states are also premised upon the unequal distribution of state goods in an uneven and preferential manner. Populations like youthful skaters enable decision makers to navigate this dilemma by abstracting discussion away from questions as to who will and will not reap the benefits of public space. Instead, these decisions may be couched in terms of the constructed identities of groups that are deemed to be deserving or undeserving of a given public good.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	iii
Chapter 1: Introduction –Young Peoples’ Role in the Political Geographies of Public Space .....	1
Chapter 2: The Research Setting – The City, the Sport, and the Site of Seattle Skatepark Advocacy.....	27
A. Seattle and its Neighborhoods.....	28
B. Skateboarding 101; “New-School Street” vs. “Transition” and the Culture of Transgression .....	33
C. Skateboarding 102; Skateboarders and Skateboarding Culture .....	41
D. Seattle’s Skatepark Advocacy movement and Public Skateparks as a Response to State Enforced Regimes of Private Property .....	48
E. Conclusion: Tensions between order and disorder, between public and private property as the setting for political struggles over Seattle’s skateparks.....	65
Chapter 3: The Discursive Negotiation of Public Space through Identity. ....	66
A. Discourse and City Politics. ....	69
B. The Role of Discursive Proxies in Liberal Politics .....	70
C. The Young Skateboarder as Discursive Proxy.....	73
D. Domestication as the Discursive Battleground for Constructing the Discursive Proxy of the Skateboarder.....	78
E. Advocates’ Discursive Framing of Skateparks as a Youth Issue .....	83
F – Governmental Construction of the Youthful, Domesticated Skater .....	104
G – Skaters as Threat – Skateparks as spaces of Danger.....	119
H – “If your City Doesn’t Have a Skatepark, Your City is a Skatepark” - Skaters as Populations to Be Domesticated and Skateparks as Domesticating Spaces.....	126
I – Conclusion, Why Argue “Where” Questions as “Who” Questions?.....	133
Chapter 4: The Role of Discursive Proxies in Coding Broader Political Questions Undergirding Decisions About Public Space.....	136
A – Political and Cultural Projects Animating Advocates’ Adoption of the Domesticated and/or Domesticable Discursive Proxy.....	137
B. Selling Seattle by Buying a Domesticated Identity for Skaters. ....	153
C. “Skater Danger” as Proxy for the Strains Imposed on Seattle’s Neighborhoods by Increasing Economic Success.....	159
D – Conclusion, Public Space as a Focus for Broader Political Struggles, Discursive Proxies as the Weapons in Those Struggles.....	188
Chapter 5: The Role of Discursive Proxies in Resolving the Dilemma at the Heart of the Liberal State .....	190
A. The Distributive Dilemma of Liberalism and Contemporary Regulation of Public Space.....	191
B. The Role of Political Proxies in resolving the Dilemmas of Liberal Governance .....	203

C. The Political Role of the Discursive Proxy and the Example of “Saving” Ballard While Enabling the “Incredible Skatepark Shrinking Machine” .....	206
D. The Ability to Successfully Mobilize the Discursive Proxy through the Planning Process as Test of Political Power. ....	215
E. Conclusion – The Discursive Proxy as Enabling Geographies of Power in Public Space .....	257
Chapter 6: Lessons from a Skatepark, Lessons from a Public Meeting .....	259
A – A Day in the life of a Skatepark .....	259
B – Findings and Conclusions: The Role of the Discursive Proxy as Reconciling Life, Discourse and Politics .....	267
C – Ramifications for Activism and Scholarship.....	271
D – Conclusion.....	293
Bibliography, List of References.....	295

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Number.....	Page
1: Opening day at the Ballard Bowl, March 4, 2006.....	2
2: Map of Seattle .....	31
3: Ballard Bowl during construction. ....	59
4: View from Marginal Way Skatepark. ....	63
5: Original Ballard Bowl .....	86
6: Skateboard deck issued as a fund-raiser for the PSSA.....	86
7: View from bowl feature. ....	87
8: Activist with “Seattle Hates Kids” sign .....	88
9: Marginal Way Skatepark.....	101
10: Photo of young transition skater used in May meetings. ....	111
11: Photo of same young transition skater used in October meetings.....	111
12: “Who are Skateboarders” slide from Master Plan presentation. ....	112
13: Image of older skater mentoring children. ....	113
14: Spectator slide from Master Plan presentations .....	114
15: Letter from young skater. ....	116
16: Portion of proposed master-plan map showing proximity of Myrtle Reservoir and High Point.....	172
17: Aerial photo showing Myrtle Reservoir and High Point.....	172
18: Master Plan map showing neighborhood concentrations of young people.....	182
19: Portion of “street” section from original Ballard Skatepark. ....	210
20: Portion of landscape architect’s rendering of the original Ballard Skatepark and ultimate location of Ballard Commons Park.....	211
21: Original rendering of plan view of Ballard Commons Park. ....	213
22: View of Ballard Commons from the northeast. ....	213
23: Original planned location of Lower Woodland Skatepark.....	218
24: Images from “lowerwoodland.org” .....	219
25: Graphic of potential Lower Woodland Sites from Seattle Times .....	220
26: Seattle Center Skatepark .....	223
27: Seattle Center Skatepark. ....	224
28: Seattle Center and surrounding areas .....	225
29: Aerial view of proposed Elliot Ave. Site. ....	226
30: Seattle Center viewed from the east .....	230
31: Seattle Pavilion.....	232
32: Seattle Skatepark Master-plan Map of Identified Skatepark Sites.....	236
33: Maps of Seattle median income and Master Plan sites. ....	247
34: Aerial view of West Seattle Stadium and surrounding park area. ....	249
35: Marginal Way under construction.....	253
36: Ballard Commons Skatepark.....	259

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## **DEDICATION**

To my parents, T.J. and Judith Carr, who taught me how to take pleasure  
in a good project diligently pursued, to maintain a sense of humor,  
and to never, ever, forget what it is like to be a kid.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction –Young Peoples’ Role in the Political Geographies of Public Space**

1

On March 4, 2006 I gave a brief speech at the opening ceremonies for the Ballard Commons Park in Seattle Washington. The Ballard neighborhood is typically thought of as home to an elderly population of Nordic descent, reflecting the area’s history as a Scandinavian fishing village. Both the opening ceremonies and the features of the park were designed to reflect this heritage. The park included a fountain composed of a series of large concrete sculptures of sea shells – an urchin, a limpet, a moon snail – intended to symbolize the community’s historic reliance upon the sea. The public speakers, including the Mayor, the Superintendent of Parks, two City Councilors, and a representative of the neighborhood followed a recital by the Seattle Norwegian Women’s choir, singing traditional Nordic songs. The opening was intended to represent Seattle at its best. City government had created new public green space for the citizens of Seattle after almost a decade of intensive planning, public participation and process (Eskenazi, 2005, at p. 94), and the most prominent political figures in the city were all present to pay homage to that process and its results. The day was unseasonably clear and warm. Children were playing in the fountain. There was a cake and free Ben & Jerry’s ice-cream.

The sense of Norman Rockwell-style civic normalcy of the Ballard Commons opening was disrupted by the final planned presentation of the event; namely a 45 minute set by a local skate-punk band called “the Fakies.” Performing songs with

titles such as “Purkiss-Rose Sucks<sup>1</sup>,” “Seattle Needs More Skateparks,” and “Ballard Bowl,” the Fakies’ set was every bit as incongruous as the setting for their performance, a 5000 square foot concrete skatepark located in the heart of the park’s green space. From the beginning of the Fakies’ performance, the skatepark was surrounded by adults and children of all ages enjoying the spectacle of contortions, aerial maneuvers, and “grinds” performed by a host of advanced and almost entirely adult skateboarders.

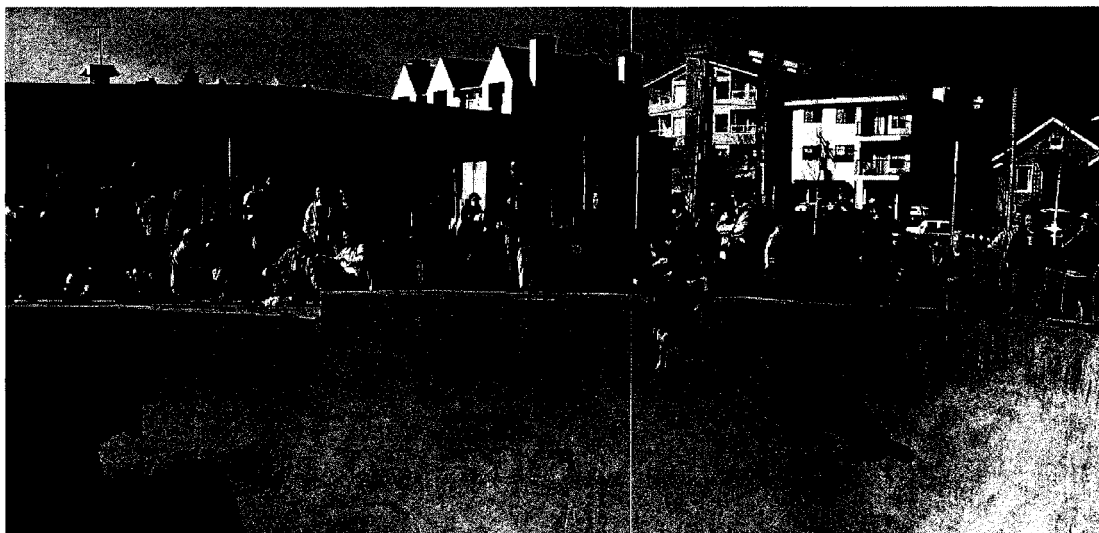


Figure 1: Opening day at the Ballard Bowl, March 4, 2006. Photo author.

Notwithstanding the large crowd of enthusiastic spectators, the skatepark – known as the Ballard Bowl – seemed at first glance to be as out of place in the Ballard Commons Park as the Fakies were on a double-bill with the Norwegian Women’s’ Choir, and as out of place as I – as one of a small group of skatepark advocates – was on a list of speakers that included the Mayor, City Councilors and the Superintendent of Parks. The sense of “out of placeness” accompanying the Fakies was heightened by

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<sup>1</sup> Purkiss Rose is a California based landscape architecture firm that has branched out into designing skateparks.

the fact that the skatepark had only been included in the Ballard Commons as part<sup>3</sup> of an eleventh hour unilateral decision by the Mayor, overriding a ten year Parks department planning process, vocal opposition by many neighborhood advocates, and such powerful stakeholders as the Ballard Chamber of Commerce. This decision was so contentious that the Parks Superintendent felt the need to address it during an opening ceremony that otherwise celebrated the smooth and competent functioning of Seattle City<sup>2</sup> government:

Those of you who have kept a close watch on this process know that there have been a few contentious points in the process, but we've had people who have really stepped up to make it work and really came together. Not everybody got everything they wanted, not everybody was 100% happy going in but as they came out I think we ended up with a product that really does benefit the entire Ballard community and we can all be proud of.

Behind the striking confluence of apparently incongruous elements visible on March 4, however, lay a profound yet largely invisible paradox. On one hand, the Ballard Bowl had been pushed by advocates, accepted by the city, and promoted by the Parks department as a public space for young people. During his speech, Mayor Nickels contextualized the provision of a skatepark for young people as part of a broader vision for the Commons to serve the entire Ballard community, and city at large:

We have people who are here today who have been involved in the process of creating this park for a decade. People who had a vision of Ballard and the changes that were occurring in Ballard and the need for a place that everyone could call their own here in the center, in the heart of Ballard. And that vision has led to the beautiful library and community service center kitty-corner from here and now to the

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this work I use the word "City" with a capital "C" to refer to Seattle's municipal government.

wonderful gathering place for people to be able to enjoy a water feature, to be able to enjoy art, to be able to enjoy the grassy areas and to enjoy a sport that looks to me to [be] much safer as a spectator sport but one which many young people are going to enjoy for many, many, many years.

On the other hand this “youthful” space was debated, approved, designed, built, and ultimately used almost exclusively by older people without the consultation or input of any actual young people. While the creation of spaces for young people by older people is a familiar governmental practice, the Ballard commons was the product of a double irony. Not only did adult efforts to create a “youthful” space ultimately give birth to an almost entirely kid-unfriendly facility, but the very process that led to an adult oriented skatepark in the Ballard Commons was largely conducted as a political debate about who young people are. And, much like the action in the skatepark on that balmy March day, this debate was conducted in an arena where young people’s presence was, at most, as passive onlookers and where their roles were largely symbolic.

## **THE RESEARCH QUESTION AND PROJECT**

Through the research project outlined in this paper, I seek to make sense of how as a society we decide to allocate an important, scarce, and valued public good, namely urban public space. The most obvious answer to this question is that these decisions are typically taken care of by municipal governments acting on behalf of the public. On closer examination, however, this explanation is lacking. While the ultimate decision-making authority over what kinds of public spaces we have and what kinds of activities and people are allowed in such spaces resides with government actors, they are susceptible to a variety of extra-governmental pressures.

These pressures include the formal inputs of periodic popular elections and referendums as well as such informal influences as campaign contributions, the efforts of lobbying groups, and press reportage.

Understanding how Seattle came to place its Mayor, a folk choir, and a punk band on the same stage to celebrate the last minute inclusion of a skatepark in an otherwise green, quiet, and passive-use public space on March 4, 2006 requires going beyond an analysis of formal government actions, and looking at the complex web of power and relationships that give rise to those actions. And as with most political debates, the struggle over the inclusion of the Ballard Bowl as part of the Commons was played out largely in the realm of idea, abstraction and identity. There had been no formal vote on whether or not to allow a skatepark into this long anticipated green space. Nor was it simply the product of financial influence or back-room political maneuvering. Rather, this decision was the result of communications between and among governmental and non-governmental actors who struggled to translate contesting visions of what kind of place Seattle should be into concrete and soil, policy and law. These struggles were largely conducted through language which served to not only to describe things, but to structure and enact certain social relationships – what theorists such as Fairclough describe as “discourse” (1995, at p. 6). And in the case of the Ballard Commons, these meaning laden discussions more often than not focused on who the users of this public space would and should be.

Because of the importance of this type of discourse to the political processes I sought to research and answer the following question; “how does the way the users of public space are defined during the political process impact the governmental

allocation of such public goods?” This is an important question for several reasons. First, because public space is both scarce and vitally important politically, culturally, and economically, decisions about such allocations are never simply a matter of one group “getting something through the local state,” but rather they implicate much broader questions about how the polity defines itself and the city (M. Brown *et al.*, 2005, at p. 275). In turn, these questions are especially hard fought in the context of public space because new claims to this public good will inevitably displace established users who will often be afraid of the “outsiders” that new uses may bring to “their” spaces.

Second, such a study has the potential to say much about how the contemporary liberal state functions. Modern American politics are premised upon a classic liberal promise of egalitarian treatment under the law, yet such ostensibly universal governmental goods as public space are inevitably distributed unevenly. Beyond the geographic disparity in how these goods are sited, the design and regulation of individual public spaces pre-determine who they will and will not serve. Not only will a given use of public space preclude others, but often one user group will displace or even repel another. A study of how the contemporary state reconciles the promise of truly “public” goods with the reality of highly unequal allocations of such goods can say a great deal about how and whether the promises of liberalism are met by government.

Third, the question of how public space will be allocated and who will be served by public space is an active and fraught struggle in many places. By exposing how these decisions are made in one city, I hope to shed light on how and whether

academics and activists might work to understand and potentially make claims upon these public goods in other contexts and places.

In order to answer my research question, I focused my research on the political processes surrounding an especially problematic type of public space – skateparks – ostensibly intended for an especially problematic population – young people<sup>3</sup>. I chose this site for several reasons. First, by studying the formation of skatepark policy in Seattle, I had the opportunity to be present and involved as a major metropolitan government attempted to address a large, organized, and novel claim to public space by a new user group. Because the controversy over the Ballard Bowl placed the issues of public skateparks on the public agenda for the first time, I was able to gather data first-hand as city policy was being negotiated and contested for the first time.

Secondly, skateboarding and skateboarders provided an especially contentious use and group of users for the City of Seattle to accommodate. Young people in public space have long been considered a threat to public order. At the same time, there are powerful countervailing social and political pressures to treat young people as particularly needful and deserving populations when it comes to public goods such as access to parks. Skateboarding heightens the tensions between positive and negative social framings of youth. Much of skateboarding’s popularity is due to its often explicitly transgressive nature, and a resulting culture that glorifies disorder and

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<sup>3</sup> Because the debates over youthful identities I discuss in this work invoke a broad and sometimes contradictory range of ages, I likewise define “young people” as broadly as possible. Just as various political actors have discursively posited skaters as including children as young as four and as old as eighteen, so too this discussion will likewise address “young people” as being under the age of majority.

resistance, thus heightening negative framings. On the positive side, this popularity has led to the growth of a vast entertainment and sporting-goods market, and the mainstreaming of skateboarding culture. By focusing on the struggles that formed around an activity and a population that simultaneously bear powerful positive and negative cultural baggage I was able to observe the political process at its most contentious, unresolved, and explicitly adversarial. In turn, such contentious struggles offered to expose the types of decisions, framings, and power dynamics that might otherwise lie concealed in debates over more politically “mature” issues.

### **IMPETUS FOR THE PROJECT**

My interest in how debates over the identities of the users of public space impact government decisions about such places was inspired by two parallel developments. The first of these was my own growing involvement with an activist movement that had been sparked by debates over whether to include a permanent place for skateboarding in Ballard. Before its development into an official City park facility, the site of the Ballard Commons was home to a previous and very different skatepark. Built by volunteers around the outside of an unused Safeway grocery store in 2002, the original Ballard skatepark was one of only two public skateboarding facilities in the city. Beginning in the summer of 2004 I began to notice flyers urging people to get involved in the effort to save that facility from destruction. By that time I had become familiar to a number of older skaters as a regular user of the original Ballard skatepark. In August of that year I began talking to one of them about the City’s plans to destroy it to make way for the Ballard Commons. Upon learning that I had once been an attorney, he invited me to attend a planning meeting with a number

of other activists who had rallied around the cause of saving the skatepark.

This early experience soon led to working with two of Seattle's first skatepark advocacy groups – the Puget Sound Skatepark Association and Parents for Skateparks – in trying to stave off destruction of the Ballard Bowl. In turn, my work with the PSSA and PFS led to a broader involvement with Seattle area skatepark advocacy, including an invitation in 2005 to join the nascent “Skate Park Advisory Committee” to Seattle Parks and Recreation (“SPAC”), and my election to chairperson of that committee in 2006. This, in turn, led to a volunteer position with the Task Force supervising Seattle's efforts to create a master-plan for a citywide system of skateparks. In these various capacities I advocated for a variety of projects described in the following Chapters. In short order, what had initially been an opportunity to get a little more involved with my local skatepark blossomed into a full-blown commitment to public space advocacy.

My involvement with skatepark advocacy was paralleled by a second development, namely my increasing engagement with the literature of public space. And while I did not enter the struggle over the Ballard skatepark with any intention of making my activism a simultaneous subject of academic study, I began to notice a variety of intriguing confluences between the literature addressing public space and my advocacy efforts. As I studied works such as Blomley (2004c), Davis (1990), and Mitchell (2003b) discussing the challenges faced by a variety of populations in making claims to public space, I was also beginning to understand and question the challenges and problems inherent to my own efforts to claim a public space in the city for young people.

During my explorations I found little academic literature addressing the intimate mechanisms by which the governmental allocation of public space is negotiated, how I might either understand that process as an academic, or how I could act to shape those decisions as an advocate. As I discuss in Chapter 3, there is substantial academic literature addressing both governmental responses to established discursive framings of youth in public space as threatening to law and order (Baumgartner, 1988; Lees, 1998; Lucas, 1998; Nolan, 2003; Valentine, 1996), and governmental approaches to skateboarders as a “disorderly” and “problematic” youth population (Borden, 2001; Brayton, 2006; Flusty, 2000; Woolley & Johns, 2001). And while the various regimes of social ordering enforced through the regulation of public space are well documented (Davis, 1990; Merry, 2001; Mitchell, 2003a; Waldron, 1991), the literature provides comparatively little analysis of the role of cultural and political discourse in determining how such governmental decisions are negotiated and set in motion (but see, Herbert, 1997, 2006a), let alone the role that users’ identities play in such decisions. Increasingly, I realized that the literature on the workings of city government either treated decisions about the allocation and regulation of public space as a matter of executive fiat and political ideology – thus failing to recognize how such decisions had been produced by active struggles between government and members of the public – or focused on discourse and the public process without addressing issues of social control through space (Boudreau, 2003; De Decker *et al.*, 2005; Degen, 2003; MacLeod, 1997; McCann, 2002, 2003, 2004; C. J. Smith, 1995; D. Wilson & Wouters, 2003). This gap between literatures addressing the allocation of and access to public space, and those exploring the messy

discursive and political negotiation of policy has, for example, led Painter to raise <sup>11</sup>  
a call for work “usefully examin[ing] the productive gap between the rule-bound  
model behaviour ascribed to bureaucratic actors and their actual practices” (Painter,  
2006, at p. 770). As I struggled with whether or not I was “doing the right thing in the  
right way” as an activist, I came to envision this project in part as an effort to respond  
to Painter’s call for “ethnographies and histories of the ‘internal’ workings of state  
institutions, to disclose the mundane, but frequently hidden, everyday world of state  
officials, bureaucratic procedures, meetings, committees, report writing, decision  
making, procrastination and filing” within the context of urban public space (Painter,  
2006, at p. 770). And in so doing, I hoped to provide inroads for both academics and  
activists who seek to expose, challenge, and potentially change those practices.

## **RESEARCH METHOD AND METHODOLOGY**

Much as my research question was suggested by the confluence of my  
academic interests and work as an activist, so too were my research methods<sup>4</sup>.  
Because I was interested as an academic in how government policy around public  
space is forged through the political process, I was naturally led to pursue my research  
question through qualitative methods. I saw the use of qualitative methods, with their  
focus on “explor[ing] the feelings, understandings and knowledges of others” as the  
only effective way to get behind the surface appearances produced by the political  
process and understand “the processes and practices underlying the evidence of

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<sup>4</sup> I recognize that my decision to research where I do my advocacy brings with it a number of potential difficulties. While “activist scholarship” has achieved substantial legitimacy in geography, care still needs to be taken to be self-reflective and disclose where bias as an activist could enter the academic work (Kobayashi, 2001). I have sought to do so in this work by noting throughout the text where I have been directly involved in shaping the events, or even creating the data upon which this work is based, and providing sufficient context for a fair evaluation of my analysis.

change [and] conflict” that I was seeing produced by that process (Dwyer & Limb, 2001, at p. 1). My immersion in my research site as an activist reinforced my inclination to use qualitative, ethnographic methods. Much of my efforts and my fellow advocates’ efforts were focused on implicitly and explicitly altering the political discourse around skateparks by disputing popular representations of skateboarders and promoting the benefits of our proposed uses of public space. At the same time, during many of the struggles we encountered it was unclear what role such discursive efforts played in the political process, whether or not our work was actually effective, and why we were able to succeed in certain struggles and not in others.

Increasingly intrigued as a scholar and activist by the tension between political discourse and government decision making, I designed this research project around a mix of three qualitative methods including discourse analysis, ethnography, and interviews that would allow me to illuminate the complex interrelationships between public space talk and public space policy. By engaging in a combined discourse analysis and ethnography of the politics of public space in Seattle (supplemented by interviews as necessary), I sought to demonstrate the negotiations involved in the governmental creation and administration of public space, the key frames through which these negotiations took place, and the possibilities those frames both enabled and denied. I took as my inspiration for this approach the successful use of combined ethnographic/discourse analysis methodologies by a number of researchers working in the realm of discourse and formation of urban policy, including McCann(2003), McInroy (2000), Schaller & Modan (2005), and Herbert (2006a).

## 1. Discourse Analysis of Texts

My curiosity about the political role of identity discourses in public space policy led me to analyze the discursive conditions under which Seattle's skateparks have been debated and created. This entailed examining the texts by which the meaning of Seattle's skateparks and their users were constructed by a variety of actors involved in the creation and contestation of these spaces, including governmental agents, administrators, users, neighborhood groups and activists.

A discourse analysis assumes that one of the most potent ways that such meanings are negotiated and reproduced is through struggles over language, and the power embodied in speech (Hall, 1997; McCann, 2003). This approach is rooted in an understanding of power as capillary and multiscalar. Under this view, power is constituted by a,

multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organizations; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies (Foucault, 2000).

Because of the centrality of language to social processes and this net-like system of power and meaning, subsequent theorists have argued that “[w]e can only make sense of the salience of discourse in contemporary social processes and power relations by recognizing that discourse constitutes society and culture, as well as being constituted by them” (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 273). And because language is the carrier

by which such hegemonic power relations are embodied and transmitted, discourse analysis requires an intensive analysis of the texts by which this negotiation takes place. Such a discursive approach to power is well suited to a comparison of not only how powerful institutional actors create and transmit hegemonic discursive meanings, but also how these meanings are resisted, contested, and/or co-opted by other discourses that “jostle and compete in their effect” (Rose, 2001).

That my focus in this project is primarily upon the discursive efforts to enframe material and political realities, however, is not to deny the importance of material and political realities themselves. While the influences of periodic elections, limited governmental budgets, city bureaucracy, and market based capitalism are of crucial importance, it is within the realm of discourse that political actors struggle to navigate these practical limitations. By integrating discourse analysis with a consideration of the broader logics and forces within which those discourses are formed, I attempt to avoid what Edelman argues is often a “lack of attention to political-economic processes” in discourse work that “makes it easier to accord ‘discourse’ analytical priority and to attribute to it a kind of autonomous power over and above other kinds of power relations” (Edelman, 1999)(p. 6). Thus, I follow the methodologies proposed by Fairclough by engaging in analyses of politics that progresses from, “discourse practices at macro- and micro-levels, to texts themselves, and finally to analysis of the social practice of which the discourse is a part” (Darcy, 1999). I am also especially interested in how discourse serves to veil the workings of such power relations, naturalizing or neutralizing otherwise potentially problematic political decisions.

My discourse analysis was based upon the documentary evidence generated by the political processes surrounding Seattle's various skatepark projects from 2004 through the fall of 2007. Overall, I examined over a thousand different textual artifacts including public comments to various skatepark projects. The most numerous of these documents were letters and emails to the Parks department in response to the Master Planning process and other skatepark projects. I also relied heavily on newspaper articles, documents generated by Seattle City government agencies, internet bulletin board and blog entries, and minutes, videotapes and transcripts of public meetings. My ability to gather and locate such texts was enhanced by my involvement with the site as an activist and my resulting relations with others within City government and various skatepark movements. Beyond internal City documents, or artifacts generated within other organizations such as neighborhood associations but not publicly circulated, I am confident that I have gathered and analyzed the majority of texts connected to this issue during the research period.

In examining this evidence, I sought to determine how a variety of institutions, groups, and individuals have attempted to frame and communicate the meanings, purposes, and publics to be served by these spaces. Textual analysis of media and other policy related artifacts is particularly valuable for its potential to reveal public discourse at a local scale, and its accompanying framings (M. Brown, 2006b, at p. 876). My analysis was facilitated by the tendency of many political actors to generate substantial textual artifacts – including letters, public statements, quotes in newspaper articles, laws, meeting minutes, streaming video of public meetings, signs, websites

and even built environments – evidencing the processes by which they negotiate and attempt to disseminate discursive power in space.

As a practical matter, my field methods for conducting this discourse analysis involved gathering and analyzing these various artifacts in order to find recurring discursive patterns, and to try to determine what underlying political goals were being pursued by such discourses. After identifying a preliminary series of recurring discourses, I then organized and inventoried the documents that evidenced each of these discourses (and any others that emerged) to evaluate the accuracy of my initial impression of the importance of these discourses. By weighing the frequency with which various discourses recurred throughout the political process, as well as the contexts in which they arose, I sought to make my, “analysis more systematic and to build up an interpretation through a series of stages, avoiding the temptation of jumping to premature conclusions” (Jackson, 2001). Once confident in the broader discursive themes evidenced by the documents, I returned to the texts for two purposes: first, to ensure that these general patterns were reflected in the texts as found, and second, to begin to determine to whom these discourses were attributed. Because I sought to determine how hegemonic discourses are promulgated, it was essential to determine what group had given voice to each major theme – such as city elected officials, upper level bureaucrats, designers, planners, members of the public, users, news sources and op-eds – in order to attempt to determine how those discourses have promulgated between various spheres. Finally, once I charted both major themes and the various groups within which those themes were replicated, I

returned again to the textual data to search for illustrative quotes that were representative of the broader patterns I had discerned.

## 2. Ethnographic Participant Observation

Because discursive political struggles do not neatly translate into governmental policy “on the ground” I used ethnographic participant-observer methods with their capacity to “explore lived experience in all its richness and complexity,” as a way of exposing whether, when, and how discourse influenced City decision-making about public space (Herbert, 2000). Broadly speaking, ethnographic participant observation may be described as the process of “living, working or spending periods of time in a particular ‘community’ in order to understand people’s experience in the context of their everyday lives” (Valentine, 2001). Based upon “prolonged and intensive first-hand fieldwork,” this methodology has the potential to enable a, “conscious and systematic [understanding of] a way of life of a group of people or a locality. . .” (Jackson, 2000). By approaching the research site as a participant, and becoming familiar with other participants and their perceptions of the site, ethnographic observation “offers the means for identifying those aspects of the environment of groups which define their space, and hence influence their behavior in relation to that space” (Matthews, 1983). Moreover, it is possible to obtain more richly textured observations of communication and the broader webs of meaning within which that communication takes place (Valentine, 2001). Thus, ethnographic participant observation is valuable for geographers, in that it facilitates an understanding of those processes by which humans interact to create meanings for and extract meanings from space (Matthews, 1983; Winchester, 2000). An ethnographic,

participant-observer methodology is a particularly powerful tool for understanding how the state functions. While often treated as monolithic in its workings, “the state and its power are processes, asserted in the everyday of such activities as policing, border patrolling, immigration oversight and census taking. In-depth analysis of these activities reveals the contingent nature of state power, and the various tensions, fractures and incommensurabilities that characterize state institutions themselves” (Herbert, 2000).

In order to trace how, when, and whether discourse translated into municipal policy, I conducted participant observation in the political realm concurrently with my efforts as an activist to build, promote, and save skateparks in Seattle. As a matter of field methodology this entailed participating in the various political processes surrounding the city’s various skatepark projects and documenting my observations. During the three year course of my advocacy I attended approximately sixty meetings of the Puget Sound Skatepark Association, Parents for Skateparks, Friends of River City Skatepark, the Skatepark Master-Planning Task Force, and the SPAC. Overall I managed to attend all SPAC and Task force meetings during the research period, and approximately fifteen meetings for other organizations. I also served as an advocate before the Seattle City Counsel, individual Seattle City Councilors, and Seattle Parks and Recreation. Additionally, I periodically provided informal advice to a Puget Sound based skatepark design and construction company involved with many Seattle area projects. Beyond such formal associations, I was consistently involved in discussing skatepark related issues with skaters and members of the skateboarding industry. I engaged in more than two hundred informal discussions regarding

skatepark issues, primarily with other advocates, Parks Department staff and contractors, and fellow committee members. My conversations also included major stakeholders involved with a variety of projects including representatives of Seattle's various neighborhood associations, representatives of the Seattle Center, Space Needle, Experience Music Project, the Vera Project, and Paul Allen's Vulcan Corporation. Given the similarities in discourses mobilized during both formal and informal discussions, I am confident that my observations are representative of the vast majority of occasions in which Seattle's skatepark politics have been negotiated.

In the process of observing the way that I and other political actors discussed and attempted to negotiate the state allocation and regulation of public space, I took detailed, hand-written field notes of the activities, exchanges, and other experiences that I perceived when engaging in my work as an activist, including literally hundreds of informal discussions with a variety of political actors and activists. Using a digital voice recorder I audio-taped public meetings. Where important, I coded personal identifiers including name, workplace and the like, and I have kept my code sheet separate from my field notes under lock and key. Where personal identifiers were not important, they were simply excluded. All field notes were transcribed within two days of a given set of observations.

### 3. Interviews.

Finally, where there were decisions, experiences, and/or perspectives that I did not feel able to adequately access through either discourse analysis or ethnographic methods I "triangulated" my data collection through the use of supplemental semi-structured interviews with activists, governmental actors, and planning professionals.

These interviews were valuable for getting participants to “provide an account of their experiences, of how they view their own world and the meanings they ascribe to it” where these perspectives were not available to me otherwise (Valentine, 2001). In order to gain a greater understanding of the rationales underlying a variety of decisions by elected officials and the Parks department I conducted several interviews non-elected government actors in Seattle city government and planning professionals. I interviewed a number of activists who led the effort to build several skatepark projects with which I was not involved. To develop a better sense of the nature and extent of efforts to exclude skateboarders from other areas of the city, and the role skateparks play in Seattle’s skateboarding culture I interviewed a series of respondents who are familiar with the history of skateboarding in Seattle. They included area skatepark designers, current and former managers of Seattle-based professional skateboarding teams, and organizers and instructors of youth-targeted skateboarding camps and competitions. I also interviewed several female skateboarders and activists to get their perspective on skateboarding as a male dominated activity. In total I conducted nine interviews. Interviewees were identified based on my knowledge of both Seattle’s skatepark advocacy movements and on knowledge I gained as an activist of various actors’ roles within City government. There is some risk that these interviewees’ are not, by their relatively small number, entirely representative of broader demographics. In the case of skatepark advocates and other skaters, this risk, however, is mitigated by the commonality between discourses encountered through the interviews, ethnographic methods and discourse analyses. In the case of the governmental actors and planners I interviewed, their proximity to the workings of City government and

familiarity with municipal decision makers provides a fair degree of reliability to their comments.

For each interview, I created a list of topics to explore and address, and a rough outline of the progression of topics to discuss. Once in the interview, I allowed discussion with the respondent to follow its own, natural path, returning to the outline only when a conversational topic was exhausted or hit a dead end. Before concluding the interview, I returned to my original topic list, to make sure that each of the questions and issues that I sought to explore was addressed. As with participant observation field notes, I transcribed my handwritten notes of all interviews within 48 hours. I then coded identifying information about respondents – where relevant – with the code to be kept separately under lock and key. Finally, I analyzed the texts of the interviews in accordance with the prior two sections.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND CHAPTERS**

As suggested by the vignette opening this chapter, an examination of the role that young people play in the political processes surrounding such ostensibly youthful spaces as the Ballard Bowl can provide a powerful insight into the link between discourse and government allocation of such scarce public goods. At first glance this role is simple and negligible; young people are excluded from almost every forum in which their place in the city is debated and decided. At a much more profound level, however, young people were not only present during every step in the political processes surrounding the Ballard bowl and Seattle's other skatepark projects, they themselves *were* the battleground upon which the struggles over whether and where to have such "youthful" spaces were fought.

I argue that that such physically absent, but discursively ubiquitous populations as young skaters serve a number of essential functions in the politics of public space and in contemporary American governance more generally. Because the identities of these populations evoke powerful and complex systems of cultural meanings, political actors are able to refer to them as a “shorthand” for a host of powerful ideas, emotions, and values. And because they are excluded from the political sphere, the ability of empowered political actors to invoke such loaded identities is unhindered by the risk that members of these often marginalized groups will contest the way they are being described. Thus, I use the term “discursive proxies” to describe populations such as young skateboarders (and, arguably, the homeless, “welfare mothers”, enemy combatants, and immigrants) for two reasons. First, other, more empowered actors are enabled to claim to represent their interests “by proxy.” Secondly, debates over their identities serve as a “proxy” by which much more problematic and politically loaded decisions may be neutralized.

In focusing on the discursive role that young people play in the politics of public space, I observed and have structured the following analyses around three major functions that discursive proxies perform. First, the figure of the discursive proxy enables the transformation of “where” questions into “who” questions. That is, questions about how to allocate scarce public space resources were largely resolved in terms of fairly one-dimensional discursive struggles over what kind of people the ostensible users of that space would be. This tendency had both political and geographic impacts. Politically, the choice of how to discursively frame the prospective users of a new type of public space had an enormous impact on the

composition and goals of factions both asserting new claims to public space and those opposing such claims. In turn, these transformations had geographically ramifications for the types of public spaces that were the subject of political contest.

Second, debates over the nature of young people served as a proxy for much more profound and potentially problematic debates underlying the City's creation and regulation of public space. Not only does the figure of the discursive proxy allow the coding of "where" questions as "who" questions, but it also enables the coding of a far-reaching set of political tensions and agendas underlying issues of where the benefits and burdens of different types of public space will be located. The discursive proxy inevitably served as a trope through which a host of political actors petitioned the state to address the myriad local changes resulting from citywide and regional economic and demographic transformations through the creation and regulation of public space.

The third function the discursive proxy serves is the negotiation of what I describe as the "distributive dilemma of liberalism." Modern liberal states are premised upon the concept of universal human rights, and the provision of certain public goods – including public space – without regard to class, race, economic might, or any other traditional indicia of privilege. Paradoxically, liberal states are also premised upon the unequal distribution of state goods in an uneven and preferential manner, creating a powerful dilemma for those governmental actors who are charged with engaging in such distributions without appearing to do so. Politically excluded but discursively ubiquitous populations like youthful skaters enable decision makers to navigate this dilemma by abstracting discussion away from questions as to who will

and will not reap the benefits of such ostensibly universal and non-exclusionary goods as public space. Instead, these decisions may be couched in terms of the constructed identities of groups that are deemed to be deserving or undeserving of a given public good. And by tracing which entities, groups, and neighborhoods are able to successfully assert their political power through the figure of the discursive proxy an otherwise invisible map of citywide political power may be brought into focus.

Before laying out the data supporting these themes, several preliminary steps are needed. Because the political tensions underlying the debates over individual skatepark sites draw upon preexisting tensions within Seattle and its neighborhoods, I provide a brief overview of the city and the transformations it was facing during the study period in Chapter 2. In order to further contextualize the research site, I then offer a sketch of the history of skateboarding and how Seattle's skatepark advocacy movement fit within and responded to that history.

In Chapter Three I begin exploring the first major theme of this work by tracing how the identity of the young skateboarder was constructed and mobilized in Seattle's public space battles. I outline the ways that skateboarders and skateparks were discursively framed by a succession of groups – from activists, to politicians, to governmental staffers, to Seattle's various residents – throughout a series of public skatepark projects. Older advocates' decision to frame skateparks as an amenity for the young drastically transformed the goals, strategies and even the composition of the movement. By framing their cause in terms of the needs of youth, skatepark advocates led debates over whether and where to have skateparks to be resolved in terms of whether the purportedly young users of such spaces were – as I describe it –

capable of “domestication.” Throughout the political process, determinations of “where” skateboard parks were to be located were inevitably fought as “who” questions revolving around whether it is possible and necessary to take an activity and group of users commonly believed to be transitory, lawless, and “wild,” and to spatially bound that activity to render it understandable, safe, and “domesticated.” Advocates’ initial framing of skateparks as an amenity for youth, however, ultimately led that movement to push for a specific and highly contested type of space that replicates the visibility, urban integration, and green setting of a traditional playground.

In Chapter Four I outline the second major theme of this work, namely how Seattle’s skateboarders have served as discursive proxies for a spectrum of political projects in Seattle. Struggles over whether or not to have a youth-oriented public space in a place like Ballard inevitably implicated, and were fueled by, broader questions about what kind of city Seattle is and should be, who should or should not bear the costs of the economic and demographic changes transforming Seattle, and what attitude, if any, City government should take towards claims of residential spatial privilege. These questions, however, were rarely addressed directly. Rather, they were at once negotiated and obscured as part of more narrowly defined debates over what kind of young people skateboarders are, and whether they are capable of or in need of domestication.

In Chapter 5 I offer the third organizing theme of this project, discussing how the discursive proxy of the young skater both enabled and cloaked the operation of political power underlying City government’s decisions about public space in Seattle.

Beginning with a discussion of the role of discourse in politics generally, this chapter proceeds to an exploration of the need for discursive proxies in liberal democratic governmental systems such as the U.S. By tracing exactly how, when, and if the various competing efforts to politically define youthful skaters actually gained traction “on the ground,” I show how the discursive framing of their identities was essential in enabling a variety of actors to assert their political power in city politics without appearing to lay politically unpalatable claims to public space. At the same time, in determining of which groups, entities and neighborhoods were successful in mobilizing either negative or positive framings of the discursive proxy the City effectively traced map of the geographies of power underlying municipal politics.

Chapter 6 concludes with an ethnographically based composite “day in the life” of a Seattle skatepark as an occasion to reflect upon the broader ramifications of what it means to politically mobilize youthful identities in the cause of making claims to public space. I use this ethnographic snapshot to simultaneously contest and confirm both negative and positive discourses surrounding the proxy of the youthful skateboarder. In doing so I question the ramifications of engaging in such discursive identity politics for an ostensibly representative and democratic system of government. This final chapter then concludes with thoughts for future directions for both public space advocates and academic researchers, tracing the potential openings and pitfalls of invoking such discursive proxies.

## Chapter 2: The Research Setting – The City, the Sport, and the Site of Seattle Skatepark Advocacy.

“You just can’t kill skating. When there is a crisis of terrain, skating will just evolve to overcome it.”

– Interview with respondent “Erik”<sup>5</sup>

If your city doesn't have a skatepark, then your city is a skatepark.

- Home Page of “Skaters for Public Skateparks” (2005).

In this project I argue that what makes Seattle skatepark politics so fruitful a site for inquiry is that it provides an instance of municipal government grappling with a novel claim to public space by a new and vocal advocacy movement on behalf of a problematic user group. And because this claim has been controversial, novel, and fairly successful, the processes surrounding City government’s efforts to deal with this user group are particularly illustrative of how decisions about the allocation of public space are typically made. Understanding the relevance of Seattle’s experience to other municipalities, however, requires a cursory understanding of what kind of place Seattle is. Likewise, understanding the various ways that the public skatepark advocacy movement proved to be simultaneously appealing and challenging to City government and other political actors requires a basic understanding of what skateboarding is, and how its performances, culture, and demographics potentially impact the city. Seattle’s skatepark advocacy movement must then be understood in terms of efforts to navigate the challenges and opportunities posed both by a particular city and a particular sport.

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<sup>5</sup> Throughout this work I have changed and/or omitted all names and identifiers of respondents and other individuals quoted to protect their confidentiality. The only exception to this rule is either where an elected official is quoted from a public statement, or I cite a news article that gives an individual’s name.

In this Chapter I first offer an overview of Seattle and those neighborhoods that figure large in my study. I argue that Seattle has flourished as a post-fordist world city, and that its civic politics have sought to simultaneously protect that success and address the dilemmas that have accompanied increasing economic growth, often manifesting in a drive to maintain “order.” I then provide an introduction to skateboarding practice, culture, and the types of built environments in which both have developed – all of which tend to challenge such traditional notions of urban order. Finally, I present a history of Seattle’s skatepark advocacy, arguing that it has emerged as an effort to reconcile the desire to maintain order within the city, and the transgressive nature of urban skateboarding. This overview of how the movement for public skateparks has developed in response to a series of opportunities, challenges, and projects then serves as a preface to the following Chapter in which I explore the ways skateboarders’ identities and skateparks have been discursively mobilized in Seattle politics.

#### A. Seattle and its Neighborhoods.

Seattle is a city in the grips of managing its own success. Popularly associated with the rise of the software/internet economy, the emergence of high-end coffee as an affordable luxury, and grunge music explosion of the 1990’s, Seattle’s economic fortunes remain strong. A mix of information technology, biotech, retail, insurance, shipping, and aerospace industry has allowed Seattle to bounce back from Boeing’s corporate relocation to Chicago and the dot-com bust of the early 1990s’s. Defying national declines in housing prices, Seattle property values continue to rise (Cohen, 2007) as employment levels return to the peak levels of the dot-com boom (Wong,

2005). Seattle's continuing growth has not, however, come without costs.

Increased housing prices have brought with them a rise in gentrification, a decrease in affordable housing, and a resulting loss of families and lower income residents (Morrill, 2007).

While the challenges brought by a booming economy and spiraling house costs would be challenging to any city, Seattle's municipal government has evolved into a multi-level, process intensive system that is especially poorly adapted to addressing swift change. The city's charter government balances a strong mayor against a nine member, generally elected city council that has a strong influence over city policy and executive decisions through control of the budget. What distinguishes Seattle, however, is its long and legally enshrined tradition of public input and process, resulting in a plethora of official and semi-official agencies, councils, committees and groups all intended to ensure a high degree of citizen input into governmental decision making. This has led to a citywide "reputation – or perhaps even notoriety – for public process" (Mattern, 2003, at p. 5), that is so involved and laborious that most all municipal decision-making tends to be glacial.

In spite of this well-earned reputation for public inclusiveness at a political level, Seattle has also developed a reputation for placing a premium on the maintenance of order and the control of "disorderly" populations in its public spaces. Whether discussing the Sidran-era anti-homeless "civility laws" of the early 1990's (Mitchell, 2003b), the crackdown on protesters at the 1999 WTO ministerial meetings (Fanin *et al.*, 2000; Herbert, 2007), or contemporary efforts to render it illegal for those previously convicted of drug or sex crimes to even enter large portions of the

city (Beckett, 2004; Beckett & Herbert, 2006), Seattle has placed great stock in the need to keep its streets, parks and plazas orderly and free of those who might disturb the very types of creative-class elites who have built the city's contemporary economy.

Much of the strain occasioned by Seattle's success may be seen at the scale of the city's neighborhoods. The gradual incorporation of a series of smaller, outlying towns has provided Seattle with a variety of neighborhoods typically characterized by an identifiable economic and cultural center and a distinct neighborhood character. The dense Downtown waterfront area is flanked by a series of wealthy neighborhoods that developed as bedroom communities for the city's elites, including Queen Anne and Magnolia to the northwest and Capitol Hill to the Northeast. While these areas have largely retained their character and socio-economic function over the past several decades growing increasingly wealthy (Phuong & Parvaz, 2002), many of the city's other neighborhoods are in flux on account of increasing urban density and housing costs. The Belltown neighborhood between Downtown to the South and Queen Anne and the Seattle Center to the north has gone from an economically depressed area characterized by warehouses and light industry to the epicenter of the city's high-end high-rise condominium explosion. The city's traditional African-American and multi-ethnic neighborhoods to the East and Southeast of Downtown, including the Central District, Columbia City, Rainer Valley, and South Park have been experiencing gentrification and white displacement of longtime residents (Andrews, 2003; Mudede, 2005). Similarly, once solidly middle and working-class white neighborhoods characterized by small to medium sized single-family houses are now the sites of

“renovation” projects seeking to expand modest bungalows into multi-story mini-mansions with minimal set-backs.

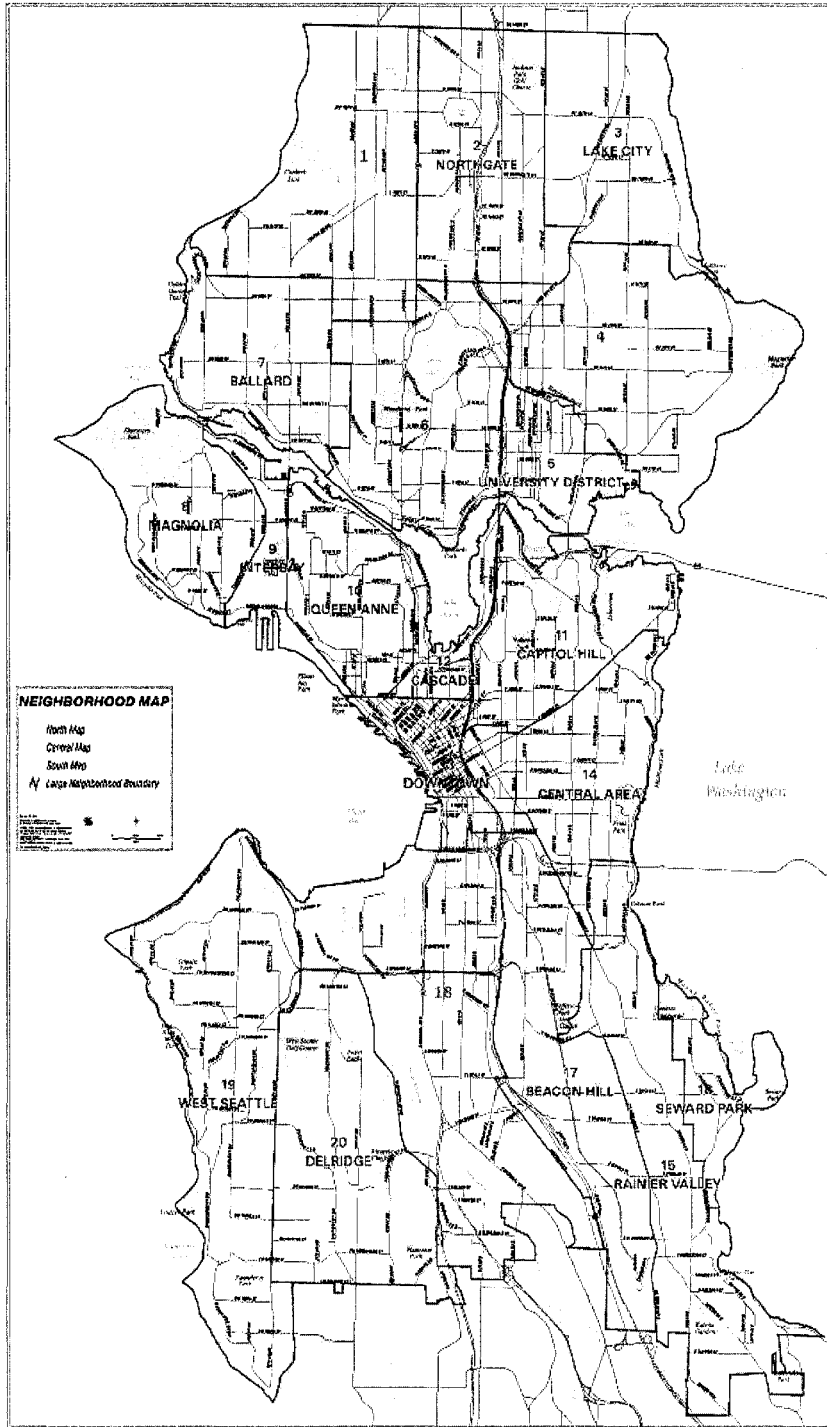


Figure 2: Map of Seattle from <http://clerk.ci.seattle.wa.us/~public/nmaps/fullcity.htm>

These neighborhoods, including Ballard, Wallingford/Greenlake/Lower Woodland, are also seeing a rise in large, dense condominium infill projects. Even the traditionally more nondescript “suburb” like neighborhoods in the north of Seattle, including Northgate and Lake City are seeing spiraling housing prices and accompanying shifts in population.

Taken together, these factors have led to a city that is profoundly reactionary when it comes to matters of public space, notwithstanding a well deserved reputation as a bastion of liberal, progressive politics. As one professional planner familiar with the Seattle’s public space politics observed during an interview:

If you look around, at people in general, most people have a deep fear of the unknown. Especially in a public space. We can bring all kinds of elements to that. I mean, you are shaking up your little world where you know the people and where they all come from and where they are going. But when it comes to the public, “god only knows what kind of elements are coming in.” You are moving out of your little system. “It’s scary.” We want other people like us to go into public space. Because we only want to go where there other people are like us. And in Seattle that is really true because we are so not ethnically diverse. We are a bunch of white, white-collar people in our pristine little world. And you start talking about bringing in an unknown [and people get upset].

Proposed changes to the city’s built environment are typically understood in terms of broader demographic shifts, and often strongly opposed by residents who are afraid of either displacement or of the diminution of their sizable investments in the family home. Such opposition is further fueled by a political system that tends towards entropy due to its emphasis on process. Combined with a longstanding governmental tendency towards the strict enforcement of order in the city’s public spaces, Seattle is

in many ways an unlikely home for a successful movement seeking to persuade the City to build public skateparks.

### B. Skateboarding 101; “New-School Street” vs. “Transition” and the Culture of Transgression

For cities like Seattle that are heavily invested in maintaining an orderly urban landscape, skateboarding is a particularly difficult activity to assimilate because of its traditional association with spatial transgression. Owing much of its popularity to an “outlaw” image rooted in a history of property trespass and urban disorder, skateboarding both provokes and precludes municipal efforts to regulate and spatially bound its practitioners. And while the creation of public skateparks may be seen as an effort to do just that, understanding this development requires a brief history of skateboarding and the spaces in which it is practiced.

From its roots as a surfer’s attempt to emulate the experience of riding waves on the land when the surf was flat, to skaters’ re-invention of empty pools as skate- playgrounds, to the appropriation of the urban furniture of bus benches, planters and handrails, skateboarding has always been constituted by and constitutive of the specific environments where it is performed (Brooke, 1999; Thatcher, 2001). The variety of spaces where skateboarding is performed has led to the definition of sub-disciplines articulated in terms of those terrains. Slalom racing, downhill speed racing, ditch skating, pool skating, flatland freestyle, banked slalom, park, and street skating each constitute a sub-genre defined by the environment encountered and utilized<sup>6</sup>. A specific skating culture has developed within each of these terrains, often

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<sup>6</sup> For many skaters, the line between, street, transition, downhill, and the like is blurred or non-existent.

(but not always) involving equipment specially developed for the specific demands of the particular environment.

