THE CITY AS A PLAYGROUND:
SKATE PARKS, INCLUSION AND NEW TERRITORY

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There are two central topics in this study: the first topic relates to the physical space created by skateboarding, while the other relates to social capital derived from skateboard culture. The paper analyzes the case studies of three skate parks, in which the theme of social inclusion is the theoretical framework. Looking through the history of skateboarding and integration of skate parks as a part of the urban environment, the theme is concerned with bringing the openness that is part of the design of our public spaces to skateboarding culture, and in general, to the feeling of belonging as an essential part of building social capital. In the manner of shared space, public space has started to be used as a communication platform between community members looking for expression of their needs and desires. The benefits of the skateboarding settings have rarely been the subject of empirical research, so these case studies will deepen our knowledge on why social bonds connected to this sport make such a significant contribution in city landscapes. Individuality and its political manifestation have a structural role in this paper: from the appearance of the architectural figuration to the idea about a movement and a settlement, which for architecture, can be seen in the form of new territories.

Key words: **skate park, public space, social inclusion, territory settlement.**

GENESIS OF MOBILITY AND CONFLICT

The essence of skateboarding has always been about movement. Movement is what enables us to change ourselves and our perspective on the world around us, thus skateboarding can be used as a paradigm of a state in which the world ceases to be what it has been, unfolding itself before us with its new potential (see: Figure 1).

The history of skate parks is connected primarily with spaces that were specifically created by skateboarding enthusiasts, from the 1960s onward (Brooke, 1999). The main actors emerged from surfers in California who were looking for sporting activity, similar to their primary one – surfing – in order to find a suitable compensation for the time when the sea was calm and had no waves. The activity evolved further, creating the term "surfing the pavement" that has been accepted among young people. The etymological origin of the original name determined the fate of skate parks in the same way both in its beginnings and today. It speaks of an apparent conflict between those who

try to use the pavement for movement, like pedestrians, on one hand, and skateboarders on the other hand, who use it for the same purpose but with the added value created by speed and style. On their journey, recreational trick skateboarders can incidentally accrue up to several miles of travel in a day, riding on trick skateboards in order to reach recreational "skate spots" to meet up with fellow skateboarders (Fang and Handy, 2017). We can identify both spatial and social values in this process. Considering that the spatial value of public space is built on the varied needs of citizens, their perception of the quality of public space can be discussed. Unfortunately, perceptions of skateboarders and their behaviour have been tarnished in some instances by damage incurred by skateboarding on public surfaces (Bradley, 2010). Spaces skateboarders use to ride on in urban conditions are not purpose-built for skateboarding. Street furniture, curbs, stairs and railings are the first material "victims" in public space. A famous saying among skateboarders tells us more about the problem, "If a city doesn't have a skate park, it is a skate park" (Claflin, 2017). The result of this different interpretation of a city is often the marginalization of young sportspeople, since skateboarding is not always a legal travel mode. Skateboarding is often

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prohibited in large sections of cities, including roads, sidewalks, districts, and other public spaces (Nolan, 2013; Fang and Handy, 2017). Besides other misconceptions, the actors in this drama have often been linked to graffiti culture, crime, drugs and alcohol, in short – vandalism (Taylor and Khan, 2011; Weston, 2010; Taylor and Marais, 2011). Even countries with a long-lasting tradition of skateboarding have a big gap of misunderstanding, which has led to some of the previously mentioned consequences. Regarding other stereotypes, it is important to mention anti-social behaviour as one stereotype that follows this group of people, although many findings, including this paper, show us the opposite (Goldenberg and Shooter, 2009; Weller, 2006). As a result, the self-image of the socially excluded group is affected by the weakening of generally accepted social rules based on the behaviour of individual members of smaller groups (Carey, 1975; Janković and Pešić, 1981). One of the consequences of this unilateral segregation relates to the strengthening of links between sportspeople themselves, crystallizing the common need of the smaller group, and consequently, joint action aimed at solving the common problem.