Of all the sub-genres of skating, two have competed for dominance in terms of popularity, numbers of participants, and media and cultural prominence over the past 20 years, namely “transition” and “new school” street skating. Skating on the street originated with the very first skateboards – typically steel roller-skate wheels and trucks<sup>7</sup> mounted to a board or plank – which began to emerge in the late 1950’s and early 60’s as a toy for mobility and for the emulation of surfing where and when waves were not available (Brooke, 1999). With the advent of the urethane wheel and the proliferation of empty swimming pools during the Southern California drought of 1976-77, “transition” skating – that is, skating on curved surfaces transitioning to vertical walls such as the sides of an empty pool, paved embankment, concrete drainage ditch or pipe – gained popularity throughout the 1970’s and 80’s, spurred by the growth of commercial skate parks emulating these often illicit environments (Borden, 2001; Peralta & Stecyk, 2001).

While skating on the street for transportation and recreation never truly disappeared, it enjoyed an explosion of popularity from the early 1980’s onward, after a hyperactive Jewish kid from Florida named Alan “Ollie” Gelfand invented his signature move, a no-handed vertical jump accomplished by “popping” the tail of the board. The effect of an ollie is to allow the skater to jump perpendicular to the riding surface, the skateboard apparently sticking to the skater’s feet without a physical bond

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To the extent that these different disciplines require different environments, however, they will be treated as distinct practices in this work.

<sup>7</sup> A skateboarding “truck” is a metal structure combining an axle and a turning mechanism. The trucks, wheels, and flat “deck” constitute the main components of a skateboard.

between shoes and board. To an onlooker, an ollie on a horizontal surface appears magical. The skater jumps and, somehow, the board rises up with her or his feet.

Once translated from transition to street, the “ollie” transformed skating by allowing the skater to jump up, over, and onto a variety of surfaces, and especially the otherwise mundane features of the urban environment including benches, stairways, stairway handrails, planters, loading docks, and ledges. As one respondent – a designer of skate park “street” style features commented – “now, if you are street skating, the entire city is basically a hundred-square-mile skate park.” The transformative nature of the ollie and the dramatic expansion of terrain that it entailed heralded the sub-discipline of “new school” street skating. New school became the dominant cultural and economic discipline of skating from the late 1980’s onward due to a combination of factors. These included the widespread closure of transition oriented skate parks in the mid-eighties on account of liability and financial feasibility problems, a recognition of the expanded opportunities represented by forms of skateboarding that did not require users to access skate-specific terrain, the concomitant explosion of media coverage of street skating, and a general cultural consensus that new school was more “real”, urban, gritty, and tough than transition. Because the shift in popularity from transition to new-school street occurred in the late 1980’s, transition skating tends to be favored by older skaters – most often in their 30’s – and a small minority of younger skaters, with most young people gravitating towards new-school street. As one interviewee, a long-time skater noted:

Every little kid wants to learn to grind a ledge<sup>8</sup>. Every little kid wants to learn to tail slide a ledge. I teach skate camp for a living. I got one coming up in three months – 25 kids per week between the ages of eight and twelve. And I split-em up. I’m the transition teacher. I ask “who wants to learn to drop in? Who wants to learn tranny<sup>9</sup> and who wants to learn street?” I break it down, and I always get a small handful of kids who wanna come over to the tranny, and I got a lotta kids who want to learn flat ground.<sup>10</sup> I’m like, “do you want to learn fun box<sup>11</sup>, flat ground, or transition?” And most of the kids want flat ground.

For this work, the distinctions between street and transition skating are important because they require two very different forms of built environment. Both street and transition were born from, and developed within environments intended for other activities. Just as the street skater re-envisioned the curb, the handrail, staircase, planter, ledge, bench, and loading-dock, the transition rider reinterpreted the use value of the swimming pool, drainage ditch, and hydroelectric pipe. Moreover both of these performances originated as profoundly transgressive spatial practices. In the same way transition skating largely began with “poaching” (trespassing) drained swimming pools, so too has street skating been associated with the illicit use of sidewalks, public parks, and the varied urban furniture of the city core.

The greatest difference between street and transition from a purely environmental perspective is the role and demand for simulacra of the “natural” spaces of those performances. Because the generative spaces of transition – such as empty pools and flood management systems – are unevenly distributed spatially and almost never legally accessible, most skaters require either a public skate park in which the

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<sup>8</sup> A “street” move where the skater ollies up onto a horizontal ledge, such as a planter, and grinds the aluminum trucks of the board against the edge.

<sup>9</sup> Slang for “transition.”

<sup>10</sup> “Flat ground” is a synonym for new-school street skating.

<sup>11</sup> A funbox is a skatepark obstacle combining such “street” elements as banked ramps, rails, and ledges.

traditional features of transition skating are reproduced, or the real-estate and resources to build their own simulacrum in the form of a wooden ramp or even a concrete pool. In contrast, the street skater needs little more than the ubiquitous and increasingly generic street furniture of the city or suburb (Borden, 2001). While an increasing number of public skate parks do, in fact, include “street courses” – permanent sections that combine ramps, ledges, rails, steps and other common elements of urban architecture – skaters often disparage these features as “unauthentic.” According to one interviewee, a Seattle area skatepark designer, “there are guerilla spots all over that if you replicated them in a park people would say they are crap. But because they are underground, people dig them.” Thus, transition skating inherently involves a greater demand for purpose built spaces such as skate parks than new-school skating, as its generative environments are extraordinarily rare when compared to the readily available (though mostly illegal) urban landscape.

Because new-school street has been skating’s most popular sub-discipline for almost twenty years in large part due to its association with transgressive uses of public space, city officials and property owners have increasingly treated skateboarding as a threat to public order. Not simply disruptive, urban new-school skateboarding may be seen as a powerful critique of market based conceptions of the city (Nolan, 2003). Iain Borden first articulated this perspective in an academic context, describing skateboarding as a new performativity of public space that holds the promise of embodying a uniquely utopic articulation of the urban. Focusing almost entirely on new-school street skating, Borden argues that skateboarding’s use of the city in a manner that does not contribute to either capitalist consumption or

production, and does not lay an exclusive claim to temporal or spatial use, points to a new urban existence freed from the self-reproducing logics of capitalism (Borden, 2001) at 89. By reinterpreting the very meaning of the urban landscape as a place for the pure production of play, street skateboarding provides an implicit critique of the city.

Architecture is intended for the production of things – either products as commodities in factories, knowledge in universities and museums, labour power in housing, information and decisions in offices, and so on. . . . Skateboarding, however offers no such contribution, consuming the building while not engaging with its productive activity. Consequently, it implicitly denies both that labour should be productive of things and that architecture should be directed toward that purpose (Borden, 2001, at 231).

The ability to reconfigure some of the most power laden spaces of the city through play lies at the heart of both skateboarding's utopic promise. By reintroducing play to the city, skateboarding begins the transformation of the urban realm into what Foucault described as a "heterotopia" – that is, a space in which "the random juxtapositions of disparate objects, activities and people not normally found together challenge hegemonic modes of regulating and representing space" (Edensor, 1998, at p. 218). Thus, while the logic of the city as capitalist engine of production continues to reproduce itself globally at an accelerated scale, bringing with it a functional urban Esperanto of placeless, generic "degree zero architecture," the countervailing spread of skateboarding concomitantly provides individuals with the opportunity to reinscribe themselves onto this functionalist landscape and thus, "challenge . . . our everyday concepts of the functions of building, and . . . the closed world we create for ourselves out of this massively unlimited city" (Borden, 2001, at p. 191). As such,

skateboarding represents a reintroduction of the Dionysian culture of “sensuality, abandon and intoxication” into streets that, under the Western tradition, have been given over to the Apollonian culture of “structure, order and self discipline” (Edensor, 1998).

Skaters themselves are, at times, aware of both the Dionysian expression and the critique implicit in their activities. As one skater quoted by Borden noted, “the corporate types see their structures as powerful and strong. I see them as something I can enjoy, something I can manipulate to my advantage” (2001, at p. 187). Likewise, one of my interviewees, a skater in his mid 30’s recognized street skateboarding as an explicitly utopian alternative to conventionally disciplined life patterns:

Society is so rigid and structured. You know that novel “1984”? It’s similar. Live. Consume. Die. There is no excitement, no drama. But you go skating and immediately you have adrenalin. It’s immediate. You are just trying not to eat shit [fall hard]. Just like if you are going to skate somebody’s pool. You pull up to the house to skate, and you just have to combat your own adrenalin. You don’t know what is going to happen. Will you get to skate? Will the cops come? I tell you, it’s better than drugs and better than sex.

This sense of freedom was echoed by a female skateboarding activist I interviewed who commented:

I love parks, but I love what it means to be a street skater a little bit more. I feel it is a little bit more like, “I’m skating because I want to and, even if society doesn’t support what I am doing, I am skating.” And you don’t have to have all this money to build a skatepark and go through all this bureaucratic crap. I mean, it’s great. I like skateparks. But I like the sentiment of what street skating is about, and the actual street skating.

Similarly, a Seattle based skatepark builder noted during an interview,

“There’s no coach. No one has to pass you the ball. There’s no game. . . It’s

the most free activity I know of” (St. Clair, 2004).

The freedom provided by street skating may be seen as profoundly contradicting efforts by cities such as Seattle to protect the urban core as a center for business through the maintenance of order in public space (MacLeod, 2002; Mitchell, 2003b; Peck & Tickell, 2002). “Seen in relation to a downtown comprised increasingly of tightly restricted quasi-public spaces, however, this persistent and highly visible play becomes a stark refusal to disappear beneath the imperatives of spatial regulation that favors select target markets” (Flusty, 2000). Thus, by conspicuously engaging in an activity – aggressive play – in an environment where it is profoundly out-of-place – the productive and consumptive spaces of the city, skateboarding transforms the urban into a place “where the previously unquestioned becomes questioned and powerful groups seek to defend the ‘order of things,’” and thus reveal the latent power behind the previously naturalized order (Cresswell, 1996, at p. 20).

While it is unclear whether the average new-school street skater is actually aware of engaging in the type of critique asserted by Borden and Flusty, the fact remains that the enduring popularity of skateboarding is attributable to the general sense of freedom and defiance of social norms that accompanies skating in spaces of the city that are were not intended for that activity. And because the threat of spatial transgression has become so intimately linked with popular understandings of skateboarding, an increasing number of actors in cities such as Seattle have come to view skateboarders as populations to be excluded and managed. As discussed in the following section, this popular sense of skateboarding as disorderly is not solely

attributable to the activities of its practitioners. Rather, skateboarders by their very demographic markers may be seen as embodying the very type of disorder that has long called for social and governmental regulation.

### C. Skateboarding 102; Skateboarders and Skateboarding Culture

While the development of skateboarding culture and practice are intimately interrelated with the demographics of skateboarders, the average skater bears substantial markers of disorderliness that are not solely attributable to the act of skateboarding. Due to a combination of factors that include the historic tradition of spatial transgression discussed above, skateboarding has developed a culture predicated on rebellious posturing and an almost exclusively masculinist ethos. In turn, this culture has proven to be especially appealing to a youthful segment of the population. When combined with the heightened mobility enabled by the skateboard itself, the figure of the skateboarder emerges as a particularly threatening figure to conventional urban order.

The roots of these tendencies may be seen in both the overwhelmingly patriarchal nature of the California surfing culture from which skateboarding originally sprang in the 1950's and again in the 1970's, as well as the "outlaw" mystique that has accreted to skating as it has become increasingly policed by the state. These tendencies have been exacerbated by media that have continually reinforced a construction of skateboarding as an exclusively masculine, "tough" and anti-social activity (Borden, 2001). This has led to an overwhelming gender-bias in skateboarding, with data from 2004 indicating that 81% of frequent skateboarding participants are male (SGMA International, 2005). Reflecting the skateboard's roots as

a children's toy and the appeal of such outlaw posturing to teens and pre-teens, these are also youthful populations. The average skateboarder is 14 years old and 83% of all skateboarding participants are under 18 years old (SGMA International, 2005). The average skateboarder is also of relatively modest socioeconomic background. The same data indicate that 63.7% of skateboarders have an eighth grade education or less, 74.2% come from annual household incomes of less than \$50,000 and 29.3% come from household incomes of under \$25,00 (SGMA International, 2005).

While skateboarding has a popular image as a predominantly "white" activity, this image is complicated by data that suggests that participation rates by minorities can approach, and may even surpass participation rates by whites in some places. For example, a 2005 study from South Carolina suggests that while 10.7% of whites over the age of 12 participate in skateboarding, as many as 8.2% of blacks do as well (Institute for Public Service and Policy Research, 2005). Likewise, figures from 1999 suggest that a greater percentage of young Hispanics watch skateboarding on TV (63%) than young whites (56%) (Statistical Research, 1999). At the same time, only 46% of Asian youth and 34% of African American youth reported watching the same type of sports programming. The sense that skateboarding's popularity among non-whites varies by region was reinforced by one interviewee, the manager of a Seattle based skateboarding team. He noted that the white complexion of skateboarding was largely a local matter, with higher rates of Black and Hispanic participation in places like Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Tampa Florida than in cities like Seattle. This sense is reinforced by comments during an interview with one of the organizers of a free public skatepark in Seattle's predominantly Hispanic South Park neighborhood:

You know, the funny thing is, we have huge support and the community loves the project and really wants it to happen, but there are some really funny comments we have heard “Latinos don’t skate.” It’s like, “What! Are you kidding me?” And well, the girls [the four middle-school aged girls who have spearheaded community outreach efforts for the skatepark], again, disprove that. You know, they are not white girls. They are not white boys. They are Latinas and Asian girls. So it is a whole other way of participating in sports on a different level. And as Warren Miller put it, “there are no losers.” And word that there is no loser travels fast.

That said, at least one commentator has argued that skateboarding serves as a way for young white men to escape “middle class whiteness” by appropriating white-constructed, urban, and criminal “black cultural signifiers” (Brayton, 2006). While this may be true for many white skateboarders, the fact remains that the skateboarding’s potentially problematic cultural codings also contribute to its ongoing allure.

In light of the youth, gender, and socio-economic markers of its typical practitioner, as well as the unconventional mobility within the city that it provides to its practitioners, new-school skating represents an especially potent challenge to the city as a safe and orderly landscape. For at least the past 150 years, young people – and especially male working class youth – have been associated with a lack of discipline, disorder, immorality, and crime, leading to a definition of “youth as trouble” (E. Brown, 2006a; Jackson, 1998; Lucas, 1998; Rosenzweig & Blackmar, 1992; Valentine *et al.*, 1998, at p. 4). Traditionally, concerns with the risks posed by youth have been heightened where young people congregate in the public spaces of the city (Baumgartner, 1988; Fyfe & Bannister, 1998; Irwin, 1985; Lucas, 1998). Groups of youth are faulted with displacing other potential users, while signaling a

general sense of lawlessness and disorder as they, “experiment[] with their freedoms, . . . assert[ing] themselves and let[ting] it be known that they’re young and free and they’re going to be wherever they want to be” (Mitchell & Staeheli, 2005, at p. 13). Often lacking spaces of their own, young people occupy and thus reinvent public spaces in ways that inherently transgress the hegemony of adult understandings of who and what is in-place in such places (Nolan, 2003). Because of such undisciplined use of space, un-chaperoned teens are typically considered a “polluting presence on the street” that demands adult regulation and control (Baumgartner, 1988; Lees, 1998; Lucas, 1998; Nolan, 2003; Valentine, 1996, at p. 214). Because of this, groups of kids who use urban space without engaging in conventional consumption and production have been lumped in with other “undesirables” as “[p]rostitutes, drug-dealers, the homeless” (Cresswell, 2004, at p. 94; Lees, 1998). Given the predominant youthfulness of most urban skateboarders, regulations aimed at prohibiting skateboarding in the city have been understood by both skateboarders and cities as representing a broader drive to remove all types of young people from the urban core (Valentine et al., 1998; J. Q. Wilson & Kelling, 1997). “[A]s one planner put it, ‘for all practical purposes we threw our teenagers off’ the Plaza” when Santa Fe prohibited skateboarding in the city’s traditional urban core (Mitchell & Staeheli, 2005, at p. 14).

Beyond the disorderly presence that inheres to the youthfulness of most urban skateboarders, the disorderly and unbounded mobility of their pursuits heightens their threat. Because new-school urban skating is, by its nature, not tied to a single “home” it represents an inherent challenge to order. Comparing the threat of mobility to the stability and order of the home, Cresswell has argued,

Place, home and roots are profoundly moral concepts in the humanist lexicon. By implication, mobility appears to involve a number of absences – the absence of commitment, attachment and involvement – a lack of significance. The more widespread associations of mobility with deviance, shiftlessness and disrepute come to mind (Cresswell, 2001, at pp. 15-16).

Much as the tramp before, the urban skateboarder inherently transgresses disciplinary senses of in-placeness due to their exercise of a mobility that is “totally unpredictable and thus threatening” (Cresswell, 2001, 2004). Or as Bauman has noted,

What made the vagabond so terrifying was his apparent freedom to move and so to escape the net of the previously locally based control. Worse than that, the movements of the vagabond were unpredictable; unlike the pilgrim or, for that matter, a nomad, the vagabond has no set destination (Bauman, 1995).

This sentiment was repeatedly applied by non-skaters to skateboarders they had encountered in the urban environment. Respondents, including administrators of a number of public spaces that are popular with Seattle skateboarders continually objected to the fact that one never knows what the skateboarder will do next, or where the skateboard (often inadvertently freed from the control of its rider) will go. As one letter to the editor of a Seattle weekly argued against the effort to keep skateparks out of Ballard:

Ballard skaters, and skaters everywhere, have an uphill battle ["Skate Park Slam," Amy Jenniges, March 25]. This is partially because, as was observed in Ballard's bowl, skaters always appear to be on the verge of colliding with their surroundings. This leaves most pedestrians feeling a bit uneasy, and convinced that sidewalks and malls are not the place for wheeled, flying risk-takers (R.C., 2004).

Likewise, one e-mailed public comment to a proposed skate-park site in Seattle's argued: “It is silly to pretend that such a plan isn't asking for litter, noise, and everyone else using the park being overwhelmed with the presence of kids doing what

kids do when they are in a group and unsupervised. Kids on wheels – for heaven’s sake – let’s be real.” Thus, the ordinary disorder of “what kids do in a group and unsupervised” is further exacerbated by “kids on wheels.”

It is no coincidence that urban skateboarders can share much the same status within the city as the homeless and transient. Both Borden and Flusty draw strong parallels between the policing of skaters and the policing of the homeless in the 21<sup>st</sup> century city (Borden, 2001; Flusty, 2000). The inherent disorderliness that youth share with the homeless and the mobility skaters share with the tramp mark skateboarding as one of the more threatening of all activities to the city as orderly landscape of capital accumulation. So when asking who public space belongs to, and who belongs to public space, the answer, “seems to be that vendors [and tourists] belong, but poor transients and skateboarders do not” (Mitchell & Staeheli, 2005, at p. 16).

The very characteristics that have led skateboarding to be associated with disorder and trouble have also, ironically, simultaneously given rise to a variety of positive social discourses. The American fetishization of outlaw culture has fueled the popularity of skateboarding, which in turn has created a vast entertainment and manufacturing industry on its own. In turn, new-school street skating, with its emphasis on illicit appropriation of the cityscape, plays an essential catalytic role in maintaining the economic viability of that industry. Reflecting the capacity of transgressively mobilized capitalist logics to frustrate efforts to maintain public order (Herbert, 1996), an enormous legitimate market has developed by exploiting and commodifying the often illegal performances of skateboarding. For example, in 2004

revenues from the skateboarding industry were estimated at approximately 5.7 billion dollars, with shoe sales accounting for approximately 1.5 billion of that income (McMahon, 2005; Washburn, 2004). Skateboarding has become a staple of the videogame industry, and major studios have begun releasing feature films such as “Legends of Dogtown,” “Wassup Rockers,” and the forthcoming “Paranoid Park” that focus on urban skateboarders as dramatic characters, and skateboard culture as a distinct milieu. On television, skateboarding is now a staple not just of ESPN’s extreme games, but such active sports channels as the FUEL network. Skateboarding even boasts its own cross-country arena tours, such as Tony Hawk’s “Boom, Boom Huck Jam.”

Because of its transgressive roots, skateboarding has become a semiotic indicator of freedom and urban cool. Recognizing the power of the skateboarder as symbol, the advertising industry has seized upon skateboarding as a tool for marketing a host of other commodities. As a local promoter of skateboarding events observed during an interview,

every major corporation wants their target market. And when skateboarding is hot, everybody is going to jump on it [including] Motorola, Mountain Dew, Ford and Jeep, Right Guard . . . When it is hip-hop you got MacDonald’s hip-hop commercials. When it is Skateboarding you got Tony Hawk commercials. So they are just taking a little piece of it.

In turn, this commodification has bestowed a degree of unexpected legitimacy upon the sport. As one of Seattle’s early skate advocates (a man in his mid 30’s) noted during our interview,

All the emphasis on bowls is really a blessing and a curse. On one hand, you have everybody whoring themselves out to make a buck.

Like Tony Hawk doing ads to sell you big gulps, and a bunch of other shit that skaters wouldn't even buy because they can't carry it on their boards. . . . On the other hand, we are creating all these awesome parks to skate.

Likewise, the popularity of skateboarding with teens and tweens both fuels and complicates the common association skateboarders and urban disorder and crime.

While groups of youth in public space have long served as symbols of disorder, they also represent the public that is to be protected from the myriad threats of the street.

Representing a “major point of symbolic investment for society as a whole,” children represent not only the future of society, but inherently serve as the focus for society's aspirations (Valentine et al., 1998, at p. 9). Thus protecting children from the danger of the street becomes a “moral imperative” (Cresswell, 1998). And because so many people skateboard, an increasing number of people know somebody who fails to fit the stereotype of skater as urban thug.

#### D. Seattle's Skatepark Advocacy movement and Public Skateparks as a Response to State Enforced Regimes of Private Property

Broadly speaking, skatepark advocacy in Seattle has been from its inception an effort to reconcile the transgressive tendencies of skateboarding and skateboarders with the powerful impetus to maintain order in the city. At every turn, skateboarders find themselves in conflict with the primary ordering logic at work in the city, that of property. Much like other types of urban “undesirables” who either cannot or will not engage in traditional property relations, skateboarders have continually adapted their activities to respond to and subvert those logics. Thus, Seattle's skatepark advocacy movement must be seen as the latest in a long series of efforts to “work around” the limits imposed by property in the city.

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PROPERTY AND REGULATION OF SPACE.

The most important logic of urban order that Seattle skatepark advocates have had to negotiate is that of private property, which serves as an omnipresent yet mostly invisible guiding and limiting force for all forms of human activity in modern western societies. As Nick Blomley has noted, “[e]mbedded within law are a rich and complex set of ‘maps’ of social life. Legal categories are used to construct and differentiate material spaces which, in turn, acquire a legal potency that has a direct bearing on those using and traversing such spaces”(Blomley, 1994, p. 54). Primary among the cartographic elements of these legal “maps” is the defining frame of private property ownership (Blomley, 2004c). Although entire multi-volume treatises are devoted to sketching the workings and details of property law, legal theories of private property tend to cluster around a limited but diverse set of concepts, practices, and power relationships most of which are encapsulated by the following entry in Black’s

Law Dictionary:

**Property.** That which is peculiar or proper to any person; that which belongs exclusively to one. In the strict legal sense, an aggregate of rights which are guaranteed and protected by the government. . . . The term is said to extend to every species of valuable right and interest. More specifically, ownership; the unrestricted and exclusive right to a thing; the right to dispose of a thing in every legal way, to possess it, to use it, and to exclude every one else from interfering with it. . . . The highest right a man can have to anything; being used to refer to that right which one has to lands or tenements, goods or chattels, which no way depends on another man’s courtesy (Black, 1990, p. 1216).

While this is a small extract of the entire Black’s entry on property, it is both representative of the broader legal literature and sufficient to illustrate how a disparate number of powerful ideologies and practices congregate within this single legal

concept. Property equates to a radical and absolute possessiveness. The defining <sup>50</sup> character of that possessiveness, however, is one of exclusion enforced by organized violence, including violence by the state (Blomley, 2003, 2004c). And because all human activity must take place somewhere, the power to exclude also implies the power to regulate those to whom a license of access is granted.

In practice, the concept of property and the resulting power to use and exclude are typically categorized by two broad forms of ownership – namely public and private – with private property ownership serving as the de-facto norm (Blomley, 2004c). Where there is collective ownership, it is presumed to be within “organized governments” that act much as a private owner (Blomley, 2004c, at p. 3). As property owners, governments set their own rules for use and exclusion in the form of laws regulating access to and behavior within those spaces deemed “public” property. Thus, the power of the government to regulate public space must be considered to be an extension of the very powers of exclusion inherent to “private” property ownership.

### **THE INVISIBLE ROLE OF PROPERTY IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SKATEBOARDING.**

Understanding the types of claims to public property asserted by Seattle’s skatepark advocacy movement requires an understanding of the ways that material realities have engaged with, developed in reaction to, and complicated regimes of property (Blomley, 2007, at p. 16). And while law has a profound ability to make the world we live in, “helping to constitute the understandings and beliefs that make the world unfold this way, rather than that way” (Blomley, 2005b, at p. 282), the relationship between law and lived experience does not just flow in one direction.

Rather, law and the lives of those subject to legal regulation are engaged in a constant process of mutual construction. “Put another way, we need to think not only about the effects of law upon space but also about the ways social spaces affect law” (Blomley, 2004a, at p. 98).

The mutually constitutive dynamic between property law and the material realities of skateboarders’ use of terrain explains not only how geographies of skateboarding have developed, but also the legal and material realities that Seattle’s public skatepark advocacy movement sought to address. As discussed above, the “second wave” resurgence of skating in the late 1970’s was due to advances in both terrain and technology. With the simultaneous advent of the urethane wheel and the Southern Californian drought of 1976-77, skaters were suddenly presented with a new technology and a new type of built environment – the empty swimming pool – that provided radical openings for the further development of their activity (Borden, 2001; Peralta & Stecyk, 2001). Because most property owners, however, were not willing to give permission for youth to skate their pools, the development of this activity depended either on the illegal transgression of others’ property rights through trespass, or the development of private, for-profit skate parks designed to emulate these often illicit environments (Peralta & Stecyk, 2001; Thatcher, 2001). The rapid spread of media images of pool skating created a demand for transition terrain in areas where skaters either could not or did not want to trespass on private pools, leading to a boom in commercial skatepark building throughout the country during the late 70’s and early 80’s (Brooke, 1999).

The status of such terrain as private property, however, ultimately led to the general demise of transition skating and the rise of new-school street skating. The immense jump in skateboarding's popularity in the late 1970's and 80's was followed by a precipitous dip in the mid 1980's. The resulting decline in commercial skatepark revenues, combined with an escalating number of personal injury suits against skatepark operators led to the closure and destruction of almost all of the facilities from this period (Brooke, 1999). The few remaining skatable, non-policed private swimming pools were insufficient to sustain transition skating through the end of the 1980's. Contingent upon the permission of private property owners who were more often than not dependent upon market forces, transition skating had all but disappeared as an activity by the 1990's.

Forced out of privately owned property, skaters made the only logical move – into publicly owned property. As described above, the no-hands jump called the “ollie” had originally been developed as a transition trick, to be performed at the top (or above the top) of a vertical surface. With the disappearance of commercial transition terrain, the ollie was repositioned as a flat land move, turning every public street, sidewalk, plaza, and other form of publicly owned or publicly accessible property into a potential impromptu skatepark. By shifting the terrain of skating from privately owned transition property to publicly owned property (or private property that is “open to the public”), however, the performance of skating became inherently opposed to dominant philosophies of public space and resulting legal regimes of regulation. As one interviewee, a professional planner familiar with skatepark issues observed:

Skateboarding is still about [breaking the law] to a certain extent. And it is only about that anymore because we don't give them anywhere to skate. And even if we did give them somewhere to skate, they have been skating illegally for so long that they are going to continue to do it. Even if we build skateparks, street is where it is at. So we created the enemy! We created the users of our public space. It's embarrassing. Now bowls aren't even interesting...

Legal responses to skateboarding's move to the streets have typically been aggressive, reflecting new-school skating's challenge to urban order and the logics of property. While a substantial literature has outlined the emergent ideologies and practice of urban "order," these measures have come down particularly hard on those, such as skaters, who make a claim to the city without engaging in the city as a place of exchange value. See, e.g. (Davis, 1990; Mitchell, 2003b). Following former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's "zero tolerance" policies, increasing numbers of both U.S. and international cities are taking aggressive steps to remove "unsightlies," including skaters, through legal regulation. See, e.g., (Bailey, 2004; Flusty, 2000; Nemeth, 2004; Nolan, 2003). Whether articulated in terms of the need to protect the city as a productive space for capital accumulation or the need to protect skaters and onlookers from injury, anti-skating initiatives have the same cumulative effect of rendering skaters out-of-place while cementing skateboarding's reputation as illegal, "wild", disorderly, and edgy. Writing in 2001, Borden likewise recognized that, "the intensification of skateboarding in public streets has led to a more pervasive form of repression," including surveillance, curfews, public skating bans, skate-proofed architecture and anti-skate legislation (Borden, 2001) at 250. Thus, skateboarders may be seen as part of those populations subject to "intensified surveillance and

policing as the streets and parks of the city have become occupied by those evicted or squeezed from urban private space”(Blomley, 2004c, at p. 31).

In Seattle, the primary logics and mechanisms by which skaters are excluded from public space are those of private property. Seattle has empowered its police force to prosecute skaters for violating the municipal ordinances prohibiting “playing in the street”<sup>12</sup> and has vested the police with a broad discretion in citing skaters for the “use of skateboards or roller-skates on sidewalks or public paths.”<sup>13</sup> Even so, numerous respondents indicated that the mobilization of formal state sanctions against skateboarding is almost always driven by property owners’ efforts to exclude such disorderly populations. As one interviewee, a long time Seattle skater, skateboard team manager<sup>14</sup>, and videographer explained:

John: How has it been in Seattle in terms of law enforcement of street skating? Has it been better? Has it gotten worse over time?

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<sup>12</sup> SMC 11.40.250 Playing in streets.

No person upon roller skates, or riding in or by means of any coaster, skateboard, toy vehicle or similar device, shall go upon the roadway of any arterial street or transit coach route, except while crossing such street at a crosswalk; or engage in any sport, amusement or exercise or play in the roadway of any street.

<sup>13</sup> SMC 11.40.255 Use of skateboards or roller-skates on sidewalk or public path.

Every person using a skateboard or roller-skates upon any sidewalk or public path shall use the same in a careful and prudent manner and at a rate of speed no greater than is reasonable and proper under the conditions existing at the point of operation, taking into account the amount and character of pedestrian traffic, grade and width of sidewalk or public path, and condition of surface, and shall obey all traffic-control devices. Every person using a skateboard or rollerskates upon a sidewalk or public path shall yield the right-of-way to any pedestrian thereon.

<sup>14</sup> While the idea of a “skateboard team” may seem counter-intuitive, most all skateboard companies sponsor a team. Unlike other sports, the primary activity of such teams is not formal competition. Instead, the team is expected to travel to well-known and challenging skateboarding “spots” in order to be videotaped. The company then periodically releases compilation videos, typically with professional editing and soundtrack music, as a way of promoting the brand and its team. One side effect of this promotional economy is that team skaters and managers often develop an encyclopedic knowledge of skateboarding around a region, and sometimes around the country.

Sean: Here is the deal. Seattle cops are cool, unless somebody... Ok, so if you're sitting over there skateboarding and somebody comes out and says no skateboarding, or somebody tells you to leave and you don't leave and then they call the cops. .. Um... Basically in Seattle, honestly, give or take a few dickheads, the cops are on our side. They are not trying to waste their time... And then, you know, because this happens to me a lot, it's not the cops. Like I say, I'm the only person who can pretty much say that most of them are pretty cool, but I get the biggest kooks acting like I'm assaulting them...

John: So it sounds like usually it isn't the police, then it sounds like, but it is property owners...

Sean: Yeah

John: So have you seen a real change with them over time, or have people always been upset about this sort of stuff?

Sean: You know, we would all be bummed out if somebody came up and scratched up the front of our porch, whether it is Columbia Tower or this house right over here (pointing). . . I watch how they treat the young kids and it is crazy.

John: Like what?

Sean: The security guards. The plastic badge security guards. They think they... I watch how they act to the little guys as opposed how they act towards me. I will tell those kids what to do, you know. Like down here at Westlake [plaza]<sup>15</sup>, the guy will come running out and, well, the fact of the matter is you can't skate at Westlake, so don't even try.

John: Right.

Sean. Yeah, they will pull their mace. There are a couple of big kooks down at Seattle center, and they just really pride themselves on harassing skateboarders and they talk shit and they say all kinds of stuff and I get them on video and we do things back to them.

For Sean, state efforts to exclude young people from public space are the exception rather than the rule, occurring only where private property owners (and their private security forces) are unsuccessful in informally enforcing the exclusionary logics of private property. This sense was reinforced by an interview with a city official who handles public space issues on behalf of City Council:

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<sup>15</sup> Westlake Plaza is a mixed public/private space in the center of Seattle's down town. In addition to being a storied spot for street skating, it is also the focus for much of the City's "civility laws" (Mitchell, 2003b) and the most visible example of mixed private and municipal policing.

It [skateboarding in public] is so low on the [police] enforcement scale. You know, even downtown it is not the cops that are shooing them away. It is going to be building managers or [private downtown patrols]... They are just not going to bother with it... It is all about priorities. And I guarantee you that skateboarding on somebody's front pavement is not going to be a priority.

These exclusionary logics of private property see their most concrete manifestations in the form of passive measures to “skate-proof” public and private urban furniture – for example by welding blocks on hand rails or benches – so as to preclude skating (Nolan, 2003). As one skate park designer noted during our interview,

there just aren't any more benches you can skate like mine [a guerilla ledge installed in public space without state permission]. There is nothing like that any more, where you have a ledge with a good clear runway. Almost all street spots have disappeared. By the end of the 1990's street was pretty much bust and skate-proofed. In fact, most big cities are almost unskatable now.

In Seattle, these tendencies have only intensified. As another skater I interviewed noted, “there is a huge difference between 2001 and 2004. In 2001, you could still find a marble ledge to go skate. In 2004, there is nothing.”

#### **DEVELOPMENT OF SEATTLE'S PUBLIC SKATEPARK MOVEMENT AS A RESPONSE TO EXCLUSIONARY REGIMES OF PROPERTY.**

As in many cities, the push for public skateparks in Seattle is a product of and response to regimes of property that have successively restricted both transition and street skating terrain. Forced off of private property through active and passive measures, and increasingly surveilled, regulated, and prosecuted in publicly owned property, skaters have turned to alternative means of creating terrain. The history of Seattle's skateparks may be seen as a struggle to find spaces beyond the market driven logics of most private property, and the traditionally order driven regulatory logics of the urban streetscape. Seattle's skaters have sought to resolve this struggle by

claiming their own discrete space in the city for non-commercial, publicly accessible skate terrain rather than simply skating the preexisting built environments of publicly and privately owned property.

In Seattle, these claims have emerged from two apparently unrelated developments; the first being a regional, underground movement to assert supra-legal claims for skatepark terrain, and the second being a fundamental shift in the legal landscape of property in Washington. The Puget Sound region is the birthplace of a growing movement towards user motivated, do-it-yourself reclamation of space for public skateparks. The Burnside skatepark in Portland, Oregon created a model for “rehabilitating” otherwise unused governmental property for user designed and built guerrilla skateparks that has since been transplanted to Seattle. Starting in approximately 1990 a number of Portland area skaters began to build a series of skatepark features in an abandoned parking lot underneath the Burnside Bridge. Constructed without governmental permission, approval, or input, the Burnside park represented the first of a series of skateparks across the U.S. that have been consciously created as public spaces outside the logics of private property ownership or government regulation of public property. “Burnside is the skateboard equivalent of a community squat, a collective-labour developing facility without private ownership – effectively creating a skatepark as a continual appropriation of urban space with the semi-condonement of official institutions” (Borden, 2001, at 76-77).

Since the mid 1990’s both the spirit of Burnside and some of its founders and builders have migrated to Seattle. While a number of Burnside inspired projects have been initiated in Seattle, the first major success for the guerilla reclamation of space

was the original Ballard skatepark. The original impetus for what ultimately became the Ballard Skate Park came from a small group of approximately half a dozen young Seattle skaters who began efforts to have a wooden-ramp based park built in Northern Seattle. Ultimately a number of older skaters, including a project manager volunteered to help, a ten thousand dollar development grant was obtained, and the city of Seattle made an initial commitment to allow the facility to be constructed at Golden Gardens Park. After rejecting the Golden Gardens site out of concerns about the proximity of train tracks, the city proposed an alternate site in Ballard in the parking lot of an abandoned Safeway grocery store that was slated to become the Ballard Civic Center Park (Bush, 2003). The Ballard organizers accepted the new site, on the condition that the facility could include a concrete bowl, rather than the temporary wooden ramps originally planned. As one of the volunteers recalled during an interview, “the city told me this was going to be temporary. . . . But my only plan was, let’s get this thing built and see where the cards fall.” As another early Ballard Bowl activist I interviewed recalled, “It is really unbelievable that the Ballard Bowl now exists in Seattle. We just ramrodded this thing into existence. We got the volunteers. We got the donations. We just ignored all of the ‘no’s.”

The first Ballard Skate Park was completed in 2002, utilizing only volunteer labor and a budget composed of private contributions and city matching funds. As built, the park included both a street section with wooden ramps on asphalt, a masonite “half pipe,” and what soon became its signature feature, the “Ballard Bowl” an approximately 1800 square foot pool-like structure including authentic swimming pool coping (the concrete block edging between the deck and vertical pool surfaces), and a

“shallow” and “deep” end. Rising to the challenges of forming concrete into smooth surfaces curving to vertical, and showing an unparalleled attention to detail in ensuring that all surfaces and transitions were optimized for skating, the original Ballard construction crew created a facility that quickly developed a national reputation for excellence.

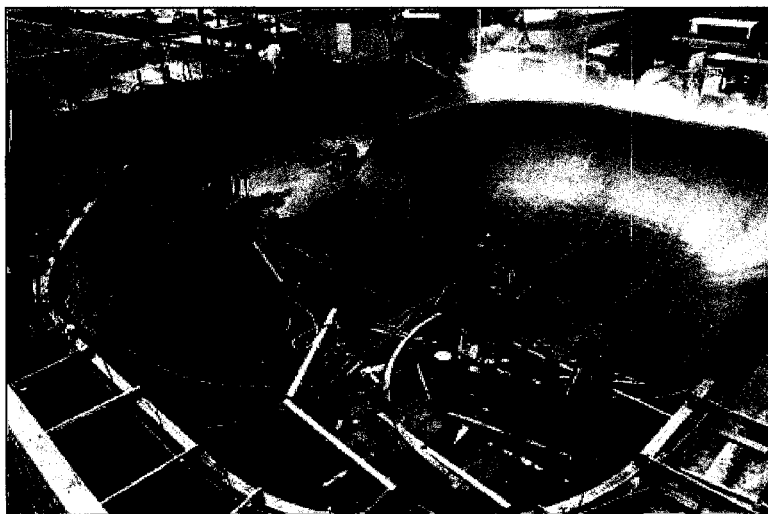


Figure 3: Ballard Bowl during construction. Digitally enhanced photo courtesy Grindline.

The creation of Ballard, however, was the product of more than the intensive efforts of a handful of skatepark advocates and builders. It was also the product of a fundamental but largely unheralded shift in the legal landscape of Washington’s public spaces. Following the lead of several other states, in 2003 Washington passed RCW 4.24.210, entitled “Liability of owners or others in possession of land and water areas for injuries to recreation users — Limitation.” Largely eliminating personal injury liability for “any public or private landowners or others in lawful possession and control of any lands ... who allow members of the public to use them for the purposes of outdoor recreation,” RCW 4.24.210 opened the door to public, non-commercial facilities such as skateparks. Because of this shift in liability law – and the resulting

alteration of the nature of property ownership throughout the state – Seattle was able to approve of the temporary construction of the Ballard Skatepark free from the legal liability concerns that had closed down a prior generation of private skateparks.

Notwithstanding the City's approval of the Ballard Skatepark as a temporary facility, skaters mobilized around the concrete skate bowl to claim a permanent space in Ballard. By the end of 2003 the city of Seattle had announced its intention to destroy the facility along with the original Safeway structure to clear way for the construction of Ballard Civic Center Park. Organizing primarily (but not entirely) around the threat to Ballard Bowl itself, the Puget Sound Skate Park Association ("PSSA") organized its first meeting on January 18, 2004. Parents for Skate Parks ("PSP") formed shortly thereafter. The PSSA organized a skate jam/fund raiser on March 6, aggressively sought media coverage of the city's demolition plans, and was planning a protest for May 15, 2004 when good news finally arrived. On May 10, Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels publicly announced his support for the Ballard Bowl, with the Parks Department Board of Commissioners endorsing a skate feature in the Ballard Park three days later on May 13 (Jenniges, 2004a). The skaters' victory, however, was far from unconditional. On May 21, the city Parks Department announced its plan to demolish the existing Ballard Bowl, and replace it with a new skate facility in a different part of the park site (Bush, 2004). Because of the Parks Departments' failure to guarantee the size, budget, designer or builder of the replacement facility (all factors directly impacting whether skaters will enjoy a park), as well as a sense that city dollars should be spent building an additional skate park on another site, instead of demolishing and rebuilding an existing facility, the PSSA and

PSP continued their organizing and activist efforts throughout the summer of 2004. Finally, the city broke ground for a permanent replacement for the original Ballard Bowl in August 2005, although not after the overall facility was carved down to approximately 1/4 of its original size, leaving only a replacement of the “bowl” feature.<sup>16</sup>

Ultimately, the impacts of Ballard Bowl activism extended far beyond that skatepark. By serving as a flash point and rallying call for a fairly disparate group of individuals loosely joined by their interests in skateboarding, youth, public space, and/or neighborhood activism, the Ballard controversy served as a catalyst for a host of differing efforts to claim a space in the city for skateboarders. At a political level, the threat to the Bowl placed skateboarding and skateparks on the agenda of City government. Activists working with both the Puget Sound Skate Park Association and Parents for Skate Parks parlayed the P.R. successes of the “Save Ballard Bowl” movement into political leverage with Seattle Parks and Recreation and the City Council. Concerned with criticisms of indifference to Seattle’s children and skaters, the Seattle Parks Department created a standing “Skatepark Advisory Committee” (“SPAC”) to form skatepark use, siting, and design policies, and to provide the Department with a resource for skateboard related issues. While the membership on the SPAC has varied over time, there has been significant cross-over between its membership and the early Ballard Bowl activists. In response to the heightened public profile of skateboarding and the Ballard Bowl controversy, Seattle Parks and

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<sup>16</sup> The reasons for this drastic reduction in size are discussed in more depth in Chapter 5.

Recreation began planning for its first internally promoted skatepark in Lower Woodland Park, near the Woodland Zoo.

Nothing better symbolized the changing political tides of skatepark advocacy by 2006, however, than the City Council's decision to undertake a master-planning exercise to locate a city wide system of skateparks in response to the political difficulties encountered with siting Ballard, Lower Woodland, and the Seattle Center Skatepark replacement. Acting on suggestions by skatepark advocates, the Council passed and funded an ordinance empowering Parks and Recreation to hire a planning firm consultant to conduct master-planning process, with the supervision of a Task Force comprised of non-voting city officials and citizen volunteers. Again, the crossover between skatepark activism and this State effort to respond to activists' claims has been high, with three of seven citizen members of the Task Force – including myself – coming from the Ballard Bowl movement. Taken together, these efforts represent an attempt to recreate the types of skate-specific terrains once provided by the private market in the 1970's outside the vicissitudes of private property ownership. By seeking to have the state formally recognize, sanction, and fund such places, however, such skateparks also represent an effort to use city government's power as property owner to protect skaters from the very forms of state control, surveillance, and prosecution that skaters normally encounter within urban "public" spaces.

Beyond such formal, state sponsored endeavors to claim a space for skaters in Seattle, the Ballard Bowl has also spawned a number of efforts to create alternate skateboarding spaces completely liberated from the logics of either private property,

or the regulatory influence of City government.

Frustrated by the slow pace of government based activism and the compromises involved in “saving” the Ballard Bowl, a number of skaters involved in the early Ballard effort organized the Marginal Way skatepark project. Working without government permission, and heavily influenced by the Burnside model of claiming a largely abandoned space under a raised roadbed, the Marginal Way organizers simply began constructing a skatepark of their own design at their own expense under a raised portion of State Route 99 in the summer of 2005.



Figure 4: View from Marginal Way Skatepark towards adjacent railroad tracks and Port of Seattle. Photo courtesy Dan Hughes.

Over time the Marginal Way activists expanded their project while successfully seeking informal *post facto* City approval of the project with the assistance of skatepark activists still engaged with city government. In so doing, Marginal Way’s organizers have enjoyed the benefits of state sanction while avoiding much of the regulation inherent to dealing with conventional governmental planning and construction processes. The trade-off for Marginal Way has been a site that was

available in large part because of its overall undesirability – set near railroad tracks, under an arterial, out of sight, in the center of a sprawling industrial district, far from neighborhoods and amenities. As one organizer noted, "We figured that the area was already so bad that it would just be an improvement [to build a skatepark there.] There were trailers parked down there, nasty cars, and people changing oil" (Hansen, 2006).

Similarly unwilling to wait for the City to provide skateparks for their community, another group of activists have organized a public skatepark on land donated by a community health provider in the South Park neighborhood of Seattle, with labor to be donated by a local skatepark construction company. This project – named the River City Skatepark – is explicitly intended to provide a public space in an underserved neighborhood without implicating either the city Parks Department, or other conventional commercial funding processes. While the location for River City Skatepark is on private property, the organizers have chosen to obtain a long-term lease agreement from the non-profit property owner as a way of circumventing the types of market driven logics that have so often foiled private skateparks. And by funding the project entirely with private donations the park's organizers hope to circumvent both the bureaucracy and regulation that comes from working with a City agency such as Parks and Recreation. Again, however, this decision has come at a cost. By opting out of the constraints that come from City oversight, River City initially missed out on large sources of City funding, and even some large corporate donations that are intended for state initiated public space projects. Even so, on June 1, 2007 River City was awarded a \$90,000 grant from the Seattle Department of

Neighborhoods completing their fund-raising efforts and allowing construction to begin on the skatepark.

E. Conclusion: Tensions between order and disorder, between public and private property as the setting for political struggles over Seattle's skateparks

Given the incompatibility between the types of exclusionary and regulatory logics enabled by property regimes on one hand, and skateboarding culture and performance on the other, it is unsurprising that skateboarders in Seattle would eventually begin to assert claims to alternate spaces in the city. Even with such alternative and "D.I.Y." projects as the original Ballard Bowl, Marginal Way, and River City, however, the logics of property are inescapable, with private institutional donors for land, labor, and materials "filling the gap" normally provided by either the state or the marketplace. Even so, all of Seattle's public skatepark projects have required at least the consent, if not the full support of City government. And because of the existing socio-economic tensions playing out throughout the city's various neighborhoods, the political processes required for obtaining governmental approval have been far from straightforward. In the next chapter I lay out the first step in understanding how it is that a city as heavily invested in the maintenance of order in its public and private spaces, and administered by a governmental system as cumbersome as Seattle could come to, at least partially, embrace the cause of allocating public space to such ostensibly transgressive populations as skateboarders.

### Chapter 3: The Discursive Negotiation of Public Space through Identity.

A group that was born out of individualism is now trying to be put in an organized community setting. Skate punk culture from the 80s to the 90s was all about not conforming and not being associated with anyone else. And so now there are these growing pains. It is not a teenager any more. It is at college for the first time. And, where it wants to grow but doesn't want to go with these other things, other people are refusing to see it as an adult because they have this history of all its teenage years of its being into graffiti and drugs, and all that stuff. You know. All the stereotypes.

- Interview with respondent Donna, a Seattle professional planner

One of the most striking aspects of Seattle City government's efforts to address skateboarder's claims to a place in the city is how little the resulting political processes focused on place, and how much debate was dedicated to skateboarders themselves. The creation and regulation of public space is accomplished through laws, regulations, the actions of state empowered agents, and the form of the built environment. The political decisions animating these policies and actions, however, are largely the product of discursive struggles over ideas and meanings. In the case of Seattle's skateparks, struggles over the meaning of skaters' identities have served as the primary lens through which questions of place have been resolved. Based on advocates' initial framing of skateparks as primarily serving young people and the demographic make-up of the majority of skateboarders, much of the battle in Seattle over these facilities has been framed in terms of who young skateboarders are.

The ability of advocates and other political actors to use the figure of the young skater to transform "where" questions into "who" questions is due to several core factors. First, the political evocation of young skaters' identities works to instantly signify a host of cultural values and related arguments. Secondly, the actual

individuals to whom that group identity refers are excluded from the very political<sup>67</sup> processes in which they might contest others' uses of their identities. Because of these factors, more empowered actors are enabled to claim to represent young skaters' interests "by proxy" and debates over their identities serve as a "proxy" by which other potentially more problematic decision may be resolved. Thus, I argue that in Seattle young skateboarders served in the political process as what I define more fully below as "discursive proxies."

The political use of the skateboarder as discursive proxy has had several profound political consequences in Seattle. Not only have they enabled the transformation of "where" questions into "who and what" questions, but the political articulation of public space decisions in terms of identity discourse has a major impact on the kinds of spaces that result from those politics. The choice to frame skateparks as a youth issue predetermined not only the discursive terms by which battles over skateparks were fought, but even the goals pursued – that is, the types of spaces sought – by those engaged in the struggle. The concept of "framing" refers to the,

process through which interest groups involved in urban politics seek to convince others of the merits of their particular understanding of how the world is, how it should be, and the policies that will make it better in the future. Social movement theorists argue that this political persuasion works through frames— simplifications of the world that selectively identify and attach meaning to certain actions, experiences, and events—for the purpose of influencing politics and policy (McCann, 2003, at p. 160).

Framing skateparks as a youth issue not only served as a technique for politically advancing that cause through persuasion, but it also served to define the meaning of that movement, its participants, and even the nature of the resistance to the movement.

As Sidney has recognized, “Problem definitions imply solutions and create interests – that is, by identifying which aspects of a problem are pertinent, they shape the coalitional activity that will emerge, restricting or expanding participation” (2002, at p. 258). In Seattle the framing of skateparks around the discursive proxy of the young skater helped determine the nature of the coalitions that formed around and against that movement, and the tactics advanced by those coalitions. In turn, these coalitions brought their own visions of what kinds of places young skaters should be in and these visions profoundly impacted the spaces that were and were not created for skaters, transforming what had been a movement to create grungy, adult-oriented facilities into one that actively and successfully pressed to create green, family-friendly, playground-like skateparks.

Because the core of my argument is that advocates’ initial decision to frame their efforts around the discursive proxy of the young skateboarder largely predetermined the participants, tactics, goals, opponents, and spaces resulting from that effort, I begin this chapter with an overview of the role that discourse plays in American politics generally and an introduction to the idea of the “discursive proxy” more specifically. I then argue that what I define as “domestication” serves as an organizing concept around which most all discursive debates around youthful skaters’ identities were framed. Finally, I offer a series of sections in which the various political constructions of the discursive proxy of the young skater are outlined in rough chronological order. I trace advocates presentation of skaters as a young, gender neutral and either domesticated or domesticable population, and City government’s adoption of that discursive framing. This domesticated vision is then

contested by a host of opponents to specific potential locations for skateparks through a counter-discourse of the youthful skater as undomesticable, gendered, trouble. This negative framing is then countered with a third discursive framing by advocates, in which they largely concede the discourse of “skater as danger”, but then proffer the domesticating spaces of skateparks as a curative to that danger. Rather than simply playing out in a political void, however, these discursive moves and countermoves have profound impacts on the types of spaces that are at issue and the resulting political pressures on the skatepark advocacy movement.

#### A. Discourse and City Politics.

Understanding the processes by which power is mobilized and distributed through urban politics requires understanding the role that discourse plays as the medium through which the public may interface with the daily policy choices of government. As Cameron has noted, discursive, “[m]eaning is not fixed or handed down by fiat. Rather, it is socially constructed, which means it is continually negotiated and modified in everyday interaction” (Cameron, 1998). While elected officials and government bureaucrats face little direct oversight from the public at large beyond periodic elections, what their decisions mean and how they are interpreted, discussed, and represented by others is wide open for contestation. And because the discourses arising from such public contestations do have the potential to impact periodic elections, public involvement in and comment upon the functioning of government works to ensure that that the activities of government are never entirely a matter of executive fiat. And because “ordinary” citizens have enjoyed a greater ability to discursively intervene in municipal decision-making since the 1980’s, with

an increasing emphasis on public participation in planning and a variety of governmental gestures towards “openness and inclusion” (McCann, 2003; McInroy, 2000) city politics has become a particularly fertile field for investigating the interplay between hierarchically organized governmental actors and the inescapably de-centered and capillary power flows of discourse among “the public.” A Seattle City Council staff member confirmed the power of public opinion to act as a counterbalance to governmental discretion in Seattle during our interview:

James: [T]he city council is very responsive to community groups... You do get some council members who are representing the populace in certain ways. Richard Conlin is the neighborhoods guy. But at the end of the day they all have to get elected city wide. By the same voters, by the same people. And for city government elections our voter turnout is pretty poor. So we...

John: Really?

James: It's not that high. So when you see the same people, it quite literally is, the same people voting. It's not like some people come in and vote for, like “I'm voting for this guy and I don't know why I am voting for him”... It's the same people voting for a slate of four people or five, and it is a small group. And so, there is a lot of competition for money and the votes that go with those.

Given the importance of maintaining the favor of these core groups of active and informed voters, Martin *et al.* have recognized that “[r]epresentation and discourse are increasingly important analytical lenses for urban politics, as these concepts provide a framework for examining the role of values, stories, and ideals in shaping the social world, and reflecting change and conflict” (Martin *et al.*, 2003, at p. 117).