Young skateboarders choose to use public spaces because of their accessibility and the opportunities they offer for tricks, which eventually leads to placemaking produced by the users. Some theorists directly point to "moral responsibility" towards the urban environment that facilitates civic engagement and community interaction (Whyte, 1980). The openness of public space towards different or vulnerable social groups speaks of the quality of the urban environment, so by its nature, the opportunity for skateboarding tricks is derived from such an environment. It is clear that skateboarding and public spaces define each other. Skateboarders did not step aside in this conflict with regard to how space is used, but rather they have continued their activities and almost, as a rule, a new and creative space in the urban environment has emerged.

Figure 1. Towards the Dead Sea: An appearance of a pure figuration in West Bank
(Source: Milorad Obradović)

CASE STUDIES OF THREE SKATE PARKS

This paper focuses on the case studies of three skate park projects, using the method of comparative analysis. This method was chosen because architect Milorad Obradović, one of the co-authors, participated throughout the whole process of their design and construction. The self-reflective method used in this paper can give us more precise data through the continuation of self-analysis in the project activities (Bourke, 2014). Given that the construction of skate parks provided us with unique insights into the social bonding process, we need all possible background data to see the process as a whole. Other reasons for the three-model comparison are related to the examination

of different preconditions, such as geographical or social, and whether they provide a different or the same outcome. Discussion on all physical and social barriers will be deepened through analysis and conclusion in the final section of the paper. This methodology could be relevant to finding new connections and problems in similar scenarios, considering today's automatic production of public spaces with a lack of connection between the designers and users. The projects analyzed here are currently in different phases of completion: the skate parks in Čačak (Serbia) and Bethlehem (Palestine), have been constructed, and the skate park in Lazarevac (Serbia) is in the phase of stagnation. These examples have different spatial and social influences, making them convenient for examining the methodology that connects them. According to Putnam (2000), the local community could be an ideal type of a generator of social capital and a place to investigate all forms of association that have the potential for bridging and bonding social "tissue". This typology emphasizes bridging the social differences between actors that are not necessarily closely connected by personal and family ties. Moreover, it speaks about mutual acceptance and public recognition of socially excluded groups (Bourdieu, 1985). The powerful strength of social bonds created by skateboarding especially stands in that respect, and there are numerous examples of collaborative activities such as developing and maintaining community sites (Jenson *et al.*, 2012). To avoid conflict of interest between skateboarders and pedestrians, the most common compromise envisages the construction and financing of an adequate sports ground for extreme sports activities supported by the local government. According to examples of good practice and the case studies of three skate parks explored in this paper, it is possible to extract the methodology which could be used in further urban design, not only from an architectonic point of view, but also as a catalyst for social networking.

SKATE PARK IN ČAČAK: DESIRE FOR RECOGNITION

The initiative to build a skate park in Čačak lasted for 15 years until a realistic framework for its feasibility began to emerge. The architect of the skate park and co-author of this paper organized the initiative and led the project from its beginnings. The shared goal was to have a place where skating was common for all ages. Young enthusiasts of extreme sports who spontaneously gathered in public places due to the lack of suitable conditions were faced with almost the same preconditions of social exclusion as previously explained. Skateboarding in this town was linked with "graffiti culture" and other forms of vandalism, leading to animosity from some stakeholders, including the police. One of the consequences of the typical negative approach was the local government's consideration of the high price of such a playground where somebody could get injured. Although the local government committed itself to securing the funding for the project, the negative point of view and concern with regard to possible injuries prevailed and resulted in less money for the whole project, which caused the work to slow down. In contrast, the results of many studies related to extreme sports activities illustrate that achieving one's best and the core value of freedom in the skateboarding subculture outweigh even the risk of injury

(Haines *et al*., 2011). In line with the limited resources, a skate park structure of 600 m² was designed in one of the derelict parts of the river Morava bank, with spatial potential for further development (see: Figure 2). The intention was to transform the fifteen-year-old pessimism, which had contributed to the decline in interest in the sport itself, into the energy of new ideas and a new beginning. The fact that the number of sportspeople in this process often varied additionally slowed down the project before it began. At one point, their number declined to a mere two in the town, and it seemed that this challenged the legitimacy of the project. In response, a few older skateboard riders started to give free lessons in skateboarding in the town square, and help acquire necessary skateboarding equipment. With time and dedication, a group of thirty young people was formed, all of them connected through the sport they loved. The same group of young people were to constitute a necessary critical mass of volunteers in the later stages of the project. After a strong initiative that lasted over 15 years, town officials put themselves in charge again to help skateboarders with funding and the procurement of legal licenses. The funds for construction works were not enough, so skateboarders joined a non-government organization with a symbolic name, *Alternative for Čačak*, which aimed to improve their organization in legal terms, with new opportunities to collect money for the project.

times of oscillations and exhaustion of the project. Together they were all pushed, as a group, in a new direction inciting them to strive for their legal association. This is similar to what Bourdieu talks about, explaining social capital as the sum of the resources, actual or potential, that an individual or a group accrues by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships and recognition (Bourdieu, 1985). A specific kind of civic activism emerged that involved a large number of schoolchildren and students, creative people and artists, who wanted to use their skills to offer an unusual approach to help with problem-solving. In this way, the added value spilt over other parts of the city, and later, in the same year that the skate park opened, over 500 m² of dilapidated facades of public institutions, primary schools and university buildings, were repaired and covered in murals. That these design solutions are sustainable is also indicated by the fact that the subsequent activities involved repairing and painting over 4000 m² of facades over the following few years, which made quite an ordinary event into something much more significant. The Days of Urban Culture festival will continue to exist as another, newly founded, legal organization over the next six years, with no signs of decline in the newly emerging enthusiasm, and the town of Čačak will have not only a new urban space to offer, but also a new tourist attraction and a cultural event of economic value.

Figure 2. The New Position: establishing a balance between space and recognition in Čačak
(Sources: Bojan Pajić and Milorad Obradović)

Given that the park itself was being built for many years following the original initiative and that it took three years to construct it, common intergenerational energy was accumulated. In addition to a newly built form, it was also the inspiration for a unique event – an arts and sports event called Days of Urban Culture. This event has since enabled participants to present various sports skills, as well as several music events and children's workshops. According to Arcordia and Whitford (2006), festivals are seen to have significant economic, socio-cultural and political impacts on the selected area and community groups. They also provide possibilities for urban development.

Due to the constant lack of funds for building skateboarding elements, young people from the skateboarding community got involved again, making up for the lack of funds with their manual labour. This action made the project's implementation cheaper. However, apart from the financial value of such activism, this element of personal identification with the project later proved to be a necessary resource in

SKATE PARK IN BETHLEHEM: MORE THAN A GAME

The construction of a skate park in Bethlehem was within the jurisdiction of the humanitarian organization Skate-Aid from Münster in Germany. The project was implemented in the children's orphanage SOS Children's Village, as a part of the reconstruction of a dilapidated children's playground. The conditions for building such an object in the West Bank area of Palestine were extremely difficult because of the obsolete infrastructure and specific political circumstances, but this did not have much influence on the social context in which the project was interpreted as progressive. Knowledge of the skate culture of children in the orphanage and the surroundings was rather rudimentary, though not entirely non-existent. The very idea that something new was being built in their backyard awakened a sense of community, which finally led to their participation in the endeavour. The profile of children in this case study was, in fact, mixed, both in terms of their interests and inherited relationship, ranging from friendly to violent. Enforced