#### B. The Role of Discursive Proxies in Liberal Politics

One of the most powerful discursive tools that I encountered during my research into Seattle municipal politics was that of identity. In particular, the identity of what I call the “discursive proxy” served as a potent shorthand for those “values,

stories, and ideals” that Martin *et al.* identify as underlying the resolution of political questions. Identity has long served as a powerful discursive tool in the formation and enforcement of spatial order and policy. As Moon and Brown have noted, at a discursive level, “geography is [often] used conceptually and subtly in the framing and marketing of policy” (2000, at pp. 68-69). That is, the ability to discursively frame the meaning of place will predetermine how that place will be treated as a matter of policy.

To this end, spatialized language can be used to signify belonging and identity. It provides individuals and groups with frames of reference to which they can relate – and which they can use in collaboration or conflict with others. The manipulation of such conceptions as place, space, proximity, access and community thus also entails competing official and unofficial discourses, the exercise of differentially distributed power, and rhetorical and symbolic use of language. In short, spatializing language provides insight into cultures of power and into the ways in which policy is ‘sold’ and ‘bought’ (Moon & Brown, 2000, at p. 69).

In turn, representation of identity forms an equally powerful discursive tool for the negotiation and implementation of policy through the meaning of place (Flint, 2003). Discursively defining the identity of a group predetermines the range of rights, remedies, and practices of governance that will apply to that group, “generating an imaginary of the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion” (Dobrowolsky & Jenson, 2004).

Foucault’s work painstakingly outlines the processes by which discourse constructs identities and social relationships (1982) and the extent to which the construction of such identities is shaped by a variety of broader social and political products through discipline (Foucault, 1975). I argue, however, that the formation of

identity serves a fundamental political function that goes beyond the already profound process of “constituting individual as correlative elements of power and knowledge” (Foucault, 1975, at p. 194). While much of Foucault’s work focuses on the role of the individual as an object of power in the formation of her own individuality, I would suggest that the discursive formation of identity also serves an important role in the individual’s absence.

Beyond framing individual identities, discourse may be used to posit excluded and absent identities as the abstract object upon which a range of political projects will be defined. I refer to such identities as “discursive proxies.” The figure of the discursive proxy is based on the identity of real individuals, who are simultaneously excluded from the processes by which their identities are constructed by more powerful actors, and from the broader political struggles for which those constructed identities serve as the battleground. Because her and/or his identity is already loaded with a variety of potent social meanings and signals, the rhetorical introduction of the discursive proxy serves as shorthand for a host of social values, arguments, and previously resolved political questions – thus serving as a “proxy” for actual debate over the merits of a given question. As McCann has argued, “politics frequently plays out most explicitly around rhetorical attempts to naturalize certain sets of social values and to define the social processes that produce place as good or bad, moral or immoral, appropriate or inappropriate, worthy or unworthy, and so on” (McCann, 2002, at p. 388). To this I would add that a major component of such political rhetorical efforts is the mobilization of identities – such as discursive proxies – that serve as shorthand for both users of places, and the social values that they are

purported to either represent or transgress. Because discursive proxies are excluded from political debate due to the very identity markers that bear these social meanings, they are unable to contest, resist, or complicate the political use to which others have put them. Thus, a variety of political actors are able to freely speak for or about them “by proxy.” Without the constraints of actually having to answer to those whose identities have been invoked, political actors are freed to use such discursive proxies as discourse laden vessels with which to engage in a variety of projects. The potential political power to be gained from the use of such discursive proxies is evidenced by the extent to which the mobilization of figures such as the “welfare mother”, the “homeless”, the “gang member”, or even “our troops” may powerfully frame and even potentially predetermine the results of debates from which those individuals have been excluded.

### C. The Young Skateboarder as Discursive Proxy

Young skateboarders may be seen as prime examples of discursive proxies in that they both bear rich cultural meanings and are excluded from the political fora in which others’ mobilize their identities as shorthand for those cultural meanings. As discussed in the prior Chapter, the character of the skateboarder is profoundly paradoxical in popular culture. Like many other “problem populations” – including the homeless, the mentally disabled and street gangs – urban skateboarders create by their mere presence a crisis for predominant conceptions of order in public space. By their refusal to behave in accepted, orderly ways in public space, urban skateboarders transgress common understandings of what public space should be and who it should serve. At the same time, both the current economic status of skating and the youth of

most of its practitioners complicate the challenge posed by urban skateboarders.

Because of the special status of children in our society, young skaters also represent inherently vulnerable and deserving populations. These positive social framings are enhanced by the fact that skateboarding now represents a sizable manufacturing and entertainment industry. And because advertisers and popular media have seized upon the image of the skateboarder as a symbol of youthful freedom, strong positive cultural meanings now combine and clash with negative framings in the public imagination.

While these powerful and often conflicting framings have been central to the Seattle's skatepark politics (described in the following sections), young people have simultaneously been excluded from the very political processes in which "their" spaces are debated and negotiated. Beyond the inherent barriers to young peoples' involvement in activism – including school and family demands, a lack of belief in their own political efficacy, and a typical lack of social ties to older activists – the very nature of Seattle's political process precludes youthful input. As discussed in Chapter 2, Seattle possesses a vast public input system as part of long-standing effort to increase citizen representation in municipal decision making. This translates into a process intensive system of municipal government requiring even the simplest public space policy decisions to navigate a torturous path through a complex and idiosyncratic screen of neighborhood organizations, Parks department staffers, a citizen advisory "Parks Board," the Mayor's office, the "Parks, Education, Libraries and Labor" subcommittee of the City Council, and the City Council as a whole. While ostensibly serving to democratize governmental decision making and provide a robust

system of checks and balances, this system limits government focused activism to only those can engage in advocacy as a part-time job (Herbert, 2005, 2006a) – a qualification that excludes young people.

The structure and content of the Seattle’s public input process is equally daunting to young people. Deliberation typically occurs in one of three fora. First, most decisions are made within the closed offices of elected officials or City staff, from which almost all citizens are excluded. As one interviewee, a highly placed government official familiar with City Council noted,

Over the long haul, the very big decisions are very rarely made out in public. There are a few examples where that is not the case. And when it happens, it is fascinating to watch. But in the end, most decisions are made... now granted, they are not sitting down and sitting in a room together saying “this is what we are going to do...” And council members do change their minds at the table. But, for the most part, community groups, constituency groups, lobbyists, whatever will go to everybody on committee first and say “do you have any questions? Can I count on you to vote yes on this?” And they are lining up their votes just like everybody else. That is just the way it works.

Secondly a smaller number of decisions are made in the “public” meetings of such entities as the City Council’s “Parks, Education, Libraries and Labor” subcommittee or even the Skate Park Advisory Committee (“SPAC”). Many of these meetings occur during conventional business hours when young people are in school. And because discussions at such meetings are inevitably technical, complex, and meaningful only as part of a much broader and ongoing set of political and planning issues, they are both crushingly dull to young people (and almost all adults) and impenetrable to newcomers. For example, while a small number of young people sometimes attend meetings of the SPAC, they are almost immediately alienated by the

level of technical detail, bored by the tedious pace of deliberation, and placed outside their depth by dense references to prior events and other political actors. When a pre-teen has been brought to a meeting by a parent, they will inevitably wander away from the room, or gravitate towards a corner to play or read. On the one occasion when a group of teenagers attended a SPAC meeting to try to assert a claim for a specific site in the city for a skatepark, they all spoke passionately, attempted with mixed success to listen attentively when other matters were discussed, and then quietly left at the soonest opportunity. Never during my observations did a young person attend more than one such public meeting whether conducted by the SPAC or any other organization related to the City.

A third type of public space deliberation involving a much smaller number of decisions occurs during formal “public input” processes, like those accompanying formal Parks planning. Here again the nature of the forum precludes substantive youthful participation. Usually held in large public rooms either in City Hall, the Parks headquarters, or community centers, these public meetings provide an intimidating and inaccessible environment for young people to express themselves. For example, meetings for both the master-planning process and individual skatepark projects typically began with a formal presentation of up to an hour by a planner, developer, or other expert who serves to frame issues that might otherwise be fairly accessible within often limited technical and bureaucratic terms. After the formal presentation, there is an opportunity for “public comment.” This comment takes the form of a succession of short, timed statements – usually amplified – in which the speaker directly addresses the planners or other staffers before the entire public

meeting. There is no substantive opportunity to engage in dialog with anybody other than the officiating City representatives and no feedback to individual comments unless a subsequent speaker chooses to comment on a prior statement. As one government official I interviewed noted, at such meetings people can offer public input, but:

there is no one to say “I know what you are saying and I disagree, or I know what you are saying and I agree.” So you go and you just talk. It is like a vacuum. And then you walk away and you have no idea whether or not you were actually heard... and even in committee hearing it is rare for a council member to say “can you clarify that” or “I’m sorry but I just don’t agree” because they don’t feel that is part of their job. And that is part of democracy. You get to say whatever you want. And it is awkward for me because sometimes you just sit there and you are like, “hold on here! Come on. I think you got a major part of this wrong.” But, what actually happens is they say “thank you for your input.” And for me sometimes that is more frustrating than not being able to speak. But that is just part of the process.

While intimidating for most adults, this format is particularly terrifying for those who are unaccustomed to public speaking and bureaucratic processes. While an occasional young person has spoken at such public meetings as those in support of the master-planning process, the vast majority will either sit mute through the meeting or, if young enough, drift off to find other more fruitful forms of stimulation. The incentives to participate in such meetings are further attenuated when (as discussed below) much of the “public input” consists of repeated negative framings of young people in general and skaters in particular. Thus, one skatepark advocate noted during testimony to the Parks Education, Labor, and Libraries committee of City Council, “it was really sad to see like all the kids who came to the Northgate [master-planning] meeting hearing these adults say these disparaging things about them as if they were

houseplants.” And while there are alternatives to offering spoken public comments, these usually involve drafting formal written statements to the City, an equally unappealing proposition for most young people.

Recognizing the importance of young peoples’ voices, Skatepark advocates have tried to bring young people “to the table” through events like the SPAC’s annual youth-outreach event. Similarly Parks staffers have repeatedly looked to such advocates to pull in youthful skaters for support at important public meetings. Even so, the nature of the political process and the rules by which political discourse is conducted inherently preclude the type of long-term involvement that would allow the development of a meaningful youth voice in the process. Accordingly, young people – while the almost exclusive topic of political debate about skateparks – are largely either absent from those discussions, or present only symbolically.

#### D. Domestication as the Discursive Battleground for Constructing the Discursive Proxy of the Skateboarder

**Do mesticated, *ppl. a:* Made domestic or familiar; tamed, naturalized.**

- Oxford English Dictionary Online (2006).

While a number of powerful discourses emerged from my fieldwork, the tensions between positive and negative cultural systems of meaning inherent to the discursive proxy of the youthful skater most often resolved themselves in terms of a single, primary web of discourses around what I describe as “domestication.” As discussed more fully in the following section, the initial discursive framings of the struggle over public skateparks in Seattle as a young peoples’ issue provided a variety of strategic and political advantages to advocates, politicians, and opponents of

skateparks by shifting the debate away from where skateparks would be placed and towards a discussion of who young skateboarders are. In turn, these debates played out in terms of whether such populations are, are in need, are capable, or are incapable of being “domesticated.”

In broad strokes, I use the term domestication to signify the use of place as a tool of discipline through which that which is wild, inscrutable, unbounded, undisciplined, disorderly, and out-of-place may be rendered tame, understandable, bounded, disciplined, orderly, and in-place.<sup>17</sup> The built environment is a key contributor to the construction of identity and the process of disciplining behavior (Crang, 1998; Foucault, 1975; Kieth & Pile, 1993). Unlike many other spatial techniques of discipline, however, I define domestication as a process by which the creation of a *voluntary* or even an *attractive* space for an otherwise disruptive or threatening population or activity is intended to facilitate the exercise of either exclusion or disciplinary tactics upon such populations and activities. For example, Blomley describes how the conversion of a previously un-programmed lot into a “greenway” for community gardening in a Vancouver, B.C. neighborhood was intended to domesticate a “wild” space by attracting reputable users to the area, while signaling “a property claim that would persuade the disorderly to go elsewhere”

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<sup>17</sup> The word “domestication” has been previously used by the Geographer Peter Jackson to signify the process by which space is rendered safe – specifically in the case of shopping and the shift from town center to shopping mall as center for consumption (1998). While Jackson’s usage overlaps with the way I intend to mobilize the concept of domestication, he fails to rigorously define exactly what he means by domestication, instead relying on popular connotations. Moreover, his usage fails to recognize that, as described herein, policies seeking to order public places may actually seek to use space to domesticate specific populations in specific ways, rather than simply seeking to make spaces somehow inherently more “safe”.

(2004b, at p. 626). Thus, domestication would fall within those disciplinary tactics described by Merry as, “depend[ing] on creating spaces characterized by the consensual, participatory governance of selves” (Merry, 2001, at p. 20).

While much of Foucault’s work was focused upon such non-voluntarily disciplinary spaces as the prison, hospital, and asylum, he did not focus to the same degree on the disciplinary potential of such voluntary spaces as public parks. Subsequent work in geography has, however, recognized the importance of spaces of all types in the disciplinary dissemination and reproduction of dominant ideologies, including the role of “the street as a site of discipline” (Cresswell, 1998, at p. 269).

By acting in space in a particular way the actor is inserted into a particular relation with ideology. Importantly, the actor has the ability to recognize a particular spatial ‘text’ and react to it in a way that is antagonistic to a particular ideology.

Meaning is invoked in space through the practice of people who act according to their interpretations of space, which, in turn, gives their actions meaning (Cresswell, 1996, at p. 17).

Cresswell has emphasized the inherent role of place in discipline, and the ways in which place, “link[s] hierarchies in society with spatial location and arrangement,” so that “deviation from the expected relationship between place and practice [leads] to labels of abnormality and inappropriateness” (Cresswell, 2004, at p. 102, 122).

Ultimately, what is important is not simply *what* actions the body is disciplined to engage in or refrain from, but *where* those actions do and do not take place. Thus, in “In Place/Out of Place”, Cresswell focuses on a series of activities (creating art, maintaining the domestic sphere) that, while normally consistent with dominant ideologies of properly disciplined bodies, are treated as profoundly transgressive and

thus subject to a host of state and social punishments precisely because they are “out-of-place” (graffiti art on a subway car, a camp of protestors on the edge of an airbase)(1996).

In using the term “domestication” I hope to draw upon both Creswell’s conceptions of “in-placeness,” as well as a host of common connotations for the word domestication itself. The Oxford English Dictionary definition of “domesticate” that opens this section draws upon many of these operative meanings. Describing domestication as the process by which an object is made “domestic or familiar; tamed, naturalized,” this definition captures much of the sense in which I use the term; namely, to signify a process by which the strange is rendered familiar, the wild is rendered tame, and the unnatural, transgressive, and “out of place” is rendered in-place and part of the “naturalized,” taken for granted order of ideologies and places (Anonymous, 2006). While the Oxford English Dictionary definition does not explicitly refer to the role of space, it certainly evokes such scientific, biological connotations of domestication, for which spatial bounding is an inseparable part of transforming what is beyond human control into something that is be accessible and thus capable of control. Thus, I draw upon the explicit spatialization of such definitions of domestication as “the process by which a population of animals becomes adapted to the captive environment through a combination of genetic changes over time (selection) and environmentally induced developmental changes,” notwithstanding their rootedness in specific scientific ways of knowing (in this case aquatic biology)(Robison & Rowland, 2005). And while nobody was claiming that the domestication of skateboarders through the creation of skateparks in Seattle would

lead to “genetic changes over time,” a number of political actors (including myself) frequently argued that “environmentally induced developmental change” would be a beneficial byproduct of those spaces.

The Oxford English Dictionary definition also encompasses the processes by which an object is rendered “domestic,” and in acknowledging this connotation, I hope to draw upon (although not fully incorporate) feminist work on the domestic as the realm of “family and household” (S. A. Brenner, 1998, at p. 8). Traditionally contrasted against the “public” realm of economy and politics, feminist theorists have long explored the highly gendered nature of this division, and the multiplicities of power flows operating upon women through the social maintenance of this distinction (Domosh & Seager, 2001; Laurie *et al.*, 1997; McDowell, 1999; Pratt, 2004; Rendell, 1998). While I do not mean in any way to analogize the political wrangling over public skateparks to the long, hard pitched struggles that women and others have faced within the various systems of patriarchy at work in the maintenance of the “domestic” as a gendered space, there are several strands of feminist analysis that I do intend to draw upon. First, feminism’s recognition of the hegemonic western opposition between the domestic sphere, and the political-economic spheres is especially important to my analysis, as I argue that the efforts to use skateparks to render skateboarding in-place is motivated – in part – by the desire to remove skateboarders from spaces traditionally associated with economic and political functions. Secondly, a feminist awareness of the gendered aspect of the domestic will be important as well. Although skateboarding is a profoundly gendered activity, much of the political process around Seattle’s skateparks has been framed in terms of specific issues of

gender and the potential for skateparks to incorporate the feminine and/or mitigate the threat of masculine bodies in public space has been a constant. Accordingly, I use the term domestication aware of the traditionally feminine and ostensibly demasculinizing connotations of the term.

Thus, Domestication may be seen as the process by which the creation of a spatially bounded “home” for an otherwise disorderly, transitory, and wild group may serve as a tool for both reforming such populations, and for determining which of those populations are in-place (and properly disciplined members of the civic body), and which are out-of-place (and thus transgressive and outside the civic body). And as more fully developed in the following sections, much of the debate over public skateparks may be understood as having been articulated as a contest over whether the ostensibly youthful users of such facilities are, are not, are in need of, or are incapable of being “domesticated” within this meaning.

#### E. Advocates’ Discursive Framing of Skateparks as a Youth Issue

From its inception 2004, Seattle’s skatepark advocacy movement has framed its efforts to claim a portion of the city’s public space in terms of the interests and needs of a domesticated and underserved portion of the city’s children, and has framed municipal government’s actions in terms of its failure to meet the needs of young people. This choice was not surprising, given skateboarding’s typically youthful demographics. Even so, it was not inevitable, considering that the majority of the city’s skate activists have been male, adult, non-parent skaters who typically have a very different set of desires and material concerns than the children they purport to represent. Social movement organizations, “have the capacity through strategic

choices of names to make gains, to block or aid their opponents, and in general to shape the universe of political discourse within which the citizenship regime takes place and is consolidated” (Dobrowolsky & Jenson, 2004). While this is exactly what happened in Seattle, the ability to discursively frame a struggle is not the same thing as the ability to control the direction and outcome of that struggle. As Warf has noted, “[r]epresentations are always authored, situated in a context, always partial and biased, and the manner in which they are interpreted and consumed is not necessarily how they are intended or produced: meanings generally escape their authors” (2001, at p. 7).

The decision to mobilize the effort to build skateparks around the identities of young skaters had three very broad and unintended effects. The first effect was that debates over whether and where to build skateparks became recontextualized as part of a broader and long standing set of debates over the nature of young skaters and children in general. Because young peoples’ status in society is so rift with paradox this ensured that debates over skatepark issues would inherently implicate the very tensions between positive and negative social conceptions of youth and their place in public space.

The second effect of discursively organizing the skatepark effort around youthful identities is that it established a source of ongoing tension between the espoused goals and aims of the movement, and the personal goals and aims of individual members. Adult skaters not only typically want to build and skate different types of terrain than younger people, they also have very different material concerns and constraints than the “average” 14 year old. This created an ongoing potential for

disconnects between the efforts of advocates and the desires of those they purport to represent.

The third effect of this framing was a profoundly alteration of the types of spaces that Seattle's skatepark advocates have sought to claim and that governmental actors deem fit for skateboarders. By attracting advocates who insisted that older male skate activists "walk the walk" and not just "talk the talk" when it came to serving young people, the discursive framing of skateparks as a youth amenity led the movement to lay claim to much more domesticated – and thus politically contentious – sites in the city.

#### **“SEATTLE HATES KIDS”**

From its beginning Seattle's nascent skatepark advocacy movement framed its struggle as one furthering the interests of "kids." This framing – while providing a variety of strategic and political advantages – has also created an ongoing tension between organizers' interests and the interests of their claimed constituency. In broad strokes, this may be seen as a tension between a vision of skateparks as "playground," (a youthful, domesticated and public space) versus a vision of skateparks as "clubhouse" (older, wild and exclusive), with many early advocates favoring the later model. In fact, the spark that ignited the movement was the threatened demolition of a feature that was widely considered "kid unfriendly," namely the Ballard Bowl, a deep, intimidating transition feature that was rarely used by people under the age of 20. Because the Bowl represented a fairly strict interpretation of traditional "old school" transition skating it instead became a focal point for Seattle's community of older skaters, most of whom had begun skating in the 1980's.

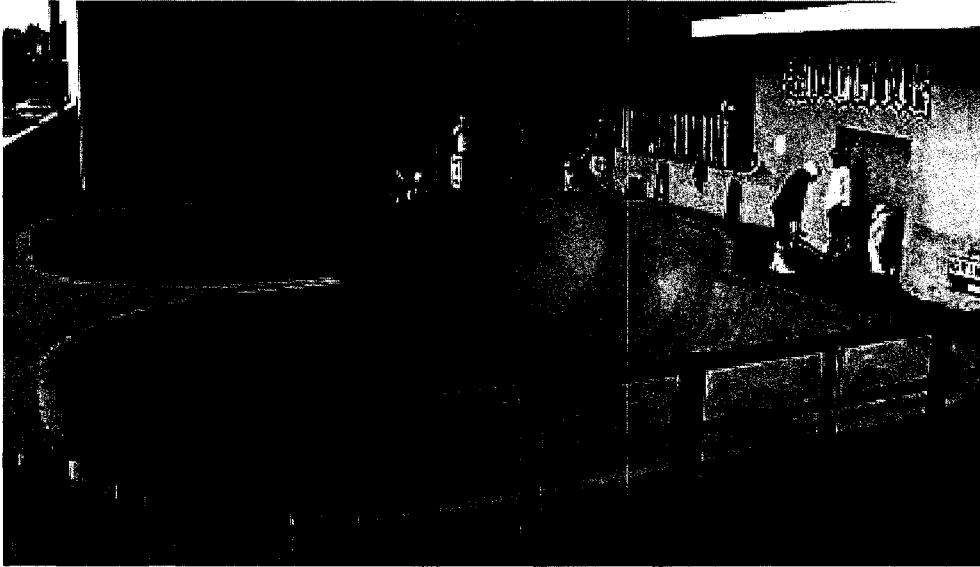


Figure 5: Original Ballard Bowl. Photo courtesy Dan Hughes

Even though the largest number of skatepark users were drawn to the skatepark's street section, the campaign to spare the entire facility very quickly became widely referred to as the "save the Ballard Bowl" effort, with advocates promulgating a simplified graphic of the shape of the bowl to represent the entire skatepark effort.



Figure 6: Skateboard deck issued as a fund-raiser for the PSSA incorporating an outline of Ballard Bowl. Photo author.

This decision revealed both the core concerns of activists and the potential disconnects between those goals and organizers' espoused constituency. Popular resistance to the decision to tear down the entire park inevitably focused on the threat to the bowl feature, even though the concrete bowl feature constituted a comparatively small part of the original Ballard skatepark and that a much larger and younger user

group would be displaced by the destruction of the asphalt, wood and masonite “street” section of the park.

The focus on more “adult” terrain reflected the largely adult composition of the skate advocacy movement in its earliest days, which was the product of several factors. First, these older skaters typically had greater time, resources, and self efficacy – that is, the belief in their own ability to initiate change – than similarly aggrieved young people. Also, because of the physical layout of the skatepark, with the Bowl area overlooking the asphalt and plywood realm of younger street skaters, the transition area served as a spatially segregated “clubhouse” for older, almost exclusively male skaters. This spatial arrangement could be seen as contributing to a greater sense of ownership, community, and belonging than the wide open and more easily contestable spaces of the street area.



Figure 7: View from bowl feature overlooking street area. Photo courtesy Dan Hughes.

Finally, older skaters also tended to have a greater sense of the historic, cultural, and political significance of the Bowl as a largely DIY effort that had brought together their community. For older users, the administrative decision to move forward with the previously planned demolition of the skatepark was seen as a citywide rejection of their community and the volunteer efforts that had built the Bowl.

Recognizing the limited political appeal of the core demographic of activists – men in their late 20's to mid 40's – the movement to save the Ballard Bowl quickly recontextualized its effort as a youth oriented cause. Almost every public statement by activists addressed the city's failure to provide activities for its children, and signs proclaiming "Seattle Hates Kids" played prominently in every protest and public appearance by activists.

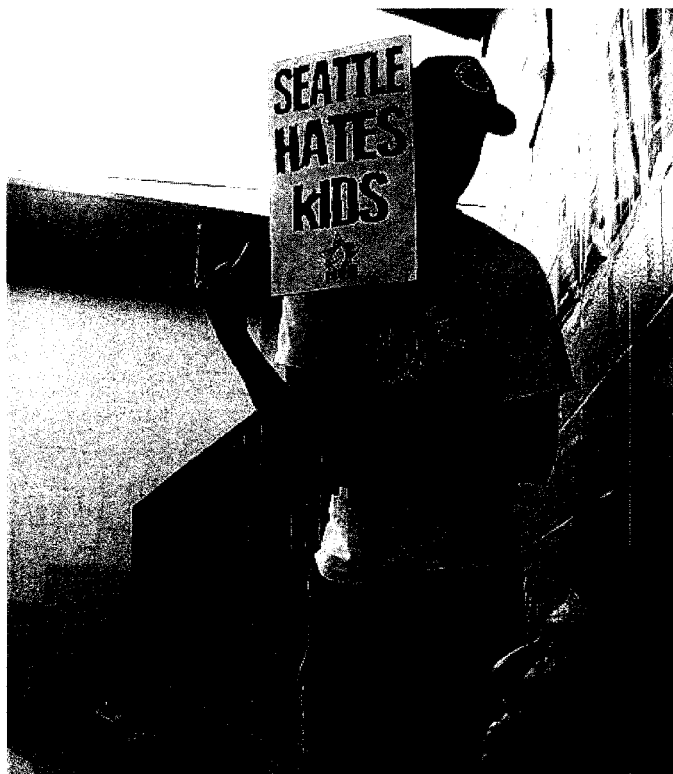


Figure 8: Activist with "Seattle Hates Kids" sign

While this fundamental strategic decision was made tacitly, the adoption of youth focused discourses in support of the Ballard Bowl was virtually universal. For example, never during my involvement in the cause did I observe any discussions of about the decision by older skaters to frame the “save the Ballard Bowl” effort as serving young people. Even so, I and other new volunteers quickly adopted youth-oriented discourses in support of the cause, recognizing either consciously or unconsciously that the identification of “kids” as our core constituency would inevitably prove more compelling to the media and city officials than “displaced male Generation-X types.”

By framing the struggle over skateparks as a struggle to claim a space in the city for kids, advocates gained a variety of advantages. Perhaps most importantly, advocates were able to posit themselves as representing an inherently morally deserving population, rather than being dismissed as a middle-to-upper class group of men seeking to protect the privilege of a narrowly focused recreational area. The discourse of skateparks as a youth issue was quickly picked up by Seattle’s media, including the Seattle Stranger weekly newspaper which readily contextualized the Ballard controversy within a variety of governmental failures to accommodate young people:

Did the chamber [of commerce] realize it was out of touch with the young people in Ballard? ... Seattle is notoriously unfair to its youth and hostile to the urban culture they help create and sustain: Witness the years-long battle to dump the obnoxious Teen Dance Ordinance. The TDO was finally dumped in August 2002 – after a 17-year-long battle – and replaced by an All Ages Dance Ordinance, which has opened up the music landscape to teens. These days, other than music, it's hard to see what Seattle has to offer teens by way of entertainment (Jenniges, 2004b).

This appeal to the needs of Seattle's young people not only broadened the political leverage of the movement, but also drew in a much broader group of supporters. In short order, the core group of male advocates working within the rubric of the newly formed "Puget Sound Skatepark Association" (PSSA), attracted a number of essential non-skateboarding volunteer activists, including a roller-skating female P.R. specialist and a woman who had been involved in drafting Seattle's first municipal skateboarding policy as a planning graduate student. At the same time, a group of primarily non-skating parents began the explicitly child-oriented "Parents for Skateparks" (PFS) advocacy group, lending support and credibility to efforts to promote skateparks as spaces for children. Activists' success in framing the movement as representing underserved youthful populations culminated in the city's 2005 invitation to a variety of activists from both the PSSA and PFS to join a newly formed Skatepark Advisory Committee ("SPAC") to the Parks department as a way of providing a forum for Seattle's skaters.

Hand in hand with the discursive framing of skateparks as primarily a youth amenity, advocates also aggressively framed skateboarders as a particularly underserved and neglected youth population. While a skatepark had been continually operated by the semi-governmental Seattle Center since 1998, the original Ballard Bowl was repeatedly framed as the "only" official Seattle skatepark within Seattle Government due to its presence on Parks department property. In contrast, advocates made frequent reference to both the abundance of other types of Parks department facilities for other recreational activities (150 Tennis Courts, 123 Baseball fields) and

comparatively large number of skateparks in surrounding towns and cities (three skateparks in Kent, Washington, population 86,000). Combined with the fact that the final Ballard Bowl skatepark was less than a quarter of the size of the original Ballard skatepark, advocates repeatedly stressed the underserved nature of the youthful populations they claimed to represent. As one advocate argued in favor of the master-planning process during public comments to Seattle's Parks Board<sup>18</sup>,

[R]egardless of which number you believe or what method you use to calculate it, the fact remains that Seattle Parks only has four thousand five hundred square feet of permanent skatepark in the city at this time. According to the lowest [skater] population estimate, that gives each skater in this city about a foot and a half of square feet of free legal public space and that is less than the footprint of a single skateboard.

Seattle's failure to provide more skateparks was repeatedly equated with excluding young people from the city and civic membership more broadly.

### **THE IMPACT OF FRAMING SKATEPARKS AS A YOUTH ISSUE ON THE MOVEMENT: THE TENSION BETWEEN CORE SKATERS AND "LI'L TIMMIES"**

At the same time the discursive mobilization of skateparks as a children's issue provided the skatepark advocacy movement with almost immediate legitimacy, it also institutionalized an ongoing tension within the movement between the goals of the "core" of older skate advocates and the needs of the young constituency those advocates claimed to represent. As discussed above, the PSSA and the SPAC were initially composed of mature "old school" transition skaters, such as me, who had gotten involved to save the Bowl feature at Ballard and to ensure that Seattle built more public transition terrain. Almost immediately this constituency's goals came

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<sup>18</sup> The Parks Board is a citizen supervisory group to the Parks department that, at the time, was appointed by the Mayor's office. While lacking any official decision making power, their recommendations tend to carry substantial weight as representing the voice of Seattle taxpayers.

into conflict with parent-advocates, including members of PFS who demanded that the movement actually serve the youthful majority of skaters (and the constituency they claimed to represent). Beyond calling for a shift in emphasis from the transition terrain to youth-friendly street terrain, parent advocates also envisioned a very different type of place where skateboarding should take place, namely visible, green, accessible, and domesticated spaces.

The original Ballard Bowl was by most standards an unappealing site. Located in an abandoned semi-industrial site between an alley, a supermarket trash compactor, and a disused loading dock, the Ballard Bowl felt grey, dirty, and inhospitable to outsiders. The Bowl itself was surrounded by an evolving set of aerosol art murals, photos of prior skate sessions and such “junk” as van seats deposited for use as benches for resting skaters. In the warm summer months, the scent of rancid fried chicken in the adjoining supermarket dumpster pervaded the entire area. Even so, many older skaters valued this setting because it created a boundary between insiders (transition skaters both competent and “tough” enough to feel comfortable in such a challenging space) and outsiders (young people, non-skaters, and most women). The overall disorderliness of the site marked these older skaters’ presence and performance at the Ballard Bowl as more authentically urban, transgressive and “real.”

Accordingly early PSSA and SPAC members were more than happy to push the city to site skateparks in spaces like those of the original Ballard Bowl. Disused, industrial or semi-industrial sites were attractive precisely because they were so undesirable to other users, making them readily available for the swift construction of new skateparks and conducive to the reproduction of the “clubhouse” feeling of pre-commons Ballard.

In contrast, a small but vocal number of activists (largely parents) vehemently argued for a radically different type of space in the city, a domesticated space, based on what they understood to be the needs of young people. Rather than accepting sites that were available precisely because they were undesirable, these advocates pushed to demand spaces typical of other amenities for children, namely; clean, visible, accessible by mass transit, and situated within broader range of passive and active uses. These advocates envisioned the construction of skateparks not as an opportunity to reproduce the “old boys” clubhouse of the Ballard Bowl, but as a chance to claim a place in the city for kids who did not want to play organized sports. And this entailed claiming spaces that were as clean, safe, orderly, and accessible to children of all genders as a soccer field or softball diamond. These were also to be spaces in which skaters could be contained in, surveiled by, and contextualized – that is, domesticated – within a broader, non-skating community. One Seattle reporter conveyed this sense of purpose at a meeting of PFS:

[Several] skate-parent allies sit around the dining room table and tell me about one of their goals: making sure the city's future skateparks are built in accessible locations. "Something like 85 percent of skaters are under 18. I believe 60 percent are under 16, with the average age being 13 or 14. Ten to 20 percent are female..." Seattle's current skate facilities, and immediate plans for additional skate space, don't serve those kids. "The sites that Seattle Parks chooses seem oriented toward 200 lb. male adult skaters." The hidden spots have a dangerous, fend-for-yourself atmosphere, instead of an open, safe-for-everyone vibe. [A]nother mom-she skateboards, too, and used to be a competitive mountain-biker, points to her small daughter, quietly sitting at the table with the grown-ups. "She should feel welcome at a skatepark" (Jenniges, 2005).

While the tension between older skaters' desire to replicate the undomesticated, fend-for-yourself “clubhouse”, and parents' desire to replicate the

skatepark as domesticated “playground” was especially strong during the Ballard Bowl struggle, it continued to resurface, guiding and transforming the complexion of the skatepark movement, its goals and its strategies. At a discursive level, this translated into an aggressive promotion of skaters as non-gendered and either pre-teen or multi-generational by the core group of skatepark advocates. As one activist argued to City Council in support of Seattle’s master-planning process,

According to a report prepared in 2004, by the National Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association, the skateboarding community comprises four percent of the US population, which equates to just over 20, 000 skaters in the city of Seattle. In addition to whomever you might normally associate with skateboarding, these skaters are also parents, women and children like my kids and yours.

Here the utilization of recent demographic figures that on their face paint a picture of skaters as predominantly male, with an average age of 14, is consciously reframed as reflecting a much broader and diverse group of users including “women and children” and “my kids and yours.”

The tension between the playground and the clubhouse within Seattle skatepark advocacy has meant that every City skatepark project to date has involved struggle over whether contemplated sites were sufficiently visible, accessible, green, and domesticated. At the insistence of parent advocates, the SPAC petitioned for a change in site for the Lower Woodland skatepark, Seattle’s first post-Ballard skate facility. Parent advocates were concerned that the original location – approximately 200 yards away from the nearest road, tucked below a cliff band and behind two sports fields, in a largely unused part of a large urban park – was unwelcoming to families and invited unsupervised, illicit mischief and antisocial behavior by teen skaters. In

response to these concerns, Parks shifted the location of the planned facility approximately 100 yards closer to the street and neighboring residential district. Likewise, at the insistence of parent advocates the SPAC rejected the City's unilateral relocation of Seattle Center skatepark ("SeaSk8") to an unused construction staging site off Elliot Avenue, in between an office block, a waste-water pumping station, 6 lanes of traffic, and a railroad right of way. Citing a variety of problems with the proposed SeaSk8 replacement site, including a lack of safe pedestrian access, noise, pollution, and a dearth of basic amenities such as drinking water and bathrooms, the SPAC succeeded after a long political battle in getting the City to agree to locate the replacement facility on the Seattle Center campus, deep within Seattle's urban core. The tensions between advocating for readily available but otherwise "undesirable" sites, and highly coveted domesticated (or domesticable) sites took on a much broader importance during the implementation of Seattle's skatepark master-planning process. During this process, individuals opposing the siting of skateparks in their own neighborhoods would typically suggest such "underutilized" spaces as areas under raised freeways as alternate locations. Advocates would then counter with the need for greater "playground" like integration within existing park environments.

Throughout this process, however, the initial framing of skateparks as a children's issue predetermined how the debate between undomesticated "clubhouse" and domesticated "playground" would resolve, what goals and strategies the movement would pursue, and even the composition of the skatepark advocacy movement itself. A large number of the original Ballard Bowl activists dropped out after the original sense of urgency around the cause was abated by the Mayor's

decision to include a skate feature at the Commons. Although older skating advocates still constituted the majority in the movement, the discursive framing of skateparks as a children's' issue increasingly meant that when debates over siting and design occurred the voice of parent advocates – although a minority – carried the day. For example, throughout my involvement with the SPAC I felt increasingly torn between my desire to advocate for the kinds of facilities that I would enjoy, and my recognition that it was hypocritical to claim to represent young skaters while failing to work to provide kid-friendly “street” style terrain. Caught between the demands of parent advocates on one side and City actors who were increasingly embracing skateparks as a youth-focused amenity on the other (as discussed in the next Section), I and the other the leaders of the advocacy movement increasingly adopted a youth-centered set of goals and policies.

This translated not only to official support of “kid friendly” sites, but official SPAC policies calling for, “a citywide goal of providing Skateparks with an aggregate of 60% street features and 40% transition features” and requiring that, “to the extent possible, every Seattle skatepark should contain a mix of terrain that is accessible, enjoyable, and appropriate to a range of skaters – from young and beginning skaters to older and advanced skaters” (SPAC, 2005). Likewise, recognizing the gap between the experiences of its older members and its youthful constituency, in 2006 the SPAC began holding annual youth outreach events as a way of making the skatepark planning process more accessible to younger skaters. The very refocusing of skate advocate strategy away from protest and media spectacle, and towards formal dialogue and involvement with the City – such as through such pseudo-state agencies as the

SPAC itself – represented a fundamental shift in strategy. In turn, this shift in strategy reflected the declining influence and involvement of the early Ballard Bowl firebrands and the ascendancy of volunteers bringing more long-term, professional approaches to advocacy – including me. The call from early Ballard activists had been for “as many sites as possible, located anywhere, as long as they can be built now,” and these goals meshed naturally with oppositional and confrontational strategies. In contrast, the emerging dominance of institutionally oriented advocates who were increasingly adopting domesticated “child and family” based approaches forced a shift in strategy to a cooperative engagement with the state in order to petition for the very types of places that other, more domesticated activities had long enjoyed.

While this shift in goals and strategies played out over several years, its impact was felt almost immediately. Within a few months a number of early organizers of the successful Ballard protests had fallen out of the movement, disavowing any constructive engagement with a Parks department that they deemed untrustworthy and incompetent. And many of the vert-terrain proponents who remained involved with the movement as the PSSA transitioned into the more formal SPAC slowly dropped out once it became clear that their interests would not be foremost on the agenda. While this allowed the SPAC to present itself as a more professional and less self-interested advocacy group, it also brought considerable costs. Already part of a small sub-culture within skateboarding, the advocates who continued at the forefront of the effort found themselves distanced from even their own subculture of fellow civically minded vert-skaters. Thus, while advocates enjoyed increasing political traction by cooperatively engaging with city politics under the discursive banner of a youth cause,

this move ironically translated to less and less support from and connection to either constituency group that advocates claimed to represent, namely youthful street skaters and older transition skaters.

Beyond the drop in involvement by many older skaters who had initially been very passionate about the skatepark cause, a powerful backlash developed against the move to embrace youth focused policies and sites. This took the form of complaints over the additional delay, bureaucracy, and compromise accompanying the shift to youth based advocacy. As one long-time Seattle skater complained about the politics of finding a replacement for SeaSk8 on a public BBS,

have any of you ever noticed how the city of Seattle spends a lot of money and never does anything. im sick of your bickering. im an adult and i want something to skate. i dont have kids and i pay taxes. the money you guy & gals have spent on this so far we could have a nice street area & a small bowl and be skating by now. im now really! sick of you all. you have ruined the whole cool ideal of having a cool place to skate.

A number of older skaters' criticisms of the SPAC's choice of pursuing the interests of young people over older skaters was encapsulated by one long time skater who drew the distinction between "lil' Timmies" (young skaters) and "lifers" (older skaters who remained passionate about the sport) in another BBS posting:

Yes, "lifers" are outnumbered by "lil' Timmies". But the majority of Timmies do not stick with skateboarding. Therefore it seems silly to cater to their needs when they won't be needing it for any length of time. It would seem to me that it is precisely the "lifers" that should be most valued for input on how to proceed and how to make a city great for skateboarders.

They may decide this is best accomplished by renegade diy projects, they may decide it's by loudly/chaotically advocating for publicly funded parks, they may push for allowing skateboarding on already existing terrain or continuing to use it at risk of ticketing, or they may

feel letting the city crawl along and break promises every five minutes is fine as long as they get to feel important in official meetings.

....

Lifers should be the target beneficiary of skateboarding/skatepark advocacy. Advocating for little timmy just reinforces the idea that skateboarding is child's play. (and i say this as a took 8 years off from skating bowl barney pad dad father of 8 and 11 year old skaters).

Similar sentiments were expressed by one of the core organizers of the Ballard Bowl effort, who had dropped out as soon as the movement began engaging with the Parks department. Arguing in favor of locating the SeaSk8 replacement at the more industrial Elliot site on a national website for public skatepark advocates, he noted:

So far since the inception of this group, we have lost our 2 skateboard parks. One was semi-replaced ("Saved?") by a half-assed bowl that only provides needs for the contingency of skateboarders who ride transition.

Instead of siding with the very people they represent, the SPAC is putting full faith into the city aspect of this fiasco and parroting facts, figures and false promises from the same governmental group that has proven it cannot hold a match to their claims time and time again.

So to sum things up, it is 2007 and we have no skatepark or legal place to skateboarding in downtown Seattle.

A number of older skaters even questioned the compatibility between skateparks and the types of domesticated populations that advocates had been arguing needed to be served by skate facilities. In discussing the Lower Woodland site, another skater argued on the same website,

this has got to be one of the worst places to put a skateboard park. won't all the leaves from the trees fall into it, keeping it wet? . . . not to mention all the people who are just passing through on their way to the lake such as joggers, parents on junky bikes with their little kids on bikes (not stunt riding bmxers but little kids w/ really big helmets, soccer players, joggers, etc. how will one keep those people out of the park? if it's a public park, those types WILL be in the park, getting in peoples way.

Although it is easy to dismiss such sentiments as representing either macho posturing or simply selfish intolerance, the movement's loss of credibility with "core" skaters imposed considerable costs. These anti-youth discourses accompanied and undergirded a slow but steady erosion of popular involvement in the public skatepark movement by those best situated to participate in it, namely passionate adult skaters. Even as political events in Seattle kept public skateparks in the news – including the ultimate demolition of SeaSk8, the litigation over Lower Woodland, and the push for a city-wide master-plan – the number of advocates interested in engaging with a more formalized, youth oriented, movement seeking the creation of domesticated public skateparks steadily decreased over time, leading to increasing stress and pressure on those, such as myself, who remained.

Beyond such expressions of frustration, the schism between the clubhouse and the playground also took form "on the ground." The most concrete expression of this schism was the creation of the Marginal Way skatepark. As outlined in the prior Chapter, Marginal Way is an ongoing "do-it-yourself" project under a raised roadbed in the industrial area south of Seattle's sports stadiums, and east of the container yards and rail lines serving the Port of Seattle. Spearheaded by older skate advocates who had rejected strategies of youth-based cooperative engagement with City government, the Marginal Way organizers simply began constructing a skatepark of their own design at their own expense under a raised portion of State Route 99. This decision was seen as an explicit rejection of the discourses, strategies, and goals of "mainstream" skatepark advocates. As one organizer noted, "there's lots of plans to

build more parks in town but the city takes years to get them done. We decided we didn't want to wait that long" (Barnett *et al.*, 2006).

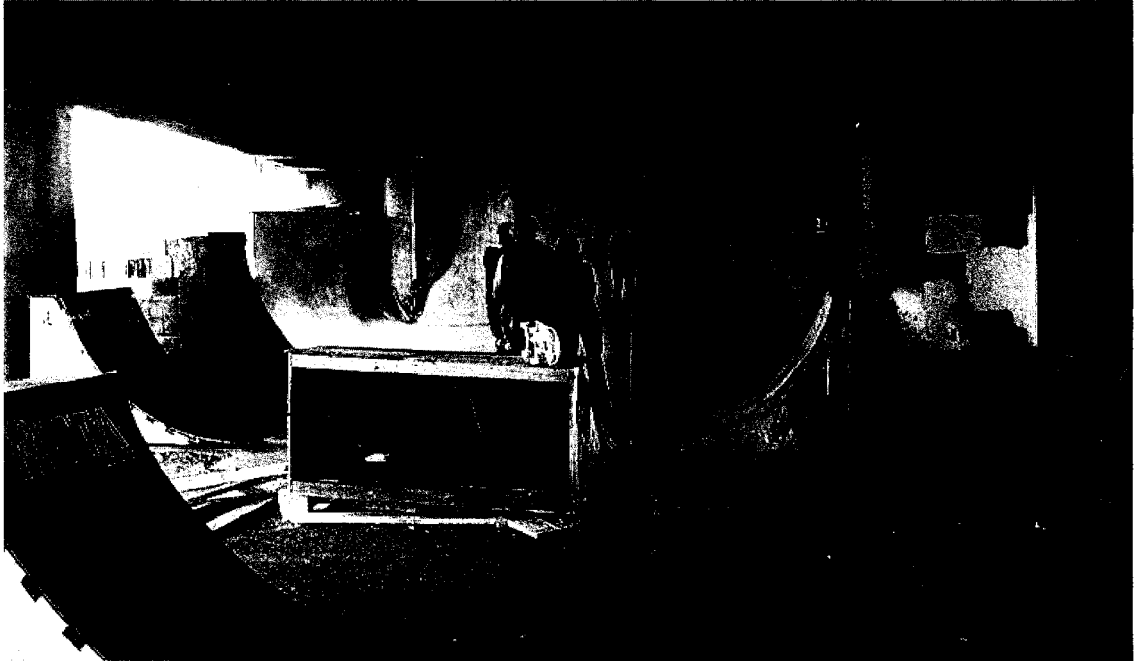


Figure 9: Marginal Way Skatepark. Photo courtesy Dan Hughes

While the end results of the project were decidedly less polished and professional than typical city funded and managed skateparks, one organizer conceded that this “home grown” sense heightened older skaters sense of proprietary ownership: “It’s so much more satisfying to skate something that you built yourself...Even if it’s not perfect, you don’t mind because it’s yours” (Moir, 2006). Another organizer explicitly framed the Marginal Way project as a clubhouse that provides an alternative to the domesticated playground promoted by mainstream advocates:

DIY parks tend to have more of a clubhouse feel. You aren’t in a pretty city park surrounded by moms with baby strollers and seniors watching the skating. They are a place built by skaters where you can hang out and relax, BBQ, listen to loud music and have fun without sweating about what other people think (Barnett *et al.*, 2006).

The potential of the site to draw a more homogenous, “core” community of skaters was foremost in another organizer’s mind: “It’s not a traditional park. . . You can go down there and find similar minded people. . . That’s all we ever aimed for; starting a community of like-minded skaters” (Barnett et al., 2006). Marginal Way is envisioned as a profoundly “adult” space rather than the type of “pay to play, pad nanny daycare center” developed by City focused advocates (Barnett et al., 2006).

The irony in the “lifers”’ frustration with, and dismissal of the needs of young, “big helmeted”, short timing, “lil’ Timmies” who make up the majority of skateboarders, was that older skaters’ practices and culture had largely rendered youthful skaters invisible to them. The fact that kids had rarely been involved in skate advocacy (other than gathering petition signatures at a local high school) made it easier for many older skaters to dismiss them as an important constituency. This tendency was reinforced by the ongoing intimidation that many young people feel showing up to skate at the very type of terrain favored by older skaters. Inevitably when a large group of accomplished older skaters are engaged in a “session,” at a park with transition terrain, young people – especially 14 and under – will rarely dare to join the session unless explicitly invited. And because the confidence to assert one’s own turn to skate and the bravery to “drop in” (to free-fall into the bowl from the lip) are widely treated as the cost of entering “insider” status as a transition skater, such invitations are rare. The exception to this rule is parks that either due to location, design, or programming draw a large number of young people, who – in the eyes of older skaters – skate in chaotic, unsafe, unpredictable masses. For most older transition oriented skaters, young people are either a phantom presence that lurks

around the park skating the flat “deck” area surrounding the park (if at all), or a mass nuisance that fills otherwise enjoyable skateparks with undisciplined chaos. Thus, the “clubhouse” subculture of many older skaters further exacerbates the tendency of the political process to exclude young people at any level beyond the discursive.

On one hand, this discussion of early strategic and political choices and struggles within Seattle’s skatepark movement likely looks a lot like the type of inevitable infighting that accompanies almost any social movement. On the other hand, it would be a mistake to overlook or dismiss the fundamental role that the movement’s initial discursive framing played in pre-figuring not only the terms of public debate (as addressed in subsequent sections), but also in pre-determining the very goals and composition of the movement itself. The advantages posed by discursively framing skateparks as a youth oriented cause came at the cost of drastically shifting the goals of the movement towards the creation of domesticated, “playground” like environments, and thus losing much of the movement’s core support. And while advocates’ enjoyed a certain strategic flexibility by mobilizing youthful identities that could not or would not be contested by children themselves, the same political flexibility in discursively framing young people in their absence was also afforded to those opposing the movement, as discussed below in Section G. By making the means and the measure of the movements’ success the discursive construction of youth, skatepark advocates forced themselves to prevail in much broader and more difficult struggles over children’s place in the city.

## F – Governmental Construction of the Youthful, Domesticated Skater

Perhaps the greatest strategic advantage enjoyed by advocates' early framing of skateparks as a youth issue was City government's almost immediate political turnaround on this issue. Having decided to support their construction, however, City government not only adopted advocates' discursive framing of skateparks as youthful amenities, but aggressively advanced a powerfully domesticated vision of young skaters. By downplaying potentially negative discourses around skateboarding and perpetuating discourses that framed skaters as socially and spatially bounded, as well as gender, class, and race neutral, these state actors sought to increase public support for their decision to support public skateparks. But in perpetuating a very specific discourse of youth identity, the City likewise set up and contributed to a much broader discursive debate contesting these identities. That is, by embracing and reproducing the concept of "skatepark as domesticated playground" the City set the stage for subsequent political backlash against such politically neutral framings.

### **GOVERNMENTAL ACCEPTANCE OF ACTIVISTS' DISCURSIVE FRAMING OF SKATEBOARDING AS A DOMESTICATED, YOUTHFUL ACTIVITY.**

Reflecting advocates' success in framing skateparks youthful amenities for domesticated populations, Seattle government has shown significant (albeit periodically fluctuating) discursive and material support for these facilities. Not only have a number of important political actors lined up behind skateparks, including the Mayor and a number of influential City Council members, but the very rationales for doing so offered by those political actors have reflected activists' discursive framings.

Much, though not all, of this support is attributable to advocates' success in positioning the figure of the youthful skater as a discursive proxy.

By 2004, activists' efforts in response to the threat to the Ballard Bowl placed skateparks on Seattle's political agenda, securing a level of support that, while fitful and erratic, has largely continued unabated. The uneven nature of this support – and City government's acceptance of advocates' framing of skateparks as a space of domesticated, gender and class neutral youth – was both initiated and typified by Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels' early decision to support a public space for skaters in Ballard. Overruling a ten-year long community based planning process for the creation of the Ballard Commons Park by executive fiat, Nickels announced his support for the skatepark during a radio interview three days before the parks department board of commissioners was scheduled to make a final determination about on the fate of the Commons. As Nickels commented, "I like the skate park. It has proven to be a very active and positive place. It's gotten younger parks users really engaged in the community . . .I've come to the conclusion it ought to be part of the permanent park," (Jenniges, 2004a).

Nickels' comment – as one of the very first public statements in favor of Seattle's skatepark advocacy movement by a governmental leader – demonstrates several characteristics that would soon come to dominate official discourses about skateboarding. Reflecting advocates' discursive framings, the Mayor's statement officially sanctions advocates efforts to identify skateparks as a youth amenity. Equally importantly, Nickels posits skateboarders as a domesticated population. By recognizing young skaters as being "really engaged in the community" the Mayor is

able to safely take the next step in accepting such youthful populations as a permanent part of Ballard's public space. In essence, Nickels endorses an official view that accepts the viability of recognizing a "home" for skaters precisely because they are non-gendered young people who are safely integrated within the broader supervisory community of adult authority. And because the mayor directly supervises the Parks department, Nickel's support guaranteed a space for skateboarders in Ballard.

While it has become common for both the Mayor and City Councilors to voice their support for skateboarding and public skateparks, these public figures inevitably reproduce an inescapably domesticated vision of the constituencies they claim to be serving. As Councilmember Jan Drago noted during the February 15, 2006 discussion approving the creation of a citywide skatepark master-plan,

I wasn't all that familiar with skateboarding prior to (the decision to exclude skateboarders from Westlake Park) but then I had a couple of grandsons that had skateboards and we would take them to Seattle Center to skateboard and they were young and they were small. It took them awhile before they kind of waded in. They watched the older people and eventually took a turn and learned to skateboard. So I have been a big fan of skateboarding now for quite some time. And when the skateboard park was threatened . . . I was there for the petitions and what I remember so vividly about that was the people that came to sign those petitions. They weren't just skateboarders. They were people from kids to senior citizens. And the seniors would say that they just liked to come and watch. Which I could relate to because I haven't skateboarded but I love to just go and watch. So I strongly believe that um it is a sport that has emerged over time and it is a new sport but more than that even though I recognize it is a wide range of, wide age range of people that skateboard, it is fairly young, younger group.