cohesion of the children meant that they faced a couple of minor problems at the construction site, and the best way to solve them was to establish and develop mutual trust. In this context, we can draw on Newman *et al.* (2007), who argue that the solidarity and trust which form between groups of individuals who have overlapping connections is the ''glue'' that binds social networks together, as they enable the group's membership to feel both accepted and valued, or even on Coleman (1988) who argues that relations of shared obligations, expectations and trust are a type of resources for actors, which can be exploited with the pursuance of a common goal. In this respect, spontaneously over time, most of the children became involved in minor construction works on their own initiative. As the number of children in the vicinity of the construction site increased, the rest of them joined in eventually, so the public space became a gathering place (see: Figure 3). If we speak of trust as a common denominator in the development of relationships, Putnam (2000) also uses it in his definition of social capital, arguing that connections among individuals are a basic precondition, since they are the product of social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from those values. Individual contributions brought back new meaning and automatically became an integral part of the project's collectivism. In his hierarchical theory of human need, Maslow (1954) ranked the development of a sense of belonging as being the third-highest human need, placing it only below basic and safety needs. We must take into consideration that all the children in the orphanage had already lived in at least one other place, so place attachment could be regarded as important for them. Place attachments develop slowly but can be disrupted quickly, and therefore, can create the need for a long-term phase of dealing with the loss and repairing or re-creating attachments to people and places (Inalhan and Finch, 2004). Furthermore, Fuhrer and Kaiser (1992) emphasized attachment to a place as a basic facilitator of emotional needs. A sense of belonging to an idea is also implicit in the words of one of the children from the orphanage, Ibrahim, who said in an interview with the British Guardian: "Painting the skate park made me feel part of something. I want to skateboard every day because it feels like flying" (Haben, 2015). The future of the young people who were living in the orphanage was uncertain, so this activity looked like something solid to hold on to. The new source of activity shifted the situation from being one of mere survival towards one with a potential future – to something more than before.

In this case, funds for implementing the project were provided in advance and there was no need for children to involve with physical labor. Nevertheless, directly through the involvement of many children on the site, manual work resulted in building self-confidence, usefulness and awareness that there is a place for everyone. Despite a *de facto* existing playground, though derelict, it was necessary to affirm territoriality and the role of the main actors. Their new identification with this space was later the main driving force and the reason for their mass participation in a real, physical sense, and not by means of a common activity, as seen in the first case study. This indicates the separation between the concept of the necessity for the project and the necessity of play for strengthening the connection with the newly founded territory in their backyard. The mutual and reciprocal connection between space and people cannot be explained merely as a space that evolves as an independent process, but rather a process made of spatial and social values together, which produce an authentic code of the site.

SKATE PARK IN LAZAREVAC: THE FUTURE ON STANDBY

Surfing the pavement in Lazarevac was no different from the beginnings of surfing in any other city. Due to the lack of an adequate sports facility, public spaces are the only meeting place for the skateboarding population. Since it is easier to recognize the habits and actions of fellow citizens in a smaller community, the leaders of the town's administration were not to blame the children for destroying the public assets. A group of skateboarders presented the idea of a skate park and the town administration understood its spatial potential for reducing vandalism. The project involved a large number of both older and younger citizens, who acted together on this occasion as a responsible community. In their study, Taylor and Marais (2011) showed that city planners frequently have to juggle competing community arguments about the need for such adolescent spaces, particularly concerning a potential skate park being built in a residential area. Otherwise, there could be a chance of creating an unintentional gap of misunderstanding. The planned location for the skate park was within the city sports centre since it had an already determined function and purpose. Although the Lazarevac case is unique in terms of the participation of a large number of people and the local government, the future users (i.e., the skateboarders) were slowly left out of the planning process and it was taken over by public services with the idea of further operationalization. Unfortunately, after the restructuring of the public service

Figure 3. The Necessity: "Because it feels like flying" (1) (in Bethlehem)
(Sources: Milorad Obradović and Partick Richey)

Directorate for the Construction of Lazarevac, the interest in participation in the project drastically declined, while the social capital carried by young initiators, was not used in accordance with their potential. Although the planning process for the skate park was finished, the funds were repurposed. In most case scenarios it looks like funding is the most important aspect of how to build a skate park and it is sometimes not even taken into consideration that the group of skateboarders can provide funds by themselves, or even build it by themselves. In this regard, it is known that there are many ways of doing so, since despite the daunting cost groups are determined to build skate parks in their communities, employing various methods to raise money, through large donations, grants, corporate sponsorship, city funding and even old-school fundraising (Claflin, 2017). The exclusion of skateboarders from the project in the implementation phase that followed the design phase can be considered as the main reason why the project has not yet been implemented. The skate park project is, therefore, in a vacuum of its existence. According to the development-oriented theory of social capital (Woolcock, 2004), there is a three-type model that differentiates between bonding social capital (connecting close actors), bridging social capital (formed among socially distant actors) and linking social capital (relationships between citizens-actors and institutions). We can see that the *linking model* is absent and therefore the circle is not closed in line with the necessary roles in the process. The institutions failed to (re)connect with the carriers of initial social capital and sympathy for young people's needs. The perception of the real future that has melted away due to the short-term vision of the actors responsible has resulted in further deterioration of public spaces, leaving a "spatial gap" that even today is filled with mutual misunderstanding and intolerance between different generations of citizens. Many of those children who were searching for a place to skate eventually found one in the nearest big city, where most of them started their studies later, choosing a better environment for themselves with more adequate content for their development in terms of both education and recreation.

THE ISSUE OF NEW TERRITORIES

Parallels with models of skate park production presented in this paper indicate that social inclusion is a form of transparency in communication. It represents a two-way process, starting from the broad community to smaller community groups, to the designer of a public space responding to the need for its adequate usage. The subcultural origin of skateboarding and compensation for the feeling of freedom in surfing through movement on the pavement further strengthen the character of creating an environment with a meaningful purpose. Lefebvre argues that modern space is the space of "blank sheets of paper" and it consists of the projection of an "intellectual representation" instead of hearing the human body, and it enacts through physical gestures and movements (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 200). Drawing on a similar conclusion, Borden (1988) advocates that public space needs to become more body-centric in its design. It also includes the question of identity, since skateboarding reflects both the characteristics of the sport and the partaker's desired social identity at the same time (Wheaton and Beal, 2003). This is not just about the relationship between the real and the virtual. From an architectonic perspective, the virtual in this context represents the natural state of things that turns architectural projections into physical objects of architecture. In this sense, skateboarding is using an instrument of individual projections, which could be applied in a physical (spatial) context, thus asking for balance between these two states.

Searching for differences between the three case studies presented in this paper, it is clear that the first case study had a good start with already established social capital through the development of mutual trust among skateboarders as the carriers of social capital. Even with the decline of members in this initiative, some participants stitched together fragmented pieces based on the old and familiar values of established identity that eventually brought new goals. In this respect, the first two case studies established their bonds through the social capital they produced, where spatial possibilities refer to the next phases in the process. The second case study in Bethlehem started with the resolved issue of location, which was inside an orphanage, so the only question concerned the children's ability to act as a coherent group. It was the place of creation of a new meeting place, thus the creation of common trust and a sense of belonging, with new social activities on the site. On the other hand, the third case study started with established social capital but it faded away without a proper role to play or specific territory to "conquer". Although the spatial values are all set in Lazarevac, they are still looking for social components to glue the activities together. According to other studies, a social network's identification with a particular public space not only facilitates face-to-face interaction between members by providing them with a place to socialize, but it also provides opportunities for intra-group networking and interactions with the wider community (Fried *et. al.*, 2004). If we take a closer look at some similar studies related to skateboarding (Walker *et al.*, 2014; Wood *et al.*, 2004), we can identify specific behaviour patterns and most of them are related to interpersonal connections. In one study which examines the health benefits derived from skateboarding in skate parks, a content analysis of 35 skateboarders' survey responses revealed four benefits: *establishing new and reconnecting with old friendships; bonding to a friendship group, gaining peer respect and status; and increased opportunities to interact with people* (Walker *et al.*, 2014). In another study, pro-social behaviours were much more likely to be rated as occurring often, and 69% of survey respondents indicated that they would like places to hang out with friends added to the skate park area (Wood *et al.*, 2004). Although the social attributes take more attention among the skateboarders at first glance, spatial values follow as the next crucial attribute. In this respect, we can see that specific territorial development occurs if the starting social values between collective identity and level of "belonging" are set. In the first section we saw that different interpretations of public space started segregation in the first place, which eventually resulted in the weakening of social "rules" leading to deviant behaviour (Carey, 1975; Janković and Pešić, 1981). Eventually, after the reconciliation of mutual relationships with a broad community, it became a key solution for adaptation in both social and territorial aspects.