Drago's justification for her support of the master-plan encapsulates much of the governmental framing of skateparks from 2004 onwards. Again we may

see a reproduction of advocates' initial framing of skateparks as a primarily youthful space, with the Councilmember reiterating that although the constituency includes a "wide age range," it is primarily a gender-neutral, "fairly young, younger group." To this framing, however, Drago adds several additional layers. Skaters, while potentially including people of all ages, are evocatively described as including those who are "young" and "small."

Skateparks are framed as places where people of all ages, including grandparents, are safe, comfortable and happy to watch older people mentoring and providing a good example to such potentially vulnerable populations. And because skaters and their environs are offered as tame, understandable, spatially bounded, disciplined, orderly, and in-place – that is, because they are offered as domesticated populations in domesticated spaces – they are proffered as an unproblematic public good to be wholeheartedly supported. Further amplifying this vision of skateparks as nurturing environment, Drago adds a discourse of skaters as children constructively engaging with the political process as a byproduct of their attachment to place. Mayor Nickels reinforced the discursive tie between domesticated youthful skaters and civic engagement through skatepark activism, as reported in a local newspaper article:

Nickels says he's convinced the kids are right about the need to save the bowl — and he's been smitten by their foray into civic activism. "I've been very impressed with the young people advocating for the bowl. They've been very articulate and effective. They haven't just sat back and complained that no one listens," he said (Young, 2004).

The City's (and particularly City Council's) discursive embrace of skateparks as a youthful space for a domesticated population is largely attributable to advocates' success in pre-framing the issue. Beyond the correspondence between the terms by which advocates described the effort to "save" the Ballard Bowl and subsequent expressions of support by the Mayor and City Council, there is evidence that advocates' framings directly impacted the very way that City officials understand skateparks and skateboarders. For example, a highly positioned official who works closely with a number of City Councilors attributed the Council's support to advocates' effectiveness in representing their constituency. When asked in interview about whom the Council understands that constituency to include, however, the official answered:

I think primarily it is youth. I think there is recognition by those council members that there aren't a lot of activities for youth in the city that you can do if you are under 21. And if you are under, I don't know, ten, there's lots to do. There are parks everywhere. Almost every park has a play area. It's great for little kids. It is that intermediate area where you are sort of, "well, there's athletic fields, and there's ... computers, and video games. And so, I think there is certainly a recognition that we don't provide enough in the way for youth. Enough activities or positive places for youth development.

#### **STAFF LEVEL ADOPTION OF OFFICAL FRAMINGS OF SKATEBOARDERS**

While discourses supporting the creation of skateparks as spaces for gender-neutral, domesticated, and youthful populations originated with proclamations of support from the Mayor and the City Council, they were quickly adopted throughout the public-space bureaucracy of the Parks department. Nowhere was this more evident than in Parks' efforts in support of the city-wide master-planning process for

skateparks. At the urging of advocates, and in response to the project-by-project struggles over siting every individual skatepark to date – including Ballard, Lower Woodland, and SeaSk8 – the City Council’s decided to fund a master-plan to locate potential skateparks throughout the city. Modeled on Portland, Oregon’s skatepark master-plan, conducted by a planning firm consultant, and overseen by a volunteer citizen “Task Force,” the public portion of that planning process kicked off with a series of public presentations and information sessions in six different locations in the city over the course of 2006.

On one hand, all of the City’s public presentations in support of the master-plan orally acknowledged recent statistics portraying the average skater to be 14 years old and almost exclusively male. On the other hand, the thrust of the presentations made during the three initial public meetings in June, and the three follow-up meetings in October 2006 offered a very different framing of skaters’ identities. In keeping with both high level governmental discourses, and advocates’ portrayals of the constituencies of the skatepark movement,<sup>19</sup> those presentations portrayed a youthful, non-gendered, and thoroughly domesticated vision of skaters as a means of rendering skateparks less threatening and more politically palatable. As the city’s planning consultant stated during one of the October meetings:

Who are skateboarders? Raise your hand if you are a skateboarder. If you look around the room, you see a lot of different kinds of people, you see young kids, you see medium-aged kids, you see teenage boys. So I think there’s a constant misconception about who skateboarders are, and I think that it’s really important to acknowledge that it’s a wide range of people and a wide range of ages and its boys and its girls, so you should just keep that in mind.

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<sup>19</sup> Several advocates from the SPAC were members of the supervisory “Task Force” including myself.

These themes of skateboarding as an activity for a wide range of people, but especially as a way for younger people to safely socialize with and be supervised by older people were further developed during the consultant's presentations in the first set of June meetings:

I think it really helps to build bonds between generations. If you go to a skatepark on any given day, you will see lots of older people helping out younger people; it's a really great opportunity for people to interact with one another ... You will always see lots of older people hanging out, and they're really excited about being able to watch people perform their sport. It gives different users of public space the chance to interact with one another, so everybody has a chance to kind of break down barriers that people have with one another. It's a safe place for people to hang out, and it's legal.

An image of skaters as an especially domesticated population is offered through this official discourse. Skaters are seen not as gangs of highly mobile, disorderly, and asocial male teens who have appropriated the adult spaces of the city as their own dangerous and unpredictable playground. Rather, they are presented as deeply integrated within a larger, multigenerational and mature community that, by providing a home for skateboarders, is able to render them safe, enclosed, knowable, subject to guidance and discipline – in a word, domesticated.

Throughout both sets of public presentations, visual representations of skaters reproduced non-gendered, youthful, and domesticated identities. Each presentation leads off with, and continues to use as a visually organizing image, a single photo of a helmeted, white, pre-teen, male skater in a transition environment. For example, the May meetings used this image of a pre-teen skater as a unifying visual motif,



Figure 10: Photo of young transition skater used in May meetings.

Another image of the same skater was used for similar effect in the October meetings:

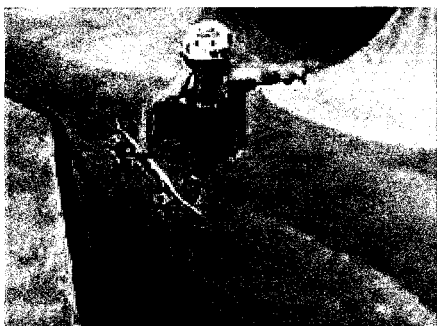


Figure 11: Photo of same young transition skater used in October meetings.

In both sets of presentations, these images are used repetitively to mark the beginning of major thematic transitions. At the same time both photos of the young skater – with his large white helmet reminding the viewer of both his safety mindedness and, by diminishing the visual size of his body, his youth – serve to visually reinforce a domesticated image of skateboarders. Taking off from this theme of skaters as already domesticated, the discussion of “who skaters are” in each of the six meetings was accompanied by this slide:

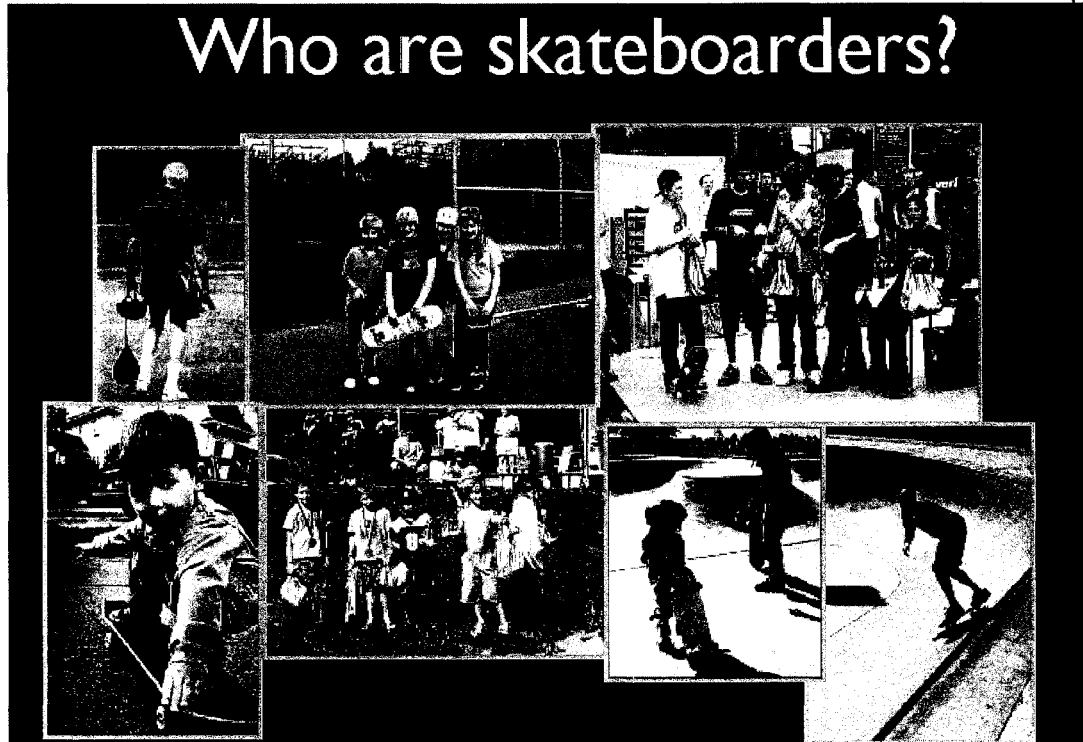


Figure 12: “Who are Skateboarders” slide from Master Plan presentation.

The slide provides a rich framing of identities, including images and themes that were common throughout the Parks department’s public communications about skatepark projects. A cluster of teenage boys is shown at the top right, representing both the most common sight at a public skatepark and the most potentially troubling population in light of long-standing fears over the presence of groups of teenage males in public space. This image, however, is recontextualized, and minimized in impact by a much broader range of visual identities. As only one of three photos of social groups – including a group of teenage girls and an array of elementary school age children with medals and other prizes ostensibly awarded for skateboarding – the visual impact and demographic significance of this group is diminished while an image of social integration and belonging is reinforced. The significance of the male-teen demographic is further downplayed by images of especially young skaters (bottom

left, and middle-bottom right), and female skaters, one of whom is instructing an especially tiny girl. To complete the tableaux of non-threatening identities, the very first and last images on the slide (if reading as a page of text) are two older, male skaters clearly marked for their maturity by their prominently balding heads. Thus, a vision of youthful, socialized, integrated, and understandable youth is further domesticated by the implicit presence and supervision of wise, older, male role models.

These images of safe, youthful, and domesticated skaters are further reinforced throughout the presentation by photos explicitly demonstrating the multi-generational compatibility of young skaters and older people. For examples, images such as this,



Figure 13: Image of older skater mentoring children.

showing an adult skater wearing full protective gear while apparently mentoring two young children, are matched by images such as those from a slide from the June meetings which includes an oft-reproduced image showing two elderly white women who would occasionally stop by the original Ballard Bowl as spectators:

# Skateparks aren't just about skateboarding

Create a safe, integrated space for youth and observers  
Fosters positive interaction between different users of public space



Figure 14: Spectator slide from Master Plan presentations

Like Councilmember Drago's description of enjoying watching her grandsons skate, this slide and its constituent photos offers a powerful argument that skaters are both part of and non-threatening to gendered and potentially vulnerable populations.

Throughout both sets of presentations similar discourses of safety – both skateboarding's safety to its participants and non-skaters safety from skaters – were emphasized. In every presentation, a slide was offered with statistics from a 2002 Journal of Trauma report, placing reported skateboarding injuries per-participant significantly behind such conventional sports as hockey, baseball, and bicycling (Kyle *et al.*, 2002). Equally importantly, skaters were presented as safe populations who bring with them none of the dangers traditionally associated with groups of male adolescents in public space. Attempting to preclude competing framings of skateparks

as spaces of criminal youth creating disorder, the City's presentations foreground positive experiences from other Puget Sound municipalities, such as this quote from the October public meetings:

So what I did was, I talked to 12 different skateparks and I did, um, people who managed the skateparks, and the jurisdictions and then also I had the opportunity to do a bunch of neighborhood surveys of people who lived next to skateparks to try to find out what it was really like for them living there. And so what are these perceptions? People think they attract criminals, are full of trash, they're noisy, are places of drinking and drug use, they're graffiti-ridden and they're dangerous. So what's the reality of that? There's no evidence at all that skateparks attract criminals or contribute to serious crime, and of all the people I talked to, not anyone ever said that there was any problem with increased crime around the skatepark. Trash does occur, but it's manageable, and the reason trash does occur is that it's the most heavily used park, a lot of times in the system, because they are so popular. So despite the need for increased management, people repeatedly said that they still would put in the skateparks and that they liked them and it was a great community investment.

Such portrayals of a safe, gender neutral, youthful, and domesticated population to be served by skateparks were far from inadvertent. Instead they represented a conscious effort on the part of Parks Department staff and subcontractors to present skateboarding in general, and the master-planning process more specifically as non-threatening and attractive to a much broader public than has traditionally been statistically represented among the sport. Specific efforts were made to portray skateboarding as less of a male and teen dominated sport. For example, the final draft skatepark master-plan presented to City Council at the conclusion of the Task Force's work included the following image reproducing a letter in support of the master-plan from a twelve-year old boy:

Hello, My name is Chris Noll  
 I am writing you this letter  
 to ask for the Denny Middle  
 School Athletic Complex and the  
 Roxhill park Skateparks to be  
 put in.

I really love the Sport  
 Skateboarding and I don't get to  
 practice my dream of being a  
 Skateboarder. I have to travel  
 over 15 miles to get to the  
 closes skatepark. With my parents  
 busy schedules they have no  
 time to take me to a skatepark.  
 If these parks are put in me  
 and my friends could skateboard  
 down to the parks and skate  
 all day.

Thankyou for reading my  
 letter and I hope for the  
 best of news involving the  
 two skateparks I recomended.  
 Thanks again.

-Chris Noll  
 12 years old.

Figure 15: Letter from young skater as reproduced, with caption, in Master Plan.

Following the “executive summary” and immediately preceding the table of contents, this letter was the only public comment reproduced in full, let alone photographically. As such it represents a powerful and particular telling effort to frame skateparks as a serving a pre-teen population. This sense of youthfulness is heightened both by the signature line, and by the reproduction of the artifact of the letter itself, with its

creasing, slightly uneven writing, and dog-eared perforations suggesting a page torn from a school notebook. Beyond reinforcing the youthfulness of the author of this comment – and by implication the core population to be served by skateparks – the letter also posits such localized facilities as essential to enabling a young person to achieve their dreams. The reproduction of the letter also explicitly serves to proffer skateparks as a concrete solution to the critique that “Seattle hates kids.” The proposed network of skateparks promises to reduce the demands faced by parents who are already stretched by the financial challenges of raising a family in Seattle. A similar effort was made during the master-planning process to present skateboarding as gender neutral. After being shown a preliminary draft of the first public presentation, one Task Force member commented during a public meeting that he saw a lack of sufficient images of female skaters; “if I am the father of four daughters, this presentation does not make me happy.” The next draft of the presentation was revised accordingly to provide more prominent visual representation of girls.

Much as it steered clear of framing skateboarding as an exclusively or even predominantly male teen activity, the Task Force likewise avoided portraying skateboarding as a white activity while simultaneously projecting a safe, de-racialized image for that activity. In all likelihood, race was a substantial consideration in choosing the members of the Task Force, which included skateboarders of Vietnamese and African-American descent and a black representative of a City agency. Moreover, advocates and parks staffers alike internally circulated such anecdotal evidence of skateboarding’s multi-ethnic popularity as a recent pro-skateboarding music video by African-American rap artist Lupe Fiasco titled “Kick, Push” that prominently features

and celebrates black skateboarders. Even so, none of the documents produced during the master-planning process – including the two public presentations – presented significant images of non-white skaters. The only image of non-white skaters in the first presentation from June 2006 was from a photo of a skatepark in Japan, and the only image of African-Americans was an image of a group of kids playing basketball. Similarly, the only image of non-white skaters in the second presentation from October was a slide taken at a public meeting of a group of teen boys that includes one Asian and two Hispanic kids. And although a uniformly white vision of the young skater was reproduced through the planning process, both the task force and the planning firm were cautious to avoid any statements that could suggest racial exclusivity in skateparks. Instead, the presence of three non-white task-force members served as a tacit endorsement of skateboarding as a multi-racial activity, at the same time white images of skateboarders reinforced the general sense of skateboarding as a safe, youthful, and Anglo-normative middle class activity.

As with the elected officials who had enabled the master planning process, the task force's efforts to present skateboarders as young, white, gender-neutral and domesticated was not inadvertent. Rather, the presence of several dedicated and aggressive advocates, including myself, guaranteed that the task force envisioned its' goal as finding and promoting as many potential playground-like sites for skateparks as possible. In order to achieve this goal, the task force explicitly sought to forward an image of skateparks that was as politically safe as possible. And this meant working to offer an image of skateboarders as actually being safe and domesticated.

G – Skaters as Threat – Skateparks as spaces of Danger

“We have had enough killings for a skateboard park to go in this neighborhood”  
– E-mailed public comment to city-wide skatepark master-planning process.

Notwithstanding the efforts of activists and the City of Seattle to discursively frame skateboarding as a domesticated activity in promoting skateparks, these discourses were soon aggressively met by counter-discourses contesting the portrayal of skaters’ identities as youthful, gender-neutral, and safe. In the same way the lack of young people in the political process opened up the discursive field for pro-skatepark adults and institutions to posit a positively value laden identity for skaters, this same opening has also allowed skatepark opponents to frame a powerfully negative set of identities for the very same group. As McCann has noted, “ideologies are never complete and elements of the discourses that underpin them are often appropriated and reassembled in combination with other elements by opposing forces in order to present an alternative vision of the future of a place” (2002, p. at 387). This has certainly been the case with Seattle’s public skatepark projects, as the greatest struggles have been framed as debates over what it means to have young people such as skaters in various public spaces.

A large number of skatepark opponents have explicitly challenged the discursive framing of skaters as a gender and race neutral population. As one e-mailed public comment to Seattle’s skatepark master-planning process noted, “[t]he meeting I was in, a presenter stated that skaters are comprised of ‘Grandparents, Mothers, and people of all ages.’ It is my opinion that this appears to be a bit glossy and does not reflect accurate data.” Another e-mailed public comment stated,

A few girls and a few adults does not make this a diverse sport? Especially since studies show that even girls who skateboard do so much less frequently than boys. It was also disturbing to see pictures of very young children on skateboards when the medical community universally recommends that children 5 and under should NOT participate in skateboarding. Why not admit that the Parks Dept. has chosen to promote an activity that is preferred by teen and preteen boys?

Similarly, one e-mailed comment demonstrated skepticism about the accuracy of City portrayals of skateboarding as a non-racialized sport.

on a side note, I noted that my photo was taken by one of the volunteer members [at the public meeting for the master-plan]. i do not know why my photo was taken or what the photo will be used for. as a younger non-white individual i am always concerned when my photo is taken especially since there were only about 5 non-white people like me at the meeting and 1 in the slide presentation; i do not want to be used for your marketing purposes.

This concern with the accuracy of the city's discursive framing of skaters' identities both extended to, and bolstered opponent's skepticism about the need and appropriateness of skateparks in general. For example, two other e-mails argued, "I don't understand why the city feels the need to create several skateboard parks in Seattle when their use will almost exclusively attract only young males," and "I was disappointed to hear of what seems like a more limited use (mainly teenagers and mainly boys)." The inference from these comments is that, because skateparks draw a much more limited demographic than promoters' are portraying, they are less deserving of public support. Some comments even directly equated the gendered nature of skating as exclusionary, disruptive and disorderly, as with this letter to Parks commenting on the master-planning process, "[w]hy disrupt places that are lovely and

now utilized by young and old by inserting an ugly space designed to create noise by a very narrow segment of the population.”

Even where comments were not explicitly opposed to the creation of more skateparks, the gendered nature of their users was often implicitly or explicitly mobilized to oppose a specific site. One e-mailed public comment argued that, “I respect what you are trying to achieve in offering something different for a segment of the population (i.e. predominantly young boys/men) that needs an outlet. However, I do not agree that a skateboard park is the right approach [for my neighborhood].” The gendered framing of skateboarding goes beyond recognizing that, statistically, the vast majority of skaters are male. Rather, by suggesting that this is a population that has a particular need for an “outlet” a very specific allusion is being made to long-standing associations between male teenagers and various forms of gendered disorder and danger in public space. This articulation of “skater as teen male” and thus “skater as dangerous and disorderly” has recurred during every public debate over Seattle’s various skatepark projects. For example, opponents of specific projects and sites have typically conflated skaters and skateparks with a variety of other “problem” teen populations. After Cowan Park – a largely upper-class neighborhood immediately to the north of the University of Washington – had been named as a potential skatepark location during the master-planning process, most of the neighborhood’s objections were framed in terms of the myriad dangers posed by young people. Thus, the threat from skaters was either implicitly or explicitly equated with past difficulties encountered with a variety of young people, almost all of whom were presumed to be “Ave. rats” – transient teens that populate the University Avenue

commercial district near the University of Washington and to the South of Cowan

Park. As one e-mail from a local resident argued:

We have CHRONIC problems with homeless teens and others who congregate in our park...and create an intimidating environment for small kids, etc... We have all witnessed drug dealing, drug use, vandalism, and graffiti on the playground and around the park. Late night parties are common with loud screaming, breaking bottles, and destruction of park property. . . . Once last year a dead pig was used to vandalize the playground leaving blood all over the slide and climbing structure. A skate park would give these people another reason to come to the park . . .

Here a skatepark is posited as yet another space that would draw the archetypes of dangerous youth, namely drug dealers, vandals and the homeless. While no direct link between skateparks and such illegal behavior is explicitly offered, the implication is clear: skateparks are spaces for teens, and teens in our neighborhood are the embodiment of trouble. One Cowan Park resident typified this aggressive linkage between the implicitly male and teen identities of skaters and the even more troubling identities of young-adult crime in a phone call to a Parks department staffer: “[i]f you let the skaters in, you are just opening our neighborhood to pushers, pimps, pedophiles, and prostitutes.” Similar concerns were voiced through electronic correspondence by residents living near proposed skatepark sites at Northgate (“Think of all the drunks that will be making that a haven”), Genesee park (facility would exacerbate ongoing problems including “brutal fights between teens, drug use and dealing, cars driving recklessly around the area ... and loss of late night noise. ...I’d hate to see a skatepark built that would just attract more unsupervised teens to our area at all hours”), and every other site that received significant negative feedback. By

discursively framing skaters' identities as essentially criminal identities, opponents were able to similarly frame skateparks as spaces of inherent danger and crime. As one e-mail comment to the proposed Genesee Park site argued, "[w]e have had enough killings, gunshots, etc. for a skateboard park to go in this neighborhood. . . . We have enough teenagers and enough noise already."

Even where skatepark opponents do not explicitly equate skateboarders with crime, the connection between young people and disorder is frequently drawn through the coded language of "noise." By framing their objections in terms of the noise ostensibly generated by skateboarding and its practitioners, these political actors are able to imply a greater and more dangerous range of social disorder while avoiding an explicit condemnation of all children as criminal. At every public meeting concerning Seattle's various skatepark projects, objections were typically framed much as this statement by one of the leaders of neighborhood resistance to the Lower Woodland skatepark: "We live right here across from the skatepark [pointing to map] . . . While I am all in favor of having skateparks, I am concerned that this one is just going to be too loud." Such comments have compared the noise generated by skateboarders to a "jet engine," a "locomotive," and a "racecourse," even though the actual noise generated by skateboarding in a smooth concrete skatepark is comparable to the level of sound generated by a dishwasher (Lemmon, 2006). The tendency of residents unfamiliar with skateboarding to aggressively argue that a skatepark would be "too loud" suggests that noise has typically been grouped with and used to stand-in for a broader range of disorder. The tendency to conflate sound levels and much deeper problems was typified by this e-mail comment from one Genesee Park resident:

My wife, 2 children and I moved to Columbia city 3 years ago and bought a new house across from the Rainier Community Center. The first year was a challenging one with a lot of gang activity (drugs, alcohol, fights, gun shots) on the Center's parking lot. Thanks to many neighbors participation and lobbying as well as the city and police's decisive involvement, we have finally reached a much safer state. . . .[The skatepark] is going to contribute massive noise pollution to the neighborhood (with skating come boom boxes, rap, parties, drinking and before you know it we are back where we began).

Thus, the "massive noise pollution" represented by the skaters provides a code for a much more threatening set of behaviors, including substance abuse, and even gang violence. A Cowan Park neighbor offered a similar analysis in a letter to Parks:

I have seen the park become a place where soccer, badmitten [sic], volleyball, crochet and just plain fun are enjoyed by all. Why anyone would want to bring noisy skateboarders from University Ave. here ... is a mystery. .. It's very sad for someone like myself after the countless hours I worked to dump the druggies for the use of civilized people only to be faced with noise, candy rappers, coke cans, needles, and concrete.

Here skateboarding is contrasted to other, ostensibly "noisy" but conventional athletic activities such as Soccer in its association with a more sinister range of problems including drug use. Given the conflation between "skateboarders from University Ave.," and "druggies," the description of skaters' "noise" stands in for a variety of problem behaviors so severe that they cannot be encompassed within the population of "civilized people." For some like the author of this e-mail, the "noise" of the skatepark served as a semiotic indicator of a greater range of social ills beyond criminality: "Lake City already has too much concrete and noise that detracts from the neighborhood. There are multiple car dealerships, a strip club, and a new gun shop. None of these are conducive to supporting a good community in which to raise a family." Perhaps most tellingly, another e-mail opposing the master-plan effectively

conceded that concerns about noise were a short-hand for youthful disorder and low-level criminality

It's true that skateboards on a properly constructed concrete skatepark make less noise than skateboards on city streets and sidewalks. However, according to [a study from Oregon entitled "The Urban Grind", the] skatepark contributed to nuisances such as litter, noise, and vandalism. Noise was usually related to music and yelling rather than skateboard noises.

The discourse of "noise" as signifying much more profound levels of youthful disorder and danger has been so widespread that skatepark supporters have attempted to deconstruct that term, and thus counter the prevalence of its use. As one electronic comment to the master-planning process argued,

I know that one of the chief concerns some people had in putting a skate park near residential housing is noise. I used to live on Delridge right across from the community center and the soccer field and know first hand that the noise from a soccer field or baseball diamond is far greater than that from a skate park. Between the whistle blowing and shouting of a soccer or baseball game and the sliding of skate trucks on coping, I'll take the skate park noise every time.

In a local news article, another advocate similarly challenged the link between the discourse of noise and broader concerns with criminality and disorder: "When they [the Lower Woodland opponents] compare noise generated from the skate park or any other athletic activity, they're the same. I think the situation is the fear there's evil children and all this evil stuff is going to happen, and that's been disproven," (Chansanchai, 2006). The tendency of resistance to Seattle's various skatepark projects to be discursively reframed around youth identities has been so great that public comments in support of individual sites have increasingly endeavored to

address prevalent negative discourses of noise, disorder, and crime. As one e-mailed comment in support of the Genesee park site in the master-plan stated:

At a public meeting last night, some of those present from my neighborhood were opposed to the development of a new skatepark in our local park (Genesee) on the basis of what I consider to be outdated and erroneous stereotypes about skateparks and skateboarders as a group. I won't waste your time listing their concerns, but to sum it up – skateparks: loud and ugly, and skaters: disrespectful criminals.

H – “If your City Doesn’t Have a Skatepark, Your City is a Skatepark” - Skaters as Populations to Be Domesticated and Skateparks as Domesticating Spaces

While both the City of Seattle and skatepark advocates have aggressively promoted a gender neutral, young, safe, and domesticated discursive framing of skaters in an effort to promote public skateparks, opponents’ counter-discourse of skaters as gendered, dangerous, and lower-class have not gone unanswered. Both governmental actors and activists have implicitly incorporated the discursive framing of skaters as gendered trouble in the process of arguing that skateparks will enable the domestication of these problematic populations. By providing skaters with a “home” in which they might be fixed in space, enclosed, rendered more knowable, tied to a given community, skateparks have been framed as a powerful disciplinary tool. Although many advocates are drawn to the freedom and potential transgression that skateboarding represents, the same advocates have not hesitated to posit skateparks as a tool for domesticating young and potentially disorderly gendered populations. Or, as one advocate I interviewed explained the motivation for building a skatepark in Seattle’s poor, multiethnic River City neighborhood,

SeaMar [the owner of the skatepark site] provides health care for infants to elders. Everything including dental, medical, but their primary target is Latino and lower income families. So we kind of

convinced them to look at that piece of property as their teen and mid-youth preventative health-care outreach. So that this would be about exercise and community, because with communities in Seattle, like the Central District, Capitol Hill, White Center, there is gang activity. And it is not just Latino. There are Asian gangs. There are African American gangs. And we have got people fighting for turf in South Park and Georgetown. Let's try to catch these kids when they are ten and get them into doing something that really matters, and they can challenge themselves with their bodies and not with guns and bravado.

Or stated more bluntly, "If I can get even just one kid out of the hands of those Mara Salvatrucha<sup>20</sup> fuckers, this will all be worth it."

The discursive framing of skateparks as a domesticated "home" for young people who would otherwise be without a place – and thus out of place in society – has been commonplace throughout Seattle's skatepark advocacy movement. As one advocate respondent argued during our interview, "skate parks provide a place to go for some people who would otherwise have no place. Skaters from our era more often than not were outcasts. Parks provide us with a place that is our own." Activists have repeatedly stressed the domesticating effect of skateboarding to counter the very tendencies towards teen criminality mobilized by opponents, including an interviewee who has managed a local skateboard team for a number of years:

And I watch some of the kids, you know, because I been doin' it forever, and with some of the kids I... Like I used to say that to [a young team skater], I used to say you need to skate. Like, please, just keep skateboarding, cuz, of course he got into tagging and then he has been to prison and through all of that, then stabbing innocent people because, like he [stopped skateboarding]...

Another interviewee echoed these disciplinary concerns while describing growing up in the 1980's:

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<sup>20</sup> Also known as "MS-13" Mara Salvatrucha is a grouping of gangs active in both the U.S. and Central America.

I was told that I was a criminal every single day that I skated. Hell, fifty percent of my friends became criminals. You gotta give a kid something to do. You know, society basically confines a boy to a limited number of outlets – mostly sex, drugs, and crime. But structured sports are not for all kids. Skating really can keep you out of trouble.

Beyond simply promoting the capacity of skateboarding to keep a young male “out of trouble” this same respondent specifically ties this disciplinary capacity to the spatially bounded realm of the public skatepark:

You know, at the end of the day, the Ballard Bowl is not that big a deal to me. I will just go skate somewhere else, but you know those guys Rex, Adrian, and Pat [three high-school age regulars of the Ballard Bowl]. Without the bowl, what would they do? I have seen so many talented kids in skating, but the distractions just suck them down the drain [without some place to skate].

Thus, the benefits of skating are framed as largely fleeting without a permanent home for that activity.

The importance of a visible, domesticated home as a tool for keeping young skaters safe and disciplining them to be safer themselves was highlighted by this statement from an advocate to City Council in support of the master-planning process:

when I started skateboarding in 1980 I didn't have a skatepark to go to. The street was full of cars and we got kicked out of both public and private spaces. So, this irrigation ditch named Uluwatus became a de-facto skate park for my friends and I. This ditch was in the back of our valley, was tucked away from homes, hidden from society and we kinda felt like we were outcasts just because we wanted to ride skateboards. In these drainage ditches that I grew up in, this is where Larry Bertelman stole my bicycle because I wouldn't introduce him to my older sister. It's where I confronted John Doyle about shooting small birds with his BB gun so he shot me instead. It's where I saw my first dead dog up close. It's where I got a staph infection from trying to fish my board out of polluted canal water. It's where I first came into contact with drug use, got into my first fight. And when I got hurt I had to walk half a mile with a dislocated shoulder just to get to a phone. I was even chased by a boar there once, and I'm not kidding. All I

wanted to do was ride my skateboard. A new day has dawned when I go to skateparks on Bainbridge, Carnation, Milton, Mukilteo, and Ballard. It's a different story. Kids skate within a stone's throw from adult supervision. The parks are clean, safe and hospitable compared to the drainage ditch that I had to ride in. This is what we need in our city. There are tons and tons of kids out there on the streets, loading docks, abandoned buildings, parking garages, and other fringes of our urban fabric. These kids are cast away into unsavory environments because they have no other place to go.

This rich statement captures many of the themes that both advocates and the city mobilized to counter the discourse of “skaters as trouble” and to promote skateparks. Adopting critics’ portrayals of teenage boys as trouble, the descriptions of the activities within children’s improvised spaces for play reflect the very criminal identities decried by skatepark opponents. Lacking programmed spaces of their own, the children described in this passage must make do with places that are illegal and unsupervised. And without supervision, the kids revert to the same patterns of youthful trouble as mobilized by residents of Cowan Park and other areas opposing skateparks: violence, drug use and crime. Beyond reproducing dangerous youthful identities, however, this statement also posits young people as endangered by such environments, with such myriad risks as injury, disease, violence from other children, and even wild animals endemic in the profoundly undomesticated “home” of the advocate’s youth. Equating children “abandoned” to such spaces with the zero-degree architecture of places such as “the streets, loading docks, abandoned buildings, parking garages, and other fringes of our urban fabric,” this statement frames modern skateparks by comparison as profoundly domesticated spaces in which such children may be reclaimed. Rather than being “cast away”, these children are rendered in place and safe, “within a stone’s throw from adult supervision.” Because modern skateparks

are “clean, safe and hospitable,” by implication so too can skaters themselves be rendered more clean, safe, and hospitable.

Advocates’ framing of skating and skateparks as tools for the spatial discipline and domestication of skaters has largely been adopted by governmental actors as well. Incapable of waging a “war of position” against skaters due to the fluidity of skaters’ performativities, cities such as Seattle have increasingly used skate parks as a means of containing and separating skaters from other users of urban public spaces. By granting skaters’ claim to a portion of the city’s urban space, the state creates a powerful physical and discursive tool for regulation. As one respondent noted, skate parks “deny us our excuses for skating the street.” While governmental discourses rarely acknowledge negative framings of skater’s identities explicitly, the need to address and remedy the problems commonly associated with teen boys often implicitly underlies many official claims about the domesticating power of public skateparks. This tendency is illustrated by a description of the benefits of skateboarding that was included as part of the City’s presentation soliciting input during public meetings for the skatepark master-planning process:

And so, what are some of the benefits of skateboarding? ... It provides an unorganized activity for people. It’s an alternative to organized sports, which is really nice. It’s good for people who don’t want to play on teams. It also provides a bond between generations, because I know if you go to the skate park all the time you always see the older folks helping out the younger folks. You see lots of dads and kids hanging out. And that goes to also, when you go to skate parks you always see people hanging out at the skate park watching the skaters. And there are all kinds of people. These older women that are big fans at the Ballard bowl, that have been around for a long time, they are big advocates of the bowl, because they get a big kick out of watching people skate, and I think that’s really important. It just fosters a positive interaction in public spaces between different types of user

groups that wouldn't necessarily come in contact with each other.

Beyond the obvious parallels with spatially bounded, supervised, and "organized" traditional sports, skateboarding is framed here as an especially domesticating activity. In five successive sentences the potential to bring young and tacitly "wild" young people under the supervision and domesticating influence of older people is repeatedly stressed. Whether it is through the reproduction of the patriarchal structure of the atomic family with "dads and kids hanging out," or the implicit promise that teens will be supervised by "older folks" who are there to help out "younger folks," skateparks are offered as places where the socialization that transforms dangerous youth into socially acceptable young adults takes place. The promise of skateparks as domesticating spaces is further accentuated by the juxtaposition of such discursively gendered and vulnerable populations as typified by "older women" who implicitly find male teenagers in public skateparks to be sufficiently safe, spatially bounded, and understandable to actually choose to spend time in those environments.

This discourse of skateboarding as a domesticating activity in support of skateparks as domesticating spaces was repeatedly stressed in comments to the skatepark master-planning process. As one e-mail comment noted,

I am 32 years old and have skateboarded since I was 11. Skateboarding was a wonderful sport/activity to participate in while growing up, and taught me many valuable life lessons such as persistence (in all aspects of life), dedication, and the importance of accepting and participating in diverse communities. And, of course, it is an excellent form of exercise and promotes physical dexterity. Skateboarding is a very positive outlet for the youth of our city, given the many pressures and negative distractions youth face today.

Beyond simply providing youth with something to do to stay “out of trouble”, skateboarding is discursively framed as a positively transformative, socially progressive activity that leads to personal improvement and a broader tolerance for others. Similar framings of skateboarding were posited by a letter in favor of placing a skatepark in Judkins Park: “Skateboarding has really been a huge influence in my life. It is more than a past time or sport to me. It has taught me several redeeming qualities. Things like perseverance, determination, and patience, as well as artistic expression.”

The discursive positing of skateparks as domesticating spaces for the spatial segregation and integration of otherwise noisy, disorderly, and dangerous gendered populations was supported not only by older or former skaters, but also by a variety of non-skater comments to Seattle’s various projects. As one Genesee resident argued by e-mail to Parks:

Aside from areas dedicated to organized team sports, there are relatively few recreational opportunities for young people in southeast Seattle. Young people need safe places to participate in less-structured activities, and a skate park provides a great outlet for kids’ abundant energy and creativity. I believe that an increase in the number of well-designed places for kids to “blow off steam” will result in fewer young people getting in trouble...

This sense of skateboarding as a means for preventing young people from engaging in unhealthy and problematic – even criminal – behavior was reflected in a majority of statements in support of public skateparks, such as this e-mail comment to parks in support of the master-planning process: “Skateboarding is increasing in popularity by the day and if more venues are accessible for people to express themselves in this sport, it will not only keep kids off the streets and private establishments, but create a

positive environment for kids/teenagers to interact.” Again, skateparks are offered not only as an alternative to the types of criminality that – implicitly – young males are predisposed towards, but also as an environment in which skaters may be at once spatially bounded (kept “off the streets”) and appropriately socialized (by interacting in a “positive environment”).

#### I – Conclusion, Why Argue “Where” Questions as “Who” Questions?

The irony posed by attempting to influence questions of skatepark location in terms of the domesticability of skateboarders is that all such discourses, whether pro or con, serve much the same political function, namely simplifying the issues and substituting emotionally and culturally loaded tropes for an explicit analysis of how the State will or will not grant various claims to public space. The discursive figure of the young skater served to enable older, transition-oriented skatepark advocates to infuse their cause with the moral thrust of caring for youth, while avoiding much more difficult political questions such as whether the city really needs to build facilities that are primarily appealing to a narrow demographic of men in their 30s. Likewise, the discursive figure of the white, gender neutral, domesticated skater enabled the City to lend their support to skateparks in its role of champion for children while avoiding such sticky political questions as why, if the city is going to create spaces for youth, is it focusing on an activity that primarily draws 13-15 year old boys. So too, negative discursive framings allowed those opposing skateparks to avoid addressing much more difficult political questions about siting. Rather than having to actually engage in a complex analysis of what locations in a given neighborhood are more or less functional for a skatepark, the “skater as danger” allowed neighborhood opponents to

simply write off an entire group as undeserving. Regardless of who was mobilizing it – City official, advocate or opponent – the discursive figure of the young skateboarder enabled an abstraction and simplification of the complex factors implicated with any decision of how to create, allocate, and regulate public space.

The choice by proponents and opponents to frame the fight over skateparks in Seattle as a struggle over the domesticability of youth identities was not, however, a purely strategic decision. Rather, the transformation of “where” questions into “who” questions had a significant impact on what kind of spaces were at issue and the goals of actors on every side of the struggle. For advocates and the City, the acceptance of domesticated framings resulted in the promotion of sites conducive to the “playground” model for skateparks. But, because this model inevitably called for sites closer to residential neighborhoods, this discursive framing both worked to evoke resistance by residents of those neighborhoods, and prefigured the use of countervailing negative youth discourses by those neighbors. The choice of negative discursive framings for skateboarders also had a major impact on the spatial goals of skatepark opponents. By framing the resistance to individual proposed skatepark sites as an effort to exclude the “skater as danger”, opponents inadvertently set themselves up to play a zero-sum game. Either their political efforts would be 100% successful and the proposed facility in their neighborhood would be taken off the table, or they would be 100% unsuccessful, leaving them with a skatepark in their midst.

Even so, it would be a mistake to understand the role of youthful skateboarders’ identities solely as tools in resolving whether individual skatepark sites and projects would move forward. Rather, as discussed in the following chapter, the

discursive figure of the young skater also served to promote a variety of other political causes.

#### **Chapter 4: The Role of Discursive Proxies in Coding Broader Political Questions Undergirding Decisions About Public Space.**

This [skate park] seems to be part of a larger and disturbing pattern with how the city treats its neighborhoods.... [W]e're wondering where the city leader is who's going to stand up and say "this has to stop."

-Lower Woodland Neighborhood Association (2006)

While the figure of the young skater was an important tool for those both supporting and opposing skateparks, the ability of youth identities to signify a range of values and arguments also served a variety of political projects that went well beyond fairly pedestrian questions about skatepark design and siting. Rather, the discursive proxy of the young skater enabled the promotion and naturalization of political agendas and perspectives animating, implicated by, and/or only tangentially related to the issue of the needs of young people. Thus, young peoples' identities provided the battleground and weapons not only in the struggle over skateparks in Seattle, but also in much more profound questions about what kind of place Seattle should be, how it should deal with the challenges posed by its success as a post-fordist world city, and what place, if any, young people should have in the city.

The tendency of young peoples' identities to serve as proxies for a host of broader and deeper political and philosophical questions was not coincidental. Rather, the projects in support of which the discursive proxy of the young skater was mobilized tended to reflect the underlying social, economic, and political pressures in a given neighborhood or location. By mobilizing the discursive proxy, a variety of political actors were able to reframe the proposed creation of skateparks as an occasion to revisit the municipal government's response to ongoing localized changes throughout the City. And in the same way that different framings of the same youthful

identities were used by those supporting and opposing public skateparks, the discursive proxy of the skateboarder has been used on opposing sides of a variety of debates over the kind of place Seattle should be, and the policies that City government should adopt.

In this Chapter, I trace the variety of ways that the discursive proxy of the young skater has been mobilized for a host of projects that either undergird or are related to the question of whether or where to site skateparks. As with the prior chapter, I first examine the agendas underlying skatepark advocates and supporters' mobilization of youthful and domesticated skater identities, arguing that the pursuit of the "playground" model for skateparks under domesticated framings of skaters serves as a proxy for more broadly articulated class and privilege projects. The following section outlines governmental agendas behind the City's support of skateparks. The final section provides my analysis of the philosophical and political projects advanced by skatepark opponents' mobilization of negative discursive framings of young skaters' identities.

#### A – Political and Cultural Projects Animating Advocates' Adoption of the Domesticated and/or Domesticable Discursive Proxy

My core argument in this work is that a public space is never just a public space, and a skatepark is never just a skatepark. Rather, the "space" in public space means that a tangle of identities, life experiences, and understandings about property are always implicated by choices of whether and how to create and regulate such places. Likewise, the "public" in public space means that the same choices always have profound implications for how the state defines the public. This has been the

case for Seattle's skatepark advocacy movement. The ultimate goal of the PSSA, SPAC, PFS, and the various other organizations and individuals pushing for skateparks was obviously getting the state to build or allow the construction of such facilities. Underlying this push, however, was a host of assumptions about who the public to be served by the state is, how the state should serve that public, and how skaters fit in that dynamic.

### **MOBILIZATION OF THE "PLAYGROUND" AS SKATEPARK ARCHITYPE – CLASS AND PRIVILEGE**

Beyond representing what was to ultimately prove to be a fairly successful strategy for promoting skateparks as social goods, the discursive framing of skaters as youthful, gender neutral, and in need of domesticated spaces replicating the "playground" may also be seen as an implicit and veiled class project. As discussed above, from its inception the skatepark advocacy movement has been populated almost entirely by professional adults in their 30's to 40's. Members of the SPAC, PSSA, PFS and other skatepark-specific advocacy groups have included attorneys, software designers, engineers, architects, and a planner. Most – though not all – of these activists live in increasingly affluent neighborhoods such as Ballard, Magnolia, and West Seattle. Demographically I was typical of my peers in the advocacy movement as a white, male resident of the gentrified Wallingford/Green Lake neighborhood and an attorney.

The latent class-bias of the advocacy movement has been a function of several intertwining factors, including historical culture of skateboarding, the early tactics adopted by the skatepark advocacy movement, and the nature of public activism in

Seattle. Skateboarding enjoyed a monumental, “second wave” explosion of popularity in the 1980’s (Borden, 2001; Brooke, 1999). As those originally pulled into the sport as middle-class teenagers twenty years ago have aged, developed careers, and obtained a degree of financial autonomy, a small but significant number have sought to maintain contact with their interest in skateboarding through skatepark advocacy – including the core group of skatepark advocates in Seattle.

At the same time, the initial strategic decisions of the Seattle’s skatepark advocacy movement served to predetermine the continuing socio-economic status of those who have remained involved with those efforts. By focusing its efforts on petitioning the state to provide skateparks as free public amenities, the movement largely limited participation to those with substantial socio-economic means and/or educational backgrounds, due to the intensive and challenging nature of government based activism in a city like Seattle (Herbert, 2006a). After most early skatepark supporters dropped out of the movement – either unable, unwilling, or simply too burned out to maintain the almost constant pace of keeping track of and engaging with an immensely complex bureaucratic system – what remained was mostly those whose professional work schedules, socio-economic status, and experience with large, complex bureaucratic systems has allowed them to continue attempting to effect change through formal governmental channels. Unsurprisingly, this has translated into a an advocacy movement that is predominantly populated and led by professional, upper class people who are either skaters, parents of skaters, or both.

While the class bias of the advocacy movement is noteworthy on its own, it has also shaped the geographies resulting from skatepark activism. The adoption of the

“playground” model for skateparks reflected not only the youthful framing of their users, but also a pointedly classed framing as well. The decision to lay claim to locations in existing parks, surrounded by such amenities as picnic tables, grass, and playfields represented an effort to find a space not only where pre-teens could be safe but also where a certain type of class-coded parent could feel comfortable. During discussions within the advocacy movement over whether or not to accept the City’s initially proposed sites for Lower Woodland and the Elliot Street replacement for SeaSk8, parent advocates equated the suitability of a site for a skatepark with whether or not that location would be the sort of place they would choose to spend their free time, overseeing their children. Throughout these internal debates the message was clear, parent advocates were not going to approve any site as “kid friendly” unless it was not only functional, but actually appealing to people like themselves: professional, middle-class, and highly sensitive to the safety, visibility, and aesthetic characteristics of the built environment. By the time the Master-Planning process began, these latent class-codings had been internalized and were being reproduced by the leadership of the advocacy movement, including me, resulting in a city-wide effort to re-label skateboarding as a respectable activity that is on equal socio-economic footing with soccer and baseball. Recognizing the importance of claiming “reputable,” domesticated spaces to Seattle’s skatepark movement, one advocate described the “almost freakish” intensity of activist support for the Ballard Bowl as a product of the sense of community that developed, “because the bowl is accessible and in a respectable part of town,” (Young, 2004).

The cost of choosing to pursue spatial privilege for “playground” like skateparks, however, cannot be ignored. By insisting upon sites that conform to classed expectations for recreational landscapes, Seattle’s skatepark movement has consciously closed the door to a number of potential skatepark sites and projects that, while lacking in amenities appealing to much of Seattle’s increasingly gentrified population, could nonetheless have served sizable youthful populations. The possibility that there could be benefits to providing spaces free of the trappings of upper-class privilege – or even that teens might need spaces that are not highly surveilled, disciplined, and domesticated in order to navigate the transition into adulthood – has been largely dismissed out-of-hand. Accordingly, the ultimate predominance of the “playground” model cannot be seen as a neutral, or even a purely politically expedient choice. Rather, it must be understood, in part, as part of an ongoing process by which even the “outlaw” spaces of Seattle have become increasingly ordered and domesticated within a classed vision for the city.

#### **SKATEPARK AS DOMESTICATING SPACE AND WELFARIST APPROACHES TO PUBLIC SPACE**

Advocates’ claims that skateparks will discipline and domesticate young skaters both arise out of and reproduce profoundly welfarist approaches to government. Many advocates, including me, would shift quickly and easily between framing skaters as either domesticated or potentially dangerous but for the domesticating influence of skateparks, depending on the political expediency of the moment. Even so, discursive framings of skateparks as domesticating “homes” for otherwise disorderly populations come from and evoke a very different set of political

perspectives and agendas. By positing public space as a disciplinary mechanism of the state, discourses of skateparks as domesticating spaces spring from, and serve to replicate profoundly welfarist political philosophies.

Typically, welfarism is based on the premise that the purpose of government should be the protection and advancement of the well-being of all people (Posner, 2006). Such approaches to government have historically focused on the provision of health, social, housing, and educational services in the name of protecting and improving the material conditions of life for the most vulnerable members of an unequal society so as to enable their full participation as citizens (M. Brown & Staeheli, 2003). In the modern state, such welfarist projects are inseparable from disciplinary projects by which the distribution of social goods is intended to be accompanied by the disciplining and transformation of the recipients – ostensibly socializing them so as to join the mainstream of society (Hartman, 2005). In this context, the support of public skateparks as domesticating spaces may be seen as part of a classic welfarist conception of governmentality. Skateparks redistribute a social good (a parcel of public space) to a vulnerable and ostensibly marginalized population, namely young people, in the hope of altering how those populations behave and interact with the broader society.

Throughout Seattle's various skatepark projects, discourses of "skaters as trouble," have been expropriated by activists and supporters in order to reframe them as populations that should be provided a space of their own in order to enable them to more fully reach their potential. Thus, e-mailed comments such as "[w]e believe that any facility that provides youngsters a healthy outlet for their energy is desirable. We

fully support locating a skatepark at the Park 'n Ride location near Northgate,” and “[i]nterest in things like skateboarding, skating, or biking are great alternatives to video games or the such,” suggest the need to use recreation to not only provide specialized services to a youthful demographic, but to protect them from unhealthy activities. Likewise, a number of actors stressed the capacity of such public programs to draw skaters into more conventional economic and social life-paths. For example, this e-mail comment supporting a site at Seattle’s Gasworks Park stated,

I lived in southern California for five years and worked in the surf and skate industry. I saw firsthand what a positive impact skateboarding (and access to it) can have. One of the great things about skateboarding (and surfing) is that friendships are made by people from all walks of life who have come together to share a common bond. It’s neat to think that a ten year old kid could make friends with a 40 year old professional – they may never cross paths otherwise, but at the skatepark a mentorship or even just a little bit of inspiration could begin.

While tacitly arguing that young people need to gain access to upper-class social connections and mores in order to fully become integrated into society, this comment simultaneously offers skateparks as a space in which such integration may take place through “mentorship” and even “inspiration” from such solidly disciplined individuals as middle-age “professionals.”

While the initial discursive framing of skateparks as a facility for youthful populations coded those projects as concomitant with welfarist approaches to discipline and social development, specifically racialized and classed youth identities have played a particularly important role in promoting and supporting skateparks. Beyond simply providing a recreational activity, advocates have repeatedly coded skaters’ identities as classed and raced such that public skateparks provide an urgently

needed outlet for those who would otherwise be faced with the Hobson's choice of either skating illegally or not skating at all and thus getting pulled into a cycle of criminality. Thus, the parents of several children who skate wrote a letter in favor of a proposed skatepark in their multiethnic Genesee Park neighborhood, arguing:

Southeast Seattle is home to a disproportionately high number of families living at or below the poverty line. Since Genesee Playfield is less than two miles from Garfield, Cleveland, and Rainier Beach high schools, and a short distance from several bus lines, getting to the park would be easy for those without a car. Furthermore, skateboarding is not as equipment-intensive as most other sports, and is therefore relatively inexpensive.

While race is not explicitly mentioned, geographic and cultural context makes the classed and raced codings of the neighbors' plea explicit: this is a sport that could serve a population that is uniquely entitled to social benefits under classic welfarist concepts of government, namely young, poor, and black people. The articulation of young skaters' class and race entitlements to such specialized facilities was frequently coded within the rubric of access to an automobile or a parent with both time and a car, with a number of comments echoing this e-mail statement in support of a number of proposed Master Plan sites in West Seattle: "I am fortunate to have a car but very few kids in the West Seattle area actually have that luxury." Likewise, a number of comments contextualized skateparks as just the start to providing such "low cost" activities to economically vulnerable youth populations. As another e-mail comment in support of the master-planning process argued,

Additionally, special efforts should be made to ensure that youth of all socio-economic backgrounds are able to participate in the activity. Skateboarding, while a bargain compared to many sports, can still be expensive. Perhaps Parks could rent out skateboards from community centers for a nominal fee. Or students from low-income families could

qualify for free or discounted generic equipment, if they are doing well in school.

Beyond reflecting such classic welfarist principles as the governmental provision of social and economic goods to the vulnerable, this comment also manifests the powerfully disciplinary drive within such welfarist programs. Not only is recreation latently tied to the reformation of the marginalized subject to social norms, the provision of such recreation is to serve as an incentive for the subject's participation in more structured and institutionalized forms of discipline, namely "doing well in school."

Skateparks have even offered as a means by which poorer, racialized youth might find a path up the socio-economic ladder. One e-mail in support of the master-planning process offered this idea:

At the last District Council meeting, members knew Garfield and Judkins were being considered. They discussed the popularity of skate boarding, liability, public safety prevention, maintenance, and what were the benefits to the neighborhood. An interesting note was, how about supporting a neighborhood skate board shop run by neighborhood youth and shop might serve as a economic develop [sic] project for the youth.