Therefore, we can see that skateboarders, the same as other users, are willing to connect with (public) space, where they can accomplish their desires and social bonds (see: Figure 4). It is no wonder why noticeable intergenerational usage of skate parks has been seen as common (Taylor and Khan, 2011). All case studies had the social component in common, which prevailed over the space itself. Regarding the starting hypothesis of public space as a communication platform, construction workers at the construction sites easily achieved a strong connection with children involved in the skateboarding projects. In Bethlehem, for example, the workers spoke a different language than the children, but the language did not represent a barrier at all. Communication was established around the same goals and values, which, in the end, resulted in more frequent activities for the children to participate in. In the mornings, construction was ongoing with a little help from the children, but the evenings were meant for children's exhibitions with a little help from the workers. Construction of the skate parks can teach us how a responsible community can look like if all members of the community are involved and included. In terms of gathering people, public space started to become a translation tool, where skateboarding was only a small fragment of the activities that respond to the desire for attachment and other emotional needs. For Bourriaud (2009), the question of settlement is the basic question of the survival of a culture and the presence of figuration by *the invention of self*.

the openness of a public space for individual interpretation, and it could result in the re-examination of our current knowledge about the existing urban environment we live in. One of the proposed solutions regarding how to deal with public space that has possibilities for skateboarders and ordinary citizens was not to design skateboarding out of the built environment, but rather in it (Borden, 1998), or as recommended by the authors of this paper for communities to be allowed to envision and manufacture their local places by themselves. In this sense, they become indicative of the layers of cultural behaviour, bringing back the focus on the individual meaning and emotional connection to a public space. Different forms of public spaces are considered as a shelter for identities to thrive, taking the role of gathering and connecting people, such as festivals or other events. These characteristics are recognized among groups without the same interest in a particular space, thus showing its potential for dialogue within the community. The benefits of joint citizen action are clear, therefore the legislative possibilities of such civil action that bring mutual endorsement should be taken into consideration. Nevertheless, the users will give their last word on whether they enjoy prefabricated public space, or whether they are looking for improvement throughout cooperation. Finally, the users of a space should answer the question of whether that space is open or not and what their own role or sense of belonging is within it.

Figure 4. Territories of Democracy: And & Or (in Čačak)
(Sources: Danijela Marinković Beogračić and Bojan Pajić)

CONCLUSION

The skate parks in this study demonstrate various forms of social inclusion. The common denominator in all three case studies is the direct involvement of skateboarders in the process of their creation. If individuals who possess a clear perception of urban space form a community, the space acquires a new identity and becomes a coherent entity. By involving members of the local community in the project activities, added value was created through new connections and attachments among the actors, which continued to strengthen and increase later on. Therefore, the success of a project is hard to predict without the participation of its future users. Its new identity is established within a unique set of actions that separates their group from another. The self-build projects raise the awareness of the importance of the inclusion of all actors, in this case, skateboarders and institutions, in the decision-making and implementation process. This brings up one of the most important themes –

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