At once recognizing the mainstream industry that has developed around skateboarding and the opportunity gap facing children in Seattle's traditionally poorer, African-American neighborhoods, skateparks are offered as a means for the state to potentially assist in the economic achievement of an underserved population.

### **SKATEPARK AS DOMESTICATING SPACE AND RESISTANCE TO PATRIARCHY**

In keeping with disciplinary, welfarist approaches to public space underlying the framing of skateparks as domesticating spaces, a number of advocates and

supporters have posited skateparks as places that enable the de-gendering of skateboarding culture. By creating a domesticated, safe, and orderly home to those who want to try skateboarding or develop their skills, a number of male and female activists and supporters have promoted those facilities as the types of spaces where openings may arise to contest the reproduction of patriarchy in a historically male dominated culture.

Indirectly addressing the patriarchal nature of skateboarding, a number of women have advocated for specific sites by stressing the extent to which they envision skateparks as positive spaces for themselves and/or their daughters. As one woman wrote to Parks in support of Seattle's master-planning process:

I used to skateboard. . . .Skateboarders are sort of counterculture but they are actually a good bunch. There's a lot of support and comradeship and it does help youth who don't fit in with traditional organized sports to have an athletic outlet and also a way to express themselves. . . . I think having designated facilities is safer for skaters and others.

This comment reproduces a number of common positive discourses, including the concept of skatepark as place to build social structure and belonging, and the capacity of skateparks to domesticate youthful populations who otherwise would fall outside such disciplinary recreational activities as team sports. The author's self-identification as both woman and former skater, however, adds an additional dimension to the claim that skateparks, as "designated facilities" are "safer for skaters and others." That is, by claiming a female skater identity, the author of this comment endorses skateparks as environments that are safer for female skaters – notwithstanding the predominantly masculine and "countercultural" nature of skateboarding – and non-skater females

alike. A similar move to tacitly recognize skateparks as potentially more domesticated and thus female safe spaces may be seen in this comment sent to one of the Park's department staffers working on the master-planning process:

this is the girl you talked to on bus 28. . . id like to add that all of downtown has its presence of drugs and crime. Kids at the skatepark are not in any more danger than in other parts of town and they are not bringing more drugs and crime to the Seattle center. The skatepark is definitely the only place for kids who want to skate to hang out. Anywhere else they are viewed as vandals and hooligans.

The Seattle Center as the most urban of Seattle's skatepark sites is offered as a place that at the very least poses no greater threat than any other part of the center city to young people generally and, by implication, young women specifically. The skatepark is also framed as a realm in which young skaters, male and female, have the freedom to develop their identities free of prevalent negative discourses.

A significant number of actors have likewise argued that public skateparks enable the formation of new types of female-gendered skateboarding identities and the reformation of a male-dominated skate culture. For example, one e-mail comment to the master-planning process by a self-identified male urged more skateparks as well as,

special outreach programs should be developed to introduce and encourage female youth to participate in skateboarding. While there has been some improvement in the female participation rate, skateboarding is still predominantly done by males. Women-only camps and clinics for snowboarding and surfing have been immensely successful. Similar programs could be developed for women wishing to get into skateboarding.

At once acknowledging the frequently patriarchal nature of contemporary skateboarding culture, the author envisions skateparks as the first in a series of steps to

counter that trend and foster greater gender diversity. Beyond simply providing a place in which such active steps may be taken, however, skateparks have also been posited as spaces that, in themselves, open the possibility to challenge skateboarding as a purely masculine realm. As one River City organizer argued during our interview:

And now the committed steering committee members [for the skatepark project] are four girls from [the local middle-school] and to say that skateboarding is a predominantly white, young, adolescent, male sport is BS. It is just not true. You can ask [either of two prominent female skateboarding activists]. We are seeing more and more young girls skateboarding. And they are schooling boys. Boys are lazy. And girls are just going to take them out... These young women from [South Park] are inspiring other young women to skate. Before it is even built, it is a catalyst that is really powerful. These girls are learning to ollie over chains and jump over benches because that is what they have and they want to be rad.

Another female skater and skatepark activist I interviewed explained, “girls don’t want to skate a loading dock, or risk getting busted by the cops in order to develop her skills. Unless you have a safe place to learn, women are not going to get into skateboarding.” For this advocate, the promotion of skateparks was seen as concomitant with carving out an increasing space for women in a sport that – due to its association with spatial transgression – has remained emphatically gender exclusive.

### **SKATEPARK AS DOMESTICATING SPACE AND PROTECTION OF CAPITAL**

In the same way discourses of skaters as trouble have been adopted by skaters, activists, and a number of Seattle residents in order to argue that skateparks are needed to domesticate, and de-gender skateboarding, these negative identities have also been mobilized to reframe skateparks as a positive alternative to the potential of skateparks

to damage and implicitly critique the city as a space of property and capital. Acknowledging the disorder created by unbounded urban skateboarding, an increasingly important discourse among advocates and supporters argues that negative impacts can only be prevented by providing skaters with a domesticated “home” set apart from the rest of the city. Throughout my involvement with the movement, I and the other major advocates have repeatedly offered skateparks to governmental decision makers, development corporations, neighborhood organizations, and the public as a cure to the property damage and disorder that accompanies street skating. In fact, the perception that non-skaters can best be reached by framing skateparks as the “fix” that for once and for all will clear skateboarders out of adult spaces is virtually universal among advocates.

This perception was reflected in the comments of one Seattle area skatepark designer and builder who noted during an interview that one of the main reasons for the promulgation of skateparks in Washington has been,

because of all the shopping malls and the kids street skating. That’s why they needed the skateparks. If the kids never would have had started hitting all the rails, we’d have none of this shit. It was a blessing in disguise. The people in the commercial districts and the shopping malls were like, “Hey! We can’t take any more of this. Get these kids a skatepark.” They’d go through all the political channels to get it going (Murphy 2006).

Likewise, a number of skaters recognized that, by asking for public skateparks, they offer to remove themselves from areas in which they would engage in property damage. As one teenager wrote in support of the Lower Woodland skatepark project, “what are these neighbors complaining about. The noise [sic]? Its better than kids grinding up ledges in front of stores around Greenlake. I see it everyday.”

Nowhere has the promotion of skateparks as a tool for mitigating property damage been clearer than during the political struggles over where to relocate Seattle Center's SeaSk8 skatepark. Advocates repeatedly stressed to City Council and Center administrators that, without a skatepark, the Seattle Center campus would continue to serve as a de-facto skatepark leading to chronic property damage and risk to other, non-skating users. In a letter urging the Seattle Center administration to determine the final site for the SeaSk8 replacement with the consultation of skaters, the Skate Park Advisory Committee drove this argument home:

In this case, the SPAC is of the strong opinion that a "skate plaza" type design would be optimal for the broadest user group, would minimize skate activity on other parts of the campus if well designed and built, and would fit in best with the "living room of the city" feel of Seattle center. That said, to our knowledge such a design cannot be simply placed anywhere and still be successful for non-skater users. This is particularly true in the case of Seattle Center, which is concerned with providing a sufficiently attractive skatepark as to prevent skaters from using other parts of the campus. Keeping skaters in the skatepark is a function of good design and construction, but the viability of many designs is site dependent.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, a proper skatepark design and location is offered as a means of enclosing, spatially bounding, and domesticating a population that, by that time had already been a long-standing disorderly presence at Seattle Center. After opening a dialog with Center staff, the SPAC offered a series of criteria for proper siting, again stressing the potential of a replacement facility to draw skaters away from the other parts of the campus they had traditionally skated so as to prevent property damage to the Center's physical plant. For example, one criterion, titled "Keep the Park out of the Center of

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<sup>21</sup> As the chairperson of the SPAC I drafted this statement and the subsequently discussed criterion after their general content and tone were agreed upon by the broader SPAC membership.

the Center”, evaluated the original SeaSk8 facility, while trying to explain why that skatepark had thus far failed to mitigate property damage on the campus:

**Criteria:** Choose a location that is on the edge of the campus and near mass transit to reduce the necessity of having kids skate the rest of the campus to get to the skatepark.

**Original SeaSk8:** Fairly good job with this criterion. Unfortunately, design shortcomings (e.g., types of obstacles, layout/flow, etc.) prevented the original park from fully drawing skaters off the campus.

**Lesson:** Build on the strengths of the original site which did not require skaters to pass through the campus, but ensure that siting, design and construction is oriented towards the needs of the skaters who would otherwise be skating the campus such that the park is more appealing than the structures on the campus. Siting near mass transit will further decrease on campus skating.

The SPAC here frames the skatepark, first and foremost, as a tool for the containment and mitigation of an admittedly problematic and destructive population, namely their constituency. The primary focus of subsequent discussions with Seattle Center staff and skatepark advocates has been upon how to utilize design, location, and construction materials to reduce the material and financial impacts of having skaters on the campus, including graffiti and damage to non-skate structures.

As with other discourses, the mobilization of skateparks as a tool for the simultaneous domestication of youthful populations and concomitant protection of property was reproduced within the general public debate over having publicly funded skateparks at all. Repeatedly, comments to Seattle’s various skatepark projects echoed this e-mail statement to Parks generally supporting the master-planning process:

*I believe providing skate parks is a positive step in providing a safe place for kids/teenagers to hang out. Skateboarding is increasing in popularity by the day and if more venues are accessible for people to express themselves in this sport, it will not only keep kids off the streets and private establishments, but create a positive environment for kids/teenagers to interact.*

This conflation of benefit to young people (“a positive environment” in which to interact) with crime and property damage prevention (“keep kids off the streets and private establishments”) typified much of the positive public support for skateparks. At a broader level, this intermingling of benefit to the marginalized with the tacit recognition of the resulting protection of privilege may be seen as typical of much welfarist thought.

The concept of the skateparks as spatially bounding and domesticating spaces explicitly highlights the common conflation between welfarist concerns and the drive to protect capital. For example, once the Ballard Commons Park was completed – including the second iteration of the Ballard Bowl – a variety of agents were keen to reframe the presence of the skatepark as simultaneously a boon to young people, and a safeguard for property. This tendency was typified by a description of the Commons in a website for realtors’ promoting the Ballard neighborhood as a center for investment in home ownership: “Also, check out the Ballard Commons - Seattle's first green space with a skateboard half pipe - keeping teens off the street in their own neighborhoods.” Here the draw of “green space” is coupled with an amenity that both serves young people and contains them. Youthful disorder is at once kept “off the street” (that is, away from your recently purchased home or business in Ballard) and bounded within its “own neighborhoods,” preventing the incursion of disorderly youth from other less reputable parts of the city and conversely preventing the exodus of good kids from Ballard into other more troublesome neighborhoods. And while it is unclear to what extent Ballard area realtors actually believe that the skatepark will

perform such disciplinary functions, or are simply trying to prevent the Ballard Bowl from scaring off clients, the drive to discursively mobilize a domesticating vision of that facility in the name of promoting property values is unmistakable.

B. Selling Seattle by Buying a Domesticated Identity for Skaters.

The nature of politics is such that the motivations of governmental decision makers are often inaccessible. Even so, both city officials' and non-governmental actors' choices of how to frame the issue of public skateparks may be seen as either directly serving, or as complimentary to a variety of broader governmental policies and goals that support a city-wide effort to "sell" Seattle. A substantial literature argues that contemporary cities in general, and Seattle in particular, have been forced to compete within an increasingly globalized race to attract "footloose" capital, and some evidence from my research supports this interpretation of the City's support of skateparks. At the same time, a much stronger strain of evidence suggests that City government's understanding of skateparks as youth oriented amenities is informed as much if not more by decision-makers' perceptions that Seattle has already won the race to market Seattle as an attractive home for business and creative-class professionals. Under this interpretation, the City's embrace of public skateparks is more an effort to cope with the costs of municipal success in the global market than it is an effort to achieve that success. This is not to say that the city's support of skateparks should not simultaneously be seen as either a response to the immediate political crisis predicated by the Ballard Bowl situation, or as a good faith effort to meet the needs of a recently identified youth constituency. Rather, the economic, political, and social contexts within which Seattle found itself after the beginning of

the new millennium and city leaders' discursive framings of their own choices all suggest that the drive to support these unlikely public facilities must be contextualized within much broader, preexisting municipal projects.

Much of the literature addressing contemporary urban governmentality has argued that the creation and regulation of public space must be understood within an increasingly globalized competition to market themselves to businesses and workers. City governments are being held increasingly accountable for attracting capital of all kinds (N. Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Hackworth, 2002; Peck & Tickell, 2002; N. Smith, 2002), and the development of local public space has gained importance as a tactic of municipal economic development (MacLeod, 2002; McInroy, 2000). Moreover, the continued transition to a post-fordist economy is requiring cities to actively "sell" themselves to the "creative class" so as to ensure their economic viability in a digital economy (Florida, 2002). The creation of public space is an important component of this project as it, "can create a visual message about the city and can serve as a site by which both visitors to the city and local people can identify with the city" (McInroy, 2000, at p. 26). Mitchell's "The Right to the City" (2003b) posited Seattle as typical of this effort to ensure municipal economic viability in the face of transnational mobility of capital through aggressive policing of public space through such measures as "civility laws" aimed at the homeless. And Seattle has been particularly aggressive within this struggle, buttressing its reputation as the home of "grunge" music, Microsoft, and Starbucks with such heavy investments in "creative class" calling cards as the new Rem Koolhaas designed Seattle Public Library, Safeco

Field (home to the Seattle Mariners), the Frank Gehry designed Experience Music Project, and the recently opened Olympic Sculpture Garden.

Under this interpretation, it is tempting to explain Seattle's efforts to position itself as friendly to skaters and public skateparks as part of a broader effort to "place market" the city to creative class workers. And, in keeping with Mitchell's critique of Seattle's history of market driven place marketing there is some evidence that a similar motive has animated City Government's support of free public skateparks. This evidence includes the fact that the drive for public skateparks has been noticeably led by such classic post-fordist professionals as software designers, attorneys and engineers. And while activists have been careful to frame their struggle as one organized around the needs of kids, they have not shied away from touting their own creative class credentials thus playing off the sense that cities much continually work to establish themselves as centers for "hipness" (Dewan, 2006). As one article noted, "[t]he face of skateboarding has changed. It's become more mainstream, and a lot of us have matured and become adults with jobs," said Matt Johnston, a 33-year-old former Microsoft employee who conducted the noise study for skater advocates" (Young, 2004).

Perhaps more persuasively, at least one comment by a leading City Councilor appears to contextualize the drive for public skateparks as the very type of "quality of life" amenity that is calculated to attract and keep the young, upwardly mobile professionals upon which its own revived, digitally driven economy is based. As City Council President Drago noted during a Council debate over whether to spend municipal funds to retain the Seattle Sonics NBA basketball team:

I would agree with you [on the need to retain the Sonics] and for this reason, this city and this region has chosen not to compete on tax credits and giveaways on financial giveaways. We have chosen to compete for business, industry, across the board, new employees, and corporations when they market this city, and they market this region, it's about quality of life. And what you just spoke about is quality of life. And professional sports is but one of the elements of that broad spectrum of quality of life that encompasses education, art, education, culture. I mean it is a big, big package.

Later in the meeting, when Council discussion had shifted to whether or not to support the skatepark master-plan, Drago explicitly tied her continued support of skateparks to this broader drive to maintain Seattle's "quality of life", noting, "well this [the skatepark master-plan] just fits nicely with the statement that I just made. This is just another piece of the fabric of a quality of life issue in this city."

At the same time, the weight of the evidence suggests that for Seattle's governmental decision-makers skateparks specifically, and much of their decision-making around public space more generally, is informed by a belief that Seattle has already won the battle of place-marketing and must now cope with the costs of its success. Concerns with spiraling costs of living and a concomitant loss of affordable housing and young families appear to be driving much municipal governance. When asked about his interpretation of Councilmember Drago's comment regarding skateparks as part of the city's "quality of life", one highly placed city official I interviewed remarked:

John: Do you have a sense for when they are choosing an issue to put their weight behind, whether the skateparks or anything else, that they are considering "how do we compete against Los Angeles or Portland." Or do you think it is much more localized than that.

Tim: I think it is much more localized than that. I think what you are talking about is something like the Sonics, they tend to try to step back and get a broader perspective. But there is so much going on within the

region, and even the state. I mean, within the state we are competing, it's basically Seattle versus everybody else. . . And so, I don't really think we compete consciously with Los Angeles. It is just a whole different... and I think part of that is, as Jan said, we know what we got here. And so, I think the underlying current to that comment is we got it good, and we don't have to go out and do those things...

John: So let's keep it that way?

Tim: So let's keep it that way. And so, clearly, quality of life is an important aspect, but it's a localized thing. Because, in terms of the skatepark, what your competition is is Kent or Renton or Burien, or wherever it is. So when you talk about "what are we going to do" we are not going to look at what does Denver have to offer. We might look at Portland having a master-plan for skateparks, because that is a good comparative city, but in the end, what we are really talking about, are we providing our residents facilities so they don't have to go to the next city, closest to find what they want... So, we, people may think about comparative cities. Yeah, they are going to say "well, if you want a big city on the West Coast, you are talking about San Francisco, Portland, Seattle or San Diego or LA... or maybe Denver because that is sort of what is in big scale competition. But in terms of projects like this we are talking about the next one close by, because that is what you are really comparing to.

This concern that Seattle's residents will "go to the next city," is animated by Citywide anxiety about the loss of Seattle's working and middle class residents and young families. Seattle's success in drawing upper class creative and information technology professionals has driven skyrocketing housing prices, regularly placing the city among the most expensive places to live in the U.S. And in a city where it is harder to raise a family, it is unsurprising that municipal government would be sensitive about charges that "Seattle hates kids." Having initially been framed by advocates as a much needed amenity for the young and their families, the City has seized upon the cause of public skateparks as a way of addressing perceptions that it has failed to meet the needs of young people and promote Seattle as a "family

friendly” metropolis. As Council Member Drago argued to the rest of Council in support of the master-planning process:

And I think in many ways the city has been, I am not going to say that we have failed to serve this group; we are slow in serving young people, and their emerging interests. So I think this is one thing that we can do that does address that need and it does add to our quality of life.

A similar sentiment was echoed by Drago and Councilmember Peter Steinbrueck in a local news piece reiterating Seattle’s prior shortcomings in providing for its young:

"We don't provide enough activities for youth and young people," Seattle City Council President Jan Drago says. She's signed the PSSA's petition to save the bowl. "Seattle has been moving steadily away from being a kid-friendly place," says Seattle City Council member Peter Steinbrueck, who is raising two kids here – a including one who begged for a skateboard last Christmas. "And that needs to change. Skateboard parks are a great amenity." (Jenniges, 2004b)

Such concerns with the adequacy of Seattle’s response to the need for youthful activities are tightly wrapped up with broader economic patterns that have rendered the city increasingly inaccessible to young, middle and working class families who might be forced out of the city into surrounding areas. As one high-ranking city official I interviewed explained City Council’s support of skateparks:

I think they think in terms of providing the kinds of amenities that people who live here want. And so, there is an active effort, as the cost of living goes up to continue to try to make Seattle affordable. And one of the things that the Council members talk about a lot is providing amenities like this is part of what keeps Seattle affordable. You know, it is not something you have to pay for. So, I think the Council members get really focused on providing services like parks and open spaces because, I think it is one of the things that goes away when you are talking about what is the “highest and best use” for a property. . . . And we as a city are going more kidless all the time. And there is a deeper paradigm shift that is going on in the city. That as we grow taller, and it is getting more expensive to live here we have fewer kids

and that is just a fact. ... I mean, one of the appeals to skateboarding, as opposed to other sports, is really, the start-up costs are pretty minimal. And you don't have to be on a team, and you don't have to drive to it if you have a skatepark, unlike soccer where you have to drive all over to go play. It is an individual sport that you can do at your own time and your own pace... And they can have fun and a good time and it's not like, renting a bunch of gear that is really expensive.

For this official the economic engine simultaneously driving both rising housing costs, Seattle's increased desirability as an upper-class enclave, and the need to provide such youth based amenities as skateparks was obvious:

Part of what brought everybody back [to Seattle after the white-flight of the 70s and 80's] was Microsoft. When they were first getting big, you could live in Seattle and commute over and it wasn't a big deal. And, you know, I think that what people figured out over time is that people like the urban experience. And so now we are having the opposite problem where people with families who want to live in the city are finding it too expensive.

Thus, while the City's embrace of skateparks might appear counterintuitive, given the Seattle's tradition of aggressively policing and excluding potentially disorderly populations from its public spaces, advocate's initial critique that "Seattle hates kids" tapped into an even greater governmental concern than that of disorder, namely the fear that the City has failed the working and middle class families that once formed its base constituency. And by mobilizing a neutral, discursive, and youthful framing of their identities, the City is able to use skateboarders as a proxy for the very populations that it sees as holding the key to retaining that disappearing constituency.

C. "Skater Danger" as Proxy for the Strains Imposed on Seattle's Neighborhoods by Increasing Economic Success.

Just as the City's adoption of "playground" like skateparks as an amenity be seen as an effort to mitigate the broader impacts of Seattle's shifting economic

complexion, so too may opposition to such projects be seen as the localized manifestation of the tensions and dilemmas imposed by municipal growing pains. And much as the discursive proxy of the domesticated youthful skater enables City actors to “sell” their vision of how to meet the challenges of change through the lens of an inherently deserving population, negative framings of the undomesticable “skater as danger” likewise have enabled a variety of groups and neighborhoods to articulate their visions for how the city’s transformations should be managed and/or resisted. This discussion should not, however, be seen as dismissing the very serious concerns and fears often expressed by opponents of various skatepark projects. Rather, it is intended to explore the broader cultural assumptions, economic realities, and political agendas that underlie those genuine expressions of concern in an effort to trace how these issues manifest within the discursive trope of the youthful identity.

#### **CLASS, HOMEOWNERSHIP AND THE THREAT TO PROPERTY**

While the discursive association of skaters with criminality bespeaks an obvious move to frame skaters as members of lower socio-economic classes, the repeated tendency of skatepark opponents to frame their opposition in terms of the logics of market economics rendered this effort especially explicit. Mirroring the contemporary tendency to create ordered urban landscapes in order to protect urban market based economies (Mitchell, 2003b), the fears about youthful crime and trouble raised by such discourses were often articulated in terms of the destruction of property values and the threat to the investment of the family home. For example, as one e-mail comment to the master-planning process claimed,

When I heard about the possibility of a skatepark being built in the park I was very upset. The people that would frequent the park and the noise that would certainly accompany such a venue would seriously effect the atmosphere of the park and our neighborhood. I would worry about the noise and the crowds that it would draw. I know that my husband and I would not have bought a house so close to a park if we had known there was a skatepark so nearby.

In both the master-planning process and the debate over Lower Woodland Park, property values were repeatedly cited as a reason for a neighborhood to reject skateparks. For example, a realtor stated during one of the public meetings over the ultimate location of Lower Woodland, “I hate to bring up the issue of property values, but if you build this thing you know it will drive down prices.” The assumption that skateparks as spaces of teenage mischief and disorder would be incompatible with capital investment in housing stock may be seen as animating the city’s decision to demolish and rebuilding the Ballard Bowl as part of the Commons redevelopment. As a weekly newspaper reported,

“the owners of a QFC adjacent to the park property had just announced they'd finally go ahead with a much-anticipated redevelopment, which would include underground parking and also housing on top of a bigger grocery store. The plans call for two-story town homes to look out on the park – and the skate bowl, if it remains. Neighborhood planners feared the developer wouldn't want to build housing next to the bowl” (Jenniges, 2004b).

Throughout Seattle’s experience with skateparks, fears over the gendered threat to individuals, and the risk to property values posed by skateboarders have gone hand in hand. As one e-mail comment to the master-planning process stated, “I have a little 4 year old girl. Please don’t make me live next to something that could jeopardize her safety or our property.”

Beyond simply portraying skaters as threats to public order who would inherently diminish the market value of whatever spaces they are allowed into, skaters have been consistently framed as belonging to an inferior social class whose impeding invasion is heralded by the inclusion of a skatepark. This calculus was concisely captured by an e-mail comment to the master-planning process which argued, “[m]any of the neighbors have proposed moving if skateboarding arrives. And that leaves Cowen Park to rental houses not family homes.” Beyond simply equating skaters as dangerous, lower-class “others” whose presence is incompatible with a neighborhood’s identity and the accumulation of family investment through home equity, this brief argument makes an equally strong discursive move to reframe skaters’ identities. Not only are skaters deemed to be the types of people who come exclusively from “rental houses,” they are de-domesticated, as it is assumed that their families do not meet the upper-class standards of family life that would allow “rental houses” actually enjoy the status of “family homes.” This is a move that explicitly plays upon longstanding Western cultural values equating ownership of a freestanding home with responsibility, belonging, and citizenship (Blomley, 2004b, 2004c, 2005a; Herbert, 2006a; Newman, 1972). The gap between “real” families and skaters’ purported backgrounds was pointedly asserted by a letter from a resident of the Cowan Park neighborhood:

As a 20+ year resident of the Cowan Park neighborhood we have been strong advocates of supporting and ensuring Cowan Park remain as an enriching in-city neighborhood park which attracts family type activities. . . . With the proposed skatepark at Cowan Park, we are extremely concerned it will threaten the family type environment of Cowan Park and generate a number of other safety and environmental issues. . . [In Dracut, Massachusetts] what was once a family oriented

park become [sic] a teenage hangout and all-day mecca ruled by skateboard gangs. After pressure by the neighborhood, the city closed down the park and admitted the park was a poor choice for an in-city family park.

This pervasive discourse of homeownership as class dividing line – and thus as measure for political viability – has recurred throughout Seattle’s struggles over skateparks. Reflecting a much broader western “political culture of property”, in which “local citizenship is predicated on ownership” (Blomley, 2004c, at p. 81), a binary class system of “renters vs. owners” has repeatedly been discursively reinforced in Seattle’s debates over skateparks. Under this logic, those who do not own property in the form of a private home are deemed “not only incomplete citizens, but partial or deformed subjects” (Blomley, 2004c; Herbert, 2005, 2006a). Nowhere has this been more evident than during efforts to site the Lower Woodland skatepark. For example, a Lower Woodland resident who had been involved for several years in maintaining a set of compressed earth mounds that served as a de-facto area for BMX bicycling area spoke in support of the skatepark project mid-way through the public comment portion of a heated design meeting. During his pro-skatepark statement he was shouted down as “just a renter” and thus not a “real” member of the neighborhood. Reinforcing the implicit distinction between upper-class homeowners as those whose voices who should be heard and lower class renters whose voices should be excluded, the speaker angrily retorted, “I own my house! I paid cash for it! Which of you can say that?!” While it has been common for adults on both sides of the skatepark debate to preface their remarks by citing their own status as homeowners, the general absence of children from the discussion has facilitated the

framing of skaters as belonging to other, lower-class, and dangerous populations from which “we” in the meeting need to protect “our” homes and neighborhoods.

The tendency of resistance to skateparks to be framed in class terms has likewise been reinforced by the professional identities claimed by many of those who have mobilized the identity of “skaters as youthful trouble.” Throughout the public comments opposing various skatepark sites and projects, professional status joins homeownership as a powerfully asserted badge of class and civic belonging, in contrast to skaters who are posited as either belonging to or attracting lower, more dangerous populations. Thus, an e-mail comment to the master-plan’s proposed Alki Beach site that protested skateboarding as an “excessively noisy activity which can easily result in serious injury and often correlates with destruction of property” was signed by a self-identified “MA, LMHC, CDP” with a local psychotherapy group. Similarly, other written comments positing negative framings of skateboarders were signed by three self identified “MD”s – including an “MD, MPH” – , a “Risk and Compliance Coordinator” for a holding company, a “MS, OT”, a middle school teacher, a “Principal” in a local “Health and Benefits” company, two real-estate agents, and a variety of “neighborhood association” presidents. In contrast, only two written comments in support of specific sites were signed so as to claim the author’s professional status. One comment from a self identified “mother of a 9 year old boy (who isn’t a skateboarder yet)” in support of the West Seattle master-plan sites, was signed as a “Financial Planner.” The only other “professionally” signed public comment in unconditional support of skateparks was from a self-identified “Design Engineer,” who wrote to approve of the master-planning process as a whole. It is

unclear whether the lack of professional credentials claimed by skatepark proponents reflects a socio-economic split between those supporting and those opposing Seattle's various skatepark projects, or whether those professional people who wrote in support (if any) did not feel the need to claim their class affiliation. Regardless, the preponderance of class markers among those opposing specific sites and projects strongly reflects the extent to which opponents often framed their resistance in terms of class and, thus, civic belonging.

### **MOBILIZATION OF THE FRAMING OF "SKATER AS DANGER" IN SERVICE OF SPATIAL PRIVILEGE AND RACIAL SEGREGATION**

Two of the most prevalent political agendas to emerge out of the skaters as gendered trouble discourse are the interlinked goals of maintaining neighborhood identity and protecting spatial privilege. Almost invariably objections to specific skatepark locations and projects are mobilized either in the cause of resisting ongoing cultural changes within a neighborhood, or to prevent the incursion of outsiders from one area into another, or both. And while these concerns often dovetailed with desires to maintain property values, they were often motivated by fears over the changes that increased housing costs have brought to most all of the city's neighborhoods. Reflecting the tendency for community to be defensively articulated through definitions of "'us' in contradistinction to an opposing 'them'" (Greenhouse *et al.*, 1994; Herbert, 2005, at p. 858), these objections aggressively posited skaters as a foreign presence that both threatens and is symbolic of other populations that threaten to alter the neighborhood.

One of the most powerful examples of mobilizing the identity of “skater as trouble” in the cause of maintaining neighborhood identity occurred with the Lower Woodland project. A small group of residents raised fierce resistance to the skatepark after its site was shifted approximately 100 yards closer to nearby homes in an effort to increase “eyes on the park” so as to reduce trouble through self discipline in response to surveillance (Foucault, 1975).<sup>22</sup> For many neighbors, however, the shift in the project site represented far more than an administrative decision to increase the facility’s safety and usability. Rather, the very choice of the Lower Woodland site was seen as the culmination of a decade long process by which the City of Seattle generally, and the Parks department more specifically, had worked to erode the neighborhood’s character.

Located between Seattle’s Woodland Zoo, an urban lake surrounded by an active running trail, and an increasingly gentrified neighborhood, Lower Woodland Park was framed by many residents as previously being a quiet, green, and fairly unprogrammed open space that served as an alternate “front yard” for nearby residents. As one neighbor noted by e-mail, “When I bought my house here ten years ago, my decision was informed by the existing uses of the park. I am a middle school teacher and I know that my students need a place that is quiet and contemplative. And that is what Woodland Park used to be.” In a letter, another neighbor recalled growing up across the street from Lower Woodland and walking through what was then a

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<sup>22</sup> While advocates have not, unsurprisingly, specifically invoked Foucault, such Foucaultian concepts as self-discipline in response to panoptic-type surveillance have pervaded advocates’ understandings of optimal skatepark design and siting under a “playground” model. Likewise, an overall concern with maintaining “eyes on the park” in order to domesticate young skaters, has become commonplace among skatepark advocates.

wide-open green space before the park had undergone a series of changes by which specific use programming of the park “[took] away all that I love about this place.”

This image of an unspoiled green place was contrasted with developments over the prior decade that had brought new uses and user groups to the park. As one resident characterized the change via e-mail:

I have lived by this park for thirty-one years, and in that time I have seen a lot of unwelcome changes. This used to be a green peaceful place to hang out. Now that it has been fenced off and lit, it is no longer a park.... You have taken our field of dreams and now it looks like a prison. I am pleading with you to say no to the skatepark

Neighbor’s complaints were most commonly linked to the transformation of much of the park into actively programmed sports fields with fences, lighting, and often noisy groups of participants and observers, as per this e-mail to Parks:

This area has suffered over the years. We have a bunch of new problems. The lighting from the [sports] fields is a problem that is getting worse. The noise from the soccer and softball is so bad at times I cannot go to bed. The noise from the traffic in the parking lots and on Stone [the road between the Park and the neighborhood] are like a racecourse. If you put this skatepark in, it will only increase traffic and make things worse.

Throughout, transformations in Lower Woodland Park have been linked to broader transformations in the neighborhood and Seattle as a whole. Thus, arguments against the skatepark were frequently couched in terms of changes in and around the area that are not directly linked to the skatepark – but rather have caused the neighborhood to have had “enough already.” Thus, one neighbor based her e-mail in opposition upon the area’s increased noise and traffic: “I live over here on 43<sup>rd</sup> & Meridian and –

believe it or not – I hear everything that happens in the park... Woodland has become cruise central. There is no parking.”

In light of prior transformations and threats to the neighborhood, the addition of the proposed skatepark was seen as the latest in the Park department’s high-handed treatment of Lower Woodland and indifference to character of the neighborhood. The skatepark was frequently compared to existing sports activities both as a comparative nuisance, and as posing an even greater threat than already problematic programming.

It's across the street from my house, and I can tell you firsthand it's heavily used: by sports teams to practice, spectators to cheer them on, cross-country teams to host their meets and by residents of the neighborhood every day," he said. "And in terms of noise, the occasional cheer from the soccer or softball fields is very different from the constant clatter and grind of a skateboard park” (Chansanchai, 2006).

Thus, the skatepark was framed as potentially eliminating

the last scrap of Lower Woodland Park that isn't fenced in or graveled over, it's become the staging, warm-up and spectator area for many other local sports, not to mention the only place for neighborhood kids to play, for people to walk their dogs, fly kites, read a book or just hang out. How do we know? We live here, and see it in use daily (Lower Woodland Neighborhood Association, 2006).

Similar sentiments were voiced by letters and e-mails to Parks in regards to a number of other potential skatepark sites including a location on a former military base that had been redeveloped into Seattle’s sprawling Magnuson Park:

We have lived at this address above the Warren G. Magnuson PARK acreage for over 50 years. Recently our PARK has become a city event area. Do Not add a skate board place here at Magnuson PARK. Already there is enough going on which gives plenty of noise for we neighbors. Many of us often walk, fly kites, boat, and of course enjoy the nice outlook.

In light of such comments, the opposition offered by a number of residents of Lower Woodland and other areas may be seen as part of a broader effort to maintain the “original” character of their neighborhoods and to resist the latest project by an agency that neighbors frequently associate with the much broader economic and demographic shifts in the city, namely the Parks department.

The latent class and race projects inherent in such efforts to maintain “neighborhood character” have been readily apparent in the context of a number of other siting struggles in Seattle. Throughout the city-wide master-planning process, concerns about youthful trouble and the “noise” of a potential skateboard park may be seen as springing from long-standing concerns with maintaining spatial privilege and repelling the potential incursion of “them” into “our” neighborhoods. Inevitably, the proposed master-plan sites that drew the greatest public outcry during this process were near neighborhoods encountering a transition in race, class, or both. As discussed at length in Chapter 3, the resistance offered by the residents of Cowan Park typified this effort. Representing but the latest chapter in an affluent neighborhood’s long-standing struggle to fight off the incursions of disorderly populations typically associated with the nearby University of Washington commercial district – including transients, homeless teens, and drug dealers – potential skatepark users were virtually uniformly associated with prior threats to Cowan Park’s integrity and privilege. As one Cowan resident argued by e-mail, “Due to the proximity of the Ave and the ‘Ave Kids’ we will find that the park will attract many people who’s [sic] interests are anything but skateboarding. . . . The Roosevelt [high school] students will descend upon this area as well and I anticipate clashes with neighbors and Ave youth.” In a

letter to Parks, one resident contextualized the debate over the skatepark as one front in an ongoing struggle between neighborhoods over who would take the burden of disorderly teen populations.

Cowen/Ravenna park is currently again in a fight to stay safe as the police, encouraged by intense pressure from the U-District merchants, push homeless youth northward into the park. Graffiti, drug-trafficking and petty crime in and around the park have all started to increase again and our community is rallying strongly to stem this tide.

Tellingly, after reiterating concerns about the noise and crime that the skatepark would entail one Cowan Park resident went to great lengths to disclaim that such opposition was being offered in the name of maintaining spatial privilege:

We are an area that is struggling to maintain its small-family residential quality. Our houses and lots are small. We have learned to cooperate to live in such a densely populated area. We are not seeking to gentrify. Indeed, we are proud that we are home to a whole range of residents, from low-income to those who earn more. We are united in our hope that this will continue to be a neighborhood that is devoted to a people-friendly quality of life. This skate park may be the last straw that will cause young families to seek out-lying suburbs away from the “challenges” of city living.

Here, a fairly affluent and predominantly white neighborhood is discursively framed as a diverse, “small” and endangered bastion against white flight. As though to make the author’s effort to avoid being accused of seeking to protect spatial privilege unavoidable, the signature and address on this e-mail comment is again followed by the statement “We are not seeking to gentrify.”

This discursive mobilization of skateparks as representative of the threat to traditional neighborhood character and neighbors’ spatial privilege recurred throughout Seattle in a variety of neighborhoods. Thus, one e-mail comment to a proposed site in Alki park near Seattle’s only sandy beach stated:

I am writing as a resident and business owner in the Alki neighbor[hood] to voice my opposition to a skatepark being constructed in the Alki neighborhood. Our residential neighborhood is already besieged (and not just during the summer) by ill-mannered visitors drawn to the area by the beach, bars, and all manner of scheduled events which regularly disturbs the serenity potentially afforded by the natural environment thus contributing to a deterioration in quality of life for those of us who call this area home.

As with this comment, skateparks were regularly posited as symbolic of, or compounding preexisting threats to an established neighborhood. Another e-mail comment in opposition to a proposed site in the master-plan contextualized the threat posed by the skatepark as part of a broader neighborhood shift to more dense, lower-class housing: “I have lived . . . adjacent to Judkins Park for nearly 13 years. In the time I have been here, I have seen a lot of green space disappear. Many townhouses, tall skinny single family homes, and low income single family homes have been built . . . adjacent to the park.” A similar concern with the growing density of the city threatening traditional “family” activities was voiced by a comment arguing, “More and more homes are being converted to condominiums leaving little grass for people with families to play. Hiawatha should be left as is...”

Beyond serving to maintain neighborhood “character” and preexisting spatial privilege, the discursive mobilization of skaters as dangerous outsiders has also been racially coded throughout Seattle’s skatepark projects. Repeatedly, the introduction of skatepark into a Seattle neighborhood has been resisted by neighbors who have contextualized the potential new facility as opening the door to an influx of racialized, lower class teens as trouble. While such racial codings are rarely explicit – as the discussion of race in the U.S. rarely is (Kivel, 1995) – in a number of cases the spatial

context of neighbors' discourse reveals a very powerfully racialized vision of the need to protect the neighborhood from outside incursion.

Nowhere has this been more apparent than in the debate over potential skatepark sites in the neighboring Myrtle Reservoir and High Point neighborhoods.



Figure 16: Portion of proposed master-plan map showing proximity of Myrtle Reservoir and High Point.

The two sites proposed by the initial skatepark plan are so close the City has used the same aerial photo to represent both locations, with the dark square on the left indicating the reservoir, and the green areas on the right indicating High Point Park:

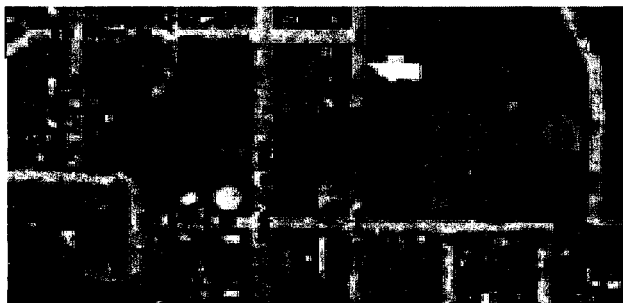


Figure 17: Aerial photo showing Myrtle Reservoir and High Point

Although these sites are almost next-door to each other, separated mostly by a busy four lane arterial, 35<sup>th</sup> avenue SW, that street represents a de-facto socio-economic border. Situated on the highest point in Seattle, the Myrtle Reservoir neighborhood surrounds one of a citywide system of water collection and storage reservoirs slated to be purchased by the Parks department, covered, and converted into public parks. Largely due to the scenic views afforded by the area's topography, the neighborhood is a predominantly white island of affluence in a part of West Seattle

that has historically been characterized by low-income housing and a multi-ethnic population.

In contrast to Myrtle Reservoir, High Point has seen a transformation from wartime housing for Boeing workers in the 40's, to public housing for Seattle's poor during the later half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to an experiment in neighborhood renewal under the City's "Hope VI" project. In preparation for a massive City lead redevelopment of the neighborhood, the University of Washington's Evans School prepared an analysis that described High Point (as of 2000) as being:

a racially and ethnically diverse community. Two-thirds of the community were immigrants or refugees, and nearly two thirds were not U.S. citizens. Most households onsite (70%) are families with children. Many household heads face poor English language ability and a lack of a high school degree as barriers to increasing self-sufficiency, a goal of the redevelopment. The average household head had lived onsite for three years and paid \$193 in rent. Less than half (44%) of residents had income from work. Furthermore, 85% of High Point residents had incomes at or below 30% of the HUD area median for King County, while 99% of families had incomes at or below 50% of the area median (Kleit & Allison, 2002).

While High Point's crime rates have been commensurate with the rest of the city and most surrounding neighborhoods in recent years, they are much greater than rates in Myrtle Reservoir (Kleit & Allison, 2002).

Due to the different racial and socio-economic compositions of the two areas, neighbors' reactions to the proposed sites in Myrtle Reservoir and High Point have been telling. High Point residents' reactions to their proposed site were fairly minor, with two e-mails opposing the location, and one in support. In contrast the negative reaction from Myrtle Reservoir residents was overwhelming, with approximately forty e-mails and letters to the Parks department opposing the potential location of a

skatepark in their neighborhood. The discourses posited within those communications, however, were strongly suggestive of a broader effort to prevent the incursion of racialized youth populations from High Point into the Myrtle Reservoir neighborhood, and the desire to maintain the racial and socioeconomic integrity of the area. While many other city residents had adopted a similar stance of supporting skateparks in principle, while objecting to the selection of their own neighborhood, Myrtle Reservoir was notable in virtually unanimously identifying the specific neighborhood that should take “their” skatepark, namely High Point. Almost every public comment addressing the potential Myrtle Reservoir site included a variation on one resident’s plea, “If you sincerely feel the City has the resources to spend on such a park, please consider locating it in the High Point recreational area. . . .”

At first glance, it would be easy to dismiss such a suggestion as purely pragmatic. High Point Park does include a number of actively programmed sports fields, as well as the infrastructure – bathrooms and drinking fountains – to support those types of facilities. The terms by which the residents of Myrtle Reservoir justified the selection of High Point over their own neighborhood, however, suggested the workings of deeper concerns with maintaining spatialized class privilege against youthful, lower-class, and racialized incursions. Myrtle Reservoir neighbors typically posited High Point as a racially coded realm of danger, disorder, and crime, in spite of a contemporary level of criminal activity on par with the rest of the area and the city. Thus, one resident noted, “Over the years, I saw the continued decline of the High Point housing facility with increased crime, drugs, sounds of gun shots and sometimes seemingly endless sounds of sirens. I was thankful when hearing of the upgrading of

High Point and hopeful that those negative elements would be eliminated.” In addition to framing High Point as a space of increased criminality, it is also offered, comparatively, as a space that has consequently received greater policing and external formal social control:

We strongly feel that a skateboard park in our residential neighborhood would bring more negative issues than positive. The increased activity for potential gang crime, a general hang-out for unsupervised youth, and increased traffic and noise is not something we feel should be introduced to our neighborhood. . . . just across the street there is a much more established and controlled facility already in existence at the High Point Playfield. . . the police are already patrolling [that] area for the not-so well-intentioned.

The source of the gang activity, unsupervised youth, and noise is clear. It is “just across the street,” an area so disorderly that it has brought upon it regimes of control and policing that are ostensibly incompatible with a “residential” neighborhood.

In contrast, Myrtle Reservoir – often by dint of its top dollar views of the rest of the city – is posited as a realm that should be maintained as separate and apart from such troubles across 35<sup>th</sup> Avenue. “Why waste this incredible view by building something that is better suited to the other side of 35<sup>th</sup> where the local community center already is?” Or, as another resident argued,

We purchased a home in this neighborhood due to the quiet and safe atmosphere it provided. Since acquiring our home, we have enjoyed the tranquil city views and green space the Myrtle Street Reservoir has offered. . . .A 10-30,000 square foot skate park does not belong adjacent to or in the middle of our neighborhood. The crime, drugs, traffic, noise, etc. that arrives with the skate park does not belong here and simply is not welcome.

Here the skatepark is posited as an external threat to the “quiet” “safety” and “tranquility” of this privileged enclave, in its capacity to bring in foreign (and by implication multiracial) criminal populations from the surrounding neighborhood.

It is in the contrast between these discursive framings of two neighborhoods, however, that much of the racial coding underlying resistance to the Myrtle Reservoir site may be seen most clearly. Throughout residents’ comments, Myrtle Reservoir is often explicitly contrasted with High Point in terms clearly suggestive of race and class. As one neighbor argued, “I am very much against placing this potentially dangerous situation in the middle of a residential neighborhood. As a good alternative, please consider installation of the proposed skateboard park across 35<sup>th</sup> Avenue SW in the High Point Play Field and Recreational area.” Thus, High Point is offered by implication as a neighborhood that is neither “residential” (even though it has historically contained the highest concentration of rental residences in West Seattle), nor endangered by such a “potentially dangerous situation,” ostensibly due to the fact that High Point is already filled with such “dangerous,” lower class, and racialized populations. A similar move was reflected in this comment opposing the Reservoir site:

My husband and I have lived near the Myrtle reservoir and water tower for several years. We purchased our house in this area because it is a quiet mature neighborhood. Yes there are children and we eventually plan to have children, but it is not a suburban cul-de-sac environment.... I am not against skate parks, children should be able to have recreation. I am, however, against putting these parks in established neighborhoods. Highpoint seems to be much better suited as a location for a new skate park.... We have endured the noise and intrusion of the Myrtle Street reservoir construction, now you are asking us to put up noise, mess, crime, traffic, etc. for the rest of our

lives! In addition to the inconvenience, this will also lower our home values.

Here, Myrtle Reservoir is posited as a “quiet,” “mature,” and “established,” space incompatible with the “noise, mess, crime, traffic” commonly associated with its High Point neighbors. High Point and its multiracial residents – who are much better “suited” for crime, mess, and noise – are implicitly posited by their predominantly white, wealthy neighbors as being loud, immature, and transient. And, as if to add insult to injury, the potential intrusion of such racialized populations into the privileged sphere of Myrtle Reservoir further threatens to undermine that bastion of class membership, capital investment in home equity.

While the case of Myrtle Reservoir and High Point provides an especially graphic example of how issues of public space for youth becomes quickly coded by, and mobilized in the cause of racial and class privilege, I do not mean to suggest that this phenomenon is limited to this particular neighborhood. Rather, due to the geographic proximity of the two sites, and the strict racial and socioeconomic boundary of 35<sup>th</sup> Avenue S.W., these codings are graphically apparent. Given the prevalence of discourses equating a potential skatepark with “gangs,” “noise,” “mess,” and “crime” – all concepts that have historically been racially coded (Gilmore, 1998; Kivel, 1995; Lucas, 1998) – resistance to these projects throughout Seattle must be seen as partially fuelled by concerns with maintaining class and race privilege.

### **MOBILIZATION OF “SKATER AS DANGER” IN RESISTANCE TO GENTRIFICATION**

Where a predominantly white, affluent neighborhood might discursively frame the potential introduction of a skatepark as opening the door to the incursion of

racialized and classed outsiders, so too have a number of predominantly non-white neighborhoods. Given the continued climb in Seattle's housing market throughout the 2000's, and increasing outside gentrification of historically African-American areas such as the Central District, a number of residents have questioned the construction of skateparks in multi-ethnic neighborhoods as evidence of City government's commitment to promoting Gentrification as a means of displacing non-white populations. As with many cities, Seattle has seen a combination of municipal efforts to "redevelop" poor areas and capital infusion into traditionally poor areas, leading to the displacement of poor and multiethnic populations (Cat Le & Parvaz, 2002; Harden, 2006).

Within the context of increased economically-driven "non-white flight", and popular constructions of skateboarding as a predominantly white sport (Brayton, 2006), it is unsurprising that a number of skatepark projects have been opposed as dangerous spaces of gentrification. The concern that the City's skatepark master-planning process (with sites proposed in or near almost every low-income neighborhood in the city) was being used to further the incursion of whites into traditionally multi-ethnic neighborhoods, was articulated directly by one e-mail comment to that process from a self-professed "non-white person" who stated, "One of my comments at the [master-planning] meeting today had to do with skateboarding being a white sport and wondering if there truly is interaction at the skate places, if the skate places will be used in south Seattle, and if the city/park dept are promoting white activities." Likewise, one professional I interviewed who had worked on the master-

plan recalled the following reaction to a proposal to put a skatepark in predominantly African-American Rainier Beach:

So we went in. And there is a pool there. And we went in there and talked to one of the women who were there at the desk and she was like, "Girl, I don't know. Skateboarding? We don't really do that down here." She was obviously representing what she saw as her constituency... "well this is a white sport, and we don't really do that."

A number of respondents who run skate-camps and other programs for young skateboarders related that the few African-American skateboarders they have worked with have had their participation in skateboarding questioned by parents and other peers.

The basis for concerns that skateboarding could serve as a wedge for gentrification was reflected in a letter from a wealthier resident of the Judkins Park area, a traditionally African-American neighborhood in Seattle's Central District that has undergone rapid gentrification: "I live in the community and my two children skateboard and have many friends in the area that skateboard as well .... I feel Judkins Park is a great location for a skatepark for several reasons: ... it would give inner city kids access to a skatepark in their neighborhood." Discursively separating herself from the racially-coded "inner city" populations in her neighborhood, this resident nonetheless offers her support of the skatepark as a new activity for racialized and lower-class youth. A similar enthusiasm for skateparks as a tool for introducing a "white" sport into a black neighborhood is reflected in this e-mail comment from a resident of the wealthy and largely Anglo neighborhood of Seward Park

Just a quick note to say that my 8-year-old is an avid skateboarder and I spent quite a bit of time trucking him around to different skateboard parks this summer. We live in the Seward Park neighborhood and feel

that the Genesee playfields would be an excellent location for a skateboard park. There are a lot of kids right in this area.

Given that Genesee Park, as discussed below, is surrounded in large part by poorer, multi-ethnic populations, it is easy to understand how such support could be understood by non-whites as the latest manifestation of gentrification by wealthier, white newcomers.

The discourse of skateboarding as a “whites only” activity was both widespread and readily apparent in the case of Genesee Park, a long park starting in the core of Seattle’s multi-ethnic and predominantly African-American Columbia City neighborhood and then turning down towards the affluent neighborhoods bordering Lake Washington. Due to the size of the park and topography of the area, the socio-economic and racial character of the neighborhoods surrounding Genesee Park shifts dramatically as the park runs through poorer neighborhoods in Columbia City and then slopes downwards towards the lake, with wealthier and predominantly white residents occupying those areas with accompanying water views. And, like many of Seattle’s multi-ethnic neighborhoods, Genesee is undergoing a rapid transformation as rising housing costs lead to intensive gentrification. Like Cowan Park, Myrtle Reservoir, Lower Woodland, and many other neighborhoods in Seattle, there was strong opposition from local residents to a proposed skatepark site in Genesee, most of it based upon the same discourses of “skaters as teen trouble.” Thus, during our interview one highly placed city official who lives near Genesee Park specifically contextualized resistance in terms of the desire to contain racialized youth groups at one end of the park, and prevent their spread to other parts of the area:

Genesee is going through massive gentrification and there are a lot of pressures surrounding it. And it is not that it is skateboarders so much, as it is the overall development of, or white-ization of the south end. And part of it is that, in some ways Genesee is an open canvas, and it is open space... And another thing about Genesee. At Rainier playfield [on the poorer west side of the park], at the hoops court there. It was only about two years ago that a guy was gunned down there. And you know, the hoops court, people sorta hang out there and sometimes it attracts some bad actors. And so, on the back side of the community center, heading down towards the water, I guess that really doesn't matter. And so there is this sense that, if you provide a facility where people sorta hang out, like basketball courts, that you are going to get some bad element that will sort of, creep [into other parts of the park], if you will. Whereas right now it is sort of concentrated at Rainier. So people don't care about that area one way or another. But if you put in something [like the skatepark] then... well it does, it does inspire people more to hang out [in other parts of the park].

Due to the racial and socioeconomic mix of residents around Genesee, however, many of those comments equating a potential skatepark with gendered youth trouble also mobilized coded discourses of skateboarding as a "whites only" activity. Thus, a large number of e-mail comments and letters to Parks, while not explicitly mentioning race, implied that Columbia City and surrounding multi-ethnic neighborhoods lacked a demand for skateparks even though the area has a sizable youth population, as reflected by a map prepared in support of the master-planning process and intended to demonstrate the presence of skatepark demand in the form of geographic concentrations of youth. The map shows Genesee park (green rectangle to the right) as surrounded by a residential population that is between 23 and 35% under the age of 18:



Figure 18: Master Plan map showing neighborhood concentrations of young people.

Nonetheless, comments from Genesee Park commonly reflected sentiments such as, “[a]s several of my neighbors have pointed out, the Columbia City area is not noted for its high skateboard-riding population. I believe I have seen one skateboarder in the 3 years I have lived here...” The implication is clear: Columbia City does not want skateparks not because it lacks young people, but because it lacks young white people. Thus, the potential introduction of a skatepark is posited as yet one more gentrifying incursion into Seattle’s multi-ethnic neighborhoods:

We have not seen any evidence or data that the community around Genesee, Columbia City or Mt. Baker is asking for a skateboarding area, or would use it to an extent that would justify the proposed district skatepark.... We are concerned that the impetus for the proposal comes from of [sic] a very small group of people, mostly from outside the impacted area. . . In conclusion, we ask that our community be widely surveyed as to its interest in skateboard facilities before significant time and tax money is invested in any detailed plans.

While the race and socio-economic status of those questioning the demand for skateparks among non-white youth is typically not indicated by their comments, it is noteworthy that almost all such comments associate skateparks with “noise,” crime, and teen disorder. The juxtaposition of discourses of class coded “youth as trouble” with suggestions that skateparks are a “white-only” sport suggests that, ironically, it

may well be wealthier white Genesee Park neighbors who are attempting to mobilize anti-gentrification discourses as a means of maintaining their own spatial privilege against racialized youth populations from Columbia City.

Thus, as with neighborhoods such as Myrtle Reservoir, one may see opposition to skateparks – and the accompanying discursive framing of skaters as trouble – as serving a broader project of maintaining neighborhood integrity against the incursions of outsiders from different racial and class backgrounds. Due to the increasing pressure of gentrification upon Seattle’s traditionally multiethnic neighborhoods, however, there is a strong suggestion that for a number of Seattle’s residents, the most worrisome populations to be excluded may be wealthy, largely white homebuyers.

#### **MOBILIZATION OF “SKATER AS DANGER” AND BROADER CONCERNS WITH PATRIARCHY**

In much the same way that a number of neighbors’ opposition to skateparks and framing of skaters as dangerous populations may be seen as springing in part from resistance to the spread of race and class privilege, a significant number of resident’s comments may also be seen as animated by a concern with gender privilege. As discussed in Chapter 2, the demographics (SGMA International, 2005) and media portrayals of skateboarding (Borden, 2001) are overwhelmingly masculinist and patriarchal. This has posed manifold barriers to female involvement with skateboarding. As one interviewee, a long-time male Seattle skater and skate-camp organizer noted,

Girls don’t like to be put on the spot in front of all the guys. Just like old people or beginners don’t want to go out with rippers. Girls don’t like going out in front of big crowds and being judged. . . And then you are going to have those few girls who have, like, I do know most of them. They have a group. And then there is the Skate Like a

Girl crew.<sup>23</sup> But they tend to skate together. And they try to go where nobody else is. Because, skateboarders, whether we are skateboarding or...most men are... well, men are pigs to women, you know. Women are there for us to look at and gawk at. So, that's not gonna change. Skatepark or dance floor. The only thing is there are a lot more girls on the dance floor to even out that thing

Beyond the tendency of skateparks to concentrate teen males and the often patriarchal and sexist attitudes that accompany such groups, skateboarding is often marked by a masculinist communicative code characterized by an almost total lack of verbal encouragement or positive comment towards other skaters' efforts. As one female skateboarding activist related during our interview:

When I was younger just being [at a skatepark] felt terrifying. Like, that nothing was happening. So, someone did not have to say something to me. It's the same thing with these teenage girls. Nobody has to say anything to them for them to feel intimidated. Whereas now I don't feel intimidated.... Almost every time I am at a skatepark where we are teaching and encouraging each other. It will be like "oh, you got hurt? Take a break. Listen to your body." And I will say all of those woo-woo things. And all of these guys will hear it and someone will make fun of us for it. But it puts a wedge into the harshness of skate culture. And literally, boys under fourteen will follow me around the skatepark trying to get me to give them attention. "Watch me do this. Look what I can do." It is a phenomenon. Because they can't ask the older dudes. It's too scary. And that is the way sexism is tough on men. They have to be tough and they can't be supportive to each other... It is totally de-humanizing, which is why nobody else does it. Aside from being physically hard, the culture is not really fun.

And while there are a small number of highly experienced and well respected skaters in Seattle who actively seek to verbally encourage other skaters and thereby "increase the stoke," they are a tiny minority. One such positive role model explained the predominance of such markedly non-nurturing communicative codes as follows during our interview: "But for a lot of people in skateboarding it is their outlet for getting

<sup>23</sup> Skate Like a Girl is a feminist skateboard cooperative in Seattle that operates skatecamps, lessons and tournaments oriented towards "self-identified female skateboarders and gals that want to learn to skate" (Skate Like A Girl, 2007).

away. It's basically like a lot of people in skateboarding are depressed and don't like life. And they skateboard as their only escape, so if they see some happy motherfucker, like clapping around they really don't like that."

A small but significant number of comments throughout Seattle's skatepark master-planning process specifically questioned the need to construct spaces for activities reproducing such masculinist cultures and activities. Written comments to the Master Plan such as, "I don't understand why the city feels the need to create several skateboard parks in Seattle when their use will almost exclusively attract only young males," may be seen as reflecting both a fear of teenage males and a resulting rejection of state perpetuation of spaces for such populations. Given that the vast majority of skaters are males in their teens – a group powerfully associated with urban disorder – comments rejecting skateparks as exclusionary, disruptive and disorderly may be seen in part as protesting the simultaneous privileges and abuses afforded men under broader patterns of patriarchy. Thus a comment such as, "[w]hy disrupt places that are lovely and now utilized by young and old by inserting an ugly space designed to create noise by a very narrow segment of the population," may signify not only a fear of the danger posed by young males in public space, but also an underlying discontentment with the privileges afforded to, and thus spatial dispossessions affected by, young men.

#### **MOBILIZATION OF "SKATER AS DANGER" IN RESISTANCE TO WELFARIST APPROACHES TO PUBLIC SPACE**

A number of political actors have also framed their opposition to Seattle's skatepark projects in terms of a broader embrace of neoliberal logics of governance

and resistance to traditional welfarist and disciplinary approaches to government and public space. Typically referring to the “political preference for market mechanisms as a means of ensuring economic and social well being,” neoliberalism is typically associated with “placing responsibility for well-being on the shoulders of the individual [and] winding back of Keynesian-welfare state institutions” (Larner, 2005). In practice, neoliberal logics aggressively support either the down-sizing or privatization of traditional government functions aimed at improving public well being (M. Brown, 2004; M. Brown & Staeheli, 2003; Herbert, 2005; Sparke, 2005a, 2006a). A number of Seattle residents have opposed skateparks under neoliberal logics that such amenities should be privatized, while reproducing discourses of skaters as trouble. For example, in a public comment to a proposed site near the Maple-Leaf Reservoir, one Seattle resident first protested the noise and disorder threatened by the addition of a skatepark to that area and then argued, “if there is a high demand for this sort of activity why not let the private sector build these facilities and charge appropriately?” The sense that the provision of services and facilities to specifically defined groups should be shifted away from government was aggressively articulated in a comment to the master-planning selection criteria sent from a “.gov” e-mail address:

The city needs recreational facilities. But the city also needs green open space that provides flexible and accessible outdoor enjoyment. Park sites should not be confused with recreation complexes. Responsibility for meeting the recreation demand should be shared with the school district, private clubs, community organizations, and a host of non-profit agencies. It is to these partnerships that the city should be looking to find appropriate sites for additional sports fields and skateparks, not to city parks that are already too few and too over-developed.

Even comments in favor of the creation of more skateparks occasionally promoted a sense that the welfare state should be scaled back and enjoyment of public goods restricted to those capable of paying for them. For example, one written comment in favor of having a large “regional” facility at Magnuson Park suggested, “[o]ne other thing you might consider is developing some sort of funding outside of tax or grant dollars. If you have an indoor facility perhaps there could be a user charge. For the outside facilities perhaps there could be some sort of license or pass.”

A small but significant number of comments contested the very notion that public facilities such as skateparks should be used to provide young people with opportunities for socialization and development otherwise unavailable to them from the family, pursuant to welfarist logics. As one e-mail comment to a proposed site near Seattle’s Alki Beach argued, “I am fed up with the Parks Department shortchanging its responsibility for environmental stewardship in favor of funds being allocated to babysitting youth whose parents have abdicated their responsibility.” Here the idea that governmental resources should be allocated to social projects of social development is soundly rejected, arguing that the proper socialization of young people should properly and exclusively rest with the family. This move is concomitant with neoliberal ideologies that stress personal development as beyond the scope of proper government, resting entirely with the family, community, or other informal social structures as a matter of “personal responsibility”(M. Brown & Staeheli, 2003; Herbert, 2005; Sparke, 2006a; Trudeau & Cope, 2003).

D – Conclusion, Public Space as a Focus for Broader Political Struggles,  
Discursive Proxies as the Weapons in Those Struggles

In the same way that the discursive proxy of the young skater may be seen in the prior Chapter as enabling the transformation of “where” questions into “who” questions, in this Chapter I outline how such figures enable the simplification of the profound political, cultural, and economic struggles underlying those same “where” questions. And because young people bear such contradictory positive and negative cultural connotations while being excluded from the political process, their identities can simultaneously support opposing sides of the same profound social debates. Thus, a host of political actors are able to mobilize the discursive proxy of the young skater both in favor of and in opposition to welfarist approaches to governance. Similarly, the ability to infuse the discursive proxy of the young skater with both positive and negative cultural meanings enables those engaged in the political process to frame skateparks as both a threat and a boon to the protection of private property, and both as a perpetuation and alternative to the preexisting patriarchal tendencies within skate culture.

The various ways that the identity of the young skater has been mobilized in Seattle politics cannot, however, be simply dismissed as a matter of political expediency. Rather, the potential insertion of a skatepark into the city serves as a flashpoint for revisiting and renegotiating existing tensions within a given area. And just as with the question of whether or not to have the state build public skateparks at all, competing visions of how the changes transforming the city should be addressed are simplified and coded through the figure of the discursive proxy. Thus, in Seattle

one may see the political process as one of increasing levels of abstraction.

Existing economic, political and cultural tensions are imposed upon, filtered through, and partially resolved by struggles over the creation and regulation of public space. In turn, these issues are further imposed upon, filtered through, and partially resolved in terms of the identities of the purported users of such spaces. While this dynamic is intriguing in and of itself, the ability of political actors to engage in the abstraction of complex social issue into fairly single-dimensional questions of identity serves a powerful and problematic role in American politics, as I explore in the following Chapter.

## **Chapter 5: The Role of Discursive Proxies in Resolving the Dilemma at the Heart of the Liberal State**

So I just think this is sort of like a social justice issue. It's not fair to say that this group of people is not allowed in any public spaces and I just wanna drive that point home. I think skateboarders deserve a place just like everybody else, not more places than anybody else, not to take away other people's places, just a place to be and enjoy their sport, be healthy and stay active.

- Public statement by skatepark activist to the Parks, Education, Labor, and Libraries Subcommittee of the Seattle City Council

The tendency of political actors to reframe complex political issues surrounding public space in terms of the users of such space, as described in the prior two chapters, cannot be simply dismissed as a matter of political expediency. Rather, discursive proxies such as young skaters allow a variety of political actors to navigate an inherent dilemma at the heart of liberal governance. The contemporary liberal state is simultaneously premised upon the universal equality of all people, yet is by its nature intended to maintain and perpetuate inequality in a variety of forms. The figure of the discursive proxy allows political actors engaged in the uneven process of distributing public goods to navigate this dilemma. In the case of such highly contested yet scarce goods as public space, the translation of "where" questions into "who" questions shifts the ultimate responsibility for the answers to those questions away from those engaged in the political process and onto the ostensible users of such spaces. Thus, potentially problematic decisions about how benefits are distributed are naturalized and neutralized by reframing them as examinations into the nature, need, and merits of their potential recipients.

I begin the analysis in this Chapter by tracing the nature and historical roots of the dilemma within the liberal state between universal equality and the core state

function of maintaining inequality in the distribution of public goods. This section focuses on the status of public space as an archetype of the kinds of social goods that are posited as being intended for universal “public” access, yet in practice are distributed unequally. In the second Section of this Chapter I then trace the way that the socially laden identity of the discursive proxy enables this tension to be resolved. The remainder of this Chapter traces the ways that the discursive proxy of the young skateboarder has enabled the political presentation and neutralization of a series of potentially highly problematic decisions about Seattle’s distribution and regulation of public space. I argue that the ability to successfully mobilize either negative or positive framings of discursive proxies such as young skaters serves as a test of a given actor, entity, group, or neighborhood’s political power, while simultaneously veiling the workings of that power. Thus, an exploration of where advocates have and have not succeeded in siting public skateparks can provide a vivid map of the geographies of political power throughout the city.

#### A. The Distributive Dilemma of Liberalism and Contemporary Regulation of Public Space

While discourse is an important field for the exercise and negotiation of power-laden relationships in all aspects of society, it performs a vital role in liberal, democratic politics. Because discourse frames, recontextualizes, and naturalizes the workings of power, it also enables political actors to navigate and render neutral their own perpetuation of one of the fundamental paradoxes at the heart of liberal governance; namely the tension between the promises of legal and political neutrality upon which a democracy is premised and the realities of the government’s role in

perpetuating inequality at a variety of levels, what I call the “distributive dilemma of liberalism.” The ability of political actors to neutralize their roles in distributing “public” goods either along or against existing patterns of privilege is especially important in the realm of urban public space. While ostensibly provided for and available to every member of society – prince and pauper alike – the multiple uses to which a profoundly hierarchical society seeks to place such “public” spaces demands the imposition of a complex system of unequal distribution and access in their creation, design and regulation. The uneven nature of public space as a state provided good is exacerbated by the fact that publicly owned property is always scarce. Moreover, because the occupation of public space by a given use or user will often displace other uses and users – especially because almost all members of society are uncomfortable around others who “different” – decisions about how to create and regulate public space always involve a choice between competing groups. Thus, the political determination of what members of society will be deemed welcome and unwelcome in such “neutrally” provided public places is exactly the type of distributive dilemma of liberalism that discourse enables political actors to negotiate.

Liberal democracy is premised upon a cluster of enlightenment values reflecting a commitment, “to securing individual liberty and human dignity through a political cast that typically involves democratic and representative institutions, the guaranty of individual rights of property, and freedom of expression, association, and conscience, all of which are taken to limit the legitimate use of the authority of the state” (Mehta, 1999, p. 3). Central to the resulting systems of democratic government, however, is the concept that state legitimacy is premised upon governmental

recognition of universally “transhistorical, transcultural, and most certainly transracial,” rights protected by institutions that “all have their justification in a characterization of human beings that eschews names, social status, ethnic background, gender, and race” (Mehta, 1999, p. 51).

Rather than representing a revolutionary overthrow of the prior order, the emergence of the modern liberal state in the U.S. and Europe – a state premised upon an ostensibly neutral legal order enshrining and protecting individually held and articulated rights – actually served as a, “compromise, more evenly struck in some countries than in others, among monarchic bureaucracy, aristocratic privilege, and middle class interest” (Unger, 1976, p. 75). By positing all men as equal by dint of the universal entitlement to individual rights, the liberal state promised political protection for existing elites, while simultaneously leaving undisturbed the material inequalities upon which those elites’ privileges were premised. As Unger explains,

an abstract [legal] generality satisfies the idea of equal worth. The fewer the distinctions the law makes among categories of persons or acts, the greater the respect shown for the ideal of equal worth. Men with similar duties and entitlements under the same rules have been recognized as equals even though their actual social experiences and their degrees of access to power and wealth may differ sharply (Unger, 1976, p. 81).

Through its promise of universal equality before the law, liberalism at once ideologically eliminates distinctions of class, birth, and wealth by eliminating those conditions as political, and allows those distinctions to prevail in a naturalized form. The very universality of equality articulated in the form of individual rights – and particularly the right to hold and accumulate private property – serves to obscure the

universal inequality inherent in the individualized pursuit of those rights. As

Marx argued,

The political suppression of private property [through elimination of property requirements for voting] not only does not abolish private property; it actually presupposes its existence. The state abolishes, after its fashion, the distinctions established by birth, social rank, education, occupation, when it decrees that birth, social rank, education, occupation are non-political distinctions; when it proclaims, without regard to these distinctions, that every member of society is an equal partner in popular sovereignty, and treats all the elements which compose the real life of the nation from the standpoint of the state. But the state, nonetheless, allows private property, education, occupation, to act after their own fashion, namely as private property, education, occupation and to manifest their particular nature (Marx, 1978, p. 33).

Marx argues that, by rendering property ownership, class, race, and religion as non-political distinctions, the liberal state actively enables and encourages those patterns of material and cultural inequality resulting from the privileges afforded by private property ownership, class, race, and religion. Thus, the elimination of the material conditions of life as a condition for political participation likewise enshrines and naturalizes the disjuncture between the political and material, the public and private, the government and society (Hardt & Negri, 2004; Unger, 1976).

This political compromise by which material privilege was at once formally excluded from political consideration and simultaneously allowed to informally permeate government has had a profound legacy, the outlines of which are well beyond the scope of this project. That said, struggles over how space is to be regulated and the “public” to be served by public spaces provide vivid illustrations of how these tensions between liberalism’s simultaneous embrace of universal rights and individualized privilege play out in the American city. While public space is one of a

limited number of public goods that is widely thought to be inherently accessible to all members of society regardless of status, the very functions that it is expected to perform are contingent upon systems of regulation and exclusion that limit accessibility.

On one hand public spaces such as parks and sidewalks have long been deemed to be realms intended to serve the greatest possible portion of the population and a classic example of a governmentally provided, universally accessible good. Mitchell captures the popular sense that access to public space should be unlimited when he argues that, “[p]ublic space represents the material location where the social interaction and political activities of all members of ‘the public’ occur” (Mitchell, 1995, at p. 115). More than simply a popular conception, the Supreme Court has, since the late 1930’s recognized that, although title to the,

streets and parks may rest in governments, they have immemorially been held in trust for the use of the public and, time out of mind, have been used for purposes of assembly, communicating thoughts between citizens, and discussing public questions. Such use of the streets and public places has, from ancient times, been a part of the privileges, immunities, rights and liberties of citizens. Hague v. CIO, 307 U.S. 496, 515 (1939).

And while the importance of these universal “privileges, immunities, rights and liberties” to the political functioning of democracies is well established (Balkin, 1990; Benhabib, 1992; Eliasopath, 1998; Fraser, 1993; Staeheli & Thompson, 1997) their significance as a space of unlimited access extends beyond their purely political functions. Rather, because of their potential to serve as a center for social and cultural life, public spaces have long been valued for their capacity to “embrace the public sphere of the city and

accommodate a wide range of city life where human contradictions, disagreements and ambiguities can be expressed and negotiated” (McInroy, 2000, at p. 26). In the west this has given rise to a tradition insisting that public spaces must be designed, built, and regulated in a manner that encompasses as much of the population as possible (Alstad & Curry, 2003; Buschman, 2003; Dahlberg, 2001; Kranich, 2004; Thompson, 2002).

On the other hand, urban public spaces have long been subject to regimes of regulation, ordering, and exclusion that render much of the universal promise of the “right” to public space illusory. Beyond purely geographic, economic, and physical barriers to access, all public spaces involve an ongoing negotiation of exclusions at a variety of levels. Because space is never “blank” the design and construction of the built environment will always delimit a range of uses and users. The ability of public space to either include or exclude goes beyond its physical features, to the cultural understandings and codes borne by such features. Even a public space as ostensibly neutral as an open grass area or concrete plaza brings with it a variety of tacit but clearly legible messages regarding who is welcome and who is not. In turn, these messages are discursively reproduced within such spaces. Thus Fraser notes, “[t]he question of open access cannot be reduced without remainder to the presence or absence of formal exclusions. It requires us to look also at the process of discursive interaction within formally inclusive public arenas” (Fraser, 1993, at 10). Equally importantly, the expectation that public spaces serve a variety of power and class laden projects – ranging from comfortable recreational spaces for the upper classes, thoroughfares for commerce, and symbols of municipal identity and affluence – has

long undermined liberal, universal guarantees of a right to access the city's public spaces. Such tensions have characterized urban public space in the U.S. since the creation of New York's Central Park which was, from its inception, intended to serve "utilitarian claims that it would promote the city's commercial and physical health; social and moral arguments that it would 'improve' the 'disorderly classes' and foster order among them; and cultural contentions that it would display the cultivation of the leading citizens" (Rosenzweig & Blackmar, 1992, at p. 23).

Contemporary techniques of spatial regulation are particularly representative of the schism between the liberal state's legitimizing promise of universal rights, and the practical tendency of the state to perpetuate material inequality throughout society. A substantial geographic literature outlines the restrictive impacts that broader structural forces – including globalization, post-industrialization, and a mixture of political and economic practices– are having upon such traditional public fora as parks, sidewalks and streets (Alstad & Curry, 2003; Blomley, 2004b, 2004c; Cresswell, 2004; Davis, 1990; Fyfe & Bannister, 1998; Mitchell, 2003b; Mitchell & Staeheli, 2005). These structural forces have caused inclusive and disciplinary approaches to public space to be usurped by ever more exclusionary practices, leading Merry to argue that contemporary western forms of spatial regulation increasingly,

focus on concealing or displacing offensive activities rather than eliminating them. Their target is a population rather than individuals. They produce social order by creating zones whose denizens are shielded from witnessing socially undesirable behavior such as smoking or selling sex. The individual offender is not treated or reformed, but a particular public is protected. The logic is that of zoning rather than correcting (2001, at p. 17).

According to these critiques, the increased pressures towards regulation, privatization,

and surveillance in traditional public spaces may be seen as egregious and self-reinforcing examples of economic, political, and social restructurings currently occurring at a variety of scales under the rubric of neoliberalism.

Constituting “an extraordinarily messy mix of ideas and practices that have been developed and deployed in different ways with different names in different places,” neoliberalism is typically characterized by a combination of regimes of governmental regulation designed to protect transnational “free markets” and a radical restructuring, re-scaling, and re-ordering of individual “civil citizenship” (Sparke, 2006a, 2006b). This involves an increasing restriction and denial of the individual rights of the least empowered populations both inside and outside the US, in the name of protecting elites’ transnational rights of movement and accumulation (Roberts *et al.*, 2003; Sparke, 2005b, 2006a). Under these logics, we may see the aggressive state management of such disorderly populations as the homeless, prisoners, and protestors as the natural counterpart to aggressive state economic regulation in the name of protecting business (Fyfe & Bannister, 1998; Irwin, 1985; Mitchell, 2003b; Roberts *et al.*, 2003; Sparke, 2006a, 2006b) and a resulting emphasis on traditional property based conceptions of citizenship (Blomley, 2004b). Based on a tacit class system under which the indicia of social merit is the accumulation of capital, neoliberalism demands that all public goods be limited to those who actively pursue the incentives of “free market” capitalism, and be denied to those who either threaten or will not participate in “legitimate” activities of accumulation and consumption.

Although such neoliberal restrictions of civic membership fly in the face of the liberal state’s legitimizing promise of universality and equality, they paradoxically

have their roots within a number of classical liberal, enlightenment era ideologies that serve to render unproblematic and taken-for-granted all manner of material and social inequalities. Neoliberalism is premised upon what is arguably the most central and enduring liberal concept to emerge from the enlightenment, namely that of the “self possessive individual,” a concept originating in the works of both Hobbes and Locke. MacPherson outlines the enlightenment re-envisioning of the individual not as, “a moral whole nor as a part of a larger social whole,” but rather as, “essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them. . . . as an owner of himself” (MacPherson, 1962, p. 3). Defining the citizen in terms of an individuality that is measured by its capacity for production and ownership of self and property, in turn opens the door for Locke’s concept of the “social contract” as the defining and legitimating mythos of the liberal state. The connection between understanding the individual as “naturally the sole proprietor of his own person and capacities,” (*id.* at 231) and Locke’s concept of the social contract as the ordering principal behind legitimate governance is obvious. If the measure of the individual is defined in terms of property rights – specifically self-possession manifested in the ability to exercise free dominion in production and accumulation – then the limitations imposed by a legitimate government must take the form of a freely consented contract by which property rights are exchanged. Through the form of the contract – with its implicit promise of equally accruing benefits to both sides – the integrity of the individual as lawful possessor of property (both physical and abstract) is reaffirmed (Blomley, 2004b) and made central to the legitimizing functions of the state. Such an approach places property law at the heart of social order, displacing morality and the

divine right of royalty as the justification and *raison d'être* for society and, thus, the state.

If it is labour, a man's absolute property, which justifies appropriation and creates value, the individual right of appropriation overrides any moral claims of the society. The traditional view that property and labour were social functions, and the ownership of property involved social obligations, is thereby undermined (MacPherson, 1962, p. 221).

In liberalism's dialectic separation of state and society (the political and material) we may see the roots of neoliberalism's rhetorical *laissez faire* insistence upon the elimination of state interference with market dynamics as impermissible intrusions of the public function of state into the private realm of personal finance. In liberalism's enshrinement of the possessive, rights and property bearing individual we may likewise see the roots of neoliberalism's aggressive promotion of individually articulated human rights (Bartholomew & Breakspear, 2003), and especially the rights of private property (Blomley, 2004b) that not only serve to undermine the universality of other rights, but to mandate the rescaling of citizenship to those who engage in the defining activities of liberalism – production and possession.

Neoliberal rescalings of universalist approaches to individual rights and entitlements have played out explicitly in the struggle over what "public" should and will benefit from the "common" goods of public spaces (Fyfe & Bannister, 1998). As a practical matter, the rise of neoliberal approaches to regulating public space has not been purely a product of political forces. Rather, as Alstad and Curry have described, neoliberal logics come to constrict the public served by public spaces when:

Financially strapped cities cannot afford to maintain public amenities such as parks, and come to depend on the private sector to fill the gap. Corporate plazas and shopping malls are ostensibly public spaces, yet

they belong to the private realm. Owners have the right to exclude certain members of the public. People are welcome as long as they are working, shopping, or eating there, but use of this type of space is not a right, but a privilege. The requirement that these spaces be both profitable and safe has led to a demand for total management and controlled behaviour, which precludes political activity and undermines the public dimension of the space (Alstad & Curry, 2003).

Similar neoliberal rescalings of civic membership through aggressive regulation of space have also occurred in traditional public spaces such as parks, plazas and sidewalks. Perhaps the best example of this tendency comes out of Don Mitchell's study of Seattle's "civility laws" in "The Right to the City" (2003b). Mitchell persuasively links the growth of such facially neutral rules as Seattle's law against sitting upon the city sidewalks, public urination and sleeping in public places as "indicative of the whole tenor of the war against homeless people that cities are waging in the name of global competitiveness" (p. 167). Beyond representing public nuisances, the daily activities of the homeless and marginalized that such laws intended to police were intended to curtail were presented by Seattle City Attorney Mark Sidran as both invitations to violent crime (as per Wilson & Kelling's "broken window" thesis (1997)), and serious threats to Seattle's economic viability, in light of the ability of "footloose capital" to relocate elsewhere under conditions of neoliberal economics (p. 169, 178). This aggressive linking of the regulation of public space with urban place marketing led Mitchell to identify Seattle as the prime exemplar of how the neoliberal revanchist "annihilating economy" has led cities across the nation to redefine and restrict the "public" for whom the public spaces of the city are to serve (Mitchell, 2003b). Neoliberal approaches to spatial regulation by which the pursuit of orderly urban landscapes are pursued as a means towards attracting and facilitating

mobile capital have also been well documented in such diverse U.S., Canadian, and British cities as Los Angeles, New York, Minneapolis, Santa Fe, Columbus Ohio, Atlanta, San Francisco, London, Glasgow, Calgary, Montreal, and Vancouver, B.C. (Blomley, 2004b, 2004c; Cresswell, 2004; Davis, 1990; Fyfe & Bannister, 1998; Herbert, 2001; Mitchell, 2003b; Mitchell & Staeheli, 2005). Moreover, because of the centrality of public space to most prevalent Western conceptions of legitimate governance (Balkin, 1990; Benhabib, 1992; Eliasopath, 1998; Fraser, 1993; Staeheli & Thompson, 1997), the restriction of participation in such spaces is an integral component of a broader neoliberal project to redefine and rescale of civil citizenship. Although such redefinition of civic membership is typically justified as necessary to maximize incentives for those who engage in appropriate accumulation and consumption, and to exclude and punish those who would threaten legitimate economic actors and activities, the effect of such policies is often to deny entire populations the very benefits of citizenship and civic membership upon which democracy is premised, including the space in which to exist (Waldron, 1991).

I do not, however, offer the foregoing discussion of neoliberal spatial regulation to suggest that such approaches to ordering public space are either the sole or even the primary regime by which Seattle's public spaces are created and ordered. Rather this fairly detailed analysis is offered as an especially vivid and well theorized contemporary example of the distributive dilemma of liberalism. This dilemma, however, is not irreconcilable. Rather, discursive framings generally and identity based discourses specifically serve to naturalize and neutralize the tacit restrictions of

“the public” in public space that are demanded in a liberal society, as I outline in the next section.

### B. The Role of Political Proxies in resolving the Dilemmas of Liberal Governance

The ability to discursively frame decisions about the distribution of public goods as debates about the nature and merits of the recipients of those goods is one of the most powerful tools available to both governmental and non-governmental decision makers in navigating the distributive dilemma of liberalism. By invoking and framing debate around the identity of groups that already discursively bear rich social meanings and who are excluded from those debates by their identity markers, a variety of political actors are able to neutralize their efforts to direct governmental resources along class, race, gender, or other group interests. By coding questions of spatial regulation in terms of the identities of spatial proxies, discussions of the systems of ranking and exclusion upon which the political system is based may be safely transformed into and concealed by discussions about the merits, behaviors, and internal characteristics of such proxy populations. The exclusion of lower-rank populations can be naturalized by recontextualizing those populations as non-conforming, irrational, criminal, or disorderly – and thus self-excluding. In turn, other “legitimate” populations may be posited as inherently morally worthy and deserving of inclusion in “the public.”

As Mehta has documented, this tendency has existed from the earliest days of the liberal state. Thus, British colonial administrators were able to simultaneously impose liberal values upon their colonial holdings while denying the benefits of “universal human rights” to their colonial subjects on the basis of those subjects’

supposed deficits in the rationality and scrutability necessary for participation in the liberal state (Mehta, 1999). Likewise, contemporary political actors are able to simultaneously uphold their adherence to liberal and democratic principals at the same time they negotiate exclusionary regimes of spatial regulation by articulating those regimes as responses to the purported success or failure of a variety of discursive proxies to meet the prerequisites for participating in the benefits of liberal society. And as with the colonial subjects described by Mehta, the exclusion of such discursive proxies from the political realm renders the political mobilization of their identities safe from challenge.

The political value of the discursive proxy, however, is not limited to those who would pursue exclusionary or anti-democratic regimes of spatial regulation. Rather, the rhetorically and culturally loaded figure of the discursive proxy may also provide political leverage to those pursuing both progressive and reactionary politics. Nowhere is this more evident than debates over the provision of access to public space to “the homeless.” Encompassing a remarkably diverse population – including those temporarily lacking a permanent residence, the fully employed who lack the means to afford conventional housing, the mentally and emotionally disabled, substance addicts, and disorderly street populations who actually have access to conventional residential situations – the “homeless” serve as a potent discursive proxy in contemporary urban politics. For example, the “homeless” have been rhetorically mobilized as a population that – due to their own choices, behaviors, and moral failings – threaten the legitimate uses of public space and the city as a whole, thereby leaving the state with no choice impose regulations excluding them (Ellickson, 1996; J. Q. Wilson &

Kelling, 1997). At the same time, there is a tendency in counterarguments against theorists such as Ellickson, Wilson, and Kelling to mobilize the homeless as discursive proxies for quite different ends. Thus, Mitchell's work criticizing the regimes of spatial regulation that have blossomed in the response to the ascendancy of "the broken windows" thesis likewise mobilizes "the homeless" as a monolithic discursive proxy to argue a largely Marxist critique of neoliberal place-marketing as a cure for post-fordist urban economic restructurings (2003b). Notwithstanding the tremendous range of life experience and material circumstances encompassed within the identity of "the homeless," Mitchell nonetheless tends to mobilize the collective identity of homelessness as a discursive proxy for those rendered without employment by economic restructuring, the flight of "footloose capital," and the need for a "reserve army of the unemployed" in capitalist economies. In so doing, he largely overlooks or ignores the greater diversity within those subject to the increasingly stringent, exclusionary approaches to spatial regulation that Mitchell terms the "annihilation of space by law." While I do not intend to dismiss its persuasive force, Mitchell's critique reflects the ease with which a disempowered or marginalized population's identity may be mobilized as a spatial proxy in the name of political struggle by even the most well-intentioned of outsiders.

Regardless of the intent of those who mobilize such identities, however, the marginal status of discursive proxies such as "the homeless" enable a variety of political actors to freely claim and contest the state's distribution of such public goods as access to public space. Without the constraints of actually having to answer to those whose identities have been invoked, political actors are freed to use such

discursive proxies as discourse laden vessels with which to engage in the “real politics” of civic belonging.

C. The Political Role of the Discursive Proxy and the Example of “Saving” Ballard While Enabling the “Incredible Skatepark Shrinking Machine”

From the beginning of Seattle’s skatepark advocacy movement, the discursive proxy of the young skater has legitimated and enabled a variety of redistributions of public goods that might not otherwise have been politically feasible. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, the initial framing of the effort to save the Ballard Bowl as a youth issue – rallying around the slogan “Seattle hates kids,” was immensely successful at a variety of levels. The irony implicit in these successes, however, is that at the same time the political flexibility of young identities empowered advocates and the city to “save” the Bowl and thus shift a portion of the Commons from the broader community to skaters, these identities also enabled the shifting of the public “good” of the Ballard Commons away from the same group of predominantly young skaters that advocates and the city were claiming to represent, and towards a private company that had been planning to develop an adjoining property.

At first glance, advocate’s insistently framing the Parks department’s removal of what had always been intended to be a temporary facility as “anti-youth” enabled a profound redistribution of public space. By 2004, a core group of Ballard residents and businesses had been involved in planning the Commons as a passive use park for almost a decade, and the overall design had been largely finalized. This prolonged and intensive planning period had been a product of Seattle’s infamous public input process. By enabling community input, however, a core constituency of neighborhood

businesses and residents had developed around the Commons. These neighborhood volunteers envisioned the Commons as a means of meeting the green-space needs of the community and celebrating the area's working-class, maritime, and largely Nordic heritage at a time when gentrification and an influx of thirty-something's was diluting that character. In light of the time, effort, and care that they had dedicated to what had been a painfully slow planning process, these community members met the Mayor's eleventh hour decision to insert a skateboarding feature into the commons with outrage, recognizing it as a redistribution of a "public" good for which they had fought for a decade.

It would be a mistake to simply treat the inclusion of a skatepark in the Ballard Commons over the protest of such important area stakeholders as the Ballard Chamber of Commerce as an exercise of executive fiat by Mayor Nichols. Rather, it was the discursive proxy of the young skater that enabled the Mayor and a host of other political actors to naturalize and neutralize the redistribution of public space from the non-skating majority of Ballard residents to the city's transition skaters. Thus from his very first articulation of support of keeping a skatepark in the Ballard Commons, the Mayor was able to invoke that facility as an unconditional good for an inherently deserving population. As discussed in Chapter 3, Nichols' initial announcement in support of the skatepark explicitly invoked the importance of skating as a positive activity for young people that had, "gotten younger parks users really engaged in the community," (Jenniges, 2004a). Once that decision had been made, and the redistribution of public space effectuated through the construction of the skatepark, the figure of the youthful skater likewise enabled a variety of public figures – including

me – to present that distributive decision as a positive and unproblematic service for an inherently deserving population. For example, Councilmember David Della’ speech during the dedication ceremony for the Commons framed the skatepark as a service to all of Seattle’s young people and their families:

As chair of the parks, libraries, and education committee it’s been my pleasure ... to chair a committee where we can look at providing open space and parks for people and families to come together and enjoy each other and you know, make sure that we are a city that values really the quality of life for all of our families... I want to lastly say that council member Drago and I were one of the few people that stood with the skateboarders to make sure that they had a place in this park as well. And most recently my colleagues have joined me on the council to approve of working with a task force of skateboarders and their families to look at skateboarding all over the city because this is an emerging sport and activity that I think families and young people can enjoy and I think we want it in Ballard and also the other parts of the city where its getting much more popular and people can do it closer to their homes.

Speaking on behalf of the SPAC, my dedication ceremony speech also repeatedly invoked the discursive proxy of the young, gender-neutral skater to justify advocates successful claim to a portion of the Commons and other public spaces.

The story of this skatepark really starts a number of years ago with a group of local neighborhood high-school kids who instead of simply dreaming about a place to skate got off the couch and said, ‘we’re going to do something about this’ and got together the neighborhood support and the political support to get a skatepark out at Golden Gardens... This bowl is the product not just of the community being involved but hundreds of hours, hundreds of pairs of hands working on every aspect, not just the skate bowl, but the larger park. And thankfully, the spirit of the people who contributed lives on. It lives on down in South Park where a group of middle school girls have taken up the torch and are spearheading the effort to build a skatepark down in South Park, which happens to be the area with the highest concentration of kids in this city. This isn’t just guys who look like me, who have too much time on their hands. These are kids who want something in their neighborhood.

By positioning the new Ballard Bowl as a needed amenity for young people and their families, these political actors were able to render natural and unproblematic a decision that violated almost every principal of Seattle municipal politics. Skatepark advocates had persuaded the executive and City Council to override ten years of public input process and planning in the process of reallocating much needed green-space for a large monolithic concrete structure. By opening day, however, even the representative of the neighborhood planning group that had gotten steamrolled by this process was describing the Commons as, “represent[ing] the best of the Seattle inclusive process and neighborhood planning...It was created out of the dreams and schemes of many of Ballard’s stalwart citizen activists and a willing and able Seattle neighborhood planning initiative.”

Underneath this discursive-proxy enabled victory for skateboarders, however, lay another less obvious and more potentially problematic redistribution of public space. In the same way the figure of the young skater had enabled the city to shift a portion of the Commons to skateboarders, it also enabled the dispossession of the very people that the City and advocates claimed to be representing. Almost immediately after Mayor Nickels’ May 10, 2004 announcement of support (Jenniges, 2004a), it became clear that the original Ballard skatepark would not be left standing. Rather than leaving the existing facilities intact the city Parks Department announced its plan on May 21 to demolish the entire skatepark – including the Ballard Bowl – replacing it with a new Bowl feature in a different part of the park site (Bush, 2004).

This decision represented a huge loss to those discursive proxies whose identities had enabled advocates to guarantee a skateboarding presence in the Ballard

Commons park. The first bowl feature constituted less than one quarter of the square footage of the original Ballard skatepark, with the remainder of the facility footprint devoted to youth-oriented street features and a half-pipe.



Figure 19: Portion of “street” section from original Ballard Skatepark. Photo from [www.concretedisciples.com](http://www.concretedisciples.com)

The City’s decision to save the “bowl” at the cost of those “street” features – which I and the rest of the SPAC endorsed as a matter of political expediency – shifted the cost of the new facility onto those it was purportedly serving, namely the young people who had constituted the majority of Ballard Skatepark users.

Likewise, the decision to create a “new” skatepark in the commons also worked to displace many of the older skaters who had rallied behind the “save the bowl” effort. Rather than simply designing and building the new Ballard Commons park around the existing Bowl feature, which had been tucked in the Southwest corner

of the site behind a supermarket, the Parks department decided to “move” it approximately 50 feet into the center of the park.

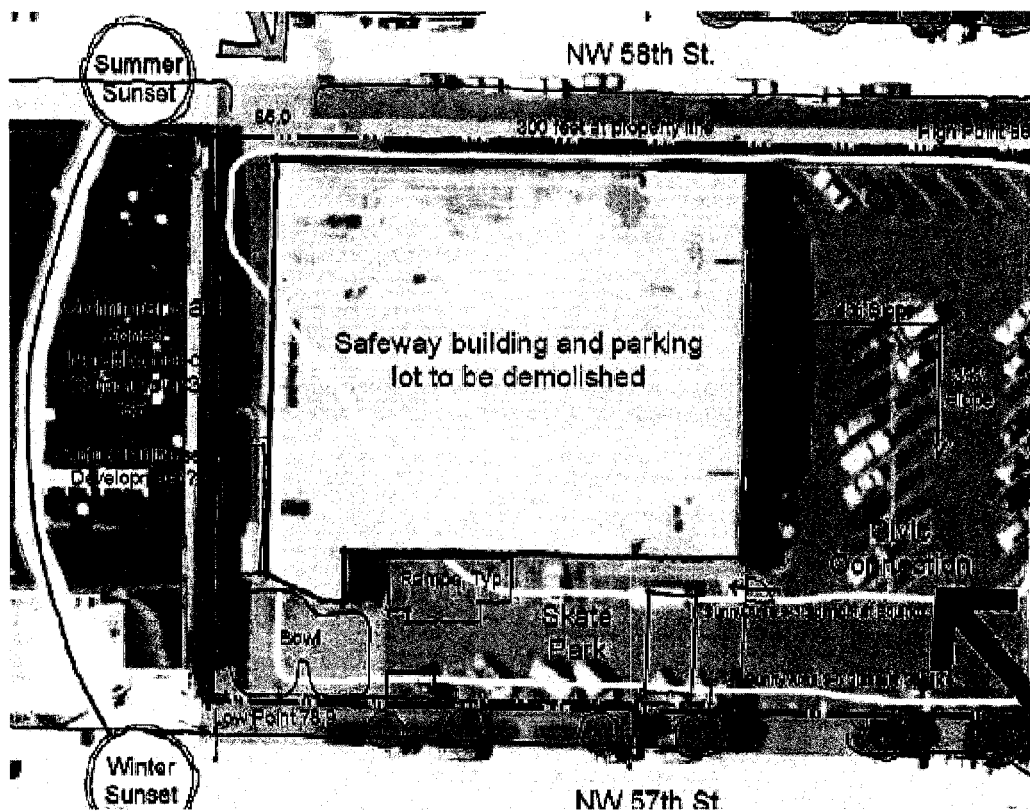


Figure 20: Portion of landscape architect’s rendering of the original Ballard Skatepark and ultimate location of Ballard Commons Park shaded in green. The Bowl and greater skatepark are in the lower left corner. The street area included the area from the bowl to the rectangle to the right of the words “Skate Park” and north of the bowl to the rectangular structure between the Safeway and the active QFC supermarket on the far left, labeled “Commercial Zoned.”

In reality, this meant demolishing a bowl that had deep emotional resonance for many Seattle skaters. Funded by private contributions – including \$50,000 from the band Pearl Jam – and constructed entirely with volunteer labor, the Ballard Bowl was perceived as uniquely belonging to Seattle’s skaters. Because of the lack of formal governmental input, many skaters considered it to be among the best in the Northwest. At the same time, a sizable and passionate community had formed around the Ballard Bowl, not only because of its excellence in design and construction, but also because

of its fairly marginal location. As discussed in Chapter 3, the very inhospitality and grunginess of this environment heightened many skaters' attachment to the original Ballard skatepark as an "authentic" urban environment whose unsavory character created a club-house like boundary between "insiders" and outsiders. And for many of these skaters, the new Ballard Bowl was, by dint of its new, "playground" like environment simply unacceptable. Within a year of its construction, only a handful of the original Ballard Bowl "regulars" were continuing to use the new facility, in spite of excellent construction and a design intended to appeal to older transition skaters.

At first glance, the limits to the skatepark advocacy movement's successes in Ballard may easily be seen as simply a product of the type of compromise inherent in the political process – what a number of skatepark advocates have begun calling "the skatepark shrinking machine." Much like the decision to include the Ballard Bowl in the Commons at all, however, the decision to "shrink" the skatepark should also be understood as a decision by municipal government to redistribute the "good" of public space from one group to another. By moving the skatepark, the City partially shifted the benefits of the Commons away from skaters and non-skaters alike in order to increase the benefits that a private developer would enjoy from that public space. As a practical matter, the Parks department's decision to shift the skatepark location deeper into the Ballard Commons was deeply counterintuitive. Because the original bowl location was compressed into a corner of the larger park site, leaving it in place would have both maximized designers' flexibility in planning the rest of the park, and reduced the possible impact of an "active" recreation area on the "passive" use of the

originally conceived Ballard Commons. In fact, the decision to move the bowl essentially transformed a large portion of the Ballard Commons into a supporting space for the skatepark, placing the bowl in a commanding central location overlooking the surrounding park areas.

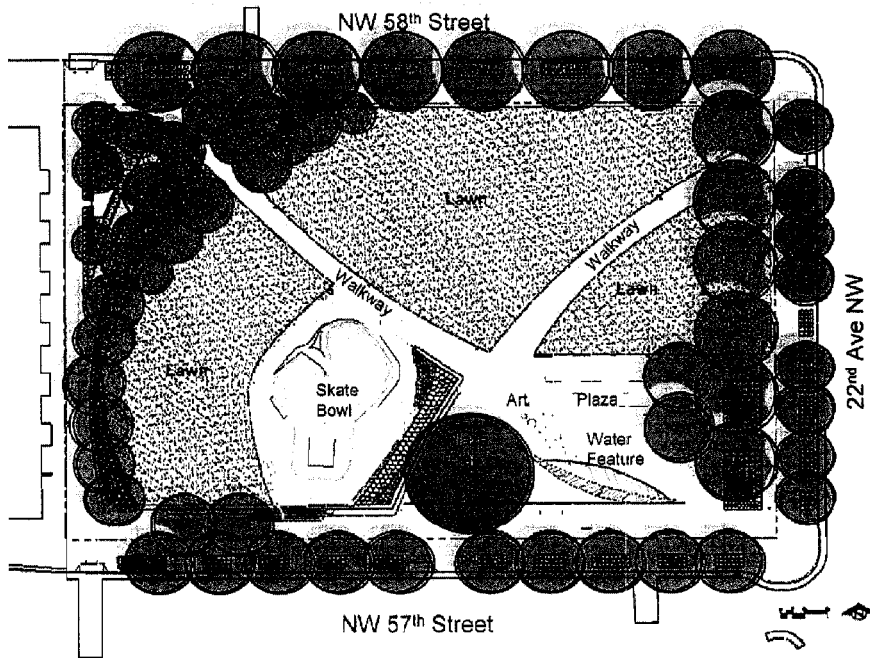


Figure 21: Original rendering of plan view of Ballard Commons Park showing ultimate location of the bowl feature.



Figure 22: View of Ballard Commons from the northeast. Water feature is on the left, skatepark in the center, QFC supermarket on the right. Photo courtesy Dan Hughes

In light of the problems with “moving” the bowl, the City’s offered rationales were strikingly unpersuasive, especially in light of activists work to refute them. For example, while the primary rationale provided for relocating the skatepark was that, as a volunteer project, it had not been built to proper standards for the Parks department to adopt it as a permanent facility, advocates recruited the services of a top regional concrete-structure consulting engineer to give the Bowl a sound bill of health. Likewise when the Parks department raised potential problems with drainage plumbing, advocates provided construction drawings, specs, and photos to establish that all work had been performed to code.

The fact that none of the official explanations for moving the bowl actually justified a change in its location (even if they did arguably justify the decision to replace it), suggested that forces outside the Parks department were motivating that decision. And while no City or Parks officials were willing to concede the point, it soon became apparent that the decision to push the bowl 50 feet to the east was being driven by Security Properties, the owner of the active QFC supermarket property to the west of the Ballard Commons. A number of conversations with advocates made it clear that Security Properties considered the nearby presence of a skatepark to be incompatible with their recently announced plans to redevelop the neighboring supermarket into a multi-story, multi-use, mixed commercial and residential development. Raising concerns about noise and the potential impact of nearby skaters upon the sale of planned condominiums, Security Properties not only publicly opposed to allowing the skatepark to remain in place, but was also the only constituency whose interests could be served by moving the Bowl to another part of the site. And while it

is impossible to fully determine what communications passed between the developers of the adjacent QFC lot and City decision makers, there is substantial evidence to suggest that a wealthy property owner considered the proximity of populations already discursively framed as “noisy” and disorderly to be a sufficient threat to successfully marketing their planned multi-use development as to lead them to persuade the city to “move” the nuisance away. Likewise, while there is no way to know the extent to which the developer actually believed that the skatepark would actually be a source of noise and disorder, it is clear that they anticipated that potential buyers would evaluate investment in the development through negative discursive framings of young skateboarders and succeeded in mobilizing the city to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to mitigate these impacts.

Thus, the identity of the young skater facilitated redistributions of public space that go beyond enabling the city and skatepark advocates’ to “take away” a portion of the Ballard Commons for the benefit of a narrowly proscribed group. Rather, that discursive proxy enabled a political decision that would otherwise be politically unacceptable in a left-leaning, progressive city such as Seattle, namely the transfer of much of the public good of the Commons from both passive space users and the purported beneficiaries of the skatepark to the commercial developers of an adjoining property.

D. The Ability to Successfully Mobilize the Discursive Proxy through the Planning Process as Test of Political Power.

In Seattle the types of raw exercises of executive fiat that led to the last-minute inclusion of a skatepark in the Ballard Commons are the exception. Instead, the

majority of state decisions about how to create, design, construct, and regulate (that is, how to distribute) the good of public space are discursively posited as products of Seattle's intensive public input and planning process. And while this process itself has a powerful ability to politically naturalize and neutralize a variety of potentially problematic distributive decisions, the figure of the discursive proxy has played a core role in the various planning exercises surrounding Seattle's other public skatepark projects. Throughout, a variety of actors have asserted their political power to either lay claim to public space or –more commonly – resist others' claims through the figure of the young skater, with its concomitant ability to bear both negative and positive cultural codings. Rather than taking the politically and discursively problematic step of asserting that the wealth and class privilege of its residents should be sufficient basis for a given neighborhood's objections to a skatepark site to carry the day, empowered residents are able to frame their rejection as a politically neutral claim that it is the skateboarders themselves who are undomesticable and incompatible with the neighborhood character. And because these assertions of political power are coded through the framing of the discursive proxy, the City is likewise empowered to pick and choose whether positive or negative discourses prevail in a given site without explicitly endorsing or rejecting a neighborhood's tacit assertion of political power. Thus, even though the city's planning processes are inevitably proffered as transparently determining how the benefits and burdens accompanying public space are distributed, the discursive proxy enables the coding and concealment of the power relations underlying these ostensibly technocratic and power-neutral allocations.

**LOWER WOODLAND: THE NIMBIES STRIKE BACK**

As discussed in the prior two Chapters, a small but well organized group of residents living near Seattle's Lower Woodland Park sought to articulate their political power through negative framings of the discursive proxy of the young skater almost immediately after advocates' successfully mobilized to claim a piece of the Ballard Commons through their own positive framings. And as with the original Ballard Bowl activists, the political power of the Lower Woodland opponents may be measured in both their degree of success in mobilizing that discursive proxy in pursuit of their claims to public space. Lower Woodland was not only the first skatepark project "officially" sited, designed, and constructed by Parks department in the wake of the Ballard protests, but also was the first test for the movement's youth-oriented "playground" model for these facilities. At the urging of parents within the movement, advocates objected to the original location – approximately 200 yards away from the nearest road, tucked below a cliff band and behind two sports fields, in a largely unused part of a large urban park – in unsuccessfully advocating for a different, more visible site for the project within the Greenlake/Lower Woodland Park complex.

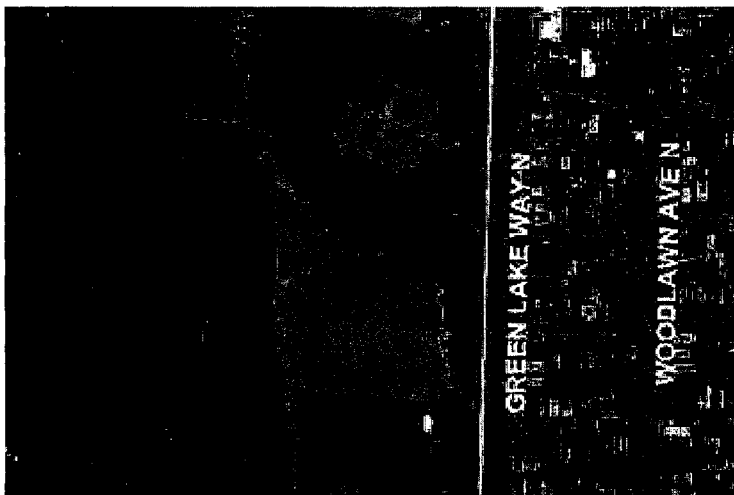


Figure 23: Original planned location of Lower Woodland Skatepark shown in blue.

Because of the visually and physically remote setting of the Parks department's proposed site, advocates argued that the skatepark would be unwelcoming to parents and would remove skaters from "eyes on the park." The distance between the site and other regular users raised concern among skatepark advocates that unsupervised teen skaters would be able to engage in undomesticated behaviors including vandalism and drug and alcohol abuse either at the skatepark or in the adjoining forested area. In turn, these behaviors were posited in conversations with Parks staffers as a potential threat to younger, more vulnerable skaters and even their parents.

Advocates' invocation of the needs of younger, more vulnerable skaters was almost immediately successful in furthering a more "playground" like vision of the skatepark site. Parks shifted the location of the planned facility approximately 100 yards closer to the street and the neighboring residential district in hopes that increased visibility and greater distance from the woods would render the skatepark safer, more contained, more domesticated (Bhatt, 2006). This victory in promoting a playground model for Lower Woodland, however, almost immediately met with fierce resistance.

Organizing around the negative framing of young skaters, a group of approximately 20 nearby residents publicly and vocally protested the decision to move the skatepark closer to their homes. Positing the shift in site as an effective invasion of their neighborhood by dangerous populations, and acting under the banner of the recently formed “Lower Woodland Neighborhood Association” this group began an aggressive political and media campaign to resist the shift in the skatepark site to the east.

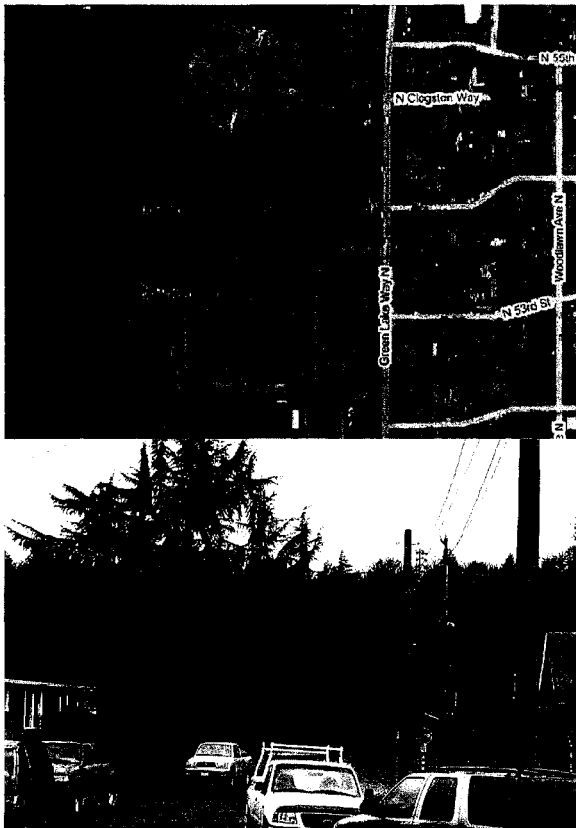


Figure 24: Images from “lowerwoodland.org” showing perceived new location for skatepark, and projected visibility of facility from a neighborhood street

As outlined in the prior chapters, these neighbors – swiftly dubbed “NIMBIES” by skatepark advocates – repeatedly protested the skatepark as a potential home to a population of inherently noisy, criminal, lower-class, and undomesticable outsiders

whose presence threatened the integrity of a neighborhood already pressured by rising house prices, an influx of newcomers, increasing traffic, and the Parks departments' decision to increasingly site sporting facilities within Lower Woodland Park.

By early February 2006, the opponents of the Lower Woodland project had used the strength of these objections to obtain a hearing before the citizen advisory Parks Board. As with almost all debate over skateparks in Seattle, testimony at the February 8 hearing was primarily concerned with what type of people the ostensibly youthful users of Lower Woodland would be, and what it means to have such populations in or near a neighborhood. Ultimately swayed by neighbors' passionately articulated negative framings of young skaters, the Parks Board recommended that the skatepark remain in its "originally" intended location and the Parks department promptly implemented their recommendation.

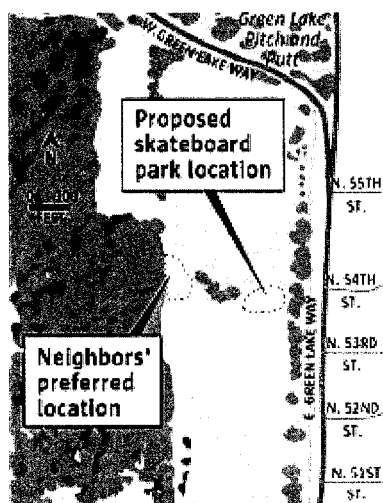


Figure 25: Graphic of potential Lower Woodland Sites from Seattle Times (Bhatt, 2006)

This "solution" represented a loss for both sides of the struggle. Opponents' efforts to exclude the skatepark from Lower Woodland had failed politically, leaving the

skatepark largely in place. Frustrated by their failure to carry the day, three core members of the “Lower Woodland Neighborhood Association,” subsequently decided to pursue self-funded litigation in a last-gasp effort to shut down the skatepark that has been, to date, unsuccessful. For proponents, the Parks Board’s decision to confine the skatepark to the western side of the park precluded a planned expansion of the facility, while the additional process demanded by opponents and subsequent litigation has indefinitely delayed construction.

At first glance, the success of a fairly small group of neighbors in overcoming the efforts of both the skatepark advocacy movement and the Parks department provides a vivid example of janus-faced power of invoking youthful discursive proxies. In the same way positive and vulnerable framings of youth enabled one group of activists to shift the site of a high-profile Parks Department project, concomitant negative framings of youthful identities provided a wealthy, well-organized, and privileged group of opposing activists the leverage they needed to successfully “push back” the site. A closer look, however, suggests that when placed within the context of Seattle’s planning processes, the discursive proxy of the young skater enabled the simultaneous assertion and resolution of incompatible and opposing claims to public space by two fairly empowered groups. And while the end result was the type of compromise typical of the political system – leaving both sides equally dissatisfied – the form that compromise took reflected both sides’ political power and resulting success in discursively mobilizing their competing framings of the young skater. By pushing the skatepark away from the neighborhood, the Parks Board partially endorsed the negative discursive framings of young skaters as a noisy,

disorderly presence that is not appropriate near upper-middle class homes. At the same time, the decision to leave the skatepark in Lower Woodland amidst the softball and soccer fields served as a partial acceptance of advocates' framing of young skaters as populations every bit as domesticated and deserving as kids who participate in more conventional sports. Thus, the ultimate location of the Lower Woodland skatepark is both spatial symbol and embodiment of the City's ad-hoc decision about who skateboarders are: a population that belongs among Seattle's active recreation spaces, but as far removed from the homes of taxpayers as possible.

#### **SEATTLE CENTER SKATEPARK: THE POWER AND LIMITS TO THE "PLAYGROUND" MODEL**

The ongoing political struggle around the replacement site for the city's first public skateboarding facility, Seattle Center skatepark, likewise demonstrates both the central role of young skaters' identities in coding claims of political power and in politically neutralizing the resolution of those competing claims to public space. Even where the discursive proxy of the youthful skater has provided advocates with the greatest leverage to promote the "playground" model of the skatepark, recent experience with the Seattle Center skatepark – commonly known as SeaSk8 – has shown that the connotative flexibility of youth has provided considerable power to those who would oppose actually hosting such a facility. Advocates have successfully mobilized the identity of young and vulnerable skaters to overcome a strong push from the Mayor's office, the Parks department, and Seattle Center to place that facility in an undomesticated site. At the same time, a number of powerful political actors

including Paul Allen’s Experience Music Project<sup>24</sup> and the administrators of the Space Needle have succeeded in both mobilizing negative discursive framings around young skaters, and coding their own assertions of power within those framings in pushing away the ultimate location of the skatepark.



Figure 26: Members of the Skatepark Master-Plan Taskforce at Seattle Center Skatepark. Photo courtesy Dan Hughes

In 2005 the city announced that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation would be purchasing a large parking lot belonging to the Seattle Center for \$22 Million in order to construct their new world headquarters (Anderson, 2005). The sale was widely regarded as a major victory for the Seattle Center, a semi-autonomous municipal entity and “living room to Seattle” which – although serving as the home to such marquee municipal attractions as the Space Needle, one of two monorail terminals, the Pacific Science Center, the Frank Gehry designed Experience Music

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<sup>24</sup> The Experience Music Project (“EMP”) was originally founded by Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen as a home for his sizable rock and roll memorabilia collection. As a subsidiary of Allen’s Vulcan Corporation, reputed to be Seattle’s largest private property owner, the EMP enjoys a tremendous amount of political power.

Project, and the long time home stadium for the Seattle Sonics Basketball team – had long been operating in the red and placing considerable strain on city finances.

At the same time, the sale was seen as a blow to Seattle’s skateboarders as the parking lot was also the location of SeaSk8, Seattle’s first public skatepark, and – during the period after the demolition of the original Ballard Skate Park – the only legal public terrain for new-school street skating. Still stinging from the controversy over Ballard, however, the City conditioned the sale of the lot upon the allocation of \$900,000 from the purchase price to replace the skatepark and a basketball court (Anderson, 2005; Galloway, 2006). The City also agreed with the Gates Foundation that a site would be found for the replacement facility before the existing skatepark was demolished.

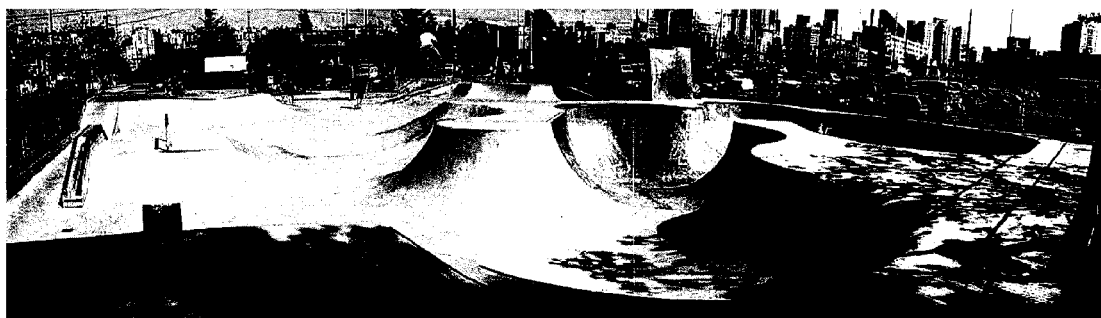


Figure 27: Seattle Center Skatepark. Photo courtesy Dan Hughes

While this proviso was almost an afterthought at the time of the transaction, it soon became a sticky problem for the City. Because the Seattle Center is located within the urban core, north of Downtown, tucked between the now solidly gentrified waterfront Belltown neighborhood, the wealthy Queen Anne neighborhood, and the South-Lake Union area – itself the subject of rapid and aggressive redevelopment by Paul Allen’s Vulcan Corporation – there is very little affordable commercial space for such a facility.

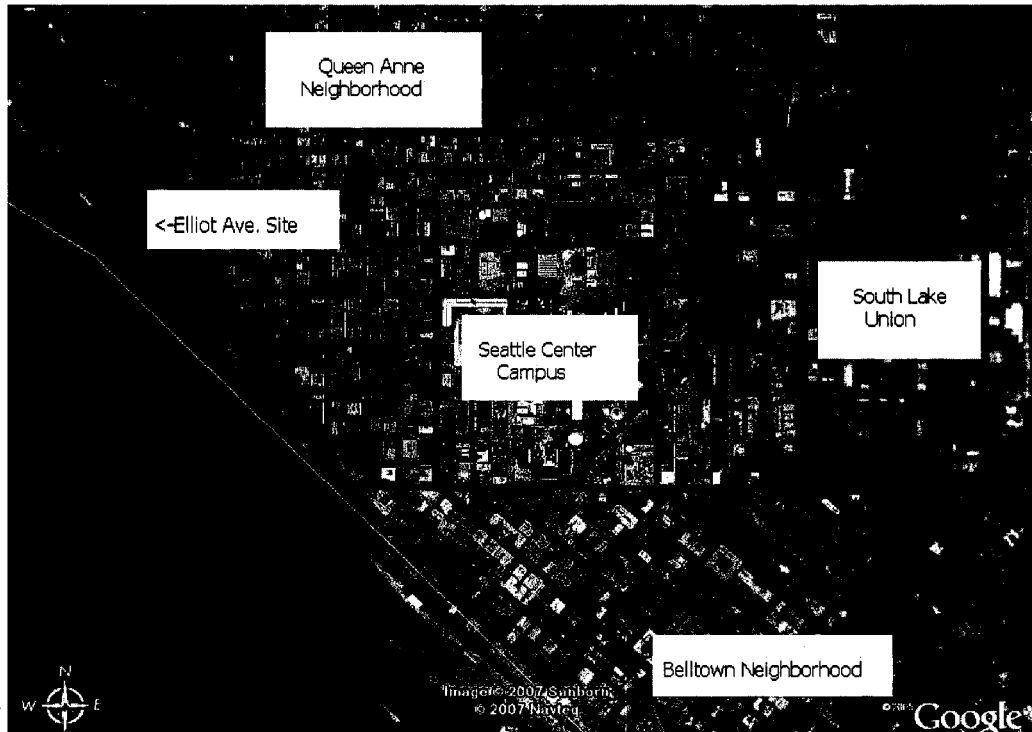


Figure 28: Seattle Center outlined in red and surrounding areas

Likewise, due to the historical density of surrounding neighborhoods, high programming demands upon existing park space, and the typically small size of most nearby parks, the Parks department deemed all of the sites it administered in the area around Seattle Center to be inappropriate or simply too small for the replacement skatepark.

The City's dilemma in determining where to locate the SeaSk8 replacement appeared to be resolved by the discovery of an unused construction staging site off Elliot Avenue, between an office block, a waste-water pumping station, 6 lanes of traffic, and a railroad right of way. Owned by the City public works department and available for an inexpensive long-term surface rights lease, the Elliot site was affordable, reasonably proximate to the Seattle Center campus and, best of all, unclaimed by any other constituency or group of users. In fact, a number of city

officials actively promoted siting the SeaSk8 replacement at Elliot as a means of “activating” a site that otherwise had few commercial, recreational, or residential prospects. By using the skatepark to domesticate the area, it was hoped that the Elliot Avenue redevelopment would spearhead further economic and residential redevelopment of this traditionally light-industrial area. The Elliot Site placed the skate advocacy community in a conundrum. On one hand, acceptance of the site would likely guarantee a swift construction schedule in a site with room to grow and almost no potential political opponents. Moreover, the Elliot site enjoyed the full support of City government. On the other hand, the semi-industrial character of the site – approximately 4 miles north on the same train tracks that border the Marginal Way location and surrounded by heavy auto and rail traffic – ran contrary to the developing orthodoxy within the mainstream skatepark advocacy favoring sites optimized for youthful and family oriented users.



Figure 29: Aerial view of proposed Elliot Ave. Site, outlined in red. Train tracks are visible to the lower left, Elliot avenue to the upper right. Pumping station is at the top left.

Advocates were thus faced with accepting a very un-playground like space for a facility that, at the time, was seen as setting the precedent for all subsequent skateparks, or trying to halt a project that the City, the Seattle Center, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation were all pushing to complete.

Ultimately, the decision was made to try to have it both ways by attempting to transform a “clubhouse” space into a “playground” environment. The SPAC recommended that it could only accept the Elliott site if the city took sufficient remedial actions to deal with preexisting problems with noise, pollution, transportation, and accessibility concerns. Rather than pushing through a site that the skatepark advocacy movement had rejected, but unwilling to ask for the resources to transform Elliott into a full-fledged green-space, the Mayor put a halt on the project and retained a real estate consultant to perform an analysis of alternative sites. When the consultant’s report again came under fire from advocates for methodological problems and for once again naming the Elliot Avenue site as the best location, the mayor vetoed the Elliot site and pushed the entire project over to City Council to resolve (Galloway, 2006).

Much like the Parks Board that resolved the Lower Woodland debate, City Council found itself caught in the middle of an aggressively pitched battle over where to site a skatepark. And as with Lower Woodland, each side articulated its position in terms of the domesticability of the intended users of the disputed facility. Unlike Lower Woodland, however, advocates were confronted with a particularly powerful and skilled set of political opponents. Advocates’ framing of skaters as young and

underserved populations, and skateparks as family-friendly amenities had led to substantial support among the City Council for the “playground” skatepark model. This model clashed with both the Parks department and the Seattle Center’s desire to site the skatepark at Elliott Avenue. The Parks department was concerned that rejection of the Elliot site would lead to the skatepark being once again inserted at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour into another politically sensitive park redevelopment project. Likewise, the Seattle Center refused to identify any workable alternate sites on its campus both due to prior problems with graffiti in the original SeaSk8, and out of a desire not to impede an upcoming campus-wide master-planning process. This tension led to months of political struggle between advocates, Seattle Center, Parks and Recreation, and City Council over whether or not the skatepark would ultimately be placed at Elliott, at the Seattle Center campus itself, or within some other city property. The deadlock was ultimately resolved by the City Council’s decision to suspend a approximately a quarter of the Seattle Center’s funding for 2007 pending the center’s identification of an on-campus site that would allow design and construction to begin in 2007 for a 2008 opening date.

While City Council’s decision to force the skatepark onto the Seattle Center campus was, on its face, a stunning victory for advocates and the playground model for skateparks, this move actually heralded a much more profound degree of political struggle. And as with the battles over Seattle’s other skateparks, this battle was largely articulated in terms of young skaters’ identities. By the same act in which it had forced the SeaSk8 replacement onto Seattle Center campus, City Council charged the Center’s administration with proposing three potential sites within the campus for

the actual location of the skatepark. This decision, in turn, led to an equally heated series of struggles between skatepark advocates, City Council, the Mayor's office, and the various constituencies present on and around the Seattle Center – including the Space Needle, Paul Allen's Experience Music Project, the Pacific Science Center, Benaroya Hall, the Performing Arts Center, Seattle Center staff and administration, and the citizen advisory "Century 21" committee in charge of the Center's master-planning process – over who would or would not share the public space of the campus with the skatepark. And while a number of Seattle Center organizations advocated in favor of the skatepark, including the Vera Project youth arts non-profit and the Center House School, it quickly became clear that a number of powerful organizations had successfully mobilized negative discursive framings of young skaters in order to push the skatepark out of their "backyard."

This struggle was most readily apparent in the debates over potentially locating skatepark in the so-called "Broad Street Green" site. Wedged between the iconic Space Needle and EMP structures to the north and south, and Broad and Mercer Streets to the east, and overarched by the Monorail line, the Broad Street Green Seattle Center staff considers the Green to be the primary and most iconic gateways into the Center campus.



Figure 30: Seattle Center viewed from the east. Broad Street Green is visible below the monorail and the base of the Space needle. The EMP is on the right of the frame and the Seattle Science Center is on the upper left. Photo reproduced under free documentation license from <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:VolunteerParkNeedle.jpg>.

The Seattle Center identified Broad Street as one of its initial group of three potential locations for the Seask8 replacement because it is large enough for the new skatepark, is not heavily programmed by other users, and because it conformed to criteria provided by the SPAC for the replacement site including visibility, and accessibility by mass-transit. Once City Council and advocates rejected the Center's other two potential sites as either too isolated among parking lots and/or too close to residential areas, Broad Street quickly became the leading option. Almost immediately, however, the Broad Street site encountered fierce resistance from such long-standing institutional actors as the EMP, the Space Needle, and the "Century 21 Committee" of stakeholders overseeing the ongoing campus-wide master planning process. One piece in the Stranger reflected the sense that institutional resistance to that site had emerged,

because EMP and the Space Needle want the Broad Street Green to be a "gateway" to Seattle Center... SPAC thinks the key players didn't

want skaters to be part of that gateway. "The whole argument [was that the] corporate tenants thought it 'didn't stage Seattle Center well enough,'" says Ryan Barth, chair of SPAC (Spahngenthal-Lee, 2007).

Advocates' impressions that large institutional opponents were standing in the way of the Broad Street site was confirmed by City Councilmember Tom Rasmussen in his public testimony on August 6, 2007 in support of that location, as well as by Councilmember Jan Drago who read a pre-prepared statement by Bryce Sidell, the Chairperson of the Century 21 Committee and the President of the Pacific Science Center:

We know from earlier discussions that selection of this site will result in legal challenges leading to cost, time and uncertainty. [Speaking] as President of the Pacific Science Center, from our institutional view the Broad Street Green site is unacceptable to us. Our major public and private functions are held on this side of our facilities and we throw open our large doors to that lawn. Any use that results in hardscaping and intrusive use of music or language on a regular basis would be disruptive to those functions

Here negative framings of young skateboarders as disruptive of legitimate social (and, implicitly, fundraising) activities are coupled with the explicit threat of litigation by, and implicit threat of political backlash from large institutional players. Responding to this pressure, members of the Parks, Education, Labor and Libraries subcommittee of the City Council identified a last-minute replacement site, namely the Seattle Pavilion, a large conference-style building that would need to be demolished to make way for the skatepark. On August 6, 2007 the full Council approved that site for the skatepark.



Figure 31: Seattle Pavilion. Photo from [www.seattlecenter.com](http://www.seattlecenter.com)

The decision to reject the Broad Street Green site in favor of the Pavilion site was not simply a minor compromise to appease a few noisy stakeholders on the Seattle Center campus. Rather, it was a product of powerful political players successfully mobilizing negative discourses around skateboarders as a way of laying claim to the city’s public space while attempting to veil their own disproportionate influence on the City’s allocation decisions. Because the Pavilion serves as the seasonal home to such organizations and events as the “Bite of Seattle” food festival, the “One Reel” film festival, the International Children’s festival, and approximately 230 other events per year,<sup>25</sup> moving the skatepark from Broad Street to the Pavilion site served to preserve the EMP, Space Needle, and Pacific Science Center’s claims to the public green-space of Center at the cost of those smaller organizations. And while the City Council endeavored to present their siting choice as a fair and transparent balancing of the demands of a wide variety of constituencies during the hearings

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<sup>25</sup> On August 6, 2007, Councilmember Steinbrueck testified before the full Council that the Seattle Center had reported:

in 2007 alone, 233 events were scheduled during that one year alone. And these are multiple organizations. 62 Commercial, 50 festival, 45 internal, 76 Seattle Center programs. They are going to have to go somewhere. Hopefully they will not go out of business or have their events just cancelled and that is the end of it.

approving the pavilion site, Councilmember Peter Steinbrueck exposed the role that negative framings of young skaters played in allowing major campus stakeholders to push the skatepark into the pavilion site:

This is no longer a model of good process. It started out on the right footing. We had skateboard advisory group. We had a commitment to relocate the skatepark on the center grounds, and they have been resisted from day one by the Seattle Center and the key stakeholders, let's be honest... So, a couple of years have passed, and we are still in indecision. ... But we are talking about our kids. We are talking about our children. Seattle center is supposed to be for children, isn't it, and young adults? And yet, nobody seems to want them next to their facility, or their business. And yes there are prominent private businesses on the Seattle Center grounds. One of those has described this activity as [reading from a letter] "noisy and intrusive." Loud music, noisy, intrusive, basically an eyesore that they don't want to look at. And I do think that sends a rather poor message to our young people. So, the process has become corrupted. And I think there has been considerably excessive influence by key stakeholders in the Seattle Center and that is unfortunate because I think that that does not always result in the best planning or a result that is for the greater good. This is a public campus. This is the Seattle Center. It is owned by the City of Seattle, the citizens. It is for the greater good of our citizens and we should make our choices on that basis.

Steinbrueck's comments to the Council reveal how powerful institutional actors had both articulated their objections to being in proximity to the skatepark in terms of negative framings of the discursive proxy of the young skater, and had attempted to neutralize their own disproportionate influence on the political process by reframing the issue of "where" SeaSk8 should go as a question of "who" young skaters are. Thus, Steinbrueck exposes the way that the aggressive use of identity politics by powerful institutional actors had not only determined the outcome of the struggle, but actually "corrupted" it by allowing those actors to lay a claim to public space that was contrary to the "public" nature of the Seattle Center campus. This concern with the

extent to which negative framings of young skaters' identities were used to code the brute workings of political influence was echoed by Councilmember Richard Conlin at the same meeting, who nonetheless tacitly acknowledged the inevitability of such influence:

I have been a little disappointed by some of the negative comments on skateboarders and skateparks. It is important to recognize that skateparks can be incredibly good amenities. And the one we build at the Seattle Center has to be an incredibly good amenity. And bringing kids into the Seattle Center, and young adults, and older people who skate for that matter is going to be a wonderful thing for Seattle Center... And personally I would have liked to have seen the Broad Street Green site. I personally thought this was the best location, but clearly the Seattle Center, the Tenants, and the Century 21 Committee had real problems with that location and it is important that we take those issues into account.

Beyond reflecting the political power of such economic and cultural actors as the EMP and its corporate parent, the Vulcan Corporation, the case of SeaSk8 again illustrates the role of the discursive proxy in enabling such political actors to navigate the distributive dilemma of liberalism. By coding their political resistance to the SeaSk8 replacement in terms of negative discursive framings of the ostensibly youthful users of that facility, the Pacific Science Center and the Space Needle were able to at once exert a degree of pressure on City Council that at least one councilmember considered corrupting, while presenting that exercise of political will as a fairly neutral objection to a population that should be properly deemed "noisy, intrusive... an eyesore." Thus, those actors' successful efforts to shift the cost of accommodating skaters' claim to a portion of the Seattle Center onto smaller, periodic users of the Seattle Pavilion are transformed into far less politically problematic value judgments about young skateboarders' own failures to properly conform to the

standards of behavior expected in a place like “Seattle’s living-room.”

### **THE SKATEPARK MASTER-PLAN AS CITY-WIDE TEST OF POLITICAL POWER TO CLAIM PUBLIC SPACE**

While Ballard, Lower Woodland and SeaSk8 all demonstrate how the discursive proxy of the young skater enables empowered political actors to navigate the distributive dilemma of liberalism, the tendency of this dynamic to track social, economic, and racial geographies of power was vividly illustrated by Seattle’s skatepark master-planning project of 2006. At the urging of advocates, and in response to the endemic project-by-project struggles over siting Ballard, Lower Woodland, and SeaSk8, the City Council passed and funded an ordinance calling for the retention of a planning firm consultant to create a master-plan locating potential skatepark sites throughout the city. Modeled on Portland, Oregon’s master-plan for skateparks, and overseen by a volunteer citizen “Task Force,” the planning process was intended to open the door to active and systematic City budgeting for and construction of skateparks, while equitably distributing those facilities throughout Seattle. Rather than freeing the siting process from local level politics and influence, however, that process simultaneously incorporated and neutralized the working of neighborhood-level power through political actors’ mobilization of the figure of the discursive proxy. Thus, the map of skatepark sites ultimately produced by the master-planning process may be seen as tracing a largely invisible geography of neighborhood-level political power.

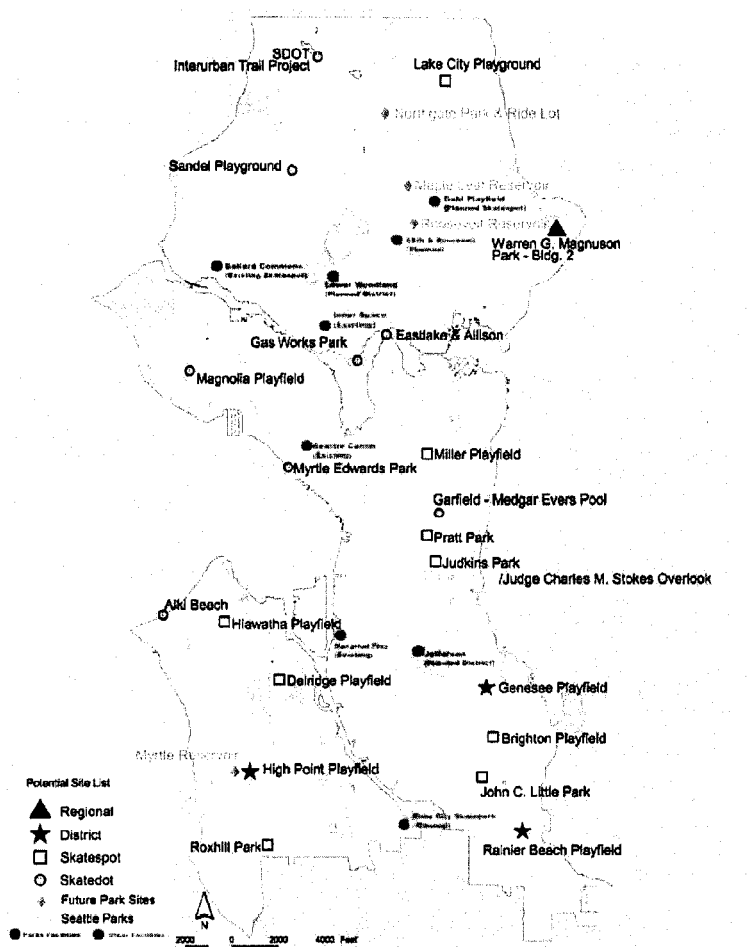


Figure 32: Seattle Skatepark Master-plan Map of Identified Skatepark Sites

By providing city funding and professional support for siting, the master-plan was intended to remove what has been one of the most insurmountable obstacles to getting skateparks built, namely the project-by-project political struggles over where those facilities are to be located. By simultaneously bringing all potential sites to the table and hopefully all the constituencies that might either support or oppose a skatepark in that site, activists hoped to circumvent the problems that had accompanied Ballard, Lower Woodland, and SeaSk8. As discussed above, in each prior project the identification of a specific potential location was invariably accompanied by objections by neighbors that, while a skatepark was needed

“somewhere,” the undomesticated and undomesticable nature of youthful skaters rendered them unsuitable for the identified location and thus the skatepark should be moved “somewhere else.” Because such local objections had led to years of delay in building the facility that ultimately was located in Ballard – as one site was discussed and rejected, then another site found, discussed, and rejected, and then a temporary home found without subsequent City efforts to find a permanent location – activists were concerned that similar struggles would occur around any future efforts to build skateparks. Recognizing the powerful negative cultural framings of young skaters and concerned that the neighbors of any specifically identified site would always have more political leverage than the unidentified neighbors of an unidentified site “somewhere else”, advocates deemed location-by-location siting to be a potentially insurmountable barrier to any project. In contrast, it was believed that a simultaneous, city-wide siting effort would bring neighbors of all potential sites into dialog while preventing decisions from being made on the basis of a location-by-location veto. By presenting the future construction of a skatepark in a given general area of the city as a foregone conclusion, discussion could remain on “where” questions – focusing on what location in that region would be most conducive for a successful project – rather than devolving into “who” questions.

In practice, however, the master-planning process worked quite differently. As part of the process of educating the public about the master-plan and soliciting public comment to that plan, the consultant and Parks staff held a series of presentations and information sessions in 6 different locations in the city over the course of 2006. And while this process drew significant public comment in opposition to specific potential

sites, particularly after an initial list of sites was identified, there was very little of the push-and-pull between neighborhoods that advocates had anticipated. Instead, and as outlined in the prior Chapters, a number of sites elicited the very sort of comments supporting skateparks in the abstract, but opposing specific locations as incompatible with the presence of undomesticable youth. Rather than being resolved in terms of a broader debate between different parts of a neighborhood deciding cooperatively where in the neighborhood a skatepark should go, resistance to the locations identified by the master-planning process served as a de-facto referendum on which neighborhoods had sufficient organizational skills and political power to influence the City's efforts to distribute public space to skateboarders. And because the master-planning process potentially impacted almost every part of Seattle, that process also mapped the political power of the city's various neighborhoods as expressed by their ability to successfully mobilize their chosen cultural framings of the youthful skater.

Seattle's residents did not face the challenge of the master-planning process in a power vacuum. Rather, for each site contemplated, potential neighborhood opponents were confronted with both the organizational power of the Parks department working under City Council mandate, and the political power already accrued by the skatepark advocacy movement. The passage of the ordinance creating and funding the master-planning process in 2005 reflected the almost startling degree of political power skatepark advocates had accrued in the year and a half from the beginning of the "Save the Ballard Bowl" movement. The fact that a comparatively small group of advocates convinced Seattle City government to fund and implement a comprehensive city-wide master-planning process for facilities as expensive,

specialized, and unproven as skateparks was a testament to the political power the youthful discursive proxy had enabled these motivated activists to accrue. And as outlined in Chapter 3, this victory was compounded by advocates' success in pushing for a large part of each of the public meetings for the planning process to serve as a P.R. session, "debunking" negative discourses around youthful skateboarders, and aggressively positing the benefits of skateparks as domesticated and domesticating spaces. Thus, for each neighborhood facing the reallocation of their public space to skateboarders, the skatepark advocacy movement served as a yardstick of their political power to overcome the momentum that had formed around positive discursive framings of the young discursive proxy.

At the same time, because the "playground" model is predicated on redistributing green, safe, and domesticated spaces to skateboarders, the master-planning process guaranteed that passionate and often quite wealthy and privileged public space users would come out in opposition to most all potential skatepark locations. The tendency of the master-planning process to target those spaces most valued by existing users was built into the criteria for site evaluation created by the Task Force overseeing the planning process and implemented by the consultant and Parks staff. The Task Force was charged with finding potential skatepark sites on properties belonging to the Port of Seattle, the Seattle Department of Transportation, the School District, and the Parks Department. Because none of those entities other than Parks identified any potential sites, the only locations actually evaluated were pre-existing parks and properties that had already been identified for future Parks Department acquisitions. This was a powerful victory for the "playground" model of

skateparks, as it ensured that only sites that already had or would have greenscaping, neighborhood integration, and supporting amenities were considered.

The criteria for site selection to be considered by the consultant and Parks staff reinforced this pre-selection of domesticated sites:

- Allow for clear, passive observation by parents, emergency services, police and the public
- Allow for the creation of a safe and secure environment; providing for separation from vehicular traffic, vehicular and pedestrian access, and ease of routine maintenance
- Are located in a highly visible area with moderate to high pedestrian traffic, in an existing or new multi-purpose park, or in close proximity to other public facilities
- Can be integrated into a larger park space that provides other park amenities
- Include a space for size appropriate community viewing
- Consider the environment for the well being of skateboarders, including noise and air quality
- Are compatible with existing uses (ex. Near an active area of the park rather than contemplative space), consider adjacent uses, and adjacent landscaping/surfaces, is compatible with safe skate surfaces

In addition, larger facilities were to be evaluated as to whether they:

- Are in close proximity to water fountain, trash cans, restroom
- Offer potential space for nearby action-oriented sports activities and events, such as BMX or climbing

Overall, these criteria ensured that skateparks could only be sited in locations to which established user groups had already laid claim. And because of the tendency of such green, open spaces to increase adjoining property values, many of these users were wealthy and politically empowered.

By pitting a small but empowered advocacy movement backed by the bureaucracy of the Parks department against politically vested public space users, the skatepark master-planning process served as a litmus test for neighborhood-level

political power throughout the city. Spatialized residential inequality inevitably translates into concomitant inequalities between neighborhoods' abilities to engage with and shape the political process (Herbert, 2006a, 2006b). While residential areas enjoy different levels of financial and cultural power, Seattle government also tends to grant more political sway to neighborhoods that are organized and communicate in dispassionate, professional terms. As one highly placed government official familiar with the City Council explained during our interview:

So, that is why council is responsive to groups that are organized, articulate, and polite, for lack of a better term. So they can come in and say "I know that you have other interests, we know ours isn't the only one. But this is a reasonable request and here are the reasons for paying attention to our issue" ... The SPAC has done a good job of that, and not getting frustrated, of consistently working. And when you say you are going to bring people out to support something, you actually get people out to support it. There are some groups that say, "we represent X-many number of people," but when the time comes we ask where are all of those people and they go "Well...ah... you know. They couldn't be here today."

Seattle's historically low patterns of municipal election turnout – hovering around a median of 35% of registered voters, but periodically dipping much lower (Caren, 2007) – exacerbates the tendency of elected officials' to listen to well organized groups and neighborhoods. The very terms by which a neighborhood or group communicates its perspectives, however, will inherently favor those who are able to communicate in a manner that is "polite," that is, professional, upper-class, and essentially white-coded.

In the case of the master-plan, concerns with the political impact of "taking on" very powerful neighborhoods were largely resolved by the Task Force of which I was a member. As part of our deliberations about whether or not to include specific

locations on the initial list of proposed sites, Parks department staff presented us with analyses of how those sites rated on the above discussed criteria and summaries of the type, amount and nature of public comments that had been directed at each site. Rather than simply providing the Task Force with those comments, the Parks staff also provided us with anecdotal indications of which neighborhoods should be taken as serious political threats to a given site, or even the entire master-planning process. This often included discussions of prior Parks projects that had encountered difficulty or even litigation from various individuals and neighborhood groups.

Based on this input, I and the rest of the Task Force quickly but tacitly learned that while negative framings of young skaters could be expected to accompany many of our proposed sites, there were certain neighborhoods where a combination of volume of negative comment and past history signaled an unacceptable amount of political trouble ahead. This dynamic was especially noticeable in the case of the Cowan Park site. Home to an already highly organized neighborhood group mobilized around the threat from youthful itinerant “Ave. Rats” from the nearby University of Washington area, Cowan Park was among the sites that solicited the greatest volume of negative public input. It is also home to a predominantly wealthy, white population. As discussed in depth in Chapter 3, a large number of neighborhood residents objected to the skatepark, equating its users with the most dangerous of youth, including drug dealers, vandals and the homeless. Cowan Park raised a sufficient level of protest that, at the urging of Parks staff, I and the rest of the citizen members of the supervisory Task Force agreed to remove the site for fear that the neighborhood had sufficient economic and political power to use negative discursive

framings of young skaters (and other potential skatepark users) to shut down the entire master-planning process.

Similar resistance transformed the master-plan's treatment of several City water reservoirs that are scheduled to be covered and converted into park space – areas such as Myrtle Reservoir that, due to their high elevations and placement in well established neighborhoods, have tend to be surrounded by middle to upper class residents. Each of these sites had been initially identified as potential skatepark locations both because the size of the reservoirs promises to enable the isolation of such facilities from surrounding residences and because they offer the opportunity to build without displacing existing green space and uses. While most of the reservoir sites attracted a small but vehement number of comments reinforcing negative discursive framings of young skaters, the aggregate outcry around those sites, and the nature of those protesting the sites led the Task Force to treat them differently. Rather than being explicitly included as part of the master-plan, Parks staff suggested and the Task Force agreed to simply list the reservoir as subject to “consideration [for a skatepark] in future planning and design for park development” under the auspices that such sites had not yet been formally acquired as Park department property. As a practical matter, this has enabled the residents of Myrtle Reservoir (a largely white neighborhood immediately to the west of another potential skatepark site in a predominantly black neighborhood) to begin planning their park without including a skate feature because the reservoir is not formally identified as a site under the master-plan. Thus, by expressing their political power as a neighborhood through negative discursive framings of young skaters, these often wealthy and well-connected

reservoir neighborhoods have enabled themselves to deny skateboarders' claims to a share of the neighborhood's new public space.

In contrast, where neighborhoods lacked the type of political power enjoyed by Cowan Park, the very same negative framings of the young skater failed to dissuade the Task Force from including nearby sites in the master-plan. For example, a comparable number of objections similar to those offered by Cowan Park residents were also raised by neighbors near Genesee Park, yet that site remained on the master-plan. A narrow park running from the multi-ethnic and predominantly African-American Columbia City area into the affluent neighborhoods bordering Lake Washington, racially and socio-economically mixed residential zones surround Genesee. And while negative comments came from individuals living all around the park – including wealthy lake-side dwellers – very little concern was demonstrated by either the Task Force or the Parks Department that the Genesee neighbors as a whole could impair successful passage of the plan. While there was no explicit discussion of the differing degrees of political power, organization, racial composition, or socio-economic status between Cowan Park, for example, and Genesee, a general consensus was reached that a skatepark in the later area would ultimately be an improvement in a park that had a mixed reputation for crime and youthful disorder. Following the lead of the Parks staffer, objections from Genesee were dismissed by the members of the Task Force as being readily addressed through future siting and design efforts. While a similar argument could have been made about Cowan Park, the demonstrated political might of that neighborhood simply ended discussion and presumably would have led me and my fellow Task Force members to remove Genesee from the master-

plan if the political threat from those neighbors had been deemed by the Parks Staff member to be sufficiently weighty.

Similar objections and requests from other traditionally less socio-economically privileged, or multi-ethnic neighborhoods were likewise written off by the Task Force, reflecting those areas' comparative lack of politico-discursive "muscle." For example, planners and Task Force alike dismissed a large number of objections to a site in the Lake City neighborhood, a largely lower-middle class area adjoining a busy regional traffic corridor characterized by car dealerships. As with the Genesee site, these objections were dismissed as capable of being resolved by future design and construction considerations. Similarly, race based objections to sites in the predominantly black Central District that have questioned skateboarding's status as a "white" sport and thus local need for such facilities have largely been ignored under the assumption that skateboarding, if brought to these neighborhoods, will appeal to non-white young people. While the validity of the assumption that skateboarding is not appealing to non-whites is complex and problematic, as discussed in Chapter 2, the lack of concern with potential race-based objections from historically multi-ethnic neighborhoods demonstrates the extent to which such areas have become discursively disempowered in Seattle's political process. Ironically, even where multi-ethnic neighborhoods actively embrace skateparks in their neighborhoods and seek to lay claim to a greater share of those public goods, the general political disempowerment of such areas prevents them from successfully mobilizing positive discursive framings of such facilities and their users. For example, the appointed neighborhood representative to the City Wide Neighborhood Council for the city's southeastern

neighborhoods – which include such multi-racial areas as Columbia City and Rainer Valley – actively and aggressively petitioned for even more potential skatepark sites in that area. And while these requests were ultimately passed on to the Parks department through the Task Force, they did not result in any additional master-plan sites in the southeast. Thus, Seattle’s experience with skateparks reinforces the sense that in the constant municipal contest over the allocation of such state provided goods as public space there is a “greater likelihood of success for those neighborhoods that are better organized and more sophisticated. . . those who are well advantaged are likely to remain that way at the expense of those less well positioned” (Herbert, 2005, at p. 861).

Beyond neighborhoods such as Myrtle Reservoir and Cowan Park where neighborhood groups explicitly succeeded in mobilizing negative discourses around youthful skaters in resisting skateboarders’ claims to public space through the master-planning process, a strong inference supports the conclusion that the political strength of a number of neighborhood constituencies was sufficient to exclude even the consideration of allowing such a claim in especially privileged areas. None of Seattle’s wealthiest neighborhoods – including Queen Anne, Capitol Hill, Laurelhurst, Madison Park, Montlake, and Belltown – were identified by the skatepark master-plan as containing potential sites. The only exception to this rule was the Magnolia neighborhood, which had long been calling for (and ultimately received) a small skate feature near their community center.

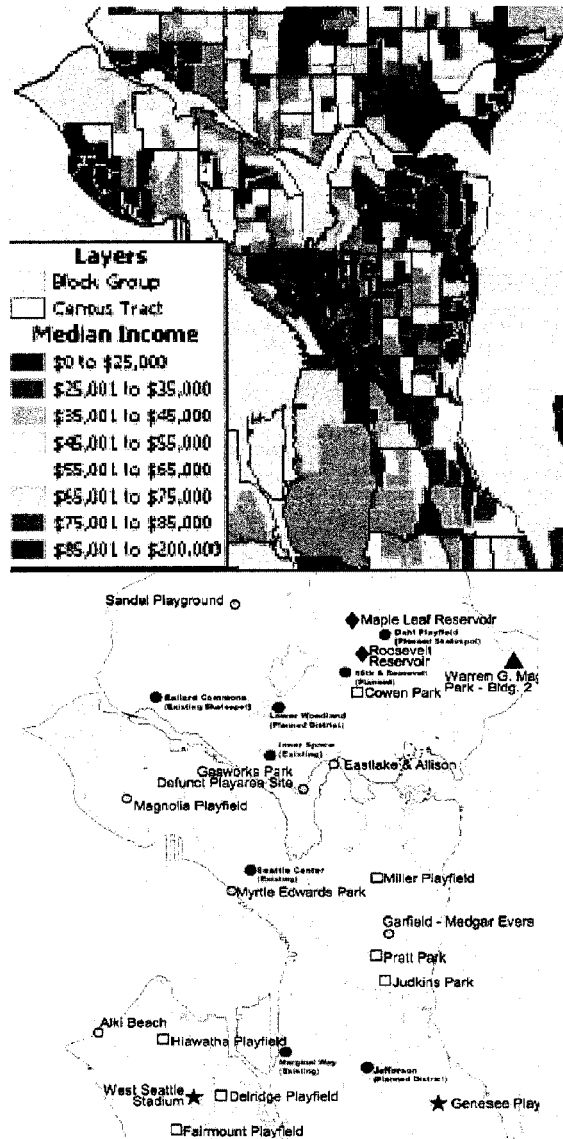


Figure 33: Maps of Seattle median income (per 2000 census) on left and relevant portion of draft master-plan map on right, showing absence of contemplated skateparks in Seattle's wealthiest neighborhoods.

At first glance, the choice of sites ultimately proposed by the master-plan was fairly transparent. Starting with criteria generated for Portland's trail-breaking master-planning process, the Task Force created and weighted its own set of criteria based upon public input and advocates' experiences with problems siting other facilities. These criteria (as discussed above) were then applied to 130 "nominated" locations based upon joint site visits by a parks staffer and a member of the planning firm hired

to prepare the master-plan. The highest ranked sites were then presented to the Task Force to make a rough evaluation of what a fair geographic distribution should look like, leading to a preliminary map of 30 potential sites that were then subject to the public comment discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

Even so, this “transparent” methodology was premised on a wholly opaque process. The initial “nomination” of sites was a process entirely internal to the Parks department, an agency under the supervision of the Mayor’s office. Because the master-plan had been initiated by the City Council, the Parks department’s “solicitation” of site nominations – and indeed all of Parks’ involvement with the process – created a major potential disconnect between the branch of government envisioning the project and the branch implementing it. In practice, this translated into Parks pre-screening all sites that could be evaluated under the “public” criteria, without input from either the citizen advisory Task Force created to oversee the master-planning process or the public at large. One interviewee intimately involved in the master-planning process confirmed that the Parks department initially and unilaterally chose most all of the potential sites to be subjected to subsequent evaluation under the criteria:

Oh, the parks department threw them out there. “These are the ones that we think are viable options.” So that was the thing that sort of bugged me. Was that they already ran them through Parks’ filter before conducting any objective analysis... We went to some parks where what happened was that, some of those parks that were not thrown in there by the parks department or suggested by the community members. And Parks would say “[politically] you are going to get your ass handed to you on a platter” [if you site a skatepark there].

This pre-selection process culled potential sites from most wealthy neighborhoods, such as Queen Anne and Laurelhurst, as well as from the dense and often affluent residential areas of Capitol Hill and Seattle’s downtown/Belltown corridor. While Parks’ staffers insisted that the exclusion of such sites was entirely the function of a lack of viable sites in those locations, a strong inference could be made that Parks – as an agency sensitive to the political fortunes of the Mayor – was eager to avoid antagonizing the more powerful and prestigious residential enclaves of the city by allowing skaters to lay a claim to the public spaces “belonging” to those neighborhoods.

Beyond the general paucity of sites originally “nominated” for evaluation, subsequent events surrounding the West Seattle Stadium site supported advocates’ sense that Parks had pre-screened out wealthier neighborhoods. Centrally and conveniently located in an area characterized by a high degree of skatepark support, the green space surrounding the West Seattle Stadium seemed like a natural location for a potential skate facility due both to its size and accessibility.



Figure 34: Aerial view of West Seattle Stadium and surrounding park area.

As the site receiving the greatest amount of (and most unconditional) positive public comment, advocates identified this location as a strong candidate for priority funding once the master-plan was passed. This hope, however, was dashed, when the Parks department announced that it had erred in “nominating” the site in the first place. A subsequent internal review indicated that the area available for a skatepark had been identified a number of years before for development of a driving range to serve the adjacent golf course. While there had been no funds allocated for the project, and no commitments for future funding, the off-chance that the West Seattle site could ultimately be converted into a facility for golf was sufficient for the Parks department to attempt to unilaterally remove that location from the draft master-plan submitted for City Council approval. After heated objection by members of the Task Force the site remained on the draft plan, however, the Parks department was clear in all communications with the legislative branch that it could not support the inclusion of the Stadium. To advocates, this reversal on a site as well-supported, popular, and highly rated as West Seattle Stadium confirmed their suspicions that Parks’ had pre-screened locations that either could have caused political problems for the department and/or interfered with other favored Parks projects. After all, advocates reasoned, if the remote possibility of a competing facility serving a well established, typically affluent, and financially self-supporting<sup>26</sup> group of users as golfers was enough for Parks to knock the number one site off the master-plan, what other considerations

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<sup>26</sup> The Parks staffer assigned to the master-plan stated that, due to greens fees and other revenue generating streams, golf courses tend to pay for themselves unlike other Parks facilities.

would have been sufficient for Parks' to prevent a site from being considered for the plan in the first place?

Although neighborhoods pre-screened out of the master-planning process were spared the need to flex their political muscle, the residents of those neighborhoods that did find themselves potentially faced with the allocation of part of "their" public space for a skatepark actively sought to demonstrate their political strength and will to resist such redistribution. And while this political will was almost inevitably expressed through negative framings of who young skaters are, the success of such codings was largely a function of geographies of power that are at once largely invisible to the average citizen, but readily apparent to governmental actors at every level of city bureaucracy. The fact that some neighborhoods were not successful in articulating their political opposition to skatepark sites through negative representations of young skaters does not mean that these discursive framings were irrelevant to the underlying political struggle. Rather, as with Ballard, Lower Woodland, and SeaSk8, the use of the discursive proxy to translate "where" questions into "who" questions enabled even unsuccessful neighborhoods to veil their assertions of political power, and thus enable the City decision makers to whom they appealed the option of favoring their residents without appearing to engage in a privilege-based distribution of public goods.

#### **SKATEPARKS AS TOOL FOR THE DOMESTICATION OF WILD SPACES – SKATERS AS "ACTIVATING" PUBLIC SPACE**

While negative framings of the discursive proxy of the young skater were the primary means by which claims of political power were articulated in the various struggles over such projects as SeaSk8 and the citywide master-planning process,

positive cultural framings of the young skater have likewise enabled the politically neutralized transfer of public space. For example, the discourse of skateparks as domesticating spaces has enabled the City to use skaters to displace transient and homeless populations in Seattle. While the City of Seattle has largely adopted the playground model for skateparks, there have been a number of instances when governmental actors have adopted and promoted the “clubhouse” model in the name of “activating” spaces used by disorderly populations. The City’s periodic embrace of such places may be seen as reinforcing Mitchell’s positioning of Seattle as an archetype of “revanchist” approaches to public space (2003b) while discursively concealing any explicit governmental action against homeless or transient populations.

Dovetailing with many older skaters’ efforts to find less “domesticated” spaces for skateparks – such as abandoned or industrial sites – in order to claim a more exclusive, “clubhouse” like space, a number of governmental actors have supported the entry of skaters into such places precisely because of their perception of skaters’ power to displace even more “disorderly” populations. Harkening back to the mobilization of such physical structures as the hedge to preclude “incursions of the poor” indigent, and disorderly at the dawn of liberal property enclosure in sixteenth century England (Blomley, 2007, at p. 9-10) and concomitant with contemporary efforts around the world to shape public space so as to preclude crime and disorder (Blomley, 2004b), skateparks have been supported by many as a physical and cultural bulwark against the least desirable members of society.

Nowhere was this more apparent than with the Marginal Way project. As discussed in Chapter 2, Marginal way is an ongoing “do-it-yourself” project under a

raised roadbed in the industrial area south of Seattle's sports stadiums, and east of the container yards and rail lines serving the Port of Seattle. After older skate advocates started building Marginal Way without City approval, its growth and success brought official attention to the park along with threats to tear out the unauthorized structures. During the process of seeking post facto approval for the project, City officials readily accepted and embraced the project's capacity to displace even less desirable transient and homeless populations. In fact, organizers had chosen the project site precisely because of its capacity to position the skatepark as a domesticating presence. During my discussions with the Marginal Way organizers, they related that the site had long served as a place for those living in their vehicles to park, a space for the shelterless to sleep, and a storage area for transient populations' possessions largely because of the shelter provided by the overpass. As one organizer noted, "I think that collectively we all agreed that South Seattle was the place. It is industrial down there. Under the bridge is where we eyed the spot knowing that it was only going to add a positive to the area from the current transient state that it was in" (Barnett et al., 2006).



Figure 35: Marginal Way under construction. Photo courtesy Dan Hughes

City authorities commonly accepted this framing in agreeing to tolerate – if not officially sanction – continued development of the skatepark. As one City Councilor noted in a discussion with advocates, “I like the way this will activate the space.” While no explicit mention of transient or homeless populations was made, it was clear that for many governmental actors “activation” was synonymous with displacement of transient and homeless populations.

The City’s embrace of Marginal Way as part of broader municipal efforts to transform the city into an attractive landscape for capital has been reflected by Marginal Way’s media coverage. While the alternative *Stranger* weekly provided most all coverage of developments in Seattle’s skate advocacy movement, Seattle’s glossy monthlies have largely ignored the issue. Official City approval of the Marginal Way project, however, was accompanied by three different pieces promoting the project in *Seattle* magazine. Claiming to be “the city’s premier monthly city magazine,” and targeted at “a young, urban, affluent Seattle metro resident. Primary age range: 30’s -50’s. 65% female, 35% male” *Seattle* magazine is filled with advertisements for jewelry, high-end condos, and expensive restaurants, as well as articles of concern to the city’s “digirati” such as “Seattle’s Top Doctors.” Nonetheless, within a month of garnering official approval, *Seattle* included Marginal Way as an “in” in its monthly “The Pulse” list of what is “in” and “out” (Seattle, 2006b). This was followed by a longer piece addressing the potential for redevelopment of the areas under the city’s many bridges, which framed Marginal Way as taking over a “seedy” and “litter-filled patch of concrete” that was otherwise “occupied mainly by vagrants and the occasional drug dealer” (Moir, 2006). *Seattle*’s

coverage of the project culminated by bestowing the honorary title of “Best DIY Skatepark” in that publication’s “Best of 2006” issue, although it was the city’s only public DIY skatepark at the time. *Seattle*’s enthusiasm for the project was couched almost entirely in terms of its ability to displace undesirable populations with a less undesirable group.

After years of watching the area be overrun with transients and drug dealers, local residents decided that skaters were a much better option. And, amazingly, the city agreed . . . allowing the skateboarders to stay in one of the few places in the city where they are welcome (Seattle, 2006a).

On one hand, this piece reproduces the classic “moral panic” language conveying a neighborhood “overrun” with the typical tropes of the transient and drug dealer – even though the area is almost entirely industrial, and had no major history of drug trafficking. On the other hand, its framing of skateboarders is interesting because they are posited as an option lying on the same spectrum as the “drug dealers” and “transients”, albeit a much preferable one. This suggestion of skaters’ overall undesirability is then foregrounded by the final sentence which confirms that they are unwelcome in the entire city, but for a few places – including spaces such as Marginal Way – where they can only disturb the dregs of society. The fact that a publication positioning itself as the voice of the creative and property owning upper-class would devote space in three separate issues in one year to Marginal Way may be seen as an endorsement of the City and Marginal Way organizer’s efforts to further transform Seattle into a more orderly landscape by displacing the transient and homeless.

Similarly, the organizers of River City skatepark in Seattle’s poor, multi-ethnic South Park neighborhood succeeded in promoting that project by framing it first and

foremost as an effort to “reclaim” an undeveloped parcel from undesirable users

and uses. As one of the activists involved in that effort recalled during our interview:

I was working with the Environmental Coalition of South Seattle at the same time on an adjacent piece of property called Cesar Chavez park, which was taking a derelict property that was left over by the highway I-99 cutting through the neighborhood of South Park and leaving these dead places in the geographic center of the neighborhood. And we had been talking about ways to invigorate these dead places. And the working tool we were using was “let’s plant it and make it a park. A green place for people to gather so that drug dealers and prostitutes people who are finding a place to sleep at night – although they need a place too – let’s reclaim this for the community in a place that deals with storm water or deals with community gathering. . . So then this other site, that the River City skatepark is on is just like Cesar Chavez except that SeaMar Community Health Centers owns it. . . .

The idea that the skatepark could be used to exclude problem populations such as gang members, the homeless, and prostitutes from a “dead place” was so appealing that organizers were able to solicit the almost unconditional support of surrounding neighbors, the nearby fire department, and police assigned to the area. The River City narrative of reclaiming a “derelict” space for the community was also sufficiently compelling (when combined with the backing of SeaMar and the involvement of a committed “steering committee” that includes a core group of four local mid-school aged girls) to attract sizable donations of time, materials, or labor from the Seattle Department of Neighborhoods, Safeco Insurance Company, the local Rotary Club, the Tony Hawk Foundation, geotechnical and civil engineering professionals, the University of Washington School of Architecture, and Grindline – a local skatepark company that volunteered to build and supervise the park in return for office space on the site.

E. Conclusion – The Discursive Proxy as Enabling Geographies of Power in Public Space

In tracing the roles that the discursive proxy of the young skater plays in Seattle's public space politics, I am eager to avoid "accord[ing] 'discourse' analytical priority and to attribute to it a kind of autonomous power over and above other kinds of power relations" (Edelman, 1999)(p. 6), or to improperly ignore the potent materiality underlying discourse (Blomley, 2003). Rather, I offer this analysis to demonstrate exactly how both the state and the political actors who seek to levy claims to "public" goods from the state manage to negotiate these power relationships without appearing to explicitly engage in anti-liberal and unequal distributions of such goods. To a large extent, the anti-democratic and anti-liberal workings of governmental power are concealed by the public input processes of cities like Seattle. Decisions that are inherently autocratic, arbitrary, or simply informed by concerns beyond the limited reach of meaningful democratic processes are given the veneer of democratic input through the mechanisms of "public comment" and "open debate." Herbert describes this process as the "project of subservience" by which otherwise unaccountable state agents make those gestures necessary to signal their ostensible subservience to the public will (2006a). While the role of such public processes in veiling the working of power within municipal government is undeniable, Seattle's experience with skateparks suggests that it alone is not enough to render the preferential allocation of such "universal" goods as public space unproblematic. Even if the veneer of "public process" is sufficient to conceal the fact that core City decisions are made without meaningful consideration of public input, the actual decisions that are made must

likewise be rendered discursively justifiable. The discursive proxy fulfills this need. The discursive proxy allows the state and those seeking the state's favor to present the uneven allocation of universal public goods as a function of the deserving or undeserving nature of the purported beneficiaries of those goods, rather than the product of political influence once again allowing the powerful to accrue more power. Thus, in contests such as those seen in Ballard, Lower Woodland, Seattle Center, and the city at large, the ability of a given group, organization, or neighborhood to crystallize its predominant framing of such proxies must be seen both as a test of the extent of such spatially embedded power and as a prime example of how the inequalities enabled by that power are rendered politically neutral and safe through the process of political discourse.

## Chapter 6: Lessons from a Skatepark, Lessons from a Public Meeting

### A – A Day in the life of a Skatepark

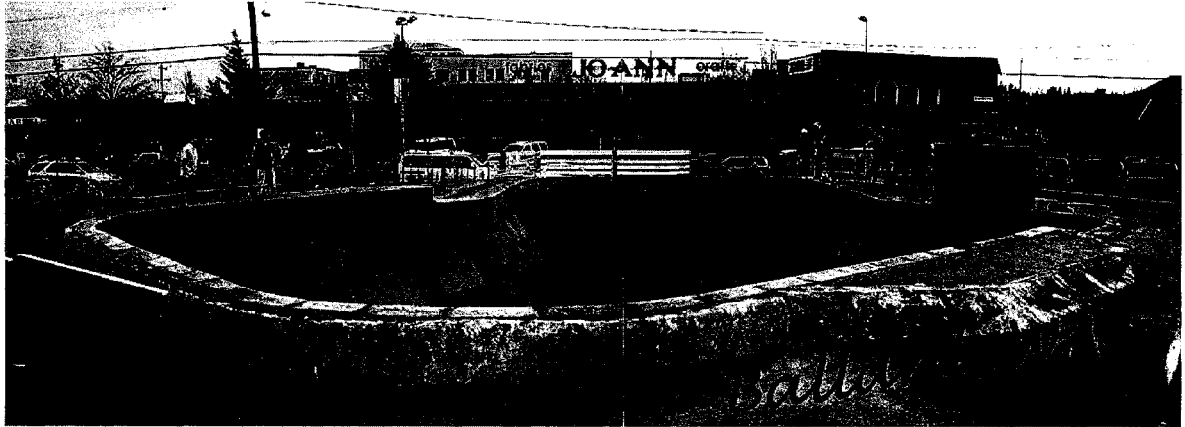


Figure 36: Ballard Commons Skatepark. Photo courtesy Dan Hughes

By 6:30 this summer morning, Sam arrives at Ballard Commons skatepark.<sup>27</sup>

Easing towards 40, he is to external appearances typical of many of those who will use this space in the next 24 hours. White, male, father of two young children, he tries to show up first thing in the morning most days to have some quiet time skating before he goes to his job designing software for a large company in another state. Sam sets down an old milk-crate filled with protective gear – helmet, wrist guards, elbow pads, and knee pads with three inches of dense foam padding and hard plastic caps. Before “padding up” he slides into the bowl to remove and throw away the night’s detritus: a three beer cans, an empty soda bottle, half a dozen skittle candies, a safety pin, a potato chip wrapper. Once back up on the “deck” (the flat pedestrian accessible surface surrounding the bowl) he walks around the circumference of the skatepark looking for new graffiti. Upon spotting a new magic-marker tag on one of the sections

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<sup>27</sup> This section is based entirely on ethnographic observations and is a composite of events occurring over several months. Likewise, many individuals described are composites of actual individuals observed. All identifiers have been changed to protect the confidentiality of individuals’ identities.

of waist-level steel fencing, he removes a can of brake cleaner and a piece of steel wool from the milk-crate. With three minutes of vigorous scrubbing he removes the offending mark. This recent transgression is nowhere near as bad as the time six months ago when somebody spray-painted the bowl with an image of a ten foot long green and pink creature combining the features of a flying-dragon and a large, erect human penis with testicles.

Having finally put the skatepark back to order, Sam dons his protective gear and takes his first run, gliding around the concave interior of the bowl apparently effortlessly, periodically surging up to the coping – the protruding juncture between the horizontal “deck” and the vertical wall of the skatepark’s internal surface – allowing the metal axle between the wheels of his skateboard to grind against that raised masonry lip running around the rim of the bowl. After a series of these casually aggressive maneuvers, he pops out of the park, riding away onto the flat surface of the deck and towards a bench for a brief rest.

One-by-one a series of skaters joins him over the next two hours. With a single exception, they are all white and male, ranging in age from mid-twenties to early forties. Staying from fifteen minutes to an hour before work obligations draw them away, they briefly greet each other with a nod or a few quick words upon arrival, and then quietly set about the business of getting in their morning runs. While virtually no words are exchanged, the skaters tacitly negotiate the order in which each of them will take their turn for a run in the Bowl that will last anywhere from three seconds, to three minutes. Standing near the coping with the tail of the board under your foot signals the skater’s readiness. The closer the board to the coping, the

sooner the skater will assert his right to a turn. In the rare event that two skaters simultaneously slide their boards almost all the way over the coping so that all four wheels dangle over the edge in preparation to “drop in”, one will inevitably withdraw, ceding the bowl for the next run and implicitly claiming the following run. In the extremely rare case that two skaters drop-in at the same time, simultaneously free-falling from the vertical wall of the bowl into the curved transition that leads to the “flat-bottom” of the skatepark, both will immediately exit to avoid collision, ceding their turns for the transgression. Typically a skater’s run will tacitly be deemed finished either when he soars up onto the deck or falls down.

This morning the exception to both established etiquette and the preponderance of men at the bowl is a single female skater, Linda. Unlike the majority of users, she lives in the immediate neighborhood and decided to give skateboarding a try after watching people skate the Bowl during her periodic walks through the Ballard Commons. Linda has recently separated from her husband, and likes going to the skatepark early as a way of clearing her head. She has made friends with a couple of the morning regulars, who have helped her develop some basic skills. Unlike the more experienced male skaters who gather in the morning, this female skater does not “drop-in”, instead sliding into the bowl while holding her board and then working her way up and down opposing walls and perfecting her moves for as much as five to ten minutes. When she falls, she starts her run again. Nobody hurries her, and only the two skaters she has befriended address her or take any overt notice of her presence, notwithstanding the breach of etiquette that her very long runs, and resumption of her run after falling would normally represent. After three of these extended sessions she

packs up to start the rest of her day, saying a quick goodbye to her two acquaintances. As with her presence at the park, her departure is – to all outward appearances – ignored by the four other male skaters gathered at this point.

By 9:30 the Bowl is quiet, with all remaining skaters leaving to attend to work, family, or other responsibilities. For the rest of the morning the park mostly sits abandoned. For a half-hour three male skaters and one female skater in their early 20's pass through to skate a few runs. They are all accomplished skaters from the southeastern part of the U.S. and are doing a skatepark tour of Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia in a rented van. Half an hour after they leave two fathers walk through the park with a group of children between the ages of four and six, boys and girls, none of whom have skateboards. The kids slide into the bowl together, running around, using the curved walls of the bowl as a slide, and taking turns riding around the bottom on a “razor” type two-wheeled scooter. After fifteen minutes they are done. Once they have left, the sole occupants of the area around the skatepark are pedestrians crossing the Commons, and three of the handful of regular park-sleepers who tend to occupy the space near the adjoining grocery store and park utility building and who periodically search the skatepark area for cans, abandoned food, or left clothing.

By 11:30 a lunchtime session has started, ultimately growing to include 14 skaters cycling in and out of the park over the course of two hours. They are all male, ranging from a recent high school graduate to a local business owner in his early 40's, who brings along his three and five year old sons. The younger son fitfully dozes in a car seat by the side of the bowl, while the older son rolls around the deck, taking two

or three fairly unenthusiastic turns rolling around the bottom of the bowl. Two skaters have either come with, or met their girlfriends at the bowl. The two women sit near each other on the bench, ignored by the male skaters, including their boyfriends. Two more regular skaters have come without their boards, talking quietly to each other and having lunch.

All of the skaters at the lunch session are white until, around 1:30 two Asian-American brothers – Jarred in his late twenties and Tim in his mid thirties – show up with Tim’s five year old son, Juno, who is off from school for the day. In spite of both brothers’ encouragement, Juno is too shy to take a turn in the bowl, only rolling around the deck, working on basic moves on the small “street” type structures on the periphery of the park. He is finally left with little choice but to enter the bowl when, after an unsuccessful maneuver on one of the small “quarter pipes” on the deck, his board shoots out from under his feet into the deep end of the skatepark. Rather than sliding into the bowl to retrieve his board, however, he runs across the deck, flinging himself over the edge into the six-foot deep “shallow” end. At the bottom of his plunging arc into the bowl, Juno bends his legs beneath him, his full weight pushing into his kneepads, his fall broken by the bowl’s smooth transition from vertical to horizontal. Recognizing an unexpected, unprecedented, and extremely bold move, all ten skaters around the bowl – who had previously appeared to be oblivious to the boy’s presence – immediately explode in cheering. Many of the adults grab their boards and loudly slap the tails on the coping, a tribute typically paid only to the most extreme and daring of maneuvers by the most experienced skaters. Startled and thrilled by this unanticipated show of approval and acceptance, Juno takes a run on his

board around the shallow end, exiting to further cheers and a high-five from both his father and uncle.

By mid afternoon the last of the lunch-time skaters start to clear out, replaced by three older skaters and fresh wave of younger skaters arriving being released for the day from nearby Ballard High School and two private middle schools. Unlike the largely silent older crowd, the younger skaters are loud and interactive. Egging each other on to complete tricks, making fun of each other, and loudly cursing when they fail to complete a move, most of these skaters tend to session the sidewalk, sculptural elements of the water feature, and surrounding parking lots (all of which are formally prohibited for skateboarding) due to the lack of new-school street style terrain in the rebuilt Ballard skatepark. The younger skaters also favor the small quarter-pipe feature on the deck opposite from the bench where the older skaters tend to rest between runs. Of approximately twenty-five kids to skate during the early evening, only five will skate the primary bowl feature, including two Hispanic brothers, the younger of whom loudly cheers himself on, violating many of the tacit communicative codes of the older skaters by enthusiastically engaging them in discussions of their gear and how close he is to mastering his latest moves. One of the most skilled of this group of younger skaters, Jimmy, takes over a dozen runs in the Bowl doggedly trying and failing to nail a difficult move. Called a "50-50 Grind," it involves floating up to the top of the bowl and then rolling along the coping with two wheels on the deck, two wheels hanging over the edge as the metal trucks grind the coping, and then back into the bowl. During a slow moment, another one of their friends – the only African American skater of the day – slides into the bowl to take a single run practicing his

moves skating back and forth in the shallow end. As with all but the most exceptional runs, his turn is met with silence as the other skaters either rest, quietly wait their turns, or loudly joke and argue with each other on the deck. Periodically the sounds of other young skaters can be heard cursing either their own frustration or each other: “Fuck! I almost had it!” “Nice move, faggot!” “Bitch!” And like almost all other behavior in and out of the bowl, these utterances are neither encouraged nor corrected by the other, older skaters at the park.

Around 4:00 James and a couple of friends show up. Part of the original group of five teen skaters who embraced both street skating and transition skating at the original Ballard Bowl, James was active in soliciting signatures from students at his high school during the original effort to save the Bowl. Long considered one of the most accomplished skaters to regularly skate Ballard, James has been working at a local skate shop and is beginning to work his way into the ranks of professional sponsorship as a skater. After watching Jimmy try and fail to successfully pull off his 50-50 grind half a dozen times, the older and larger James walks over to a nearby sapling, pulls off a branch approximately four feet long and returns to the bowl brandishing it. Immediately he tells Jimmy, “Next time you nail that grind, or I am going to whip you with this branch.” Nervously, Jimmy protests. Nonetheless, during his next run – and with James standing a few feet from the corner where he has been trying to perfect the move – Jimmy pulls a perfect 50-50 to the accompaniment of whistles, cheers, and an explosive chorus of boards being slapped against the coping.

By 5:00 an older crowd begins to filter in from work. Skaters of a wide variety of abilities begin showing up, taking runs that range from rudimentary to professional.

All of them, except for one well-known and accomplished skater named Annie are male. Half a dozen times, less experienced kids ranging between seven and twelve years old are encouraged or allowed to take a run during periodic breaks in the action. While spectators have drifted by the skatepark throughout the day – ranging from lone office workers pausing during work errands or a lunch break, to groups of young mothers pushing strollers – a rotating crowd that ranges as high as 40 people now develops to watch the action, including parents with kids, couples, and a number of elderly residents on their way to or from the nearby Leif Erickson hall. A group of four girls, ranging from 5 to 9 years old, watch with visible excitement when Annie drops into the Bowl to pull a series of expert grinds and aerial maneuvers.

By 6:30 the tone of the session has changed markedly. By now, approximately a dozen highly skilled skaters have found their way to the bowl. Pulling bigger, faster, and more technical moves and more often wearing extensive tattoos instead of protective gear, these experienced skaters barely wait for the preceding run to end before dropping in, many often ignoring the tacit etiquette of turns – “snaking” each other to get as many runs in as possible. While Annie continues to skate, most other, less-capable skaters are now holding back both for fear of being shown up by the crew of veterans now trying to one-up each other and due to the difficulty of claiming a turn amid the “snake-session.” Within an hour, a group of these older skaters have stashed a case of beer underneath the bench and are drinking from cans wrapped in paper bags between runs. Another skater has brought a boom-box and is playing a mix of rap, vintage punk, and an occasional track by Johnny Cash.

As the session heats up, emotions start to run high among those still skating. One remarkably skilled and aggressive skater – a portly fellow in his mid-30s who tends to skate with a lit cigarette in his lips – begins yelling “fuck!” louder and louder as he repeatedly fails to land a challenging move that involves soaring several feet up over the deck and back into the bowl backwards. Oblivious to the group of parents standing a few feet away with half a dozen children among them, he continues to fly out of the bowl, bail out of his landing at the last minute screaming, and then haul himself onto the deck cussing and muttering. After twenty minutes, he retires to the bench to drink a beer and talk with friends.

As evening falls, the session cools off. By the time the park lights turn-on, the spectators have moved on, and only a small group of half a dozen regulars remain, drinking and talking. After a while, they decide to push on to a local bar for dinner, leaving behind only the detritus of the day: a cardboard beer case overflowing with empty cans leaned against the trash can, a blue sweatshirt that somebody forgot, the guts of a wheel bearing that detonated mid-run, an empty sunflower seed bag, a handful of loose food wrappers. Sometime in the early hours of the morning a young man in a dark hoodie passes through the park, slipping into the Bowl to spray-paint his tag in the deep end. He is gone within three minutes.

#### B – Findings and Conclusions: The Role of the Discursive Proxy as Reconciling Life, Discourse and Politics

I offer the preceding description of a composite “day in the life” of the Ballard Commons skatepark to suggest that, paradoxically, all of the discourses that have been politically mobilized around the discursive proxy of the young skater are both accurate

(at least partially) and entirely inadequate. A day spent at the Ballard Commons provides evidence to support both the positive discursive framing of skateparks as youthful spaces, and skateboarders as domesticated and/or domesticable, as well as the negative framing of young skateboarders as undomesticable, gendered trouble. One may see the skatepark as a space in which white, male, heteronormative identities, performances of gender, mores, and communicative patterns dominate to the almost total exclusion of all others. At the same time one may find evidence to support the interpretation of the Ballard Bowl as a potential space for racial integration, and as an entry point for the inclusion of women in an activity that has long been vehemently masculinist. Both petty vandalism and a profoundly self-disciplined response to disorder are evident. As with the incident with James and Jimmy, threat, vandalism, and the heavy-handed reproduction of masculinist codes are, at times, inseparable from the development of community, friendship, and athletic ability. Noise and vulgarity coexist with a considerable adult supervisory presence that, in turn, is often tacit and symbolic. The very concept of skateparks as youthful spaces is simultaneously upheld and rebutted as young people are alternately drawn to, included in, encouraged at, and excluded from the Ballard Bowl, sometimes simultaneously.

None of the discourses, however, that have been arrayed in Seattle's skatepark politics – either pro or con – begin to capture the rich variety of actual experiences in Ballard, even though the skatepark is a comparatively narrowly focused allocation of public space. Any given representation of what kind of place the Bowl is and what kind of people use it, is bound to be no more than a crude two-dimensional distortion of the multiplicity of experiences encountered in a single day there.

The fact that competing discursive framings of skateparks and their ostensibly youthful users ultimately fail to capture the reality of life in such places must not, however, be understood as a failure of the political process. Instead, the political distortion of public spaces through the distortion of the identities of their users is an essential and fundamental tactic for a liberal state that is perpetually engaged in an unequal and particularized process of distributing and denying the benefits of such ostensibly unqualified public goods. By reframing the public debate about how such distributions and exclusions of public space will take place as debates about the nature of the users of such public space, this inherently anti-egalitarian process may be naturalized and neutralized not only by governmental actors, but by those portions of the citizenry that hope to benefit (or fear being the butt of) such unequal distributions. Rather than being seen as discriminating for or against a given claimant to public space (or a claim to exclude others from public space), the shifting of debate to the nature and worthiness of the various supposed users discursively attributed to those claims enables governmental and non governmental political actors to reframe their struggle as a power-neutral and dispassionate process of planning. What is at issue is no longer the highly problematic and anti-democratic process of simply excluding certain bodies from public space or providing other bodies with heightened access to public goods. Instead, the debate may be couched as a benign weighing of how best to mobilize public goods given the preexisting characteristics inherent to the discursively constructed user group; characteristics that are at once constructed by political actors and for which such actors may simultaneously deny any responsibility.

Thus, discursive proxies such as young people are essential to the functioning of modern liberal states. While excluded from directly participating in the political processes by which public space is defined, created, and regulated, young people – as bearers of abstracted identities – serve as the terrain upon which these decisions are contested and resolved. Because of their absence from the political sphere, young people enable more empowered, adult actors to speak for and about them “by proxy.” And in Seattle’s debates over skateparks this is what happened at every step; adults freely argued on behalf of and against a spectrum of youthful populations in furthering their own visions for the city. And in so doing, these political actors were able to substitute facially anti-liberal and anti-democratic debates over the distribution of public goods with politically neutral deliberation over the nature of – and thus the proper location for – such politically absent populations. In this way, young peoples’ identities serve as proxies for the real – and potentially more problematic – issues of governmental involvement with broader patterns of power and privilege in society.

As outlined in the prior Chapters, the process of transforming “where” questions into “who” questions had a number of important geographic impacts. By leading advocates and city actors to adopt a “playground” model, the discursive proxy of the young, domesticated skater profoundly altered the spaces over which Seattle’s skatepark battles raged and the nature of the resistance that was arrayed against claims to playground like sites both within and outside the advocacy movement. By positing the beneficiaries of their activism to be young skaters, older advocates also placed themselves in a peculiar bind. Although drawn to skateboarding as a free,

unstructured, and undomesticated pleasure, these advocates found themselves working to spatially bound, discipline, and domesticate themselves and their fellow skaters in order to lay claim to a portion of the city's public spaces. And by engaging with the state, these advocates worked not only to domesticate skateboarders, but the very process of building skateparks. Likewise, by tying efforts to carve out a place in the city to the resources, procedures, and politics of municipal government these advocates profoundly disciplined their own efforts, accepting the costs of increased delay, regulation, and power-laden decision making processes. The process by which such efforts to lay claim to state provided goods becomes laden with such disciplinary and power laden conditions was concisely described by Agamben:

It is almost as if, starting from a certain point, every decisive political event were double-sided: the spaces, the liberties, and the rights won by individual in their conflicts with central powers always simultaneously prepared a tacit but increasing inscription of individuals' lives within the state order, thus offering a new and more dreadful foundation for the very sovereign power from which they wanted to liberate themselves (Agamben, 1998, at p. 121).

Beyond such immediate impacts upon Seattle's skatepark advocacy movement, I argue in the following Section that the transformation of "where" questions into "who" questions has a number of substantial ramifications for both those studying and those working to lay a claim to public space.

### C – Ramifications for Activism and Scholarship

Because this project arose from my interests as both a scholar and an activist, I have sought to identify the broader ramifications my research may have for those working on issues of urban governance both inside and outside academia. I have enjoyed the pleasure and privilege of working with and conducting my research

among a group of individuals who have been united in their passion, commitment, and unflagging energy in the cause of making Seattle a better place. It is my sincerest hope that my reflections may ultimately be of some help or guidance to somebody who – like the activists I have met and worked with – has made the difficult but immensely enriching choice to try to effect change in her or his community.

### **RAMIFICATONS FOR SCHOLARSHIP**

One of the most recurring themes that I encountered in the course of my research was the realization that, to the extent the political process incorporates discursive debate and decision-making, it is contingent upon not only a process of distortion of meaning but also a process of violence. By reinterpreting, simplifying, and contorting identities to serve others' political agendas, discursive politics work a form of nonconsensual force upon those individuals whose identities serve as the grist for the political mill. The very real individuals whose identities serve as discursive proxies are of essential value to the political process because of their powerlessness to resist that violence. And while this process is likely not unique to the political negotiation of public space, the paradoxical nature of public space – as a powerfully universal right that is at once premised upon exclusion – makes the workings of this process particularly stark.

As discussed in this and the prior Chapter, the tendency of identities to be discursively simplified and distorted is not a *failure* of the political process, but rather an essential *function* of that process. The power to decide implies the power to be arbitrary within a given sphere of influence (Agamben, 1998). But the philosophical foundations of the liberal state demand that the state's exercise of arbitrary power be

given the veneer of democratic input through the mechanisms of “public comment” and “open debate” (2006a). One respondent, a public official who works closely with City Council, stressed the importance of performances of subservience to public will in Seattle during our interview:

John: And I had a sense, almost intuitively that when things went up before the [Parks, Education, Labor and Libraries Subcommittee of the City Council], like the master-plan, that, well “I’m pretty sure it is going to pass, but it is still important that we are all there to show a constituency.” It’s sort of like it is a performance that has value and importance on its own, even though it still has a performative component.

James: And there is a good reason for that because, the committee vote is just for recommendation to the full council. And it is not binding in any way, shape or form. So if you as the sponsor or somebody who is a proponent of it, you can go to full council and stand up and say, “we heard from all these people in committee and when we voted on this, they support of it, they thought it was a great plan...” It’s a big thing for this council in particular, and Seattle in general is; have you gone through the right type of process? Have you heard from community groups?

Through the public input process, the propriety and merits of the state’s distribution of scarce public goods by fiat is cloaked within the trappings of a “debate” about the abstracted beneficiaries of such distributions. This abstraction, however, must be seen for what it is, namely a form of latent violence against the individuals whose identities are discursively negotiated through that process. First, this process of distortion cannot be seen as value neutral because discourses are not equal to each other. Inequality between discourses is especially evident in the case of populations like of young skaters where, although there are competing positive and negative framings of their identities, certain of these essentialized framings achieve dominance and others fail. As discussed in depth in Chapter 4, these discourses often track and

veil dominant class interests. “In a class society, distinguished by relations of domination and control, one linguistic structure frequently gains prominence and prestige and, though claimed to be a natural or common language, in fact functions in the service of the dominant class” (Huspek, 1993, at p. 15). Thus, in neighborhoods such as Myrtle Reservoir and Cowan Park, negative discursive framings gained ascendancy as a product, tool, and manifestation of those neighborhoods’ political, economic, and cultural power. Second, the tendency of identities to become fragmented, with one simplified facet gaining discursive and political prominence is exacerbated by the class, cultural, and economic biases that accrue to those sufficiently empowered to enter the political arena at all. Third, it is not discourse alone that is at issue in the political process. Rather, because the object and product of that process is the translation of discourse into policy – policies that in turn reflect and reinforce the very discursive framing of identities upon which they were premised – the distortions inherent in the production of such discourses are multiplied and reified by the political process. Thus the political system’s violence goes beyond distorting and foreshortening, stereotyping and essentializing the identities of the very individuals upon which its functioning is premised by then reproducing those essentialized, foreshortened identities within regimes of spatial regulation that institutionalize them. That is, the State physically embodies its acceptance of these politically simplified and distorted user identities by allocating and shaping public spaces in response to discursive framings its users. This tendency leads to the creation of spaces such as the youthful, “playground” of Lower Woodland or the older,

undomesticated “clubhouse” spaces like Marginal Way that reinforce and reproduce the very identities upon which the city based its underlying policy decisions.

The recognition of the violence inherent in the negotiation and reification of the discursive proxy’s identity during the political process has a number of potentially intriguing ramifications for further scholarship. It is a short step from recognizing the role that the young skater as discursive proxy has played in Seattle municipal politics, to recognition of the ubiquity of other potential discursive proxies in American politics. Whether discussing “our troops”, the “gang member”, the “welfare mother” or the “unborn fetus”, it quickly becomes apparent that such politically excluded, essentialized identities form much of the grist for the modern political mill. By enabling the shift away from uncomfortable confrontations with the material realities of governmental actions and the transformation of policy decisions into debates over the needs and merits of such culturally loaded identities, the figure of the discursive proxy may be seen as enabling political decisions at all scales of governance. Precisely because of the absence of their voices from the political arena, the abstracted personas of discursive proxies may be fully conscripted into the service of a variety of cultural, economic and political projects.

To recognize that such abstraction in the name of political expediency constitutes a fundamental violence against the real individuals who are called upon to serve as discursive proxies, however, further calls into question the costs that are born by those populations who are even more vulnerable, and less “positively constructed” than young people. This project has focused on a relatively privileged population –

young people in Seattle, Washington – and efforts to obtain for them non-essential and narrowly focused recreational facilities. The fact that part of the cost of claiming such inconsequential amenities is that city politics will subject children to a process by which their identities are distorted, simplified, laid flat and then embodied in spaces and policies designed to reproduce those identities is significant on its own. This process, however, takes on an even greater importance to the extent it occurs around those less favored by dominant cultural codings such as immigrants or the homeless who find themselves the recipients of ever dwindling shares of “public” goods.

I would also suggest that an understanding of the violence inherent in the tendency of the political process of mobilizing the discursive proxy is not only important for understanding marginalized or semi-marginalized populations. Whether as residents of “red states” or “blue states,” “rural dwellers” or “urbanites”, we may all be seen as fitting the definition of the discursive proxy. With our voices excluded from the political arena by an information industry that has returned to 1950’s levels of complicity with an electoral and party political system that is intended to insulate decision-making elites from the interference of the populace (Herman & Chomsky, 2002), we find our own identities increasingly distorted, simplified, and rendered one dimensional in a process that is intended to demonstrate to us our own consent to the machinations of the state. This is not to deny that representative democracy is premised upon elected officials speaking for the electorate “by proxy.” Rather, the fact that the contemporary political process enables our identities to be reinterpreted and codified by other political actors in order to serve as proxies for our real selves in

decisions from which we are excluded is a profound violence against both the legitimating ideology of the state and all of those – citizen and non-citizen alike – who are subjected to such a re-construction.

Beyond these understandings of the role of abstraction in political discourse, my research also points to an understanding of the role of public space not merely as the product of techniques of spatial regulation, but as a discursive artifact produced in the course of and in furtherance of ongoing political struggles and debates. It is fairly common to treat public space and accompanying regimes of spatial regulation as the byproducts of dominant ideological, economic, and political regimes (Davis, 1990; Mitchell, 2003b; Mitchell & Staeheli, 2005). While this is surely the case, these projects are often far from monolithic or uncontested. As suggested by my research, the broader debates within which decisions about spatial regulation are contextualized, understood, and heatedly fought are in a constant state of negotiation. The fact that a specific project has been successfully pursued or resisted by agents acting pursuant to an identifiable set of politico-economic goals – such as neoliberalism or welfarism – does not mean that these successes will be reproduced in subsequent projects. Rather, actual public spaces and the lives of those who use such spaces then become available for further discursive mobilization in the political process. Advocates' successes yesterday in “saving” the Ballard bowl open the door to the development of a set of lived experiences by real actors today. In turn, those experiences and the identities of the individuals having those experiences become discursively reinterpreted, abstracted, distorted, and reproduced by a variety of political actors engaging in

tomorrow's "public" debate – whether it concerns skateparks specifically, public space more generally, or the proper role and functioning of City government overall.

Equally importantly, the Ballard Bowl must be seen as an argument in and of itself. As the physical embodiment of a complex, multifaceted set of propositions about who skaters are, what type of city Seattle is, and how and where young people should be located in the city, the Bowl – like any public space – becomes part of a broader constellation of discourses perpetually playing out through the ongoing political struggles and debates about spatial regulation, economics, culture, race, gender, age, and class in the city. This is not to deny the importance of public space as socially constructed and experienced by real people. Rather, these understandings must be supplemented by an awareness of the additional discursive role of public space as part of a system of discourses by which we continually struggle over more profound questions of politics, economics, and culture.

To take this analysis one step further, I think that the transformation of "where" questions into "who" questions also veils profound disagreements around foundational and often latent beliefs about the fundamental nature of humans, the state, and the meaning of place. This tendency was illustrated throughout my experience with Seattle's skatepark projects. Upon the announcement of a contemplated skatepark site, a variety of neighbors would come forth to offer public input reacting less to the merits or need for such a project than to how they perceived the project would impact much broader social, political, or economic projects. As discussed in depth in Chapter 4, such projects could include the need to make Seattle more "kid friendly", to protect home prices, maintain neighborhood character, prevent crime, or resist the incursion

of outsiders. Regardless, those projects would become discursively translated and abstracted into very specific positions about the merits of a given project. These positions would then be further discursively abstracted into debates about the nature, identity, domestication and/or domesticability of the youthful discursive proxies for whom those projects were ostensibly intended. In turn, these discourses revealed profound and often irreconcilable differences in foundational beliefs.

For example, at the same public meeting one could hear perspectives that presented young people as first; innocent vulnerable, and in need of supervision and protection, second; as inherently dangerous, criminal and destructive, and third; as capable of becoming dangerous but for the domesticating, transformative influence of their own space in which to develop as responsible members of society. Accepting these discourses as sincerely believed and held, however, suggests that the root of disputes over skateparks specifically, and the broader political questions implicated by those projects more generally is not simply a matter of differing access to information or faulty interpretations of fact. Rather, they suggest opposing, and I would suggest often incompatible, understandings of how humans work. The belief that some young people are simply incorrigible trouble, incapable of being socialized, reflects a profoundly differing understanding of the internal life, ethical compass and mutability of human behavior than a belief that the same young people have the capacity for “good” and “bad.” The proposition that the state, by creating certain types of spaces for young people can influence young peoples’ ethical choices also brings into play fundamental – if latently held – beliefs about the role of the state, and the relationship between humans and their environment that are quite different from those core beliefs

animating neo-liberal approaches to policy. Expressions of support and opposition to skatepark projects have expressed quite different world views about the questions of “who are we and who are they?”, “what constitutes a good life and/or good place and how should this vision be articulated and defended?”, “what constitutes danger in society and what constitutes safety?”, and “can we change people to make them conform to social norms and if so, how can particular constructions of public space contribute to those changes?” In turn, these core beliefs were articulated in terms of very specific fears of and desires for public space, which in turn were discursively abstracted and projected upon not only “us” in “the neighborhood”, but also upon “them,” the discursive proxy of the young skater.

This dynamic, however, suggests a highly problematic tendency within liberal governance. Democracy is premised upon the belief that rational individuals, if given the opportunity to engage in the free exchange of information and ideas will ultimately be able to decide among themselves how the state should best be governed (Balkin, 1990). If such exchange and debate is fruitless because the fundamentally opposing world-views of its participants preclude them from being able to understand how differing views could be made commensurate with their own foundational beliefs, let alone to reach agreement, then the “democratic process” begins to look like a sham. Throughout my research I only encountered two members of “the public” who admitted to having their opinions changed by the “public input” process notwithstanding the skilled and passionate mobilization of argument, anecdotal evidence, and statistics by parties on all sides of various debates. As one professional involved in Seattle’s master-planning process noted during our interview, “what we

got at the public meetings, primarily was, ‘skateboarders are fantastic’ or ‘they are not.’ So, we barely got anybody in between. They didn’t need to come. They are not going to come.” For the vast majority of participants this process was less a “marketplace of ideas” than yet another battle ground in which entrenched positions were taken, tactics mobilized, and terrain gained, lost, or –most often – left undisturbed as a draw was proclaimed. This is not to say that the political process is incapable of producing compromise, which it amply is. Rather, because the largely inflexible positions adopted by many combatants reflected their fundamental and irreconcilable convictions about the functioning of people, society, and government, the political process was incapable of producing consensus between opposing factions.

Just as the power of discourse as a tool for persuasion and consensus building may be seen as limited by its inability to bridge fundamentally irreconcilable worldviews, so too must the political mobilization of discourse be recognized as limited as a tactic for altering public policy or making a claim to public space as it functions as often as not as a veil by which the workings of power may be concealed. While the importance of public opinion as a counterbalance to the power of the state has been outlined and explored by Habermas (1974, 1989) and such subsequent theorists as Fraser (1993), my project highlights the very concrete limits to this counterbalancing force. On one hand, skatepark advocates enjoyed an almost total discursive victory with upper-level City decision-makers. The Mayor and City Council adopted advocates’ framings of skateparks and their users, and their acceptance of those framings led – for example – to the decision to “save” a space in Ballard for a new skatepark. On the other hand, vested economic and political

interests mandated that victory come at the cost of the loss of youth-friendly terrain and the destruction of the original D.I.Y. Bowl. While advocates succeeded in having the city undertake and ratify the second skatepark master-planning process in the country, political animosity between the Mayor's office and the sponsoring City Council put implementation of that master-plan in doubt and led the Parks department to put a hold on all pending skatepark projects. Throughout, the discursive proxy of the young skater served not only as a tool for achieving change but also – and perhaps more importantly – as a tool for obscuring the workings of power underlying change. At every turn, advocates' and opponents' efforts to discursively marshal political force has encountered very real, yet often invisible limits set by a host of governmental and non-governmental actors. In turn, each of these actors was able to present and justify the exercise of their power as simply a reaction to the set characteristics of the discursive proxy of the young skater. Thus, while an analysis of the public discursive negotiation of the meaning of public space and the identities of its users is essential to an understanding of how urban public space is formed and regulated, it is not enough on its own to fully explain the governmental formation of spatial regulation. Rather, the creation of such regimes must be understood as a complex interplay between a constellation of such mini-sovereignties and the political mechanisms designed to at once counterbalance and conceal the exercise of such sovereignty.

#### **RAMIFICATONS FOR ACTIVISM**

I entered this research project concerned about the tendency of academic analyses to stress political problems and limitations over opportunities for moving forward to effect geographic change. And while the foregrounding of critique over

praxis is an unfortunate byproduct of any “critical” theoretical project, I do not consider such approaches to be incommensurate with an active political engagement with the very structures of power that we must evaluate as scholars. As with authors before me, I wholeheartedly believe in the potential of discourse analysis “to specify emergent practices of resistance, and to discern possibilities for change” (Fairclough, 2000). Fairclough argues that discourse research can constitute a resource for struggle in so far as it does not isolate language but addresses the shifting network of practices in a way that produces a clearer understanding of how language figures in broader struggles over power and meaning, and how resistance or transgression can be partly pursued in language. Accordingly, my greatest hope is that this research may serve future activists.

Because it points to the considerable risks and problems inherent in engaging in discursive struggles over meaning in the political realm, my work must also be considered a cautionary tale for activists. Caution must always be taken when an activist movement adopts the tactic of politically mobilizing the identities of those otherwise excluded from the political process in furtherance of the movement’s goals. As a purely strategic matter, this fairly common and superficially unproblematic choice can and will have immense ramifications for the success of subsequent activism, as discussed in Chapters 3 and 5. The experiences of activists in Seattle’s skatepark advocacy movement suggest that the choice to adopt a given discursive proxy as the standard-bearer for a political struggle may serve to not only ultimately redefine the goals, tactics, and even the composition of the movement, but may also prefigure the way that resistance to that movement will be articulated. The choice to

equate the ends of a movement with the character of the discursive proxy may even serve to pre-determine much of the ultimate success or failure of the movement due to factors entirely outside the control of the movement – namely the ability of others to successfully mobilize contesting cultural constructions of such a discursive proxy.

While discursively linking a movement with the identity of a discursive proxy can help build political power, they can also conceal the workings of power both within and against activist movements, as demonstrated by my research. Not only did the identity of the young skater provide me and my fellow activists with a powerful lever with which to move Seattle City government (as well as a lever for our opponents to use to “push back”), it also provided a variety of political actors with a shield behind which all of our efforts to make our claims could be concealed. Older skatepark advocates could conceal the size, age, and privilege of our “core” constituency. Wealthy neighborhoods and powerful institutions could conceal their disproportionate influence on the political system. And governmental actors could conceal the fundamental arbitrariness of the state behind the twin shields of “public input” and “Seattle’s kids.” A movement’s choice to articulate its claims to public goods in terms of identity politics, thus will always threaten to exacerbate the tendency of the political system to occlude its own workings. Given the strength of those who will oppose any new claim to public space or any other public good, this should never be a decision made lightly.

Beyond such strategic decisions, an extraordinary amount of care must be taken in choosing to presume to speak for those who would otherwise be excluded

from the political arena, due to the violence inherent in placing real peoples' identities at play in that process and discursive proxies' inability to resist that violence. While the choice of attempting to speak for such otherwise silenced populations may come from only the most noble of intentions, it opens the door to a variety of potentially very powerful political actors resisting a movement's efforts through negative or damaging counter-discourses about those populations. In the case of Seattle, when the same young skaters for whom these political battles were ostensibly being fought actually attended public meetings debating skateparks, they were confronted with "these adults say[ing] these disparaging things about them as if they were houseplants" – in the words of one of my respondents. Beyond simply inviting the further negative discursive construction of the identities of such vulnerable populations, invoking the discursive proxy inherently involves a risk that such negative framings will ultimately be embodied in governmental policies and/or public spaces.

Arguably, one answer to the problem of the discursive proxy's inability to defend her or himself from such discursive violence is for activists to work to bring the voices of the excluded into the political conversation. By enabling these populations to express their own experiences, activist movements can counter the tendency of political discourse to distort, abstract, and oversimplify identity. Experience from Seattle, however, suggests that this process is far from straight forward. The very lack of self-efficacy that typically precludes young people from becoming involved in politics likewise kept most young skaters silent during those public meetings that they did attend. Moreover, due to their youth, small numbers,

and inexperience with public speaking, it was easy for opponents to ignore or dismiss such skaters' efforts to speak in support of skateparks and against others' negative framings of youthful identities. As one interviewee, a local skatepark advocate noted:

As elder skateboarders who are helping to make skateparks, it is almost our responsibility to speak for the younger generation, because they may not know that they can. Because it takes a pretty special high-schooler or junior high-schooler to know that they can speak up. How many high-schoolers are at your neighborhood association meetings? Maybe one. Maybe.

And while the Skate Park Advisory Committee has endeavored to bridge the gap between young peoples' voices and the political system by hosting an annual youth outreach event, the good-faith solicitation of young peoples' views does not change the fundamental dynamic of older people speaking for younger people "by proxy."

Thus, my research suggests that, for many discursive proxies, the very characteristics that have historically excluded them from participating in the political sphere may be largely insurmountable.

A second area of cautionary concern arising from my research has to do specifically with activism focused on claims to public space. Understanding that public space is not only an end-product of a discursively informed political process, but also a discursive artifact that is in ongoing conversation with a variety of persistent and constantly-negotiated society-wide debates helps explain the powerful resistance that arises whenever new claims to public space are involved. Obviously, such spaces serve a variety of concrete and mundane functions for a startlingly broad array of people who form powerful attachments to such places. Beyond their importance as

lived places, however, public space also serves a variety of essential symbolic and discursive functions. As outlined in depth in Chapter 4, almost all actors weighing in on Seattle's various skatepark projects – the majority of which range from the size of a half-size basketball court to the area of a double tennis court – contextualized these physically small facilities within much broader cultural, economic, and political struggles. For governmental agents, proponents, and the vast majority of opponents alike, a skatepark is not just a skatepark. Rather it is an ongoing symbol of privilege, governmental favor, and the choice of a very specific articulation of the city's identity over a host of competing visions. Because it is always understood as far more than simply a place, any activist seeking to assert a claim to public space must be prepared to meet heated resistance from an often breathtakingly broad spectrum of actors.

In the course of my fieldwork, I witnessed Seattle's skatepark advocacy movement not only face resistance from various neighborhoods, but also from the Mayor's office, the Seattle Center, the Parks department, a society for the preservation of historic Olmstead parks, a self-appointed "association of neighborhood councils", green-space advocates, the management of the Experience Music Project, the management of the Space Needle, a coalition of performing arts centers, BMX bicyclists, business owners, local chambers of commerce, a small but passionate group of roller-disco enthusiasts, and even the skateboarding community. I do not, however, offer the caution that public space advocacy will inevitably provoke resistance from a startling variety of quarters in order to discourage such work. Nor is it simply intended to enable public space oriented advocates to be prepared for the inevitable backlash against their work. Rather, it is my hope that by understanding that any

claim to public space promises to both displace other constituencies and play into a myriad of ongoing political struggles, advocates will be prepared to anticipate and even build coalitions based upon others' understandings of and claims to our public spaces.

This warning leads naturally to my third and final caution to activists, namely to be aware of not only the openings provided by discourse, but the potentially anti-democratic and anti-progressive nature of all activism. Because my research suggests that discourse is limited as a tool for overcoming incompatible and incommensurately opposed world-views, one cannot enter the discursive realm under the good-faith belief that "the best idea will win." This does not mean that discourse cannot be used to change "hearts and minds." For example, my research demonstrates how parent advocates' mobilization of youthful identities radically transformed the perspectives, goals and tactics of those such as and including myself who got involved in the cause to create more "grown-up" friendly transition terrain. Even so, discourse in contemporary politics simply does not serve as the democratic cure-all that the myth of the "marketplace of ideas" promises. Rather, political engagement with municipal government always involves a show of force that is contingent neither upon correspondence with democratic processes nor any guarantee of the representative nature of the discourses asserted. The successful mobilization of discourse in politics must thus be understood to often be a profoundly anti-democratic tactic.

This anti-democratic tendency is further exacerbated by the extremely limited degree of public participation in the political process. At many of the public meetings of such powerful decision-makers as the Parks, Education, Labor and Libraries

Subcommittee of the City Council no more than a handful of citizens would show up to comment on the issues under consideration. In this context, as few as a dozen residents could give the appearance of a massive majority, in spite of the statistical insignificance of their numbers. Inevitably, the number of voices present on either side of quite heated issues was a function more of advocacy groups organizational effectiveness, the degree of commitment by core members of those groups, external scheduling difficulties, and successes or failures in obtaining press-coverage for a given issue or meeting. The tendency of politics to reduce the interests of an entire “community” to the perspectives of a small number of “representatives” who may or may not reflect the demographics and desires of those for whom they are presumed to speak is well documented (Herbert, 2006a). Thus, activists must be aware that the choice to entering the realm of municipal politics is the choice to participate in a power laden field where such liberal, democratic ideals as representation, majority will, and the “market place of ideas” are meaningless, and the political process “benefits [the] well-advantaged” (Herbert, 2006a, at p. 59).

The potentially anti-democratic and anti-progressive nature of municipal activism is further exacerbated by the inherent limits to public discourse as a political tool. As discussed in Chapter 5, throughout the Seattle skatepark advocacy movement there have been key moments when no amount of successful discursive mobilization during the myriad public processes of City government has been sufficient to overcome vested political and economic interests. This tendency can either lead activists’ efforts to result in victories that are largely discursive – such as a master-plan that, although completed, has neither been endorsed by the mayor nor earmarked

for future funding – or drive activists to seek to engage in “back room” influence based politics. Whether in the form of campaign contributions or aggressive lobbying of public officials, such nominally legitimate political efforts must likewise be recognized as potentially deeply problematic. Beyond the fact that such tactics reinforce systems by which economic and other socially unequally distributed forms of power are translated into political power, these approaches have the further effect of further removing political decision making from the realm in which public opinion may serve as a counterbalance to the abuse of state authority.

That said, I must reiterate that I consider the forgoing cautions to be exactly that, namely considerations that must be constantly considered and weighed in pursuing progressive activism. And while many of these critiques may appear virtually insurmountable, they must neither be ignored nor allowed to discourage the aggressive pursuit of change through the political process. To paraphrase Patricia Williams “we cannot abandon politics, because politics will not abandon us” (Williams, 1990). While the distortions and violence imposed by the political system are deeply problematic, it is far better to consciously engage them in the name of achieving progressive change than to abandon the field to those political actors most served by the status quo.

Finally, I would suggest that this research stresses the importance of progressive activists focusing on those areas where there is greatest need and utilizing tactics that go beyond conventional, state based goals and strategies in doing so. For example, both Marginal Way skatepark and River City skatepark activists have succeeded by working across the traditional political boundaries of state, civil society,

and private property in areas that are largely underserved by State based services.

By simultaneously seeking spaces outside state control and garnering state support for those spaces, these projects suggest that there are vital openings for citizen empowerment from “hybrid spaces amidst relations of state, civil society,” and private enterprise (M. Brown, 1997, at p. 187).

For example, River City Skatepark offers a host of lessons about how activists may create a space within the logics and mechanisms of state agencies, NGO’s, and community. By focusing on a neighborhood that is at once underserved yet already well organized in response to ongoing crime problems, the River City organizers have found a way to engage a startlingly broad range of shareholders in the cause of claiming a space that is quite literally being created by young people for young people in a neighborhood with the highest concentration of youth in Seattle. One organizer attributed the projects’ success to the neighborhood’s disadvantages during our interview:

South Park is really half industrial and half residential. You have trucks rumbling through the neighborhood. It is a pretty direct line where the industry ends and the neighborhood starts... But the community is pretty low income. If you think about mixed industry and residential, in the flight path, on an industrial river, you have got a tough neighborhood. You have got a place that closed down, that is most affordable... The city averages 20% kids under 18 and South Park averages 28%. And that kind of goes back to the low income, big families, lots of kids that is pretty endemic and illustrative of what the neighborhood is... And the funny thing is that all these other neighborhoods have NIMBYism. Like Lower Woodland. Crazy NIMBYism...In South Park, since it has been such a disadvantaged neighborhood we don’t have NIMBYism. “You want to put a skatepark near me? Hell yeah! Bring it! You want to put it in the noisiest site in the neighborhood? Ok. You want sound barriers? We will help you with sound barriers. Sure, we’ll take your golden goose. We’ll take your wonderful thing.”

River City's success has not simply been a function of a disadvantaged neighborhood's willingness to accept a facility proposed by outsiders in hopes it will help with crime and an endemic lack of youth oriented programming. Rather, since its initial conception as a community service project by three local high-schoolers who had gotten into trouble for skateboarding at a local school campus, River City has been driven by, and intended to serve the youth of the neighborhood. The same organizer explained the continuing and active involvement of young people in every level of skatepark organization by stressing youthful activists' ownership of the project:

They are part of it. So when they see someone doing graffiti or throwing trash, one thing is they will pick it up or wash it off. And they will tell people, "hey, don't do that. It is ours" It is not like somebody gave you a basketball and you have to give it back and if it gets scuffed up so what, it is not mine. It doesn't matter. They will give us another basketball. They know the process. That they are not going to get another one. .. It is theirs, and that was the effort from the beginning. And the people who are involved are not that type of bureaucratic person. And I am not saying the people who want Lower Woodland or who want SeaSk8 or who want those other projects are not as much advocates for their communities as anybody else. But the City, there is an authority there that may scare youth. And that is something we come across. I know that we have an authority over helping them find more information or an authority over knowledge, but not an authority over what they can say and what they can do. The rules are that you have to participate. You have to or it is not going to happen. When we write grant applications, we cannot puppet youth. We can't puppet that they show up. We can't just say "we are going to do this." And you can't just order them. Why would someone follow orders? I see myself as an advocate and a facilitator. An advocate for youth and a facilitator of youth. But without those kids showing up, it's not going to happen.

This extraordinary level of youth investment is possible only because River City is not a governmental project with the resulting bureaucracy, cost, and insulation state technocratic decision-making from the public. Instead, by looking to a health-care

NGO for the land, another environmental NGO for blanket non-profit status, private business donors for labor and materials, and a combination of City funding and grants from both businesses such as Safeco and non-profit's such as the Tony Hawk foundation, River City has cherry-picked the most advantageous of providers for every resource needed for the project. Moreover, they have done so for approximately a quarter of the cost that the same project would cost City government, and in less time than it has taken for Seattle to choose a replacement site for the Seattle Center skatepark. The lessons from River City are powerful but simple: work where the needs are greatest, don't be afraid to cherry-pick between tactics, logics, agencies and mechanisms of funding, and most importantly don't try to make claims "on behalf of" your constituency. Rather, work to empower your constituency to make their own claims and, where needed, work as a conduit between that constituency and more formal, institutional actors.

At the same time, it is essential to realize that gains in the realm of public space are never unconditional, absolute, or universal. Just as activism in the realm of conventional politics is always potentially anti-democratic and anti-progressive, so too is activism outside such conventional spheres. The potential to displace other users, other voices, and other visions for the city – as illustrated by organizers' intent for River City to exclude the homeless and gang members – is a constant risk and cost that must not be overlooked.

#### D – Conclusion

While the "day in the life" of Ballard skatepark opening this Chapter presents that public facility as a space of play, it must also be seen at a profound level as a

space of privilege. The privilege at play in this space, however, is not limited simply to the question of what neighborhood does or does not have a skatepark, or even who does or does not get to use that facility at various times and in various ways. Rather, public spaces such as Ballard Commons must also be seen as physical embodiments of political processes that not only create and perpetuate privilege, but that veil the state's implication in such projects of privilege. And while the Ballard Bowl may be seen as both the product of, and a continuing argument as part of ongoing debate about skateparks and their users, these struggles veil much more profound questions about what kind of city Seattle is and should be, what the role of municipal government should be, and what portion of the city's residents are welcome in its "public" spaces. In turn, by articulating these debates through the abstracted figure of the discursive proxy, these debates further veil the deeper processes of privilege by which a contemporary state, premised upon liberal promises of equality and universality, actively works as a "difference engine" for the creation and maintenance of privilege along economic, cultural, racial, and political lines. My hope is that, by exposing the discursive and political mechanisms by which these privileges are created and obscured that openings may be created to not only evaluate but also contest them. By recognizing the profound geographies of power and privilege beneath the surface of all of our public spaces, we may consciously choose to try to alter those geographies to achieve a more just and fair city.

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**VITA**

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